

# 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, black hills, that alone broke the monotonous flatness, flung interminable inky shadows as the cold, white glare, electric in its fierce intensity, shown out level across the plains. The sense of loneliness, of utter isolation, was overwhelming; the heaves, sown with fire, seemed so remote, and the bare earth, stretching far 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 fire light, where moon and flame struggled for the mastery, loomed the wavering outlines of the track even tethered to the dissolution, and now and again the figure of a man.

The only sounds were the crackling and chirping of the fire light, where 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 boy."

"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 woman to eat?" demanded the Boer, anxiously. "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 should I feed the wife and child of every black scoundrel that is fool enough to want them? Verdome swartakop! And he spat angrily into the fire.

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

There was a moment's pause. "Well, the least, then, in God's name," mapped 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!" A grunt from one of the blankets answered him.

"Bas Jakob says the baby may ride with the woman 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, 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, for it was all I could get," he said roughly, and turning on his heel he went back to where his brother lay sleeping. Bas Jakob was as averse to being generous as the transport rider, though for other reasons.

For a while Klaus lay still.

Presently carrying the hard piece of sun-dried meat and his own supper of biltong, 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 Beta 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 Krol three years ago. She had been with him ever since, and now, when the trek began, Bas Jakob would not let her ride in the wagon or even come near it.

Klaus grasped the korrie 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 Bas Jakob was a hard man; he did not understand such things.

Ever since they had left Burghersdorp—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 the river. But the baby was to ride in the wagon now with the woman, and the girl would not be so tired.

Ah! Bas Piet was a good man—better than Bas 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 Krol, and he started to his feet as the pipe of a honey-bird came faintly out of the distance. Beta was there at last.

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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 vervoerker 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

## A WAR SNAP-SHOT OF PRESIDENT KRUGER REVIEWING THE TROOPS.



President Kruger believes in fanning the fires of patriotism and frequently reviews his soldiers. The above snap-shot shows him on the parade ground. His appearance is the signal for long continued cheering.

them in eddying, choking masses about the wagon, and then swept them away until they vanished in the shimmering 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 unwanted 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 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 Bas Piet stepped out on to the fore part of the wagon, yawning sleepily. "Boy!" he shouted, "consider the mare. I shall ride onto 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, Bas Piet, the spring 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, lightened the girths, and rolled up the rein of the neck halter. Bas Piet swung himself off the edge of the wagon into his saddle. "Tell the Bas 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 scorched hillside.

It was now five days since they had left the last veld, and he had given nearly all his share of the hot muddy water that the woman 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 parched lips through the heat and loneliness of the plains, always dropping farther and farther behind as evening drew in.

He heard the snores of the transport rider and his woman as they slept comfortably under the tilt. If they could only feel what Beta 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 more plump every day. The woman rather liked it, black as it was, for she had no children of her own.

All at once came a warning shout from the vervoerker. 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 shoeing under one of the hind wheels while Bas 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 far 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 were 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 before.

"Verdome doolnek!" raged the angry Bas, beside himself. "Twist their tails; get that iron spike here, Hendrik—that will make the devil 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 vervoerker 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 scoundrel? Where is it?" roared 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.

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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 belched again. Scattered 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 vervoerker tugging at the leaders' heads, strained panting at the farther 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 Basuto came out of the crevices, only to scuttle back with a shriek of their tails. There was water in the drift now—red water, dripping softly down between the stones and clanking into the thirsty sand. Overhead sailed 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 breaker of fresh water from the pool and his supper; the Bas 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 see Beta. But no Bas 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 tonight, for there was no moon, only the half light of the stars, and the bottom of the drift yawned black at his feet. A prowling jackal snarled close by and at his approach a 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 many hours, but the girl did not come. Of course, having the baby to carry again would make her take longer; for Bas Jakob had told him that he had seen it roll off the wagon that morning, trying to reach a large tortoise on the road, and crawl after it until Beta had picked it up when she came along. Still, she would catch them up next evening, and he left the water breaker and the food tied up in a piece of rag under a heap of stones in the middle of the road, so that the Basuto could not get at them, and Beta might find them there in the morning.

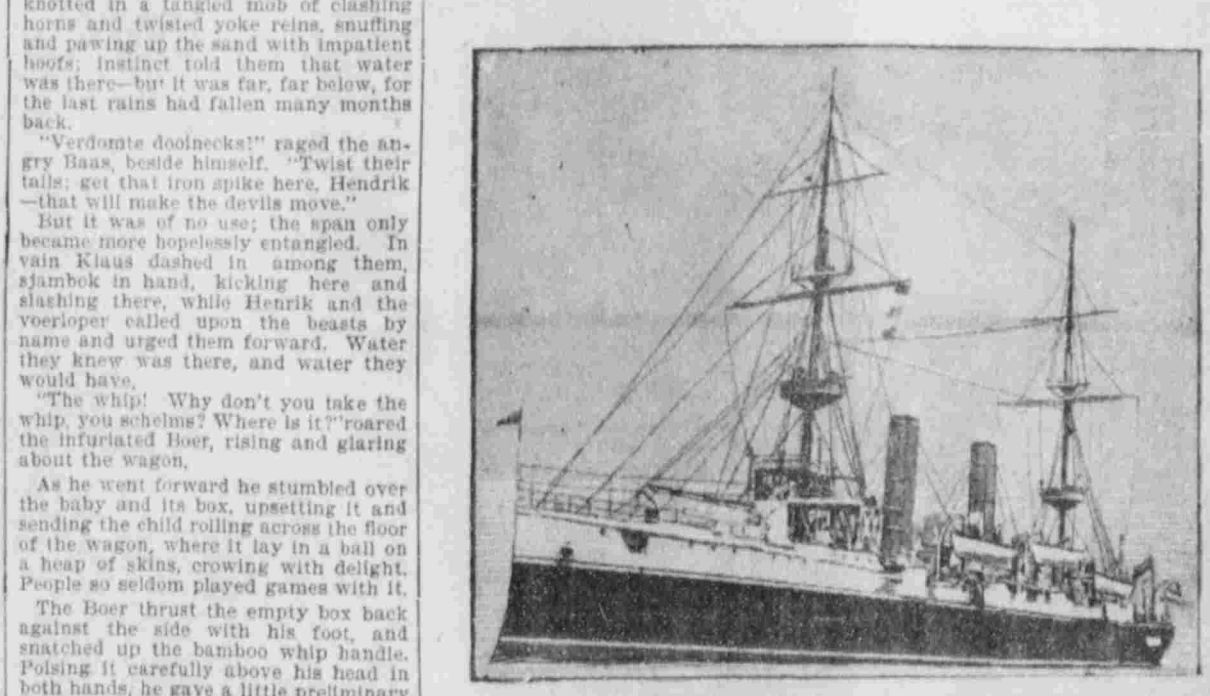
But Beta did not catch the wagon up next evening, or the next.

Four days afterwards they had passed the edge of the desert, and entered among the shady tamarisks and the willows by the banks of the Great river.

"Never mind, Klaus," said Bas 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 Bas Jakob and me yet a bit?"

"I stay with you—and Bas Jakob," answered Klaus solemnly. "He treats me as well as any other Bas."—*Pall Mall Magazine.*

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