



The Mercy of the Boer.

A SOUTH AFRICAN PASTORAL.

Night had just fallen upon the veldt. The short dusk had suddenly deepened into a heavy, thick obscurity, impenetrable for a space until there rose the rim of a full moon over the edge of the plain which showed hard and clear-cut against the great dark. The ant-hills, that alone broke the monotonous flatness, flung interminable inky shadows as the cold white glare, electric in its fierce intensity, shone out level across the plains. The sense of loneliness, of utter isolation, was overwhelming; the heavens, sown with fire, seemed so remote, and the bare earth stretching away into the dim, starry distance, so empty and limitless. It might have been the roof of some dead world.

By the edge of the marsh a transport wagon had outspanned for the night, and within the circle of firelight, where moon and flame struggled for the mastery, loomed the wavering outlines of the trek oxen tethered to the dissel-boom, and now and again the figure of a man.

The only sounds were the crackling chirps of the bullfrogs in the vlei, and the voices of two men who sat leaning back against the kaross of meerkat skins flung over one of the wagon wheels.

"No!" repeated the elder man, the transport rider and owner of the wagon, raising his voice. "With us they shall not come—either she or the brat."

"But look, Jakob," persisted the other; "it is now three weeks, four weeks, that we are on the trek, and she has followed all the time, and carried the child, too. How the poor girl lives I do not know. Take only the child, Jakob."

"How are we to eat? How is the Vrouw to eat?" demanded the Boer, querulously. "Are there not enough mouths to fill already? And God knows how much further the span can go without water in this accursed country; they have enough to pull as it is. And why should I feed the wife and child of every black scoundrel that is fool enough to want them? Verdomte swartkops!" and he spat angrily into the fire.

"But the child," persisted Piet; "that is small, and eats but little, not a quarter as much as a dog. Besides, Klaus may run away if the girl falls sick, and he alone knows the road and the drifts across the river."

There was a moment's pause. "Well, the brat, then, in God's name," snapped the other. "The girl can walk, as she has walked these three weeks," he added, and rolled himself in his rug to avoid further surrender.

Piet rose stiffly to his feet; the night breeze was growing chill. He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, kicked some fuel into the embers of the fire, and went around to the other side of the wagon, where the three Basuto boys were lying.

"Klaus!" he called. "Here a moment!"

"Baas Jakob says the baby may ride with the Vrouw in the wagon, but the girl must still walk."

"There was a sudden movement at his feet, and a dark figure rolled out of the blanket.

"No, boy, no! Not that!" His hand was being covered with kisses. Piet drew it sharply away, and, taking a strip of biltong from his pocket, thrust it into the Basuto's grasp.

"Here, this may help for the girl; it was all I could get," he said, roughly, and turning on his heel he went back to where his brother lay sleeping. Baas Piet was as averse to being generous as the transport rider, though for other reasons.

For a while Klaus lay still.

Presently, carrying the piece of hard sun-dried meat and his own supper of boiled mealies, he crept shivering from his blanket and went slowly out on to the silent veldt, in the direction from which the wagon had come, as he had gone every night to listen for the signal that told him Betta was there among the ant-hills. Then he would cheer her up, and sit beside her while she ate some of his poor rations, though they were not enough for her and the child. Betta was a good girl. He knew that when he gave her father two oxen and some wethers, and took her away with him from the old kraal by the wagon drift across the Krei three years ago. She had been with him ever since, and now, when the trek began, Baas Jakob would not let her ride in the wagon or even come near it.

Klaus grasped the kerrie dangling from his belt at the recollection of the cut across the mouth that the drunken transport rider had given him with his sjambok when he had asked his permission. Besides, there was the baby, and he could not have left both of them behind, so far from the kraal and her own people. But Baas Jakob was a hard man; he did not understand such things.

Ever since they had left Burgersdorp—many weeks ago—she had walked after them, the baby slung at her back; and there were yet three weeks more and the desert strip to cross before they reached the Great Belt, and he could not have the baby to ride in the wagon now with the Vrouw, and the girl would not be so tired.

Ah! Baas Piet was a good man—better than Baas Jakob. He would help; and later on he might even be rich enough to buy a few head of cattle and some ponies, and they would all go back to the old place on the Krei, and . . . He started to his feet as the pipe of a honeybird came faintly out of the distance. Betta was there at last.

The wagon was creaking along under the burning noonday sun; the oxen stumbled lazily with lolling tongues, crawling at snail's pace without fear of the flick of the lash, for every one was asleep except the little vooerloper trudging in front of the two leaders, crooning an endless native song to himself. The wind, more burning than the sun, came in ceaseless gusts across the arid veldt, destitute of grass or tree, and, catching up great clouds of red dust, whirled them in eddying, choking masses about the wagon, and then swept them away until they vanished in the shimmering heat haze. Now and then a tortoise dragged his black and yellow shell out of the way of the span, and lumbered heavily off the track to a safe distance, there to retire within himself until the unwonted apparition had disappeared beyond his limited horizon; or a snake would shoot out a shining head from the shelter of some deserted ant heap as the rumble of wheels roused him from his nap; and far up in the clear blue air floated a great vulture, without a tremor of his wide pinions, just as he had floated for many days past, watching and waiting.

Suddenly there was a stir under the tilt. The curtain was flung aside, and Baas Piet stepped out on to the fore part of the wagon, yawning sleepily.

"Boy!" he shouted. "onsaddle the mare. I shall ride on to the waterhole beyond the drift. It cannot be far off now."

Klaus appeared from underneath the wagon, where his blanket was slung hammock-fashion in the daytime.

"No, Baas Piet; the spirit should not be more than one hour's ride now, and the hole is only two, three mile further."

Presently he brought the mare around from the back of the wagon, where she had been tied up, tightened the girths, and rolled up the riem of the neck halter. Baas Piet swung himself off the edge of the wagon into the saddle.

"Tell the Baas when he wakes up," he said; and with a shake of the reins cantered off through the dust.

"It cannot be far off now," repeated Klaus to himself, as he watched him until he became invisible in the midst of the vast brown expanse of sun-scoured hillside.

It was now five days since they had left the last vlei, and he had given nearly all his share of the hot muddy water that the Vrouw served out to the girl for the last few days, but that was very, very little; and she was sick, too.

For a moment he stopped and looked backward. There, just topping the last rise, miles and miles away, his keen sight could pick out against the skyline the little black speck that had been behind them for so many weeks now, faltering on with parched lips through the heat and loneliness of the plains, always dropping further and further behind as evening drew in.

He heard the snores of the transport rider and his Vrouw as they slept comfortably under the tilt. If they could only feel what Betta felt—yet it was easier for her now that she had not the baby to carry; and the water was close in front; and after that only two or three days' trek before the desert ended. And, comforted by the thought, Klaus walked on after the wagon and returned to his blanket.

The baby was certainly the most contented of all, lying in an empty sugar box under the shade of the tilt, engaged in coiling the soft end of the eighteen-foot lash round and round its chubby arms. It grew fatter and merrier every day. The Vrouw rather liked it, black as it was, for she had no children of her own.

All at once came a warning shout from the vooerloper. They were right on the edge of the drift, and the leaders began to pick their way slowly down the steep bank over the loose rocks and sand. Klaus was busy putting the heavy iron shoe on under one of the hind wheels, while Baas Jakob, in a bad temper at having his sleep disturbed, sat upon the front of the wagon, swearing at him and the other boys for being lazy.

Now sliding sideways over a smooth shelving rock, now plunging down over a ledge with a jar that wrenched every bolt and wheelspoke, the heavy wagon crashed down the bank, only to come to a dead stop at the bottom, imbedded in sand up to the axles. The span was knotted in a tangled mob of clashing horns and twisted yoke reins, snuffing and pawing up the sand with impatient hoofs; instinct told them that water was there—but it was far, far below, for the last rains had fallen many months back.

"Verdomte rooieknies!" raged the angry Baas, beside himself. "Twist their tails; get that iron spike here, Hendrik—that will make the devils move."

But it was of no use; the span only became more hopelessly entangled. In vain Klaus dashed in among them, sjambok in hand, kicking here and slashing there, while Hendrik and the vooerloper called upon the beasts by name and urged them forward. Water they knew was there, and water they would have.

The whip! why don't you take the whip, you scoundrels! Where is the whip? don't the infuriated Boer, rising and glaring about the wagon.

As he went forward he stumbled over the baby and its box, upsetting it and sending the child rolling across the floor of the wagon, where it lay in a ball on a heap of skins, cowering with delight. People so seldom played games with it.

The Boer thrust the empty box back against the side with his foot, and snatched up the bamboo whip handle. Posing it carefully above his head in both hands, he gave a little preliminary flourish, but the end was caught in something—"The brat again, curse it!"

It opened wide eyes of pleasure at him, holding up its dimpled wrists, wound round with the end of the lash.

With a savage oath he kicked it off the end of the wagon into the midst of the struggling cattle and brought the great whip down upon them with all his force. Again and again it uncoiled and whizzed down with a crack like a rifle shot, cutting into the steaming flanks of the plunging mob until they bellowed again. Scared and bleeding, deafened by the report of the whip and the hoarse yells of the men, the maddened beasts straightened out, and with Klaus and the vooerloper tugging at their heads and backs, they hauled the further bank of the drift, the wagon creaking through the rocky river-bed behind them, and then trailed wearily forward into the dusk.

And when all was still the lizards came out of the crevices, only to scuttle back with a whisk of their tails. There was water in the drift now—red water, dripping softly down between the stones and sinking into the thirsty sand. Over the sated a vulture in ever-narrowing circles. And then the night fell.

It was late that evening before Klaus crawled stealthily away from the wagon, taking a full beaker of fresh water from the pool and his supper; the Baas was very angry with him because the wagon had stuck in the drift—though how could he help it if the oxen would not be driven?—and had forbidden him to leave the wagon to seek Betta. But no Baas could keep him from doing that, no matter how many hidings he got for it.

He walked back as far as the edge of the drift, and sat there waiting. He could not see far to-night, for there was no moon, only the half light of the stars, and the bottom of the drift tawny black as his foot. A prowling jackal snarled close by, and at his approach a great vulture, gorged with the remains of some worn-out trek ox that had fallen there to die, though he did not remember noticing it, had flapped heavily off into the night.

Klaus waited for many hours, but the girl did not come. Of course, having the baby to carry again would make her take longer; for Baas Jakob had told him how he had seen it roll off the wagon that morning trying to reach a big tortoise on the road, and crawl after it unhurt, and how he had watched it there until Betta had picked it up when she came along. Still, she would catch them up next evening, and he left the water beaker and the food tied up in a piece of rag under a heap of stones at the end of the road, so that the aasvogels could not get at them, and Betta might find them there in the morning.

But Betta did not catch the wagon up next evening, or the next.

Four days afterward they had passed the edge of the desert and outspanned among the shady tamarisks and the willows by the banks of the Great River.

"Never mind, Klaus," said Baas Piet, kindly, patting him on the shoulder; "hunger is a bad death, but it is God's will. Besides," he added, with a smile, "there are yet many good girls in Basutoland. But you will stay with Baas Jakob and me yet a bit."

"I stay with you—and Baas Jakob," answered Klaus, simply. "He treats me as well as any other Baas."—*Pall Mall Gazette.*

Had Him Fast.

It was only recently, according to a letter in an exchange, that in St. Paul's Cathedral a London guide held forth thus to an American gentleman:

"That, sir, is the tomb of the greatest naval hero Europe or the 'ole world hever knew."

"Yes?"

"It is, sir, the tomb of Lord Nelson. This marble sarcophagus weighs forty-two tons. Hinside that is a steel receptacle weighing twelve tons, and hinside that is a leaden casket, 'ermetically sealed, weighing two tons. Hinside that is a ma'ogany coffin 'olding the ashes of the great 'ero."

"Well," said the Yankee, after reflecting a moment, "I guess you've got him. If he ever gets out of that, telegraph me at my expense."

THE QUIET HOUR.

"Give Us Men."

Give us men!
Strong and stalwart ones:
Men whom highest hope inspires,
Men whom purest honor fires,
Men who trample self beneath them,
Men who make their country wrestle them,
As her noble sons

Worthy of their sires!
Men who never shame their mothers,
Men who never fail their brothers,
True, however false are others,
Give us men—I say again,
Give us men!

Give us men!
Men who, when the tempest gathers,
Grasp the standard of their fathers
In the thickest fight:
Men who strike for home and altar
(Let the crowd cringe and falter),
God defend the right!

True as truth, though lorn and lonely,
Tender—as the brave are only:
Men who tread where saints have trod,
Men for country—Queen—and God:
Give us men—I say again—again—
Give us men!

There is a cry going up from many homes in city, town and village—an intensely earnest cry, from many and many a heart. Sometimes the pleading voice is almost hopeless, and yet the prayers go up day after day, night after night, with hope or without it. Mothers praying for sons, wives praying for husbands, sisters praying for brothers. Do not mistake my meaning. I do not now speak of the many prayers, both public and private, offered for the safety of our soldiers in a distant land.

I speak to-day to young men particularly, and wish to remind you, to begin with, that you cannot take the downhill road—recklessly, defiantly, or carelessly—without involving others in the shame and misery which you may think you have a perfect right to heap up for yourselves. When you spend night after night with bad companions, losing by degrees the shame and self-contempt which at first made you miserable, dare you assert that it is no one's business but your own? Have you lost your manliness altogether? Don't you feel ashamed to drag down the women who love you, instead of using your manly strength to protect and shield them from harm? Are you not ashamed to show such mean ingratitude in return for the kindness you have received? Your mother will forgive! Yes, until seventy times seven! A mother's love is almost infinite. Is that any reason for making her miserable?

These are severe words, and you may indignantly exclaim: "I am not a brute! I don't intend to break any woman's heart!" Probably you don't. Surely no one ever did set out with that intention. But, think a moment, are you carelessly drifting in that direction?

Did you ever watch the Niagara River some distance above the Falls? How quiet and peaceful it looks, yet the current is terribly strong. Drop your oars and drift a little. Then try to row back to safety—if you can! If you let yourself carelessly drift into evil habits, it is folly to think that you can pull yourself up at any time. If you have such a delusion, think of other men who have made shipwreck of their lives; who have lost their own self-respect, and are pitied or scorned by their fellow-men. Did they intend to fling away, with both hands, their hopes for this life and the next? God has provided a natural protector for the weakness of childhood, and another for the weakness of old age. He did not need to write on tables of stone the command that parents should love and protect their children. That law was already written in their hearts. But He did command children to honor their parents, and even singled out that commandment by adding a promise to it. You disobey that command at your peril. If there is a promise attached there is also a penalty implied in the promise. The Apostle says, "Honor thy father and mother, which is the first commandment with promise, that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth"; and certainly it is not likely to be well with those who are undutiful and disobedient.

There is some truth in the Spanish proverb, "One father can support ten sons, but ten sons cannot support one father." Think how your parents denied themselves that they might provide you with everything you needed. Think how proud and pleased they were when you were successful in school or the world. Think how untiringly they cared for you in sickness and in health. Have you paid back any of the debt of love you owe to them?

"A wise son maketh a glad father," and you may, if you choose, fill the last days of your parents with gladness; you don't want to earn the opposite title of "the foolish son," who is truly said to be "the heaviness of his mother," do you?

God made man in His own image. Think what an honor He has bestowed on you, and do not drag down His image below the level of the brute creation.

But over and above the negative virtue of refraining from evil and keeping your manhood from trailing in the dust,—

"Be noble; and the nobleness that lies
In other men, sleeping but never dead,—
Will rise in majesty to meet thine own!
Then wilt thou see it gleam in many eyes.
Then wilt thou light about thy path be shed,
And thou wilt never more be sad and lone."

HOPE.