

# THE STEADFAST

A NOVEL BY

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*For my Father*



## AND THEREABOUTS DID THE LORD SURVEYOR SET HIS TRANSIT UPON THE MARK



The big howitzer came to a jarring halt when Isaac Bhako screamed out in pain. The gun's heavy wheel had slipped off a rock and come down

heavily upon his foot; now his agony was only increased while the giant gun sat there, dumb and motionless. The rest of the young black boys were motionless too—utterly transfixed by Bhako's strange, high-pitched howling. Isaac struggled feebly to push the gun ahead, but groping in fits and starts, he could not make up his mind whether relief could be gained faster by moving the gun, or instead, attempting to yank his foot out from under it.

Jacob Moorten suddenly startled the gang into action again. As the great howitzer began once more to roll toward the top of the hillock, young Bhako collapsed on the side of the road where he stood. Moorten trudged over in the boy's general direction, never taking his eyes completely away from the gun as it continued to make its herky-jerky progress up the narrow dirt track. Stopping, the big heavily-bearded man whipped off his battered slouch hat and wiped the sweat from his face with his shirtsleeve, which was already heavily soaked with perspiration—especially under the arms.

Moorten looked at the writhing boy blankly, then glanced once again at the howitzer. Isaac's eyes, however, were fully fixed upon Moorten—and on the very large, nickel-plated revolver which was strapped to the Boer's waist. When he saw the man's

lips move, Isaac slowly rose to his feet and began to hobble up the dusty road.

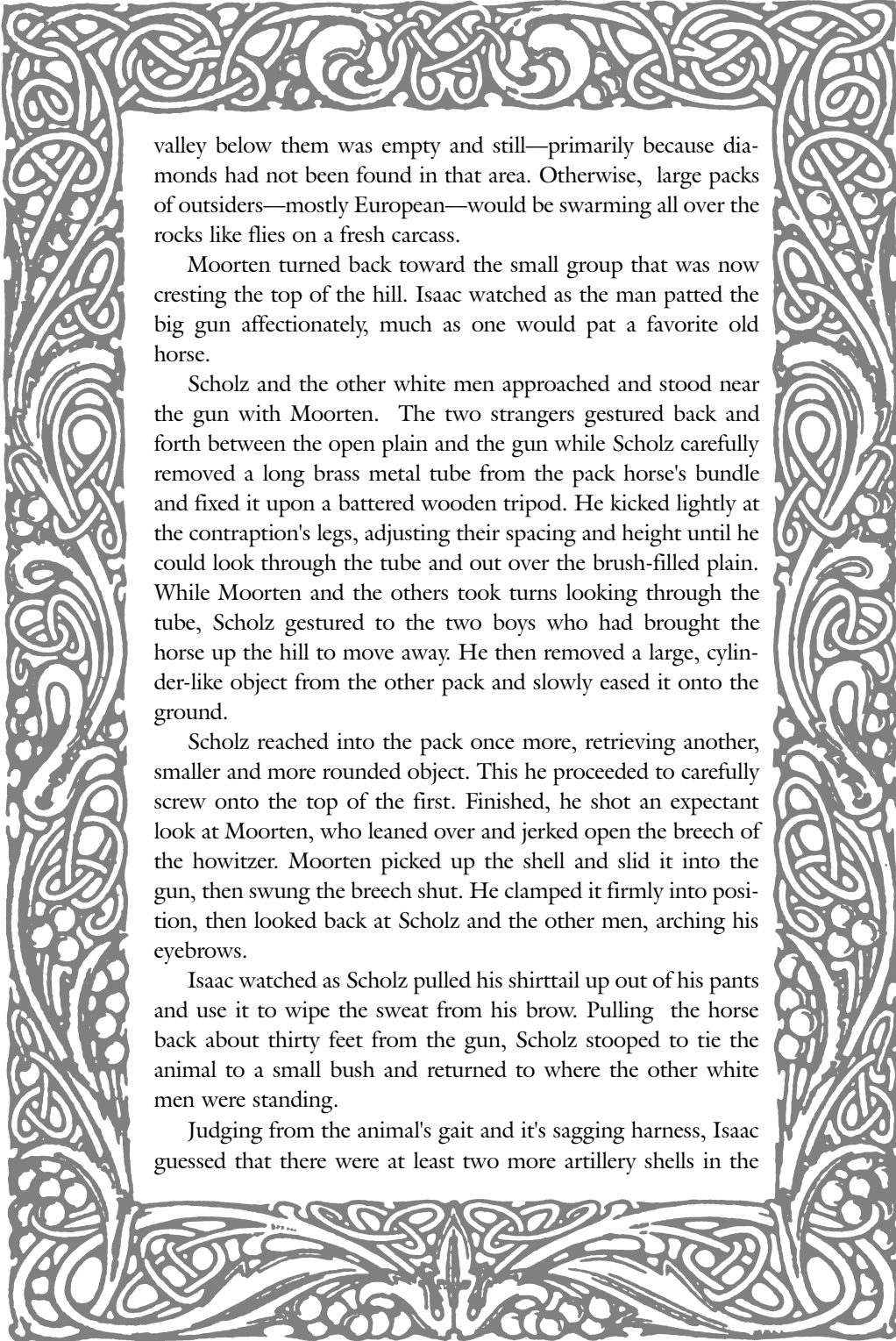
Reaching the top of the hillock, Isaac saw Moorten point over to the right, where a broad, level spot was revealed among the rocks and brush. Leaning on the gun or sitting on the ground where they had momentarily stopped to rest, the gang followed the sweeping motion of the Boer's gesture with their eyes. Isaac watched as they settled into their positions once again, and taking up the slack on the ropes, gradually managed to grunt the steel beast over to the desired location.

Bhako hopped past Moorten, who was now looking back toward the bottom of the hill, where two more young boys were leading a pack horse up towards him. Beyond, Isaac could see Moorton's friend, John Scholz, tying up the remaining horses. Closer, under the shade of an old dying tree, stood two other men. They were well-dressed, and perspiring heavily as a result. Grimacing, Moorten waved the boys with the pack horse onward.

Isaac Bhako stopped about twenty feet away from the big gun and collapsed into the shade under a large rock. His foot still throbbed, yet he did not feel any sharpness to the pain—and the pressure he carefully applied with his hand led him to believe that it might not be broken after all. Easing back, he looked over to see the gang removing the pull ropes from the gun. One by one, they sank to the ground in a small circle around it.

Moorten walked up, stood beside the big howitzer, and stared beyond it, towards the eight-mile-wide plain they overlooked. Bhako watched the Boer gaze blankly out over the Transvaal, where the ground rose gently to the west. The broad





valley below them was empty and still—primarily because diamonds had not been found in that area. Otherwise, large packs of outsiders—mostly European—would be swarming all over the rocks like flies on a fresh carcass.

Moorten turned back toward the small group that was now cresting the top of the hill. Isaac watched as the man patted the big gun affectionately, much as one would pat a favorite old horse.

Scholz and the other white men approached and stood near the gun with Moorten. The two strangers gestured back and forth between the open plain and the gun while Scholz carefully removed a long brass metal tube from the pack horse's bundle and fixed it upon a battered wooden tripod. He kicked lightly at the contraption's legs, adjusting their spacing and height until he could look through the tube and out over the brush-filled plain. While Moorten and the others took turns looking through the tube, Scholz gestured to the two boys who had brought the horse up the hill to move away. He then removed a large, cylinder-like object from the other pack and slowly eased it onto the ground.

Scholz reached into the pack once more, retrieving another, smaller and more rounded object. This he proceeded to carefully screw onto the top of the first. Finished, he shot an expectant look at Moorten, who leaned over and jerked open the breech of the howitzer. Moorten picked up the shell and slid it into the gun, then swung the breech shut. He clamped it firmly into position, then looked back at Scholz and the other men, arching his eyebrows.

Isaac watched as Scholz pulled his shirttail up out of his pants and use it to wipe the sweat from his brow. Pulling the horse back about thirty feet from the gun, Scholz stooped to tie the animal to a small bush and returned to where the other white men were standing.

Judging from the animal's gait and it's sagging harness, Isaac guessed that there were at least two more artillery shells in the

pack. He watched the four men as they stood about, looking alternately across the wide plain in front of them, then back down the hill behind, them, toward the settlement from which they had come. For the next half hour or so, they paced around in the dirt; first sitting on a rock, then rising again to look into the distance, then shuffling off to find another rock to sit upon. The two



strangers kept mainly to themselves, looking at some papers and a notebook they had taken out of their brand new leather satchel. Isaac knew from their manner and dress that they were Europeans, though he was not sure about their nationality. Attempting to read their lips had proven a waste of time.

Eventually the taller of the two strangers removed his watch from his pocket and approached the gun. Scholz then jogged back over to the dirt track where they had brought the gun up and took a last look down the hill, towards the settlement. After a moment, he turned back to face the others and shook his head firmly from side to side, shrugging his shoulders.

With that, the strangers stepped up towards the looking glass, and Moorten gingerly hopped over the gun carriage and stood behind the breech. He turned a few cranking mechanisms, sighting the gun carefully, and pointed to a spot far across the shallow valley. The strangers watched him without emotion, the taller one nodding slowly in response to Moorten's careful and deliberate movements. By this time, Scholz had come back up too, and was standing about ten feet behind the gun, fanning himself with his cap.





Isaac Bhako watched all this with mild interest. He saw the other boys around him tense slightly—anticipating the loud roar that would soon shake the ground beneath them. Isaac would not jump as the others would when the gun fired, however, since he did not suffer the shock of noise. He had been around guns before—large and small—and the most it had brought forth from him was a quick blink, and a brief tightening of the lips. He saw no reason why it would be any different this time—though this particular gun was much larger than any others he had seen.

Isaac rose to his feet for a moment, in the shimmering heat, staring blankly at the head of a smaller boy who crouched nearby. Three or four large flies made tracks around the dark, nubby hemisphere, as the boy made no effort to shoo them away. Just as Moorten pulled the big gun's lanyard, Isaac felt a fly dancing on his own head.

There was no sound this time either.

There was, however, a blinding fireball that instantly burst toward him like a white-hot hammer. In fact it was exactly like a hammer, with chunks of jagged steel packing themselves into Isaac's flesh and that of everyone else around him. Along with the steel, Isaac was blasted with stone dust, splinters of wood—and sprayed with the contents of the boy's head he had been so intently observing. Almost immediately, another bright flash knocked him in another direction, followed by bits and pieces of the unfortunate pack horse.

*Time went by*—or stood still—it was hard to tell. Isaac still knew no sound, but as he gained some bare level of consciousness, he became aware of a strange new sensation; one most peo-

ple would describe as the ringing sound caused by exposure to sudden high-decibel noise. It was new to Isaac, but it's novelty soon vanished as he became aware that not only was he unable to move, but that he was also missing most of his left arm. There was also an indescribable feeling that his lower jaw was no longer connected to his face. He could not feel pain, nor could he move, but through the veil of blood and brain matter that partially blocked his vision, he could see the wispy gray smoke settling over the bodies and parts of bodies that were scattered about the hilltop. There was no movement among them, only little tongues of flame flickering about the rocks and bushes, and consuming tattered bits of clothing which hung in a nearby tree.

Though he guessed it was not yet night, Isaac could sense a gradual darkness coming on. More time had passed by—he was not sure how much—and then, in the creeping shadows, he could make out a human figure, walking among the silent, smoking remains of the Europeans' unsuccessful military experiment. The boy could not recognize the stranger who shuffled about, bending over here...crouching down there...then, finally-reaching down and picking something up.

Eventually the figure made it's way over to Isaac. For a moment, it looked as if it might pass by him, then it stopped. The boy saw the figure standing there, motionless, casting a long, hard shadow over him. He saw the cloudless purple sky above. He saw a fly buzzing in front of his face.

The last thing he would ever see was the big, nickel-plated revolver which had belonged to Jacob Moorten. It was pointing straight at his head.

