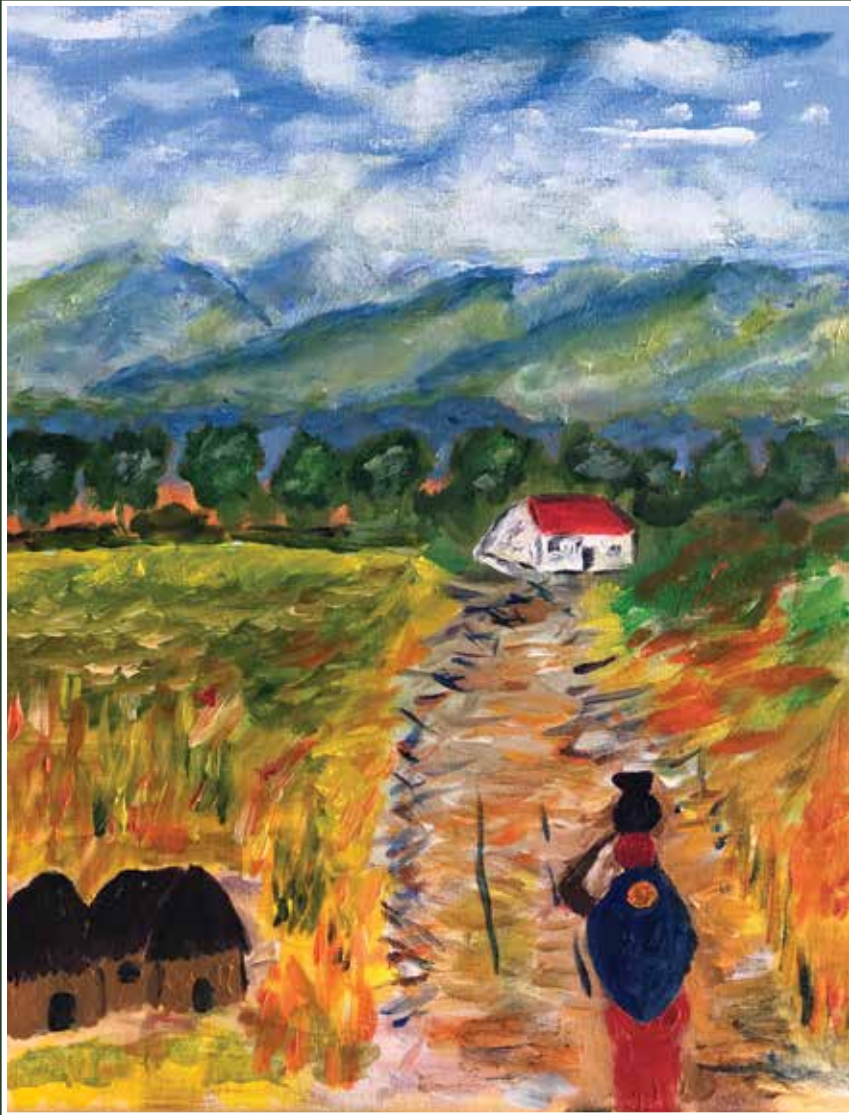


THE TYRANNY OF GIANTS



The Novels of Mary Elizabeth Martens

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*The Tyranny of Giants: The Novels of
Mary Elizabeth Martens*
© Lynn McMaster and Nancy Bowring

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Mary Elizabeth Martens, 1939

PREFACE

The enthusiasm, support and extensive input from Christopher Merrett, without which this project would not have come to fruition, is gratefully acknowledged. Thanks are due to Gillian Tatham, Stella Smuts and Susan Naylor for assistance with Martens' family history and genealogy.

The title of this book is taken from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, in which Isabella utters the following lines:

it is excellent
To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous
To use it like a giant

The painting on the cover is by Nancy Bowring. Cover design and text layout were by Jo Marwick and proof reading by Cathy Munro. The two novels were retyped by Suzie van der Merwe. To all of them grateful thanks are due.

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MARY ELIZABETH MARTENS: A BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION

Our great-grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Martens, was the first born, in 1870 in Liverpool, England of John McKenzie and Mary Clark. The couple were married in 1869 in John's Scottish home town of Glenluce, Wigtownshire where he had been born in 1844. Mary Clark hailed from Newcastle-upon-Tyne in Northumberland. Her father was a blacksmith by trade and worked in the shipyards of Ireland.

After Mary Elizabeth's birth, the McKenzies returned to Scotland, where their sons Hugh, John, James and James Brown were born. The two younger sons (both James) died at a young age from smallpox in 1876 and 1878, and the family returned to Liverpool where another son, William, was born in 1881. Following the death of their two small sons, in 1881 Mary Elizabeth's parents left England with their family aboard the *Asiatic* and arrived at Port Natal (Durban). This move was precipitated by both the smallpox deaths and the fact that some of her mother's family had settled in the Eastern Cape. Thus, at the age of 11, Mary Elizabeth arrived in Natal.¹

On arrival, the family travelled to Estcourt where they settled. Later, they moved to Coalfields, Dundee where John worked as a blacksmith and was employed in the building of the railway line to Biggarsberg Junction (Glencoe). Mary Elizabeth's younger brother John, born in 1874 in Scotland, eventually served two terms as mayor of Dundee: 1918–1920 and 1928–1930. During the Anglo-Boer War he served with the Natal Carbineers at the battle of Talana and in the siege of Ladysmith. He subsequently owned a farm in the Dundee district, which he named Glen Luce after his birthplace.

In 1891, at the age of 21, Mary Elizabeth married Roelof Gerhardus Petrus Martens in St Phillip's church, Dundee. Roelof, commonly known as Piet, was born in Umvoti in 1868. At the time of meeting Mary Elizabeth, he was a successful farmer living near Greytown. His ancestors escaped religious persecution in the Netherlands during the first half of the nineteenth century and emigrated to South Africa. They participated in the Great Trek, eventually settling near Pietermaritzburg. In 1838, Piet's forebears had taken part in the battle of Blood River fighting under Andries Pretorius. Piet settled at Kranskop near Greytown and was described as a fine upstanding man. He became president of the Kranskop Farmers Association and was known as a

tireless and very successful public servant, highly respected and much loved by family and friends.

Mary Elizabeth and Piet lived on their farm, Jammerdal, near Kranskop. They were prosperous farmers and as well as Jammerdal, they owned three further wattle farms in the area – Elandsvlei, Silverstream and Thorn Leas. Both Piet and Mary Elizabeth became staunch supporters of Jan Smuts and the South African Party founded in 1910 and English was the language of their home. They had seven children; three sons and four daughters. All of Mary's children adored their 'little mother'. She was an outstanding cook, loved good food and enjoyed entertaining: Jammerdal was known for its tennis, house and dinner parties. Regularly on Sundays all the staff would be dismissed for the day and the Martens family would host Sunday lunch, at which local residents were entertained lavishly. In the absence of staff, the daughters assisted with the cooking and waited on the guests. The Jammerdal home welcomed all.

Mary Elizabeth was erudite, witty and a lively conversationalist. She read widely and was well-versed in the classics, ancient and modern, as well as being a voracious reader of the popular authors of the day, such as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Ella Wheeler Wilcox. The earliest record of Mary Elizabeth's published work is 1903 when two short stories of hers appeared in the *Greytown Gazette* and the *Natal Witness*.²

In 1911, she published her first full-length book, *A Woman of Small Account*. It covered a wide range of South African social issues of the time, appeared to wide acclaim, and was reprinted three times.³ An Australian reviewer of the book noted that it 'assumes the guise of a story, [and] is a powerful plea, worthy of Olive Schreiner, for the fair treatment of the natives of South Africa, male and female'.⁴ The book is also notable for its views on feminism. Another reviewer writes of the 'conflict of modern feminism with the humdrum traditions of the spiritual obligations of matrimony' as presented by Mary Elizabeth.⁵ More recently, it has been noted that set against a background of South African life and conflict the book is 'remarkable for its sympathetic portrayal of a woman with feminist inclinations and her inevitable alienation from her husband'.⁶

In 1915, Mary Elizabeth's second book, *Daughter of Sin*, was published.⁷ Set in rural colonial Natal, for its time it was a courageous account of racial prejudice in an extremely racist community. Her views on race and 'immorality' were well in advance of her time. Had she lived in the era of the National Party government, it is likely that she would have been a fierce opponent of apartheid injustices, on a par with Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton and André Brink; and possibly fallen foul of the law. The predominant subject matter of *Daughter of*

Sin concerns section 16 of Natal Act 31 of 1903, which forbade white women from carnal relations with men of colour.⁸ Those who did and were caught were subjected to imprisonment with a maximum of two years hard labour. Offending black males suffered the same punishment with an added 25 lashes. Issue from such a union was often removed from the parents. White males were not mentioned in the Act. Mary Elizabeth dedicated her second book to ‘Those women of Natal who have suffered under an unjust, one-sided and most iniquitous law’. In both of her books, no social group escaped her biting pen and Mary Elizabeth’s concern for the rights of women is evident. By 1920, she was considered ‘Natal’s leading novelist’.⁹

In 1920, both Piet Martens and Mary Elizabeth’s mother, who was now living at Jammerdal, died. They are buried at Jammerdal. After 31 years of happy marriage, at the age of 50 Mary was widowed. She did not remarry and wore black for the remainder of her life. During her final months, she went to live with her daughter, Mary Georgina Hutcheson at the latter’s home Khayaletu at Isipingo Rail and there in 1939, just before Christmas, at the age of 69, Mary Elizabeth Martens died of cancer. She fought her illness to the end, frequently saying she was not ready to die. On her death certificate, her occupation is listed as journalist. As can be imagined, her children were devastated by her death. In her will to her ‘beloved family’, she bequeathed her ‘undying love equally’ to all her seven surviving children. Having been the victim of much ill-fortune in the later years of her life, she had nothing else to leave. She is buried at Jammerdal.

LYNN McMASTER and NANCY BOWRING
Cape Town, South Africa and Bodiam, East Sussex
2019

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HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVELS OF MARY ELIZABETH MARTENS

Whatever settlers may say—and they generally have a lot to say—the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element – Patrick Wolfe.¹

Political and economic background

Mary Elizabeth Martens arrived in Natal as a child of eleven in 1881. In her forties, shortly after the founding of the Union of South Africa, she published two books. Her young adult years were thus largely spent during the period known as Responsible Government that had been instituted, after long local pressure, on 4 July 1893. It was popularised by dissatisfaction with the perceived lenient attitude of the Colonial Office in London towards Africans; and also characterised by anti-Asian sentiment and strong views on cheap labour. Almost all white settlers anticipated a comfortable life in Natal based on service from perceived racial inferiors. Responsible Government awarded whites a free hand over all black inhabitants, and authority over Asians and Africans was progressively tightened.²

'The white population', Edgar Brookes and Colin Webb record, 'was so small and colour prejudice so vocal.'³ The politician John Robinson, who would become the first premier of Natal from October 1893 to February 1897, was a case in point. He described the presence of Asians as 'pernicious on social grounds, commercial, financial, political and especially on sanitary grounds.' Much of the colonial government's effort and animosity was directed at the Asian population: anti-Indian speeches were the 'stock-in-trade of the average Natal politician'.⁴

Zululand was annexed in 1887, with King Dinuzulu demoted to the rank of induna of the Usutu. Tongaland (Ingwavuma) was annexed in 1895 and then absorbed into Zululand two years later, thus completing the subjugation of Africans south of Portuguese East Africa. The immiseration of all Africans in Natal south of the Thukela River had started well before 1893. White enterprise benefited from railway and other infrastructure development, particularly the connection to the goldfields of the interior. African food self-sufficiency was threatened by increasing population and land shortage: the

locations were overpopulated by a factor of two with disastrous effect on grazing. Commercial peasant agriculture was circumscribed by discriminatory legislation and practice with restrictions on land purchase and discouragement of rental. On top of this there followed a series of natural disasters from the 1890s – locust plagues, drought, rinderpest and East coast fever – that white farmers were much better able to resist. The combined effect was growing restlessness and religious separatism such as Ethiopianism, which further accentuated the socio-economic rift between whites and Africans.⁵

In 1892 black farmers supplied one third of Pietermaritzburg's grain at a time when Africans owned over 83 000 hectares of freehold land. This was being acquired in lieu of cattle and put to increasingly sophisticated agricultural purposes. The number of Africans exempted from the Natal Native Code (kholwa) reached 1 334 by 1894. They were theoretically entitled to equal status with whites in some regards, but they were treated with high suspicion and distrust by the authorities and white public opinion. By 1905 it was no longer possible to inherit exemption; while new powers were exerted over traditional authority. Social and economic power and authority were increasingly wielded by, and in the interests of, white farmers: the Natal Agricultural Union was effectively a 'second parliament'. Mobilisation of capital to the benefit of white farmers while denying African access was the *modus operandi*. Africans were becoming serfs, the burden of tax borne by them proportionately greater than that of whites. The trusteeship powers of mission stations were transferred in 1895 to the Natal Native Trust, followed by abolition of individual tenure on missions and a ban on African purchase of Crown land.⁶

The turn of the century was marked by the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). Participation by white Natalians was relatively low – 20 per cent of men of military age – but the post-war settlement included absorption of the Northern Districts. By 1906 the white population had reached 94 000. The economy was still underpinned by agriculture and forestry with a significant coal mining industry; and there were concerns about labour supply. Economic potential was enhanced by steady railway and dock development.

The African population was increasingly impoverished and only three men had managed to obtain the vote.⁷ The South African Native Affairs Commission (SANAC, 1905) largely endorsed the status quo, supporting tribalism and chiefly authority.⁸ Recommendations about restrictions on land purchases led to the notorious Natives' Land Act of 1913 after Union. In general, segregation

and discrimination were entrenched. In Brookes and Webb's memorable phrase, African life was 'everybody's business and nobody's business'.⁹

This was clearly apparent during the Bhambatha Rebellion of 1906 when martial law was declared before unrest developed while colonial forces behaved in an unscrupulous, provocative and brutal manner. The basic causes of African dissatisfaction were misrule and the imposition of a poll tax designed to encourage wage labour. These undermined the traditional rural political and social order, compounding the crisis of the 1890s. The rebellion culminated in the Mome Gorge massacre and political trial of Dinuzulu. He was defended, on the whole successfully, by W.P. Schreiner. But the case is notorious in a wider sense for a response by the Natal Attorney-General to a Zulu witness: 'What! Would you dare to contradict a white man?'¹⁰ Native administration was purportedly apolitical, but strongly imbued with this sort of racism, and minor attempts at reform were dead by 1912.¹¹ Indeed, by 1910 the 'economic prosperity and independence of the small peasantry had been destroyed' together with middle-class African aspirations.¹²

In 1910 Natal, outmanoeuvred, was absorbed into South Africa. Its African population was ignored and faint hopes raised by the Cape franchise ring-fenced. Natal premier, F.R. Moor, who vehemently opposed African rights, pushed for the enfranchisement of white women, but without success.¹³ A referendum in 1909 had shown a growing sentiment of white South African nationalism in Natal, especially in Pietermaritzburg. A year after Union, Natal had a population of 98 000 whites, 133 000 Asians, 9 000 coloured persons and 953 000 Africans. The rulers thus constituted a tiny minority of less than 10 per cent. Many of them regarded education in general as a waste, irrelevant to Natal which was seen as a place of business based on physical labour overseen by whites. It was an essentially backward place.¹⁴ In 1910 there was not one government school for Africans, although by 1915 missionaries were educating nearly 22 000 pupils at 302 schools.¹⁵ And in 1923 the Natives (Urban Areas) Act would institute a national policy of urban control and segregation.

Social conditions and moral panics

In December 1886 white men in Durban staged intemperate gatherings, marched in large numbers, staged a riot, and formed a Vigilance Committee in response to reports that Africans had committed 'outrages' on white women. In both Pietermaritzburg and Pinetown, Africans were assaulted; and in the capital a Females Protection Society prevented blacks from using

pavements.¹⁶ Meetings, consisting largely of men – 1 600 in Durban and 700 in Pietermaritzburg – called for the registration of Africans in urban areas, capital punishment for rape, and flogging and branding for indecent assault. Legislation was indeed introduced, yet within six weeks the febrile atmosphere had subsided and the mobs dispersed. The Attorney-General confirmed that the December ‘outrages’ had been minor and that there had been no abnormal activity. The panic had been based on a chimera, an ‘imagined pandemic’, perception above fact: ‘In place of evidence, white settlers relied on rumour and supposition.’¹⁷ Indeed, ‘sexual crimes were not especially prolific’ and inter-racial rape rarely exceeded single figures each year. In 1888 and 1889 there was none. Yet John Robinson felt able in the Natal parliament in November 1886 to describe ‘social terrorism’, words that his colleague H. Binns condemned as lacking in wisdom.¹⁸ On a well-worn theme, Robinson called for measures to ‘protect the honour of our women, to shield the innocence of our children, and to preserve inviolate from savage lust the domestic sanctity of our homes.’¹⁹ White space was privileged, specially protected from a supposedly threatening and insalubrious surrounding environment. The necessary reinforcing language, in a colony whose politics were stained by mediocrity, was blatantly racist.²⁰

A root cause was white male dissatisfaction with the practice whereby African males (so-called houseboys) performed domestic work regarded as a female preserve, sharing space closely with white women.²¹ They, it was felt, were careless in their interactions with black male servants. The issue was that of white masculine control over both white women and African men: ‘The panic provides a glimpse into the colonial home – a domain usually hidden from view – and reveals some of the fraught gender relationships and racial tensions that characterised Natal settlers’ domestic arrangements.’²² Moral panics reflected psycho-sexual and other white male insecurities that undermined assumed gender and caste superiority.²³ Consciously or subconsciously women were to various degrees male property, subordinates of patriarchy, the ‘despotic authority of husband and father’.²⁴ Thus ‘strong ideals of racial superiority were combined with patriarchal attitudes which recognised the right of men to protect their property in women’, assumed to be pure and chaste, often under the guise of chivalry.²⁵ There were frequent warnings about the over-familiarity of white women and children with African servants. White men feared potential change to gender roles as much as any perceived ‘black peril’, which ‘came to stand for a dense array of ill-defined fears and fantasies of racial contagion and invasion.’²⁶ Protective mobs sought female obedience:

all-round dominance, hegemonic masculinity and the patriarchal dividend were at stake inflamed by misogyny, racism and homophobia.²⁷

Natal had been through a similar but more protracted experience in the late 1860s and early 1870s, which Norman Etherington ascribes to fear of loss of control and a panicked state of mind on the part of white patriarchs about apparent phantoms, things unseen: much anxiety derived from very little evidence. Men were the predominant commentators on events for which there was no hard evidence. Cases of common burglary were elevated to charges of attempted rape and taken seriously by the courts: 'the imagined perpetrator was often a stranger [not a servant], indeed was often a phantom not seen clearly enough for identification.'²⁸ The accompanying inflamed language, fanned by the press – 'shocking', 'outrage', 'dastardly' and 'disgusting' for example – indicated a neurotic obsession with the topic, ironically at a time when the range and level of crime and vice among whites in what amounted to frontier society was escalating. These seem to have been the classic signs of moral panic and fear of general change at a time of reconciling the irreconcilable. Africans were expedient demons, wanted and feared in equal measure in urban areas.²⁹

Legislation imposing capital punishment for black-on-white rape had been disallowed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London in 1869, before the first panic had taken full hold. There are suggestions that it was fuelled by press and political speculation. A togt registration scheme had finally been introduced by Theophilus Shepstone in urban areas in 1874 at the time of the campaign against Langalibalele when the scare subsided. Until 1886 there was intermittent discussion with occasional surges of excitement in response to specific incidents, some of them based on the flimsiest of evidence. Yet in December 1886 history repeated itself and there was an explosion of white anger.³⁰

At its most sober this involved a renewed call from Harry Escombe for the compulsory registration of all Africans in urban areas, a move that had previously been thwarted by London. His measure was passed into law in February 1887. Earlier that month, Law 27 provided for a mandatory death sentence for rape and various other harsh punishments for assault with intent to rape and indecent assault. The definitional discretion given to juries in such cases was such that 'it is possible that consensual relationships between female settlers and male Africans could result in criminal convictions'.³¹ The vagrancy provisions were also tightened but London used its powers to withhold Royal Assent from compulsory registration on two technical grounds, which were

adjusted in October 1888. Law 27 referred to 'uncivilised races' and applied only to Durban and Pietermaritzburg.³²

Such white panics have been interpreted in various ways. They generally involved a perceived health or security threat to white settlers and were associated with the proximity of 'uncivilised' people. Generally short-lived, they resulted in long-term and draconian measures. But there were other less obvious reasons such as economic change and general dissatisfaction with government. Responsible Government had coincided with a three-year economic depression and the independence of Africans, urbanising in increasing numbers, provoked anger. Insolvencies rocketed and invoked stigma in Victorian society in which white men were supposed to provide for their families. Furthermore, there was 'rising visibility and self-confidence of certain classes of women'.³³ Numbers of them were attempting to enter the job market and there was a rise in feminism relating to marital and suffrage reform and temperance issues. 'It seems likely that the depression served to exacerbate existing, but normally latent, tensions within Natal's settler society.'³⁴ Keegan sums this up as a 'malaise of masculine identity' that included a growing fear of the feminisation of society, a rise of crude masculinity and veneration of imperial adventurism that could quickly transform into violence and brutality with constant racial overtones.³⁵

African men employed in domestic work continued to create an obsessive anxiety among whites that was commonplace in colonial settings. Few African women migrated to towns because of their position in traditional society and in Natal African men did not appear to find domestic labour incongruous. Rape scares were symbolic of diffuse fears and resentment about loss of control in an environment often regarded as exotically alien; so much so that it engendered fears of loss of identity and 'degeneration'. Ironically, African servants enabled bourgeois standing and respectability but simultaneously posed a threat to those very values, particularly in times of economic stress. And while unemployed Africans were regarded as loafers engaged in unacceptable activity, when employed they became a primitive and rapacious threat. As Keegan puts it succinctly, whites were challenged by the 'two faces of "Jim"' around whom there existed a 'dark fantasy world'.³⁶ The economic utility of Africans was strangely at apparent odds with grossly racist spoken and published views about savages of limited intelligence and other unpalatable characteristics; although these were used to justify authoritarianism and exploitation, which made the mission-educated African the most despised of Africans as a threat to white identity and space.³⁷ Underlying this complex situation was the master-

servant relationship.³⁸ The social order was paramount and when ‘Africans simply were not subservient enough’ reactionary populism was mobilised with mob justice as the ultimate sanction.³⁹

White women who employed African ‘nurse boys’ – either because they were working or they wanted to lessen their domestic load – were often objects of criticism in the press.⁴⁰ ‘Confidential reports submitted to the government by members of the judiciary confirm that sexual relations between white women and black men were not uncommon in colonial Natal’; and that they were not infrequently close companions, making the issue of social distance and the ordering of domestic space contentious.⁴¹ This provided fuel for the siege mentality of December 1886, for a brief period a ‘call to arms’.⁴² Its outcome included legislation with the effect of ‘limit[ing] interactions between white women and black men.’⁴³ Sol Plaatje alluded to predatory white women and African victims, although he was careful to commit his thoughts to print only in the United States.⁴⁴ For their part, white women were conversely wary of employing female servants out of distrust of their husbands.⁴⁵

Miscegenation

Miscegenation was a longstanding concern. For instance, in 1861 a Mrs Harrison complained that her 18-year-old daughter and a Zulu man called Ubunu had produced a son. Magistrate John Bird suggested to the lieutenant-governor as supreme chief that cohabitation should be criminalised under Native Law in the interests of preserving white prestige. The Attorney General in turn felt that this might in fact accelerate the loss of status.⁴⁶ ‘For whites, “half-castes” blurred the demarcation of racial frontiers, for they straddled the binary opposites of civilised and uncivilised, threatening to make claims for inclusion in the former while tending to legitimise the aspirations of the latter. Hybridity had its own chilling metaphorical allusions in the discourses of degeneration and racial threat.’ Yet racial purity was considered a female responsibility. Men lived in a ‘fantasy world of their imaginations, a repository of deep anxieties about race purity, degeneration and defilement.’⁴⁷

The fear of racial mixing was tied up with concerns about fallen women and prostitution, liquor sales and lapsed whites living in slums who betrayed caste standards and made a hegemonic code of behaviour look fragile. In particular there was a clampdown on inter-race sex workers in Natal, Transvaal and Rhodesia in the early 1900s: ‘It was in these northern territories that the principle of the inviolability of white womanhood was proclaimed in law,

not only as protection against the unwanted attentions of black men, but as prohibition against their own flouting of racial mores.⁴⁸

The Criminal Law Amendment Act (31 of 1903) was designed to 'amend the law relating to brothels and immorality'.⁴⁹ Section 16 ran: 'Illicit sexual intercourse between any white woman and any coloured person as defined by the Law 15, 1869, shall be unlawful; and any white woman or such coloured person contravening the provisions of this section shall be liable, on conviction, to be imprisoned with hard labour for a period not exceeding two years, and, in the case of such coloured person, with lashes not to exceed twenty-five.' Inter-racial sex, whether for love or gain, was criminalised and potentially subject to harsh punishment. Procurers of white women and brothel keepers could be sentenced to five years and 25 lashes (ss. 17, 18). Other sections of the Act were largely definitional and technical. Law 15 of 1869 was enacted to control 'idle and disorderly' black (then described as coloured) persons, defined as 'any Hottentot, Coolie, Bushman, Lascar, or any of the people commonly called Kafirs, whether they are refugees from any of the surrounding states or tribes or belonging to the tribes originally in this Colony and its neighbourhood.'

Other writers

Martens had a male counterpart in the opening years of the twentieth century. Under the same title – *Black Peril*, a synonym for black rape – George Webb Hardy published an article, then a novel, in 1904 and 1912. This period had seen further moral panics, sustaining a long tradition in Natal and South Africa as a whole that had profound political and social consequences. These episodes occurred in 1902–1903, 1906–1908 and 1911–1912. The first panic coincided with an upsurge of white prostitution operating across racial lines at the end of the Anglo-Boer War, and had little or no hereditary consequences let alone any foundation in claims of increased cases of sexual assault. The second was linked with the Bhambatha Rebellion; and the third had no discernible source other than a general sense of growing degeneracy and contamination as a result of an increase in the numbers of poor whites.

In 1912 there were only twelve convictions for black-on-white rape amid numerous acquittals: 'Almost anything, it seems, could be interpreted as an attempted rape.' Newspapers reported these supposed cases in formulaic fashion using narratives full of pregnant silences, which connected with the sanitation syndrome that created an air of contagion.⁵⁰ The ultimate fear was a blurring of racial lines and an increase in miscegenation. All these panics

exhibited the familiar mix, to various degrees, of socio-political anxiety and psychological fear.⁵¹ Charles van Onselen argues that they embittered South African race relations in the years leading up to the Great War at a time when comparable hysteria was first developing in Rhodesia and for a similar reason: 'simply a product of a racist imagination.'⁵² After the Anglo-Boer War white men had been disadvantaged in the labour market as well as frustrated at their inability to replicate Australia or Canada in southern Africa.⁵³

Hardy has been described as a 'rhetorically belligerent Englishman', a 'political gadfly' and an 'intemperate critic'.⁵⁴ His novel addresses sexual relations across racial lines.⁵⁵ Like Martens, he was a journalist and his earlier identically named article exposed alleged sexual misconduct at a prominent Durban girls' school. As a result he had been in and out of prison for obscenity in 1904 and 1905. He turned his reportage into what Gareth Cornwell describes as somewhat poor writing 'treading an uncertain line between fiction and autobiography'. Literary quality notwithstanding, he had grasped the truth that the issue was emotional not political. (Cornwell argues that Hardy's work anticipated William Plomer's 1920s novel *Turbott Wolfe*.) Webb's novel is set in the town of Mosquito (Durban) where a journalist, Raymond Chesterfield, publishes details of sexual relations between white schoolgirls and a black labourer. The writer is imprisoned, exposes appalling prison conditions, and on release leaves for England. The thrust of the book is that 'liberal ideals are incompatible with the reality of race relations in South Africa, and that the reward of the prophet bearing this truth is martyrdom.' The book is anti-imperialist, mocks the supposed civilising mission, and attacks land theft. But its protagonist eventually arrives at the conclusion that social segregation of the races is necessary in South Africa; irrational because his democratic principles find him in favour of political and legal equality. Cornwell concludes that Chesterfield's fear is not of rape, but sexual competition, and that his solution is a caste system.⁵⁶ For his part, Hardy had changed his tune considerably with a more measured approach to race and a new, critical attitude to imperialism.⁵⁷

Hardy's earlier article, published under the same title in *The Prince* (7 October 1904) and which landed him in prison for obscenity, is described by Cornwell as 'hysterically racist' and 'pitched at a level of emotional intensity which nothing in Hardy's novel would lead one to expect'. Hale describes his writing for *The Prince* as 'sardonic' and concludes that it 'became increasingly venomous' including advocacy of lynch law and criticism of racial equivalence as a pathology. Webb wrote of a 'corner of hell dumped right down amid the sanctity of Durban life' and Cornwell questions whether the precise events

described ever took place. Drawing on wider work about moral panics, he makes a case for the aggravating role of the media. He also suggests that Webb in his writing treats both white women and African men as the mysterious ‘other’ with characteristics disturbingly akin to white males, lending credence to theories about insecurity and anxiety.⁵⁸

The writing of Mary Elizabeth Martens

Mary Martens’ books effectively vanished soon after publication. However, there is recent mention of *A Woman of Small Account*, a copy having been among the possessions of Madge Smallie (née Tatham) of Pietermaritzburg. The book had been given to her by her husband. She and Martens would have been part of the same Dundee social circle – Smallie’s father and Martens’ brother both held the position of mayor. There is no record of Smallie’s response to the book, but she is not known to have had any suffragist leanings although she held on to the novel. A repressed figure, she punished her daughters when they expressed their feelings and ironically kept caged birds.⁵⁹

A Woman of Small Account according to *Mendelsohn’s Bibliography* can be found in nine South African libraries: University of the Orange Free State, Library of Parliament, South African Library (Cape Town), Durban City Library (which also has the third printing), Killie Campbell Africana Library (Durban), Johannesburg Public Library, University of the Witwatersrand Library, Natal Society Library (Pietermaritzburg) and State Library (Pretoria).⁶⁰ *A Daughter of Sin* is not mentioned. It is possible that its absence relates to its content, but library acquisitions of overseas publications were probably not as complete as they might have been in the middle of a world war. Both books are, naturally, listed in the *British Museum General Catalogue*.⁶¹

***A Woman of Small Account: A South African Social Picture* (1911)**

The novel is set in Natal, sixty years after the Great Trek (1835–1845), so the years concerned would probably be 1895–1905. Neither the Anglo-Boer War, nor the likelihood of Union, is referred to. Most of the events occur in the country, near the Drakensberg, on the farm Berg Vlei, owned by a Dutchman, Hendrik de Villiers. Pietermaritzburg features towards the end of the novel.

Feminism and suffrage

For the time of its publication the book is remarkable for its portrayal of feminism in southern Africa. The heroine is Hester de Villiers, who is about 20 years old. Hester is described as a suffragist in embryo and a woman of

advanced ideas. She objects strongly to the subjugation of women by men, whom she says are often 'brutes' in all spheres of life. Hester's views on women's rights and suffrage were shaped by her upbringing and education.

She had been born to a young Scots woman, a governess, and a Dutch man – the adopted son of Hendrik de Villiers. Her mother committed suicide when Hester was an infant, and her father, who lived a dissolute life, abandoned her. She grows up on the farm Berg Vlei in rural Natal, owned by her paternal grandfather, Hendrik de Villiers. The latter is an uneducated bully and tyrant who beats his wife and children. He had acquired his land by marrying a wealthy young Dutch woman who died at an early age. Hendrik's second wife is also wealthy, the Scottish daughter of an attorney. Early on in the novel the influence of both the Dutch and English communities in Hester's home life is apparent. Hendrik's second wife is a staunch advocate of women's rights and she has friends who are suffragists. She becomes Hester's godmother and is responsible for her early education, providing the young girl with a vast array of classical literature to read. Works include those of Virgil, Flavius Josephus and Macaulay; George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*; and many others. When Hester is 16, her godmother dies and Hester is sent to a college in the Cape to complete her education before returning to Natal. At college, she takes scant interest in 'womanly' pursuits, and the headmistress says that Hester has a 'reprehensible tendency' to closely follow the politics of the day.

Her views on the status of women are markedly influenced by the Jewish-Roman historian Flavius Josephus, who wrote in biblical times. From his writings, Hester learns that women were strong, unselfish, intelligent and wise. Josephus never refers to women as weak. Hester notes Josephus telling of an unnamed 'woman of small account' who singlehandedly prevented the massacre of a besieged city. Not a single male assisted her. Hester believes that women of her time have lost sight of their own powers due to excessive repression by males, creating the unjust society in which she lives. Thus Hester, on the farm as an independent and opinionated young woman says that she feels like a caged bird, that she beats her wings against restraining bars. She would like to lend her weight to the great struggle for women's rights, but has to bear these thoughts alone because if she voiced them her relations would think her mad. Nevertheless, Hester writes and publishes articles on women's wages and the right of women to the franchise. She dedicates her articles to the cause of women and their 'unequal struggle for common rights'.

Hester is highly critical of the practice whereby men of the time, particularly Dutch farmers, would marry women for their property and fortunes to which,

on marriage, the women would lose all access. This theme is seen throughout the narrative and Hester personally experienced this in her own family, with her mother and her tyrannical grandfather. She protests at the lack of laws to prevent this and thus protect women. In her conservative society, family and friends, both male and female, are shocked and criticise her for unmaidenly, immodest and, to them, unacceptable views. She is rebuked for even thinking of these things.

Hester's views are contested by her friend Phyllis Gray, who abandoned a promising career as a solo concert violinist in England to marry the narrow-minded and bigoted missionary, Paul Gray. The English mission station is close to the farm on which Hester lives and the two women see each other frequently. Phyllis's views on males reflect those of the Bible. She sees men as noble, grand, passionate and worthy of worship. Women are the weaker sex, and must bear suffering and pain. From a young age, girls must be taught to foster their own sexual modesty and sense of shame to prevent social transgression. Hester disagrees, saying that this has created a most unjust society where men can do no wrong whereas 'fallen' women are castigated and permanently lose their place in society. Phyllis further believes that women are collectively incapable of speaking 'sensibly', as do men. Hester believes this is because many women have not been afforded the opportunity of an education enabling them to become equals in society.

Phyllis's views on suffrage reflect those of many in Hester's circle. Phyllis and others espouse the view that suffragists are spinsters, bitter because they have been unable to get men to bend to their will. They only ever see their side of the question. These women do not know the 'truth' of life and are not conversant with the real issues, ignorant of the wide breach between the sexes. The only way to learn about this, according to Phyllis, is through marriage. Lack of knowledge drives suffragists to absurd excessive behaviour and their cause becomes a matter of mirth and ridicule. Phyllis believes that if a woman is married to a good man who provides for her, the woman should want for no more in life other than to provide a happy home for him. Furthermore, she says that when a woman marries a good man who loves her, she can influence the man to do as she would like. Hester disagrees with all of this. She firmly believes in the franchise and rights for women and says she will never marry – she will learn the 'truth' in other ways. She will never be dominated by a male.

Nevertheless, Hester does marry. The culmination of her feminist views is seen in the failure of her marriage and she remains true to principles of which she becomes victim. She marries an English lawyer, John West, and leaves

Berg Vlei to live in Pietermaritzburg. A year into the marriage, the tedium of married life is eased by the unexpected arrival of Phyllis Gray when John is away. Phyllis has come to find two 'fallen' young black women, members of her husband's mission congregation who had had sexual relationships with local white policemen and borne 'half-caste' children. They ran away from their rural homes to live in Pietermaritzburg, but rather than abandon them to an awful fate, Phyllis has come to rescue them and return them to their worried families. Hester accompanies Phyllis into unsavoury areas in the city, searching for the women. Eventually, they find them living next door to Hester, with John's cousin, Norman. Both Hester and Phyllis are shocked by miscegenation, especially that associated with black Christian mission women (see below). They discuss how common a practice it is and the fact that the men involved bear no consequences. To bring the matter to public knowledge, Hester promises Phyllis that she will write a book detailing the experiences of the young black women.

Phyllis departs for home with the runaways while John returns and learns of what has happened from Norman. He is furious with Hester and forbids her to write the book – it is unwomanly and abominable. She may never see Phyllis again. Despite Hester's pleas, John writes to the Grays telling them that Phyllis may no longer contact Hester; but John will not condemn Norman for his cohabitation with the young girls, regarding his behaviour as 'immaterial'. Hester, however, believes that the government should enact legislation to punish such men. Thus, as foretold by Hester earlier in the novel, domination of women by men, the complete exoneration of men who have committed unacceptable behaviour, and the castigation of innocent women all occur.

Although Hester had agreed with John to write no further articles for magazines, she refuses to accede to John's further demands and says she feels like something 'better than his dog and a little dearer than his horse'. She tells him that she married him as his equal and not as his 'subordinate or bondswoman'. She refuses to bend in any way, and will not allow Norman in the house. Hester continues to write to Phyllis, but her letters are returned to her by Phyllis's husband, unopened, and the authoritarian Paul Gray forbids Hester to write any further letters to his wife. Although the breach between John and Hester is permanent, she remains in the home and writes her novel. When it is ready for publication in England, John refuses to accompany her overseas. He says that it is 'fiddlesticks' that the book could be good for her 'downtrodden sex' as Hester claims. She remains steadfast in her determination and promise to Phyllis to publish the book, and leaves John permanently to go

to England. He forbids her to ever return to their home. Fortunately, Hester has her own capital, not having given it to John at the time of their marriage and she is financially independent. Hester remains overseas for ten years and becomes a famous author, but unknown to her John divorces her.

The mission stations

Social problems associated with the Christianising of the local black population by English missionaries are a major theme of the novel. They are presented as complex and the book is a devastating critique of the failure of mission stations to achieve their objectives. Profound problems exist within the system, but no solutions are offered by the missionaries. The problems are presented largely through the medium of discussions held between the heroine Hester de Villiers and Phyllis, wife of the English missionary Paul Gray.

Regarding the status of the black population, there are two points of view within the white rural community. The missionaries believe in universal brotherhood – that all men regardless of race are equal. They advocate that the black population, through education and the acquisition of Christian religion, should be given an estimation of themselves and an ambition to rise above their surroundings. In stark contrast are the proto-apartheid views of the Dutch, who believe that the white race is superior and that black and white must remain forever separate. The Boers are bitterly opposed to English missionaries. Typical views are expressed by Hester's grandfather who says that missionaries have no business educating blacks as the missionaries are ignorant of local culture: they tend to break down the social values and mores of black culture and replace them with nothing. Blacks should never be taught that they are the equal of whites. Once they join a mission congregation, they become insolent and lazy; and acquire the faults of the white race, but none of its virtues. The Boers also disagree with missionary teaching in English and not in the mother tongue, Zulu.

Hester is also highly critical of the teaching of the missionaries. She believes they have failed and that the education given is only half complete. She states that the main interest of missionaries is to gain Christian converts to fill their churches and schools. This is often done by resorting to nefarious means, which include giving the women the materials they need in order to dress in the style of Europeans. Overall, there is an ever-increasing problem of 'frightful' immorality between young female black Christian converts (*amakholwa*) and white men. Many *kholwa* resort to prostitution and live in brothels.

Phyllis has observed these disturbing trends at her mission station and agrees entirely with Hester. With regard to black lovers, she believes there are two types of white men. On the one hand, are those who are born in the colony, who readily and openly take black women lovers and discard their name and position within society. These men, says Phyllis, do no harm. On the other hand, there are the 'sneaking sensualists' who meet one face to face, are courteous, but smug. They whisper 'sweet nothings into innocent pink ears, kiss the girl next door, and show the quickest way to hell' to kholwa at the nearest mission station. Phyllis also acknowledges that it is an unfortunate fact that the gift of a 'trashy muslin dress' or some ribbons or a chemise readily wins the favour of a 'half-civilised' female. Further, for the gift of money, these women sell their souls. Both Hester and Phyllis agree that the guilty men face no chastisement and are never called to account for their behaviour. Hester strongly advocates the enactment of legislation to punish such men.

For the women involved in these relationships, the situation is very different. They often fall pregnant and give birth to illegitimate 'half-caste' children. At the mission stations, the 'evils' of their behaviour are pointed out to them, and they are then expelled from the congregation. They are provided with no support from their Christian mentors. Within their communities, the women are forever despised and lose value in the eyes of their relatives, their lobola much reduced. Thus the missionaries become disrespected within the general black community. Hester blames the mission stations entirely for cultivating a love of dress in the kholwa thereby exposing them to profligates of the white race. She expresses the view that although not all kholwa women fall prey to prostitution, the 'best' teaching of the missions often produces worse results than 'direct savagery'. Thus according to Hester, it is no surprise that local blacks shield their daughters from European civilisation as they would from a pestilence. Hester recommends that rather than these women going down such a path, the churches should be shut, schools closed, and communion tables abolished. This, she says, does not imply there is no salvation for non-Christian blacks; for, if ignorant children go to heaven, so too will the heathen.

The complexity of the situation is seen further, as told by Phyllis, at a well-known German mission station that teaches 'black is black and white is white' as the Boers would have it. However, this has also failed and the missionary is detested by his congregation. The kholwa desert the congregation and constantly try to have the missionary arrested. The authorities do not support him and they are dissatisfied with the poor attendance at the mission school.

Both women agree that the extent of the 'immorality' problem at missions is unknown to the general public. Phyllis would like to lay the issue open to view and peel the scales from their eyes. Hester undertakes to write a book to expose what is happening and to include every 'lurid' detail. Phyllis wishes her well, but says that if the contents of the book are true, it will be unprintable.

Dutch attitude to the black population

In the eyes of the Dutch, white and black races must be separate. The black must not see himself as the equivalent of a white. Throughout the novel, the treatment of local blacks by Dutch men and women is, at best, derogatory. The Boers see blacks as descendants of the biblical Ham. In keeping with this view, blacks are regarded almost as slaves in bondage to the white race and treatment of their black staff by many Dutch is at times brutal. Physical punishment, by means of a sjambok, is common and blacks are regarded as lazy, dishonest, indolent and untrustworthy. They must be kept subservient to the white race the Dutch see as superior masters. The attitude of the Dutch in Natal to the blacks remains significantly influenced by the murder of Piet Retief by Dingane and the subsequent massacre of Voortrekkers by Zulu impis at Weenen in 1838.

Attitude of the Dutch to the English

Generally, the Dutch are depicted as detesting the English and their tongue, and refer to the English as *vuiles*. In the home of Hester de Villiers, her grandfather prohibits the use of the 'mincing English tongue'; explaining his bitterness against the British government as being rooted in history. He speaks of the Great Trek, when the Boers left the Cape Colony for new lands around 1835 to escape oppression by the colonial government. Settled in Natal, Hendrik de Villiers' family was massacred by Dingane, after the murder of Piet Retief, at Weenen, in 1838. Other family members died elsewhere during the war.

After Weenen, the De Villiers family was granted farmland in the Zwartkops Valley in the Boer Republic of Natalia. Hendrik terms it the land 'for which we had bled'. His ongoing hatred for the British was the result of the annexation of Natal as a colony by the Cape government in 1843. By 1845 an effective administration was installed with Martin West as lieutenant-governor and the power of the Boer Volksraad finally came to an end. Hendrik describes how the British in 1845 mulcted Dutch children of their inheritance and took from the Dutch, by means of the 'violence of their great power', the lands for which the Dutch had bled. All the farmland at Zwartkops was taken from the

De Villiers family by the British and given to their ‘protégés ... murderous demons’ who had killed the Boers. As a replacement farm, Hendrik’s father was offered for sale by the British 2 000 acres of land not fit for rock rabbits. He refused to take it, and ended his days in a mud hut in Pietermaritzburg, having had to sell all his stock in order to survive. This was not an isolated case, but occurred throughout the colony and was seen by the Boers as gross injustice, cruel greed and high-handed arrogance by the British, which caused years of hatred and bitterness.

Hester on the other hand despises and disdains the Dutch and regards most Boers as half educated and ignorant. She disapproves of the manner in which they treat their wives, many of whom were married for their money and property – as personified by her grandfather. Hester is not well-liked by the Dutch, including those within her family. They consider her to be ‘too English’ and sophisticated. Her grandfather says she is possessed of the *duivel*. She is far too free-thinking and refuses to be part of conservative Dutch society opposing and ridiculing many of its social mores.

Calvinism

The theme of Dutch Calvinism is often apparent in the novel’s depiction of ultra-conservative Boer society. It is deemed a sin – going against the Almighty – to read anything other than a Dutch Bible. Certain Dutch farmers, some of whom have acquired farms through marriage, are ridiculed by Hester for sitting on the stoep all day, doing little other than reading the Bible, while their wives work to earn money and provide food. The Dutch fear the ‘over-education’ of their children, which is responsible for them despising their own *taal*.

A Daughter of Sin (1915)

A Daughter of Sin is the sequel to *A Woman of Small Account* and located in rural Natal in the years prior to the Great War. Certain of the characters who appeared in the latter book are reintroduced and, similarly, the setting is the rural farmlands of Natal. As there is no copy of *Daughter of Sin* in any one of the major libraries of South Africa and no record of it in the *South African Bibliography*, it is entirely possible that the subject content would not have been well received in Natal.

Like *A Woman of Small Account*, the sequel refers to the failure of the mission stations in their Christianising of rural blacks, feminism, the franchise for women, and animosity between Dutch and English residents. But these are

dealt with relatively briefly. The controversial central and dominant theme, which also featured prominently in *A Woman of Small Account*, concerns carnal relationships between white and black men and women. The social implications of these relationships are presented in detail, which for its time was remarkable.

Central to *A Daughter of Sin* is Act 31 of 1903. The provisions of section 16 have already been described and are relevant to the novel. Martens courageously dedicated her book to 'Those women of Natal who have suffered under an unjust, one-sided, and most iniquitous law'. In the novel, through a series of relationships, she vividly presents all the consequences for those, both black and white, male and female who conduct intimate relationships across the colour line. Implications for wider society are also referred to.

Relationships between white men and black women

Central to the novel are the Dutchman, Phillip Meyer, and his English wife, Louise (Lulu), who was formerly governess to the district magistrate's children. Lulu relinquished the Catholic faith to marry Phillip. The marriage was fiercely opposed by Phillip's staunch Dutch family who loathe both the British nation and the Roman Catholic Church. Phillip is a failed farmer who runs an unsuccessful local store from his home. He is considered wild and godless, and has lost a great deal of money through gambling on horse races and drinking, much to the shame of his devoutly Calvinistic Dutch family. Phillip is notorious for many relationships with young Christianised black women (*amakholwa*) with one of whom, Christina, who works in his home, he has fathered a mixed-race child. However, as was the norm, relationships between white males and black women were overlooked by society and Phillip is never called to account, maintaining his normal place within white society. However, his wife does question his behaviour. When Lulu, who has to face Christina daily in her home, confronts him about his extramarital affairs, asking whether she would be forgiven for the same, she is told by Phillip that a man is 'but indiscreet' and his affairs are not parallel to a white woman doing the same. For a woman, such indiscretion is 'unnameable', he says.

From the perspective of the black population, the young kholwa who indulge in affairs with white men are regarded as outcasts by their own society. Children from such unions are unaccepted by both black and white and rejected by most. According to Martens, there is an 'army' of young black women, products of the failed Christian mission system, who fall prey to such affairs. Phillip is indeed called to account by black elders of Christina's tribe.

She had been betrothed to a young black man, Mjiba, who went to work on the mines for two years and returned to find Christina as Phillip's mistress with an illegitimate 'white' child. Mjiba demands his bride money (lobola; £28, the value of seven cattle) back from her family. The black elders request of Phillip that he pays them the money, which they have spent, and is now owed to Mjiba who no longer wishes to marry Christina. To pay would be an admission of adultery by Phillip, who would fall foul of the Kerkraad, so he refuses. When the men threaten to go to speak to his wife Lulu, he agrees to lend them the money they require.

Through the voice of Mjiba, Martens presents the views of the black community. He says that his betrothed Christina has become the 'tool of the white man's desire' and a 'bearer of bastards'. He now despises her and blames the missionaries who teach young black women to like the ways of the white man and their white God, and to dress in their garb. He states that Phillip has no chastity when it comes to black women. When he is threatened with jail by Phillip's furious brother (Andries Meyer) for supposedly lying about Phillip and his black amours, Mjiba wants to know how he can be jailed for speaking the truth. To do so would be falling victim to the white man's justice, the 'justice of Satan'. Mjiba further goes on to say that should a black man even raise his eyes at a white woman, he is thrown into jail with hard labour under Act 31. He further points out that if a white woman who has just one sexual encounter with a black male is caught, she goes to jail, is jeered at, and becomes a social outcast. Yet there is no legal protection for black women who prostitute themselves for white men; while the latter continue unscathed, living a normal life within society.

Relationships between black men and white women

The results of a black man attempting to gain the love of a young white woman are ruthlessly portrayed by the case of Absolom and an unsuspecting young white woman, Maisie Gray, daughter of the missionary Paul Gray. Absolom is the cousin of Phillip's black shopkeeper, David Magoma, and he is regarded as a bit of a dandy. While walking home unaccompanied one afternoon from one farm to another, Maisie is accosted by Absolom who says he loves her and insists she gives him her brooch as a token of her love for him. Maisie is taken unawares and tells him to leave her alone; she would rather die. She is terrified. Absolom becomes angry, grabs hold of her, and pinions her arms. In the ensuing fracas, he tries to strangle her. Martens portrays vividly the consequent difference for the black male who dares to look at a white woman.

Two white men arrive on the scene, responding to Maisie's screams. Absolom is captured and almost beaten to death with a stirrup strap, but is permitted to go. Those who beat him do not want to receive the death penalty on behalf of Absolom. The latter makes his escape and leaves the colony. Eventually, the incident makes it into the press. The black man is roundly condemned and the white nation infuriated. The situation is entirely different from that of white males who conduct relationships with black women.

Relationships between white women and black men

The situation regarding an affair between a white woman and a black man, and its subsequent punishment, is seen in the case of Lulu Meyer and David, Phillip's black storekeeper. David Magoma is an educated black man, who because of his education is unacceptable within both white and black society. He is regarded as being 'too clever' for his station and after a series of positions ends up running the farm shop. He senses that Lulu is desperately lonely, all but abandoned by her philandering husband. Lulu is also very frightened at night on her own as the farmhouse is close to the black location. David offers her comfort, lends Lulu his classic English books to read, and a friendship develops between the two. This eventually becomes a sexual affair and Lulu falls pregnant. Phillip, however, believes the child is his. After the birth of a daughter, it is obvious that the child is of mixed race, and it becomes known that David is the father. He is immediately arrested under Act 31 and sentenced to lashes and hard labour not exceeding two years. Despite Phillip's own waywardness and his numerous extramarital affairs with black women, he is distraught, and personally reports his wife to the local police station.

Martens then describes the situation for a white woman who crosses the colour line, and it is completely different from that of young black women who have affairs with white men. The kholwa receive no protection from the law. Lulu is to be arrested and face trial. The reaction of the white community towards her is harsh. She is roundly condemned, becomes an outcast and tries to kill herself. She is saved by the arrival of Hester de Villiers (see *A Woman of Small Account*) who is a registered nurse and she cares for Lulu until her strength returns. Hester arranges for the child of the 'illicit' union to be removed from Lulu and adopted by a family in Pietermaritzburg. Once she is strong enough, Lulu is taken to prison to await trial. Hester supports her throughout, thus remaining true to the values she expressed in *A Woman of Small Account*. Lulu admits guilt and is sentenced to one year in prison with hard labour. Hester manages to achieve a reconciliation between Phillip

and Lulu; and it is arranged that once she is out of prison, to escape further condemnation by the community, she and Phillip will leave together to live in Rhodesia and assume new names. Hester tells Lulu that she will work to get the law changed to improve the situation. The lot of a white woman in such a relationship was severely punitive.

By using local public reaction in the immediate aftermath of Lulu's trial, Martens clearly indicates whom she believes are the guilty parties responsible for illicit black/white affairs. She challenges many preconceptions. A crowd of people gathers outside the courthouse where Lulu has recently been sentenced. A few are most unhappy about the treatment meted out to her and want to take the matter before the Union by sending a deputation to Prime Minister Louis Botha. A meeting of about 60–70 men and women is held in the courthouse and chaired by the magistrate. The issue is whether Act 31 is 'just and worthy of a land governed by two civilised nations'; namely, the British and Dutch. Relevant questions raised by Martens include:

- Is it right that a white woman is faced with 'public calumny for a crime that a man can commit a thousand times with impunity?'
- Is it right that a European woman is imprisoned and degraded for a fault which in black women is overlooked and barely commented on?
- Is it a reflection of 'British fair play' that a black man should be scourged and sent to hard labour for a sin that white men openly indulge in?

In the audience there are those for and against the law and the punishment. Revealingly, the sole missionary present, Paul Gray, although invited to speak, refuses to take a stand.

Martens expresses her views through the voices of the magistrate and Hester de Villiers. The magistrate states that the one-sidedness of the law is 'unique among countries over which the British flag flies'. The legislation is 'iniquitous' and continued talk of 'black peril' by the white population should this law be repealed is unfounded. Rather, the only black peril is the 'army' of black women that fall as helpless if willing victims to 'our sons', the white men. Should one black male spring out of the dusk at a white woman, the whole country 'shrieks with horror' and every man would 'shed blood to avenge the white woman's honour'. Crucially, the author points out that it is the whites who set the blacks the example by overstepping racial boundaries. Given these circumstances, who can blame a black male for wanting to do the same with white women? But he can only achieve this by means of violence and outrage.

Another fact critical to the novel is that the average white South African woman of the time thought the black male to be a 'low brute', a 'savage' and 'barely human'. A white woman admits black males into her home as she would a dog; but often he has access to the bedroom of the mistress to give her morning coffee and he dresses the children in her presence. However, as Martens indicates, he is not an animal and has all a man's basic instincts. Any Christian religion he has teaches him that he is the white man's 'equal and brother'. Thus according to the author, any black peril is of the whites' making.

Hester speaks: she says that if justice were 'evenly applied', the jails would be 'overflowing'. White males court Christianised black women 'whom a black man would woo', and in so doing become the black man's rival. Whites are able to bestow favours superior to those offered by black men and therefore it is no surprise that the black male does 'not respect and honour the white race'. Whites claim to 'cherish chastity', yet take no notice of the evil shown by many white males within their own community. The morality law (Act 31) is one-sided and iniquitous, and it is that way because only white males have the franchise and make the laws. Women have no say, but want just legislation. If women are deprived of a code of morality and equality in rights and wage earnings, women must be given the franchise; and Hester is determined to fight to that end.

All points of view are thus starkly portrayed and the meeting ends unresolved. However, Martens' views are clear: the whites are solely responsible for what are commonly regarded as illicit carnal affairs across the colour line and Act 31 is a most unjust and evil law.

Subsequently, the Immorality Act (1927) was proclaimed to prohibit illicit carnal intercourse between Europeans and Africans. The Immorality Amendment Act (1950) forbade sexual intercourse between Europeans and anyone not European. The prohibition was therefore extended to intercourse between white people and coloured or Asian people. It followed the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act passed the previous year.

Overview

Mary Martens' novels may justifiably be regarded as significant social commentary on their times. They portray suffocating patriarchy in which wives and children were regarded and treated as property. Yet females were expected to uphold morality while their husbands could behave as they pleased. White women who transgressed were regarded as 'fallen' and punished as criminals; while the penalties for black men were extreme. They were all victims of

moral panics stirred by male psychological insecurity. A crisis of male identity and ego is plain, especially as early stirrings of feminism were evident, for example, in suffragism. Fear of challenge to the social order manifested itself in misogyny and racism, the latter especially towards Africans seen as educated. The irony was the philistinism and backwardness of rural society, demonstrated by Dutch farmers in particular.

CHRISTOPHER MERRETT and LYNN McMASTER
 Pietermaritzburg and Cape Town
 May 2020

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- 8 Natal was represented by Marshall Campbell and S.O. Samuelson at the 1905 commission.
- 9 Brookes and Webb, *A History of Natal*: 219.
- 10 Ibid: 227.
- 11 Ibid: 228.
- 12 Lambert, 'The impoverishment of the Natal peasantry, 1893–1910': 304.
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- 14 Ibid: 253.
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- 16 This was an issue that would crop up again in Pietermaritzburg in the first decade of the twentieth century.
- 17 Jeremy C. Martens, 'Settler homes, manhood and "houseboys": an analysis of Natal's rape scare of 1886' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 28(2) 2002: 379–381; David M. Anderson, 'Sexual threat and settler society: "black perils" in Kenya, c. 1907–30' *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 38(1) 2010: 49, 56; Timothy Keegan, 'Gender, degeneration and sexual danger: imagining race and class in South Africa ca.1912' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27(3) 2001: 460.
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- 19 Brookes and Webb, *A History of Natal*: 172.

- 20 Ibid: 171.
- 21 The use of the term 'boy' was intended to belittle in condescending and paternalist fashion (Robert Morrell, 'Of boys and men: masculinity and gender in southern African studies' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24(4) 1998: 616.
- 22 Martens, 'Settler homes, manhood and "houseboys"': 381–382.
- 23 Rickert, 'Race, sex and the law in colonial Natal': 95.
- 24 Morrell, 'Of boys and men': 607, quoting Lawrence Stone.
- 25 Anderson, 'Sexual threat and settler society': 67; Keegan, 'Gender, degeneration and sexual danger': 460, 474.
- 26 Ibid: 471, 474.
- 27 Morrell, 'Of boys and men': 607–608.
- 28 Norman Etherington, 'Natal's black rape scare of the 1870s' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 15(1) 1988: 36–38, 40; Keegan, 'Gender, degeneration and sexual danger': 470.
- 29 Etherington, 'Natal's black rape scare of the 1870s': 40–41, 43–45.
- 30 Martens, 'Settler homes, manhood and "houseboys"': 382–384; Etherington, 'Natal's black rape scare of the 1870s': 45.
- 31 Martens, 'Settler homes, manhood and "houseboys"': 400.
- 32 Ibid: 384–386.
- 33 Keegan, 'Gender, degeneration and sexual danger': 463.
- 34 Martens, 'Settler homes, manhood and "houseboys"': 389–392; Keegan, 'Gender, degeneration and sexual danger': 461.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid: 467; 475.
- 37 Charles van Onselen, *New Nineveh: Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886–1914, volume 2* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982): 39–41; Keegan, 'Gender, degeneration and sexual danger': 474. There were echoes of this in the removal of Cherokee and other indigenous North American tribes from Georgia because they were becoming too successful (Wolfe, 'Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native': 396).
- 38 Rickert, 'Race, sex and the law in colonial Natal': 82–83.
- 39 Anderson, 'Sexual threat and settler society': 51, 54, 66, 68.
- 40 Martens, 'Settler homes, manhood and "houseboys"': 392–396.
- 41 Ibid: 397; Van Onselen, *New Nineveh*: 30–33, 46–47; Keegan, 'Gender, degeneration and sexual danger': 475.
- 42 Martens, 'Settler homes, manhood and "houseboys"': 398.
- 43 Ibid: 400.
- 44 Keegan, 'Gender, degeneration and sexual danger': 476. Plaatje's piece was biblically entitled 'The mote and the beam' (1921).
- 45 Van Onselen, *New Nineveh*: 17.
- 46 Etherington, 'Natal's black rape scare of the 1870s': 48.
- 47 Keegan, 'Gender, degeneration and sexual danger': 464, 466, 467.
- 48 Ibid: 464–466. In 1913 a Commission into Assaults on Women focused on prostitution.
- 49 *Natal Government Gazette* 55(3352) 15 September 1903. J.G. Maydon was the Colonial Secretary responsible for this legislation.
- 50 Keegan, 'Gender, degeneration and sexual danger': 471–472.

- 51 Gareth Cornwell, 'George Webb Hardy's *The Black Peril* and the social meaning of "black peril" in early twentieth-century South Africa' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 22(3) 1996: 441–444.
- 52 Van Onselen, *New Nineveh*: 45; John Pape, 'Black and white: the "perils of sex" in colonial Zimbabwe' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16(4) 1990: 700–701, 707. In 1907 there was violent uproar in Nairobi after a minor incident of impertinence by rickshaw pullers. It took very little to stir up white male outrage.
- 53 Keegan, 'Gender, degeneration and sexual danger': 462.
- 54 Frederick Hale, 'Racist attitudes and prison reform in George Webb Hardy's *The Prince* and *The Black Peril*' *Natalia* 25 (1995): 26, 28.
- 55 There were other, similar novels: for instance, Perceval Gibbon's *Souls in Bondage* (1904) and Francis Bancroft's *Of Like Passions* (1907).
- 56 Cornwell, 'George Webb Hardy's *The Black Peril* and the social meaning of "black peril" in early twentieth-century South Africa': 445–448, 453.
- 57 Hale, 'Racist attitudes and prison reform in George Webb Hardy's *The Prince* and *The Black Peril*': 37, 38, 39.
- 58 Cornwell, 'George Webb Hardy's *The Black Peril* and the social meaning of "black peril" in early twentieth-century South Africa': 442, 448–451; Hale, 'Racist attitudes and prison reform in George Webb Hardy's *The Prince* and *The Black Peril*': 26, 28.
- 59 Julia Martin, *The Blackridge House* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2019): 135–137.
- 60 The names of libraries used here are those listed in the bibliography, which checked the holdings of 29 of them in the mid-1970s.
- 61 *A South African Bibliography to the Year 1925 being a Revision and Continuation of Sidney Mendelsohn's South African Bibliography (1910) edited at the South African Library, Cape Town* (London: Mansell, 1979); *British Museum General Catalogue of Printed Books ... to 1955* 153: column 782.

A Woman of Small Account

[A South African Social Picture].

BY

MARY E. MARTENS.



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TO
MY HUSBAND
AND
MY DEAR MOTHER.

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CHAPTER I

AND WHISPERS IN ITS SONG, “WHERE HAST THOU BEEN SO LONG?”

A LONG, dreary road had it been – an interminable road. Like the pathway in a chequered life, it had assumed at will every varied hue to which Mother Earth can lay her diverse claim. Winding its tortuous way between countless miles of still veldt, it had borrowed, here a hue of russet brown, there a tinge of dull red emanating from thick, sticky mud which had clung with fiendish tenacity to lagging feet: now again the brilliant glare of a white sand that had ached its way into broken boots and about blistering toes. Over stony hills it had swept, bare and uncompromising, “thorns” of mimosa trees, fern palms, endless luxuriance of vegetation, where the palpable beauty of the surroundings was lost and wasted upon the pedestrians, accompanied as it was by an undershower of pebbles sharp as crystal and cruel as sin.

Now once more out upon the high veldt, with a blue sky and a merciless afternoon sun overhead, a line of mighty hills against the horizon, and near above a short range of imposing rocky eminences leading up to majestic parent, yclept the Drakensberg.

And everywhere, in and through, and out and about, sickening, penetrating, a heat-laden wind that nauseated the very breath of life to the belated wayfarers.

“I’m about done for, Tom.” It was the elder of the two who spoke, as he fixed hollow, blood-shot eyes upon his companion. “How far did you say it was?”

“Seven mile,” returned the younger man, a shade more respectable in appearance than the other. “That’s what the old woman said it was. ‘Got any saddles to mend, mum?’ says I. ‘No,’ says she, sharp-like, nor harness, nor boots, nor nothink,’ says she. ‘And what’s more, we don’t want no tramps here; so you’d better git,’ says she. ‘Ow far is it to the next plice?’ says I. ‘A bit more’n an hour,’ says she. ‘A horseback?’ says I. ‘O’ course,’ says she. ‘That must be seven mile at least,’ says I, ‘and me mate’s sick,’ says I. ‘Well, clear out,’ says she. ‘I don’t want no sick tramps here.’”

A volley of Billingsgate, choice and passing rich in variation, here broke from his perched lips.

“Drop that,’ growled the old man, “and help me along, if I’m to reach the place on my own feet.”

His companion eyed him in quick alarm.

“You don’t never mean as you feel worse, hold man?” he asked, with something of yearning in his hard young voice.

“I can’t get much farther,” was the reply, with thick difficult utterance. “If there was a tree or a bit of shade anywhere —”

The voice died away, too tired and listless to keep time to the heavy feet.

A sudden gravity settled upon the young man’s features; good, well-cut features in themselves, if stamped in Nature’s common mould; and an anxious glance from furtive blue eyes stole ever and anon towards the haggard figure of his companion as the toilsome way was pursued in painful silence. They took a short cut to which the younger traveller had been directed by a passer-by, and found themselves creeping along over a long, swelling bult¹ of brown, wiry grass, which crackled underfoot and stuck strong, sharp spikes with arrogant persistence into the worn patches of shoe-leather. Gently and tenderly the hardy young tramp led his companion into the track of the Kaffir footpath, and himself trod stolidly at his side, lending the strong support of his sturdy arm and shoulder, while the spikes underfoot ached their way into the quivering flesh of his own soles. A brown desert of a bult it was, arid almost as the sands of Sahara, haunting and hateful as a bad dream.

Out upon the highway once more and down a long decline which swung its tortuous way around the foot of a miniature mountain. And now the blessed relief of a rippling spruit, gurgling under juicy grass of luscious green, and embanked with an extravagant wealth of wild fern and a luxury of flowering arums at its brink.

The suffering vagrant sank to the cool, moist earth with a dry sob bursting from his throat, and a passion of nameless regret struggling for understanding in his seared brain and dully-aching heart. The other man laid their soiled and dirty impedimenta at his feet, and busied himself about the preparation of a meal. Out of a smoke-begrimed can of the camp-kettle species he produced a few thick slices of bread, dried and distorted by the heat, and plastered together with evil-smelling butter; then a tough stale junk of boiled beef. With a huge, tobacco-stained clasp-knife he split the beef in two; and impaling the larger half upon the point of the blade, he set it upon a slice of bread and handed the

¹ A low hill.

ration to his companion. The other barely glanced at the delectable with dull, sunken eyes, and shook his head.

"I can't, Tom," he said, with thick enunciation. "The sight of it's enough for me."

"Oh! Come now, Villiers," said Tom in a voice of wonderful entreaty. "Try and take a bit o' vittles, old man, or we won't never git to that theer bloomin' Dutchman to-night."

"Who told you he was a Dutchman?" asked the other with quick, unreasoning anger.

"The old Yorkshire gal, o'course," returned Tom, simply; and proceeded to explain with graphic precision the how and wherefore that he had acquired his information. Long before his tale had reached its meridian his companion had sunk again into the half-lethargic stage, and was gazing across the water through a gap between the hills, and far beyond the blue line against the horizon, with eyes of haggard misery and craving, heart-sick longing.

Tom shook his head and heaved a half-strangled sigh; but reflecting, mayhap, that it were pitiful to waste the good substance which the gods provide, he deposited his own minor share in the can for future service, and proceeded, with the aid of his faithful blade, to despatch the larger and better portion which his friend had rejected. With a nice tact inherent within him, and fostered by no aid of training or education, he forebore to make further remark or comment, and proceeded with his meal in silence. At its conclusion he released the cup of enamel hanging by a length of voorslag (stolen many months before from the whip of a transport-rider who had afforded them a night's lodging) to the rolled blanket which composed his bed; and crushing back a clump of regal arums to ensure the non-presence of lurking puff-adder or like reptile, he knelt upon them and filled his mug. Having rinsed and refilled the cup after a hearty drink of the loo-warm fluid, he returned to the roadside and offered it to the other man. The latter took the drink without comment, tasted it, and handed back the cup: then lay face downwards upon the bank.

A long half-hour passed, and the sun was making towards the Berg, when Tom touched the recumbent figure.

"If we don't git a move on, old man," he remarked humbly, "we won't git to that theer Dutchman to-night. And it'll be infernal cold down in this here vlei."

The words aroused the older man. He lifted his head and regarded the younger with something of interest or even kindness in his gaze.

"I am ready, Tom," he said with an attempt at briskness in his tone: and held out his hand for assistance. Tom helped him gently to his feet, and strapped the

blankets of both upon his back. Lifting the camp-kettle with his left hand, he motioned across the spruit with the right, and pointed to the long, thread-like road which wound up the hill.

"Once we're up there, Villiers," he remarked, "I reckon we ain't got fur to go."

"No!" said Villiers. "The old place lies at the bottom of the hill on the other side."

Tom glanced at him askance.

"Ow d'ye know?" he asked softly.

"I surely ought to know," responded the other, "seeing that —" His voice died away in silence. The keen evening breeze had already stolen down the valley, in place of its heat-laden precursor of an hour or two ago, and with a shiver he crossed the rivulet and made for the long purgatorial way once more. A weary climb he found it. A weary climb for heavy, leaden feet, tired brain, and sick heart. Truly the sins of his youth pressed sore upon him, and bore him down with burden too deep for human utterance to enunciate.

Long before they reached the summit of the hill he was leaning weightily upon his companion's supporting arm. A damp, soaking mist was stealing fast upon their wake, but before them, dark, blue, lowering, yet full of a celestial promise, wide and high as its own majestic beauty, towered the mighty range which is the boast of northern Natal. The sun in his setting had left a fast-departing glory behind, and the vivid prism of yellow and crimson, and faint iridescent green, was reflected about them as they turned with simultaneous gesture to the evanescent loveliness, so soon to give way to the darkness of night.

And despair! The word had echoed itself in the elder man's brain as he faced the western sky. Each line of pain, each furrow wrought by wilful dissipation and hard living, started into glaring self-assertiveness upon his pallid face, as he turned it, with a wan smile, upon the humble companion of his wanderings.

"I feel, Tom," he said, in a voice faltering with regret, "I feel as though we have taken our last tramp together, and as though that is the last sunset I shall ever bodily witness. Strange!" in a musing monotone. "Strange that I should only realize the vast wonder of it now! God forgive me. God forgive me for the long years of sin and reckless blasphemy. And help me to meet Her."

His head had sunk upon the breast again. A movement of his companion aroused him.

"I wish, Tom," he said, with wistful impotence, "I wish you were the better for my company these years we have spent together."

“O’ course I am,” said Tom, half snivelling, “‘Aven’t you always been a-gittin’ at me, and a-chuckin’ me pore old mother in me fice? ‘Aven’t ye mide me swear to go back to ‘er as soon as I’ve brass enough?”

“And you’ll keep your promise, Tom?”

“O’ course I will,” returned Tom with hearty acquiescence, firm in the easy assurance that the necessary brass was as likely to come to his willing palm as the moon was liable to descend to his disreputable feet for the express and gracious purpose of participating in a game of football. He turned his eyes to the slope far beneath them. At the bottom of the hill nestled a substantial farmhouse, the walls of white stone gleaming from out the surrounding dark pines with a peculiar home-like aspect that struck a memory chord in the heart of one of the men.

The mist from behind was creeping with stealthy silence about the hills. Its advance guard of thin smoke-like particles was already upon them. One last glance of the elder man’s at the dying glory of the west; and it was closed to his view. The mountain fog, fine, white, impenetrable, was about them.

“We’d as well move on,” hazarded Tom, and they stumbled forward.

If the ascent of the hill had been weary – and only he, whose halting, agonized footsteps had marked every laboured yard of the way with anguish unspeakable, could ever tell – the long descent, the painful, broken, rugged misery of the tortuous bridle-path, was as a road in purgatory. A purgatory to which opened at its other end only the sure guerdon of a yawning hell.

CHAPTER II

“THERE’S NAUGHT TOO HIGH TO CLIMB”

“THE PITY of it!”

The words were only faintly enunciated within the inner consciousness of the man, as Frank Gray, Doctor of Medicine and District Surgeon, regarded, with blue eyes in which a certain wistfulness lurked, the white-clad figure of the girl before him. She was leaning over the rails of a clumsy wooden gate, and, too evidently oblivious of his very existence, was gazing before her at the seamed, dark side of the mountain spur.

A girlish figure of medium height it was. Slight and slender, with yet the suggestion of a future fuller development of physique that would round off and beautify the somewhat severe lines of the young form. No startling beauty of feature characterized the face, oval in outline and clear, with an habitual paleness. But it was lit by a pair of dark grey eyes in which lurked a curious, thoughtful brooding – curious in one so young – and it was surrounded by a mass of brown hair that had a wonderful trick of reflecting the warmer tints borrowed from the sunshine. The mouth was sweet and mobile in expression, if somewhat stubborn in its lines, and the lips parted over very perfect white teeth.

“The pity of it!” Almost he had uttered his thought aloud, as he regarded her once more, and the echo of her voice with its stinging condemnation of the things that be yet rang in his ears.

To him she made a winsome picture, gazing upward at the everlasting hills, the reflecting radiance of the sunset tinging her face with a weird light, the evening breeze ruffling the tendrils of hair about her brow. It was vast pity (he resumed in thought) that to so much that was gracious and lovely should be united such strange, unhallowed, unmaidenly ideas.

“Sometimes, Hester,” said he, picking up the thread of discourse which had resulted in her long silence. “Sometimes I think you will look at these matters from a different standpoint as you grow older. When you are married—”

“I am not sure that I shall marry,” she interrupted quietly and dubiously. “I should certainly never marry a man who would attempt to crush my own

individuality, or force his ideas about the most vital interests of life to become mine.”

“I can’t understand you, Hester,” he objected with feeble protest. “You are so young to trouble your head about such matters. The Suffragists are always spinsters of a certain age, or married women who have failed to henpeck their husbands to their own liking—” She had shot him a glance of quick scorn and some contempt.

“Go on, Frank,” she remarked with quiet tolerance, as she once more turned her profile to him. “Don’t study me, I beg.”

“I mean,” he resumed deprecatingly, “out of your own experience, Hester, you can have nothing to urge against the existing order of things. You have been sheltered, and loved, and nurtured with the most tender care—”

“By charity. Don’t forget that, Frank! A charity almost divine in its love and compassion, but charity all the same.”

She turned to him, and a passion of ebullient protest glowed angrily in her eyes.

“You talk of my experience? Why it is out of my own experience that I speak, and feel, and breathe: that I know the *cost* of life. Have you ever heard the story of my own parents? Do you know that my sweet young mother, gentle, meek, and loveable as any woman who ever lived, trod deep in the very mire of misery and despair, partly because there was no law in the land to give her control of what was her own? Do you know that a man – my own father – who had sworn to love and cherish her beyond all the world beside, wilfully broke her heart, trampled her peace of mind in the dust, spent her substance in Barberton gambling hells, and then deserted her?”

“Who told you the story,” he asked with some hesitation.

“Nobody told me the story,” she answered coldly, “I have always known it.”

“That was one case,” he hazarded.

“Just one case!” she agreed. “But where was the law? Why should he, by virtue of being the male animal, have the right to squander her substance, simply because, out of her trust in him, she had made no provision in her own interests? She – my poor little mother! – made every effort to save a wreckage for her own maintenance, but with no avail. And when she was left penniless and forsaken, she lay down and died, and left me, a tiny infant, to eat the bread of charity. That the bread has had a sweet taste in the mouth” – holding up her hand as he would have spoken – “is in no wise to be accredited to my father. I might have been the veriest workhouse brat, for all he was concerned, and for all the inquiry he has made of my welfare.”

A troubled frown settled on the young doctor's brow. For weeks – nay, for months past – an uncertain struggle had been going on in his mind. Not in his heart, for that belonged for all time, and, he believed, for Eternity itself, to this girl at his side. Every atom of the love he was capable of had long been enwrapped about her; she formed the centre and nucleus of his every wish and thought and palpitating hope. Every fibre of his being craved for her, desired her; but his mind had taken to raising objections, formulating the conditions upon which he would possess her. Sufficiently shrewd in his generation, he realized to the very full that her character was an immeasurably stronger one than his own, and that his will would be as powerless to master or influence hers as to raise the dead. Clever, if not brilliant in his profession, he was instinct with earnest, energetic purpose, and his ideal of womanhood was a pronounced one, formed upon the type to which his own sisters – guileless, flirtatious girls with no thought beyond the enhancing of their own personal charms – belonged. In person he was good to look upon, appearing less that his actual height owing perhaps to the fair, boyish hair and the deprecating blue eyes. The light-coloured, small moustache failed to cover from view a sensitive mouth of singular sweetness, with more than a suspicion of weakness in its setting, combined with a faint hint of petulance. A sincere friendship filled Hester's heart for the young doctor, a pleasant good comradeship which chose him as her confidant and intimate.

"I feel like a caged bird," mused she in bitter tone. "I want to be up and doing something to lend my small weight to the great struggle. My life is cramped and narrow. I beat my limbs against bars that seem to hold and pinion me. And I dare not speak aloud, or my relations would think me mad as well as wicked."

A smile of fleeting amusement flashed in her eyes for the space of a second.

"You had better marry me, Hester," said he with a huge gulp in his throat. "I would – I would spend every hour of my life and every fibre of my being to make you happy."

She brought her eyes slowly back from the distant hills, blue and dark against the yellow sky, and looked at him thoughtfully.

"I believe you would, Frank," she said softly.

"And you will marry me, Hester?" Passionate words of love and wild longing which sprang to his tongue were restrained ere they found utterance, as his eager blue eyes watched her calm indecision.

"I think," she said slowly. "I almost think I will."

As a woman of advanced ideas and a suffragist in embryo, she was not too grateful for the proposed honour, having, indeed, her own decided views about man's prerogative in that line.

"I should like to be considered almost free for a while," she resumed gently, "as I may change my mind and wish to eschew marriage altogether. You are really not in a position to burden yourself with a wife at present, and I am in no hurry to bind myself down by an open engagement. Therefore there must be no attempt at love-making – I couldn't endure that! – until the time comes to speak openly. For the rest I know that Uncle Hendrik would make no objection to the marriage."

Objection? He rather thought not! Doctors, and, indeed, professional men of any branch, were not as plentiful as blackberries in a land overflowing with half-educated Dutch farmers and hobbledehoyes of such ilk. Object!

He had asked for bread, and a stone had been thrust upon him. And he was a fool for his pains. He gulped down the bitter chagrin consuming him and said quietly –

"As you will, Hester. You shall make your own terms and conditions, now as always."

"The mist is coming on from behind, Hester," he said presently, "and we are both bare-headed."

She turned to him again.

"I do love the Berg," she half-whispered. Then, with a quick laugh as the fog reached and enveloped them, she remarked, "Not a very good omen for your wooing, is it, Frank? Let's run!"

She gathered her white skirt in her right hand, and, holding out the other to him, they took to their heels like a pair of light-hearted children and ran up the path within the pines towards the straggling, irregular farmhouse.

CHAPTER III

“LIFE’S WORN AND WEARY BARK”

OUT in the mist moving along, slowly but surely, inevitably as Fate herself, crept the two tramps. Fully an hour had elapsed since they began the long descent by the Kaffir path from the hill summit, each agonized yard of way bearing witness to the anguish of the dying man who made his last earthly pilgrimage in such-like tribulation.

“Let me leave you ‘ere, old man,” said the younger vagrant. They had reached the dip that intervened before the slight ascent began upon which stood the farmhouse, only revealed now by the glitter of a red light blearing dimly through the mist. “I’ll go and tell ‘em as how they must give an ’and to get you up to the house. They couldn’t turn a dog out in this ‘ere damp.”

His companion tightly gripped his arm with a frenzy of strength.

“You’ll do nothing of the kind, I tell you,” he gasped hoarsely. “I want to see them myself, just as they are.”

“All right, old man,” returned the other in soothing tones. “But we’d as well sit down and rest a bit.”

With great patience and some tenderness he supported his companion against himself as they sat side by side, cowering against a boulder which marked the roadway. The fine, smoke-like particles emanating from the blank wall of fog rolled round and about their belated figures; and above their heads the reflection from a window made a long streak of cloudy lustre through the density.

It may have been that the unconscious beacon suggested a dim memory of past pleasure to the younger man, but the thought of the long-distant splendour of a London music-hall came upon him with a haunting persistence that was almost pain. The burst of light; the buzz of many voices; the quick jest; the delightful noise. Oh! the glory of a London night: the vigour of a great crowd! His thoughts, wandering aimlessly back to the scene of past cheap pleasures, unattainable, and so rich in seeming now, struck upon the memory of one summer’s evening when, within one of the best known halls of the metropolis, had appeared upon the stage a girl in whose face sorrow was writ large.

Involuntarily he gave voice, not untunefully, to the simple lay which had been the burden of her song —

*Thy face is ever near to me,
Tho' thou art far away;
It is a beacon bright and fair
To cheer me on my way.*

“Drop that!” growled the elder man in quick, pained fury, “and help me up.”

Slowly, haltingly, they pursued their way, coming at long length to a stone wall, along which they crept forward, the younger man staggering under the weight of his companion. Reaching an iron gate, they entered the enclosure and faltered their way up a well-kept hardened path. The suffering man now steered straight for the window with the glittering light that had served as their beacon during an hour which had seemed to both a slice out of Eternity itself. The window, giving on to a wide, high verandah, was uncovered, and had its curtains swung back upon either side. A bank of begonias in huge flowerpots intervened between the watchers and the window, but they could see from their sheltered vantage ground that the apartment was untenanted. A very paradise of a room it seemed to the besmirched, shivering wanderers. The light which had been their guiding star emanated from a tall standard lamp situate in the centre of the room, its pink shade casting a grateful glow upon the surroundings of softly padded furniture, thick, warm-coloured carpet, and green feathery palms.

A door directly opposite the window opened, and a girl with a sweet, thoughtful face entered the room, followed immediately by a young man of pleasant aspect and gentlemanly bearing. The girl moved towards the lamp, and began wheeling it to an open piano: then smiled as the man gently put her aside and himself pushed the lamp. She seated herself at the instrument and turned to him.

“What shall it be Frank?” she asked in a low, clear voice that penetrated distinctly to the watchers outside.

“Something sacred, Hester — being Sunday,” returned the young man.

“Of course,” with slightly raised eyebrows. “But what? I don’t feel equal to the classics to-night, and above all you mustn’t ask me to sing. I am vaguely depressed, somehow.”

The young man sank slowly, and a trifle wearily, into an adjacent armchair, from whence he could watch the musician’s face.

"She's a-going to thump the dominoes," whispered the younger tramp, as the girl's fingers glided into a low, soft melody of haunting sweetness.

"Will you shut up?" growled the other below his breath.

"What does she want to play a blasted dirge for?" asked his companion with sniveling indignation. "Ain't we got enough to put up with, let alone listenin' to a bloomin' psalm?"

The door opposite the window opened again, and an elderly man of a tall, slightly-stooping figure, entered the room. The thin face was grave almost to melancholy, and the Vandyke beard and scant hair about the forehead were of a grizzled hue. Although he was followed by a splendid old man of patriarchal aspect, erect as a dart, and with a brown eye sharp as a hawk's, the man at the window had his eyes glued upon the first comer: nor noticed that a young woman of generous proportions and large face, carrying a huge Bible in her arms, had filed in as the last of the party. She placed the book upon a small table, and proceeded to light a pair of candles. The girl at the piano struck a sharp discord and turned round upon the stool. Her eyes followed silently the stooping figure of the man with the Vandyke beard, as he seated himself in the corner of a sofa near the piano. And the close observer noted the passage of a slight smile between them, before the girl, turning to the old man who was already seated before the open book, and wiping silver-rimmed spectacles with a fragment of newspaper, said quietly —

"Don't you think we could sing an English hymn to-night, Owupa, as Dr. Gray is here?"

The old man flashed a quick look of disapproval at her, and as she met it fearlessly, a wonderful resemblance for the moment seemed to startle into life between the two.

"Ja!" he replied slowly, dividing his attention between her and the glasses in his hand. "Since you came back from your accursed Scottish relations you think the taal of your fathers not good enough to sing your Maker's praises in. Soon you'll want to pray to Him in the mincing English tongue." He snapped his lips together as though he had given expression to the utmost limits of human depravity.

Disdaining to give utterance to a single word in reply, the girl rose directly from the piano, and moved to a corner of the room hidden from the outside view. Soon the long notes from a small organ droned out the opening bars of a psalm-tune. Strange that she should have chosen that number of all others, with such an audience unseen at the window!

The Englishman leaned back his head in silence, a poignant regret too evidently stirring his senses, as he stared up at the low, beamed ceiling with unseeing eyes. The voices of the other occupants of the room rose and fell in slow, droning rhythm, the stout woman singing a very perfect alto that agreed in exquisite harmony with the other voices.

Strange that the girl should have chosen that Twenty-third Psalm of all others upon this night. A big sob broke from the throat of the man outside.

“Ik vrees niet, neen; schoon ik door duistre dalen, In doodsgevaar—”¹

It was the language of his childhood, and the words, though long forgotten, seemed now to have been with him always.

“Gij troost mijn ziel—”²

“O mijn God! mijn God!” It broke with a hoarse roar from the man’s throat.

“Help! Help!” the words rang out sharp and clear, and the melody within-doors broke with a sudden crash. “Me mite’s dead, s’help me!”

1 “I fear no evil; though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”

2 “He restoreth my soul.”

CHAPTER IV

“LIES SCATTERED WILD AND DARK”

WANDERING aimlessly and restlessly about the long dining-room was Hester. When, an hour ago, the appalling shriek without the window had startled the inmates of the room out of their ordinary self-control, she had cowered within herself, away from the nameless terror out upon the verandah, and hidden, coward-like, in the remotest corner of the room.

That phase was past, and she was now flitting about the house, from pillar to post, spreading confusion around as she made sudden descents upon the kitchen, or into the linen press, where her dusky maids were carrying out the sharp, concise orders given by the doctor. Anon peeping, half-affrighted yet with a bitter scorn of herself, out at the back-door towards a shimmering light which glimmered through the mist. It shone from an out-room adjoining the stables; a room which from time immemorial had been kept sacred to the use and behoof of the “Weary Willie” fraternity.

“Are you as frightened as all that?” asked a trenchant voice from out the darkness, and the stout young woman – she could not have been more than five or six-and-twenty – loomed into view, her large face flushing, her eyes glittering with anger.

She threw a bundle of rugs and blankets over the nearest chair, and rolled down the sleeves over her massive arms.

“They sent for your Owupa,” she observed in chagrin, “so I thought I’d go down too and see what was on. But that English doctor of yours shut the door in my face, and told me he didn’t need the blankets. Vuiles!”¹

“You had no business there,” observed Hester coldly, turning away from her; “and Dr. Gray did his duty only when he kept you out.”

“Perhaps he thought I’d be as great a coward as you are!” snapped, viciously, the aggrieved one, as she picked the rugs up one by one and began folding them. “See here, Hester, I wouldn’t be as white-livered as you – no, not for money! I could cut a man’s throat, if necessary, and sew it up again.”

The girl looked at her with disgust.

1 The dirt!

"I believe you could – and that you would enjoy the performance," she said, palpable abhorrence in her tone.

The other smiled a proud acquiescence; and picking up her bundle, left the room, calling loudly for one of the servants.

"Jantje! Here, you Satan's offspring! Take these blankets to the outside room."

Hester, brushing aside the quick vexation, took to pacing the floor backwards and forwards, down the length of the room, once more.

"I have never been so foolish and fanciful," she muttered under her breath. "It must be – yes, it must be Frank. And," bitterly, "I really thought I was above heart-fluttering over a man's proposal."

A quick footstep on the flagged yard, and she turned with parted lips to the door. Dr. Gray, with blue eyes, in which a strange trouble had taken its home, appeared before her, bareheaded.

"You must come with me, Hester," he said, a yearning pity making his voice quiver. "Can you bear a shock?"

"No, I can't!" she said abruptly. "I can bear nothing to-night."

"Nevertheless, Hester," he returned gently, "you must come." And standing in the doorway, he held his hand towards her.

"I can't!" she gasped, breathless. "I hate myself for it, Frank. I despise myself unutterably; but if he is going to die, I can't come!" Her eyes had widened with horror.

He looked at her in surprise. Mayhap he compared her present abject demeanour with the brave words she had uttered a few hours ago. But he gave no sign of displeasure or disappointment. Whatever mood Hester chose to assume, she was the one woman in the world to him, and it may be that he was relieved to find some strain of weakness and inferiority where he was accustomed to look for so much.

"I am sorry, dear," he said, tenderly and pitifully, "but you must come. They have sent me for you: it is necessary for you to be there."

He held his hand towards her once more. She moved to him reluctantly.

"I— I don't think I should be afraid to face death myself, Frank," she whispered with a quiver. "But to watch another die — !"

He took her hand in his warm, firm clasp, and led her across the yard, straight for the misty light. The young woman, who had been standing behind Gray, quietly and stolidly followed in their wake.

"There is so little time, Hester," he said low and troubled, as they mounted the steps leading to the room adjoining the wagon-house.

Gray pushed the door gently back and led the girl in. For a breathless second she hung back in the strange hush, then looked around with wide, grey eyes. Her grandfather stood at the foot of the small old iron bedstead, his shoulders bowed, his tall figure somewhat shrunken, as though a sudden burden had fallen heavily upon him. Her uncle, the man with the Vandyke beard, sat upon a common wooden chair near the bedside with his face buried in his hands, the fingers tightened like whipcords. Utter dejection and woful misery were expressed in every line of his figure. A young man of disreputable and ultra common appearance, with unshaven chin and check shirt open at the neck, sat upon an old wagon-box at the far side of the bed. He glanced at her with indifference, and then riveted his gaze upon the occupant of the bed. She seemed to have taken in the whole scene, and impressed it upon her memory for ever more, from the first second. The nameless, haunting familiarity of the face on the bed struck upon her senses and strangely calmed them. The paralyzing fear, the fierce restlessness of spirit departed and left only a consuming pity and overwhelming compassion in their stead.

She approached the bed, her eyes seeking and holding those of the dying man, with a strange power.

"I am sorry for you," she said, standing beside her uncle, and bending slightly over the gaunt form. Her voice awoke, God knows what echoes, in the passing sinner's memory. The sunken eyes gazed fixedly at her, and though evidently past the power of speech, no peace found home in the eager, straining face. A silence fell upon the group again. The doctor stood by the old man's side at the foot of the bed, marking the scene with more than a professional interest.

Hester touch one of the rough thin hands upon the coverlet.

"You believe," she faltered softly, her face paling with emotion, "you believe that Christ died for you?"

A spasm of pain or wistful memory crossed the scarred, tired face.

"If you could trust in Him, your path would be made easy and happy."

A change was stealing over the staring eyes, and Gray moved forward.

"Try," whispered the girl. "Try to say in your heart, 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff —'"

"Hennie! Wait!"

The words came like a trumpet call from the man at the bedside. She sprang erect as he pushed his chair away and stood beside her.

"Don't go yet!" He interlaced his working fingers the while great tears of uncontrollable agony chased down his furrowed cheeks. "Don't go till you

forgive me for my part of it! I forgive you. As I hope for Heaven, Hennie, I forgive you all.”

The girl gazed around with dazed eyes.

“Who?” she whispered with trembling lips. “Who is it?” The young doctor stood, with working features and white face, watching the man on the bed. He glanced at her for a brief second.

“Your father!”

His lips had formed the words, though scarce sound issued from them. She cowered and shivered as from a sudden ague.

But she reached forward again, and bent, with limbs which knocked together, over the motionless form.

“Father!” she cried, falling on her knees, and grasping the cold hand. “Father! one word of prayer. You are going to meet your Maker. Oh! One word of prayer – for God’s sake.”

The dying eyes leaped once more to her own.

“I know —” The words were faltering, trembling, as they dropped like ice from his leaden tongue. “I know in Whom I have believed.”

In Whom he had believed! Despite the long, unbroken record of sin, and sorrow, and heartbroken unrepentance. In Whom he had believed.

So the prodigal crossed the valley to meet the vast Love and Infinite Mercy which welcomes and accepts the vilest sinner, even at the eleventh hour.

CHAPTER V

THE DAUGHTER OF AN IMP

THEY laid him to rest in the quiet farm graveyard. A great concourse of people gathered together to do honour to the hallowed dead, who, living, would have been spurned from their doors, with all the contumely which is the meed of the unhallowed rondlooper.¹ To pay homage to the dead man did they congregate in their numbers; but also, and in far greater degree, they hurried to the scene to satisfy their powerful curiosity and to glut the insatiable love of gossip which is so potent a factor of country life, and, in particular degree, so greatly permeates a community of Dutch Boers.

In strict accordance with the etiquette of the occasion, Martha van Wijk, housekeeper, or lady-help, feeling that the opportunity of her lifetime had occurred, and glorying in the exercise of her own self-importance, sent out by early dawn on the morning following the death three or four notes of intimation, carried in different directions by the best native runners on the farm. Each notice, written in the Taal, and inscribed in Martha's best sloping hand, provided that "the Lord had seen fit to remove our beloved father, Hendrik Jacobus van der Walt de Villiers, from our midst, on Sunday the 16th inst., in the forty-seventh year of his age," and that the burial would take place at Berg Vlei, on Tuesday the 18th inst., at 11 a.m. The document was signed (in the same flowing caligraphy)—

"Bereaved daughter,
HESTER MARGARET DE VILLIERS.
Thy will be done."

After the fashion of the fiery cross of old, the notice was passed on from farm to farm, in an incredibly short space of time, each household providing its fleetest runner to convey the news which was to electrify the countryside, to its nearest neighbour. Not a soul, far nor near, but knew the lamentable story connected with Berg Vlei. But long ere this the tale had become so old, so threadbare an one, that a new and startling development was a veritable God-send to the whole Division.

¹ Vagrant, tramp.

As was only to be anticipated, an overwhelming avalanche of relatives and distant connections by marriage had descended upon the old farm, and taken by storm the stronghold. In most instances the families arrived in half-tent wagons, with bed and bedding in quantities, in view of a possible camping out at night. Some there were who brought contributions in the shape of vegetables or bottled fruits to the funeral feast of the morrow. But all came with the laudable desire to get as much work of preparation accomplished on this day as the hours would afford. Strong, capable women vied with one another in excess of zeal; and roaring fires were in a short time ablaze in different parts of the yard, while the kitchen stove soon resembled a flaming furnace. The masculine half of the visitation kept at even and safe distance from the general melee, taking up permanent quarters in the dining-room, where, enveloped in a dense cloud arising from the rankest Transvaal weed, they improved the shining hour.

Numerous sheep were slaughtered. Half a dozen fattened fowls and even a young porker fell victims to the morrow's feast, and all was subdued merriment and pleasant bustle in the back apartments, where the women divided themselves into contingents for the preparation of the different viands.

Native servants took advantage to the very full of the chaotic state of matters, to appear wildly industrious and over-worked when under supervision, with the mental proviso always to shirk labour upon each and every occasion when chance might conspire. It was an easy matter to slip round to the outside fires, to place upon or snatch from the cinders juice morsels of hissing fatty stripes cut from the entrails of the slaughtered animals – always the greatest luxury of a killing. If the momentary lapse from duty were discerned and rewarded by a cuff on the ear or a volley of abuse in strident Dutch, a tissue of lies could always be invented on the spur of the moment; and another opportunity to slip out of the work's way would inevitably soon present itself.

Much criticism and some severe censure were bestowed upon the attitude of the daughter of the house. Proud and English had she always been, holding herself aloof from her own flesh and blood, and treating some of them like the dirt beneath her feet. But in circumstances such as these she might have conformed herself to her bounden duty. Not only did she refuse point-blank to take any part in the arduous preparations for the morrow's feast, but she declined to allow herself to be measured for a crape-covered frock which her cousins were ready and willing to make for her on the spot: and she looked sternly, with hard, grey eyes, upon the general air of jubilation which obtained.

But the crucial point of her wicked and unthankful behavior was condensed in the fact that she had possessed herself of the key of the out-room where lay all that remained of her parent, and refused coldly and most emphatically to hand it over. As usual, Klein Hendrik, who styled himself her uncle, but who was in reality only her second cousin, upheld Hester in whatever she did, and was every whit as unreasonable as his ward. Indeed, less satisfaction was to be obtained from him, for he had shut himself up in his own room from the arrival of the first batch of relations, and refused admittance to his own sisters and their husbands. Once only during the day had his door opened, and that was to admit his ward, accompanied by the common young rondlooper, who, it was whispered, had accompanied the dead man to the farm. The interview had been a long one, but it had been held behind closed doors, and no one of all the crowd of workers was any the wiser of its result. Klein Hendrik, when interrogated through the keyhole by an intrepid spirit, had given full authority to the multitude of invaders to do exactly as they pleased and spare naught.

The permission was taken gladly and literally, and preparations of adequate magnificence were set afoot. Great pails of vegetables were peeled and laid under water, ready for popping into immense Kaffir pots on the morrow. Fricadelles, stews, and hot curries were all cooked and left overnight in the saucepans for re-heating when required; while fowls, together with huge joints of mutton and pork, were placed in the pans ready for slipping into the big Dutch oven on the following day.

“Aren’t you going to make any puddings?” asked Martha van Wijk with her large smile. She was the heroine of the day, and was happier perhaps than ever in her life before. To each new-comer she had been required to repeat word for word all that transpired on the home-coming of the prodigal, and upon each several occasion her copious tears had fallen as she dilated – with firm adhesion to the truth, be it recorded in her honour – upon the death-bed scene which she had witnessed from the open doorway. Her eyes were red and somewhat swollen from the frequent testimony required of them to provide of the tender, feeling heart of their owner. But the wide mouth was ready to smile at a very short notice between-whiles.

“Are you not going to make any puddings?”

The women were standing in the large cemented pantry, resting from their labours, and sipping strong coffee the while a couple of native girls scrubbed down a long white table just cleared of all the meats.

"I don't think puddings are necessary," said a stout little woman with a quiet face and meek demeanour. "It would mean such a lot of extra plates and spoons."

"What do we keep so many black *duivels*² for?" asked trenchantly a lady with a bold face and shrewish mien.

"I don't think Boet³ Hendrik would like it," protested the little woman anxiously. "After all, it isn't a wedding-breakfast we're getting ready for."

"I think Tinnie's right," interposed a brisk, capable woman who had done as much work during the day as any two others present. "We don't need puddings, and I don't feel inclined to do much more to-day. We'll get just the same thanks in the end, no matter what we do."

"Ja Tant' Bett, you're quite right," acquiesced Martha, siding with the stronger party. "And after all, there's the bottled fruits. Oom Hendrik said you could do as you liked; so you could open some of them if you ran short."

The women turned with one accord and eyed the bright array of fruits upon the snowy shelves.

"Ooh mag!"⁴ said Tant' Aletta, she of the bold countenance. "To think that child should have all she wants; with her guavas and pineapples!"

"I brought some bottled peaches and quinces," hastily interposed Tinnie.

"Who talks of peaches and quinces?" asked Tant' Aletta with fine scorn. "We get peaches and quinces every day. Nothing would suit but Boet Hendrik must send down country for fruit that would please my Jevrouw Hester, because she took to bottling herself this year in a new way that she learned at the Cape."

"They look beautiful," remarked one of the others.

"Nobody says they don't," snapped Aletta, compressing her thin lips. "But she's been so stingy and mean about them. I told her I would like some bottled guavas and pineapples, and what do you think she said?" A significant hush and a warning glance from her audience directed her eyes to the door.

Hester stood on the threshold with pale face and condemnatory eyes.

"Go on with your story, Lett," she remarked quietly. "Have you forgotten? I told you I would give the Durban address where we got the fruit; and added that you must have plenty of money to buy it with after all the neighbour's sheep you and Gert had impounded."

A tense silence followed her words.

2 Devils.

3 Brother.

4 Oh might!

“Come this way, Tant’ Tinnie,” she said; then turning to the little woman: “Uncle Hendrik would like to see you.”

“What a Satan’s child she is!” gasped Aletta as the two went away. It was out of her calculations that all of Hester’s speech should have been repeated. Especially in the presence of one or two here to-day, she felt a degree of shamefacedness at the reference to the impounded sheep.

The rest of the women gulped their coffee in silence, and a steely glitter showed itself in Tant’ Bett’s brown eyes as she looked long and steadily at the last speaker. Aletta tossed her bold head with jaunty air, but seized an early opportunity to unburden her mind to her husband, giving him a full, graphic, and detailed account of the inconvenience she had incurred through the wicked tongue of that daughter of an imp.

CHAPTER VI

THE HOME GRAVEYARD

TUESDAY morning dawned bright and clear, and the last act in the tragedy of Hendrik de Villiers' earthly course was enacted. Such a largely attended burial, or one for which such elaborate arrangements were made, had not been known in the county for many years. From far and near the guests came, horsemen trotting down the road and round before the stable door, from an early hour. Somewhat later the cavalcade of carriages began to arrive, generally at a brisk rate, calculated to show the stepping-out powers of well-matched roadsters. Buggies and Cape-carts wheeled round corners with an apparent recklessness that took the breath away, as they swung and swayed their way among other vehicles to the strip of short sweet grass before the outhouses. Now and then a half-tent wagon wound its long path round the tortuous, common road of the hill, its human cargo quiet and subdued upon nearing the homestead.

The guests were greeted at the house doors by distant relatives of the deceased, who ushered the men to the dining-room or verandahs, and conducted the women to bedrooms for the disposal of their head-gear and the multitudinous face wrappings without which a Dutch woman of the old school never travels a yard from her own door. The nearest relatives of the departed should, according to the etiquette of the occasion, have been congregated with depressed mien and becoming gravity in the *zit-kaamer*,¹ where they might accept the whispered condolences of the guests according to the measure of their own sorrow.

But the drawing-room stood wide open to-day, and the principal mourners were not to be seen, with the sole exception of the old man, who, with hands clasped behind his back, paced up and down the pine-path alone. His magnificent white beard sweeping his chest, and his head bent in palpable dejection, there was yet that fire in his hawk-like eye that forbade any who approached to obtrude their presence upon him. And Hendrik de Villiers the elder was held in sufficient awe, if not esteem, by his compeers to be left severely alone when such was his own pleasure.

¹ Sitting-room.

Two or three young men, dressed in their best black suits, handed trays of sweetened tea and coffee around. Despite their palpable determination to maintain a suitable gravity, a quick smile or happy retort would break from their lips at the witty sally of some local wag. But the seriousness of aspect would be involuntarily re-assumed as the tray was passed farther around.

And now the whole concourse was gathered out under the shade of the pines, and the beautiful oak coffin, with its lid only loosely placed upon it, was carried into the open, out under the blue sky which had glared with wide, unseeing eye of majestic calm upon the journeyings of the wanderer. An involuntary hush struck a chill to the hearts of the multitude as the pastor, a reverend figure with white hair and thin, aesthetic face, moved slowly forward. No assumption of grief was in his benign countenance. A deep sorrow and overwhelming pity filled his godly heart, and shone from out his kindly eyes as he turned for a moment towards the shrinking black-clad form of the bereaved daughter, and then faced his congregation.

Tears flowed copiously from the eyes of the women present as the predikant dilated shortly and tenderly on the divine Charity which had guided the wandering footsteps back to the home of their youth. On the gracious, abiding Love which had freely given the wonderful promise "Him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out." Gently he dealt with the dead man's memory, expatiating only on his sorrows and sufferings, leaving his sins to the universal Tenderness that would blot them away.

A resounding hymn in long metre and of mournful cadence awoke the echoes for miles above, up among the krantzes. As its conclusion, and while the melody still lingered reluctant about the atmosphere, a short prayer, spoken from the soul of him, was uttered by the venerable predikant.

An elder then stepped forward, and in somewhat stern tones invited the friends of the departed to take their last look upon the features of their beloved brother. As with one accord, the whole concourse moved forward, and filed past the coffin which had been placed upon a double row of chairs.

Open to the light of day, above its body covering of snowy white linen, and at rest upon a pillow of down, lay the strange, pallid, unshaven face of Hendrik de Villiers, thin to emaciation, haggard, and lined, stamped and imprinted with such wan misery as struck a chill to the heart. A thoughtful, disturbed look stole across the faces of men whose curiosity had impelled them to stare at all that remained of this man, whose blasted life, with all its strange temptations and unknown sins, had ever been an enigma and wonder to them. The loud

sobs of certain of the woman were stilled, as though by a cold rebuke, when they had passed the coffin by.

The stern old man, whose pride had held him apart from the throng, and out of the way of the pastor himself, had moved forward last of all, and standing bare-headed in the sunshine for a moment, he had bent and kissed the dead face. He who stood near to close down the case for all eternity, afterwards averred that a big tear was still wet upon the brow when it was shut down from earthly view.

Only the daughter of the deceased, together with her guardian, refrained from moving forward with the crowd, and in their wake hovered the young vagrant. According to the unwritten law of such occasions, only the male relatives were required to follow in procession to the graveside, the female, and therefore lesser half, being expected to join up at will and accompany or follow in a promiscuous crowd. It caused, therefore, a slight uplifting of eyebrows that the names of the chief mourners were called out as "Hendrik Jacobus de Villiers, Hester Margaret de Villiers."

The stepped silently forward, while two by two the men present fell in behind them. The girl was thickly veiled. Slowly the coffin was raised, and the procession, flanked by the women and crowds of children, stared at from a respectful distance by silent natives, moved towards the home graveyard. Only a furlong from the house, out at the back, was the last resting-place of the De Villiers family, and the short journey was soon accomplished. The oaken chest was placed on poles over the yawning gap beside its freshly-turned earth, and the congregation came to a standstill, grouped about the grass-grown, neglected mounds of the long-dead.

"I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord: He that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live."

"He believed," breathed the girl to the man at her side. "He believed!" And the rest of the words were lost to her as she pondered, half stupidly, over these, the most significant.

The bearers gently lowered their burden, the while others rapidly slid the supporting poles away.

"Dust to dust. Ashes to ashes." The loud thud broke upon her heart simultaneously with the storm of sobs emitted by the women behind. She wondered vaguely why only she and the one most concerned had no tear to shed, and why the palsy-like shuddering should again overcome her.

"Come away," she whispered her guardian with white lips. "Come away. I can bear no more."

Silently he turned and followed her: as he had followed her, acquiescent, all the days of her life.

CHAPTER VII

DEALING OF RETROSPECT

ALL his life long Hendrik de Villiers the elder had been an autocrat. When, sixty years back, he had accompanied his parents from the Old Colony to Natal, the beautiful Land of Promise, he had held, although but a stripling of sixteen, the unchallenged post of hero, bully – what you will – among the crowd of half-educated, half-wild young Boers who belonged to a long convoy of wagons making the northward trek in company. A wild, untamed spirit he had been, brave as a lion, fearless as an eagle, always foremost in mad escapade, and ever the nucleus of any devilry afoot. Many a tale is till extant of the way by which, during the long, tedious journeying, he trampled his way over his adversaries to be a power among them; of the distant game brought down by his accurate aim; of the fiery, untameable horses he had “broken in”; of the daring essays he had made against the fierce little Bushmen and almost equally deadly Bantu.

A very few years later, when, from his thatched, unglazed hut of lath and mud daub, he had mounted his *vrij-paard*¹ and gone forth on wooing intent, he had won and won the prettiest, gentlest, and withal richest maiden in all the land. A hard taskmaster he had ever been to her; a cold relentless tyrant, exacting much, giving nothing, and ruling with a repellent, strong hand over the meek-voiced, broken-spirited woman and the seven children she brought him. For five-and-twenty long years she bore her shaded portion, and then died with his praises on her lips.

“The best of husbands you always were, Hennie,” she gasped, holding his rough hand to her failing heart, and gazing at him with dim, forgiving eyes, “the best of husbands.”

And so he had ever been. From his own standpoint the best of husbands. He had laid out her money to the best advantage: purchased the best land procurable, stocked it with her own possessions, and husbanded the increase with diligent, fostering care. Although she had never possessed the privilege of laying claim to one atom upon the whole estate, she had been content, for, as she would explain to her expostulating and well-meaning relatives, “it was

¹ Courting horse.

there,” and what was his was hers in equal degree. For the cost of her own personal needs, and also those of her children, he had generously permitted her to rear poultry for sale amongst the natives, to dispose of her butter to the less fortunate settlers, and even to take in sewing from her compeers. Her earnings belonged exclusively to herself, and what more could exacting wife desire? The lath and daub habitation had speedily been rejected and an ambitious dwelling of hard, greyish-white stone raised upon the new farm. The house was a superior one for the times, with wide glazed windows, spacious verandahs, and huge, dark beams across the low ceilings. The meek-eyed wife had been encouraged to display a lavish hospitality in the substantial home, and on all occasions of note was required to attire herself in the best fabric which the colony could afford. What though she were ordered like a dog or a female slave to bedeck her shapely body in the rich silk or satin brought by him from the city as part proceeds – discount as it were – from the wool sale? Many a woman would have given her ears for the silks, hard words and all.

For the rest, it was incumbent on his dignity that the wife of Hendrik de Villiers, Field Cornet and deacon of the Church, should be the best-dressed, best-groomed, and most dignified woman present at any given *nachtmaal*, wedding celebration, or funeral feast. More than once had it been freely whispered that his hard, heavy hand had not been guiltless of laying cowardly strokes across the meek shoulders of his gentle mate, and more than one gossiping hag had deposed to slyly viewing weals upon her white flesh. But such calumnies found circulation only after the quiet, uncomplaining creature had been laid to rest, and his detractors took exquisite care that no whisper of the scandal should reach the ears of the person most concerned.

Certain it is that as his wife held his hand in hers and praised him with hot, quivering lips, his heart misgave him; and although his set features never relaxed one iota, great tears rolled down upon his white beard: whether from love or pity, or, as his enemies alleged, from remorse, his stern lips never revealed.

To his children he had been a hard master, a cruel tyrant always. No word of tenderness or sympathy had ever, during the chequered days of their miserable, subdued childhood, fallen from his lips upon their ears. For his only son, the first-born and his own namesake, he had always shown a peculiar aversion. The lad had come into the world with the fair skin and blue eyes of the Du Plessis – his wife’s – family; and though handsome of feature and firm and round of limb, he lacked most singularly the boasted attributes which had made his father’s boyhood such a triumphant march among his fellows.

Competent instructors were, in those far-off days, considerably scarcer than the wherewithal to procure them, and the education of the younger fry was a matter of some anxiety to the isolate farmers. Hendrik de Villiers overcame this difficulty by personally instructing the children in the rudiments of both languages. Endowed with remarkable strength of will, and fired with an ambition to rise above his compeers, he had at one time in his youth taken advantage of the gratuitous tuition offered him by an educated storekeeper, a man who had come down in the world, and grasped at the recreation and pastime afforded by the training of the young Boer's mind as a drowning man grasps at a straw. When a turn of Fortune's wheel sent the storekeeper away from the district, he endowed his erstwhile pupil with his varied collection of books, and for many years handsome volumes of popular works had come at long intervals from overseas, swelling the already considerable library. Hendrik de Villiers never had more direct message from his friend and benefactor, but he kept grimly to the vow he had given to improve his own education; and although he only used the English language when it suited his own purpose so to do, he kept up an intimate and thorough knowledge of the questions of the day.

So Hendrik was well competent to instruct his own children. The lesson-time was after supper at night, when, the table being cleared and a couple of home-made candles placed upon the board to enhance the light granted by the hanging lamp, the books were produced. The meek and sorrowful mother was never permitted to interpose or assist, and any attempt to whisper surreptitious aid to the unhappy scholars was punished by a roar of fury at them, and a sharp order to her to quit the apartment. Never upon any occasion had she possessed the temerity to question the order.

That period of agonized tuition left its mark upon at least one member of the circle of scholars, for the only son and namesake emerged from the fiery ordeal with hopeless hesitation in his speech which only stopped short of actual impediment, and recoiled with terrible force upon his ultra-sensitive nature.

To his own infirmity he never alluded; but his sisters, who quarrelling among themselves were yet united in a deep, pitying love for their only brother, often told that a vacancy of look, as well as the strange hesitation of speech, had crept across him through the wild fear which had seized upon him when he stood forth, after a day's hard slavery, to repeat his catechism, or recite passages of English poetry before the frowning, awful figure of the father who begot him.

CHAPTER VIII

STILL OF RETROSPECT

IT was at this time that Hendrik de Villiers, after one of his periodic visits to the centres of civilization with the yearly wool supply, brought back with him a lad of ten or eleven, some three years younger than Klein¹ Hendrik (so-called to distinguish him from his father). The lad was in deep mourning, and had come to take up his residence at Berg Vlei. Hendrik the elder explained to his wife in the usual terse terms that the boy's father had been a relative of his own, and his mother had lately died. And although she had never heard of this existence of the particular cousin, she accepted the statement with her usual meek acquiescence, and extended a warm sympathy to the motherless boy, which soon grew into very real love.

For he was a winning lad, of singularly sweet disposition. Remarkably like his godfather Hendrik, whose name he also bore, he was of handsome feature, bold and daring, and mischievous to the last degree.

Strange to say, he found his way straight to the heart of the autocrat who had hitherto shown love to none. His very faults commended themselves to the elder man, and though the youngster laughed at all authority, and kicked over every shred of discipline, he was rarely punished for the wildest misdemeanor. To distinguish him from his cousin he was always called Hennie, and a sincere and lasting affection sprang up between the two lads, despite the marked preference which the head of the family showed for his nephew over his son. No room was left in the loyal heart of the latter for jealousy of his father's affection. For his young cousin's superior gifts he had only affectionate admiration, and the close companionship of a boy of his own age who forced him to participate to some extent in pursuits hitherto almost foreign to him, undoubtedly saved his own mind from sinking into a state of melancholia.

As for the younger, he loved Klein Hendrik with every fibre of his honest young heart, and early threw a protecting sympathy about the unnaturally silent lad, albeit he was the younger of the two. Many a rough word, many a cruel blow, did Hennie avert from his cousin's back by the telling of a ready lie, or the taking undeserved blame upon his own shoulders. A succession of

¹ Little Hendrik.

tutors made their bow at the farm and carried on the work which the father had so well inaugurated. Side by side the boys worked, making very fair progress, Hennie keeping himself well in check lest he might outstrip the slower intellect of his cousin.

They had long reached manhood's estate when the gentle soul of the house-mother took its flight to regions unknown. After her death Hendrik, her husband, became converted, and henceforth held nightly worship, usually of the sternly denunciatory order.

The grass was not yet green upon the grave of Berg Vlei's first mistress when a successor was brought home to the honorary post of house-wife. The second lady, the widow of a well-to-do attorney, was possessed of a very decided character, as well as a not inconsiderable fortune of her own. Of Scottish birth, she was colonial bred, and spoke the Dutch language with a fluency that defied criticism. Naturally of a kindly disposition, and with a heart of sterling worth, she was shrewd and far-seeing to a degree, and her life at Berg Vlei was not many days old before she formed a fairly accurate estimate of its condition. With a grim inward smile and an iron grip, she took her Boer spouse in hand from the very outset, and henceforth Hendrik de Villiers, in savage bitterness of spirit, found himself for the first time in his life, forced to take a secondary place. She could fight so well with his own weapons! A shower of abuse from his lips brought such a volley of denunciation interlarded with so much naked, bare-faced, unholy truth about his ears, that he was glad to escape, vanquished, from an inglorious field. Her own money was tied tightly away from his covetous fingers, yet she exacted – and secured – what she considered her just due as the price of her services to the household. She had been president, in her time, of a strange, unhallowed league of women who rebelled against the righteous order of things. And now she filled the old home to overflowing just when it suited herself, and her friends talked big things about "woman's rights" and such unspeakable gibberish.

One of her first acts at Berg Vlei was to rout the disreputable Hollander who filled, for a nominal fee, the position of schoolmaster at the homestead. The three elder girls, Elizabeth, Zannie, and Linnie, were married and away; but the services of a competent governess were secured for the younger daughters of the house. And it was in this connection that Hester de Villiers, the new wife, made the mistake of her lifetime.

To all but one member of the household she was indifferent and tolerant only. Owing to her natural kindliness of disposition, she was good and indulgent to the motherless girls, who looked upon her with suspicious eyes; but there was

no real liking upon either side. The one exception, distinguished by her active interest, was the only son of the house, who, now as ever, held no place in his father's heart. Silent and unassuming, painfully retiring in disposition, Klein Hendrik, when well forward in his teens, had suddenly developed a rapid growth, and was now, at five-and-twenty, a well-looking youth, tall and of splendid physique, with regular features lit up by a pair of mild, if somewhat pathetic, blue eyes.

No less handsome and well-developed was Hennie, but he favoured the De Villiers family, with his dark, speaking face, and bold, bright nature. From the first – very possibly on account of her husband's marked partiality for him – the second wife cultivated a distinct aversion to the younger man.

After a succession of disastrous failures in the shape of governesses, Mrs. De Villiers paused and took counsel with herself. The result was the establishment in the vacant place of a young relative of her own, who, on her arrival from overseas, at the express invitation of her aunt, proved to be a girl of barely twenty years. As far as her duties were concerned, the new governess was a decided acquisition, and her pupils made quick and steady progress under her kindly rule. With her pretty Scottish accent, speaking grey eyes, and dainty winning ways, Margaret Buchanan burst as a revelation of unknown loveliness upon the view of the young farmers. Hitherto they had only been acquainted with such beings in the pages of the novels bought by Hennie on his periodical visits to the city with the wool and hides, and surreptitiously devoured many times over in the security of their own bedrooms. Bright and winsome as a spring day, with a sweet, passionate face of quite unusual beauty, Margaret made too palpable a conquest of both young men to retain her own peace of mind for long. For the first time in their lives a shade crept between the two cousins – a shade which was to lengthen out to the long shadow that would reach beyond the grave itself.

The girl's conduct was enigmatical. Now she seemed to favour the bold, fearless, laughing Hennie; anon to pay particular respect to the quiet, earnest Hendrik, with his strange, slow utterance, and blue eyes that followed her every movement. His stepmother from the first had set her heart upon the consummation of a match between her favourite and the girl, and she displayed less than her usual tact in urging the latter to decide in accordance with her own wishes.

But quite suddenly young Hennie announced his engagement to the governess, and a succession of stormy scenes between himself and the old man – aided and abetted by one of the daughters of the house – promptly ensued.

He was reminded in biting terms of all he owed to the charity that had fed and clothed him, and told that the luxury of choosing a bride – unless a moneyed one – was not for him. Margaret herself had become pale and silent, while Mrs. De Villiers held herself aloof, sternly repressed and unsympathetic. The girl left for the city, and one day after a scene of particularly stormy character, Hennie left Berg Vlei, passing over the hill, and never returning till after many years he “dreed his weird” and bent his world-worn footsteps back to the old home.

But diverse reports of his conduct had penetrated to even that silent spot, and it was known that after his marriage a “bit of money” had come to his wife Margaret through inheritance, and Hennie had embarked the little all in waggons and oxen and had taken to transport, having first installed his wife in shabby rooms in 'Maritzburg. Reports of his wild dissipation in Barberton gambling hells, of his frequent appearances in the city, and then of his death, reached the quiet farmhouse, and it was averred that Margaret had taken upon herself the duties of a daily governess. Although Hendrik the younger journeyed frequently to town about this time, he never spoke of his cousin's wife, except when upon one occasion he stated in answer to a question that he had met her in the street, dressed in black, and carrying a roll of music in her hand.

The strong sympathy between Hester and her step-son had developed into a deep love, which was a worshipping devotion on his side, and satisfied the mother instincts of the childless woman, and the two held many long conferences together.

It was at this time that Mrs. De Villiers felt herself constrained to visit the city in order to take part in a series of religious revivals about to take place. Her spouse, all unaware that he had been influenced and incited thereto, delegated his son to accompany her. His daughter Aletta, now emancipated from the schoolroom, was well competent to take charge of the household, and there was no immediate necessity for a speedy return. After an absence of more than two months they returned home, Hendrik looking haggard and worn, his mother carrying a tiny babe in her arms. She looked at her husband's frowning brow with defiance.

“It is Margaret's child,” she said shortly, with indrawn breath. “She is dead, and I have adopted it. Hennie turned up after all, but was gone again.”

She changed her tone suddenly, and turned to her husband in deprecating mood.

“I thought you would welcome her – the little one – for both their sakes,” she whispered with tears in her voice.

He answered her never a word, and scarcely vouchsafed a look at the sleeping infant. But as the years went by and no sight or sound was heard of the wanderer, it may be that he reconciled to his own conscience the house-room afforded the child, as a mitigation of the harsh treatment meted out to the father. His own daughters married one by one, and little Hester grew up to be a close companion to her godmother and namesake, whom she was taught to regard as her grandmother, and from whom she received her education, which was of the solid, thorough order, and devoid of any smattering of fashionable accomplishment. She became to a great extent imbued with the principles and views of her broad-minded instructress, and was naturally of a thoughtful, inquiring turn of mind. The only other intimate friend she was allowed to make was the wife of a neighbouring missionary, a woman who for love had given up a brilliant career as a famed violinist, and who was a distant relative of Mrs. De Villiers’ first husband.

The great glass case of carefully preserved books was requisitioned for the use of the young student, and Hester studied with intense relish translations of Josephus, Virgil, and Plato at an age when girls usually weep over *A Peep Behind the Scenes* and *The Wide, Wide World*. For recreation, and as a reward of merit to herself, she kept Dickens and Thackeray, with a stray volume of *Ivanhoe*, another of *The Mill on the Floss*, and thus grew and throve upon the best in English literature. A set of Macaulay’s works formed a joint birthday-gift from her god-parents. For Klein Hendrik, whom she revered in equal degree to her whom she looked upon as a mother, shared with the latter the responsibilities of sponsorship, and loved the child with the all-absorbing worship of his starved heart.

Hester had reached the age of sixteen when she was bereft of the companionship of her godmother, who received a sudden and unexpected summons to the last long bourn of all humanity. With her dying breath Hester the elder commended her child to the ceaseless care of Hendrik, and provided that she should be sent to her own relatives at the Cape – people of consequence in officialdom – for the completion of her education.

When her affairs were wound up it was found that Mrs. de Villiers had left all the means of which she was possessed – approximating several thousand pounds – to Hendrik the younger, in trust for her godchild Hester, the annual proceeds to be spent upon her education, or otherwise used in her behoof, till she attained her majority or married. In the latter event the principal was to be

settled upon her, and so securely tied before marriage that her spouse should have no control or active interest in the money.

To state that Hendrik de Villiers was irritated at the disposal of his late wife's property is to liken the pale wintry moonlight to the fierce sunshine of the Tropics. An unreasoning, but nevertheless very bitter, anger against the young legatee filled his hard old heart. He had never more than tolerated the child in his home, seeing more of the mother in her young presence than of the lad he had loved and so cruelly spurned at the first crossing of his will. The mere fact of the girl's existence in his house was ever a silent reproach to him, and he had rarely unbent his stern demeanour to her. On her side she had passively accepted his wilful neglect, never intruding upon him, but on the other hand never showing the slightest trepidation in his presence.

Her grief at the loss of her godmother was deep and almost unspeakable at the first shock. Strange to say, it was the old man's demeanour towards the memory of his dead wife that first aroused her out of the dull apathy of her misery.

The whole family of daughters with their husbands, troops of children, and a supplement of relations, had gathered together to proffer sympathy to their bereaved parent. Wide-eyed and silent, pale in the deep black of her mourning, Hester moved among them dispensing the necessary Sunday hospitality to the host of visitors.

The old man was in particularly irascible mood, as, on the stoep after breakfast, he explained the conditions of his wife's last will and testament. Hester stood silent in the doorway, gazing past them all at the rugged sides of the Berg, each chasm and sunlit krantz showing near and bold in the clear morning air.

"She was a trial to me always," rasped the old man. "It's bad to speak ill of the dead, but she was a godless sinner."

"That's a lie!" The words came, sharp and shrill, from the girl in the doorway. "She had more goodness in her little finger than is to be found in the whole family of you, root and branch – with one exception."

"You little devil!" shrieked Aletta, shrewish by nature, and ever the foremost in a fray. "You mean imp of a blackguard sire, how dare you call my father a liar?"

"As for *daring*, Aletta Skinderbek,² rapped out the clear young tones, "if you ever dare mention either of my parents again, I'll tell you more truth –

2 Scandalmonger, slanderer.

openly here – in five minutes than you have heard in ten years. Truth about yourself!”

The woman paled perceptibly and cast one frightened glance at her huge husband, puffing unconcernedly at his reeking pipe.

“You little imp!” she whispered with a gasp, “You wild cat!” But Aletta was cowed for the nonce, and shrank within herself.

The old man was now fairly aroused, and turned upon the girl.

“What do you mean, the child of the evil one?” he roared his eyes ablaze like basilisks. “What do you mean?” He was reaching for his knobbed walking-stick.

“Mean!” She brought her calm eyes upon him. “I mean that you have no right to allow any one living to say one word against my father, no matter what he is or how low he has fallen. You should be the first to answer for him and shield him from Aletta’s vile tongue.”

There may have seemed a hidden meaning to the old man either in the words or in the steadfast gaze, but the stick dropped from his nerveless fingers, and he whispered, “My God!”

But Klein Hendrik sent his ward away the following week to her maternal relations at the Cape, and two years went by before he allowed her to return, dearly as he loved the very earth she trod upon.

Her progress at college was a very qualified one, her character being a strange anomaly always. With a passionate love of the beautiful, she yet loathed a paint-brush, and refused point-blank to take a first lesson in the fine arts; while she professed an unmaidenly contempt for fancy-work, a needle and thread being her especial abhorrence. With a soul that literally vibrated at the sound of a complete chord of music, she yet hated and dreaded the lessons which forced her against her will to pick out a few tunes on the piano, that most abused of all instruments.

She was, in short, as the Lady Principal regretfully wrote to her guardian in her yearly report, “absolutely devoid of accomplishments, and possessed of a reprehensible tendency to follow too closely the political questions of the day.”

CHAPTER IX

“HERE’S NONE WILL HOLD YOU”

“YOU had better come out among them all, Oomie!”¹

It was the evening of the burial day, and Hester stood over her guardian as he sat in a low chair at his bedroom window. She regarded him with lurking anxiety, and noted with an aching heart that the grizzled hair about the temples had whitened perceptibly during the past few days.

“They will only talk and blacken his memory the more for the grief you show. Come out and face them, Oomie.”

He turned to her with a weary air.

“They—er— they’ll talk anyhow,” he remarked low, his strange hesitation of speech falling heavily upon him. “I – you – you don’t know it all.”

“No, I don’t,” returned she in a forced, matter-of-fact tone. “And I don’t want to hear it to-night. I want to go out and join them. But if Aletta or Martha van Wijk should irritate me the very slightest, I couldn’t answer for myself – unless you were there.”

He looked at her in quick alarm.

“It’s a pity I take after Ouwpa, isn’t it?” she said in a musing tone. She was opening a drawer ostensibly in search of a clean pocket-handkerchief. “I have an awful tongue, haven’t I? Only Aletta and I, out of all the family, take after Ouwpa. But tell me, uncle,” she had turned round and was gazing at him in evident anxiety, “*do* you think I shall grow to look like Aletta? At her age, I mean?”

A quick smile flitted across the thin features.

“If – if – I mean if you —”

“Yes, I know. If I call her Aletta, she’ll be angry. But I wouldn’t call her ‘aunt’ for any bribe this world could offer. It isn’t in me!”

He followed her, passive, from the room. Down the passage she led him, out on to the stoep, and so around to the dining-room. The old house had been so often added to and altered that it presented an irregular, ugly building, round whose corners the winds whistled and howled at nights; but, thanks to the

1 Little uncle.

good taste displayed by the second Mrs. de Villiers, the interior throughout was comfortable and even refined in aspect.

As Hester and her guardian entered the dining-room a palpable hush fell upon the assembly there, which might perhaps indicate that the previous conversation had been a personal one. A cloud of old smoke hung up about the blackened beams of the ceiling, and the masculine portion of the audience was at present fired with the laudable ambition of manufacturing a new and fresh supply emitted from the strongest Boer weed. The ladies, some six or seven in number, were for the most part engaged in crochet work.

The old man sat in his accustomed rocking-chair, with a mat of goat-skin at his feet. He glanced with a passing interest at his son and the girl as they entered, but puffed silently and morosely at his meerschaum. A splendid figure he always presented with his snow-white hair and magnificent physique, attired now, as always, with scrupulous care; a grand presentment of the Boer gentleman, immeasurably superior to the men of this younger generation by whom he was surrounded.

Hendrik seated in silence, and Hester taking her stand by the window, where she played with the curtain tassels (for every seat being occupied, none had dreamed of vacating his chair for her), Tinnie Piet broke the awkward spell by asking of the redoubtable housekeeper –

“Where did you get that pattern, Martha?”

“Out of a book,” returned the widely-smiling Miss van Wijk with a flash of pride as she held up a yard of crochet work nearly a foot deep.

“Ah! You get everything out of books nowadays,” remarked, with loquacity, the only old lady present, a little personage with sharp eyes and gestures quick and jerky. “That’s why destruction and plagues and pests descend upon us as upon the Egypt of old. It’s going right against the Almighty. He gave us one Book to read, and never meant us to set up any others of our own. If our young people would read the Bible more, they wouldn’t get all the mean English ideas into their heads. No wonder” – she shook the words out, twitching her apron, and giving all the significant air of intending offence – “no wonder, when our children are over-educated, and taught to despise their own taal, that the Lord should send locusts and rinderpest and hail upon the land.”

“Yes, Tant’ Torie,” interposed Aletta, with a baleful glance towards the window, “that’s what I always say. It’s a judgment upon us.”

“We – we heard that you had a hailstorm last week, Tant’ Torie,” said Hendrik quietly and mildly. “Did it do much harm?”

"It ruined our crops," she snapped with stern satisfaction, "and killed some of the kids."

"Yes, but it did more damage at our place," remarked Aletta, "for we had the first big brunt of it. It knocked the forage all to pieces, and cut the mealies up into ribbons. I don't believe they'll cob properly."

"You told me the other day," remarked a quiet voice from the window, "that Oom Hendrik's sheep had swept your lands clean, and you wouldn't reap a bag of mealies from the whole place. That was when you exacted such heavy damages, you know. So," with a cool smile at the heated face, "it's as broad as it's long, isn't it? There's always something to be thankful for!"

"We lost all our crop of fruit," remarked, hastily, Tant' Tinnie. Apart from being a born peacemaker, Tinnie was possessed of a secret partiality for Hester, whose proud young spirit appealed strongly to her reluctant admiration. "Piel told me the other day that we'll have only about seven peaches, apples included."

The little joke passed harmlessly by, scarce receiving its just tribute of a smile.

Hester gazed coolly and deliberately at Tant' Aletta, who, hard as nails, and intrepid as a hawk, was yet, in the presence of Margaret Buchanan's child, vaguely restless and ill at ease. She knew the share she had taken in the bygone mischief at Berg Vlei, and the deceitful part she had played in the breaking of the dead woman's heart. Worse than all, she knew that this, the bitter-tongued young daughter, was well aware of that past perfidy.

"It's jammer² that the Bible is read so little nowadays," observed Tant' Bett in the interval of counting her stitches. "You never see it in anybody's hands except when they are holding family worship."

"There's only one good man that I know," averred Dewald, her husband, taking his pipe from his lips and waving it gently towards the audience. "Only one good man: and that's Erich van Oom Lucas. You can come there whenever you like, and you'll find him on his stoep or in his eet-kaamer,³ reading his Bible. He says it's enough for him."

"Yes!" enunciated the clear young voice once more, with ineffable contempt. "But it's not enough for his wife and children."

"Six of them, and another one coming," murmured Tinnie, holding up her work against the light.

² Pity.

³ Dining-room.

"I was there the other day," pursued Hester with a faint tinge of colour in her cheeks at the last words. "And the house was beautifully clean and tidy. Anna and three of the children were out in the garden. She was scuffling the beans, and the children were digging potatoes for dinner. Erich sat on the verandah with his Bible."

"I said so," interposed Dewald.

"Ja!" remarked one of the other men, with unctuous complacency. "He's a very good man, my brother-in-law."

"Yes!" resumed Hester meditatively, "and I told him that if he were my husband I should poison him."

"You did?" Dewald regarded the girl with surprise and horror unspeakable.

"What did he say?" asked Tant' Bett with a smile towards the window, her eyes glued upon her work.

"He said," and Hester's lips parted in a fresh young laugh. "He said I was going to perdition."

"I shouldn't wonder," remarked the old man drily, and speaking for the first time. "Maybe he was right." But his look at the girl was almost kindly, and a flitter of amusement crossed his face.

"Maybe!" returned she indifferently, the laugh dying out of her eyes. "But I hope not. I think not," she added after a pause.

After a hastily gulped breakfast the following morning there was a bustle of departure on the part of the self-invited guests. Without all was noise and seeming confusion, with a medley of bullocks from which each driver was whacking out his own team: an adjustment of yokes, and a drawing out of spiders and harnessing of horses.

Within doors, confusion was worse confounded, the while native maids ran to and fro carrying miscellaneous loads, and their mistresses tied up belongings into unshapely bundles, stuffed soiled starched pinafores and petticoats into pillow-cases (brought from home for the purpose), or hunted with wild haste for missing kappies and tiny socks. There were much scrubbing of round faces and subdued roaring from the owners thereof, accompanied and often prompted by resounding slaps from hands which had common practice upon kitchen boys. A leaven of shrill scolding, accompanied by a modicum of heavy vituperation in the native tongue, ran as a mighty undercurrent through all the vicarious preparations.

"I mean to take this pig's leg," said Tant' Bett when, all other work completed, the women gathered in the pantry to annex their belongings and

whatever else, in the way of eatables, might be lawful prey as the price of their work. "I roasted it myself, besides helping to scrape the pig."

"Nobody sent you to scrape the pig," remarked Aletta concisely. "It's Kaffir's work anyhow. But take the leg and welcome so far as I'm concerned. For my part, the pie was cooked in my dish, and I'm taking it as it is. It's not my fault that it wasn't used."

She lifted, as she spoke, a huge meat pie from the very topmost shelf, and gingerly placed it in a round Kaffir basket already half-filled with divers articles. A look of significance passed between the other women at the clever engineering displayed in the hiding of the pie till the last moment; but Aletta was too intent upon her packing to trouble about the interception of glances. When she had placed the basket upon the head of a waiting girl, she turned round, and, wiping her hands upon the huge apron she wore, murmured in envious discontent –

"Dear Lord! to think that that imp child should have so much—"

Her eyes roved once more along the rows of bottled fruits and preserves as she slowly revolved upon her heels. "Sardines and salmons, and tinned tongues, and Heaven only knows what not, just because wholesome salt mutton isn't good enough for her. Mijn Hemel!⁴ And she has a strain of the real Satan in her."

4 My heaven.

CHAPTER X

A LANDFUL

THE LAWFUL occupants of the old home – Hendrik the elder, his son, Hester, and Martha van Wijk – still stood out at the gate watching off the last contingent of guests, as is the hospitable Dutch habit, when a horseman rode down the hill and made for the group.

“It’s Dr. Gray, uncle,” remarked Hester, shading her eyes from the sun.

They awaited his arrival, when he sprang to the ground and advanced towards them with the bridle-rein over his arm. Silently wringing the hands of the men, he gave brief greeting to Martha, and turned to Hester last of all.

“I have come for you, Hester,” he said, his heart throbbing as his gaze took in the sweet seriousness of the face he loved. “Phyllis sent me to fetch you.”

The girl turned questioning eyes on her guardian.

“Go, liefje,” he smiled. “It will do you good.”

A native came forward, and, taking the rein from the doctor’s hand, led the horse towards the stables.

“Don’t off-saddle him, Tom,” remarked Gray. “I am going back presently.”

“Saddle Sultan for me, then, Tom,” added Hester. “And tell Dolph to get ready to accompany me. He must ride old Colonel.” In answer to the doctor’s questioning gaze she added, “You might be called away at any moment, Frank, and uncle never allows met to ride alone.”

“Quite right too,” answered the young fellow with pleasant heartiness. “It is not a country for womanhood to wander over unattended. I should have been here yesterday,” he added, turning to the men, as with one accord they all bent their steps up the path to the house, “but I was called away to make a post-mortem examination right at the other end of my district.”

“Post-mortem?” It was Miss van Wijk who queried, with eager interest.

“Yes,” said the young man, only glancing at her briefly. “On a native. Poor fellow, they made him work though he complained of being ill, and yesterday morning they found him dead in his hut. There were no marks of ill-usage,” he added thoughtfully. “Death was due to natural causes only.”

The old gentleman resented the words.

"One would think you were anxious to find marks of ill-usage," he said in trenchant tones. They had reached the wide back stoep, and, as Hester entered the house, they seated themselves in low Madeira chairs. "If you knew the accursed nation as well as I do, you would also know that for one Kaffir who is really sick five hundred are shamming."

"Yes," added Miss van Wijk, turning at the door as she would enter the house. "And after all what is one Kaffir? Lord! there's not a handful – there's a landful."

"I can't help sympathizing with the natives," said Gray slowly. "I know they are cursed with a lying, indolent nature —"

"They are accursed through and through," interrupted the old gentleman. "Especially the educated ones. And I wouldn't trust the best of them as far as I could throw him."

His son nodded acquiescence.

"Yes – yes! Just so. You can't trust them. That's why I never allow Hester to go about alone."

The young man turned eagerly to him.

"I quite agree with you, Mr. de Villiers," he said quickly, "especially as far as Hester is concerned. But don't you think – don't you really believe that the brute nature is merely the result of savagery? If they were taught the difference between right and wrong, educated to seek the truth for themselves, would they not in course of time rise above the nature within them?"

"No, they wouldn't," said the old man shortly, "for, to begin with, they don't want to seek for truth. They are inherent liars, and if they were to find any truth they would also find a way to dodge round it."

Klein Hendrik shook his head.

"I have had wide experience of natives all my life," he said with his painful, slow utterance. "I have known them since I have known myself, but I have never yet found the good effects of teaching them to read and write. As soon as a Kaffir can use a pen and ink, he considers himself the white man's equal."

"Which only proves that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing," returned the doctor. "The mistake is made in not educating them enough: not raising them high enough out of their environments —"

"And have them aspiring to our womankind," uttered the raucous tones of the old man. "Heaven help us!" Look here, young man, you stick to your physics, and poisons, and cutting up of dead bodies, and leave the question of dealing with the Kaffir race to wiser heads than your own."

Klein Hendrik looked kindly at the crestfallen young fellow, who, sensitive to a degree, felt the palpable rebuke very keenly.

"Take the condition of the district alone into consideration," he said, in his gentle, slow way. "Before your brother set up his Mission Station in our midst, the natives were as natives always are – indolent, anxious to shirk work, and not over-honest, but not over-untruthful either. It was at least possible to understand them, and their demeanour to the white man was civil and respectful. But since they have taken to imbibing the doctrines Mr. Gray teaches them, there is no sounding the depths of their character. Insolent to a degree, they are accomplished liars, and terribly loose in their morals. How many of the women members of the congregation have landed in brothels? Try to find out. Then take the same statistics among the thousands of location natives around. Compare the results and you will be staggered."

"We don't say that the fault is your brother's," added Hendrik the elder, with a glance of keen approval at his son. "It is only the fault of his system. No man has the business to come from overseas and teach the native idea here. He has no knowledge of his subject. I have known a missionary or two who turned out fair results. But they were not Englishmen, and they had been born and bred in this country."

"And yet," the young man was wholly unconvinced, "human nature is the same the world over."

"It is not," sharply iterated the old man. "The Zulu has a nature of his own, and that is where you ignorant missionaries make the hideous mistake. In Heaven it is possible that the Kaffir may be equal with the white man – though I very much doubt it – but the first thing a native should be taught in the way of education is that never on this side of Eternity can he stand equal with the European. Unless you impress him with that knowledge at the very first, you are committing a great cruelty to him, and a rank sedition against your own race."

"It is a marvellous thing," mused Klein Hendrik, "that a native should so readily acquire all the faults of the European, and so persistently shun his virtues."

"I should think," hesitated the young man, yet with a tone of conviction, "that the first thing to do is to raise a certain pride in the native's breast: to give him an estimation of himself and an ambition to rise above his surroundings."

The Dutchmen smiled in derision.

"You could easily accomplish that, Frank," said a contemptuous young voice in the doorway. "Try it on your own servant first, and you'll find it

will work with good effect. He'll raise himself sure enough, but it will be by puffing your cigars and airing your best umbrellas when you are out of sight." Hester emerged from the passage doorway, holding the fold of her habit skirt in her hand, but wearing still the white blouse with a tie of black ribbon. She moved aside as a maid handed the visitor a cup of tea.

Her grandfather nodded his head in acquiescence. "She is right," he said briefly. "And another thing. If the missionaries must teach the wild idea to shoot, by showing them how to read and write, why can't they confine themselves to the Zulu language? There's your brother now – he is giving lessons in English to every black skin that attends his school. What does he do it for?"

"To give them a chance to forge orders for drink," remarked Hester grimly. "And to write passes for one another at their leisure."

"Hardly." Gray looked at her with an uneasy, somewhat deprecatory smile. "But, you see, funds are somewhat scarce with him, and the Government gives a grant for passes in English only."

"The Government's a pack of fools," commented the old man with cold disapproval.

"And so they are, Owupa," assented she cheerfully.

"But it was not the present administration who framed the law about giving grants for the passes," observed Dr. Gray.

"They are supposed to take office," rasped the old man, "for the purpose of framing good laws and overthrowing bad ones, aren't they?"

"Yes, Owupa! But they are really there for the purpose of lining their pockets with filthy lucre. Well, Frank," as he put down the empty cup, "are you ready?"

CHAPTER XI

THE MISSION STATION

A BRISK tripple brought them up on the high flat, when they took a bridle path to the left along the ridge, overlooking the quiet sun-steeped valley below. As they rode along in single file, she looked down towards the irregular old house of stone that was the only home she had ever known.

"I don't know that I should have come away," she called backward over her shoulder, and reining her horse in to suit the slower pace of her companion's roadster.

"Why not?" he asked, pressing forward, and forsaking the path to come to her side.

"Look there!" She pointed downward with her whip, a troubled frown in her eyes. He followed her gaze. Scarcely half a mile distant as the crow flies, he could see a figure in black standing motionless in the home graveyard, beside the newly-turned mound.

A sudden dip in the road hid the view from sight and brought a long undulating plain before them. She urged her horse down the steep incline at what her companion considered a perilous rate, and then slightly holding up till Dr. Gray came alongside, she let go, and the two horses soon thundered side by side over the turf. A long, maddened gallop it was, and when the rise of a bult confronted them, pulled in with some reluctance.

"That has done me good," she remarked concisely, adjusting the curb rein with delicate precision and forcing back the reluctant paces of her hunter, to suit the weaker animal that her companion bestrode. "But I am afraid it has taken the wind out of your chestnut. I beg your pardon, Frank, but I had to let Sultan go. Just look at Dolph." She turned and gazed angrily along the plain. "About a mile behind, and whipping old Colonel most unmercifully. The young rascal! Just wait a little, Frank. I won't have the old animal so ill-used. He was the first horse I ever really possessed, and I shall never love another as well – not if he had a pedigree a mile long."

After a sharp reprimand to the half-caste, and a strict injunction to walk the horse slowly for the rest of the way, they turned to the hill and pressed forward again.

Plainly he perceived that though there was a palpable shade across her temperament, and an added gravity in her pale face, she was bent upon shutting up her cares within her own breast, and anxious to avoid any serious topic of conversation.

He readily and tacitly acceded to her wish, trying to shake off the oppression of the past few days from his own spirits the better to suit hers.

A long winding climb brought them upon a small table-land, across which a main road, kept in order by Government, wound its white way, railwards, and so to the centres of civilization. Facing the road, and but a few paces from its side, stood the Mission Church of grey stone, its tall spire surmounted by brazen cross, making it a conspicuous, white object for scores of miles beyond upon the lower veldt. Half a furlong from the church, surrounded by schools and outhouses, stood the low dwelling-house, at the back of which they emerged from the Kaffir footpath. Some magnificent oak trees, planted half a century ago by the old Boer who had owned the place when it was but a farmstead, stood sentinel around the Mission Station, and imparted a peculiarly home-like appearance to the place.

A group of little children, playing under the oaks, with their tiny black attendants, came running wildly towards the backyard as they caught sight of the riders.

"Here's Hester!" they called as they passed the house. "Aunt Hester with Uncle Frank."

"Keep back from the horses," cried Hester, sharply. "Don't come too near, you restless monkeys."

Reining in her startled steed, she sprang lightly to the ground ere the doctor could reach her side, and leaving the horses in his care, she was soon in the midst of clinging arms, with a shower of soft kisses on her lips and cheeks.

"I never saw such a crowd of little wretches in all my life," gasped she laughing, as she dropped her whip to the tender mercies of the throng, and picked up a tiny maiden of two. "If I were mamma, I should take you all away in the veldt some day, and lose you there."

"It wouldn't be easy to lose *us*," remarked, with lofty contempt, a gentleman of some eight years, who hung on the outposts of the crowd, with hands in breeches pocket and air of haughty indifference.

"Oh, are you there, Teddy?" cheerily responded the girl, looking past the fair little face, nestling against her own, to the curly-headed young rascal. "And with new breeches on too!" Come here and kiss me at once, or I shan't bring you the marbles I have at home."

"I don't know how to play marbles," replied he, doffing his cap and moving forward to give a reluctant salute.

"That's because you've never learnt," said Hester loftily. "But we'll make Uncle Frank show you all the games."

"Father is going to teach me and Eli and Zadok how to play cricket," remarked, *en passant*, the young hopeful, as he fell in with the wake.

"He is? Well, I wonder at father, I do indeed. Fancy playing cricket with Eli and Zadok! I *wonder* what he'll be after next!"

The laughing words met the missionary himself as he emerged round the corner of the house, and greeted her with a grave smile, awaiting calmly her pleasure to take his outstretched hand.

"I am afraid your bump of reverence is not too well developed, Hester," he said in a low, even tone.

"It hasn't even begun to form yet, Mr. Gray," she said cheerfully, as they turned to the house with the whole contingent around her.

"Don't trouble with your habit skirt, Aunt Hester," said a small maid of six. "I'll carry it for you."

"Yes, do dear," she returned, "but do be careful of my ankles."

"Oh, yes!" we shan't tramp on them. I'll lift the skirt high up."

"You got your own back there, Hester," smiled the father with a quizzical look at the girl's flushed face.

"More!" agreed she. "What little pickles they are!"

At the open front door stood a frail, fair-faced woman, with a tiny infant in her arms. She greeted the girl with loving, eager eyes.

"I couldn't come out to you, dear," she said low, as she bent forward and kissed her on the lips. "Baby has a cold, and I am keeping her indoors. Take them all away with you, Paul," she added to her husband. "I want Hester just to myself for a little while."

She handed the infant to a waiting nurse, as Hester entered the living room, which opened direct upon the verandah.

"Come and take your things off, dear."

They passed into a wide, high room, which was evidently the principal sleeping apartment of the house, and as Hester slowly withdrew her gloves, the woman removed the hat and kissed the girl once more.

"I have been thinking of you all the time, dearie," she said gently, "but I thought it best to keep away, and Paul only returned from Maritzburg yesterday afternoon."

“Oh, I have wanted you dreadfully, Phyllis!” Her face dropped suddenly in her hands. The woman encircled her in frail arms and crooned over her, as she crooned and mouthed over her baby.

When, an hour later, the two emerged from the house and joined the missionary upon the verandah, a faint smile lurked round his lips after he had caught sight of the younger face.

“I thought Phyllis would bring the tears,” he murmured within himself; “the calm and hardness were unnatural.”

He bent over the sermon he had been preparing for a special church festival the same afternoon. Of striking personality, handsome presence, and great earnestness of purpose, this missionary was yet as careful to inculcate the observances of every Church form and rigid ceremonial as he was scrupulous in teaching the divine laws of Christ Himself. Detractors both to him and to his mission were wont to declare, and mayhap with good reason, that he paid, in his teachings, more emphasis to the former than to the latter. Small blame to him if he taught the congregation he himself had formed out of the raw material around the doctrines which were as the breath of life to his own nostrils. Christianity itself meant to him the Christianity of the Church to which he belonged: all other forms of worship were, in his esteem, mere schism and heresy.

In every other respect a man of broad mind and singular culture of nature, he was in the matter of his calling peculiarly narrow and bigoted, with a lofty and serene disregard to the admonition or advice of well-wishers who knew and understood the native nature in its every phase. To re-model the said nature, to start out upon a material of his own puny creation, was the dream which filled this man’s mind. Almost a one-ideal individual in this, his great ambition, he was saved from utter egoism by the absorbing, all-worshipping love with which he enveloped the woman who bore his name and was the mother of his children. Deeply self-satisfied in his home, in his work, in himself, no happier man, no truer husband ever lived than the missionary, Paul Gray.

“You have had a crowded house, Hester?” he asked, looking up from his pleasant work-table towards the two women as they seated themselves on the low verandah bench.

“Yes, it has been a great crowd, returned the girl quietly. She was subdued in aspect, and her eyes showed traces of recent bitter tears. “They were all there Aletta Gert as well. And as usual I misbehaved myself.”

“Even then? Oh, Hester!” The reproach came from the woman.

"Yes, even then, Phyllis. It's no use," she added sorrowfully. "I can't help it! I have often told you, Phil, that I have the very spirit of them all within me. We are a quarrelsome family, and the very essence of every bit of antagonism, in all the generations of them, seems to have come out in me. It is pure cussedness, I suppose, for you are always at hand to teach me better. There's Aletta, now – I could no more help snubbing her than a bird could help flying. She'll pay me out for it some day: I know she will."

"Just at first," she resumed, her eyes wandering up the avenue of young oranges to the white church porch. "Just at first, the night my unhappy father came home, I thought I should never feel wicked or hot with anger again. I seemed to get near to Heaven – a sad Heaven, where everything was grey and solemn and mournful, but good. I knew—" Her voice faltered. "I knew that my Redeemer lived, and I seemed to feel Him near—" She broke off abruptly.

"Yet only the next day I was among mine own again, and one of them."

The missionary regarded her with a thoughtful smile. A man of keen perceptions, he had his own opinion about the fearless, truthful young character; and the girl's dauntless spirit infinitely refreshed and interested him. Never had he attempted to offer spiritual comfort or advice to her, leaving her entirely in his wife's loving hands, the while he reflected that for good or ill she would work out her own destiny, dree her own weird; and that in no mean degree.

"With her headstrong will and pronounced ideas," he had once observed to his wife, "Hester will be a great saint or a great sinner. Handle her carefully, Phyllis, and above all things give her nothing but the Truth." And Mrs. Gray, who felt herself in some wise responsible for the young soul, fretted and worried over the girl she loved.

"What has been done about the young man who accompanied your father?" asked Paul Gray, quietly changing the topic of conversation. "Is your grandfather finding employment for him on the farm?"

"No!" said she slowly, bringing her eyes once more to his own. "It seems he promised my father to return to his mother in England if ever he had the chance; and when uncle asked him what he would have from us, he petitioned for help to work his passage home. Strange to say, Owpa has insisted upon charging himself with the cost of the fare to England, so uncle and I are helping him to settle. He is a shoemaker by trade, and he says that twenty pounds would enable him to set up a little business of his own behind his mother's shop. Uncle and I have given him fifty pounds. It will go by the mail-boat with him."

"He's gone, then?"

“Yes; and the poor fellow seemed genuinely grieved at leaving. Ouwpa never does things by halves, and he packed him off to the station after the – the ceremony yesterday. Then he wired to his lawyer in Maritzburg to make all the necessary arrangements, and to get an outfit for him. He must be out on the ocean now.”

“You surely didn’t trust him with the fifty pounds here?”

“No,” she said, with a slight smile. “Only a little pocket money for the journey. Uncle wired his lawyer to send the bank draft by mail to the man’s mother’s address. Not quite because we don’t trust him, but because it is safer so for his own sake. Fortunately he doesn’t drink, and I hope he will settle down. He was very good to my poor father; we gathered that much without his telling us.”

CHAPTER XII

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

DR. GRAY had not yet returned from the magistracy, whither he had been called, when she left the mission station, so the ride home, attended only by the half-caste Dolph, was accomplished in quiet and thoughtful mood. The wild gallop across the veldt was restrained in the afternoon to a quiet, swinging canter, and reduced nearer home to a slow, ambling triple, her accustomed hand controlling almost automatically, and without her own cognizance, the impatience of the animal under her. A musing fit of restless melancholy had settled over her spirits, and again an aching impatience with which she was only too familiar seized hold of her – a wild desire to break she knew not what asunder, and strike out a new line of action, of life, of thought itself. It was a mood implanted all unconsciously by the woman who had acted a mother's part to her, and had left her uncontrolled and headstrong just at the age when she needed most a careful guiding hand.

The heaviness of spirit was full upon her when she reached the farmhouse and found her grandfather sitting grimly in his sheltered corner, Martha van Wijk close beside him, her eternal crochet in her hand.

"Where's my uncle?" she asked of the latter as she passed through the room.

"He's in his own room: he doesn't want any supper," replied Miss van Wijk. "And you must make haste, for your Ouwpa wants to go to bed early."

"I don't want anything to eat," said Hester coldly, "I'll drink a cup of tea with uncle."

"I don't approve of eating or drinking in bedrooms," remarked the redoubtable Martha, as she rose and deposited her work upon a small side-table. "It's a nasty, lazy, English habit."

"Your approval signifies nothing," said Hester in icy tones. "And as you haven't seen above half-a-dozen English people in your life, you know nothing about their habits."

She was still frowning heavily when, a little later, she carried a tray with two cups of tea and a plate of biscuits into Klein Hendrik's room.

"What! In the dark?" she exclaimed, placing the tray upon the bed and fumbling in a drawer for matches. "It isn't good for you, Oomie, to sit moping

here. I have brought you a cup of tea and I'm going to have one myself." She lit the candle, and found him sitting at the open window. He turned a suffering face to her.

"You are ill!" she exclaimed sharply. "You are ill, Oomie, and you never told me!"

He smiled at the reproach and shook his head. "Nothing more than usual, liefje; nothing to be alarmed about."

She brought him a cup of tea, and forced a biscuit upon him. "For every one you eat I shall have two," said she laughing cheerily at the memory of a childish jest, and placing the plate upon the deep window ledge.

After a very slender meal between them, she carried the tray away, and returned to take a low seat at his feet.

"Now, Oomie," she said softly, "tell me all about it. Begin at the beginning, please, and I shall understand it better."

"I don't know." His speech faltered, slow and hesitating, from his hampered tongue. "I don't know if I should tell you."

"You must tell me," she said quietly. "I know you loved my mother, and I heard you ask my father to forgive you. You must let me know the truth, lest I misjudge some of you."

"Yes! he said slowly, "I have thought of that, and I have thought also that you might hear a wrong version from some lying tongue. Nobody living knows the truth now but myself."

He bent his forehead in one hand, the elbow resting upon the arm of the chair. The fingers of the other hand idled with her hair, then dropped into her lap a large sealed envelope.

"Our last mother left this for you, Hester," he said, low and faltering. "She foresaw that this time would come."

She sprang to her feet.

"From Granny!" she cried, looking at the superscription. "Oh, Oomie, how could you keep it from me so long?"

Her eyes were shining as she held the letter against her breast.

"Re-read it here!" said he, not lifting his head.

She carried the candle back to her seat at his feet, and holding it in one hand, broke the seal with the other.

Her eyes shone through a mist of tears, as she opened the sheet before her. It was dated three years back.

"Hester!" it began. Her guardian bent forward and softly wiped the tears from her eyes, as he had done in childhood's distant days.

“Read it aloud, liefje,”¹ he whispered.

“Hester—

“*In justice to my stepson, I am leaving behind for your behoof a true record of what took place between your parents and him. My time is limited, and I must hurry over the task I have to do.*

“*Hendrik and your father both loved Margaret, my niece, and when she chose Hennie I was angry and hurt, and took no pains to hide my feelings from her. She left Berg Vlei one morning with a white face, and never a reproachful word for the cold treatment accorded her. Hennie went immediately after, and it was not until they were married that we learned the hideous mistake of it all.*

“*It appeared that Hennie had written a note telling Margaret of his love for her, and she, thinking it had come from Hendrik (and that he had written, owing to the painful impediment in his speech), wrote back and accepted, telling him she loved him with all her soul. Aletta was the bearer of the letters, and I have always felt that she wilfully mislaid one of them. When Margaret heard Hennie proudly announce his engagement to her, in the teeth of my husband’s sharpest anger, she was too foolish and frightened to own to the mistake she had made. The very fact of her accepting a man who had never sought her love cowed and humiliated her, and the unfortunate child allowed herself to be hurried by circumstances into a marriage that was hateful to her soul.*

“*If she had held her tongue all might yet have been well, but during a slight tiff with her husband she taunted him with the real facts of her engagement to him, and told him that she loved his cousin Hendrik. We only found out the truth after Hennie, wild with rage, had deserted her, taking with him a sum of money which had unexpectedly come to her by the death of your great-uncle. We should probably never have known the truth but for the incoherent letter of mad reproach which Hendrik received from him. Later on came reports of his wild dissipations up at the goldfields, and his subsequent death from Delagoa Bay fever. God forgive me, I was glad to hear the news.*

“*I sent Hendrik to Margaret in Maritzburg to do what he could for her. Hennie had appeared three months before and left again with all her savings. She was teaching music for her living, and my son found that she*

1 Lovey.

had received ample proofs of her widowhood. I don't think she pretended grief at being freed from him.

"Hendrik placed her comfortably in a small furnished house, and some months later you were born there.

"We told my husband nothing, for he was greatly incensed at Margaret, blaming her for all the wild excesses of his favourite, and hating her cruelly and bitterly, as only he can hate. And I may here remark that I never fathomed my husband's relationship to your father.

"You were but a few months old when Hendrik came and told me that Margaret had consented to marry him if he could gain his father's approval. He knew that condition killed his hopes, and left it for me to decide. I made what excuses occurred to me at home and returned to the City with him. The poor girl had sadly changed during her two years of married life, and I was greatly touched at her joy at seeing me and placing her child in my arms. I persuaded her to marry Hendrik, and leave the breaking the news to his father to me. It was easily seen that she loved my dear son with every fibre of her being. The wedding was necessarily a very quiet one, and I took charge of you while they went to the coast for a fortnight. They came back radiantly happy, Margaret sweet and winsomely bright again; Hendrik, worshipping the very ground she trod upon, looking quite ordinary in his joy. Hitherto he had always worn a melancholy, deprecatory air.

"I like to think of them at that time. They had had their two weeks of bliss, and it was pretty to see their joy, the one in the other. We were discussing that evening of their return, the coming interview up at Berg Vlei, I somewhat grimly, the two most concerned laughing and making light of it, when – Oh, Great Powers above! – the door opened and Hennie stood before us.

"I cannot describe the scene that followed. You were on my knee and I threw you from me as your father struck Margaret. But I was too late, and Hendrik lay felled at my feet before I could get between them. Hennie hurled his murderous loaded stick across the room at me as he went out into the night again. I have never seen or heard of him since. Wherever he is, may he be accursed!

"Margaret was like a being stunned. I implored her to help me with Hendrik, or to take you, who were screaming on the floor. But she only looked from you to him and shuddered.

“Hendrik’s injuries were slight, and he was able to leave the house to us that same night. But Margaret was struck with horror, and I believe her reason must have been unhinged. Nay, I feel sure of it. For two days and nights she moved about the house from room to room, a strange, deathly look on her face, and never a tear in her eyes; with no word to me or her child, and no understanding of the comfort I tried to offer her.

“The third night I had sunk exhausted and fallen into a heavy sleep, when she came to me in her white nightgown. ‘Auntie!’ she said, shaking me awake. ‘Auntie, tell him that I leave the child to him. Ask him to care for her and love her as though she were his and mine.’ ‘Yes, dear!’ I said soothingly, ‘but go and try to sleep now.’ ‘Oh, yes! I shall sleep.’ She bent and kissed me with hot, dry lips. Then pressed her white face against your sleeping baby one.

“Tell him I give him my love – my dear love – and the child.” With a sob she crept away again.

“Next morning she was lying dead with wide, staring grey eyes. The doctors said it was an overdose of chloral.”

The letter had broken off abruptly and was unsigned. The grim reaper had hastened the gathering-in of Hester de Villiers herself.

CHAPTER XIII

GERT

IT was about this time that Gert van Wijk, Martha's brother, and husband to the redoubtable Aletta herself, began to haunt the precincts of Berg Vlei. Hester had always especially disliked this man, who belonged to the most objectionable type of Boer. Crassly ignorant, he hated and affected to despise every branch of knowledge derived from other sources than the divine writings or the columns of inspired wisdom to be found in an *Africander* newspaper. Keenly selfish and alive to the main chance, he, as a natural consequence, bitterly envied the good fortune of others, the while he preached vague sermons about the evils of the love of gold. The enterprise or progress of a contemporary (especially when crowned with success) was stigmatized as a wicked tempting of Providence.

He himself had married his wife Aletta solely for the sake of the fat portion she had brought him and the flocks and hers which she, alike with her sisters, had taken from the home farm when she blessed her husband with the crown and glory of her love. And he had been content to sit at his ease under the thatched roof, which a generation ago had sheltered his parents before him, paying little heed to the march of events progressive, or to the beautifying or possible developing of the home inherited from his forebears. What was good enough for them was good enough for him, and to the devil with pride and progress! He tilled the ground his father had ploughed, with a few score acres extra, and the profits accrued therefrom, together with the yearly proceeds from his increasing flocks, sufficed to keep him and his in luxury sufficient for their own comfort. Unlike the vast majority of his contemporaries, he remained immune from the craving for land – and ever more land – which keeps innumerable families in debt and penury for all the days of their existence – one farm being no sooner redeemed from the mortgage of its purchase-money than an additional thousand or two acres of ground are annexed, and the old rasping anxiety recommenced, with perhaps added cares and burdens.

Gert van Wijk was not that kind of man. The sum of hard cash which his wife had brought him twenty years ago, by being put out at bond on the purchases of his more venturesome neighbours – eight per cent, on mortgage,

or ten per cent, without security to a safe client – had steadily multiplied itself and swelled to appreciable dimensions.

He stood six foot two in his stockings, was big in proportion, with huge loose limbs and lounging gait. Kept under and subdued by his wife, he took a vicious delight in playing to advantage the part of a mighty Bull of Bashan whenever opportunity should occur, and in consequence he earned a meed, full measure, pressed down and running over of hearty hatred from his dependents.

Three months had paced slowly by and two changes in the tenour of her life had forced themselves upon the almost unconscious notice of Hester de Villiers. The more palpable of the twain was the different footing upon which Gert van Wijk stood in the household. Never more than tolerated by Klein Hendrik, whose heart contained naught but kindness for all humankind, the man had ever been treated with a measure of contempt and indifference by the old gentleman, whose vague wonder had been excited many a time and oft at a daughter of his – and the one of them all who most favoured himself – choosing for her life-partner a being so beneath the standard of her own up-bringing. He had rarely deigned notice to this, the most objectionable of his army of sons-in-law, and beyond the merest civilities of occasional intercourse, he had never permitted the intrusion of the man's personality upon his own company.

Now, however, the aspect was changing. Slowly, but most perceptibly, Gert van Wijk was gaining a large influence over his wife's father, the cultured mind and refined instincts of the latter notwithstanding. Almost day by day the huge, white, raw-boned quadruped appertaining to Gert, might be seen swinging at slow trot over the brow of the hill, and the gentleman himself, cultivating an air of the free and easy, would stride into the house and throughout the various apartments, slapping his moleskins with the lithe sjambok which controlled the paces of the white steed.

His large, shaven face and thick, loose lips under their scant covering of ruddy bristles, wore an expression of peculiar satisfaction and gratified pride as he lounged about the house with an affectation of exaggerated ease.

The quiet questioning of Klein Hendrik's eyes, alike with the keen resentment of Hester's gaze, passed unnoticed or unconsidered in view of the pleasant welcome accorded by the old farmer himself, and the huge gratification of Martha, the "lady-help." And it was in some manner noteworthy that the lady herself had assumed a distinct air of arrogance and superiority in the household, treating Klein Hendrik and his ward to a behaviour distinctly cavalier. "Improvements" of her own innovation began to creep about the irregular old dwelling – Christmas cards nailed in fancy patterns upon the

walls – draperies of sixpenny calico embellished with crochet work of her own manufacture, creeping about the shelves and dresser in the pantry. Blinds of the same spotless material, enriched with various designs of the same hand-worked lace, raised themselves between the beholder and the distant view at bedroom windows.

Beyond expressing a quiet wish (which was contemptuously disregarded) that the blinds should be withdrawn from before the front windows of the house, Hester took but little account of the doings of her auxiliary, and ignored with quiet hauteur the covert insolence and jaunty self-assurance which had begun to slightly pall upon the nerves. In her own room, the young mistress of Berg Vlei found plenty of occupation for the passing of her leisure hours, and Martha, driven distracted at the locked door which barred her ingress, gave it out, freely and graphically, to all and sundry of the country-side, that Hester Rondlooper¹ passed all the days of her life sprawling on her bed and reading novels.

For, be it noted here, that the commiseration for the fate which had befallen Hennie de Villiers did not for one instant defer his sympathizers from imbuing his young daughter in thought and name, with the stigma of his tramping propensities. And Hester Rondlooper she would all unconsciously remain throughout the length and breadth of the country, till her eyes should close in death. Aye! and then the name would be bequeathed to her children after her.

With a quick sense of aptitude, a Boer community will tack on to any given person a nickname or pseudonym that will cling with marvellous tenacity, and mark its possessor and his progeny after him, with ridicule or infamy, till eternity itself. The constantly recurring habit of naming children after their parents, and their relatives afar and near, is largely responsible for the peculiar tendency to bestow distinctive appellations upon people of one name. Thus in a generation of cousins there may be a Black Piet, a Red Piet, a Dirty Piet, a Piet Squint, or a Piet Liar. And so on *ad libitum*. And each child shares the honour of the parent's appellation, as, for instance, Cecilia Dirty Piet of Minnie Piet Squint. Just as no married woman is ever referred to by her titular dignity, or even by her husband's surname. From she leaves the altar rails, after bowing to acquiesce in the exigencies of the position (for neither party is required to express in words the vows prescribed by law) she becomes Mrs. So-and-so to her English or other foreign friends only, and among her own she is known henceforth as Annie Jan, Annie Koos, as the case may be.

¹ Vagrant: tramp.

So Hester de Villiers, who had heretofore been Hester Van Klein Hendrik,² was now and for evermore, to her contemporaries, only Hester Rondlooper.

2 Little Hendrik's Hester.

CHAPTER XIV

MARTHA

THE SECOND change upon the tenour of her life's way which had slowly forced itself upon the conviction of Hester was an intangible one, and yet faintly, though none the less surely, to be felt. It was a certain reserve, a restless, indefinite something which had crept across the sunny disposition of her intimate Frank Gray and spoilt the pleasant intercourse of their relationship. Never since the evening when he had confessed his overwhelming love for her had the subject of their strange, half-cemented engagement been alluded to upon either side. Relieved at first by what she considered the true consideration of her knight-errant, she had gradually begun to ponder over his strange abstinence from the subject, and at the same time to wonder regretfully over his evident discomfort in her presence. With half-closed volume in her lap, or pen idle in her hand, she would stare, in musing mood, out through her window at the chasmed side of the near mountain head, and the vague disturbance within her would unsettle and interfere with the work she had taken in hand.

It was subsequent a long fit of abstraction, that rising suddenly one day at noon, she changed her skirt for a riding one, and, after locking every vestige of paper out of sight, she opened her door and called one of the maids:

"Go and tell Dolph to saddle Sultan for me and Jim for himself," she said to the girl. "Why are there tears in your eyes?" she asked then gently. "You have been crying." The girl was a favourite of her own, who had been born on the farm and grown up side by side with her.

Before a reply could be given a loud strident voice from the dining-room took up the burden, and Martha van Wijk strode down the passage with flushed face and fierce eyes. The maid flew out of the door and towards the stable.

"I struck her," said Martha angrily. "She broke a saucer and I thrashed her. That should be enough."

"It is enough," said the girl very quietly. "Only don't attempt it again, please. I will not have my servants beaten for such a trivial cause. Please remember for the future."

“Zoo!” The ejaculation was one long sneer with indrawn breath through clenched teeth. “Zoo! And what right have you to interfere with me, I should like to know. Who are *you*?”

“Who I am is not your concern at all,” returned the girl proudly. “But you are my servant, and I wish no more impertinence. Leave my room instantly.”

She picked up her soft felt hat and gloves as though quite unaware of the buxom figure evidently struck to stone upon her threshold. But when reaching to a rack for the pretty riding-whip which had been Frank’s one gift, her eyes encountered the pale, flabby face of her subordinate staring at her with distended eyes, now almost protruding from surprise and astonished anger; and a tiny smile rippled over her mouth as the quick thought of Lot’s wife flashed across her brain. However, she had played into her enemy’s hands, for, with a shriek of rage, Martha cried aloud her wrongs and fled, weeping, to the dining-room.

Hester followed quietly with compressed lips, and found, as she had confidently expected, that the burden of the housekeeper’s wrongs and ill-usages was being poured into the willing, fleshly ears of Gert, her brother. Nerved to the conflict, she smiled inwardly, and rushed with naked sword upon the combat. Gert turned with a scowl to regard her.

She looked upward at his towering height and raised her eyebrows with gentle surprise.

“Are you here *again*?” she asked lightly.

“Where would I be?” he queried, falling into the wily trap, and putting himself on the defensive. “Where do you want me to be?”

“Hemel! I don’t want you anywhere. The idea!” She laughed airily. “Whatever made you think I want anything to do with you?”

“You’ll see more of me than you want soon.” He could not resist the threatening taunt in his access of irritation.

She laughed again.

“But I’ve done that ever since I remember,” she remarked, fastening her gloves with a pretty interest in the task. “I saw more of you than I wanted when you only came to this house on sufferance once in six months or so.” She looked at him sidewise out of soft grey eyes. “That was when grandmother wouldn’t have you about the place, you know,” she reminded him pleasantly.

“Hark at her!” shrieked Martha, wild at being kept outside the conflict. “Do you hear her?”

“He won’t hear me,” commented the girl severely, “if you make such a noise.”

Martha's fingers literally clawed the air.

"She – she insulted me too," she spluttered. "Called me her servant."

"Yes," returned the culprit, with easy grace. "But make your mind happy on that score. I'm going to discharge you soon."

Gert van Wijk was now roused in earnest.

"Look here, you child of a Scotch slut," he roared. "You brat of an accused rondlooper!" He raised his whip in vapid fury. "If it wasn't for the respect I bear for Klein Hendrik—"

For instant a gleam of passionate anger had leaped from the girl's eyes, but with a great effort she turned her pale face upon him, quivering with quiet contempt.

"Oh, don't let such a slight thing as that interfere with your amusement," she said, with calm scorn. "Just forget it for a moment and hit me."

His arm dropped, and the sjambok trembled in his big fingers.

"You won't?" in a tone of rich disappointment, "I might have known as much."

"Look here, Hester—" he began in threatening rage.

"Nonsense, Gert!" replied she briskly. "I have not time to waste. Just make your remarks to Martha there."

She turned from the room and left them petrified and incoherent.

Outside, down at the gate, the half-caste Dolph stood holding two horses by the rein, one Hester's own black Sultan, the other an ancient bay animal, somewhat the worse for his years and in poor condition.

"What does this mean, Dolph?" asked the girl sharply and angrily. "Didn't I tell you distinctly that old Colonel is not to be ridden while he is so thin? And didn't Nombuka tell you to saddle Jim for yourself?"

"Yes, Nona,¹ she did," protested the boy, edging to the other side of the horses, "but Baas Gert says he wants him to-day."

"Wants him?" in utter incredulity, "What on earth for?"

"I don't know, Nona. He says he's leaving his horse here to-night and taking Jim instead."

For a few seconds she stood, tapping the ground with her foot, too angry herself to speak. Then –

"Where's the baas?" she asked.

1 Miss.

He's ridden over the sand-bult,² Nona, to look for a foal that's missing. I heard Baas Gert ask the Ouwbaas³ for a horse," he added tentatively, "and he told him to take which he liked."

"Very well," she said gulping down her chagrin, "we'll leave Jim for him: but you can't ride Colonel, so I'll go alone."

"The baas will strike me dead if you go alone, Nona," remarked the lad with a grimace that was half a whimper.

"Could you ride Spitfire?" she asked.

"She's quite tame," he answered eagerly. "Mijn Pa says a child could ride her with a curb."

"Well, be smart," she said shortly, "and change the saddles. I'll make it right with the baas. You had better put a martingale on her." This was added as an afterthought.

"It's good, Nona!" The lad was half-way to the stable and calling over his shoulder.

Only a very few minutes elapsed before he returned, leading a fiery young blue-grey mare by the rein, and followed by a couple of grinning farm boys.

Dolph mounted his young mistress, and then, with the help of the natives, climbed up to his own uneasy seat, which was none of the surest. Hester eyed the performance with censoring eye.

"If you don't do better than that at the gates," she remarked critically, "I am sorry for you, for there'll be nobody to hold her there."

"She'll be all right once we're off, Nona. It's only the start with her."

"Steady with that curb, Eesel!"⁴ she called out sharply. "You'll break her jaw in two."

Once under way up the hill, the unhappy half-caste holding on with every nerve in his body to the fiery, heaving horseflesh beneath him, Hester remarked, with a critical survey of the *tout ensemble* beside her –

"I'll ride her myself next time."

"Oh Lord, no, Nona," jerked the lad, his yellow face pale at the thought. "The baas would break my neck if I put your saddle on her."

I can't keep behind, Nona. She won't let me."

"Well, never mind. Only keep on the right side, and don't go thumping against Sultan, and I'll forgive you that!"

2 Sand-hill.

3 Old master.

4 Donkey.

CHAPTER XV

UNDER THE OAKS

“OH, HESTER I am glad to see you!”

The ejaculation broke from Mrs. Gray as the doorway darkened, and she looked up from the small garment she was stitching to see the girl before her. The woman looked tired and worn, but her thin face flushed with pleasure.

“And how well you look!” She kissed the face presented to her. “You have such a pretty colour.”

“That’s the result of temper, my dear,” was the half-grave, half-quizzical response. “I had a passage of arms with Martha and that hateful brother of hers just before I left.”

“Not really, Hester?” There was a world of reproach and quiet rebuke in the tone.

“Yes, really Phyllis; and you would be astonished to hear how naturally I can abuse them all. It’s really wonderful. I often think of myself as two distinctive personages: one thoughtful, of refined tastes, imbued with lofty ideals and a great ambition. That’s what I am with you. The other, vixenish, shrewish, sometimes nearly blasphemous in speech. That’s when I’m among mine own.”

“And yet,” mused Mrs. Gray, putting aside her work and securely locking scissors and penknife away from possible temptation to itching young fingers. “And yet some of the Dutch people around are most superior.”

“Of course they are,” conceded the girl, following her hostess to the bedroom. “But I’m not criticizing Dutch people at all. I’m talking of my own belongings only. But don’t let us waste our time over such trivialities. I came to consult you about something very different.”

“Well, I shan’t listen to a word you have to say till we’ve had dinner.”

“Oh, dinner!”

“Yes, dinner!” and Mrs. Gray looked severely at the young face. “Decidedly dinner. If you are not as hungry as a young tigress you should be, by the look of you. There are boiled chickens with white sauce for dinner.”

"I almost guessed as much," replied the girl, laughing aloud. "That's partly why I came – because Martha was cooking salt mutton. I smelt it all over the house. Where's Frank?"

"He's coming over this afternoon." Hester was brushing back the disordered tendrils of brown hair before the mirror. Mrs. Gray moved back from her side and looked out of the window. "Is there anything between you and Frank, Hester?"

"Well, there is," said the girl slowly, "and there isn't. There's a kind of half-cemented engagement – not even quite that. But why do you ask, Phyllis?"

"Curiosity, I suppose," she said, absently. "Inquisitiveness!" Then, still keeping her back to the figure before the mirror – "He spends a great deal of his time at the Residency."

"With the new people?"

"Yes. They seem to be generally very well liked. Mrs. Ashley's sister, Ethel Dallas, is said to be a good, sweet girl. Somewhat large, but most attractive."

"I see. But that's a silly reservation, Phyllis; you can't have too much of a good thing. Only don't trouble your dear head about me or Frank or Ethel Dallas. We are none of us worth that." She had come behind the woman, and bent forward to kiss the pale cheek. "I believe the fowls will be boiled to rags if we waste any more time here. They are really fowls, aren't they? You call them by courtesy chickens?"

Mrs. Gray turned and smiled.

"You would like to make one believe that you have no heart, Hester," she said.

"I haven't *that* kind of heart, Phyllis," she answered, with a little laugh.

The mid-day meal at the Mission Station was always a pleasant one, and the Missioner himself extended his usual warm welcome to the girl whose love and friendship meant so much to the wife of his heart and home. At table the little Grays were models of bright, good behaviour, under no apprehension of needless reprimand, and their joyous chatter and cheery laughter were a rich delight to Hester, whose own home had ever been a silent and subdued one.

"I want mamma all to myself for a while," she observed for the general benefit, as the party rose from table. "If some little boys and girls were to look into my saddle-bag, they might find some chocolate or butter-scotch. I knew that would disperse them," she ended, laughing, there was a general stampede towards the back apartments. The missionary, smiling in sympathy, gathered together his books, for superintendence of afternoon school. The day was sultry and warm, and the house seemed redolent of the odours of the meal.

“Shall we go out to the garden, Hester?” asked Mrs. Gray. She had taken recently to indulging in an hour’s siesta in an afternoon; but not for half a kingdom would she have spoiled the girl’s pleasure by hinting at her heavy weariness.

“Yes; to our usual seat, Phyl, please. I’ll carry the violin. When did you practise last?”

“Ages ago!” returned the woman, with a wan smile; “and I haven’t played since you were here last.”

“Dear, you look tired,” said the girl suddenly. “Shall we stay indoors?”

“No, Hester, but we’ll carry some cushions with us.”

Out in the garden, under the shade of an oak-tree, and half-way between the house and the church, stood a solid wooden bench with comfortable hollowed seat and wide, receding back. Here they ensconced themselves, and Hester took, with tender care, a shabby old violin from its case and enwrappings of silk.

“Play first, please, Phyllis,” she said softly.

The woman tuned the instrument with strong, albeit delicate precision, and then, turning to the girl said quietly –

“I should like to know, first of all Hester, what you wish to consult me about. Is it – Frank?”

“No, Phyllis, of course not! I couldn’t consult even you about anything of that kind.”

A look for intense relief settled upon the woman’s face, and she sank back at her ease against the soft cushions.

“They” – the young voice was hushed and shy – “they accepted that paper I told you of, Phyllis.”

“About the wage of woman workers?”

“Yes; and the Secretary has written prophesying such great things for me if I persevere in a literary career. She says I have an inborn, heaven-sent gift, and begs me to ‘dedicate it to the cause of woman and her unequal struggle for common rights.’ She wrote me pages and pages, Phyllis; but I didn’t bring her letter, as it would seem like self-glorification if I were to hand it to you.”

Her friend nodded thoughtfully.

“Now they wish me to submit a paper on the franchise for women, and I seem to have nothing to say. I went most carefully through all Granny’s papers this morning, but I could get no satisfaction. The arguments used in the letters from her friends are all vague and frightfully hackneyed; and I could make nothing of them.”

“No,” said Phyllis; “I don’t suppose you could. Who were the writers?”

“They were mostly old fellow-workers of Granny’s: Mary Brown, Elsie Burns, Miss Runciman, and others. But those were the chief three.”

“All unmarried women,” commented Mrs. Gray slowly, “and therefore not conversant with the real issues of life. They lash themselves into bitterness, and will only view existence – the existence of man and woman – from one standpoint: and no matter how talented they are, how advanced in their ideas, how intellectual, they can never get a grasp, or any but a faint insight into the heart of things. They see their own side of the question only, and with sinful blindness close their eyes to all else, and refuse to look across the chasm between the sexes, or even to peep around at the other side of the shield. It is their fearful ignorance that drives them to such absurd excesses, so that their Cause is laughed at where it might have most consideration.”

“But I don’t want to be ignorant, Phyllis!” The girl turned an earnest face upon her. “I want to know the truth of things without marrying to get at them. I don’t know that I could marry. Some men make me shrink within myself; and the utmost I have ever felt has been friendly tolerance – the tolerance I have for Frank. But the thought of marriage—”

“And yet a good man is a noble creation of God’s!” Phyllis smiled softly at an inward thought, and a little quiver of calm happiness played around the ultra-sensitive mouth. “You see, to begin with, Providence set out the male half with greater passions than we possess, and a larger strength and energy of purpose – a greater nature of daring. We have to bear the heavy penalty of pain and a suffering beyond human words to express; and yet I would rather, a thousand times, pay my whole dole of anguish as a woman, than be as a man accursed with the strong passions which are his by birthright. In our very weakness in this matter lies our great strength. That’s why you’ll usually find a good, virtuous man completely dominated by his wife. Often he is not aware of his thralldom of will, and none else sees it: but she – the woman at his side – knows that every action of his life is prompted by her, or thought of her. It need not be aggressively felt or aggressively shown – where it is really potent it never is! – but it is there all the same: the making or marring of the most godlike child of man, or the sorriest male creation under the sun. I tell you, child, a woman can lead the man who loves her whithersoever she will – to Heaven or to Hell.”

“I can’t think that really true, Phyl. If it were so, why should the men – and in particular the good, domesticated men – be so bitterly opposed to granting us the franchise?”

"You have me there," said Phyllis, idly and softly thrumming the strings of her instrument, as she gazed intently out through the gap in the gum trees at the far distant stretch of green. "I cannot say; unless it is because they wish to keep up in a public capacity the semblance of a power which they rarely possess in their private lives. It is a strange thing, but absolute as Truth herself, that if even the best man on earth knew that his wife dictated every action of his life – nay! every thought of his being – he would rather be cut in pieces than acknowledge it."

"From your own showing, then, man is but a pitiable creature after all;" and the girlish lip curled with scorn.

"Not at all!" The tired blue eyes rested upon the girl with a faint gesture of expostulation. "I tell you, Hester, that upon God's good earth, He made nothing so noble, so grand, so wholly worthy of all honour and worship, as a good man. When a man keeping down his own strong nature, keeps his body pure and his mind clean, and 'cleaves only unto his lawful wife,' then that man richly deserves all the love and duty his spouse can lavish upon him."

"But why, when a woman and a man do a mutual wrong, should she be the one to fall alone, and to bear all the calumny, as well as the suffering? Why should she be barred from respectability while he takes his former place in society? It is not right; it is cruelly unjust."

"It is unjust. But then, my dearie, you should remember that she, through having the weaker passion should also possess the stronger moral nature. An all-wise and all-merciful Providence has endowed her with an innate sexual modesty which should act effectually as a shield between her and all harm. From her tenderest years a girl should be carefully trained, and drilled gently in a knowledgeable way to foster her own modesty and sense of shame.

"There is so wide a breach between the sexes! And from a moral point of view ours is so much the superior! Yet, by the exigencies of life, ours is the one to suffer the tortures of the damned once the irrevocable step in wrong-doing has been taken. To the unhappy creatures who have sunk to nameless depths of unspeakable degradation, it is a mere matter of livelihood – a tortured slavery and agonized endurance cunningly devised by Satan himself. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred these women are driven to such infernal extremes simply through their sheer inability to reinstate themselves after the first fall."

"What brutes men are!" The words broke from the girl's mouth.

"Perhaps they are!" agreed the woman. "Perhaps they are brutes – but only when women are fools."

There was a long silence. Phyllis was resting her chin upon the clasped hands that held the violin upright on her knee, while she gazed far away, the light breeze ruffling the tiny fair curls which clung lovingly about the worn features. Hester's stern young face softened as she looked at her friend.

"You mean to say then," she continued gently, "that we women are really stronger and better than the men?"

"No, I don't!" returned Mrs. Gray in mild surprise. "I mean nothing of the kind. We are stronger only in that our passions are weaker, and therefore we possess a certain hold over the men who love us. And, as I said just now, in our weakness lies our greatest strength. But man has the larger, more expansive nature, the clearer mind, as well as the brute strength. If you need proof of what I say, take, perhaps, a dozen men out of any community, give them some simple subjects to discuss first publicly, and then at their leisure among themselves. Take, then, a pack of women, and let them go through the same programme. And you will see – what you shall see!"

"Education – or the want of it – is responsible for the most of that," murmured Hester in vague discontent.

"Perhaps so," assented Phyllis indifferently. "I only know that if ever I committed a small indiscretion I would rather trust my reputation to a score of men than to three of the best educated women I ever knew."

"You are very hard, Phyllis!"

"The truth always does sound hard, dear, and nearly always has a most unpalatable taste."

"I sometimes think," the words were bitter and somewhat sad, "that you take the man's part all through, Phyllis."

"Do I? I hope not, dearie, I shouldn't like to be so unjust. There are thousands of women whose lives are a daily martyrdom through their being cursed with bad husbands, just as there are men whose lives and prospects and earthly welfare are blasted through the wives of their own bosoms. But we are not discussing those at present. We are setting aside drunkards, gamblers, violators of the marriage vow. We are only talking of the conditions of normal men and women who live together according to God's Holy ordinances.

"And I do hold that a great deal of unmitigated rubbish is said and written about the male prerogative and woman's rights. While he is earning the bread for her and hers, why cannot she be content to make happy and bright for him the home which his love has provided?"

"Then you are against the franchise for women, after all?"

"Not the franchise. Oh no! To begin with, the franchise is granted too freely as it is. Boys of twenty-one have no business to be entrusted with a vote, for at that age the vast majority of them know as little about the true interests of the country as they know about the distance to Heaven. No man under twenty-five years of age, unless married or possessed of a certain amount of property in the country, should be granted the franchise. And all spinsters of that age, and widows of any age whatever, should have a voice in the government of the land."

"And married women?"

"Oh, in most cases a married woman is quite content that her husband should vote as he pleases. If she is not, and is worth her salt, she'll see to it that he votes as she pleases. Hush, now!"

She raised the instrument to her shoulder, and the strains of a pulsating, haunting serenade that searched the memory like a half-forgotten dream of pain long past, wailed out from under the shadows. With dreamy, unseeing eyes fixed upon the dull grey of distance, she drew her bow with nerved, master hand, and the nameless message of a heart-suffering beyond her ken hurt the girl.

As the last sob of melody died away, like a gasp of physical pain, she turned and looked at the woman. The sunlight, flickering through the changing leaves of the oak, had tinged her face with a pale light, and the blue eyes looked strangely pathetic and weary. The lines which much care of life and "child-birth pain" had implanted round the speaking, sensitive mouth, seemed doubly intensified; and a strange restless yearning seized the girl's heart.

"Sometimes, Phyllis," she said softly, "I think of you almost as an angel"

"A very sordid one, Hester," returned the woman quietly. "A most faulty one. An angel who murmurs continually over the too munificent blessings which have been showered upon her."

"Murmurs?"

"Yes! murmurs, and frets, and fumes. Of my own accord and free will I gave up the brilliant career that lay before me: threw everything away for love of a man—"

Her voice died and a strange look, half-wistful, tender, withal wholly petulant, crept into the quiet blue eyes and overshadowed the pale forehead.

"I thought it would be heaven sufficient to sit at his table, to lie by his side, to anticipate and carry out his every wish throughout our joint lives," she whispered, "and just at first it was enough to know how he loved me. Then the sameness of the life out here began to pall upon me, and the children

came so quickly one after the other; and I lost all interest in the mission work. And misunderstandings arose through my quick temper and sharp tongue. He thought I had ceased to care, and himself seemed cold and unsympathetic. Then I yearned for the company of old friends, the lighted streets at night, the crowds about the theatre doors the sea of faces from the platform, and the roars of applause. Even for the sight of lovely women in evening dress!”

“And my own lines in life seemed cast in sordid places. I hated these lying, thieving, time-serving Amakolwas,¹ and they could not understand me. I had tried to play to them at first, but they only wondered at, and cared nothing for the music I made, unless I played an Irish jig or the ‘Keel-row.’ Then they would dance about like jumping-jacks, or so many animated demons. For more than a year I put my violin aside and gave myself up to sullen repining, breaking my own heart and my husband’s as well. God knows he never said one word of reproach, but streaks of grey appeared in his dear head, and fretful lines set their marks in my own face. It seemed as though the death of one of us could be the only possible relief to both out of a life of corroding misery. Then God, in His merciful wisdom and all-embracing love, took to His own gracious keeping the baby I had loved above all the others; but only after weeks of horrible suffering. It was nachtmaal² time, and all the neighbours were away at church; so between us Paul and I made the little coffin.”

An emotion which worked her features and choked her utterance stayed her narrative for a short silent space.

“Each nail that we drove home seemed hammered into our own lacerated hearts, and by the time we lifted our lost blossom into her narrow, cold bed, and stared with dry eyes at the waxen face and blue lips, we had opened our souls the one to the other. I knew how he loved me beyond his own soul, and how my peevish perversity had almost broken his heart. When he read the burial service over his own child and threw the dust upon her, his voice faltered and broke, and I thought my own heart would burst. Even now at nights I sometimes hear the empty, hollow thud—”

“Only the mission natives joined with us in our bitter mourning, and ever since that day, when their unrestrained, sympathetic weeping brought the relief of tears to my own tortured anguish, I have tolerated them better, and even liked some of them.”

1 Christianized natives; literally, ‘believers’.

2 Dutch sacrament occurring once every quarter.

The cloud was still upon the tired, passion-worn face, and a tearful frown at the memory of past bitterness of heart and spirit, distorted the expression and distended the throat.

“You never would speak of my little namesake before,” whispered Hester.

“I could not, child.” She arose, a long, quivering sigh paying its dole to the pain of retrospect. Then with a wintry smile she handed the violin to Hester for enwrapping.

“Here come Paul and Frank,” she said quietly. “An escort home for each of us.”

CHAPTER XVI

OLD COLONEL

DR. GRAY found himself unable to accompany Hester on her homeward way. His excuses of previous engagement and much work were flimsy and untenable as a tissue of cobwebs. But when he found how cheerfully and even eagerly she grasped at the opportunity of riding home unattended, save by her servant, he looked at her with wistful gaze. Hitherto he had avoided meeting her calm eyes; but when she assured him with a laugh that she preferred her own company when none better was to be had, he chose to be reproachful and vaguely discontented.

"I don't like you to talk in that manner, Hester," he protested as they two stood under the verandah thatch waiting for the horses. "I think you like to seem heartless."

"I like to seem what I am, Frank," she said lightly, "and that is decidedly unsentimental. Surely you don't want me to cry and pout because you don't find it convenient to come with me and leave the study of your nasty physics to lamplight? I couldn't do it, Frank: not for the best man who lives. And you are not that."

"Well," said he, somewhat nettled, "You need not go out of your way to — to —"

"To be candid," she supplemented. "I don't. But I never say one thing and think another."

"According to that estimate, you don't think much of one Frank Gray, then," he commented, "for you rarely say anything very flattering to him."

"Now, we are descending to personalities again." She shrugged her shoulders and turned to greet the egress of her host and hostess from the house-door.

"You are going very early, Hester," objected Mrs. Gray. "It is not four o'clock yet."

"Yes, I know, but I want to call round and see Anna Erich. And I am coming up on Monday again."

"You won't fail, Hester, will you?" remarked the missionary. "I am going over to the station early, and Phyllis will be alone all day."

"No, she won't," said the girl, with a quick smile, "for I shall be here. Kiss the children for me, Phyllis. Now, Frank, are you going to mount me, or is Mr. Gray to have the honour?"

When she had vaulted to the saddle and the young man was arranging her foot in the stirrup, she bent down and held her hand to him. He looked well-groomed and handsome, his fair head shining in the sun's rays.

"Good-bye, Frank," she said, her grey eyes meeting his with something soft and kind in their depths. "Please arrange to ride home with me on Monday."

Before he could answer, and while his every nerve was yet tingling at the contact of her fingers and the sweet graciousness of her parting words, her horse had bounded away for the big main road, and she was cantering past the church and heading for a distant farmhouse which nestled at the base of a kopje.

"I wish after all that I had gone with her," said the doctor, addressing his sister-in-law. She turned, silent, away from him.

"How lovely she is!" remarked the missionary to his brother. "What a sweet, gracious woman she will make!"

"Yes!" The young man strangled a sigh and strode towards the church, from which he would command an uninterrupted view of the journeying of the woman he loved.

Her errand accomplished at Anna Erich's, Hester proceeded leisurely on her homeward way, thoughtful and ill-satisfied.

"After all," she mused, "I have gained nothing for my work from Phyllis to-day. She speaks from the point of view of the happily-married woman, and her opinions and verdict are quite useless for my paper. I know nothing from actual experience, and yet I feel in every fibre of me that it is all wrong – that the whole system is one-sided. There is Phyllis herself. Her constitution is run down and completely unnerved through the exigencies of her life. And she is one of the happy ones!"

She picked her way down the hill, the boy Dolph controlling the young mare to easier paces upon the homeward journey.

An exclamation from him in the rear caused her to turn her head.

"What is it, Dolph?" she called back.

"It's the vultures, Nona," he replied, pointing to a dip between the hills to their left. "They're eating something big – looks like a horse or a beast."

"So it does. Just you ride across and see what it is. You'll catch me up by the time I come to the gate."

The boy departed at a quick canter, and Hester proceeded on her way slowly down the hill. As she neared home a certain unpleasant tinge of irritation crossed her spirit and disturbed her thoughts.

"There's sure to be another scene with Martha," she said, half aloud. "She's getting beyond everything reasonable. I wonder what an Englishwoman would say if her upper servant took such a high hand! I suppose she would be struck speechless."

A faint smile rippled her lips as she sprang to the ground and turned to Dolph, who was cantering up to the gate.

"What's wrong?" she demanded, in sudden terror at the horror in the boy's face.

"Ooh, mijn Nona?" he gasped, beside himself with excitement. "O— oh, mijn Nona!"

"What's wrong Dolph? She asked gently. "Tell me quickly. I can't bear anything but waiting."

"Its old Colonel, Nona." He had thrown himself to the ground in a very agony of grief.

"Colonel?"

"Yes, Nona. The vultures, Nona! They're eating him – he's been shot."

A cry loud and sharp broke from the girl's lips. She staggered against the stone wall, nor felt till long afterwards that she had badly bruised her arm under the thin muslin of her blouse.

A quick footstep from the house hurried down to the gate, and Klein Hendrik, his face working with emotion and alarm, took his child within his sheltering arm.

"Did – did you – cry like that?" he asked.

She moaned and shook her head.

"Is it about Colonel?" He addressed Dolph, and the boy nodded.

"Listen, Hester. It was that hound – that accursed hound – who shot your horse. And I can do nothing. I can't even sjambok him, for my strength is gone. God help me!"

She hardly heard him as she leaned her cheek against his shoulder. The old horse had been her especial favourite, a faithful companion till his age had told upon him, and her guardian had secured the sleek-skinned hunter Sultan. But not for fifty Sultans would she have had a hair of old Colonel's body hurt.

“Nona, Martha is watching through the zitkaamer¹ window, announced Dolph, his grief turning to rage, “and she’s laughing.”

The words acted like an electric shock to the girl. Her guardian had been softly stroking her face with his handkerchief, but she raised her head from his breast.

“Dolph!” The boy turned at his master’s call. “Put Spitfire – Spit-fire in old Colonel’s place in the stable. She belongs – be-longs – to Nona Hester now.”

“Ja, baas. Danke, baas!” and Dolph hurried off to the stables, his grief for the old favourite already greatly assuaged. Hester turned to speak, but her lip quivered as she met the kind gaze of her uncle’s glistening blue eyes.

“Such a dastardly thing to do.” She whispered. “Such a cruel, brutal act! The poor old horse—”

“Hush, mijn dierbaarste.² You will make them so happy if you show your grief. Can’t you make a brave front, my own little maid? You were always braver and brighter than your unhappy, useless old uncle.”

She smiled at him through swimming eyes. She knew so well that he was deprecating himself as the surest means to arouse her.

“Let us go and get it over indoors. Is he – that brute – still here?” They took the path up to the house.

“No. He went home on Jim.”

“Did he act on his own authority?”

“Not exactly. He talked to Ouwpa about the fodder the old horse consumed, and persuaded him that he was not fit for work, and a burden to himself.”

“That was a lie.” sharply enunciated the girl, “and Ouwpa knew it. Besides, it was your fodder he ate, Oomie.”

“I only reached home after it was done, liefje.” He said sadly. “I would have given a great deal to spare you the pain.”

They had reached the house, and Miss van Wijk met them in the doorway, casting a furtive, searching look at the girl’s wet eyes. The latter looked her calmly in the face, and responded quietly to the “mid-dag!”³ ventured by the lady-help. No remark touching upon the day’s occurrences was passed upon either side.

After removing her riding clothes and bathing her face, Hester entered the dining-room to give the final touches to the table for the evening meal, as was her usual custom. The first thing that caught her eye was the fact that a length

1 Sitting-room.

2 My best-beloved.

3 Good afternoon.

of crochet lace, nine or ten inches deep, attached to a covering of cheap calico, hung over the sideboard, a piece of really magnificent mahogany furniture belonging to herself, and part of the legacy from her godmother. From the bracket shelves, also, suspended lace of the same patterns in a lesser width than that which hung over the face of the board. With quickly compressed lips, Hester gently removed the article from the calico to the bare mahogany, and one by one folded the drapings neatly and placed them upon a side-table. She had only completed placing the strip of embroidered linen once more upon the board in its wonted place, when Martha bustled in. A very incoherence of rage seized her. Perhaps she had been anxious for an excuse to vent her venom, and yet take the airs of the injured party.

"Is *that* the thanks I get for slaving day and night to make this house look decent, and like other people's?" she cried in shrill wrath. "My work isn't good enough for you, isn't it?"

"Well, no!" said Hester quietly. "It isn't good enough for me. So I've taken it off."

"Oh! And I suppose I'm not good enough for you either, with your English ways?"

"That's it exactly," enunciated the girl quietly and distinctly. "You are not good enough for me – with my English ways."

Miss van Wijk flung out of the room, snuffing loudly as she made for her own apartment.

"That's the worst of that class of person," mused Hester wearily. "They always snuffle when they cry, and snigger when they laugh."

The words were addressed to no one in particular; and the old gentleman, entering from the verandah, made no comment when he saw his granddaughter alone in the room.

She quietly wished him good evening. It may be that her white face and wistful eyes sent a pang of compunction through his hard old heart, or it may be – and probably was – but further evidence of a certain weakening of intellect which she had noted of late months, and more in particular since the advent of her father; but, certain it is, that his piercing gaze softened as it rested on the girl's face.

"Don't you feel ashamed of crying out as you did?" he asked, by way of holding out the olive branch.

"I do rather," she said, a bright spot in either cheek. "It was childish."

"It was the best thing that could have happened to him," resumed he, setting his feet carefully on his goatskin. "He was old, was Colonel."

“Ouwpa, should be the best judge about the feelings of old age,” she returned coldly.

The old man glanced quickly at her in undefined displeasure, but the quiet look upon her face and the resigned gentleness of her eyes once more disarmed him. Where a stormy scene had been expected and prepared for, and hard, sharp words rehearsed in anticipation of their urgent need, it was disconcerting to meet with quiet acquiescence and no tangible reproach.

The native maids appeared with the trays, and they were immediately followed by Klein Hendrik and the redoubtable Martha herself, whose air of injured innocence would have been entertaining had any of her companions been in the mood for humour or amusement.

The party was seated in silence, and the old man’s strident voice had pronounced a blessing on the repast, when he returned his attention once more to the girl at the foot of the table.

“Colonel was old,” he reiterated, and a listener might have fancied that he was anxious to impress this fact upon his own consciousness. “He was past work. But there’s Jim! You can have him for Dolph whenever you want him.”

She raised her head in quick, scornful anger, but two pairs of eyes met her own and stayed the speech upon her lips. The agonized entreaty upon her godfather’s face for her acceptance of the offered concession hardly matched in intensity the eager desire in Martha’s eyes for a sharp conflict and a stormy battle of words.

Quietly, with a sudden change of mood and a little forced smile, she looked across the centre flowers at the white-bearded face.

“It is very kind of you, Ouwpa,” she said with a break in her voice. “But I loved my old horse.”

“There’s Jim,” hesitated her guardian. “She can’t be sure of him.”

“Why not?” The old gentleman’s tones were raucous and testy. “She can be sure of him if he belongs to her, can’t she? You take Jim when Gert brings him back to-morrow, and only never mention Colonel to me again.”

She met her guardian’s eyes once more then left her seat and walked round the table.

“Thank you, Ouwpa,” she said, imprinting a kiss upon his broad brow. “I accept the gift, and I shall try not to blame you henceforth in connection with my horse’s cruel death.”

But her plate remained empty throughout the meal, and it was an uncomfortable repast for all concerned.

When Nomkuba brought her mistress's cup of coffee to her bedside next morning, she startled the latter with the news that Gert van Wijk's big white horse lay dead in the stable. Without sign of ailing or mark of violence, the maid said, the animal lay lifeless.

"There has been some foul play," cursed Gert with a bitter scowl when he had paid his daily visit to his sister in the pantry. "That little slut has put Wilhelm Bastard up to some devil's work. And I'll never get another horse that will keep up his condition on so little."

"Yes, Boet Gert, and when you do get one you'll have to pay for it. Some people have all the luck! Just because you shot her scabby old horse, she got two others as a present. The mare Spitfire belongs to her now, and the old man gave her Jim last night. So you'll have to borrow one of the others to get home.

An imprecation, obscene and filthy, fouled the air.

As a matter of fact there had been foul play, for when the white horse was dragged out of the sight for the feast of vultures, several of the feathered scavengers were found dead on the carcass the following day. But the perpetrators of the act of revenge were wise in their generation, and managed to elude discovery.

And from that day onward, Hester de Villiers never acknowledged, by word or sign, the presence of Gert van Wijk.

CHAPTER XVII

HANS LIAR TELLS THE TRUTH

“PUT down that pinafore, Phyllis. I am going to take the whole basketful away with me.”

Monday morning had arrived, bright and clear, and Mrs. Gray had but arisen from an early breakfast to sit at her work-table, when the sewing was gently removed from her fingers, and Hester stood over her, fresh and buoyant from the quick gallop across the veldt.

“That’s a new habit, dear. Oh, how pretty you look!”

“Yes, don’t I?” She laughed aloud. “I *feel* pretty. Now just stay where you are while I run and change. We are going to have such a lovely day – just music and scandal – and the children will be as jolly as sandboys, for there’s a box coming for them presently. The wagon arrived on Saturday with the half-yearly goods. I wrote to Maritzburg and told them to put in toys for the discount, and you’ll laugh when you see them. Uncle and I did!”

She was talking so rapidly that the expostulations about extravagance from Phyllis were drowned by her own eloquence. When she returned a few minutes later from the room, gowned in a dainty admixture of black and white, she resumed the thread of discourse.

“My people from the Cape have sent me such heaps of magazines,” she remarked, as she drew out a rocking chair. “There’s a pile of them coming for you, and we can exchange again later on. You would feel lost without any sewing and nothing else to occupy your attention, wouldn’t you?”

Phyllis looked up with grateful eyes.

“I have felt rather tired lately,” she said doubtfully, “but I don’t know that I should let you take the work. You hate sewing so much.”

“Phyllis shook her head.

“Bless you, I sha’n’t sew them,” returned Hester with a laugh. “Anna Erich owes me some money. She borrowed a few pounds to get some new things for herself and the children. She must work the money out, while that lazy lout of an Erich sprawls all over the stoep reading the Bible. I promised to give her work to do for the money, and there isn’t a stitch for myself. So just give me every article you can lay hands upon.”

Phyllis shook her head.

"I am afraid Hester," she said with a slight frown, "that this is simply a new way of cheating me into accepting benefits."

"What a pig you are, Phyl," returned the girl softly, touching the thin cheek with her finger. Smilingly she gathered up the work, and threw it in the capacious basket. With a backward, laughing glance, she opened the lid of a small cretonne-covered box ottoman, and piece by piece removed all the unfinished work.

There!" she said with supreme satisfaction. "Now give me your cottons, and tapes, and buttons, so that you needn't accept any 'benefits.' You should be only too glad of the chance to do poor Anna a good turn. It's a blessing I thought of you and the children, or I should never have got my money back again."

She had bethought herself of an adjacent work-drawer, and was now removing sundry cut-out garments from its recesses. Phyllis sat watching her with mute, frowning expostulation.

"You know," continued the girl, dropping her voice confidentially, "I worked it all in rather a mean way. I promised Anna she should have the money on condition that I might have the ordering of the things out of the samples H – G – and Co. sent me. I left her quite happy, for she thinks I get a big commission from the firm, and she has done me a good turn. And the best of the whole thing is that she hasn't a penny of it to give to that religious brute of hers."

"Hester! Hester!"

"Yes, dear. And you'll be *astonished* to see her and the children turn out next nachtmaal. That is," thoughtfully, "the children anyhow. I suppose she won't be able to go out for a while."

Mrs. Gray was sitting with idle hands crossed in her lap, and her eyes did not lighten as usual at the bright buoyancy of spirit which usually took her out into a smiling realm of its own.

"Where is your horse?" she asked absently.

"Round at the back. Yes," anticipating the question, "I have off-saddled, and Dolph has led the horses out to the paddock. You got my note, Phyllis?"

"Yes, dear, and I am more sorry than words can tell. What a savage the man must be!"

"He is a savage," said the girl bitterly, an expression of cruel hate in her eyes. "I told you so all along."

"Hester!" The woman rose suddenly. "You haven't had breakfast yet, I'm sure, and you let me sit idling here, with my own appetite satisfied."

“Oh, what a glutton!” She laughed as she brushed back the smarting tears that would spring unbidden at the memory of her murdered horse. “What an enormous breakfast you must have swallowed to look so satisfied!”

“But I am sure you are hungry,” protested Mrs. Gray.

“Of course I am, though I had a rusk with my morning coffee. How many eggs could you spare for a good square meal, do you think? Nay, Phyllis,” with a little laugh, “I am only teasing you; and if you look at me like that, I’ll feel as though I were hurting a baby. I just want a cup of tea.”

“Oh, that’s all, is it?” retorted Mrs. Gray sarcastically. “I don’t remember asking you what you wanted, “and she disappeared to the back apartments.

Hester issued in search of the children. They came at her call from every direction, running like wild things from under cover and rushing towards her.

A native girl trundling a substantial mail-cart down the avenue brought up the rear. Hester received the riotous welcome which she looked for and loved above all things: in five minutes she procured, unsought, more eager news than she could have retailed in an hour.

Gleeful as the youngest of them all, and entering with glad fervour into their small joys and imaginary sorrows, she loved them as dearly as a plant loves the light, while to their young understandings she was the living embodiment of all the tales of fairy godmothers and mystic princesses of nursery lore – and something more and dearer still.

At the first lull in the many-sided conversation,

“The wagon has come home,” she remarked with calm deliberation.

There was a clasping of small hands.

“Oh Aunt Hester! Oh Aunt Hester!” in different inflexions of acute ecstasy.

The eldest girl, fair-haired, and a replica in miniature of her mother, looked up with a wistful mien.

“Mamma says you are too good to us, Aunt Hester,” she remarked shyly.

“The girl smiled and kissed the young face.

“Mamma forgets how good she is to me, Phyllis. There’s a post-card album for you, dear,” she whispered, “and such lovely picture post-cards for you to exchange with.”

A pair of soft arms slid around her neck, and, with a rapture of joy and gratitude, warm lips were pressed upon her own.

“But what would Aunt Hester do wif all her toys and fings?” asked, judiciously, a small maiden not yet five. “She’s too big to play wif dolls.”

“Shows what girls know,” remarked Teddy with fine scorn. “Aunt Hester *buys* the things, silly!”

"Well, but she hasn't any child'en of her very own to give them to," retorted the maid, firm in her own logic.

"Of course I haven't; and whatever should I do with them? You wouldn't have them lumber up my room till I couldn't lie on my own bed, I hope?" asked the one most concerned with indignant gravity. "I do wonder at you, Teddy! What would people say if they kept falling over a great kite with a tail as long as a house every time they crossed my door?"

"Is there a kite, Aunt Hester?" His nonchalance and air of easy indifference had evaporated like mist before the sun.

"You wait and see!" was the oracular reply, delivered with a dark air of mystery.

"Oh my! Oh my!"

A couple of native maids with huge baskets upon their heads had appeared from the direction of the back-yard, and a multi-coloured kite of respectable dimensions was strapped to the back of one of them.

"There you are, Teddy," remarked Hester, smiling, as she helped the girls to deposit their burdens on the ground. "You release your kite, and Phyllis will play Father Christmas. The dark-haired doll is for Maisie and the fair one for Edie, but you will distribute all the rest of the toys and picture-books, won't you dear? The parcel of magazines is for mamma."

She busied herself in preparing the basket of sewing for transit across the veldt and bustling it out of the house before the mistress reappeared.

Her maids had just left, and were almost out of sight round the church corner *en route* for Anna Erich's home, when Phyllis emerged to the verandah. She looked with smiling eyes at the small heaps of toys and the shrill of the children, but she shook her head at Hester.

"They say such quaint things," said the latter, laughing. "Paul is happy because he possesses a 'bird with a long face', and Maisie is going to ask papa 'to baptize her new baby. Its name is to be 'Dinah Rose.'"

"Come and get your breakfast! No, Phyllis, dear; you must keep the children on the verandah, or Aunt Hester will have no peace to eat."

"Yes, mamma, but I don't think they'll keep very quiet," and the child turned back to the others, hugging her book in her arms with gentle ease.

"That album is altogether too good for a child, Hester," expostulated the mother as they entered the dining-room.

"Nonsense, Phyl! nothing is too good for that child. You do grudge one a little real pleasure! It's fearfully selfish of you. Every bit of sunshine I get is up here in your home, and yet you would deprive me of the happiness of pleasing

the children. Is that breakfast for me alone? What a lot of trouble you have taken! I'll clear the board, of course!"

She had finished the dainty meal set before her, and was sipping her tea and toying with the napkin ring when Mrs. Gray remarked –

"Hans Liar was here on Saturday."

"Yes!" Hester looked amused. "And what's the news for next week?"

"I am afraid it is only true news, dear; and I have been much concerned for your sake. Indeed, it is a heavy thought to me."

The girl looked disturbed.

"Don't dole it out in drops, Phyllis," she said quickly. "Give it in one dose, whatever it is."

"Well, they do say," and Mrs. Gray avoided the questioning grey eyes, "that Martha van Wijk is to be married very soon."

"Yes! Oh, but, Phyllis," with a low breath of intense relief, "that is good news. She has become insufferable lately."

"Yes, dear, I know. But she is to marry old Mr. de Villiers – your grandfather."

The girl sat bolt upright in her chair. In a long silence she digested the most unpalatable morsel of gossip it had ever been her lot to receive.

"It explains so much," she said at last slowly. "I might have known that there was something of that nature. And yet – Ouwpa has been kinder of late than he ever was to me in all my life. And he has been so friendly – almost genial – to uncle also."

"The settlements to Martha," resumed Mrs. Gray, "are the most unjust that I ever heard of. Hans had come direct from Gert van Wijk's, and he was full of the subject."

"But Hans is such a liar, Phyllis."

"I am afraid he spoke the truth, darling. Gert knew Hans was coming here, and I fear he primed him with the object of letting us know. In fact, Hester, they say that Martha is to have Berg Vlei as a deed of gift upon the wedding-day."

"She can't," sharply exclaimed the girl. "Berg Vlei belongs to uncle."

"It should," gently interposed the woman; "but though the farm was bought with his mother's money, there were no settlements made and no will drawn up during her lifetime. There was a fair amount of cash left, and half of that was divided among the children of the marriage, as well as a good deal of stock. I very much fear that the old man has the law on his side. Auntie used to say that her predecessor must have been a born fool; and I almost believe she was right!"

“I wonder if uncle knows!”

“I think so, dear. Indeed, I know he does, because he particularly asked me not to mention the matter to you until we were sure that it was not idle rumour. He said he would not have you disturbed – possibly for nothing. A wonderful love he has for you!”

“This affair has been the talk of the countryside for months, Hester, and Gert van Wijk is accredited with edging the match on for his own purposes. I believe,” thoughtfully, “that your uncle could contest the granting of Berg Vlei to Martha. He could make a law-suit of it. But I doubt that he would.”

“Yes, I doubt it.”

CHAPTER XVIII

“I SEE, BUT CANNOT REACH THE LIGHT”

A DAY of quiet enjoyment, clouded somewhat by the ever-present thought of the unwelcome change impending in the life of one of them, had worn towards late afternoon, and under the thatched verandah Mrs. Gray had been arousing wonderful echoes around the Mission Station from the mellow old violin. With chin pressed lovingly upon the instrument, and pathetic eyes fixed upon the lights and shades filtering through the russet clad oaks, she had played to herself and the girl she loved, as she had not performed for years past. Her slender form swayed, and the thin cheek flushed with rapture of the sweet sound awakened to birth by herself, and her companion watched her with a pleasure that was half pain – afraid to move, or breathe aloud and break the spell.

“Oh Phyllis, you have been good to me this day,” she ejaculated softly as the instrument was, as usual, handed to her for envelopment in its wrapping.

“It was heavenly that last. What was it?”

“Nothing in particular. It only evolved itself.” The notes seemed still trembling about the air.

“How happy you are!” breathed the girl.

“I should be!”

A house servant summoned the mistress to the back apartments, and when she returned some minutes later Hester was still sitting in the same attitude. Perhaps she had been pondering over the last words, but she looked up and smiled as Mrs. Gray made her re-appearance.

“What’s wrong, Phyllis?” she asked, the smile dying on her lips. “You have had more disturbing news?”

“Yes, but not concerning you, dear. It is simply a recurrence of an old worry, and I know Paul will feel it deeply; he has such ambitious dreams of raising the standard of thought and morals among his congregation, and any lapse from the right path hurts him like a physical blow. I don’t know that I should tell you of it.”

The girl sat very still and thoughtful.

"Just as you like, Phyllis," she said at last. "Sometimes I think I realize more than other girls of my age. I seem to know so much – to have always known so much," she added sorrowfully.

"Two of the Mission girls have got into trouble," said Phyllis slowly, looking past her companion and up at the white walls gleaming through the green of the oranges, as though she apostrophized the church itself.

"The usual trouble?" asked the girl below her breath.

"Yes, of course," in slightly surprised tones, as if there could be no other trouble in the same connection. "White men – also, of course – and this time members of the local Police Camp, which is supposed to be there for the protection of the weak. This will make six cases within a twelve-month. And Paul was already sick at heart."

"The vile brutes!" from the girl.

"Well, I can't help feeling genuinely sorry for these two," said Mrs. Gray, in evident distress. "They are the sisters Henrietta and Miriam, and were my housemaids for two years, as you know."

"Oh, I didn't refer to the girls – poor fools! I mean the other creatures. The white men who wilfully defile and destroy that which can nevermore be recovered. And I have told you over and over again, Phyllis, that every woman should possess a vote, just to secure firm legislation about such matters, and punishment for brutes such as those. At present, if a white woman be found guilty of lowering her sex and race, by giving birth to a half-caste child, she is not only hounded out of society for it – she is held up to contumely in the eyes of the Colony; imprisoned, put to hard labour for her sin. And serve her right! But why should one woman who falls suffer so frightfully while five hundred, or five thousand, men go scot free? It is abominable.

"I don't pretend that it is just, Hester", said the woman wearily.

"And", continued the girl, in hot indignation, "it's all very well to talk high falutin' ethics about the fostering of virgin modesty. Who is going to teach it to these girls, I should like to know?"

"It is the very ones who are taught that seem to stray the easiest," sighed the woman.

"Yes, and why? Tell you what it is, Phyllis dear, whenever I think of these Mission Stations I think also of some words of Bret Harte's, 'Is our civilization a failure?' Somehow most missionaries only succeed in making a mess of things. You know yourself that for one raw native girl who falls, five or six

amakolwas¹ come down, and for one location kaffir who will get into misery five or six learned black brothers will manage to wriggle out of the law's clutches. I don't say it is the *fault* of the missionaries, Phyllis. It is only their misfortune, that in the great majority of instances their pupils take more of the bad than the good out of the teaching. And I don't say that all amakolwas are bad: because I don't know them all. What will be done with the unfortunate girls?"

"They will be expelled from the congregation, of course. And they were only confirmed three months ago."

"Poor things! What will be done to the men?"

"Paul will petition for their removal from the local Camp."

"And that's all? They will carry on their designs with impunity elsewhere in the country, knowing that for them is no open disgrace, no punishment of any kind. Oh, God help the unfortunate native girls!"

The missionary, astride his bicycle, loomed into view past the church and down the avenue of oranges. Raising his hat to the ladies, he rode round towards the school-house, where certain members of his congregation awaited his arrival.

"If you look around at the half-caste children of the Colony," resumed Hester, earnest and thoughtful; "you will find that nine-tenths of them have amakolwa mothers. No!" slowly, "I think the proportion is greater."

"But what is one to do?" asked Mrs. Gray, puckering her brow in distress. Always the leader in discussions between the two of them, she now turned helplessly to the colonial girl for advice, or solution of this, a problem dealing with her own life's work. "We can't leave them in ignorance. It is from Holy Writ itself that the inspiration comes to preach to the heathen."

"I can't pretend to tell you what to do, Phyllis," said the girl, turning an earnest face to her. "You see I have the old Boer blood in me, and I draw a very sharp line betwixt white and black. If I considered I had a mission to train the native mind, I should first impress upon my congregation that they belonged strictly to Ham's issue, but that they might be purified and become partakers of salvation only by believing in our Saviour and emulating Him in whom was no sin. But one great essential of the teaching should be that there can be no admixture of race, no familiar intercourse between European and native. As Owupa says, in the Vast Beyond there will be equality and brotherhood according to the decree of Divine Mercy and Love. But upon this earth there

1 Civilized natives.

must always be a great void – an immeasurable gulf between black and white. And the white must be masters.”

“Yes, Hester, that is all very well.” It was a masculine voice which answered from within the doorway, and the missionary himself came to view, grave, troubled and somewhat stern of aspect. “But if we preached the doctrine you advocate, how many of our congregation would gather around our Mission?” He bent and kissed his wife.

“Just as many as are worthy your administrations,” she retorted quickly and gladly, as though relieved at having found a foeman worthy her steel. “That is the bitter grievance we Dutch people have against you missionaries as a whole – a most unsatisfactory whole. You want converts: men and women to dress in conventional European garb and fill your churches; to sing hymns in beautiful harmony; and, it may be, to pass examinations before your directors. You preach the truth to them, but not the whole truth: you teach them aright, and show them awrong. And you handle gingerly the vast question of frightful immortality between European men and native women. You edge round and round the subject with half-averted faces, and now and then give it a tiny poke with a gloved finger; or fly off shrieking in disgust and loathing when its hideous bareness forces itself upon your notice. Never once do you grasp the matter with a bare hand,” – she held her own outstretched – “or point out its evils to the unhappy, ignorant creatures themselves. But you expel the unfortunates from your congregations as a stern suffering example for their sisters. And when they land in the vile places, the world exclaims at the inherent depravity of female nature. Oh! it makes one sick!”

There was no scorn in her voice; only a passionate sorrow at the existence of regrettable circumstance.

“We do our best, Hester. We cannot all think alike.”

“No!” she replied quietly and sadly. “We cannot all think alike, and it is only to be deplored that your best has often worse results in one direction than the direct savagery. It is lamentable that you missionaries cannot get the respect from the natives that they accord to the old Boers. If you could, you might make something profitable of your lessons then.”

“By the doctrine of the sjambok?” he asked with a half smile.

“Even so!” she said coldly. “By the doctrine of the sjambok. But you plead with a native, cajole him, ply him with visions of a Universal Brotherhood, and he thinks you wish to please and flatter him; and he despises you accordingly.”

The missionary looked at her in doubt.

“There is much truth in what you say, Hester,” he said slowly and grudgingly. “But if we propounded your theory, we might as well close the school and shut up the church.”

“Do so then,” she said severely. “Close your schools, shut up your churches, and abolish your communion tables, for all the good you do. And if I were in your place to-day, and expelled those girls from church, I should also proclaim aloud before the congregation the names of the two men, and far and wide, to the uttermost corners of South Africa, I should publish their infamy: so that they might be hounded out of respectable society I should be content. But they will go free and unscathed, while their victims will be branded with pitiable infamy all the days of their lives. God help them! God help us all!”

Looking up she met the gaze of Dr. Gray in the doorway.

You are here, Frank!” she exclaimed, with a complete change of tone. “No letters to write to-night? Nor nasty physics to prepare? Well, please order Dolph to bring the horses round. We shall never get down the hill in daylight.”

CHAPTER XIX

“IN FRIENDSHIP’S NAME”

O God, our Help in ages past!
O God, our Help in ages past!

THE WORDS broke from her lips, as they had been sounding in her heart, over and over again during the twilight ride home.

“Did you speak?” asked Gray, turning with inquiring eyes to the earnest, girlish face, white and troubled in the pale light. They had reached a wire gate which stretched across the road and necessitated the dismounting of Dolph, the ubiquitous.

“Speak?” she repeated. “I believe I must have thought aloud, Frank. A horrible habit it is! I was trying to recall the words of that old hymn ‘O God, our Help in ages past,’ and I was wondering if it were written for men alone. But,” slowly and thoughtfully, “I don’t think so. If you glance back at the Bible story, you will find that woman took a big, prominent place in the forming of the world’s history. I have been studying Josephus very carefully with this end in view, and you can believe me, Frank, I have not come across a single weak woman yet. Wicked some of them were, wrong in their estimates and cruel at times beyond the cruelty of men. But weak, never. There was one woman in a besieged city – a woman of small account – and she, by her wit and brave forethought, saved the whole army and all the women and children. Not a man of the thousands of them had the courage to come forward; but she, says Josephus, ‘being both wise and intelligent, and seeing her native city lying at the last extremity,’ mounted on the wall, and by her splendid, unselfish act she gained pardon for them all, and averted a fearful massacre. Yet she was so insignificant in station that even her name was not handed down to us. She was only ‘a woman of small account.’”

She touched her horse, and they moved simultaneously through the gateway, passing slowly side by side over a strip of rough, boulder-strewn highway.

“So,” she resumed, after a backward glance to see that Dolph had duly closed the gate before mounting his horse. “So the existing condition of things has evolved itself out of the progression of centuries. To the everlasting

disgrace of manhood and civilization, the physically stronger sex has pressed down, and kept down, the weaker – the one that gave it birth – until the latter has lost sight of its own powers.”

A long silence ensued.

“I don’t like you to talk like that, Hester,” he said at last, heaving a deep breath. “I don’t think such thoughts are wholesome, or that you are any the happier for harbouring them.”

“Who prates for being happy?” she asked tersely. “I was not talking or dreaming of happiness.”

She struck her horse a sharp cut across the flank, and both animals broke into a quick canter. By the time they reached the brow of the hill a bright young moon was riding high above in the heavens, and the momentary twilight had merged into a soft, shadowed moonshine. Down in the hollow the white walls of the house glistened against the background of dark pines. The horses slowed of their own account as they trod the steep descent. The girl turned then to her companion.

“Frank!” she said earnestly, her voice sweet with emotion. “Many a time since that night when you asked me to be your wife – the night that poor wanderer came home – I have fancied that you spoke too suddenly, and that I agreed too readily to fall in with your wishes.”

He looked straight before him, nor met the clear gaze of the questioning eyes.

“I could never love another woman as I have loved you, Hester – as I do love you,” he said slowly. “I don’t know what it is in you that reaches to the very soul of me. Sometimes, in some of your moods, I could lose myself in very worship of you. And yet—”

“I know,” she supplemented gently. “You think my views of life unmaidenly and immodest, and you hold that a girl should not even think the things which I proclaim aloud. Is it not so?”

“Well, Hester—” began he in painful hesitation.

“For Heaven’s sake, Frank, speak out,” enunciated the clear young voice in sharp irritation. “It means everything to us now. If you want to be free, only say the word, and the matter is simple as daylight. That’s why I have you riding here with me now.”

“But you, dear?” He faltered and hesitated once again.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said in quick contempt. “Look here, I will help you. Frank, I decline to marry you. There! I wouldn’t marry you if you could

pave the veldt with diamonds. There! I don't love you: I never pretended to love you. There! Now that's settled. Let's be simple friends once more."

"But, Hester—" He turned to the girl, whose face seemed white and strange in the fitful light of the young moon; and his own eyes were troubled, his own lips twitched under the fair moustache which covered them. "What must you think of me."

"Think?" She turned and regarded him long with so free a wealth of bitter scorn, and such a vast contempt in her ringing young voice, as made him cower within himself. "I think the opinion Ouwpa once expressed of you is the only true one. You are only fit to be a missionary!"

"Mijn Nona, de duivel is los."¹

The words, in a horse whisper, reached Hester as she sprang to the ground and picked up the fold of her habit.

What's wrong, Wilhelm?" she asked quickly and anxiously as Wilhelm Bastard, the father of Dolph, emerged from the shadow of the stone wall and approached her stealthily. He was a tall, intelligent-looking half-caste, with more of his European father in him than of his Hottentot mother. Since she remembered her own personality she remembered Wilhelm also. From her earliest years he had been her devoted henchman and willing slave, ready to lay down his life for her if need were, and many a time receiving his dole of sjambok stripes for duty neglected on her behalf.

"The Nona Martha had a big clearing out just after you left this morning," he continued in suppressed wrath, "and she has turned Baas Hendrik out of his room and fixed it up for a vrij-kaamer.² Donder!³ And an Englishman has come, and he is in it. And Baas Hendrik has the outside room that's been kept for boys. And, mijn Nona, I hope you'll—"

"Wait a minute, Wilhelm," she interrupted quickly, and turning to her companion. "Frank," she said coldly, "I'll excuse you from coming in this evening. Good-night!"

He had dismounted, and, somewhat disconcerted, advanced to her side with hesitating hand.

"Won't you shake hands, Hester?" There was a certain mournful cadence in his voice that irritated her.

1 My Nona (Miss), the devil is loose.

2 Spare room.

3 Thunder!

“Oh, yes, certainly. Why not? I thought we agreed to part ‘in friendship’s name.’” A tiny smile rippled across her lips as she placed a small gauntleted hand in his. “Good-night!”

“Good-night, Hester. God bless you. God bless you now and for ever.”

He vaulted to his saddle and headed for the hill again. A painful sense of discomfiture and a hungry craving after the unattainable accompanied his homeward way.

“I wonder what made her talk of ‘friendship’s name,’” he muttered. “I wish she hadn’t. It haunts me somehow.

Would we had dearer grown!
And hand in hand and heart to heart
Would that you were my own.
Tho’ memory lives to bring regret—

Oh, Pest!” He dug the rowels of his spurs deep into his horse’s sides, and tried to gallop away from the pain at this heart.

“Take Sultan round yourself, Wilhelm,” Hester was saying at the same moment. “And you might see that he has a drink before Dolph makes up his bed.”

“What will the Nona do?” asked the man with the anxious familiarity which obtains among old coloured servants.

“Do?” repeated his mistress in clear unequivocal tones. “I’ll go inside and – raise Cain!”

CHAPTER XX

“‘TIS PAST ENDURING”

UP the garden path strode Hester, in a very passion of anger and bitter mortification, quivering to her finger-tips. Arrived at the verandah door leading on the dining-room, she paused a moment to gather her forces, and keep in check the wild rage consuming her. Then she turned the knob, and standing on the threshold of the room, surveyed its occupants.

The table was set out for the evening meal with the dainty precision inculcated in the native servants by the second mistress of Berg Vlei. Two tall glasses filled with brilliant carnations cast a brightness over the whole, and a few simple pieces of glistening silver adorned the board, laden otherwise with a plentiful supply of home-made bread and yellow butter, dishes of dainty preserves, and a huge home-cured ham.

In his accustomed seat of state sate Hendrik de Villiers the elder, with the buxom Martha hovering near, an uneasy smile upon her expansive lips and a feverish glitter in her eyes. Gert van Wijk lounged over the sofa, with a cushion crushed under his elbow, very much at home, and offensively assertive of the fact. Calm and silent, as usual, sat her guardian in the massive easy-chair which had been her gift to him, and was arrogated peculiarly to his own service. At his left hand, with the repose of manner and the calm assurance of superiority of the English professional man, sat the new-comer. A man of dark features and commanding presence, splendid height, and garbed in a conventional black suit, with the patent leather evening slippers of civilization, he was one who would ensure attention and respect wherever he went. Somewhat stern of feature, and with a firm, square jaw of ironbound determination, he was emphatically not a man to be trifled with. Even Gert van Wijk, vulgar, domineering, self-assertive, sprawled in silence to-night. To him had been relegated the honour of escorting the Englishman here to-day, but no familiarity had been permitted by the cold distaste for his presence which the manner of the guest evinced. And he felt chagrined and vicious.

Involuntarily Hester's eyes had sought the guest as she entered the room, and the fierce, defiant expression died out of her countenance as she advanced slowly into the room. Her grandfather, who had been speaking, turned his

head slightly towards her as she came forward, her face pale from the chilling evening air, or perhaps from the suppressed agitation under which she laboured.

"This is Hester," remarked the old man in introductory vein. "Miss de Villiers. Child," turning to her, but bestowing no smile upon the winsome young figure, "this is Mr. West – Mr. John West – my lawyer."

She bowed gravely, and then, as though by an afterthought, slipped the loose gauntlet from her right hand and held it open to the stranger. He clasped in in his, rising courteously, and looked long and earnestly into the oval girlish face, uplifted to his gaze.

"I am pleased to meet you," she said gently. "I hope you have been made comfortable during my absence?"

"Quite comfortable, thank you," he said, wondering at the girl's quiet, refined air of hospitality. Wondering also, that it should be so, here, in this house, with an older woman, so very much the aggressive hostess. He released the slim hand, and seating himself once more, watched the slight figure in its dark habit, noting unconsciously that little tendrils of brown hair had broken from under the helmet and encircled the pale, somewhat troubled face.

She had turned to Hendrik the younger.

"Have you missed me much, uncle?" The note of tenderness struck upon and vibrated in the young man's brain. Somewhere, long ago, in the dim recesses of his early childhood, he had heard a voice with such inflection. But it was before his long orphanage.

Klein Hendrik shook his head and smiled.

"Because," she said, clearly and distinctly after she kissed his brow, "I should not like you to feel neglect through my being away from you. I am here only for your sake."

No word had she addressed to the young woman or her brother, and now, without a glance in their direction, she passed from the room, casting a somewhat wan smile upon the guest, as though in duty bound to appear pleasant to the stranger within the gates.

The light was still lingering in Klein Hendrik's eyes, and the lawyer was yet treasuring the liquid tones that had touched a memory-chord, when Gert van Wijk spoke.

"That child is possessed of the duivel," he remarked, through thick, loose lips.

The large cheek of his sister took a grave setting, and a fervour of religious denunciation shook her head.

"She is a limb of Satan: an imp begotten in wrath," she agreed, a hard line drawing itself across her firmly compressed lips.

A steely look of passionate remonstrance had leapt into Klein Hendrik's blue eyes. But the Englishman intercepted the glance before Hendrik, with his slow utterance, could enunciate a word. A certain meaning flash of intelligence between the two men launched into birth and cemented an understanding which many weeks of acquaintance might have failed to ensure. Hendrik sank back on his chair, with an inward sigh, and John West turned to the host:

"You were remarking, Mr. de Villiers," he said calmly, "that we English—"

"No!" rasped the old man, with fierce distinction. "I have nothing to say against the individual English. I speak of the Government, who in 1845 mulcted our children of their inheritance, and wrested from us, by the violence of their great power, the land for which we had bled, and offered up the tribute of our dearest and best. My own family suffered fearfully in the wars with the natives. My mother and brothers were killed at Weenen, while my father and I were down-country seeking fresh pasture for our stock. I would not harrow your feeling by telling you what we saw when we came back. The sight of it turned my father's hair grey within a week. And yet, when the English wrested our country from us – after waiting, like the vultures, till the game had been killed for them – they put my father in the second division of the claim for land, and granted him two thousand acres of ground not fit for rock-rabbits. We were turned off the farm in the Zwartkop valley, which, after the Weenen massacre, we had acquired, and every yard of ground was claimed from us, except what was not good enough for the English protégés, the murderous demons who had shed our best blood. And they would have had us pay for it! My father threw their documents at them, and ended his days in a mud hut in Maritzburg, having sold his stock to procure the wherewithal of existence. Ours was but one case. Throughout the length and breadth of the colony you might have heard similar authentic complaints of the gross injustice, the cruel greed and high-handed arrogance which in those days oppressed the weak and kept down the helpless."

Hitherto in his career, John West had paid but little heed to the bygone history of the colony, and, beyond a certain uneasy sense that but little honour and less glory accrued to the early British Natal, in connection with the treatment meted out to the pioneers of the land, he had given no attention to the subject. In listening and keenly responding to the lively reminiscence of the old Boer he had spent an entertaining hour in the farmhouse.

Still courteously bending his attention to the recital of the injuries, real or imagined, which still make the old Dutch blood boil, he, however, since the interruption caused by the girl's arrival, had caught himself watching the inner door for her re-appearance. Once or twice he fancied that he heard her voice, accompanied by a switching of eggs in the back apartments; but a long half hour elapsed before a native maid, clad in neat navy blue print, over which was folded a spotless apron, entered, carrying a tray laden with steaming viands. The bare head of the girl, adorned in picturesque fashion with beads, and innocent of cloth or handkerchief, proclaimed her as a heathen, and not a member of the amakolwa class. Yet her face was pleasant and gentle in expression, and she moved with the precision of a well-trained servant.

Martha laid her crochet-work aside, and familiarly removed the skull-cap from her master's head. Venerable and patriarchal looked the old man with his high intellectual forehead crowned by a framework of snowy hair, and fine features enframed in glistening silvery beard that shone in the lamp-light.

The door opened once more, and Hester appeared clad in a flowing tea-gown of quiet grey, and bearing in her hand a dish of savoury omelet. She placed it upon the table, and turned with a grave smile to the guest.

"Will you take this seat?" she asked, indicating a chair with her hand. The others moved up to the table, and Hester seated herself at its foot, the stranger at her right hand, Gert van Wijk at her left. Next to John West, and between him and the old man at the head, sat Klein Hendrik, Martha occupied the post of honour at the right hand of the master.

After the resounding blessing implored by his own lips, the old man began lading out the stew-like substance before him.

"Kop en pootjes!"¹ remarked Martha, with a large pride in her own cookery.

Hester picked up her silver spoon and fork.

"Will you take some of the stew?" she asked of the guest, "or will you try this omelet?"

"The omelet, please," he said, his face relaxing as he met her serious grey eyes.

She helped him generously enough, and then put a lesser supply upon her own plate: the others had already begun upon the principal dish at the head of the table, and conversation, conducted in English out of compliment to the guest, was general. The meal was a long one, but John West noted that though the young hostess quietly attended to his comfort, plying him from time to

¹ Sheep head and trotters.

time with crisp rusk or beautiful brown bread handed with preserved guavas or apples in jelly, she touched but little food herself, sending her plate of omelet to the kitchen almost untasted. He noted also that the native maid stood behind Hester's chair, paying her the nameless deference due to the mistress of the house, and seeming to know by tuition what was required of her.

The gigantic appetite of Gert van Wijk had lost its keen edge, and that gentleman was well started upon his second plate of ham before he found leisure to make conversation on his own account. Turning to his neighbour Hester, he then remarked, with thinly-veiled insolence –

“Where's your doctor to-night?”

The girl stolidly sipped her tea as though the question were unheard.

Martha rushed upon the breach, and repeated distinctly, “Hester! Don't you hear what Boet Gert says? Where's your doctor?”

She looked across the table at the heated face.

“I have no doctor?” she said gently.

“You know very well what we mean,” said the lady with a disagreeable laugh that showed a wide expanse of ivory. “We asked, *where's your doctor?*” The last words were emphasized with a keen appreciation of her own wit.

“And I told you,” returned the girl very quietly.

“Ooh!” with a sarcastic intonation. “And I suppose you think yourself very slim. Not?”

“Tolerably!” she replied, with cool indifference. “Certainly as ‘slim’ as I have any occasion for at present.

“Ooh, Machtack!” The expression came from Gert with a huge guffaw; but the girl was not looking towards him. She had turned to the guest, and begun an easy discussion upon the literature of the day. The head of the house was more silent than was his wont to be: the recital of past wrongs and bitter grievances had left, as usual, an aftermath of cruel thought and painful recollection in its train.

Immediately on conclusion of the meal, a short celebration of family worship was held, and the old man retired to his own apartment. Gert van Wijk produced his blackened wooden pipe, but the Englishman joined Klein Hendrik upon the verandah, though the air was chill and somewhat sharp. Hester opened the window, presumably to emit the fumes caused by Gert's pipe. A shrill protest from Martha accompanied the act.

“I won't have the window opened,” sharply exclaimed the lady. “I'm not going to catch my death of cold to please you.”

“No!” said the clear, ringing tones of the girl’s voice. “You are going to do nothing further to please me. You are leaving my service to-night.”

She quitted the room, and the men on the verandah heard Gert’s voice mutter low –

“What’s she up to now?”

“Lord knows!” Martha replied. It is something accursed, you may be sure.”

Klein Hendrik moved to a position opposite the window and watched nervously the proceedings within. Hester had returned, and, counting some money in her hand, she placed three sovereigns on the table opposite Martha.

“That is your wage for the current month,” she said low and distinctly, “and I am dismissing you for your insolence. To-morrow you may make what arrangements are necessary for leaving Berg Vlei. I shall instruct Wilhelm to be at your service.”

“You can’t do it!” gasped Martha, white with rage, and regarding the calm face with distended nostrils. “I’ll have the law of you.”

“I know I can’t dismiss you without due notice; so, although you have only worked one week of the current month, I am going to pay you the wage of another month in lieu of warning.” She pushed three more sovereigns across the table. “Give me a receipt, please.”

“I’ll give you a smack on the mouth first,” spluttered Martha. “I’ll have the law of you, do you hear? And I’ll turn you out of this house before you are a month older, you slut of a Scotch –”

Klein Hendrik, with a bitter curse, moved towards the closed door, but a firm strong hand shot out and held his arm in iron grip. Hester was speaking again quietly, and as though the last speech had been unheard.

“You must understand distinctly that if you remain here after to-morrow, you will be simply a guest on sufferance. And in no case must you issue orders to my servants.

“I’ll see about that. My lawyer is here.”

“I congratulate him on his client,” said the girl’s voice coldly. She touched a handbell on the sideboard. The maid Nomkuba quickly appeared.

“Take the English baas’s things into the big spare room,” she was ordered in the same even voice, “and remove the baas’s clothes and boxes back into his own room from the outside one. Send for Wilhelm and Dolph to help you. And see that there is fresh water put in the spare room and clean towels. Don’t forget a box of matches. And, Nomkuba,” the maid had been turning away after receiving her instructions, “the Nona Martha finds she must go home to her own people. She may remain here a little longer, but she will be only

visiting us in that case; so you must not expect her to work, or even supervise your work. Come to me for all instructions.”

“Yebo, Nona!”

“Played!” The ejaculation came from the Englishman as, standing at the curtained window, he still grasped the arm of his companion, and the two men watched the girl in her long grey dress.

“I’m going to Pa!” Gert spoke for the first time. “He’ll soon put *you* in your right place.”

The girl joined the men on the verandah. They were leaning against the outer trellis work, staring with a suspicious absorption out at the declining moonlight.

“I find the servants have put you in the wrong room, Mr. West,” she said pleasantly, “but I have had your portmanteau removed to another one. Uncle will show you the way. I hope you will be quite comfortable.”

He regarded her with laughing eyes.

“Thank you,” he said gravely. “I am sure I shall be.”

Gert van Wijk blundered out upon them.

“There’s something wrong with Pa,” he said in evident anxiety. “Come quickly.”

The Englishman, left alone, puffed his sweet-scented cigarette out towards the pines. A low, thrilling voice was vibrating in his ear, and a face, bright, piquant, and lovely, rose unbidden between him and the blue ridge on the horizon.

“What a girl!” he mused, emitting a thin vapour of scented cloud. Then, “What a woman she will make!”

CHAPTER XXI

SOMETHING WRONG WITH PA

YES, decidedly there was “something wrong with Pa,” and before the midnight hour struck Dr. Gray had again taken the bridle-path down the hill. A slight stroke of paralysis was his verdict upon the condition of his patient. No immediate danger to be apprehended, no great cause for anxiety; but absolute quiet and freedom from excitement of any kind an imperative essential.

In fearful perturbation of spirit Martha had hastened to Klein Hendrik upon his first issue from the sick chamber.

“Hester wants to turn me out, Oom Hendrik,” she said in imploring tones, “and I can’t go with him lying there like that. We were to have been married next month. Say I may stay, Oom Hnedrik. Make her let me stay!”

“I shall not interfere with Hester,” said the man coldly and sternly, no hesitation this time in his speech. “She shall do exactly as she pleases, and any punishment you receive from her you will richly deserve. You have been a deceitful, insolvent viper, and you and your brother deserve no consideration in this house.”

She burst into unrestrained weeping and hurried from the room.

“You won’t turn me out, Hester!” she implored. “They will all be here tomorrow – the whole crowd of them – and the work will be too much for you. And Sister Aletta will fleece you right and left if I am not here to watch her. She took a whole jar of melon preserve when she was here for the funeral. I only found it out afterwards, but I would watch her this time – I would indeed.”

Hester regarded the swollen face with cold distaste.

“You may stay for the time being,” she said, turning away; “but only upon the distinct understanding that you attempt no more impertinences, such as turning my uncle out of his own house or chastising my servants.”

And Martha was satisfied. To be upon the spot: that was all she wanted.

True to her prophecy, an avalanche of relatives came over the hill next day. From dawn till dewy eve they descended upon the house in their numbers, all eager to be in the midst of the bustle, to show their prowess in cookery and house-management, or, it might be, to take turns in “watching” in the sick room. The clatter and clamour, which were ceaseless, well-nigh drove

Dr. Gray to despair. But the house was in possession of the Amazons, and his authority, together with that of the lawful inhabitants of the old home, was routed with contemptuous ignominy and thrust into the background. Tant' Bett and Aletta Gert were the two moving spirits of the party, not only because their tongues wagged the loudest, but also because their hands worked the quickest. The men occupied the dining-room, the children scrambled about in every direction, and the invading servants blocked up kitchen and pantry.

No will was made. This fact ascertained, the continued presence of the young would-be stepmother in their midst was held to be an unwarrantable intrusion: so that too much respect was not lavished upon her. Although the redoubtable Martha found that the lines of her present life were not cast in the pleasant places, she, acting upon the advice of her respected relative, remained upon the spot, and awaited the next turn of fortune's cogged wheel.

Only once had the old man spoken during the first day, and it was to request that his lawyer might await his pleasure, and not quit the farm before an interview with him. A week of waiting had set in, which would have been found insupportable to the Englishman but for the saving presence of the girl, whose personality had attracted his own from the first gaze into her deep eyes. Her uncle, easy and pliant in all else, was adamant in aught concerning her welfare, and after the first day or two he insisted with resistless authority that she should resume her daily rides. Truth to tell she was not loth to obey the mandate, for no peace or privacy was to be secured in any corner of the farmhouse. Three young cousins had been quartered upon her, and her bedroom, with its numerous shake-downs, was aught but a haven of refuge.

So John West took to accompanying the girl on her daily rides, and when they arrived after any given meal (a feat which the man soon became skilful in accomplishing) they had delightful, simple little feasts of dainty viands out upon the verandah table. The courtly chivalry and tender attention of the man was as pleasant and grateful to the girl, as her bright loveliness and fresh, sweet wit were delightful and piquant to him.

More than once or twice had it been the lot of Dr. Gray to witness the growing intimacy between his whilom sweetheart and the stranger within the gates. And strange to tell, despite the part he had played in the episode between himself and the girl, a sullen discontent filled his being, and an intense irritation, not unmixed with potent regret, gnawed at his heart-strings. The shrewd eyes of John West had taken stock of the young doctor from the outset, and a certain undefined antagonism marked the occasional intercourse between the two men.

“I must go to-morrow.” Such had been the daily plaint of John West for a week, but Monday night had come around, and he was still awaiting the summons to his bed-ridden client.

On this evening he altered the burden of his expressed resolution.

“I shall go on Wednesday,” he said.

CHAPTER XXII

ERICH'S NACHTMAAL SUIT

OUT on the stoep of his green brick house, shaded by thick meshes of an evergreen creeper, and comforted by the balmy inhalation from Transvaal weed, sat Erich van Breda, his Bible upon his knees, sockless feet in well-worn velschoens, and greasy wide-awake upon shock of fair, straggling hair. Over and over he mouthed sonorous passages from the songs of Israel's sweet psalmster, and anon rolled aloud sublime beauties of everlasting, divine loveliness as emitted for humankind upon the seashore of blue Galilee. From time immemorial he had felt – nay, realized – that the exquisite promise of the new Dispensation belonged peculiarly to one Erich van Breda, and each song had been chanted by Israel's Heaven-chosen bard in strict anticipation of the same good gentleman's temptations and manifold trials. Trials which chiefly arose through the accursed importunity of tradesmen who pestered for filthy lucre in exchange for the mere essentials they supplied.

This day he sat undecided as to whether he should turn to raise the necessary sovereigns for a new suit of clothes to wear at the coming nachtmaal, and now he reclined at ease in a wooden rocking-chair, and apostrophized (chiefly through the medium of psalm and proverb) his enemies, in bitter mood. He had indulged in a heavy dinner of sheep's liver and deremptjes,¹ accompanied by sugared sweet potatoes and vet kookjes,² diluted by copious draughts of excellent coffee. And now he was in but dubious frame of mind, yet half-content with the existing state of matters mundane, as he reflected upon the carcase of fat mutton newly slaughtered that morn and hanging at present on the back verandah. The vision of kop en pootjes for supper which floated pleasantly before the mind's eye was a palliating prospect which faintly atoned for much cruel persecution. In the meantime, as an inevitable reaction from the heavy carnivorous feast of an hour or two ago, a very definite craving for something sweet in taste assailed his palate.

1 Entrails.

2 Fat cakes – i.e., a species of doughnut.

“Mijn lief!”³ he cried, reaching forward and peering into the kitchen garden, which, interspersed with carnations of singular beauty, and pansies of shy purple glory, reached right up to the front stoep of the house.

“My child?” responded a thin, loving voice.

“Have you any *comfijt* left? Or some of the preserved figs Sister Zannie sent from Umvoti?”

“Ja, my child. I kept all the figs for you,” and a flushed face raised itself and turned towards the verandah. Its owner had been scuffling cabbages and making rings around each plant for the reception of the evening douse of water. A pair of moleskin handmoffjes covered the hands and arms, and the laps of the print kappje were held firmly between the teeth in the all-absorbing desire to protect the complexion from the attentions of old Sol, which is the born heritage of every daughter of Eve of Afrikaner persuasion. “Do you want them now?”

“Ja! But mijn Hemel, who is coming now?” He was peering through the leaves of the sheltering vine. “It is Hester Rondlooper – that Satan’s child who talks of poisoning people better than herself. “Don’t bring the figs out.”

His wife hastily shook out the skirt that had been held tightly between the knees, let loose the lap of the kappje and straightened her back the while she looked towards the gateway.

“It is Hester Rondlooper,” resumed her husband under his breath, “and she has the big Engelschman with her. He’s riding Sultan, and she’s on the blue mare.”

“Hemel!” ejaculated the woman with anxious brow.

“Ja! But no harm will come to her. The Engelschen say that the *duivel* takes care of his own: and when did you hear of her going to church last? I don’t believe she even wishes for the blessings of confirmation.”

“She has always been good to me,” murmured loyally, if humbly, the woman, as she wiped her brow.

“We are one flesh,” sternly asserted her lord, “and when she mocks at me, she mocks at you.”

“Ach, my lord, here they come; and she looks as pretty as a pop.”⁴

She had hardly time to remove the rude handmoffjes before the riders, in accordance with the strict, unwritten law of farm etiquette, walked their horses slowly into the yard. The tall dark bay bestrode by the Englishman paced the few yards of uneven turf up to the house with a gravity becoming to his own

3 My love.

4 Doll.

lordly dignity, but the young mare chafed and fretted at the drapery of habit skirt, rebelled with angry rage at the firm hand upon the curb, which forced her action against her own better judgment.

“Dag Anna! Dag Erich!” the fresh young voice was clear and sweet as she called from her saddle. “No, Mr. West!” as he, having dismounted, advanced towards her. “Hold her head, please, and I shall jump off.”

The man grasped somewhat sternly at the bit, with the result that the animal plunged and wrenched at his arm with foaming mouth and tossing mane.

“Gently, please!” laughed the girl, “or I shall sit perched here all day. There!” as she vaulted to the ground and turned with pride to regard the vicious brute. “She justifies her name all right, doesn’t she? A real Spitfire!”

Erich cast a glance of no pleasant meaning at his wife.

“That’s why you like her, I suppose?” hazarded he, with a smile at the brilliance of his own wit. “Yes, that’s why!” he repeated with a nod.

“It is!” agreed Hester slowly. She had entered the garden and was now mounting the steps as her companion led the horses to the back premises. “And that’s why I hate idleness, and cant, and hypocrisy. You are busy, as usual, I see – comforting your wife with holy reflections while she earns your daily bread. What a *good* man you are, Erich!”

She gazed at him quizzical, laughing eyes. He pressed his hat more firmly upon his head and made for the steps.

“I never read wicked English novels or lying newspapers,” he muttered in transit. (“Indeed, he doesn’t!” murmured his wife deprecatingly.) “I am content with my Bible.”

“Quite right too, Erich,” called the scornful young voice after him. “Only you don’t read it all. If you remind me, I’ll mark some passages for you!”

But Erich had made good his escape.

“Lord! Lord!” he whispered, safely round the corner. “What a young Jezebel she is! I don’t believe she’d respect the Predikant himself.”

“Anna!” the girl said abruptly, kissing in duty bound the red face of the woman, who, having followed her up the steps, was now removing the ugly kappje and smoothing down the sweatened hair, “what a fool you are!” But the touch of the detaining guantleted hand upon either shoulder was a soft and kindly one. “Why do you slave in that garden while there are plenty of native women willing to do the work at sixpence a day?”

The woman smiled.

“It isn’t always easy to pay the sixpence, Hester. Have you come about Mrs. Gray’s work?”

“Yes, partly.”

“I sent over the first lot this morning, and she seems pleased with the sewing by her note. My Nonie has taken the children over to Oom Maans’s to-day, but we’ll start on the other things to-morrow. I’ve never had any one pay as well as Mrs. Gray does. You don’t happen to want any crochet, Hester? Nonie has been making d’oyleys and traycloths, and we don’t know where to sell them.”

“The very thing I wanted,” returned the girl without a blush at the ready prevarication. “How many has she?”

“Come this way.”

She followed the woman into a narrow passage, and from thence to the dark, unused zit-kaamer. The room was cool, if somewhat close in atmosphere, and with the indefinable chilliness which appertains to an apartment rarely penetrated by the rays of daylight.

Anna hastily rolled up the white calico blind, disclosing to view the eight horse-hair hairs which ranged along the walls upon the bare stained boards, the round table covered with a cheap, gaudy cloth, and supporting a large Family Bible in company with a couple of wide, empty vases. A harmonium, flat against the wall, and covered with an elaborate ornamentation in the way of crochet work, completed the furniture of the room. Gaudy almanacs or calendars, ranging in date over the past eight or ten years, embellished the walls: and these varied in subject from representations of the Saviour of mankind in the extremity of earthly woe to highly-coloured prints of the nineteenth-century beauty in evening dress, or to curious pictures of animals in strange disproportions of limb.

Passing through the zit-kaamer, the hostess led the way to a bedroom adjoining, and promptly closed the door, as the men’s voices sounded in the passage. This was the spare room of the habitation, and the linen and hangings were of the peculiar snowy whiteness upon which the Boer woman prides herself. A couple of dressed Angora goat-skins were spread upon the bare boards, spotless muslin draped the window and toilet tables, while the high feather bed upon wooden katel was covered with linen of virgin-like purity.

Anna Erich bent down and withdrew a cardboard hatbox from under the bed.

“Here is the work,” she said, removing tenderly a number of d’oyleys of neat workmanship and dainty cleanliness. “There are six d’oyleys and two tray-cloths, and Nonie thought she might charge a pound for the lot.” The woman looked anxiously at the girl’s face. “But if you think too much, Hester, you could knock off a shilling or two.”

“No, it is not too much, Anna,” said the girl slowly. “The linen is beautifully fine, and the work exquisite. How her eyes must have ached with that fine cotton!”

“It took her nearly a month to do that lot,” said the mother softly, “and, of course, she had the cost of the materials as well.”

“Of course she had,” said the girl, also softly.

“Then there is the quilt that I commenced myself when I was abed with my last baby,” resumed the woman. “It is finished but for a bit of the fringe. The cotton only came to-day.”

She spread the article out upon the bed. It was of coarser, common pattern than her daughter’s work, but the author surveyed its dimensions with proud delight.

“Tinnie Piet took such a fancy to it,” she said, smoothing out its pattern. “She said she would have given me two pounds for it if she could have spared the money.”

“Did she really?” asked the girl with some eagerness. “Well, she shall have it: Tinnie has always been good to me. But I want the other things for myself. Can you finish the fringe to-day, Anna?”

“Within an hour,” replied the woman with glad alacrity.

“Well, please send it down with the other things this afternoon. And look here, Anna, I’ll send back four pounds for the work. It is really worth more.”

“Four pounds!” The woman hugged the girl to her capacious bosom. “Oh, Hester, the Lord be merciful to you!” She folded the things tenderly together. “My man will have his new suit for nachtmaal,” she murmured in deep delight.

The girl made a grimace behind her back as they turned to the zit-kaamer.

CHAPTER XXIII

TANTA

JOHN West was heartily tired of making conversation with which to entertain his host, when the ladies reappeared in the zit-kaamer. He regarded the girl with quizzical eyes as she sat down and leisurely sipped the huge cup of coffee handed her. A constrained silence had fallen upon the group when, with great clack and clatter, a Cape cart swung up the path and round to the side of the stoep. Anna glanced through the window.

“Ach!” she exclaimed with evident pleasure. “It’s Tanta!” and accompanied by her husband, hurried to the front of the house. The visitors followed as far as the stoep.

“Are you ready?” questioned he.

“Yes,” was her reply, “but just wait a minute or two.”

A huge old lady, tall and big-boned, with figure in admirable proportion to her size, was climbing laboriously from her high seat the while her husband, a long, lank, old man, hurried around from the back of the trap to her assistance. With infinite gentleness and anxious care he guided her foot to the ground as she stepped down backwards.

“Zoo-o, mijn Moeder!” he said kindly as her feet touched terra firma. She was all the while giving precise and particular instructions to the driver, her nephew, as to the safe bestowal of her goods and chattels. That duty performed with stern precision, she turned to greet her hostess.

“’Tis surely going to rain, Tanta,” beamed the latter, kissing profusely the new-comer upon the mouth. “It will surely rain when you take us by surprise like this!”

“Ach, Anna! we haven’t long to live, and we see but little of our relations. What *has* a mensch¹ got of this miserable life?”

She had slowly mounted the steps before she threw back the lappets of the huge black kappje and caught sight of the strangers on the stoep. Hester, a pretty picture of slender youthfulness, was standing with hand outstretched and a bright smile of greeting for the old friend.

¹ Person.

“Ach, fooi tocht,² it’s the child!” and in another second Hester was bodily enveloped in the huge, tender arms, while more than one loving kiss was pressed on the warm young face. “Ach, Hester, mijn lief, you grow more like your sweet mother every time I see you. And like old Hendrik, too,” she added thoughtfully, as though assailed by a curious inward memory. “You are as good to look upon as Margaret was, but she was made of softer stuff than you. And she expected too much from life.”

Quick tears sprang to the girl’s eyes.

“You will tell me all about her, won’t you, Tanta?” she asked holding the kindly hand with slim, trembling fingers.

“Surely, child, surely!” returned the old lady. “Come over and stay a few days with me as soon as Martha van Wijk marries your Ouwpa. Dear Lord! you’ll be glad to get out of the house then, at any price. Though she’s my own sister’s child, I say it, and I should say it before her – she’s as deceitful as Judas Iscariot, for all she’s as smiling as a wax pop.”

“She’s a magnificent creature, that old lady,” remarked John West, as, after the first canter on the homeward way, they gently ambled along. “How do the brains pan out in a woman of that size?”

“I don’t know about *brains*,” said the girl musingly; “but no woman under the sun, be she princess or peasant, has a sounder, truer heart than Tanta – or a stronger will. No one could help regarding her: her personality is a striking one, and those who know her best love her most.”

“There are others to whom that might apply, I should think,” remarked he with a faint smile.

“Yes, certainly, but I haven’t met many such,” she said seriously. “You see, Tanta is the kind of woman who would, under conditions, rise to the very heights. Hers is the nature that, under pressure, would trample over every obstacle and soar aloft, triumphant above her fellows. She would never look about her, and condescend to court – or even notice – the wildest adulation that could be paid her. She reminds me somehow of the women whom Josephus depicted, and they – the few who rose to the surface – were greater and stronger than all the men about them. Wicked, too, mostly.” This last was added as an afterthought.

“You seem to glory in the fact that so many of the women of old time were ‘wicked.’” He stroked his moustache as though to hide the smile lurking about

2 A pitying, loving expression.

his lips. But she was not looking at him. "Unspeakably wicked," he added with a decided emphasis.

"I don't 'glory' in their wickedness," she corrected gently. "Though I, personally, would rather be wicked than weak. And I am only glad to think that in those old days so few women were weak. There was the common herd, of course; but the few who rose to the surface were strong – brilliantly strong. And it gladdens me to think that, in these our times, after countless centuries of oppression, the woman should realize the power within her, and struggle to get out of the throes of despotism, and afloat on the top; equal always with the male creature whom" – a soft blush overspread her face – "whom she nurses." She had obviously substituted a word for the one she originally intended.

He glanced aside at the pure profile presented to him, and the smile in his eyes died away to give place to something of deeper, intenser meaning. She turned her face to him and met the look. An answering fire leapt to her own eyes and she turned them swiftly away, shy and trembling sweet for the first time in her life. He leant forward and caught the right hand resting lightly upon her knee.

"I love you. Hester, I love you!" His voice throbbed in his throat. "Do you hear? Strong or weak, good or bad, right or wrong, you are the one woman on this earth for me. So help me God!"

She turned the quivering face towards him, with the strange, fleeting light upon it, born of an inner shyness and new modesty hitherto unknown to her personality.

"You love me, Hester! You dare not deny it—"

"I don't deny it," she murmured low. "I don't know if it is *love*, but I feel that I have known you – always; and that life can never be the same again."

"Wait!" he ordered sharply, as he reined in his horse and sprang to the ground. She pulled up the mare in trembling astonishment and wonder. He strode round her horse and held up his arms. Sliding into them, she found herself enveloped in a strong embrace of loving rapture.

"I could wait no longer," he murmured, kissing her lips and eyes, and holding her passive against his heart. "Oh, Hester, I have wanted you always – always. Ever since that first look into your sweet eyes I have known it was you, and have longed to hold you. Thus!"

She moved shyly towards her horse. He placed her in the saddle and then bent and kissed the little shoe in his hand.

They ambled gently homeward, her touch upon the curb bringing the short, impatient tripple of the young mare to keep pace with the heavier stride of the

big bay. And the setting sun shed a long pathway of glory over the veldt for their onward road.

She turned a laughing, piquant face to him.

“A red sky, Mr. —”

“John!” interrupted his stern tones.

“John! A red sky, John!” she said, with trembling smile playing about her lips, as she pointed with the whip over the blue Berg. “A happy augury for us. You know the old saw – ‘A red sky at night.’”

“I know,” he said, regarding, with keen appreciation, the picture of joyous womanhood before him. “And you are – my ‘delight.’ The augury is happy, Hester; but for me the thought that you love me is bliss enough for the present. The future can care for itself.”

The thud of cantering horse-hoofs struck upon the veldt silence. With one accord they watched the winding path before them, till, around the bend of a kopje in front, a horseman swung into sight.

“It’s Frank – Dr. Gray,” breathed she quickly. A red blush dyed her cheek as he drew nearer.

“Good-night, Hester!”

“Good-night, Frank!”

Only time to make the brief salutation, her voice ringing in sweet friendly tones that would haunt his homeward way. He had trotted past them, and yet a glance of quick instinctive rivalry and strong mutual aversion had passed between the men; a glance bitter and defiant on the one side, challenging and triumphant on the other.

“Tell me, Hester,” John West turned with jealous frown towards the girl, “were you ever engaged to that – to him, as Miss van Wijk asserts?”

“No!” she said, softly and slowly. “Never engaged to him, John. But almost so – indeed, provisionally so. But he always knew that I had no love for him. Indeed, I thought no man lived whom I could care for in that way.”

She smiled across at him.

“Did he —” The frown was heavy upon his brow. “Did he ever —”

“He never kissed me, John,” she said, lifting sweet eyes to his, and laughing with a bright blush as she recalled words used to Frank himself. “I could not have endured that.”

“My little queen!”

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ENGLISH MARRIAGE SERVICE

THERE comes at least once in the course of every life-time an epoch when events move rapidly, and the human atom is swept off his feet and carried relentless over a succession of changes which would have caused alarm and heart-burning even to contemplate.

Such a time had now come upon Hendrik de Villiers the younger. But a short half-year before had he been secure in his home, unconsciously assured of his inheritance, and calmly happy in his child's love. Now he found his home made unbearable, his inheritance by way of being thrust from him, and the child of his heart pledged to leave him.

For Hendrik the elder had taken a turn to rapid recovery, and his first connected utterance had been tantamount to a request for the clearance of his home from the flock of carrion crows who had come hither to batten upon a dead body. To his sons-in-law, in order of sequence, had he, in biting terms, expressed his contempt for their obvious eager anxiety to don the shoes which he would leave behind; and in raucous tones he had bidden them go home and work for the riches their own children would wish them dead for. For his part, he was going to live and seek a new heir. His substance would be swept away from before the greedy grasp of men whom he despised for their parsimony and covetousness. With one exception only, he desired to be rid of the whole crew. And within an hour or two, with tears of genuine sorrow, and heart-sick from injured love and pride, his daughters had taken the trek from the house where they were born, and which would never more be a welcome home for them or theirs.

The favoured exception from the general dismissal was Gert van Wijk, with his wife Aletta, and their family. Klein Hendrik found but a cold welcome in his father's presence, and within a very short time Gert was installed in the sick chamber as permanent nurse and general factotum. With the air of possessing full authority, and bursting with business of mighty intent, he would issue in shirt sleeves from the sick chamber, and, ignoring everyone in his heavy, tramping transit, he would shout orders to the farm natives directly contradicting the commands already given by Hendrik. Or he would assume

an exasperating show of great mystery, and calling one of the half-castes aside, would hold a conference of patronizing secrecy. The whispered colloquy was rarely worth repeating, but such as it was, it was duly and faithfully recorded to Baas Hendrik, who possessed the confidence and respect of his servants.

Martha's manner was more assured and hopeful once more, but no tricks of daring were tried either upon Hendrik or his niece. Aletta fought severely shy of both the last-mentioned relatives, but, from a certain firm compression of lip and venomous glint of eye, it might have been inferred that she was but biding her time.

John West, after a prolonged interview with Klein Hendrik, had returned to the City, and though no announcement was made, it was noticed by the two women in possession of the house that each post brought thick, heavy letters for Hester, which were jealously kept from the common view. A half-hoop of splendid diamonds also appeared upon one of the fingers of her left hand; but as she made no remark anent its presence, she was left in her taciturnity.

Then one morning, barely a month after the old man's seizure, a strange clergyman arrived at Berg Vlei. Although very obviously an Englishman, he was met and welcomed by Gert the ubiquitous, received as an anticipated guest by Aletta, and regaled with tea and sponge-cakes. The giggling, shy bashfulness of Martha to enter the drawing-room, and the self-conscious air of great importance assumed by her in the presence of the stranger, caused Hester much disgusted surprise. So irritated was she, that she left the insipid going clergyman entirely to the administrations of his self-constituted hostesses, and issued to the verandah, where her guardian sat, evidently in anxious thought. He cast a questioning look at her, but she smiled in reply, and sat down beside him, lifting his hand in both hers and retaining it.

Not long had they chatted in idle mood, when they heard a movement of footsteps in the sick-room whose window opened at their left. A high pitched voice began almost immediately to recite matter of sacred nature. Involuntarily the two on the verandah suspended conversation. Hester looked at her guardian with startled, horror-stricken face.

It's the English marriage-service, Oomie," she whispered in consternation. Her uncle nodded.

"I expected it," he murmured low.

They moved round the corner of the verandah, out of earshot.

"This will be no home for us, Oomie," she said in distress.

He shook his head sadly.

"I don't mind for myself," she resumed, "but she will make you so unhappy. There will be no peace for you, no liberty in your own home."

"It ceases to be our own home from to-day," he said quietly. "My father has given the ground from under my feet to – her – and we would be here on sufferance – her sufferance – only."

"That would be intolerable. But who told you, Oomie?" She was in deep distress.

"Mr. West told me. He refused to draw up the agreement as Owpa would have it, and offered to act for me in the matter. But I shall make no move, and they have employed another professional man."

"What shall we do, Oomie?"

He shook his head again.

"Only wait," he said quietly. "My crops are still on the ground. They must be garnered and realized – for your sake."

"Why for mine?"

"For a reason I have," he replied absently. Then, regarding the troubled face with a smile, "Don't you think somebody must have a wedding-present?"

She tried to smile back, but the present celebration of these other nuptials took the brightness of spirit from her.

"There's – oh, thank God, there's Tanta!" She gave a cry of relief, and darting from his side, flew down the steps and out to the gate in the stone wall. He followed, more leisurely, and found his ward held close in the old lady's capacious arms, the while she imprinted loud kisses upon the up-turned face.

"I didn't bring my old man with me to-day," she remarked, releasing the girl and turning to Klein Hendrik. "I thought you could have his seat back with me, and the child could ride on horseback. I meant you wouldn't care to stay at home to-night?"

"Oh, Tanta!" Hester was removing the manifold wrappings from about the grand old face, and gazing with love and joy into the kindly eyes. "You don't know what's going on inside!"

"Don't I? Then what brought me down that mean hill, do you think? Mijn Hemel, I knew Gert would earn his wage. That man clings to money as the devil holds on to a soul."

Not long had they seated themselves in the dining-room – Tanta having refused to do more than throw back the hood of her ugly kappje – when the bridal party issued from the sick chamber. The stern old man had paid to the ceremony the compliment of rising and dressing for its celebration, and he himself led forward his blushing bride with an infatuated air of great gallantry

and conscious pride. Save for a certain shakiness of limb and a palpable pallor of face, the period of enforced inactivity had left no appreciable mark upon the giant strength of the old frame, and his tones, unless addressed to the lady of his third choice, were raucous and domineering as of yore. Gert van Wijk and his lady, accompanied and followed by the olive branches which blessed their union, completed the bridal procession; and it is worthy of remark that two of the young ladies of the party carried aloft huge bunches of Hester's best carnations. The clergyman had retired to a bedroom to rid himself of the vestments he had donned for the occasion, and to prepare for the journey back to civilization.

"This is your mother, Hendrik," enunciated the bridegroom in rasping, unconciliatory tones; "and in future you will pay respect to me by addressing her as 'moeder.' According to the treatment you give her, you will receive consideration from me."

His son took limply the fat hand outstretched, but failed to bestow a filial salute upon the expectant, proffered countenance. His natural hesitation of speech may have excused any reply from him, for his parent turned to the new-comer.

"Hoe gaat dit, Salmina?"¹ he asked, as his bride embraced her aunt with gushing effusion.

"Not too bad, and not too well," returned stolidly the old lady as she, keeping her seat and her ease, shook hands stiffly with her host. "It goes with me like with the rest, I suppose. Sometimes I want to cry out and carry the mean old world on my own back; then I have to give in and let it carry me."

"This is your grandmother." The old autocrat was regarding Hester with eyes that showed strong condemnation of her late achievements. "If you stay here you will obey her, and do exactly as she wishes. And you'll call her Ouwma."²

For one second a flash of mischief glanced across the grey eyes.

"I'll dae a lump less wi' mair ease!" she murmured low, making no movement to embrace the queen of the hour.

"I say you'll pay her the proper respect due to her if you stay in my house – both you and my son Hendrik." His voice had risen, and he regarded her with eyes which glittered like basilisks.

"We shall!" said the girl distinctly, laying a detaining hand upon her guardian's sleeve. "We shall pay her all the respect she wants – if we stay."

1 "How goes it, Salmina?"

2 Grandma.

“And something over, if you’re of my opinion,” muttered the old lady. She was seated in Klein Hendrik’s own chair, and bore the decided air of one at war with the world, and anxious to get her own back at any cost.

But Aletta here broke in.

“Pa!” said she, “let’s have the cake and wine first. The English parson will expect some, and you can talk business afterwards. I thought,” she added in a loud whisper heard distinctly throughout the room, “you decided not to let them know everything till you came back?”

Her father looked at her in angry doubt, but seated himself in his accustomed place at the head of the table, with his blooming young wife at his left hand.

A short, animated bustle took place, in the midst of which Aletta, with her daughters aforementioned, placed a couple of bottles of cheap sherry and pontac on the table, and bore in triumph a huge iced cake and several dishes of smaller ones, with a plate of pastry. The delicacies were placed in an exact row down the centre of the table. It was evident enough that the confectionery had come from the station in the trap with the English parson, for there had been a loud breaking open of packing-cases upon the back stoep.

A constrained silence had fallen upon the room, and the three inmates, who found themselves no welcome guests to the coming feast, sat depressed and near together, feeling singularly out of place and strange to the signs of prevailing jubilation. When the clergyman entered the room, Aletta, in her office as hostess for the day, provided him with a chair, seated her five children upon the couch, and, after handing round plates and wine-glasses, came to anchor herself upon a high chair with a straight back.

Obeying the command in her eye, the husband of her bosom took up the bottle of pontac, and, going the round of the room, filled each glass to the brim. Amid a tense silence, and before the wondering awe of his round-eyed progeny, he stood up to make the first speech of his life-time.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced in English, his big face taking on a pale hue at the importance of the moment. “Ladies and gentlemen. This is a joyful occasion. It is a pity that more of Pa’s children are not here to see it. Perhaps they would look pleaseder to see it than some does that’s sitting here now. But I hope the time won’t come when certain people will be punished for their wicked behaviours to them that – that – got them. I am glad and proud that my youngest sister’s got to be Pa’s wife, and me and my family will now look to her as a mother, no matter what some others does. I knows, and my family knows, what’s their duty. I have always been a true and dutiful son to Pa since —”

“Stop your bragging, Gert!” sternly commanded the old lady, “and get on with your speech. The English parson has to climb on his train to-night, remember that!”

The orator cast a glance, half-baleful, half-sheepish, at the easy-chair.

“If any of my relations is against this marriage,” said he in slightly louder tones and with an access of dignity, “let them stand up and say it now, or keep silence for evermore.” Clearly the marriage-service was lingering about his brain. He looked proudly around to mark the effect of his eloquence. “I have known Pa since the days I courted his good-lookingest daughter, and I have known my sister, Martha, since she was a babby in long clothes, and I say this – they have got blessings in one another. So we’ll drink to the bride and bride-groom.”

The toast received due attention at the fair lips of the bride herself, and plates of cake were handed round. After sufficient pause to allow of further remark from the company, and an expectant glance to the clergyman, who sat silent, a picture of singular, smiling discomfort, the bridegroom uprose at the head of the table.

In any other character, at the celebration of any other ceremonial or feast, the magnificent personality of the splendid old man must have instilled an instinct of respect and pride in all who claimed knowledge of him. His falcon eyes took in now, with singular insight, the various expressions upon the faces around him, and, in perfect English of some fluency (for the benefit of the parson) he launched forth into a diatribe anent the wicked ingratitude of children who, reared and nurtured with tender, fostering care, turned round like serpents in the bosom and stung the hand which had caressed and fed them. He consigned to ultimate realms of everlasting glory, and abiding rich reward, the son and daughter who rejoiced in the true happiness of the parent who hereby blessed them. Then he descended at one and the same time to the Taal, and the discussion of his various adventures in the pitfalls of matrimony.

“There was my first wife,” he remarked, with contemptuous retrospect. “She was but a poor thing,”

“I thought she was rich,” interposed Tanta in an audible tone. “I know this place was bought – *and* built – with her money.”

“A poor thing,” repeated the elocutionist, eyeing the big chair with severe brow, and continuing with an added emphasis. “My first wife was a poor thing.” An inviting pause. “But I was a good man to her. She said so herself, the last time she spoke. ‘Hennie,’ said she, ‘you were always a good husband to me!’”

A snort from the capacious chair.

"A good husband," repeated the autocrat, regarding mid speaking silence the stolid features of his antagonist.

"Then there was my second wife. She was a trial to me. A trial and a punishment for my sins." A soft laugh here prompted the discourse. "But," a long telling pause, "for six months I have had an angel in my house. And glory be to Providence, now I wear the angel in my home and in my heart, and I shall wear her there till I die."

"The sooner the better for the angel," muttered the incorrigible old lady.

"What's that you say?" The speech had broken abruptly.

"I say, *Where's the angel?*" asked Tanta in sharp exasperation.

"Here she is!" The old man snapped his lips together and placed his hand on the massive coils of black hair beside him. The bride smiled widely.

"Nonsense, Hendrik!" The old lady bridled in expostulation. "How in the name of Jehoshaphat can the duivel give an angel away?"

"What do you mean?" and clenched fist struck the table a blow that made the glasses ring again.

"Mean?" The kappje strings quivered in wrath. "Dear Heaven, the meaning's clear enough for any fool. Isn't it a known fact since the world began that the first marriage comes from the dear God Himself, the second from man, and the third from the duivel? Ach, Hendrik, drink your wine if you want it, but don't stand there talking stinking rot. And before the Engelschman too!"

"Look here Salmina!" The by-play in the Taal was beginning to assume the aspect of a very personal dispute. "Is this your house or mine?"

"Neither yours nor mine if Aletta Skinderbek³ there speaks the truth," returned the irrepressible, with calm superiority. "It belongs to Martha there. If she turns you out, you can deal with her yourself, and welcome. If she tries any tricks with me, she'll live to curse the hour she was born. And look here, you, Hendrik," she added, with a sudden access of hot rage, and not glancing at the eyes of sparkling fun beside her. "Just mind whom you are talking to, will you? And don't take any liberties with your betters. I am own sister – *elder* sister, mind – to your wife's mother, and you'll call me 'Tanta' in future. If you don't—"

The old man sat him down in grim wrath. But Aletta turned to the intrepid occupant of the easy chair.

"If *that's* the way you congratulate Pa," she began in shrill volubility.

3 Scandalmonger.

“Who talked of congratulating your Pa, you eesel?⁴ If anybody’s to be congratulated it’s your own man, who has brought the marriage about. My Lord! I know him as well as if I had made him myself out of some untouchable dirt, and I know that he never works without reward. Don’t talk to me! No, child!” to a daughter of the van Wijk’s. “I don’t want any cake. I’ve had enough cake for one day.”

4 Donkey.

CHAPTER XXV

“THE ANCIENT GRUDGE I BEAR HIM”

IT was not until the English parson, bearing with him, in addition to his substantial fee, a lively sense of the social life obtaining among the Boers, had left for the station, and the rest of the party had dispersed about the house, that the question of the immediate future forced itself upon Hester's mind. To stay at Berg Vlei was impossible; to leave on the spur of the moment seemed almost equally so. Tanta took the horns of the dilemma in her strong, firm hands.

“You can't stay here, child, either you or your uncle,” she said determinately. “Alett Skinderbek never could hold her tongue, and I know more than you do. The greatest spite you can deal to Martha and her brother, Gert, is to get out of the way before they get any revenge out of you.”

“We shall have to stay under their roof for a night or two,” said the girl, vexed and impotent. “It will take some time to pack our things.”

“Yes! but they won't be here to trouble you. The whole swetterjoel¹ of them are going off to Gert's place to hold the honeymoon. Lord save us! They're packing up the cakes now, and they'll be away for a week or two. By that time you can be out of the place, bag and baggage.”

“Where shall we go, uncle?” He had become strangely pale and livid of aspect. “Are you ill, Oomie?”

“Nothing more than usual,” he assured her in his slow, gentle way. “Go? I don't know. Uncle Erich in Umvoti would be glad to have us for a while. I haven't been there since our last mother died.”

“Well, why not go there now?” asked Tanta directly. “Spend a few months with them – they're a big houseful, Hester, but the mother is dead – and look around you before you decide where to settle. Have you enough money to buy a farm?”

He shook his head.

“No,” said he; “but I would not buy a farm. I'm too old to begin afresh.”

Truth to say, he looked old and worn, and far lacking in the fresh energy which characterized his parent.

1 Crew.

“Well, you could look around and please yourself. In the meantime, you had better make arrangements about moving your things: and if you take my advice, you’ll point them all out to me before your father. It would save trouble and skinder² later on.”

“It’s good advice, Tanta.” It was Hester who spoke. “But will you approach Ouwpa and explain to him?”

“Lord, yes, child!”

“Thank you. I think uncle will be happier if we can quit without any bitter words, and it is easily seen that he is malignly disposed to both of us.”

“Well, what could you expect?” the old lady snorted. “But leave it to me, liefje. Old Hendrik is only terrible to those who he knows fear him.”

She left the apartment, and returned after a short interval with the old man and his bride.

“We have no time to waste on foolery,” rasped he, shortly. “What do you want to mark your things for?”

His son answered never a word, but the girl said quietly –

“We wish to send them away. Uncle is going to share my home, and we shall need our furniture.”

“Ooh! you are going to set up home for yourself, are you?” The question came with a titter from Mrs. de Villiers. “It’ll be a grand home that! You’ll be keeping a white maid, perhaps?”

“Perhaps!” repeated the girl indifferently. “But not a Boer one. I have found them most unsatisfactory.”

“You keep your cheek to yourself, will you, permant?”³ The bride’s own cheek had coloured darkly.

“You got what you paid your cash for, Jevrouw Martha,” interposed the old lady stolidly. “I haven’t time to stand here fooling, and your man says he hasn’t. So we’d better begin.”

“I know the sideboard belongs to Hester. I remember the late Hester told me it cost a might of money in London. It’s made of a wood with a funny name: but I would rather have one with lots of looking-glasses in it. The big chair is Hendrik’s, isn’t it? Our wagon brought it from the station, so I should know. Is there anything else in this room belonging to you? No! Well, let’s go to the zit-kaamer.”

2 Scandal.

3 Impudence.

Slowly and heavily the old lady made her ponderous tour of the house, the whole party, swelled ultimately by Aletta and certain of her progeny, following in her wake.

"There's the piano, child," she said concisely. "You'll want to take that with you. It's your own, anyhow. And besides," in a loud whisper which penetrated to every corner of the room, "it wouldn't be any use to Martha. She's more used to the sound of pots and pans. Her mother made a low marriage, my little one; she wedded a Hollander meester,⁴ and her children got no education. My earth! he was an ongeschekte duivel,⁵ that Hollander. He promised my fool sister that if she'd marry him she'd never need to put her hands in cold water. Then, when she had to work like a heathen Hottentot, she yelped, the poor eesel, and reminded him of his promise. 'Well,' said he, 'you *don't* need to put your hand in cold water. You can heat it,' says he. But, dear land, she cried when he died, just as if he had been a Christian Boer. Is the music-seat yours, too? Well, don't forget it. I'll send my nephew to help pack the heavy things." She looked around rapidly.

"They say you are going to marry the big Engelschman, liefje," she breathed low. "I don't mind it a bit. Either an upright Boer or a decent Engelschman. But anything else is low. Hollanders and Germans are a mean lot, and the Frenchmen eat toads and snails. The Russians and Japanese are half-wild yet. So you see the only respectable people are Boers and Britishers. And if you can't get a decent Boer, I see no harm in your taking an Engelschman. He's an agend,⁶ isn't he?"

"Yes, Tanta," with a quick, low chuckle of keen delight.

"Ah, well, child, you can't have everything. The English call them lawyers. That's their name for 'leugenaar,'⁷ as everybody knows. But, Hemel! they must earn their bread somehow, and they've never been taught better. Tell me, child, does Klein Hendrik's furniture belong to himself?"

"The suite does, I'm not sure about the bed."

"Well, we shall put the bed in anyhow. I don't suppose he'll erf⁸ anything else."

4 Schoolmaster.

5 Impolite devil.

6 Lawyer.

7 Liar.

8 Inherit.

“Are you going to sell your bottled fruits?” interposed Aletta here. “You can’t take them with you; and if you let them go cheap, I don’t mind taking them over.”

“It’s very kind of you, Aletta,” said the girl quietly. “But Tanta is taking them all home with her. There’s not more than a dozen or two, Tanta,” she added to the old lady with a smile; “but they are really good, as I should know who bottled them.”

Her guardian whispered in her ear.

The huge old woman bent and kissed her.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather take them with you, mijn lief?”

“Certain, Tanta. And uncle says will you send over your Scotch cart for his pigs? The white Yorkshires are all his, and they are such lovely animals. We call the old sow ‘The Belle of New York,’ because we got her from the Salvation Army people. If you call ‘Belle!’ she’ll follow you about like a dog.”

Tanta looked genuinely distressed.

“But, child,” she remonstrated, “wouldn’t you rather sell them? Hendrik! those pigs cost a power of money.”

He smiled.

“Tanta, if it were twice as much you would be welcome,” explained the girl, reading his thoughts aloud. “We have made pets of those pigs, and shall be so glad to think you have them. Besides the parents, there are five little ones and one half-grown animal, who is a picture.”

“Ach, Hendrik. Thank you! I’ll go home rich assuredly.”

“I want that half-grown boar myself,” interrupted the old man rudely.

“Ouwpa is too late,” said the girl coldly. “They belong to Tanta now.”

“I want that young boar,” he repeated, looking at the imperturbable old lady.

“You can have it,” she said coolly, “at a price.”

“I mean to keep that animal,” rasped he, “and I shall.”

“Not if I know myself,” retorted his newly-acquired relative with a smile of calm assurance. “And at present I’m going to sit in the pantry and take care of my fruits, in case of accident. Is there anything else I can do for you, child?”

“Yes, Tanta. I would be glad of your help to pack the jams and preserves for the Mission Station.”

“It seems to me,” observed the bride of an hour with an ill glitter in her eyes, “that the place is going to be stripped, and there’ll be nothing to eat by the time we get back.”

“Leave some of your cakes behind, then,” advised the old lady, moving with heavy tread towards the kitchen.

CHAPTER XXVI

“SOMETHING SOLID”

AN HOUR later the bridal party left for the strong-hold of the van Wijks. The old man shook his silent son by the hand and bade him a cold good-bye; but his manner to Hester was more aggressive.

“You have made Hendrik the son that he is,” said he with eagle glance at the pale young face. “And may you suffer for it!”

“That’s a lie,” enunciated Tanta with wilful misinterpretation. “You did it yourself when you taught him the vile English tongue. Many a time I was there myself, so you can’t tell me anything. It was only by the mercy of the dear God that he was saved from being a helpless idiot, let alone a hopeless *hakelaar*.¹ No! don’t say good-bye to me. I’m going to the gate with you.”

With an ill grace they accepted her escort to the waiting vehicles. Aletta drove her own spider, for to Gert had been deputed the honour of acting jehu to the happy couple. To this last contingent Tanta moved forward after the party was seated.

“I want to congratulate you on your work,” she said with bitter emphasis and addressing the old man. “Not content with blasting the life of the best son who ever lived, you have done your utmost to break his heart too. In exchange for a big, filthy lump of female flesh, you have sold his birthright from under him, and left him to go forth without a roof to shelter his head. And mark this, you! – his mother’s malady is full upon him, and he’ll end his days very soon among strangers. Take that thought to your marriage-bed with you. It should make easy rest. And when you pray for the orphaned and the fatherless at your *Godsdiens*² to-night, just remember your own son, and hide your wicked old head from your Maker.”

Gert whipped his horses viciously, and Tanta strode slowly back to the house, a satisfied expression on her face.

“I think I’ll stay and see you off the premises, child,” she said, sinking with a sigh into a chair that creaked and groaned under her weight. “You had better send Dolph over for my night-things.” I couldn’t sleep without my own

1 Stutterer.

2 Family worship.

mussie,³ and,” with a glance of contempt at the slight figure before her, “I would split your night-shirt in two before it got over my head.”

“Oh, Tanta, how good you are! How good you are!” What should we have done without you this day?”

“Not very well, I dare say,” answered the old lady with supreme satisfaction. “And old Hendrik hadn’t heard any of the truth that’s good for him since the late Hester died. *She* kept him achter makaar,⁴ Lord knows.”

Through the good offices of Tanta, and one or two others who came at her call, the belongings of Hendrik and his niece were packed and away stationwards by the Saturday morning. No cracked ornament or broken-handled cup belonging to the two of them was left behind, owing to the relentless supervision of the intrepid old lady. Such articles as Hester considered not worthy of packing were sent to the poorer neighbours or handed to the native servants. Half bags of flour and sugar, together with sundry bed-linen and blankets, were despatched across the plain to Anna Erich. Delectables in the way of tinned foods were sent up to the Mission Station, Tanta refusing point-blank to accept of any “dead horse flesh put in tins by the half-black Amerikanders.” For old Hendrik had kept a keen eye on the house-keeping accounts, and though he willingly shared in the luxuries provided for his table, he had had nothing to do with their purchase.

They were left alone at the last, for Tanta had hurried off early in the morning, averring trenchantly that her accursed women would steal the ears off her old man’s head and skimp every bit of the work if she were not at hand to look after them. For, as is the universal custom among the Boers, the native women living on the farm scrubbed the house on Saturdays, and kept the yard in order, in lieu of rent.

Strangely empty and sad seemed the dismantled old homestead to the two left behind. Equipped for their ride, they made a silent tour of the house, but in every room an ugly space gaped at and chilled them.

“It is not home,” whispered she, laying her cheek against his sleeve. “It could never be home to either of us. And God orders all things for the best, for I might have gone to John and left you here, if this had not happened. And how could you be happy without me, vader lief?”

How, indeed? A soft tenderness stole across his face as they emerged to the open. She locked the door, and, sealing the key in an envelope prepared for the purpose, handed it to the weeping maid, Nomkuba.

³ Night-cap.

⁴ Straight.

“There is only one place more, Oomie.”

Hand-in-hand they went over the turf to the graveyard. A wealth of blossoms had been earlier lavished upon the mound there, by hands which would nevermore perform the hallowed task. He turned and looked at her with quivering mouth.

“God bless you, beloved,” his eyes plainly said, but his tongue was silent. A few heart-heaving sobs shook his thin, stooping frame, and when they turned to their waiting horses great tears were rolling upon his grizzled beard.

A painful farewell from Willem Bastard and his subordinates; and they were up the hill and half-way across the veldt to the Mission Station before either spoke to the other.

“I was sorry not to say good-bye to Dolph,” said she then.

“He wasn’t there, liefje?”

“No!” sorrowfully.

But the first face that greeted them in the back-yard of the Mission Station was the high-boned yellow one of Dolph himself. Hester brightened perceptibly.

“You rascal!” she said softly. “Is this where you are?”

“Ja, Nona. Mijn Pa sent me here with Jim. He says I must go with you, and he’ll cut me in pieces if I go back home.” The boy grinned in delight at the anticipation of being dismembered.

“But what did you bring Jim for? He must go back.” They had dismounted, and she looked at the boy through wet eyes.

“Mijn Pa says that if Jim goes back, he’ll be lying dead in the stables one of these mornings. The Ouwbaas told him he belongs to the Nona, and mijn Pa says he won’t have him about the place.”

The missionary and his wife, accompanied by Dr. Gray himself, had joined them by this time.

“This simplifies matters wonderfully,” Hester, turning to her friend’s husband. “We were going to ask you to give stable-room to our horses, Mr. Gray, till we have settled what to do. Now here is this faithful lad to take care of them.” The faithful lad looked aught but edified. “It is only for a little while, Dolph – I promise you – and then you shall bring the horses to us wherever we are. Wilhelm has undertaken to send a load of fodder over some time during the day,” she said, turning to the others. “And, Phyllis, Jim will remain here always. I have often wished you had a horse to ride.”

“You don’t mean,” said Mrs. Gray, her delicate face flushing, “that you are giving the horse to me, do you, Hester?”

"No, I don't – if you won't accept him. But Teddy will have no such scruple, will you my son?" She bent and kissed the little man, who had been her favourite always. "If mother won't take Jim, he shall be yours."

"Can't he belong to both of us, mamma?" asked the boy with anxious eyes on his mother's face.

"Thank you, darling," said Phyllis. "I didn't mean it in that way. I do most thankfully accept the horse – for Teddy and me."

"Then that's settled," said the girl, with a sigh of relief. "You'll take her for lots of rides, won't you, Frank?"

She turned in a pretty, friendly way, and placed her hand in his palm. He looked fair and handsome in his light tweeds, but his manner was cold and somewhat constrained. "I shall like to think that you are good to Phyllis," she added softly as they two moved apart from the others towards the house. "Her companionship has been a Heaven-sent gift to me."

"When do you leave?" he asked quietly and somewhat lamely.

"On Monday morning. We go to Umvoti first, to an uncle of my uncle's. That sound vague, doesn't it?" She laughed, but he thought uneasily, that he could hear the sound of tears in her voice.

"But Oom Erich is the youngest brother of uncle's own mother; so you see, although they accept me as a cousin, I am not really related to him. They sent us a most cordial telegram in response to our own," she added thoughtfully.

It was little after sunrise on the Sunday morning that Mrs. Gray came to Hester's room clad in a warm flannel dressing-gown over her night-gear. She found the girl staring wide-eyed at the beamed ceiling.

"Mr. West has come, Hester," she said, with a searching gaze at the face on the pillow. "He arrived at the station by the 4 a.m. train, and has ridden over on the hotel horse. He seems very impatient."

The girl turned a quivering, happy face towards her. "He will be impatient," she murmured, a smile trembling about her lips.

"It is true then, Hester?" The woman held the candle which she had extinguished in her hand.

"That he loves me? Oh yes, Phyllis, it is true. Most gloriously true." She sprang from the small spring bed and began brushing out her hair, in shy, if somewhat diffident defiance of her friend's judgment.

"And Frank?" asked Mrs. Gray.

"Oh, Frank!"

The girl's lips curled. A slight silence ensued.

"I meant to tell you to-day, Phyl – about John, I mean."

“I haven’t met him, Hester,” said the woman dubiously, “but I saw him just now, out of the glass door. He was holding his horse by the reins and simply glaring at the house, as though in a rage with it for holding you.”

“Yes, dear!” murmured Hester, a glad colour flooding her face and neck as she gathered up her hair. “He would feel that way.”

“I daresay,” acquiesced Mrs. Gray drily. “But as I looked at him – and I took a good long stock of him, dearie – I couldn’t help feeling – nay, knowing! – that you have met your match at last, Hester. You have struck something solid this time!”

CHAPTER XXVII

A COUNTRY PRAYER-MEETING

THERE was a prayer-meeting in preparation at Oom Erich's farm-house. The gathering was dignified by such a name, and the presence of certain staid matrons and decorous deacons lent a spice of solemnity to the occasion. But little of so desirable an element was displayed among the dozen or so of young bloods who grouped themselves about under the huge gum-trees to talk hunting and range-shooting, to whisper the latest tit-bit of gossip, or to roar with laughter at some questionable sally from a well-known wag.

Less gravity still was displayed in the kitchen, where the daughter of the house, enveloped in a huge over-all pinafore, and reinforced by a few particular friends, prepared the substantial mid-day meal which was destined to regale and strengthen the devotees upon the conclusion of religious exercises. Here was a deafening clatter of cups, being washed and re-filled for an hour on end, for each new arrival was greeted with a cup of steaming tea and a rusk, such refreshment being invariably welcome after the invigorating ride across the veldt.

"I think," said Mimi, as she cast one last anxious look at the pots, "I really think we can go inside now. Everything is in a moving way, and Maria will see that nothing burns. Won't you, Maria? You know the prayer-meeting was held last month at Oom Louis Heine's place, and while the service was on the fricadelles and potatoes got burnt as black as midnight. If that happened here, I should never hold up my head again."

She looked at the other girls with anxious, rueful countenance. Some of them laughed aloud.

"You may laugh if you like," said she, half offended; "but I have a good mind to boil the potatoes myself after the meeting."

"And I have a good mind to let you do nothing of the sort," retorted a girl with black, wavy hair and merry brown eyes. "You know the ridiculous way Pa has of bursting home in the heat of the day? Well, if the potatoes are not cooked in time we'll go without our dinner. And I do hate to be hungry!"

"Poor little dove," gurgled one of the others. "It sha'n't go home hungry. We'll put a leg of mutton in the carriage."

“And half a suckling-pig,” added another.

“And a loaf of bread and a dish of pumpkin,” supplemented the brunette herself, nothing abashed. “But come along, Mimi, and leave Maria alone; she’ll do better without you. I’m all anxiety to see our cousin. Is she very formidable?”

“Not at all,” declared Mimi in all good faith. “She’s not a bit proud, but she has a little way of her own—”

““Touch me not, my name’s Temptation””; suggested the dark girl laughing. “That kind of thing?”

“Yes, that kind of thing. You know Susie, you boarding-school girls do fancy yourselves.”

“And each other. Of course we do,” agreed Susie, her brown eyes dancing. “Well, lead the way, and let’s get out of this hot place. Old Oom Berand would say it’s half a hell. The clatter of dishes is enough to deafen one. I fail to see why you can’t leave Maria to do the cooking altogether. *I* should never dream of pitting myself against her.”

“That’s what I say,” grumbled Mimi, picking up the threads of her grievance. “You girls come back from English schools thinking yourselves quite above ordinary housework. And what kind of wives you’ll make passes my comprehension.”

“Some of us will make very pretty ones, I should say,” retorted her cousin. “I, for one, mean to marry an Englishman who can afford to keep a good staff of servants.”

“Don’t talk rubbish,” snapped Mimi. “There are better men among the Boers of South Africa than ever came out of England that I ever heard of. Your ambition should be to marry one of your own race, and make a good wife to him.”

“Farmers, every one of ‘em,” murmured Susie meekly, “and I only like to see butter when it is on the table.”

Her cousin flashed an angry look at her, but led the way in silence through the crowded dining-room, up a wide passage, down a narrow one, and into a long, low room. Two girls were seated at the wide, double window. The one, who was fair and delicate in appearance, was lying back in a low chair, with her hands folded listlessly in her lap and a look of utter weariness in her pathetic blue eyes. The other, who was slightly taller, sat with a volume of Kipling’s poems open before her, but she was obviously paying more attention to her companion than to the book. Hester’s face, speaking and attractive,

seemed yet slightly cold and proud to the new-comers. She looked up as the group of girls entered the room and half rose from her seat.

"This is your step-cousin, Susie, Hester," said Mimi, who, being still faintly ruffled, was not over gracious; "and these are friends of ours – Miss Nel, Miss du Plessis, Miss Joubert. My cousin, Miss de Villiers."

Hester bent forward and kissed Susie on the girl's cheek, and then offered a slim white hand to the others.

"I am pleased to meet you," she said in low, even tones. "Will you sit down?"

"No, thanks!" said Mimi shortly. "It wants ten minutes to the half-hour, and Pa hates us to be late. Are you coming to the meeting, Hester?"

"I think not," said Hester, with a glance at her companion. "I will stay and keep Elsie company."

"Just as you please," said Mimi coldly. "If Elsie would arouse herself and do a little healthy work, it would be better for her, both body and soul."

She turned away and left the others to digest the words of wisdom. There was an awkward pause subsequent to her departure till Susie, in her bright, pretty way, remarked –

"Mimi got the wrong name altogether. She should have been Martha, because she's 'troubled about many things.'"

"There's Cornelius Meyer," exclaimed one of the others. "Well! I wonder what next?"

There was a pressing forward of girlish faces towards the open window, opposite which, under a shady loquat tree, two or three young men stood chatting.

Hester's eyes inadvertently caught sight of Elsie's face as the girl pushed back her chair into the shadow. It had flushed painfully, and then settled into a ghastly pallor.

"I wonder what on earth he wants here?" said Susie with a frown. "I always make a point of snubbing that man."

"Rather an undertaking, I should say," remarked Miss Nel, a graceful, slender girl with more than a touch of hauteur in the poise of her head. "Did you hear of his latest achievement?"

"No!" exclaimed the others eagerly. "What was it?"

"You know Louise van Groot Paul and Anna van Rooi Jan,¹ of course. They live at the other side of Greytown. Well, they talked a great deal about Cornelius, I believe, and were going to do wonders in the way of teaching him

¹ Louisa of Big Paul and Anna of Red John.

lessons, and putting him in his right place. Certain peacemakers carried the tale of their boastings to him, and he took a characteristic revenge. When they met at Nachtmaal a fortnight ago, there was a delicious scene. It happened to be in our cottage in Greytown, so I was present at the time. 'I am engaged,' said Louise in her simpering way. 'Why, so am I,' said Anna – and added, rather shamefaced, 'to Cornelius Meyer.' 'That can't be,' said Louisa, turning red, 'for he proposed to me last night, and I accepted him.' 'It was last night that he spoke to me,' gasped Anna. They were both terribly angry, of course, and to the best of my belief the matter stands just there."

"And what about their brothers?" asked Susie with quick contempt.

Isa Nel shrugged her shoulders.

"My dear," she said, in her calm, even way, "to be able to throw stones you must not live in a glass house. What has been done to their sisters they have surely done to other girls – or will do. There seems to be a jilting strain, or epidemic – I don't know what you call it – among the young men of our nationality. I don't pretend to know why, but lady-killing seems to be their favourite pastime just recently. Sometimes I think Cornelius Meyer set the example. However that be, our young men pride themselves more of the girls they have wooed and jilted than a Red Indian does of the scalps at his girdle. For my part I prefer the Indian. Cornelius is only a little more successful than the others – that's all – probably on account of his superior education as well as his good looks."

"Now, there's a fault our parents make to a very great extent," chimed in another of the girls. "They send us to first-class schools; have us educated as well as they know how in English; give us a smattering of music, painting, even of French, and Heaven knows all what. And neglect our brothers! The consequence is that when we come home from our 'finishing' schools, we look down upon our young men for a while. Then we sink to their level and marry them."

"I wish some of them could hear you," smiled Miss Nel. "But what you say is very true. Take, for instance, my three brothers. All the schooling they have had – independent of the few months at a Cape school, where they mingled with other Dutch farm boys only – has been at the hands of tutors more or less incapable, and more or less (but generally more) dissipated and drunken. They have scrambled through their yearly exams, pretty fairly. And after stating that fact, it is merciful to say no more."

"Well, there's a general move to the sitting-room, so I suppose we had better go, too," said Susie in her downright way. "That's one fault we all possess in

common with our brothers – we come together with the ostensible purpose of prayer, and then talk scandal.”

They moved away and left the two girls alone again.

“Elsie,” said Hester, bending forward, “who is the Adonis they have been talking about?”

“That is not his name,” said Elsie innocently. “It is Cornelius Meyer, and he has bought a large farm about an hour and a half from here. He is very handsome and such a gentleman, but—” Her lip quivered.

“I think I understand,” said Hester in gentle sympathy. “But please tell me all about it, dear.”

“I don’t think I would have felt it so much,” whispered Elsie huskily, “but I was just getting over a severe illness at the time. It was on my conscience all the while I lay ill, and father and Mimi were so patient and loving, and tended me with such untiring care. But I had promised him not to mention it to anybody— As soon as I was well enough I wrote and begged him to allow me to tell Mimi of our engagement. He sent me such a cruel note. I have it still.”

“Please give it to me,” said Hester softly.

Elsie rose languidly and walked to a chest of drawers at the farther end of the room. She opened a drawer and removed a small work-box. Taking the key from her pocket, she turned the lock and took out an envelope of good stiff paper, which she handed to her cousin.

“I have never felt the same since I got it,” she said in a subdued, uncomplaining voice; “and the worst was that I dare tell nobody – not even Mimi. To be pointed at and spoken of as those girls talk of his other dupes would simply kill me. I don’t know why I tell you now.”

Hester smiled upon her; then opened the envelope and drew forth the note. It was undated and contained neither address nor signature. The words were brief and to the point: –

I am sorry that you have taken to heart what I thought was merely pastime for both of us. Pray forgive me if I have inadvertently caused you pain. I am not in a position to marry at present. When I do enter matrimony, it must be partly with the object of bettering myself, socially and monetarily.

Hester’s lips set themselves in a firm, hard line, and something like passionate anger glittered in her eyes.

“And he dares to come here after writing that!” she said as she folded the note and placed it in her own writing-case. “The unspeakable viper! You will

lend the note to me, Elsie, dear? And now help me to change my things. I am going out to join the company as soon as the meeting is over.”

Elsie watched mechanically as she bent over a huge trunk and removed some of her belongings. She seemed inordinately hard to please, this cousin from the north. She who had worn a plain serge skirt, with the most ordinary of cotton blouses, ever since her arrival, could find nothing to her satisfaction. At last, from the bottom of the box, she drew out a dainty bodice of grey silk, somewhat the shade of her eyes, and adorned with beautiful Maltese lace at the collar and cuffs. A skirt of heavier material of the same nondescript colour was thrown carelessly after the blouse upon the bed, and Hester rose triumphantly to her feet. Noting the look of interested curiosity in the younger girl’s eyes, she said pleasantly –

“I wish you would pack those things back in the trunk for me. I see there is no room for hanging them up. I mean to improvise a corner cupboard to-morrow, or beg Mimi for a share of her wardrobe. There’s a white blouse for you somewhere here. Please look for it. There it is! – that silk one. I believe it will suit you beautifully.”

“Oh!” breathed Elsie, a soft colour mantling her cheeks. “It is much too good for me, Hester. It is so rich that it looks more like satin than silk. What lovely things you have!”

“Do you think so?” A little smile played around Hester’s mouth. She had guessed that the child only needed a little judicious management to arouse her out of her apathy. “Put it on now, and come out with me.”

“Oh, no! Mimi would be angry and say it is too good for the farm. I shall where it at next nachtmaal.”

“As you please, dear,” said Hester, bending to receive the grateful kiss. “We’ll go through my boxes to-morrow, you and I. There are several trifles for all of you, which I got in town when coming through. And you shall help me to distribute them.”

While her cousin was busily engaged with the delightful contents of the trunk Hester slipped the diamond ring from her finger, and enclosed it in an empty, old-fashioned pendant. This was made doubly secure and strung on a piece of stout black velvet, which in its turn was tied carefully around her bare neck. In a very short time she had arrayed herself to her own satisfaction, and stood clasping a superb ruby bangle – John’s only other gift – upon her left wrist.

“I need a touch of colour somewhere, Elsie,” she said, turning round before the kneeling girl. “What shall it be?”

Elsie looked up.

“Oh, Hester,” she said softly, “I never knew before how – how lovely you are! Do you always dress like that at home?”

“No, not always. Only in the afternoons when I lived at Cape Town.”

“Oh! You know all the grand people at Cape Town, don’t you?”

“Some of them,” said Hester laughing.

“You are different from us,” Elsie gave a little sigh.

“But what about my touch of colour, Elsie?”

“Wait a moment!” and Elsie, springing to her feet, hurried from the room.

Hester stood at the window and waited. From the sitting-room came the sound of many voices, singing in good harmony a long-drawn, monotonous psalm, which was strangely wistful and memory-inspiring. She had heard it last up in the north, when its echoes had pealed round among the Berg fastnesses. But her brain carried her farther back by thousands of years, and momentary visions of old-world, sandy plains, crowded tents, fleeting glimpses of Jordan and the river Euphrates flitted across her mind with a strange, persistent, haunting pain for the countless multitudes that were no more and had passed away as the grass that withereth.

The ensuing silence was broken by one voice, grave, resonant and full, pronouncing the blessing in solemn, reverent tones.

Elsie’s light step, somewhat hurried, re-entered the room.

“They are just closing,” she whispered. “See what I’ve brought you. It is the only one I could get, and I’m nearly sure Mimi saw me in the garden.”

She held a beautiful half-blown rose of deep ruby red in her hand.

“Thank you, dear!” and Hester fastened the flower in her waist-belt.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A RED ROSE

“HAVE you seen Hester de Villiers?” The words were whispered behind Cornelius Meyer’s ear an hour later. He turned and regarded his sister, a little lady several years his junior, who had but lately attained the dignity of matronhood.

“No, Bettie!” said he, bending his head with a quizzical smile. “Is she a wonder?”

“Come and see,” said she briefly. “And Niel, dear, they say she is rich – very rich! – and fancy free.”

She led the way into the house, through the dining-room, which literally steamed from the savoury viands in course of consumption as they threaded their way out, and beyond to the front verandah, where the young people seemed to have congregated.

“This is my brother, Mr. Meyer; Miss de Villiers,” he heard his sister say.

He had turned his head to answer a laughing remark from a friend; now he looked up, and the smile died on his lips. Surely the most striking girl in the sub-continent nay, in the universe – stood before him. Slightly above the medium height, with slender, supple figure, gowned most perfectly in warm grey, Hester leant against a verandah-post, idly fingering the tender leaves of a young evergreen vine. Her face vaguely puzzled him: not beautiful, not handsome, yet something more than merely pretty, with a perfect contour and splendid eyes. Said eyes rested upon him merely for a second; no more. And then, after a cool little bow and no outstretched hand, she became oblivious of his very existence.

“A lovely day, Miss de Villiers,” he said, by way of opening conversation.

She turned languidly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“It is a lovely day,” he remarked, slightly crest-fallen.

“Yes, it is beautiful, – Mr. – Mr.—” It was impolite and decidedly ill-mannered of her to forget his name so soon.

“Meyer,” prompted he, deprecating.

"Thanks! Mr. Meyer." Then, regarding him with a pretty interest, "Are you a near neighbour of my uncle's?"

This was better.

"Not very!" He felt decidedly easier. "But my brother-in-law's farm adjoins this one, so I come here rather frequently."

"Ah!" with a sigh of relief. "Perhaps it will not be so dull, after all."

"Are you making a long stay?"

"We have not decided yet." She looked at him with a brilliant smile. "It will depend partly upon my guardian's health, which has been indifferent of late, and partly upon the conditions of life here. I don't think I could bear to be very dull." Her voice had taken a plaintive note.

"Are you fond of riding?" he asked with great eagerness.

"Yes!" she said slowly. "But not the kind of horses I have seen here. What shabby animals you farmers indulge in!"

She was a rude young woman this, but almost he wished, for the first time in his life, that his calling in life was not that of a tiller of the soil.

The conversation was flagging, when Susie appeared upon the scene.

"Have you had any dinner, Hester?" she asked brusquely.

"No!" said Hester, "but wild horses won't drag me into that hot dining-room. Mr. Meyer will bring me a cup of tea, and some sandwiches out here."

He hurried off with alacrity, and Susie frowned. The others were filing off slowly to the dining-room, where the table had been set afresh for the second contingent.

"Hester!" whispered the little maiden rapidly, "I – I don't know if you will be angry with me, but Cornelius—"

"Is the lady-killer-in-chief, isn't he?"

"Yes!" hesitated Susie.

"Well, don't trouble about me, dear," Susie blushed painfully.

"I hear he has been very anxious to meet you, and his sister was overheard telling him that you are rich."

"Go and have your dinner, Susie," said Hester lightly, touching the dark hair with a lingering hand. "By the way, what a very handsome man he is! I am not sure that I have seen anyone quite as good-looking."

Susie paled visibly, and her lips trembled.

"Handsome is, that handsome does," she quoted shortly, as she turned away.

"What a little Spartan it is!" muttered Hester. Her cavalier presently returned, with a tray in his hands.

"There are no sandwiches," he said apologetically, "so I brought some bread and butter cakes."

"Thanks! But where is yours?"

"Oh, I shall have something presently." He stood in her place at the trellis while she sat in one chair and ate her luncheon off another.

"I wish you would join me," she said with a flash of fun in her eyes, as she took up a tart and bit into it. But to watch her eating was pleasure enough for him. She had a strange attraction for him, this girl who was at will cool, or impertinent, or haughty, and yet throughout so wonderfully winning. The while she ate she entertained him to bright glimpses of piquancy, which added a distinctive flavour to her company; and for once in his lifetime he found himself unable to make the most of his opportunity.

"You may take the things away now," she said graciously, putting down the empty cup and saucer.

He stooped obediently and lifted the tray. It was a novel experience to be ordered in such manner, and decidedly invigorating. He placed the load upon the nearest table in the dining-room and hurried back to the verandah.

But she was gone, and only a red, half-crushed rose lay upon the floor near where she had sat. He picked it up and turned it round in his hand.

"Only an hour ago," he muttered. "And I seem to have never lived before I knew her. I wonder—!"

He placed the flower carefully in an inner pocket, and then mingled with the throng outside. Saddled horses were standing about under the trees, spiders were being driven rapidly out of the farm-yard, and all was a bustle of departure. Soon he was himself cantering across the veldt, a sweet, mocking voice keeping time in his brain with the thud of his horse's hoofs, a pair of sparkling grey eyes looking into his own.

CHAPTER XXIX

A CHICKEN COME HOME TO ROOST

MR. MEYER became a frequent visitor at the deacon's homestead, and it soon became apparent to all concerned that his visits were paid in chief to one of the honoured guests at the farmhouse. Evident also that her prettiest toilets were donned on the days when he was expected to appear. Her guardian watched at first with a slight anxiety, but a few words of calm assurance allayed any passing fear he might have entertained.

To Cornelius himself her moods were distractingly uncertain. Greeting him with, perhaps, a delightful flattery of manner that soothed him like a caress, she might be as distant and cold as an iceberg on another occasion, or as cutting as an east wind in winter. And, when it suited her own purposes, none living ever possessed as cutting a tongue as Hester.

Distracted, torn with conflicting doubts, his life became a problem even to himself. Now in the seventh heaven of delight, he would almost forget himself into confessing to her the great overwhelming love which had come upon him; but any attempt at sentimentality inevitably brought into lurid play her bitter powers of sarcasm.

"I am sorry for her," said Susie one day, when she had ridden over to visit her cousins.

"You had better be sorry for him," said Mimi grimly. "If ever I saw mischief and wickedness in an eye, they shine through hers when she looks at him. I don't believe she has a heart, or feeling of any kind, except for her uncle. As for Cornelius, I believe he would die for her.

"Well, I only hope the case is not reversed," said Susie, her cheek flushing, at the secret memory of a stolen kiss and a few words of soft endearment, which, sweet as nectar then, rankled now like a festered wound.

"Are you staying all night, Susie?" asked a clear, rich voice at the open window.

"Yes, replied Susie, looking towards the window with loyally admiring eyes. "Why?"

"Because Mr. Meyer wants to get up a riding party to-morrow, and I should like you to join us. You will come, won't you, dear?"

A decided frown across Mr. Meyer's countenance showed that his ideas were not represented aright. But he was out upon the stoep, and from where she sat Susie could not see his face.

"Oh yes, I'll come!" said she innocently. "and you, Mimi?"

"Well, I might." Mimi's one weakness was a love for horseback exercise, and her tone was decidedly gracious.

"Very well, Mr. Meyer," said Hester sweetly. "You may go home now, and try that chestnut under a side saddle.

He turned away with an impatient exclamation and an uncomfortable assurance that he had received but cavalier treatment. All the way of his long gallop home, when he tried the powers of his horse as he had never done before, he swore he would never return to her presence again. And this he emphasized with a wealth and flow of flowery invective that would have shocked his sister and amused the arch-siren who had upset his peace of mind.

Nevertheless, he "broke in" the prancing, spirited chestnut to the side-saddle and the feel of the habit-skirt, and rode up to the farmhouse next afternoon leading the horse decked out in handsome new side-saddle and silver-mounted bridle. He meant to decide his fate that day, and the horse with his trappings was to be his first love-gift.

For Cornelius Meyer never for one second doubted the ultimate success of his wooing. She was more difficult than the others, more assured, more presumptuous. But, then, she knew her own worth. In the end he had always known she would capitulate. And then! Ah! his pulses beat rapidly, and the blood coursed madly through his veins as he thought of seeing that proud head humbled and that imperious voice softened. For him!

He has lost sight of her reputed wealth. He wanted Hester. Only Hester, the woman.

Dismounting, he threw the reins of both horses to the stable-boy and strode to the house, hitting his well-polished leggings with the small sjambok he carried. When he was seated in the dining-room, Elsie brought him a cup of coffee, and handed a dish of sweet biscuits.

"No, thanks, Elsie! Nothing to eat," he said pleasantly. It was only characteristic of the two of them that he should be easy and self-possessed in her presence, while she was shame-faced and nervous. She had recovered from her long illness and taken up her ordinary household duties, her sweet face a little thinner, and paler, and larger-eyed; and her merry laugh rarely heard. But to him she was as she had ever been – a little girl who showed her feelings too plainly, and was rather ordinary in her preference for himself.

"Are you not coming too, Elsie?" he asked kindly.

"No, Cornelius; I am not coming," she returned, lifting her pure eyes to his. "But the others are getting ready."

A few minutes later Mimi and Susie entered the room in habit skirts and neat white blouses.

"Where is Miss de Villiers?" he asked, all impatience.

"Oh, she's not coming," said Mimi shortly.

"Not coming?" It was surely not his own voice he heard.

"No. She says she has changed her mind. It's no use asking me why, Cornelius, for I don't know."

His face had become an ashen grey. They all three pitied him.

"Perhaps she is afraid of the chestnut?" he questioned, moistening his white lips.

"Afraid? Not she!" said Mimi, who was singularly void of tact. "Hester would ride anything, from a camel to a kangaroo. You should have seen her on that chestnut pony of Tom's. He threw Tom and bolted with the saddle. She had him caught and saddled for herself of the spot. Afraid!" She repeated the word with contempt. "But come along, Cornelius: it's no use waiting any longer. We have decided to drop Susie at her home on the way back."

He followed her like one in a dream.

"Can one your boys take the chestnut over to Bettie's place, Mimi?" he asked with set teeth.

"Oh, certainly," said Mimi kindly. "He can go at once."

It was a wretched ride for him. The chatter of the girls wearied him almost beyond endurance as, sick at heart, he tried to respond to their good-natured attempts for his amusement.

The sun was sinking beyond the western slopes, when he and Mimi neared home again.

A full, rich voice that he knew only too well was singing with wonderful pathos a strand from an old Scottish ballad.

Wi lichtsome he'rt I pu'd a rose,
Fu' sweet upon its thorny tree.
But my fause lover stole the rose,
And ah! he left the thorn wi' me.

The song ended abruptly as they entered the yard, and Hester, nothing abashed, came forward in very pleasantest mood.

“Enjoyed yourselves?” she asked airily. “I was almost sorry afterwards that I didn’t go.”

Cornelius lifted his hat gravely. The lad’s heart was sore within him, and for the first time her gay mood failed to win his answering smile.

“You will excuse my coming in, Mimi?” he said quietly. “I wish to speak to your cousin, and it’s already late.”

Hester lifted her eyebrows as Mimi turned to the house, and she was left standing beside Meyer and his horse.

His handsome, fair face was drawn and very pale. She looked at him with a pretty, puzzled expression of countenance, her bright head bare in the afternoon sunshine.

“Did I understand aright, Mr. Meyer?” she asked. “Do you wish to speak to me?”

He turned with a deep sigh, his hand leaning heavily on his horse’s neck, and looked at her.

“Don’t you think you have been unnecessarily cruel, Hester?” he asked sadly.

“Not unnecessarily. Oh no!” The sparkle had left her eyes, and she became suddenly as quiet and subdued as he.

“Well, will you end my misery?”

“Your misery?”

“Yes. Will you promise to be my wife?”

“Your wife?” she re-echoed, looking him thoughtfully in the face. “Now I wonder if you mean that?”

“Mean it!” he cried in pain. “Mean it?”

“Well, you do seem to be in earnest this time, so I shall answer you, in all seriousness — to-morrow.”

“Why to-morrow?” asked he eagerly. “Tell me now, Hester.”

Something in her face struck a chill to his heart and stopped the current of his speech.

“I will send you my answer some time to-morrow,” she said firmly and imperiously. “Don’t come till you receive it, please.”

A fevered ride home was succeeded to him by a long, sleepless night, during which, against his will, his brain worked out continuously the new, alarming, and ever-recurrent problem as to whether the answer from a mere girl would be favourable or unpropitious: whether her letter would be bright and sparkling like her own mood; or shy and sweet; or cold and disdainful. He

had never received even a note from her hand, and now it seemed that his very life depended upon the receipt of one.

Morning came after an enervating vigil, and the weary hours dragged slowly by. His solitary breakfast was untouched. Another long stretch of suspense obtained till the dinner hour arrived, and he forbade the servants to lay the cloth. Still he dared not move from the house for fear of missing her messenger, and thus wasting precious moments.

He had given up hope, and had just told himself bitterly that he had been befooled once more to the top of his bent, when one of his own natives entered with a dainty, scented epistle in his hand. He snatched it from the boy and closed the door. Then a curious, sickening trembling seized him. A long, sleepless night of tortured thought, followed by a day's fasting, had played havoc with his nerves; and it was with an unsteady hand that he tore open the envelope and removed the enclosure. A mist swam before his eyes, and blood rushed back upon his heart as he opened it.

For the handwriting was his own, and he remembered inscribing it in that very room. It was his note to Elsie, sent four short months before.

"I am sorry you have taken so much to heart what I thought was merely pastime for both of us. Pray forgive me if I have inadvertently caused you pain—"

A malediction, bitter and deep, broke from his lips, as he strode from the house and ordered his horse.

CHAPTER XXX

“JUST LIKE OTHER PEOPLE”

HE found her at some distance from the house, with an open book in her hand, and a setter as her companion. She wore a long, white dress that showed to the best advantage her graceful lines.

And she was very evidently nerved for the combat. No conventional greeting passed between them, and she eyed him calmly as he jumped off his horse and turned to her.

“What do you mean?” he asked with passionate anger. “What do you mean by repaying my love with such ghastly cruelty?”

“What is so easy to give can’t be too hard to take,” she remarked imperturbably.

“You – you have broken my heart,” he whispered thickly.

“Breaking hearts is a pastime,” she said with cheerful smile, “for both of us. We are both sinners in that respect, but I, as a woman, am the lesser one. Because, you see,” she added in a tone of easy confidence, “I, owing to the exigencies of affairs, can actually initiate nothing in that way. I can’t even give or extract promises unless I possess your gracious sanction beforehand. But you – oh! you know yourself it is quite different. And there are Louisa Somebody, and Anna Somebody-else, and several others who have some pretty little tales of the initiative you have taken. My cousin Susie is too true a little Spartan to lay her wounds open to view, but you know – and I know – that you have dealt unfairly by her.”

The pitiless voice had become stern and icy, and the relentless grey eyes regarded his quivering, working features with cold disapproval and some contempt.

“Of Elsie I hardly care to speak, but it is right for you to know that you nearly killed that child, who herself would rather die than hurt a living creature.”

There was a long silence. The anger had died out of his face, and only a deep wretchedness and almost ludicrous self-pity remained in his heart.

At length –

“Do you go about the world righting the wrongs of silly, romantic girls?” he asked, sarcastically.

“No!” Her tone was amused, and her eyes smiled sweetly upon him once more. “I only try to teach foolish, conceited boys lessons in chivalry and honour— and respect for those others who, by virtue of their position in the universe, must be the weaker vessels.”

“Have you no love for me?” His voice quivered with entreaty. “Can you give me no hope?”

“No, none!” She was regarding him curiously.

“I don’t believe you have a heart. You are utterly without sympathy of any kind.” He spoke with bitter emphasis.

“I think so myself, sometimes,” she agreed readily and lightly. “But don’t let us waste the precious moments discussing me and my failings. Surely someone is coming this way, along the road from town. The sun shines straight in my eyes. Can you see who it is?”

“No!” said he shortly, without turning his head in the direction indicated.

“He is coming nearer,” she volunteered, holding the open book before her eyes with both hands.

The rider was almost abreast of them when she gave a great cry, and her book crashed to the ground.

“John!” she cried, in a voice of glad rapture, “John!”

The rider reined in and sprang to the ground.

“Hester!” he exclaimed. “My darling!” Without regard to time or place, he drew her to him and tenderly kissed the up-turned face.

Cornelius Meyer cast one look from the tall, dark-moustached Englishman to Hester’s blushing, happy face – lovely and sweet with emotion as he could never have imagined it – and then, springing on his horse, he galloped away in the line of the setting sun.

Late that night he removed from its hiding-place a dark faded rose, and scowled at its dead beauty, with drawn haggard face. Bitter anger filled his mind against the woman who had befooled, and then jeered at him, keen regret and passionate chagrin that the first, only great love of his life-time should have been sown upon barren ground.

“She wasn’t worth it,” he faltered. But something wet rolled down his cheek and splashed upon the dead flower.

"I couldn't understand your long silence, so came in person to investigate," said John West, as he took his sweetheart's face in his hands and gazed earnestly into the deep eyes.

"I was doing something that I feared you might disapprove," she said softly, "And I felt that I could not write to you quite freely under the circumstances, so I thought it best not to write at all. I will tell you all about it some day. But not now. You trust me, John?"

"Trust you? Ay, to the death, Hester," he said quietly.

"You will take the good people here by surprise, John," she remarked as they turned downhill, the horse following at reins' length towards the farmhouse. "They know nothing about you. Uncle and I have kept that little secret just to ourselves. And they have been so good – so very, very good – to both of us. I wish you to like these Dutch relations of mine, dear."

"It is but for you to order, Queen Hester," he said, smiling into her face and taking her hand in his. "Why, Hester, where is your ring?"

"Here it is!" she indicated the edge of a narrow band of black velvet around her neck. "But I shall wear it to-day, dear love."

"Wear it?" echoed he with authority, smiling at the expression of endearment from her lips. "Of course you will wear it."

The unexpected arrival caused some surprise and much comment at Oom Erich's home. Mimi took the introduction in pleasant vein, if somewhat abrupt manner.

"You needn't tell me who else you are, Mr. West," she said with a grim smile. "I can see it in Hester's face. Why, child," with an indignant glare at the softly-coloured cheeks, "I didn't think you had it in you. I took you to be as hard as nails."

"And now you think I am as soft as putty?" laughing shyly.

"No! Not as soft as putty," conceded Mimi, "but just like other people."

The dark, tender eyes of the man she loved met her own. "Are you just like other people?" he asked, laughing low.

He had a long talk with her guardian that evening, and though he regarded his promised wife at its conclusion with, if possible, an excess of tender love, his manner was thoughtful, even to gravity.

"Has anything of a disagreeable nature occurred between you and uncle?" she asked him when, next morning, she met him on the verandah and missed the cheeriness of his smile.

"No, darling. Good heavens, no! But we are both preparing ourselves for a little business interview with you – my dear!"

“Preparing yourselves? Surely—”

“Listen, Hester.” He took her two hands in his and looked gravely and earnestly into her face. “My house just beyond Maritzburg has been vacant for the past month, and I have been busy making it as suitable for its sweet mistress as an unfortunate bachelor can contrive. Mr. de Villiers’ room is ready furnished with all his own belongings to make him feel happy and at home. Your sideboard stands in the dining-room with, as nearly as I can remember, your ornaments placed just as they were up at the Berg. Your piano stands silent, waiting for you. There is no reason for delay in blessing my home with your sweet presence, and he – your uncle – joins me in imploring you to agree with our wishes and make us both happy. He asked me to approach you, and if I fail in persuasion he will add his appeal personally. But, Hester,” his voice was graver and sadder, “I would advise you not to force this ordeal upon him. He is not fit for any great strain or excitement—”

“He has had to bear so much within the past few months,” she whispered apologetically.

“So much,” he agreed quietly; “and he would feel rested and happier if he could see you settled in your home, with me to watch and guard you – my dear!” Again the yearning caress in his voice, and still holding her hand in his he gazed with grave tenderness at her doubtful face. The morning breeze whispered behind them among the huge boughs of the waving gum-trees.

“I had not thought to be married so soon,” she hesitated, “but if uncle would like to settle in a home of our own—”

“It is the only earthly desire he has,” said he.

“Settle it as you will then,” she said quietly and decisively; “you and Oomie.”

He bent and kissed her hands.

“Next week,” he said.

CHAPTER XXXI

“TAKE HER TO THY PROTECTING ARMS”

IT was only a few days later that when the mid-day train from Greytown steamed into the Maritzburg station, John West, accompanied by a small, slight girl dressed in the extreme of fashion, and looking as dainty and fresh as a newly-painted figure in Dresden china, moved forward upon the platform and rapidly along the line of carriages. He himself was clad in a suit of white flannels, no less spotless and correct than the costume of the little lady at his side.

“Here she is!” he exclaimed with cheery fervour, as a porter opened a carriage-door. “Dollie has come with me, Hester, to bid you welcome. Just come out as you are, dear. I’ll attend to your parcels. Hester – Dollie Emerson, my cousin.”

“And your cousin from to-morrow,” added the little maiden with a cool smile. Hester, standing on the platform in her black travelling costume, with hair somewhat disordered from the long, early drive to the station, felt suddenly slovenly and dirty before the daintily-robed figure with the china blue eyes and elaborately coifed head.

“Gently, Mr. de Villiers! Leave those things severely alone, please. Dollie and I will see to everything. That’s what we’re here for, isn’t it, Doll?”

Miss Emerson’s welcome to the man, was, if somewhat patronizing, also more cordial than had been her greeting to his niece.

“You will find our pony-carriage outside,” said she in her pretty, self-possessed way to the porter who was laden with rugs and baskets. “You are staying with us to-night,” she added with calm importance to Hester.

“No, please!” said the latter gently. “My uncle is feeling very wearied from the journey, and he is not over-well. We have already engaged rooms at the ‘Imperial’ and I think the hotel ’bus must be here to meet us.”

“We couldn’t think of it,” iterated the small person, in a determined way. “Mother has prepared for you, and Mr. de Villiers could rest just as well at our house as in a hotel. Put the things on the carriage, porter.” She gave an emphatic nod to that factotum.

Hester turned to her lover. “Help me!” her eyes implored.

"Steady on, Doll," said he decidedly. "We'll excuse Hester and Mr. de Villiers till this evening. You'll come then and spend an hour at Aunt Mary's, won't you, dear?" His voice softened with a caress in itself as he addressed her. "Dollie feels that she has been done out of a good thing by the quietness of to-morrow's ceremony. I think she had visions of being a bride's-maid or something, and—"

"And, in short," interrupted Dolly, "to partly make up for it, we meant to have a mock rehearsal to-night. But, of course, if you won't come—"

They were moving down the station towards the entrance. "We shall come and spend an hour this evening, as Mr. West has promised," said Hester, somewhat coldly. A strange dislike for the dainty busybody had seized possession of her, for which she took herself severely to task when settled quietly at the hotel.

"'Mr. West,' indeed!" repeated Dollie with indignation, as her cousin drove her home preparatory to returning to the hotel. "Bad taste, I call it. But I suppose John," sweetly and innocently, "that's Dutch manners?"

"Drop that, Doll!" commanded he, looking nevertheless, with amused tolerance at the pretty, flushed faced beside him. "Hester has a way of her own that refuses patronage, I grant you. But she is a lady to her finger-tips, and quite the most superior girl I have ever met."

"Oh, of course!" with a small chin tilted in the air.

When during the same evening, John West ushered Hester into his aunt's drawing-room, he found that apartment crowded with Dollie's particular friends, gathered together at her instigation to meet and inspect the Dutch bride-elect. At Hendrik's own request he had been left at the hotel to quietly retire for the night, instead of joining the party; and Hester heartily wished she might have pleaded for a reprieve on her own behalf. She was silent beyond her wont in the midst of the fast set affected by Miss Emerson, for she would fain have spent the last evening of her maidenhood in other guise.

A young man, with hair parted down the middle of a sleek head, was concluding a comic song as Hester took her seat in an out-of-the-way corner, with her lover beside her.

"Don't bother her with introductions," he had said to his relatives. "There's plenty of time for that, and she can meet them all when we come back from Durban."

Mrs. Emerson, a lady of quiet aspect, who was led whithersoever they would by her children, quietly acquiesced, and the guest of the evening was left alone in the midst of the throng.

“Now for the rehearsal,” commanded Dollie, and though her voice was not a loud-pitched one, it was heard above the laughter and noise.

The furniture was seized by several willing hands, and a clear line made from the door to the extremity of the long room, where, behind a small table, a young man ensconced himself, garbed in a black mackintosh, over which was thrown a huge, white kitchen over-all. There was a roar of laughter as he screwed an eyeglass before one of his optics, and looked round the room with a vapid expression of comic solemnity.

“Come, John!”

Dollie stood at his elbow.

“Come along! We’re waiting for you.”

“No you’re not!” said he decisively. “I am one of the audience upon this occasion.”

“Nonsense, John! Don’t spoil the sport, and act like a wet blanket. Come along!” The stamp of a tiny foot prompted the order. “You can surely do without him for a few minutes, can you not – Miss de Villiers?”

“I think so,” said Hester calmly. John made a slight grimace.

“She’s the only one in all my life who has ever ordered me about,” he protested, following her from the room.

A little later they returned at the head of a procession of giggling girls with attendant cavaliers. John led Dollie with a wedding-veil thrown over the elaborate coils of her fair hair, and caught under a crown of orange blossoms (culled from the garden) right up to the self-constituted parson, who forthwith began a bland, eloquent, really witty and pithy oration as an address to his audience. Roars of laughter prompted his periods, but the bride of to-morrow, sitting looking on with quiet eyes in which was no appreciation of the jest, paid little heed to the discourse. A strident, queerly-pitched voice immediately behind her seat made such apt and clever criticisms upon the moving scene that she caught herself listening for the remarks and neglecting the sense of the improvised ritual. She learned afterwards that the individual in the window-seat was a young cousin of the family whose deplorable deafness failed to obliterate a strong sense of humour, but who, on account of his infirmity, had a painful propensity for proclaiming aloud the unvarnished truth about his neighbours, in the complacent belief that he was talking in a confidential whisper. In the ordinary way of conversation he bawled.

John West (by exclaiming “Right, oh!”) had just promised to provide Dorothea Emerson with sack-cloth for raiment, and mealie meal at the cheapest market rates for the rest of their joint lives, when the voice behind exclaimed:

“My country! Doesn’t Doll look demure? See that glance she gave John? Like a dying duck, wasn’t it? Wouldn’t she just be glorified if she could take the Boer girl’s place to-morrow! Been angling after John, has Doll, ever since her petticoats came below her knees.”

“What are you jogging my elbow like that for? Hang it man, drop it, can’t you? You hit my bally funny-bone. What’s that? What are they saying now? Lor! Look at that sniggerin’ Nicolson girl. Makes you feel kind o’sick, doesn’t she? Doll’s not bad-looking if she wasn’t such a little cat. As spiteful as they make ’em, is Doll.”

Hester almost looked around in warning at the speakers, but the loquacious voice had commenced one more.

“Where’s the wild Dutch girl? I saw some country Johnnies at the country ball, and they were enough to make you sick with laughin’. One of ’em a Dutch boy – had a long black tie down his dress shirt-front, with a big brass tie-clip in the middle. Some of their dress suits were sights to behold: they fitted where they touched and then hung loose.” A subdued roar from the speaker. “Felt inclined to advise them to turn ’em inside out, and see if they’d sit better. What? Eh? Where? Oh, Lor’, she might have heard me! Doesn’t matter anyhow. It’s all as true as gospel, every word of it.”

The tone sank half a pitch.

“My aunt! She’s not much to look at, after all. Seams as haughty and stand-offish as they make ’em. They said she was a beauty. Dobbin went up to their place to marry her great-grandfather or something: and he yapped about nothing else but the girl’s looks after he came back. But every one to his taste, and Dobbin always was a silly ass.”

Strangely weary and somewhat sick at heart was Hester as she left the Emerson stronghold.

“You have not enjoyed yourself, darling,” he told her, as, folding the soft shawl about her throat, he placed her hand on his arm.

“I fear I am tired and dull, John,” she said gently, “and a strange depression is upon me.”

The real ceremony of the morning was very quiet and impressive. Learning of her strong distaste for a display before the company of last evening, West arranged with the clergyman to be at the church building an hour before the previously-appointed time. No guests had been invited, and subsequent events took away the feeling of irritation which at first attacked the self-constituted congregation when they learned they had been foiled of the show.

Hendrik de Villiers gave up his child to her husband, and when they parted at the church door (for the bridegroom strongly urged against his accompanying them to the station) his trembling lips formed blessings to which the voice could give no speech.

“As – as you deal with her,” he muttered to the man.

“She will be the one care of my lifetime, Uncle Henry,” and John West held almost tenderly the thin hand of the elder man. The bride smiled through her tears. They had reached the gate of the churchyard, when she turned round again. He still stood upon the steps. Strangely, the thought of her young mother struck across her brain as she looked at his lonely figure outlined against the grey stone of the building. She ran back to him.

“One word, vader lief,” she whispered in their own tongue. “One word of good-bye or blessing.”

He struggled with his infliction, the great tears stealing down his ashen cheeks. He shook his head in despair. She gently drew his face to hers and kissed him.

“Some day I shall tell her how you cared for me.” And she left him.

Three days later John West said to his wife, after a perusal of his letters –

“We must go back home, Hester. Can you be ready to catch the next train?”

She looked at him and smiled.

“And the Amanzimtoti trip?”

“It must be abandoned,” he said quietly. “You shall come back again whenever you wish, dear love.”

It was not till they were in the railway cottage, which he had taken the precaution of reserving, that he told her.

“Hester,” he said, as the train steamed away northwards past Congella, “Uncle Henry loved you so greatly – so terribly – that he would not permit one cloud upon the happiness of your wedding. I wanted to tell you. I implored him to allow me to prepare you, but he—”

“Tell me. Quick!” she gasped with white lips.

“Little girl,” he whispered hoarsely. “His mother’s malady— He was to have been operated upon yesterday: but while under the chloroform, before the knife touched him, he—”

She cowered away from him.

CHAPTER XXXII

HENRIETTA AND MIRIAM

THE BETTER part of the year had gone by since Hester's wedding-day, and the life in the bright new home provided by her husband's love had settled down to a quiet routine. The fearful blow which had well-nigh struck her to the earth at the beginning of the wedded existence had excused her attention to social duties; but now among her husband's relations she began to be regarded as a misanthrope, who considered herself above her surroundings. Utterly unconscious of the adverse opinion of those she should have been most anxious to conciliate, she would probably have been equally indifferent to its existence. Surrounded by Indian servants with the honourable exception of Dolph alone, she suffered many a long day from utter weariness of spirit. The staff of Asiatics was a capable and most efficient one, and no duties seemed left for the young wife to perform. Time hung heavily upon her hands. The house itself was situate about two miles outside the city, and she rarely cared to take the trouble of riding in, and never without a special object in view. Her husband cycled daily to his office in the early morning, and returned late in the afternoon, having lunched in town. Pale and listless in her isolated home, with an aching void and an abiding sense of the fearful finality of loss which had come upon her in the removal of her life's dearest and earliest protector and friend, little wonder that the days dragged heavily by her.

Spasmodically she would take an interest in the garden, which was merely a huge lawn dotted with wondrous variety of blossoming roses, with here and there a clump of her favourite carnations. Occasionally she would assist the young gardener, who was not old enough or experienced enough to cavil at the instructions given, or to pretend to more knowledge of the subject than his mistress. But the happier moods were transitory and short-lived.

Several months of quiet monotony had passed by: a weary monotony of which her husband was ignorant and innocent alike. To him she was an ideal wife, bright and smiling in his presence; lovely and ever more lovely in his sight.

But oh! the heavy languor of the hours between! The insipidity of the Indian cook's best effort for her appetite at the solitary mid-day meal! The utter weariness, the sickening loneliness of it all!

She was training one morning the first tender shoot of a banksia rose up the verandah post, and she was rather more tired of her solitary day than usual, for her husband had left at an early hour for an up-country farm in the interests of a client, and would be away for a few days, when the sound of wheels on the private road caused her to turn around. A hired vehicle had stopped at the garden gate, and a lady, closely veiled, had descended. The driver turned round and whipped his horses back along the road whence they had come. Hester threw her thick gloves and the scissors on a verandah seat, and advanced down the garden.

"Hester!" The voice was passing sweet, and loving beyond words. "Hester!" Don't you know me?"

"Phyllis! Oh, my blessed, blessed Phyllis?" She could say no more, but rocked the thin figure in her strong young arms, and sobbed in big tearless gasps.

"Hester! Why, Hester, child!"

The woman was shocked and distressed at the sight of the young face. "What on earth? – what *has* John West done to you?"

"What has he done to me, indeed!" echoed the young wife, laughing in indignation, the while she wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Well, why are your nerves in such a fearful state?" The woman regarded her with anxious eyes. "You used to have such a healthy temperament. And you never told me you had been ill," she added with keen reproach.

"I haven't been ill," retorted Hester. "But just see how the coolies are staring at us. Come inside, my beloved. You are the most precious birthday gift I have ever had."

They had reached the verandah. Phyllis stopped short.

"Why, you don't mean to say it's the—"

"Yes, dear it's the 16th, and I am twenty-one to-day. But oh, Phyl, don't look like that. I didn't want a birthday present, or anything under Heaven: but you."

"And Mr. West, of course."

"Yes, dear, of course; but that's the worst of it, John has gone away for a few days, and he felt it keenly."

"And who takes care of you at nights?"

"Dolph, of course. He sleeps in the passage at my door, and the Indian women sleep in the house when John is away."

She had led Mrs. Gray into her bedroom, and was gently removing her outdoor trappings.

"Oh, how thin you are! And how white your dear face is! What has Paul Gray been doing to you?"

"There never was such a good husband as Paul Gray," said his wife indignantly.

"Except John West," retorted Hester. They laughed at one another and issued to the living room.

"What a pretty little nest, dearie!" exclaimed the woman. "How happy you should be!"

"And am. But you are going to see nothing more till we have a cup of tea together. I shall enjoy it so, with you sitting there. Oh, Phyl, my Indian cook makes such delicious little cakes, and I never can enjoy them alone. I often wish I could transport them right into the Mission Station for the dear children. How are they all? And Teddy?"

The mother smiled at the distinction.

"Teddy rides about alone on Jim," she said. "He is so happy and important when Paul sends him to any distance."

With desultory chat they beguiled the time for an hour or two. Both women had brightened wonderfully in the congenial companionship, and more than once hearty peals of laughter had surprised the outdoor servants.

"Oh, Heaven forgive me," ejaculate the visitor, after one such merry paroxysm. "I had forgotten my errand."

"Then you didn't come to visit me, after all? I have been aching to know how long you would stay, and terrified to mention the subject. For pity's sake, Phyllis, have mercy on me, and stay till John returns."

Mrs. Gray looked at her thoughtfully.

"I don't know but I might," she said slowly. "If I could get into town every day, I believe I could stay with you by night." A passing thought caused her face to pale and her frame to shudder. "Have you a trap of any description?"

"No, we haven't, because, you see, I always ride into town. But oh, my dear, I would hire a trap to take you backwards and forwards fifty times over, if you would only stay with me."

"I should love to stay, darling, and it is good of you to take such trouble for me. I couldn't walk the distance, and I am afraid I couldn't afford—"

A soft palm on her mouth closed the speech.

“Oh, Phyllis, I didn’t know what was wrong with me. Since the big pain of that fearful anguish left me, I have yet felt that I needed something. Now I know it was you – I wanted you.”

“Hester, I am going to speak to Mr. West. He must get you a companion.”

“A what?” She looked at Phyllis in horror. “You will do nothing of the kind. John has a horrible little cousin who has offered two or three times to come and live with us, and he has tried hard to persuade me to it. If you add your vote against me, it will come to blows among us. But what has brought you to town? You’ve not told me yet.”

“Well, you are partly to blame. I have never forgotten something you threw in our faces – as missionaries – about a year ago. You remember how you blamed us bitterly for our lack of sympathy with the fallen girls of our congregation? For expelling them from our churches, and then letting them go to the vile places?”

Hester looked troubled.

“I am sorry,” she said.

“No, you were right, Hester. I have known it in my innermost heart ever since. We loosen our authority and let them go after the first false step, and when they migrate townwards we wash our hands of them and let them rush headlong to hell.”

They sat silent awhile.

“Henrietta and Miriam have left home. Miriam’s baby mercifully died, but they have Henrietta’s with them; and it is a little girl! I am going to find them – even among the ‘vile places,’ and I’ll bring them back home. Their parents are respectable location natives, as you know, and their mother is wild with grief. She came and reproached us cruelly, blaming us for the education we had given them, and cursing our children after us. Her husband beat her unmercifully for speaking to me in such a manner, and there was a scene. But I sympathized with her all the time, and I swore I would bring her children back.”

“But, Phyllis, you can’t go there – to those places. You won’t know where to look.”

“I have Rebecca with me. She is in town at the hotel. The same thing happened to her, and Paul expelled her two years ago. She went away and only returned last month. I begged her to assist me, and if she helps to reclaim these lost sinners she will take her place in the congregation without even sitting upon the penitent stool. She was so eager, Hester. And she is willing to take me where I will—”

“But you will rest to-day, Phyl? Surely you will rest to-day.”

She shook her head.

"I must not," she said softly. "The trap from the hotel will be here at two."

An hour later the two women were being bowled along the road into town.

"You understand, of course, Hester, that you don't come one step with me beyond the beaten track? That is the one condition I make about staying with you till the day your husband returns."

And so it had to be. Expostulation and entreaty were alike useless, and Hester, albeit with a pain at her heart, parted with her friend at a given point every morning. She waited then at a quiet hotel till, wearied, sick and generally sore disgusted, Phyllis, with the repentant Rebecca (who, truth to tell, gave but little indication of the character) returned back after a fruitless search. A telegram to her husband announcing the presence of her friend brought a return one from him that he would take advantage of the circumstances and complete a more extensive business than he had hoped for.

More than a week had passed, and Rebecca had definitely assured her mistress that the girls were not in town. Phyllis was worn and tired, and the daily fruitless searches had told fearfully upon her frame.

It was then that, suddenly dispirited one day, she returned to the hotel long before the usual hour.

"Let's go back, Hester," she said, her thin face flushed, her hair dishevelled and untidy. "I am *sick* tired of it all, and Rebecca says they are not here. I have been in such fearful places; I have met such frightful women – white as well as coloured. I have been jeered at, insulted, spat upon by such hellish women. I can bear no more. I think my heart is broken."

She lay down across the bed and wept as though indeed her very heart would burst.

"The horror of it!" she gasped. "The vile filth of it all. I can never feel pure again. I can never look a fellow-woman in the face and feel that I am as she is. The contact with those awful, unsexed demons. Oh, my God! my God! That such things should be."

Hester left the room, and returned shortly with a glass of sparkling liquid.

"Drink this, Phyllis," she said sternly, "and don't talk such unspeakable rubbish about yourself. Such – such *piffle*. I wonder at you! How dare you utter such contemptible nonsense? What do you mean by making me feel such a brute?"

The elder woman drank the wine held to her lips.

"You a brute?" She looked up with pale eyes swimming in tears.

“Yes, a brute – a pig – a cat! Anything you like, for allowing you to overdo yourself, after first putting the bee in your bonnet. And look here, Phyllis,” she added angrily, “every step of the road you take in this ridiculous search I shall now take with you. You hear? I don’t care if you threaten never to put foot within my door again. I shall accompany you all the same. But no more to-day, thank you! As soon as you rested you shall have more champagne and then we’ll go home.”

A little later she returned to the room.

“We can’t have the trap for a couple of hours yet,” she said. “You see they keep it for us at five, and it isn’t three yet. Shall we take a riksha, Phyl? I don’t feel like hanging about here, do you?”

Phyllis readily agreed. The wine had acted as the necessary stimulant, and when they started, her thick veil covered a composed, if very sorrowful face.

Outside the town they dismissed the riksha and decided to walk the rest of the way, Hester in her old bright spirits beguiling her friend to momentary forgetfulness.

“I am so much better, Phyllis,” she said pleasantly. “Before you came I was fearfully moped, and it has been cruel to John. He is so good, Phyllis! And I have done him so little credit among his people. I think they must hate me for my airs and graces. I simply couldn’t bear them, and didn’t try to hide it. Now!” she laughed cheerily. “I feel as though I could love them all. I always told you I was at my best with you, didn’t I? There is no one like you, Phyl.” The last words were somewhat shy and inexpressibly sweet to the tired woman.

“You are like a good tonic, Hester” she said with a smile.

They had accomplished half their journey when Hester said –

“That’s the last house before our own, Phyl. Isn’t it funny, I have never seen its inmates? John thinks them probably undesirable neighbours, and says it’s just as well not to meet them, or know them even by sight. But do you know, I don’t think I’m at all snobbish in that respect, and I would just as soon make friends with a farm labourer’s wife as with the governor’s. A pretty little place, isn’t it? They might make something decent of the garden if they would only try.”

Mrs. Gray looked up at the picturesque little cottage with indifferent eyes. Suddenly she gave a shrill cry and darted across the road. Hester followed involuntarily as she fled down the neglected garden path.

“What’s wrong?” she cried in alarm.

“Henrietta!” ejaculated Phyllis, her voice throbbing. “She was looking at us over the blind. Run round to the back. Quick!”

Hester flew round the house the while Phyllis turned the handle and entered the front door. She heard stifled exclamations that were smothered cries, and a girl with a little half-caste child in her arms burst open the back door and rushed out in a tumult. Hester made a wild grasp at the child, and secured it as the mother swept past. Mrs. Gray was holding fast the arm of another girl, abject and livid from fear, while she herself sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Oh, Hester," she choked between her sobs, "don't say anything. Don't preach. It's from joy, and I would die if I couldn't cry. Oh, the pretty little thing! Give her to me. Oh, the poor mite, cursed before her birth with such a fearful racial stain! Oh, Hester!"

The mother came whimpering back.

"Give me my child, Nona," she said in her own tongue, half-imploring, half-defiant. Her sister was wholly subdued.

"Come along to my house, then," said Hester sternly, and snatching the baby back from Mrs. Gray's weaker arms. "You shall have your child there. You are going back home with the Infundisi's lady."

"Who says so?" with marked insolence.

"I say so?" said Hester coldly. "Unless you wish to go back handcuffed, in charge of the police, you'll quietly accompany the missis."

Very little later the party crept slowly along the road, Hester still clasping the child in her own arms.

"Whose house is that?" she asked of the girls, still in their own language.

"It belongs to Mis' Wess," returned Miriam, who was weeping quietly all the way.

"That's a lie, said Hester sharply.

"She doesn't mean your husband," said Henrietta sulkily. "She means mine – Mis' Nolman Wess."

"That's another lie," retorted Hester. "And don't you presume to talk of your paramour as your 'husband' in my hearing again, or I'll box your ears."

The girl was silenced and abashed. Alone, Mrs. Gray might as well have attempted to stay the north wind as to force the girls against their inclinations by her eloquence. A curious phase of the Zulu character is the unbounded respect accord to a thorough knowledge of themselves and their own language.

CHAPTER XXXIII

“A MATTER TO BE WEPT WITH TEARS OF BLOOD”

“I AM afraid it is all true, Phyllis,” said Hester as, after dinner the same night, they issued to the verandah and sat in the cool evening air. The day had been hot and sultry.

“What is true, dear?” A beautiful calm had settled upon the missionary’s wife, and her tone was dreamily content.

“The story they tell. And Norman is John’s favourite cousin. He is the only one who has come here much, and I could never have dreamed why. He is so happy and kindly and has such cheery ways. I have thought more of him than of all John’s people put together. And the friend he invariably brought with him is a clergyman’s son: he is the other man. I fell greatly grieved, and I am afraid it will be a heavy blow to John.”

Mrs. Gray had her own opinion on the subject, but she said softly –

“Dearest, I have learned so much during the past few days that I feel stricken old.”

“My darling! But, Phyl, I am so grievously disappointed in Norman. You must know he was born and bred in the colony, and is a colonial to his fingertips. I always thought it was the home-born man – and preferably the gentleman – who was the most prone to fall in this respect. Indeed, Phyllis, as far as my own experience goes, small though it be, I have always remarked that.”

“Yes, dear, as far as your experience goes, and your own superficial observation can note, you are quite correct.”

She turned for a moment to regard the grave face and set lips near her, and slightly smiled.

“But, then, you see so little Hester, and understand so much less than you see. It is the home-born gentleman who most readily sinks into the abyss from which there is no rescue this side Heaven. It is he who loses himself body and soul through the fearful fascination which the native girl exercises in purely animal degree over a certain section of the sterner sex. He doesn’t understand her and the condition of things out here, and in his unhallowed desire of possession he throws away name, position, self-respect, and descends to her level. All honour to him! He forfeits home, country, eternity itself. But he

does it openly, in the sight of God and man. And never again does he meet his fellow-man, much less the women of his own race, upon equal terms. He takes his puny will, but he pays a fearful guerdon for it.”

There was another silence between them.

“And, after all,” resumed Mrs. Gray thoughtfully, “he is a gentleman, even in the depths of his self-made hell. The sight of such an one is enough to make the angels weep. I remember myself crying like a baby at the view of one of them. He was a man who played Mozart like a being inspired, and was a Heaven-born accompanist; and I saw him one day surrounded by his copper-coloured progeny. The girls were dressed in lovely silks of the most delicate shades, and they had great holes in their stockings through which you could have thrust both your fists, and hats on their heads of the commonest straw, trimmed with flaming scarlet cotton. Of course it was plain to see that his people had sent out the dresses. God knows! perhaps they thought the children were as white in skin as their sire.

“But it is not those people who do the most harm, Hester. It is the sneaking sensualist. The man who meets you face to face, smug, smiling, courteous, who whispers pretty nothings into innocent pink ears, and kisses the native girl next door, or shows the quickest way to hell to one, two, perhaps three of the girls at the nearest mission station. It is a deplorable fact that the gift of a trashy muslin dress, a few yards of ribbon, or a lace-betrimmed chemise or two will win a long way into the favour of a half-civilized female. A sovereign, and the promise of more to come, will buy her soul.”

“That’s where my argument comes in, Phyllis. What do you want to educate them for? Civilization is not ready for them yet. If you must start a mission, why not set out to purify and exalt one’s own race? If little children go to Heaven on the strength of their own weakness and ignorance, why not let the heathen have the same chance yet awhile? But no! you must set up your stations and your ridiculous schools; and when you have implanted the love of dress in an unfortunate half-savage female, you have exposed her, without one word of warning, as a prey to the sneaking profligates of your own civilized race. Heaven be merciful to us all!”

“Then, when a little bastard is born into an unwelcoming world, another girl has lost caste in her own sphere, and value in the eyes of her relatives, and a substantial reduction has to be made in her lobola.¹ Small wonder that natives should strive with every fibre of their being to keep their daughters back from

¹ Marriage price, usually ten head of cattle and a sum in cash.

the civilization of the European, as they would shield them from a pestilence to come!"

"I can't disagree with you, Hester," said Phyllis wearily. "I can only deplore the truth of what you say. And yet one feels so helpless. One missionary whom we know – a German – has taught his congregation on much the same lines as you advocated to us once. But what is the result? His Amakolwas hate him, and take every opportunity to get the law of him. And he has no sympathy from the authorities: so that he stands alone. He tells his congregation quite distinctly that upon this earth black is black and white is white. The result is that the directors of his mission are dissatisfied with the attendance in his school, and at present there is a deadlock between them."

"More power to him!" ejaculated Hester.

"But touching this fearful question of the immorality between the races," resumed Phyllis discontentedly. "I wish I could do something tangible to tear the scales from before people's eyes – to probe the matter, and lay it open to view. There has never been anything printed which more than touches the outer edge of the evil. If such a book were written—"

"It shall be written," cried Hester. She sat up in sudden resolve, her face quivering from the excess of her feeling, her eyes flashing. "I'll write it, Phyl. You remember what those women said – that I had a marvellous gift of description, and an innate knowledge of human nature at its best and its worst? I'll write such a book with every lurid detail that has come under your own observation."

"Do so, dear," said the elder women in sudden languor. "Write the book! but if you make it true it will be unprintable."

Mrs. Gray left the following morning for her home in the north. The three interesting members of her husband's congregation accompanied her in a third-class compartment of the same train. Rebecca, a fine-looking girl of splendid physique, garbed in a white frock of virgin-like purity, her curly wool tucked out of sight under a pink head-cloth, bore the expression of one at ease with herself and the world in general. Miriam was subdued and tearful, but Henrietta's bearing was indicative of sullen discontent and covert insolence.

"You have played your part in this drama most nobly, Phyl," said Hester, with a smile, as she stood at the carriage window, waiting for the guard's signal. "You can go home with a clear conscience and a contented mind. But don't break your heart if Henrietta kicks over the traces again. There's a certain vicious look about her that I don't like."

Mrs. Gray's thin face flushed, and her eyes dilated in alarm.

"You don't think she'll run away, dear?"

"Not now: certainly not now," assured Hester, cheerily. "I have put the fear of death in her for the present. But you must never go trapezing about the country after her again. When next you come to town I want you quite to myself," smiling, "you and the children. And that reminds me, Phyl, there's a hamper in the van with a few trifles for them, and some port-wine for yourself. Don't neglect to take it, please: you look as if a capful of wind would blow you over."

"Oh, Hester, you are always kind and thoughtful. You have always been so good to me and mine." Her blue eyes were swimming in tears as she looked out at the slim figure in its blue habit. The train was moving slowly, and Hester paced with it along the platform. "Good-bye, Hester. Good-bye, dearest!"

"Good-bye, Phyllis. God bless you!" She was left alone, looking after the retreating train. "I wish," she said sorrowfully, "I wish she had not been crying when she left."

She was back at the station in time to meet the down-train that brought her husband.

He sprang out on the platform before the line of carriages came to a standstill, and took both his wife's hands in his own.

"How good of you to come, Hester! and how well you look," he exclaimed, devouring her with his eyes, and noting with quick pleasure the soft colouring of the face he loved above aught else upon the earth. "You are as bright as the day."

"I should be bright, John," she said apologetically, and blushing with keen appreciation of the delight in his eyes. "Having had Phyllis for a whole week, and now your coming back to me safe and well—"

"Oh, don't apologize." He laughed aloud. "I shouldn't quarrel with you if you were as bright as the morning star itself. As indeed you are," he added, with another searching glance.

"Shall we take a riksha?" she asked with self-conscious avoidance of his eyes. "Or shall we walk to the office?"

"Walk, by all means," he returned, handing his portmanteau to the widely-grinning Dolph. And they turned to the entrance.

"I have been busy about your affairs, darling," he remarked as they strolled down the street, "and I have at last arranged about the moneys owing to Uncle Henry. Together with the purchase price of his stock and the funds I have collected, there will be a sum of about fifteen hundred pounds in all. I have arranged for it all to be banked to your credit during the coming month, and if

you wish you may consult with me about its disposal. Or do you prefer to keep Reynolds as your business man?"

He looked at her with a smile.

"Oh, John, of course not! But, indeed, I hadn't thought of it."

"He was telling me the day before I left that a thousand which he had put out at interest for you will be due very shortly. Shall I direct him to bank it for you, dear?"

"Yes, John, certainly. Do as you think best."

"We could then arrange about a safe investment for the whole of this sum. The rest of your money is tied up on mortgage for three years yet. What a rich little woman it is!"

"Rich only in your dear love, John," she said, turning soft, speaking grey eyes upon him, a smile trembling around her mouth.

CHAPTER XXXIV

“SOMETHING BETTER THAN HIS DOG”

A CERTAIN shadow, which was born of no pleasant thought, clouded the brow of John West upon his return home the self-same evening. His wife, living for the nonce in a dreamy, inward world of her own, failed, for the first time in their wedded life, to catch her mood from his own. During the evening meal she gave him a brief account of the search in which she had assisted Mrs. Gray, with the ultimate success which rewarded their efforts. She reserved, however, the unpalatable knowledge of his own cousin's connection with the affair for a future occasion, when she would break the news with gentle circumspection.

She was mildly surprised at the lack of interest displayed by her husband in the narrative, and with delicate tact passed to pleasanter topics. But it is to be questioned whether John West took cognizance of her pleasant efforts. Of a certainty he made no answering response.

“You are tired, John,” she said gently, as the cloth was removed and the Indian servants left the room. She noted now with some anxiety his unwonted abstraction. “You have had a worrying day at the office! Shall I have the drawing-room lamp lit, or will you sit here while I make the bread?”

“I shall sit here,” he said drily, and took a volume from the adjacent book-case. Ever since their marriage she had arrogated to herself the duty of making the loaves of sweet, wholesome bread which he enjoyed and appreciated as coming from her hands. And the unwritten custom had been that he should sit in Uncle Henry's chair and assist the kneading process by happy converse. His eyes followed her now in silence as she moved about the pretty dining-room, locking drawers and giving the last touches to the room for the night.

She was emphatically not the typical Dutch girl of fiction. From the crown of her brown head to the soles of her dainty feet she was as different from the accepted interpretation of a Boer damsel as a lily is distinct from the rankest weed. The thought was her husband's own as he watched her with a puckered brow over the top of his book.

She disappeared into the pantry, and returned with a dish of flour and a bottle of yeast. A journey to the kitchen brought a jug of warm water, and she began to mix the bread.

“John!” she said then, when her dough was the right consistency. “John!”

“Well?” he returned, laying aside his book with a short sigh. “What is it, Hester?”

“Do you remember my showing you the letters the editress of *Woman’s Sphere* wrote me?”

“I remember!” he returned gravely, “and also the articles you had written for the paper. I asked you to send no more, Hester, and you gave your word that you would not.”

She coloured painfully.

“And I kept my word,” she said somewhat proudly. “But I referred to the letters the editress wrote. You remember what she said in one of them? – that I have a ‘Heaven-sent gift of remarkable literary power.’”

She looked over the dish at him with a deprecatory air as she kneaded rapidly.

“I remember,” he said again very quietly.

“Well, John, I am going to test the truth of her words. I am going to write.”

“And the promise you made me?”

“I promised that I would write no more articles for *Woman’s Sphere*. I shall not. But I am going to write a book, John.”

She had almost whispered the words as she turned the dough in her dish.

“I thought I knew a deal when I wrote before,” she continued softly. “But I have learned so much since then, and the experiences of the last week – the experiences Phyllis had – have made me feel old. When I have told you all, John, you will be shocked and horrified at the depravity of mankind and the fearful immorality that goes on right around us.”

He looked at her in silence, and suddenly he felt sorry for her. He knew more – realized more out of the depths of his own experience – than she would ever learn, safe-sheltered behind his protecting love.

“And what, may I ask, has this to do with the book you are going to write?” he interrogated gently.

It has everything to do with it, John,” she replied quickly. “It is what the book will be about.”

“Great Powers above!” He sat bolt upright in his chair and regarded her with astonished disapproval. “Do you know what you are saying, Hester?”

“I think so, John. It is a fearful thing – a loathsome thing. But no man would tackle the subject, for the sake of his fellow-men.”

“For the sake of decency, say rather, Hester.” The words were cold and cut like a whip-lash. “You, as my wife, will write upon no such unsavoury topic.”

She regarded him with startled eyes.

"And," he continued in answer to the mute appeal, "while we are upon the subject I may as well tell you that I will have no more intimacy between yourself and Mrs. Gray. A woman who could descend to the depths which she reached during the past week is no fit associate for my wife, and must never again cross my threshold."

"Merciful Heaven!" The ejaculation came from the young wife's white lips. "Do you know that Phyllis is the best and the purest woman who walks upon this earth?"

"She may be," said the man grimly. "She doubtless is; but she is not fit society for my wife. I shall write and tell her so, and forbid any correspondence between you for the future."

A look of agonized fear flitted across his wife's set face.

"You would not, John! You would not," she implored, descending to an abject entreaty which she would rather have died than employ on her own behalf. "You would never hurt Phyl like that! Such words – so undeserved, so cruel – would cut her to the very soul. They would nearly kill her."

"I am sorry for that," he said, albeit there was no pity in his hard tone. "But I cannot have my wife contaminated, and I must take the necessary steps to secure my own peace and her protection."

A passion of mad rage blazed from her eyes.

"May I ask," she articulated the words with difficulty. "May I ask where you have acquired your information about Mrs. Gray?"

"That fact is quite beside the question," he returned coldly, "but I shall tell you all the same. My cousin, Norman West, came to my office this afternoon and told me all."

She threw a cloth over the dish of dough, and turned to him, one hand resting upon the table.

"All! He told you all? Did he include in his information the part he had played in the matter?"

"That is quite immaterial," he answered coldly. "He told me what haunts your guest visited, and how far you accompanied her in the most unwomanly quest I have ever heard of. There are matters of which no pure and good woman need be cognizant, and I must beg you to keep back from them."

"And this man – this cousin of yours. Do you expect me to receive him here – vile profligate as he is?"

"I told you that there are things of which no chaste woman is cognizant – Hester, my poor little wife," he added, "be guided by me. It is my purpose in life to shield you from harm."

Her face softened, and a long quivering sigh shuddered from her lips. She neared him, and placed a floury hand upon each of his shoulders.

"John, dearest," she whispered with trembling lips. "You will not strike Phyllis through me?"

He remained silent.

"And you will not ask me to receive Norman – an infamous sensualist who consorts with black women: who wilfully lures them to ruin?"

"I am sorry, Hester," said he, with set lips. "In your own interests, I must stop all intimacy with Mrs. Gray. As for Norman—"

"You have said enough, John," she interrupted, drawing herself proudly back. "I hope I will never mention the subject to you again. But, as there is a just Heaven above us all, I will use every endeavour within me to arouse my fellow-women to the condition of things about them."

"Listen to me, Hester! You have been, hitherto, the most perfect wife that ever blessed man. Any change in you must be for the worse, so we shall keep you just as you are."

"Something better than his dog: a little dearer than his horse." She quoted the words heavily, below her breath.

"That is nonsense," said he gently. "But I must ask you to refrain from doing anything that you may regret as long as you live."

"I shall write my book, and proclaim aloud to all the world just what I know, what I have learned this past week." She was standing at her old position at the table, and her eyes were dull with grief and reproach. "Had you made the small concession to me which I implored of you, I might have acceded to your request, and tried to submit to your authority. As it is, I feel in no wise bound to respect your wishes. And I shall not."

"Then I positively forbid you to write at all."

"Forbid me?" She repeated the words in real astonishment.

"Yes; and what is more to the point," he resumed, rising slowly and giving her the first angry look he had ever cast upon her, "I will hear nothing more upon the topic, either now or hereafter. Understand distinctly, and once for all, that I will never tolerate your writing one line upon a theme so unwomanly, so abominable.

"And let me tell you now," she said slowly, turning to face him as he would leave the room, "that on this, as upon every other occasion hence-forward, I

shall do exactly as I please. You have cast the die, and upon your own head be the consequences. When you brought me here, it was as your wife and equal I came, not as your subordinate, and the bondswoman to your wishes. I shall make a point of riding into town to-morrow and procuring the necessary articles for my work. When the book is written, I shall publish it, even if I have to expend the last penny that belongs to me. And for that purpose I will keep intact the funds of which you spoke to me this morning. The money will be necessary to me."

CHAPTER XXXV

“IN SOME GOOD CAUSE, NOT IN MINE OWN”

ALTHOUGH she “made a point” of riding into town the following day, Hester did no violence to her husband’s feelings by preparing for the outing before his departure for his office. A constrained relationship which enforced a cold and studied politeness at the morning meal had arisen between them, and it was a relief to each to be out of the other’s presence. John bade her a cold “good morning” as he lifted his hat and mounted his machine without bestowing upon the waiting face at the door the accustomed kiss. She turned to the house, her heart steeled to bear to the uttermost the while her spirit was incited to ebullient rebellion.

A short canter with the inevitable Dolph in attendance brought her to town. She had only entered the door of a well-known stationer’s shop when she was accosted by a pretty, gushing voice.

“Oh, Hester, I am so glad to see you.” She turned, and an alluring vision of pink and white imprinted a kiss on her pale cheek. “John cycled past me an hour ago without even glancing in my direction, and looking as gloomy as a thundercloud. You haven’t been upsetting him, have you? You both have the look of being at daggers drawn with the world.”

“John and I thoroughly understand one another,” said Hester coldly, “and our looks need be no cause of anxiety to our friends.” Turning, she addressed the salesman at the counter.

A momentary flush dyed the cheek of the girl as she bit her lip and hesitated. But it did not suit her purpose to take offence for the occasion, so with a sharp indrawn breath and a plaintive droop of the mouth, she followed her cousin’s wife.

“Forgive me, Hester,” she said, in a humble, self-deprecatory way. “I had no intention of offending you.”

“Forgive me, rather, Dollie,” said the other gently, as she turned and placed her gauntleted hand upon the girl’s shoulder and looked down at the fresh rose-tinted face. “I am out of sorts this morning, and am in rather a hurry to get home.”

“Oh, I am sorry,” said Dollie quickly. “I wanted to ask you to call round and see mother. Flora is ill, and wants mother to go to Durban and stay with her for a month or two. We wondered if you would mind having me with you during the time? I can’t stay alone, and I have nowhere else to go.”

“Oh, come by all means,” said Hester, with as much cordiality as she could infuse into the invitation. “I shall be busy with a little work I have to do, but I am sure John will be glad of your company. Please excuse me to Aunt Mary, and tell her I shall make you as comfortable and happy as possible.

“Thank you ever so much, Hester, said Dollie, with real gratitude. “I shall surely be happy with you. Then may I come to-morrow?”

“Certainly. Shall I send Sultan in for you?”

“Oh, Hester, if you would be so kind!”

Very little later, Hester was riding briskly homewards, her parcel in her lap, and her thoughts engage upon the work before her.

When John West returned home in the late afternoon, he found his wife sitting with rapt expression reading over and correcting sundry pages of manuscript.

“Oh, John!” she cried, throwing the papers upon a couch and advancing quickly for the accustomed greeting. “I was so busy, love, that I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Busy?” He bestowed a short kiss upon the upturned lips and proceeded to empty his pockets of the newspapers and magazines which bulged them out of shape.

“Yes!” with a self-conscious laugh. “And almost happy.”

She glanced involuntary at the scattered manuscripts.

A motion from her husband’s hand stopped her smile and chilled the blood in her veins. She had hoped very much from the presenting of the olive branch to him.

“If you mean that you are writing upon the unmentionable subject you would have discussed with me last night,” he iterated, coldly and sternly, “I must positively decline to listen. But I cannot think that you will actively disregard my wishes and commands.”

A proud, hurt look leapt into his wife’s eyes as she slowly gathered the scattered leaves together. Suppressing the sharp anger consuming her, she said quietly.

“We may, at least, temporise with each other. I am willing to agree to your commands if you will regard my wishes – if you will only spare Phyllis any undeserved pain. I would do anything you ordered: I would even try to forget

the cruel words you have used to me.” Her speech degenerated to the abject, and her mouth trembled with its imploring. “For the sake of the promise you made to Uncle Henry, you will not hurt Phyllis, John?” She is so good, so gentle, so womanly—”

Her husband regarded her with cold, determined eyes, and the words died in her mouth.

“I have already written to the missionary himself,” said he with a faint smile, “and forbidden any intimacy between his house and mine. I have also explained the reason.”

“My good Heaven!” She moistened her dry lips with her tongue as she whispered the words. “Oh, Phyl! Oh, Phyl!”

Her husband looked at her with some concern. With every nerve of his being he loved and yearned over this woman, the love of his life, the wife of his heart and home; but he would mould and fashion the nature to the model approved of his own human soul, the type admired by his own lordly tolerance. And he well understood the powerful will, the dogged Boer obstinacy which, her heritage by birth, had been fostered by her training. He understood; but not to the full. A struggle for complete dominance of her proud spirit, for the assertion of the master’s prerogative, had come, and the while he regarded her with sincere sympathy in his heart, he was yet determined that in no iota would he yield an inch from the firm stand he had taken.

“And furthermore, Hester,” he continued in the same even voice of calm command, “I must ask you to keep out of my sight the evidence of your unwomanly folly, and shun the subject in your conversation with me. But I have expressed my wishes, and I hardly think you will persist in writing matter that is not fit for publication. You understand me now, I think?”

“Oh, yes, I understand you,” she said quietly. Her face was very pale and her lips were compressed. “You have been at great pains to explain my footing in your household, and I will only ask you to remember that the breach between us – and it must be a lasting breach if I know aught of myself – is of your making, solely. Not mine. But after the way you have spoken, I would rather die than yield.”

She walked slowly past him with the papers in her hand. Entering the hall, she found Dolly Emerson upon the doorstep, standing with her back to the house and facing the garden, as though she had occupied that position a considerable time.

“Come in, Dollie,” she said. “Why didn’t you knock?”

"Oh, I did, Hester. I knocked twice," answered Dollie volubly, turning and revealing herself as a dainty vision in a costume of pale heliotrope. "I thought John would have told you that he passed me on the road. Our boy has gone round to the back with my trunk."

"Then you've come to stay?" Hester's voice was not conspicuously ingratiating. Truth to tell, she was in no mood to work violence upon her own feelings.

"Yes, I've come to stay, dear. Flora's husband wired for mother, and she left for Durban this afternoon, so I decided to walk out. And the road is so hot and dusty!"

"So it is," said Hester quickly, "and you must have a cup to tea at once before you remove your things. Just go in and join John while I see about your room. The teapot is under the cosy. You will excuse me, Dollie, and help yourself?"

"Of course I will." Dollie laughed as she entered the dining-room and shook her cousin's outstretched hand; "but you will have to go, John, or promise that you won't count the times I do help myself."

Oh, I promise!" He leaned back in his capacious chair. "You shall help me, too, for I have had no tea yet."

"Waited for me, eh?" Well, I expected as much, I must say."

The vexation was melting rapidly from his brow as his eyes rested approvingly upon the flower-like face beneath the chip hat. She had thrown her long white gloves upon the table, and now, with teacup in hand and a dish of cake at her elbow, she settled herself upon the couch opposite her host.

"What a horribly pretty little thing you are, Doll!" he remarked lazily, bringing the tips of his fingers together as his elbows rested upon the arms of his chair. "What damage you must do among the town boys!"

"Of course!" She showed her white teeth. "That's what all the war paint is for!"

"Exactly!" with an answering smile. "And who is going to get the bargain, Doll?"

"Don't know," remarked she laconically, sipping her tea and looking at him over the edge of the cup. "No bid has been high enough yet."

"Well, you are honest enough at all events!" He regarded her with undisguised amusement.

"No use to be anything else with you," said she, giving a short laugh the while she helped herself to a generous lump of plum cake. "Hester keeps you well posted in such interesting points of my character."

West abruptly changed the conversation. Irritated and justly displeased as he was with the wife of his bosom, he had no intention of listening to Dollie's stinging sneers. Deep within him he recognized the immeasurable superiority of Hester over the pretty social butterfly.

After all he was not too sure that he relished the invasion of his quiet home life. Especially at the present moment he would have preferred solitude, during the crisis in which he would bend his wife's spirit to conform with his own interpretation of the ideal in womankind. To the world at large she might show the queenly dignity and proud disregard for opinion which so well became her personality. But to him, as to the master spirit dominating her own, she should show only the sweet humility and yielding love of the lesser mate. An unbending firmness during this, the first issue of strife between them, would decide the whole bent of the future life together. And it was regrettable that there should be outer influence to disturb the driving home of the sharpest lesson his spouse would ever have to learn.

A sudden, alarming thought occurred to him.

"I say, Doll, you won't be bringing a string of your friends and followers out here, will you?" he asked diffidently as she poured herself a second cup of tea.

She looked sideways at him.

"Is thy cousin a servant?" she asked with a little grin. "How dare you talk of 'followers'?"

"But you won't bring them, Doll?"

She sweetened her tea, and deliberately sat down again before she answered. Then she regarded him in a quizzical, mildly-surprised way.

"Why, what did you think, John? You surely don't expect me to sit in silence, or assist you and Hester to bill and coo?" She leered wickedly across at him. "I am going to wake you up. Hester has shirked her responsibilities long enough, and I will take you both in hand now."

Her cousin groaned.

"Don't, Doll," he expostulated. "I'll do anything you like – double your allowance while you stay here – but for Heaven's sake leave us as we are."

"Thanks!" she said with an elfish laugh. "I'll take the cheque and welcome, but I mean to have the fun all the same. Hush! Here comes Hester!"

She was that kind of girl: the kind who is more at home with men than with women. The latter, she was wont to plaintively aver, always, "misunderstood" her, and she shirked their society whenever better was to be had.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A CLOSED CHAPTER

TRUE to her word, Dollie most effectually woke up the cottage and its inmates, and the latter found themselves shaken out of their erstwhile stupor. At her instigation the neglected tennis court was put in speedy repair and freshly rolled, and a new net was stretched across its width. Almost every alternate afternoon saw troops of young people about the grounds. Happy, girlish laughter awoke the echoes round the cottage, and deep-toned, musical tennis calls rang resonant from the court.

To Hester, who instinctively disliked and held aloof from the fast set which formed the nucleus of Dollie's social delights, the new innovation was particularly distasteful, and with her usual quiet hauteur she took no pains to disguise resistance to the invasion of her home. But Dollie, nothing abashed, undertook her own entertaining as at her mother's home, and her guests speedily grew to accept her as their hostess proper at the cottage. The mistress of the house rarely emerged from her own room on Dollie's reception days, before the hour upon which her husband was due from the city. She would then be ready to make tea and share the little meal with him, her grave face proud and calm, her tones quiet and courteous. John West himself never made, by word or sign, the first faint effort to break down the invisible barrier which had arisen between them, and which had been of his own blind seeking. In his recreation time, and when the house was free of the noisy crowd which had taken to haunting its precincts, he had Dollie's society for his entertainment and diversion. And freely he availed himself of the relief her light companionship afforded.

His wife made no demur, and gave no glance of disapproval or reproach at the man who had taken her into his keeping with vows of passionate devotion. Though her heart was bitter within her, she allowed no complaint to reach her lips: and yet the breach between man and wife widened perceptibly day by day.

Two things occurred which broadened and intensified the unseen chasm till it seemed well-nigh impassable. The first happened through John bringing home with him one afternoon his cousin, Norman West. The latter was a fair

debonair young fellow, good-looking, and sunny-tempered to a degree, with a quick jest, or a bright repartee ever ready upon his lips: a man who was adored by women, and received with hearty approval as a “jolly good fellow” by his own compeers.

Hester had been sitting by the tea-tray, with ink-stained fingers folded idly in her lap, when her husband and his cousin appeared before her. She sprang to her feet with startled eyes, looking from one to the other in a sharp emotion, painful and breathless.

“I have brought Norman home with me, Hester,” said the man whose name she bore, with a smile which he meant to make conciliating, and she interpreted as a direct challenge. “And we both need our tea badly. The dust on the road makes one as dry as a lime-kiln.”

She darted a look of fierce expostulation at her husband, and gave no glance to the visitor.

“You don’t expect me to receive this man, John?”

There was a tense silence for the space of a second or two. John West’s blood surged within him, and his brown eyes glared at the pale, determined face before him.

“Do you understand me, Hester?” he said deliberately, “I have brought Norman – cousin – home, to my house.”

“I understand,” she said, as quietly. “But you made me mistress of your house, and—” She turned to the guest, who stood dumfounded, staring blankly from husband to wife. “Go!” she commanded him, pointing to the open door. Then, as he stood irresolute, too utterly confounded and dismayed to move – “Do you hear? Go!” she blazed, with a stamp of her foot, and a threatening movement towards him.

For many subsequent days her husband barely deigned to recognize her existence beneath his roof.

The second cause of open eruption between them was of a more serious nature to her, and cut her to the very soul. The weeks had passed slowly by, and without news from Phyllis, they had lagged heavily upon her. Over and over again she had written her friend in a strain more trustful, more affectionate than she had ever, perhaps, employed before: but no word of acknowledgement had ever been vouchsafed her, and she was almost in despair at the utter loneliness of her existence. Then one day, upon his return from the office, her husband silently placed an open letter before her. Her pulses leaped in dread and her eyes clouded for an instant, as she recognized the handwriting of Paul Gray.

Gathering her forces together with pitiful energy, she braced herself to read the page before her.

“Sir,” it began.

In justice to myself, and the better for the peace of my dear wife, I must desire that you request Mrs. West not to intrude her letters upon us. They cause Mrs. Gray very keen distress, and I shall be reluctantly compelled to return to you unopened any such letters that emanate from your house to mine in the future.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

P. W. GRAY.

“So that chapter is closed, Hester,” said he gently, and attempting to place his arm about her.

“You are mistaken,” she said indifferently, avoiding the proffered caress with quiet persistence. “It is closed only as long as I allow it to be so.”

But in her heart she knew that the words were born of mere bravado, and she realized to the very full that upon this earth she stood, for evermore, without the protecting love of Phyllis’s friendship. For a while, she felt that she hated the man, John West. His offer, at this time, to adjust her monetary affairs met with a cold rebuke and cutting retaliation.

“I have no wish to change my business man,” she told him trenchantly. “If I have need of your advice, I shall approach you in your office.”

But he played a quiet, waiting game. In his inmost soul he felt assured that in the end success must be his, and his proud quarry would lie ultimately acquiescent at his feet. Meantime he amused his lighter moods with Dollie’s pretty frivol.

The months went slowly by, and Hester’s book was finished. Certain changes had marked the time, not the least of which being the sudden death of Mrs. Emerson, brought on by the shock subsequent to a boating accident. Dollie, her tearful, weebegone little face exciting universal sympathy, resided permanently at the cottage, and had already become a factor of its life.

“John,” said his wife one afternoon, coming behind his chair and placing her hand on his shoulder with a pitiful attempt at the old caressing manner. “John, dear, will you put down your paper for a little and listen to me? And please be patient, John?”

"What is it, Hester?" he asked, taking the hand in his own, and pressing it against his cheek. "Am I generally impatient with you?"

His eyes were smiling in the anticipation of certain triumph; his pulses beat high within him. The hour of capitulation, the hour he had waited for, had come at last, and he would stand once more heart to heart with his wife, as hand in hand they stood before the world.

"Don't be angry, John – but my book is finished, and I want to arrange about its publication in London. I heard you tell Dollie that you are taking us to England soon. When do we go?"

A flash of bitter chagrin and keen disappointment struck the man home.

"What is your book about?" he asked quietly, with a set face.

"About – what I told you of," she faltered humbly.

"And, therefore, not fit for publication," he answered in a cold, hard voice. "You may do as you please about it," he added, releasing the gentle detaining hand and striding towards the door, "but with such an object in view you certainly shall not go to England with me."

She sprang to the door before him, and turning she implored with agony:

"John! John, love, listen to reason. My book is a good one, and cannot harm you or me, while it must do good – it is bound to do good – to the tempted or wavering of my own down-trodden sex."

"Down-trodden fiddlesticks!"

A heavy sob prompted his exclamation.

"And if you will not come with me, I must go alone."

"Go then!" said he in savage anger, with no dim perception that he might be taken at his word. "But understand one thing most distinctly – I will not have the name I gave you affixed to any abomination in literature which you may have the effrontery to produce."

"That is understood." Her lips were white and trembling, and she could hardly see him for the tears in her eyes.

"Then let something else be understood: the day you leave my home on your shameful errand – be it but a hundred yards from my gate – you leave it to return no more. The matter has already been sufficiently discussed, and we will consider it closed for the future."

He strode past her, hot with the rage within him, and somewhat sick with a passionate heartache. Soon he left the yard at a sharp canter towards the hills.

Little, crape-clad Dollie crept away from the verandah, as Hester, with white set face, packed a travelling trunk and a huge portmanteau with such articles of apparel as she first laid hands upon. An hour later she called for

Dolph, and giving him instructions to return to his Berg home on the morrow, she enriched him with a couple of bank notes for himself, and another for his father, which realized his highest dreams of avarice. Then, calling a couple of boys from their work in the field, she showed them her luggage and sent them before her, on the road to the city.

One swift, backward glance at the little home which had once been Paradise upon earth to her, and she left it with a dull pain in her throat and a small maiden's blush rosebud in her fingers.

CHAPTER XXXVII

AFTER LONG YEARS

*Of all sad words of tongue or pen
The saddest are these, 'It might have been'.*

TEN long years had passed since Hester stood before the church at the Mission Station. Yet to her it seemed but yesterday – but the space of a watch in the night – since she had carried the precious old violin out to the bench under the oaks, and listening to the pulsing throb which Phyllis had evoked from the quivering strings.

A special saint's day service was in course of celebration within the grey walls of the building, and the concluding hymn of thanksgiving, delivered in a rich, pure harmony which seemed to rest upon a solid foundation of magnificent bass, was resounding through the open window and across the mission grounds. At the sound of the benediction, pronounced in warm, earnest tones that roused and vibrated upon a dormant chord of memory, she listened intently, with a peculiar smile upon her lips.

Soon the congregation streamed out from the open door and the gaudily-attired females stared with open, somewhat insolent curiosity from the figure of the lady in blue travelling cloak, to the waiting vehicle which stood at the roadside beneath the shade of the towering gums. She herself was regarding them with an intent, open observation that bespoke the inquisitive stranger.

As the chattering concourse melted away in all directions, a nurse-girl, carrying a lovely baby in her arms and leading a handsome boy who clung to her skirts, advanced up the avenue of oranges towards the church building. Two other children came laughing and running after them from the direction of the house.

Hester moved with rapid steps towards the girl.

"Whose children are these?" she asked in the Zulu tongue. But before the girl answered she knew the reply that must come.

"Ka Dokitela!"¹

"A marvellous resemblance!" she said, within herself. "I should have known that baby as Frank's, if I had met her in China."

¹ The doctor's.

She bent and kissed the little face. A curious smile and something that would have been a blush ten years ago flitted across her features.

"I might have been her mother," she whispered, again within herself. And again she almost blushed.

A quick step down the avenue arrested her attention, and she turned to face Frank. The same Frank as of old, with the sunny smile, and the mobile mouth of sweet, sensitive expression.

She held her hand to him.

"Hester!" he cried, taking it in both his own and gazing somewhat eagerly at the face that had often haunted his dreams by night, even in these last years of calm content.

"Oh, Frank, it is good to see you," she said with a little cry.

He looked at her through blue eyes that were suddenly dimmed with moisture.

"You are just the same, Frank," she said softly. "Hardly a day older; and yet much – much—"

"Improved, you would say?" Unconsciously he was still detaining her hand. "You are the same, Hester – and yet not the same. You were always a creature of variations, and your face reflected your moods. Now you are – beautiful."

"Don't let us discuss me, Frank," she said somewhat hastily and gently withdrawing her hand. "I am sick to death of myself. I want to know all you will tell me about you and yours. I have been looking at your children, and I have fallen in love with the baby. I feel as if I want her, Frank. She is the dearest sight I have seen for years."

"Her name is Phyllis," he said softly.

She turned again to the child in her nurse's arms and kissed her tenderly. When she faced Frank once more, her eyelashes were wet with tears.

"You know?" he queried.

"Yes, I know," she said painfully. "The hotel driver told me all – all the history of the inmates of the Mission Station, past and present."

"Then you know that I took your advice?"

"My advice?"

She looked at him in surprise.

"You told me once," his voice faltered, and again the dimness came over his eyes, "that I was only fit to be a missionary."

"Oh, Frank, forgive me!" She frowned in distress. "I was young and headstrong—"

"You were right, Hester," said he loyally. "I have realized long ago that you were right in everything you said. You were always right, and strong, and true."

At his silent instigation they had been pacing slowly down the path towards the house.

"I am glad – glad and thankful – that you are happy, Frank. Whom did you marry? Who is your wife?"

"Ethel Dallas," he said simply. "She is a good woman, Hester, and a most perfect wife."

"Thank God!" she whispered, beneath her breath.

He glanced aside at the face beneath the blue travelling cap, at the lissome figure, and the speaking, soft grey eyes. And the thought of his youth came full upon him, with the sharp sting of an old pain that had cankered its way throughout the years.

In silence they made the rest of their way to the Mission House. The two elder children had skipped on before them, and the mistress of the house was already upon the verandah, awaiting the approach of her husband with the strange lady, who, they avowed, had, "made Papa cry."

A large woman, over stout for her age, with a comfortable, happy personality that secured her friends without number, was Mrs. Frank Gray. Emphatically a good woman, to whom the call of distress was as the proverbial trumpet to the warhorse.

She watched her husband, the doctor-missionary, approach with the striking, strangely-beautiful woman at his side; and a premonition of pain and vague uneasiness seized upon her. For the first time in her life, the husband whom she adored and yet dominated by her stronger will, failed to meet her eyes when he turned to her.

"This is – Hester," he said lamely, hesitating unaccountably over the name. "Hester, this is Ethel, my wife."

Mrs. Gray drew herself up to the full extent of her matronly dignity.

"How do you do?" she said stiffly, as she indicated a verandah chair. "Will you take a seat?"

It did not occur to Hester till long afterwards, when she understood so much more, that she had never been invited to enter the house. She only felt for the moment an indefinable discomfort in the presence of this black-browed, comely woman, who looked upon her with eyes of emphatic disapproval. She turned to her host, in vague annoyance.

"Ouwpa – my grandfather?" she questioned. "Is he well and happy?"

"He died six years ago," said Gray quietly. "Martha made him a good wife, but when he was laid to rest she quickly forgot him. She married a man several years her junior a year after Mr. de Villiers' death, and she is now the mother of three fine healthy children. From words which she has used, when at the extremity of feminine anguish, I think she has bitterly repented the part she played in turning your guardian away from the home which was his by every right."

Hester's lip curled.

"Where are Phyllis's children?" she asked abruptly.

"Phyllis has married a young coast farmer by name of Runciman," he said quietly, "and she has taken the care of the two younger children upon herself. Unfortunately her husband is not too lavishly endowed with this world's goods, and the young people have had hard times. His farm is mortgaged. That remind me, Hester, the mortgage is in your own favour, in the hands of your solicitor, Mr. Reynolds."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"Give me the details, Frank."

"I am sorry I cannot," he said. "All I know is that Runciman got into debt and misery through the advent of tick fever among his cattle, and the burning of a wattle plantation by accident. He had no animals with which to work his farm, and no money to buy them: so he borrowed £500 from Reynolds and mortgaged the place for it. He is a good, hard-working lad, and in spite of all his losses has been marvellously kind to his wife's young sisters. With the mules and donkeys he bought, he will soon work himself up again."

Hester's eyes were shining.

"Please put his name and address here," she said, passing a notebook to him. He complied, handed it back to her.

"And Teddy?" she asked, with interest.

"Edward works in a Durban lawyer's office. He wished to become an articled clerk, and take law as a profession; but, of course, that was beyond the powers of his father."

The notebook was passed back to him.

"Put down Teddy's address, please."

He hesitated to comply.

"Don't hurt me by looking like that, Frank," she said abruptly.

"You were always painfully generous, Hester." He wrote the name with a troubled brow.

“You don’t know how rich I am in this world’s goods – and in nothing else.” The last clause had been uttered beneath her breath; to herself, as it were.

He opened his lips as though to speak, but the quietly-watching eyes of his wife were upon him, and he handed the book back to Hester in silence. But his face had paled visibly.

“Maisie is at St. Anne’s College now, finishing her education. She will then be trained for the teaching profession,” resumed he somewhat heavily, “Little Paul died after his mother. I am glad she was spared the grief.”

A quick, indrawn breath that was almost a cry interrupted him; but when he looked up, her face was very still and quiet.

“And where is Mr. Gray?”

“Paul? He lives with us. The station is nominally under him still, but he has given up active work since Phyllis died – seven years ago. He has never recovered her loss: he never will recover. He is away to-day.”

“I am glad of that,” she whispered low. “There is only one thing more, Frank.”

She had arisen, in mute discomfort at the presence of this silent woman, whose eyes watched her every movement, and whose lips – finely-modelled, kindly lips withal – were set in a grim line.

“The graveyard, Hester?”

They paced slowly down the path at right angles to the church, and came upon the aloes-encircled patch of ground set apart as the mission cemetery. Rows upon rows of significant mounds testified to the growth and enlargement of the mission congregation, but in the midst of them all was one railed-in grave with a plain, rough stone at its head.

There she lay whose wonderful talent and pale beauty had once been the delight of thousands, and whose heart had slowly broken in the chequered path she had chosen for her own life. There she would lie till the trumpet of the arousing angel should wake her strong, glad cry of rapture: surrounded till then by the bones of the heathen on whose behalf she had broken her own spirit on the wheel. O Fate! O Destiny! What more could renunciation itself desire?

A flood of soul-stirring anguish overpowered Hester as she stood at the grass-covered mound.

“PHYLLIS GRAY,
Aged 35 years.”

And underneath –

*She was so meek and reverent,
So resolute of will,
So bold to bear the uttermost,
And yet so calm and still.*

Hester pressed her white cheek on the roughly-sculptured name.

“I will do what I can for them, Phyl,” she whispered. “For every one of them. They shall all be made happier for their mother’s dear sake. I swear it!”

She plucked a few blades of grass from the grave and placed them, with streaming eyes, in the notebook which held the names of the dead woman’s children. At the gate between the aloes she turned and looked back.

“Good-bye, Phyllis! Rest sweet and long!”

Her heart-sick weeping seared the soul within him as they proceeded in silence back to the house whose doors had not been opened for her.

“Excuse me to your wife, Frank,” she said as she laid a card upon the verandah table. “I will say good-bye to you here. No, don’t come with me, please. Good-bye, Frank! Good-bye, dear friend! Thank God, your lines have been cast in the pleasant places. Good-bye!”

She left him and sped rapidly up the orange path. His wife joined him under the thatched verandah. He turned to her with his working throat.

“I can’t help it, Ethel,” he whispered hoarsely. It is the first time I ever saw her weep. And it hurts –”

She compressed her lips yet more; and turning from him, picked up the card from the table.

“MARGARET BUCHANAN,”

she read.

“Oh, Frank, call her back,” she cried suddenly in sharp distress as the vehicle drove rapidly away past the church. “Call her back!”

He shook his head sadly.

“You don’t know Hester,” he said, dashing the back of his hand across his eyes. “She would never come back, Ethel. After the way you received her, she would rather die than return here.”

“Oh, God forgive me! She is the one woman I have admired above all others in the world. The woman I have longed to meet!”

He looked at her in reproachful surprise. She held the card to him.

“Oh, Frank!” Her voice broke, and she hid her face in her hands. “She is the wonderful writer whose works have done so much for womankind, and who has instigated the big social reform movement. The great authoress, Margaret Buchanan!”

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE COST OF FAME

BACK in Maritzburg again. Back to the place of her birth, to the scene of her married happiness, and of the subsequent months of cold neglect and wilful misapprehension, which yet formed in her mind the acme of despair, the very nucleus of earthly misery.

The sensation was a strange one. To be here and not with him: to be within walking distance of his home, and yet without intention of crossing its threshold. To be almost within speaking distance of his presence, and filled with no longing to hear his voice or see his face. Surely the very nature within her had changed!

She looked absently in the mirror, as from long habit she made a careful dinner toilet and donned a white evening gown of soft, shimmering silk and lace. As she clasped a single row of pearls about her bare neck she gazed with thoughtful intentness at the reflection cast back upon her.

She had altered little during the passage of years, and only a glorified vision of the Hester de Villiers of old presented itself now to the grey eyes, which had quieted in expression and gained in thoughtful dignity. The first blush of the girlish, fresh prettiness was past; but now at thirty, in the full blow of perfect womanhood, Hester was more alluring, more attractive than she had ever been, even in the unconscious insolence of youth. The early slenderness of form had given place to a fuller development, a richer outline of figure. The face which stared back from the mirror's surface gave little indication of the inward, agonized struggles endured alone, of the fearful fight for place – hampered, chained to conventions, narrowed by the unwritten law of sex; of the yearnings after recognition – only recognition, not Fame – which had seared her soul; before Success, big, blatant Success in full measure, pressed down, and running over, had come as a thief in the night, suddenly upon her.

She looked herself over carefully.

“Frank said I had grown beautiful,” she thought with a grave, inward smile. “I wonder what *he* would say! Not that it matters. Not that anything matters much!” she added, turning to the door.

Truth to say, she did look beautiful – very beautiful, her fellow-guests thought – as she took her seat at a small side table in the crowded hotel dining-room. The spirit of nervous adventure had seized upon her, and her cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkled with repressed excitement. After all she was glad – glad, and almost happy, to be back in her country, in her own country, the warm land of her birth; and she had scant patience to sit throughout the meal.

She slipped from the room, and, throwing a light woollen wrap around her head, she sallied out into the garden. The night was a perfect one. Moonlight bathed the silent city in a white flood of cool delight, indescribably refreshing and invigorating after the choking heat and noisy jar of the day's railroad journey.

"Oh Natal! Beautiful Christmas Land, how I love you!" She stretched her arms aloft, and smiled at the night, then wandered to the end of the gravelled path that led to a distant corner of the garden. Just over the privet hedge a tiny cottage, covered with a dark creeper, nestled among a group of sweet-smelling orange trees. She had already turned to retrace her steps down the garden, when the throbbing pulsating tones of a banjo broke the whispering silence. A baritone voice of singular purity and depth of feeling took up the burden, and sang with yearning pathos. It was only a simple little ditty – a minstrel song that the singer was rehearsing for a coming entertainment. But the words struck home to the rebellious soul of Hester West.



A stab of mortal pain struck through her heart.

"I must see him once more," she muttered aloud. "I have been lying all the time: lying to myself about him. The bare naked truth of it is, that I would go back to him at any cost, on any terms."

"She paused irresolute on the crunching gravel beneath her feet. A sudden surge of wild grief, of love, and fearful craving overpowered her being.

"He might take me back!"

The unseen singer was articulating with maddening tenderness the refrain of his lay.



Up the garden path sped Hester, and out to the open street, down which she hurried with hastening footsteps. As she passed the open door of a church, the words of that other wanderer of old time flashed through her brain, and she slightly smiled, as she repeated them softly.

“I will arise and go to my father.”

Swiftly she hurried on, out past the last few straggling houses, on to the white dusty road. Each familiar tree, each half-forgotten landmark caused a heart-throb that was half pleasure, half pain. The cottage around which had occurred events that had seared their indelible mark across the pained record of memory was still the last upon the road to her own home, but the garden was trim and tidy, the windows were alight and curtained, and the sound of a piano being “practised” upon floated out at the open door.

Yet half an hour’s brisk walking and the white house she had so often seen in her visions by day, her dreams by night, loomed into view. Nearer she came, and nearer. Then a quick pained flush over-spread her anxious face. Her hedge of sweet briar was gone, and in its place was erected a white, glaring fence of spiked palings.

She let herself in by a new iron gate, and walked about in a strange dull dream of unreality. Her pretty lawn, with its occasional bed of roses, was but a pleasant memory of the past, and the place was now laid out as a florid garden, with trim paths and symmetrical beds cut out in a pattern - the kind of thing she hated. Her eyes wandered stupidly to the house: that at least was unchanged. The banksia roses she had planted at the verandah posts were trailing with wild, rich luxuriance up on to the roof; but otherwise the house was, outwardly, just as she had left it.

She stepped slowly towards the creepers, and pushed them back before an open window. Under the light of a hanging-lamp somebody was sitting within the room reading a ponderous book, and directly facing her.

She felt it was John before she could see the face, for the mist that came over her eyes, and she knew well that her love had never wavered from its true home. She knew also that it had grown stronger, deeper, more intense than it had ever been. Her heart hungered with a strange yearning, to lie passive at his feet, to be his bondswoman and the slave of his desires, for ever and ever; to receive only the faint dole of tolerance that he might accord the prodigal returned. To belong to John – that was all the woman within her now craved.

And yet a strange trembling reluctance held her back. John looked supremely comfortable. He had the air of a man at peace with the world, and pleased with himself. It had seemed easy to hurry along the highway bringing repentance to his door, and warm love to his heart, but now —

The door opened and her pulses stood still within her, as a woman entered the room – a woman with a young child in its night apparel in her arms. She glided to where the man sat, and placing her hand upon his book, she said peevishly:

“John, I do wish you would leave those nasty old law-books at the office!”

“I wish I could, Dollie,” he returned with a smile. “But Jennings was wired for to-day to attend his uncle’s deathbed, and that means that I must take his work upon myself for a few days.” He sighed audibly, and Hester noted when he raised his head that the flight of years had left its mark upon him. “As it is, I must go back to the office for some papers I have forgotten.”

“And leave me alone?” shrilled Dollie.

“I will be no longer than I can help, Doll. I’ll call at Norman’s and get my bike, and cycle back. Here! give the boy to me for a moment! He seems restless to-night.”

The lonely watcher crouched on her knees in an ecstasy of anguish as the croons of baby laughter, mingled with the happy voices of John and Dollie Emerson, floated out on the evening air.

Rising softly, she crept away with tottering footsteps out of the hideously-trim little plot of ground and turned towards the white City, too stunned to realize for the moment the new hopeless blank which had come upon her life. She only dimly knew that this night would be a weird memory of eternal bitterness to her, here and hereafter.

Involuntarily she clasped her hands tight upon her head, and stopping short, looked around in vague anger at the cool, quiet flood of light. With a shiver she faltered on in dreary, suddenly-fatigued pilgrimage.

Anon, she became aware that someone was striding along the road behind her, round the bend where the syringas grew. Someone with quick firm,

sounding footsteps. She moved wearily to the side of the road and leant against the straining post of a wire fence, waiting till the wayfarer should pass.

A sharp exclamation in a beloved, well-remembered voice brought her eyes back from the far distance to,

“John!” she cried in a voice of anguish.

He looked coldly down upon the uplifted face, encircled by the soft wool of the white wrap, and said abruptly –

“What do you want here?”

“I want my husband,” she said slowly.

“You have no husband,” returned he coldly. “Unless indeed you have chosen another one.”

She looked at him with wide eyes of passionate reproach.

“Have you not injured me enough?” she asked with a sob.

“I never injured you,” said he shortly. “You injured yourself. You left my home and me. You chose your path; I have chosen mine.”

“And this is the man who turned me from his doors,” she wailed aloud, “because he found he had not bought my soul. My God, judge between him and me!” Her hands covered her stricken face. “Him and me!” she repeated, with a moan.

“Tell me, Hester.” His voice had softened, and he checked his feet as they would have made a step towards her. “Have you been true to me all these years?”

“True to you?” she echoed, looking up in sharp surprise. “What do you mean? Whom do you take me for?”

“Why did you come here to-night?” His tones were wistful, his features were working convulsively: against his will, against his better judgment, the old love – the one love that had counted throughout his life-time – was tugging full at his heart-strings.

“I came to ask you,” a dry sob broke her sentence in two, “to ‘take me again to your heart.’ But I went home and saw you playing with your baby. And then I knew that Dollie Emerson was your mistress.”

“My wife,” corrected he darkly.

“I am your wife,” she said dully, gazing with eyes of dark misery upon the white town lying before them.

“Since – since I got the divorce our marriage is cancelled of course.” His voice broke and faltered over the words.

A shrill scream of unutterable anguish and lurid horror startled the night and drove the man well-nigh frantic from unnameable fear.

“Hester!”

“And I loved this man!” She wrung her hands in wild agony. “My God, I love him *now*!”

“Hester!” He was sobbing like a little child. “Don’t take it like that. For God’s sake think of me too. I know now – I knew all the time – that I loved you too. Only you; I have never got away from you. I have had you with me every day, every hour, since you left me. I was thinking of you now, to-night, as I came upon you, and my heart could have shed tears of blood over you. Do you hear me, Hester? As there is a Heaven above us I love you still.”

She turned upon him like a tigress.

“Be silent about your ‘love’. Surely you have hurt me enough to satisfy even you.” She moaned aloud and wrung her hands again. “You have dragged me through the mire of the divorce court. And you would prate of ‘love’!”

“There was no mire,” began he eagerly, but she was unconscious of his words.

“This is what I have worked for,” she said slowly and distinctly, “longed for, prayed for! This is the cost of Fame.”

A long silence fell upon them. The cloud had fallen unheeded from her bare head and neck as she stared with wide, miserable eyes at the dark hills against the distant sky; and her husband that was stood gazing at her strange beauty with longing, hungry craving, too concerned and cowed by her mightier grief to realize his own in all its intensity.

“Hester!” he whispered. “What shall we do?”

“Do?” She turned upon him with lighting scorn. “You will go back to your ‘wife’ and your baby.” A quiver of pain moved the white lips. “I will go my own way, which will never cross yours again, and will never concern you, however, long we two may live. This hateful Natal will see me no more!”

“If it were not for my boy,” began he hesitating.

“Be silent!” she cried sharply. “Have you not said enough to canker at my heart for all the coming years? Will you never be satisfied? Can you feel no pity – even for me? Oh, John!” A revulsion of feeling brought on a flood of anguish that was too much even for her strong pride. “Oh, John! what have you done? What have you done?”

He grasped her to him, held her passive in his strong embrace and kissed her eyes, her brow, her bosom, with lingering rapture.

“Hester!” he whispered hoarsely. “We shall leave all and go away, you and I, where we are unknown. In the sight of Heaven and all the angels you are my wife – my one only wife! You and I, love – we two against the world!”

For one moment the woman allowed herself to lie within the shelter of his beloved arms, for one second her lips clung to his with hunger unspeakable and her bare arm stole around his neck. Then she disengaged herself, and gently put his clinging hands away from about her.

“In calmer moments, John,” she said, and her tones struck like his own death-knell upon his ears, “you will bless me for resisting your mad folly. You and I will part here, never to meet this side Eternity. I could have wished to lie side by side with you in the last long sleep; but God knows best! and that is not be. We part without a shade of anger or bitterness – my dear! – on either side, for both have much to blame and much to forgive. Who knows what joy there may be for us together – there in the vast Beyond? ... In Heaven there is no marrying or giving in marriage. Thank God! Thank God for that! You will think kindly of me, John, and pray for me – sometimes – as for an exile from home.” The steady voice almost broke. “And you will be good to – her. Your baby’s caresses will atone for much! ... Let me look at you once, John, to carry your dear image with me. With me to the end.”

She placed a hand on each of his broad shoulders and gazed up long and earnestly into his face.

“Good-bye!” she whispered low. A mighty, heaving sob was his reply.

Stooping, she lifted the shawl from the dust at her feet, and without one backward glance or one faltering step she passed away, down the white, winding road, out of his view and out of his life. For evermore.

THE END

A Daughter Of Sin

A Simple Story

BY

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CLAREMONT BUILDINGS

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Dedication

TO

THOSE WOMEN OF NATAL

WHO HAVE SUFFERED
UNDER AN UNJUST, ONE-SIDED,
AND MOST INIQUITOUS LAW.

CHAPTER I

*The earth was beautiful as if new-born;
There was a nameless splendour everywhere,
A wild exhilaration in the air*

“THAT’S the third time the whip has dropped!”

The remark came in crisp, clear tones from the back seat – the one sheltered beneath the hood – of the post-cart.

The only other passenger, who occupied the box at the driver’s side, slightly turned his head and smiled. He gathered the ribbons in his own hands as the half-cast dismounted and ran back in the track of the dust.

“One must expect these little drawbacks while travelling,” responded the man in finely modulated, somewhat apologetic tones. His fellow-traveller had, during the two hours’ journey from the county town, made no remark hitherto, and the veil which shielded her eyes and nostrils from the penetrating dust of the dry, sun-baked road, had also effectually concealed her features from view.

“Y-es!” The voice was decidedly silvery, if somewhat didactic and imperious. “But what do they warn you about ‘rapid travelling’ for? Please look at your ticket, and see exactly what it says.”

The man, transferring the reins to his right hand, fumbled with his left forefinger and thumb in a waistcoat pocket, and brought to view a pink paper of respectable dimensions.

“It says,” and again his lips curved in a slight smile of amusement, “that the passenger must take the risks attendant upon rapid travelling.”

“I said so,” reiterated the voice behind, somewhat wearily. “I expected to be jolted all to pieces, and nearly hurled to death along the road, whereas we are an hour behind time as it is, and these mules don’t seem to have a trot left in them.”

Plainly she was disappointed at the failure of her expectations, and it was in a conciliatory tone that he observed:

“We shall have a fresh team presently. You are tired of the journey?”

“Tired?” The tone itself was rich with contempt at the inadequacy of mere language to provide a better word. “I have been travelling since yesterday morning, and I haven’t had any sleep all night. And,” in rueful self-pity, “I have been living on nasty, potted meat sandwiches all the time.”

“Poor little girl!” The words were whispered beneath the man’s breath. Aloud he said: “In about ten minutes we shall reach the half-way place, where the teams are changed. We might get a cup of tea there.”

The driver, whip in hand, had mounted once more to his seat, and the vehicle moved forward with a slow, uneven jolting upon the level or incline, and a quick rush and whirl upon the down grade.

No further word was spoken until the cart swung out from the main road upon an open track in the green veld, and past the hedge of Mauritius thorn which secluded a prosperous-looking farmstead from too open view. About a hundred yards beyond the gates of the main entrance the cart was brought, with a jerk, to a standstill, and from a yawning gap in the hedge, a native *umfaan* issued to take the local mailbag, and to assist in unstrapping the mules. With the slow, deliberate movements of his race, the driver climbed down laboriously from his seat and began fumbling at the thongs which secured the luggage to the back of the vehicle. The man had already sprung to the ground, and now, raising his hat as he passed his fellow traveller, he made his way back at a brisk pace to the iron gateway of the farm-house. But a very short time had elapsed when he returned.

“I am sorry”, he said, coming round to the step on the off-side, “but there is no tea to be had. A very superior young person in narrow embroidery informed me that her parents don’t cater for the travelling public. I asked if we might purchase a little fruit, but she said they had nothing ripe but lemons.”

“I hate lemons,” interposed the girl.

“I didn’t bring any,” he assured her hastily.

She emerged from under the hood, and, throwing back her ugly veil, looked, with a frank, undisguised curiosity, at the quiet scene around. The afternoon was rapidly waning, and the curious hush which breathes across the face of the veld in the late day seemed to lie like an invisible pall over the long stretches of green, the huge, distant plantations, and the boundary belts of black wattles. Near at hand mighty specimens of towering blue gums stood sentinel over the red-brick farm-house with its orchards and lawns and well-filled poultry yard. The early spring sun bathed the tender young grass with the blessing of his chastened warmth, and tipped, with a brighter gilding of his own, the fluffy golden blossom of the nearer stretch of sweet-smelling wattles.

“There’s no doubt about it,” said the girl almost grudgingly, as she balanced herself upright in the cart, and slowly revolved, “the country here is beautiful – in its way. But I’m used to the north of the Colony – to the Berg and krantzes, and things – and I like them better.”

"We have krantzes and things here, too," the man remarked in a quizzical tone, "though they are out of sight just now."

"But no Berg," she interrupted quickly. "One could get deadly tired of this view, I should think, watching the veld turn from green to brown, and then giving place to bare black stretches in winter when the grass is burnt off. And it must be cruelly hot down here in summer. But the Berg! There you can always breathe."

He had taken one comprehensive glance at the delicately pretty face with its blue eyes and circle of fair hair, and had then deliberately turned with her and viewed the scene.

"Would you care to walk along the road for a mile or two?" he asked. "It will take at least a quarter of an hour to complete the business of the mail-bags, and changing the mules, and it might be pleasanter walking."

For the first time she looked at the speaker. He was a tall, finely proportioned figure of a man, of handsome feature and kindly, albeit somewhat reserved, expression of countenance. The sprinkling of grey among his closely cropped brown hair, and the staid aspect of the whole man, made the girl set him down in her own mind as verging upon middle-age.

Before she could reply to his suggestion, and while she hesitated for an instance, he added quickly:

"My name is Meyer, and I am the newly appointed magistrate for this division." He raised his hat as he made the self-introduction.

She held out her hand to him, and poised herself to jump to the ground.

"My name is Gray," she said, "Mariamne Gray; only they call me Maisie, which I consider objectionable in this country. Reminds you of mealies, doesn't it? – especially if your hair is the colour of straw." She had alighted beside him, and as she flicked a speck of dust from her skirt, she added tentatively:

"I'm going to stay with some friends for a few months. And that reminds me – they are of the same name as yourself."

"Not Andries Meyer?" he asked quickly.

"No, I don't know Andries," she said; "I am going to stay at Philip Meyer's, as a sort of companion to a dear old friend who lives there, and who is really my godmother."

"Philip Meyer is my cousin," returned the man pleasantly. "I am going there to-night, so we shall still be travelling together after we reach the village."

They turned their steps down the slight incline which led towards the main road once more, walking briskly side by side in the joy of quick motion after the long hours of cramped position

“You don’t fear that you will find farm life dull?” he asked. “This district is about a thousand miles away from anywhere, you know.”

“Oh no, I shan’t be dull,” she replied, cheerfully. “I am used to the country, and besides, I shall have plenty of work to do. I am to give music lessons to some children in the neighbourhood, and also I mean to work steadily at my own studies – especially the piano.”

“We should see quite a deal of one another,” he returned.

“Oh yes we should – if you care very much for scales and exercises?”

“I don’t,” he said frankly. “But it is just possible that you might break into something else occasionally?”

“Possible, yes! I might give you Wagner as a change.”

“That’s worse,” he returned quickly.

“I’m afraid your education has been neglected,” said she, with a severe glance; “and you are hard to please as well.”

He met the look, and they both burst into a quick laugh.

“To tell you the truth,” she said, sinking her voice as though even the silent veld would rebuke the sacrilege of her words, “I am not too keen on the classics myself – either in music or literature. I love a novel by Mrs Henry Wood better than any essay Ruskin ever wrote, and I have a mean craving for bioscope music and rag-time. I was the despair of my music mistress, because, you see, I have naturally great aptitude for music. It is the only talent I possess.”

CHAPTER II

A dish that I do love to feed upon

“IT’S wonderful,” said Tanta, placing a huge glass dish of strawberries in the exact centre of the table, “how the Engelsche love this fruit and cream! Now I wouldn’t give one peach or a good ripe granadilla for a whole *schotel*¹ of these earth berries. And as for the cream, I couldn’t swallow a spoonful if you paid me for it. The last *oorwaxter*² I gave Kaatje was when she brought my morning coffee with a great blotch of boiled cream, floating like a toad, on the top of it. The very sight made me sick.”

The girl sitting at the end of the room, with a coverless magazine in her lap, looked towards the old lady, a faint glimmer of amusement flitting across her face. Somewhat well-featured as the face was, of clear-cut lines and delicate profile, much of its charm was wanting, owing to the expression of discontent – or it might be fretfulness – which set its mark upon the whole, drawing down the corners of the small, flexible mouth, and setting tiny, almost indefinable, creases across the brow. The eyes were large and brown, and full as they were of a vague, introspective melancholy, yet gave the impression that they might, under certain conditions, blaze in a very passion of emotion. Upon the whole a sensitive face, that under happy circumstances might be very lovely. The dark neatly coiffed head was well poised upon the shoulders, with perhaps a hint of hauteur in its setting.

She moved down the long, narrow dining-room, her step a trifle languid and slow, and came to a standstill under the full blaze of the Miller lamp over the supper-table. She wore a long gown of white cashmere, touched here and there with a knot of black ribbon, the heavy folds hanging loosely from her shoulders.

“I wish you would help me, Lulu,” remarked the old lady with some concern. “I can’t get the table to look right. There seems something wanting to it.”

“Tanta only fancies that,” said the other, looking slowly over the board. Her voice was low and full, but, like her general appearance, somewhat subdued. “There is nothing wrong. The cold mutton is fat and good, and Tanta’s brown

1 Dish.

2 Box on the ear.

bread and butter always tastes better than anybody else's. But what a lot of jams!"

"Only three kinds," returned Tanta almost apologetically. "You see the child was always fond of sweet things; I never knew such a family as the Grays for jam. They were not allowed too much in that way at home, so they could never have enough elsewhere. I know Maisie loved fig and pineapple jam better than anything else – except pampelmoosie preserve; and you could have led her into a trap with that."

"Well, you have them all ready for her tonight, and *zoet-koek* and *biscuit* as well."

"But I don't like the look of the flowers," grumbled the old lady, an anxious wrinkle across her broad, placid brow. "Haven't you put too many green leaves about them?" She glanced from the beautiful glasses of nasturtiums to her companion's face in some perturbation.

"I think not," said the girl quietly; "but Tanta should have let me take all this trouble."

"There has been no trouble, child. I have liked to do it myself. Besides, for the sake of Maisie's dead mother, I would break stones with my bare hands for any of the family. I promised her when she was on her *sterf*³ bed that I would look after her children as well as I could – and I have never been able to do anything for them." The large old face took a grave setting. "*Ach lieve land!* it was a big crowd of *kinders*⁴ to leave behind, with a man who cared for nothing but his Kafirs, and his dead *echtgenoot*.⁵"

"But they have all done well, Tanta?" The remark was more in the nature of a statement than a query, its kindly intent unmistakable.

"*O ja!* They've done well enough, and they are all good children. Maisie was my old man's favourite of them all, so I have most love for her. She was always the naughty one of the family, but she may have bettered her temper by now. My sins! she never was one to let anybody trample on her toes!"

The young woman moved silently back to her former seat near the window, and, placing her book upon the table, took up a strip of work that she was embroidering.

Tanta gave a comprehensive glance around the table, moved a spoon here, and a plate there, then seated herself opposite the girl in pleasanter mood, and with the garrulity of old age full upon her.

3 Death.

4 Children.

5 Spouse.

"I was saying," she remarked, "that it is queer how fond the Engelsche are of strawberries and cream." She folded her hands before her on her wide white apron, sitting stiffly upright in her chair. "Now, there's Maisie's sister Edie, who made the grand marriage with the doctor. They came here for a week for their honeymoon, and we killed the great prize *hamel*⁶ just for honour to them. (You can take my word for it, child, we got a shilling enamel dish full of dripping just from his tail, and his inside fat made enough water candles to last the kitchen for more than a month.) It was beautiful meat and made your mouth water to look at it. But would you believe me, the doctor hardly touched it! He said that in summer he preferred to be a veg'tarin; that's an English word that means living on cabbages and such things. For my part, I think if I was meant to eat like that, our dear Lord would have made me a cow – or perhaps a goose. (You never saw anything like a goose for green stuff. That's why I never rear them – you can't keep them out of the garden in the winter, no matter how you fence.) Well, Lulu, you can freely believe me, the doctor never so much as touched that beautiful *schaapvleesch*,⁷ though there was more fat than lean to it, but he filled himself up with strawberries: and Jevrouw Edie – " a reluctant smile hovered for an instant about the large features – "she laughed at both of us, and said she would eat her man's share, as well as her own. She did try, I do believe, but Philip and I, we had nearly the whole of that *schaap* to ourselves, fresh *and* salt."

She paused and looked expectantly at her listener.

"And Dr Brown," remarked the latter, "what did he say about his bride trying to devour fat mutton?"

"Dr Brown," returned Tanta with a heavy sigh of content, "would think that Edie did the right thing if she devoured eels and oysters." She stared reminiscently at the bent, dark head. "And he is no fool, either, or he never would have got Edie. When I was at *nachtmaal* last month, some of my own cousin's children passed me in the street as if they had never seen me before, because they were walking with some store clerks, and carrying bats to go and play tennis with and I wasn't good enough for them. But," she paused impressively to look intently at the calm face raised to examine a stitch by candlelight, "when you mix with ladies it's different. Last time I went to Maritzburg, I couldn't do otherwise but I must stay with the Browns all the time. And there were Edie and her doctor waiting at the station for me with a moto' car, and they treated me just as if I was some *magistraat's* wife, instead

6 Wether.

7 Mutton.

of a simple old *vrouw*. They called me Tanta, and introduced me to all their grand friends. They were not at all ashamed of me.” The old voice had softened humbly. “Edie let me go about the kitchen just as I would, and it was all as clean as in any Boer house. I tried to teach their coolie cook to make *roll-oppjes*, because his mistress loves them, but he got them to draw the fat, so I made them myself. Oh, they handled me well there, and I promised to stay with them every time I go to Maritzburg. That’s why I have not gone since; I don’t want them to tire of me.”

CHAPTER III

*Heart's dearest,
Why dost thou sorrow so?*

"I FANCIED I heard the sound of wheels just now." Lulu lifted her head in a listening attitude. "And – here they are."

She broke off abruptly as a light tap sounded on the upper half of the glass door, and the handle was turned. Tanta had risen to her feet, but before she could reach the door it was flung open, and a girl with a sweet, flower-like face crossed the threshold eagerly, a smile in her blue eyes. She threw her arms round the old lady's neck with a laugh that was half a sob, and kissed her heartily. Tanta held her off with big, firm hands, and scrutinized her somewhat anxiously.

"Quite grown up, you see, Tanta," said the new-comer with a slight blush. "Long skirts – not hobble – hair up – and everything!"

But the old lady regarded the laughing face with a grave shake of the head.

"I hope you are going to be as good as Phyllis and Edie," she said slowly. "They never thought themselves *mooi*,¹ and they were never proud."

"Neither am I," said the girl cheerfully. "I am not a bit proud; and I know that I am – ugly."

Two men had entered the room behind her, and she turned to laugh at them in a pretty, shamefaced way, as she uttered the last word. The older of the two came forward with outstretched hand.

"Tanta remembers me? I am Theunis Meyer's son, and we are distantly related."

"*Ja!* so distantly that you would have to throw a stone a long way to touch it," said the huge old woman, holding out her big, capable hand, and clasping his kindly; "but I am glad to see *mijnheer*?"

"Why '*mijnheer*'?" he asked, with a slow, pleasant smile. "I am still Cornelius, I think."

"*Ja*, child, but you have come to be a *magistraat*," said she simply; "and it is only natural that you should want your title."

"Well I don't, so Tanta mustn't give it to me again."

1 Pretty.

The other man, a finely formed young giant of perhaps six or seven-and-twenty, now turned round from placing his carriage-whip in a corner of the room. He had a pleasant boyish face of somewhat irregular features, with quiet brown eyes in which a world of innate kindness lurked. He was dressed in rough tweed riding clothes, and his whole appearance conveyed the impression of a large reserve of strength. He strode forward now and kissed the old lady as simply as he would have kissed his mother had she been spared to bless his home.

"The cart was late, as usual," he remarked pleasantly. "Were you getting anxious, *moeder*?"

"No child; the time went quickly by," she replied "for Lulu kept me company."

"That was good of Lulu," he said, turning with a smile to the girlish form that had stood, unnoted, by. "Miss Gray, this is my cousin, Mrs Meyer."

"Oh but I know her!" exclaimed the new arrival advancing quickly, with her hand somewhat shyly outstretched, "and I used to call you Lulu," she added in her pretty voice. "You remember when I had the stamp-collecting craze on – years ago – and we corresponded regularly?"

"Five years ago," responded Lulu, somewhat coldly. Then, as the blue eyes looked pleadingly at her own, the muscles of her face relaxed into a slow smile. "I am still Lulu," she said more graciously, and kissed the offered face.

"Now go and wash your hands and face, *lievje*," interposed the old lady, in the tone of one who ordered a child to do something against its will, "and comb your hair straight. Then the coffee will be poured out."

A native maid led the way down a long passage, the girl following, with her wraps trailing behind her. At the doorway she turned to cast a laughing look back to the room. The men watching her smiled involuntarily as they turned and their eyes met. Lulu, her lips pressed together in a tight line, folded the work she had still held, and began to prepare an extra place at the table for the unexpected guest.

An hour later, the supper dispatched, and the table in process of dismantlement, the party crossed the passage to the large, low *zitkamer*. Miss Gray, cramped from her long journey, and perhaps slightly nervous in her new surroundings, moved restlessly about the room, examining the pictures upon the walls – chiefly enlarged portraits of dead-and-gone Meyers, encased in heavy gilt frames. The parents of the present owner of the old farm held the place of honour opposite the door, but enlargements of the grandparents upon both sides of the family, flanked by plush-enshrined photographs of

certain of their progeny, occupied prominent positions upon the walls, and looked coldly upon these people of a strange generation. The only picture in the room was a fearful and wonderful print in striking colours, depicting the battle of Blood River. A few carved brackets supported cheap vases or coloured Christmas cards. The furniture itself, though old, was really excellent and comfortable, while a thick carpet covered the floor. An upright piano, by one of the best makers, stood invitingly open, a large American organ standing sentinel across one corner. The low ceiling was supported by huge dark beams, and the curtains with which Lulu had draped the doors and windows were in excellent taste. The defect of insufficient lighting and sparse ventilation was not noticeable under the bright glare of the high standard lamp.

Lulu had seated herself in the corner of a sofa, and she now regarded the inquisitive figure flitting about the room with some curiosity, and, perhaps, a little disfavour.

The girl had come to a standstill before the picture of the Blood River fight, and was regarding it with astonished eyes.

"The man who painted that," she remarked thoughtfully, "must have had 'a soul devoid of art.'"

There was no reply, and, turning round, she found the eyes of them all unconsciously regarding her. Tanta was sitting upright in an uneasy, straight-backed seat, especially arrogated to her own use; the magistrate occupied a huge armchair near the piano, while the two others sat upon the sofa.

She blushed a little, and said contritely: "I am afraid I have been rather rude."

"You have been *ongeschik², lievje*," said the old lady with a large indulgence; but you will improve when you have been here a little while."

A quick glance of merriment flashed across the girl's face as she surveyed them all.

"What shall I do to expiate my sin?" she asked; you do look so very dull."

"You can play the piano, if you like," said Tanta with a gracious concession of favour. "Some people object to music, but I care nothing about it one way or another, so I don't mind."

"Neither do I," said Cornelius Meyer, with a laugh, as he drew out the piano stool. "May we have some of that rag-time please?"

She sat down before the instrument, and immediately broke into a quick, spirited march with a martial, bracing movement that brought an involuntary

2 Impolite.

smile to the lips. That was succeeded by a dreamy, swinging waltz tune, and at the request for “more” and yet more she played steadily on for the better part of half an hour. Then she glided into a simple, Swedish reverie that slid from under her fingers with a soft, haunting rhythm, and ended in a plaintive theme which clung about the air long after its last notes had floated away.

Cornelius Meyer opening his eyes with a sigh, as she turned round upon the piano stool.

“Thank you, Miss Gray,” he said quietly. “I had not heard that for many years – more years than I care to remember.”

“I found it among my mother’s music,” said Maisie quietly; “it had belonged to a very dear friend of hers. Will you play now, Lulu?” She rose from her seat, and regarded the other with a smile.

“Not to-night, thanks,” said Lulu briefly.

Maisie turned to the old lady.

“I am tired,” she said, in suddenly depressed tones. “Please, Tanta, may I go to bed?”

An hour later every light in the old house was extinguished, and only one figure was about and restless during the watches of the night. In a small, dark bedroom, the lattice window was thrown back on its hinges, and Lulu Meyer, kneeling on the old, covered wagon-box that served as window-seat, gazed out at the waving tree-tops that came between her view and the starlit sky.

So still she sat, so silent and motionless, that she might have been carved from stone, and her eyes wide and dark, might have been lost in awed contemplation of Nature’s majesty. The first faint streak of dawn was about the world, and the morning breeze struck chill upon her as she turned from the window.

“Oh God!” she whispered, and the words were uttered as a prayer. “Oh God! God!”

CHAPTER IV

*'Tis no time to jest,
And therefore frame your manners to the time*

SOME six or seven years previous to the opening of this true record of events, evil days had fallen upon Tanta, for she had been widowed and left desolate by the removal of her spouse, who, in all their joint lives, had never crossed her will, nor questioned one act of her doing. A gentle, quiet old man, with a pliant, somewhat weak nature, he had been pleasantly guided and directed by the stronger spirit at his side, meekly quiescent and willing to leave in her firm keeping the reins of the homestead government. Childless themselves, they had adopted an orphaned nephew as the heir to their simple estate, and he had come into legal possession of the farm at the old man's death. A certain portion of the flocks and herds belonged strictly to the widow, and until her death the profits of the place were to be charged with an appreciable percentage on her behalf. These were saving clauses insisted upon, and inserted by the agent-at-law, who had arranged the affairs of the old couple. They, in their simple faith, had been willing to sign all their substance away, to the satisfaction of their adopted son, who, in return for their whole-hearted devotion and care, truly revered and loved the only parents he had ever known.

But when the old place came into his possession he had gone a-wooing, and from the neighbourhood of the City, he had brought back, as his wife, a young person of some education, and with ideas in advance of the simple country folk among whom her lot in life was to be cast. Almost from the first moment of her arrival she had set out a process of revolutionising the home and its inhabitants. At her ceaseless instigation certain walls were pulled down and passages introduced in the house; the floors of *ouklip*¹ were dug up and boards laid down; while the roofing of thatch was torn off, with corrugated iron erected as its substitute.

Tanta, in her self-centered grief for her dead mate, perhaps out of regard for the feelings of her adopted son, made no demur at the dismantling of her old home. With her own strong sense, she realised also that in any dispute between herself and the determined young lady who had now complete sway where she herself had reigned for so long, she would inevitably fall upon

1 Ground stone.

the losing side. She bore, therefore, with silence, the changed temperature of the house, consequent upon the iron roof, which made summer hotter and winter colder than had obtained in the old days of the comfortable thatch, though the rain pattering upon the zinc at nights would keep her awake for hours at a stretch. The uprooting of her fuchsia trees and geraniums, with their company of other sweet, old-fashioned flowers, hurt her like a physical blow, and the wealth of new lawn which soon covered the ground in their stead, in no wise compensated for their loss. Even the English cookery was passed by without comment, and unsweetened pumpkin and other plain boiled vegetables partaken of with mute disapproval. Quaker oats porridge – a sinful extravagance where good mealie pap cost nothing and tasted better – was consumed, and no remark made upon its appearance at the breakfast-table. But much to the secret anxiety of her nephew, the old lady's step grew slower, and her demeanour less assured and domineering, while she seemed to lose her grip upon the interests of life.

For two long years the new-comer queened it with undisputed authority over the little kingdom she had claimed as her own. Then she overstepped the mark and deprived her *ménage* of the voluntary and unstinted monetary assistance which her husband's aunt and benefactress had so freely accorded. For she turned her attention to the old lady herself, and set about a sweeping reform in the matter of the latter's clothing. To obviate offence to the young matron's sense of gentility, the snowy aprons were set aside without demur, and as she surveyed the unprotected folds of her black dress, Tanta lived in a continual dread of soiling the beauty of the cashmere by grease stains or other homely marks. The ugly moleskin *hand-moffjes* also gave place to a large pair of men's riding-gloves, which were clumsy and uncomfortable to wear till the fingers were cut off, when they promptly refused to keep firm upon the hands.

But when the ambitious climber of the social ladder provided smart little lavender betrimmed lace caps for house wear, and forbade the use of the old, beloved, time-honoured, black *kapje* out of doors, the utmost limit of human endurance had been reached. Tanta could bear no more. So it befell that one day, arousing herself from the stupor which had enveloped her intrepid spirit, she shook herself free from the thralldom she had so long undergone, and packed her belongings, tramping about the house in her old masterful way, and gathering her personal belongings together.

“You may think – and with good reason after all I have undergone at your hands – that you have a mean *ezel*² to deal with, but I am not such an old fool as you take me for. Because you went to the Government School in Maritzburg, and stayed for three years at a back street boarding-house, you think you have turned English! And did you ever hear of an Engelschman who tried to turn Boer, or anything else but his own thieving nationality? No! That’s the one good thing you can say of them – they are not ashamed of their nation – mean and all as it is! But as soon as a Boer of your class can say ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ he begins to speak of ‘home’ when he talks of England, and sets all the Scotch and Irish laughing at him – because they are as bad themselves. *Mijn lieve land!*”

She turned upon the astonished lady of the house, her arms full of white starched aprons and snowy muslin ties which she had herself been “doing up” in the kitchen.

“What do you get by it? *Jij is een Boer vrouw* – you will never be anything else, or look anything else, as long as you live. But if you could, you would forget your own mother-tongue. Here you have made me eat Engelsche, drink Engelsche, sleep Engelsche for two years, and now you would have me dress Engelsche. Me! *Mijn Hemel*, if I give in any more you’ll be having me put on the indecent Engelsche dresses with the breast cut open. But thank our dear Lord, I am still a Boer as far as that goes. I am not an English-woman yet, *nor* a Kafir maid, for both nations are equal in that – the women like to show their naked bosom to the men. *Ach! Sis!*”

A few days later, her nephew, with lowering brow and remorseful heart, listened to her exhortations as he drove her the many miles of rough road, stationwards – advice as to how to work the farm to the best advantage, manage her own stock, and above all cherish the wife of his bosom before all things earthly. It was characteristic of the honest old heart that she had many appreciative and kindly words to say of the woman who had made her own pathway rugged and uneven.

So it came about that Tanta, in search of a new home, visited many of her relations in turn, making it known that where she settled she would also take her just share in household expenditure, yet reserving the right to leave her still considerable substance to whom she herself chose.

In her self-constituted search she had travelled over a considerable part of Natal, until, a year ago, she had quietly domiciled herself with the recently

2 Donkey.

orphaned son of a distant cousin of her husband's. With no stated arrangements, and no spoken words on the subject, it was yet tacitly understood that Tanta had now found the home that would be hers till she would require earthly shelter no longer.

CHAPTER V

*If you ask me why –
Sufficeth, my reasons are both good and weighty*

“SUNDAY may be a day of rest for the men,” Tanta was remarking with some irascibility, as Maisie entered the kitchen the morning after her arrival; “but for us women it is the hardest day of all. While they lie round on the *stoep* smoking, and bragging about their dogs and horses, or grumbling at the crops our *lieve Heere* has granted them, we have to sweat in the kitchen over the big dinner and the puddings for their eating. Good morning *lievje*.” She turned slowly around and looked at the girl.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you, Tanta. May I help?”

“Not in that dress,” returned the old lady as she carefully washed the fowls that she was dressing for the day’s dinner. She made an exhaustive survey of the pretty morning costume. “I hope you won’t wear white too often, child,” she said anxiously. “My *strijk-meid*¹ is an impudent hussy, and she skimps the work when she gets too much to do.”

“I’ll iron my dresses myself Tanta,” answered Maisie serenely; “and then I can wear what I like.”

“Surely,” returned the old lady with unctuous satisfaction. “I am glad you have been brought up to know the use of your own two hands.” She stepped with her heavy tread to the inner door and looked down the short passage leading to the dining-room, then returned to her table with a meaning glance at the girl. “I want you to make friends with Lulu,” she said rapidly, in a low tone. “I am troubled about the child, for she is young to have the look of one who is tired of life. She had already lost her two babies before I came here, yet her face didn’t look as it does now. She seems a creature without hope and without belief ... There is something that troubles me by day, and keeps me awake by night.”

She looked furtively over her shoulder, and her voice sank to a low whisper, “I am feared for her soul, *mij hartje*,” she breathed. “Her mother was *Roomsch*² and so was she herself till she came here and got converted. Before Andries

1 Laundry-maid.

2 Roman Catholic.

taught her to believe the truth, she was almost a heathen, and worshipped our Lord's mother, and all his followers, good and bad. She came to this division of *gouvernante*³ to the *magistraat's* children."

"That was when she corresponded with me about stamps," said Maisie. I was at school at the time, and she used to give me such lovely stamps."

"*Ja, kind*,⁴ but don't interrupt," corrected the old lady gently. "Always let your *ouders* speak first."

"Excuse, Tanta," said the girl, smiling and blushing.

"Surely, child. Well, I was telling you that she was governess to the magistrate's children. (Dear Lord, they were spoilt *goed* if all one hears is true. It's mean of parents to spoil their own offspring.) And there Philip Meyer met her. She was *mooi* – she's good to look at yet – and he married her right away in spite of the upbringing she had had. His father would have turned him off rather than let him marry a *Roomsch*, but she converted for Philip's sake."

Mindful of the rebuke she had just received, Maisie waited in silence while the old lady placed the fowls in the baking dish, and began spreading lard upon their breasts. Then she asked softly:

"And have they been happy?"

"I don't know, child. I tell you I don't like the look on her face. It was not so when I came here first, though they had had bad luck in plenty – if you can talk of 'luck' when all things are arranged for us by an Almighty power. But Philip lost all his cattle from tick fever, and he has not been too successful with his store. That's natural enough anyhow, for I've never yet met a Boer who could keep a store properly, except one – and he ate the profits up on sweets. He was my brother-in-law's nephew's son, and was as *slim* in storekeeping as any Engelschman."

"Lulu had two children, but they died one after the other. As for Philip," and the old lips settled in a firm line, "he is wild and godless, and wholly unlike his father, who was a good man, with a light that shone behind no bushel. He died before I came here, but I have heard them say that he wept tears of grief over Philip's marriage, and even after she was converted he always prayed for her as a brand plucked from the burning. When she heard about it, she was ungrateful enough to be *kwaad*.⁵"

"And her husband?"

3 Governess.

4 Child.

5 Angry.

“Her husband,” said Tanta sternly, “is a godless sinner, and he laughs at everything – conversion and prayers and Lulu’s anger as well. *Lieve land!* you never know what you bring your children up for. Old Andries Meyer was a very pious man, and reared his children in the proper way, hiding the sins of the world from them, and feeding their souls with the Bible even before they could read. He was a patriot also, and he pointed out the wickedness of the British nation to his family from time to time. Up till the day of his death he fought for the Taal, and kept his own children in fear and respect of him.”

“Don’t you think – perhaps” – suggested the girl timidly – “that he was a little too stern with them?”

“No, child! How could he be too stern? If you spare the rod, you hate the child. He loved his children, for he led them along the paths of righteousness, and he gave each one a farm and a good start in life, though there were eleven to provide for. They have all turned out well – all but Philip – and Andries will soon fill his father’s place in the *kerk*. But Philip has followed the ways of the world. He goes to races, and gambles over horses, and goes into drinking bars. *Ach!* He is a wild man, and I don’t wonder that his family is ashamed of him.”

The inner door opened, and Lulu, her face pale and drawn, with dark circles under her eyes, came into the kitchen.

You haven’t slept well,” remarked the old lady, after the first greeting, as she wiped her hands on a kitchen cloth. “No, you can’t help me! I like to work with the food myself, then I know it’s clean. But after breakfast you might take Maisie about with you. Show her all over the house when the maids have cleaned up and take her out to the garden and orchard when the dew is off the grass.”

“But I must go home after breakfast, Tanta,” returned the younger woman in her low, subdued tone. “Philip will expect me.”

“Well, take the child with you,” returned the old lady with ponderous good-humour, “I can’t be *opgeskeep*⁶ with her to-day.”

With quick intuition of the kindly intent, Maisie turned to Lulu and laughed shyly.

“Won’t you please take me off Tanta’s hands?” she asked, her face colouring brightly. “I should love to come, and – Tanta is tired of me already.”

An involuntary, answering smile lurked for an instant round Lulu’s lips. She held out a thin, white hand to the girl.

“Come to the front veranda and look at the ferns,” she said kindly.

6 Inconvenienced.

An hour later, when Tanta emerged to the high *stoep* to summon the two to the morning meal, she found the ferns, with their delicate fronds of tender green yet quivering from their early douche of water, left to their own cool glory in the grateful shade. The morning was astir with the piercing scream of the *sonbeestjes*, the twittering of wild canaries and the fluttering of a light breeze among the branches of the eucalypti. Tanta emerged to the topmost step, and looked around. The land was flooded with golden sunlight, the air sweet with the mingled perfumes of mignonette, roses in full bloom and southernwood. To the left of the house, and separated from the flower garden by a thick hedge of bananas, lay an old orchard, the green apples and tiny woolly peaches nodding at the spiked pine plants, which gave off a faint, sweet odour from their ripening fruit. To the right lay the stables and outbuildings, the drive sweeping past them, and beyond, to the open road. The veld, reaching right up to the wire fence, around the big front garden, stretched away, undulating, in a very ecstasy of verdure, to meet the vivid blue of the cloud-bespecked sky.

From the orchard at the other side of the bananas came the sound of voices, accompanied by a low musical laugh that struck pleasantly upon the ear.

“Lulu!” soliloquized the old woman. “Laughing already! That child always was a *zonnebloem*.”⁷

7 Sunflower.

CHAPTER VI

LITTLE more than a mile from the home of Philip Meyer the younger, lay that of his cousin and namesake, Philip the storekeeper, husband of Lulu, erstwhile Roman Catholic and present-day convert. The road between the two places lay through a great full-grown wattle plantation, which reached right up to the backyard of the old farm. The path was well trodden and soft to the footfall, covered with decayed leaf-mould. The tree-tops met overhead and provided a grateful shade that kept the ground moist and the atmosphere cool upon the hottest summer's day.

"How refreshing it is in here!" exclaimed Maisie, as they entered the plantation, and she removed her big hat to raise her eyes to the interlaced boughs overhead. Her face was flushed and her breath quick from the short passage under the blaze of the sun. She turned to her companion.

"You don't seem to feel the heat at all," she said in a palpably injured tone, "while my clothes seem too tight everywhere, and cling to me all over like — like eels." She paused for a moment to consider, with some dissatisfaction, her own metaphor. Her companion smiled.

"I keep thinking, of running streams," she resumed, "and waterfalls, and trickling springs covered with maidenhair fern, and cold baths—"

"You had a cold bath just before we left," interposed Lulu.

"Well it left me hotter than ever," she replied tartly. "There isn't a breath of air down there at the house. You simply swelter. Now, under these lovely trees—"

"These 'lovely trees' are to blame for the very breathlessness that you complain about," interrupted Lulu once more, with the air of reproving a spoilt child. "They catch the breeze that would be waving round about the house, and cooling life generally." They paced side by side along the path. "But you can comfort yourself with the thought that they will soon to be levelled," she added. "This plantation has to be stripped next winter."

"What a pity that seems!" returned the girl as she swung her hat to and fro.

"Philip won't feel at all sentimental about it," said her companion. "The plantation is worth some thousands of pounds."

With desultory chat they wended their way slowly along, the trees upon either side stretching in long, unbroken rows, their straight, clear stems

reaching upward to the network of feathery boughs crowned on high with golden blossom that emitted a sweet, too penetrating perfume.

Their path came abruptly to the open at a small iron gate set in a wire boundary fence, and the home of Lulu, relieved by scarcely a tree or a shrub, lay open to the blazing sun. A signboard facing a wide public road which ran past the house on its farther side was erected upon two poles, and therefore presented its back view to them. The building was shaped like huge T, the top portion being evidently utilised for some public purpose, the longer part, nearest to them, having the appearance of a dwelling-house.

"We keep the store here," said Lulu, in answer to the girl's look of interest. "Did you know?"

"Yes, I knew," returned her companion, adjusting the big hat on top her fair head. "Tanta said something about it."

"My husband disliked farming," said the woman slowly. "He lost his cattle from tick fever, and his mules from horse-sickness, so he sold his ground."

Her brow had become clouded, and the subject seemed a distasteful one, so they paced the rest of the way over the short veld grass in silence.

Sounds of loud laughter, intermingled with the monotonous strain from a concertina, came from the direction of the house. The woman led the way to the zinc-covered veranda towards which the track directly led. Pots of dejected-looking begonias and half-withered fuchsias shared the wall space with a few old paraffin tins filled with dry, cracked earth, some of them still retaining bunches of black spiked stems that had once been ferns of fresh loveliness.

As Lulu tried the door, and the girl looked around, a vague depression settled upon her, and clouded for the moment her half-petulant, half-laughing mood. The iron roof overhead was vitiating the air with a sweltering, blistering heat, while the cement of the floor felt hot to the touch of the feet where the sun slanted in upon it. But it was not the discomfort of the atmosphere which told upon the girl's spirits and checked the smile in her eyes. Abnormally sensitive to outside surroundings, she felt keenly the air of neglect which spoke so loudly around her, not only from the untidy flower-stands but from the carelessly draped, soiled windows which gave outlook upon the veranda. Something like keen disappointment in her new friend filled her understanding as she noted with criticising blue eyes the unwashed panes, the torn blind, and bedraggled curtains of the French door before which they stood. The woman tried the handle and knocked once or twice without avail.

"We shall have to go round by the back," she said then, a frown settling upon her face. "Do you mind dear?"

“Of course not,” said the girl hastily.

As they retraced their steps and walked around the building, the noise of the laughter seemed doubled, while the monotonous throb-throb of the lower notes of a concertina wheezed out a few bars of music over and over again with exhausting persistence. Their appearance round the corner of the house, where a tank leaked and formed its own pool of mud, was at first unnoted by the actors who revelled in sinuous sensual glee. A native *umfaan*, sitting upon an empty candle-box, manipulated the musical instrument, while a couple of girls, dressed in European garb, with bent, twisting bodies, and arms hung loosely before them, danced and swung to the strain. The ribald laughter came from a group of natives who squatted on their haunches, and made open remarks upon the limbs of the performers – also from the lips of a white man, who stood, pipe in mouth, and one hand in the pocket of his light lounge coat, watching the *tableau* with keenly critical eyes.

The musician was the first to notice the intrusion of the white women, and his performance ended with a sudden squeak, while he arose sheepishly to his feet. The group of the natives also suddenly ceased their laughter, and their master turned in some surprise.

A man of striking personality, with a tall, well-knit, athletic frame, a face of unusual beauty of feature, and an expression of debonair good-humour, he well deserved the sobriquet of “*mooi*¹ Philip” which had been bestowed upon him, and distinguished him from the personality of his plainer, more ordinary cousin. Of a sunny temperament and laughter-loving nature, a general air pervaded the man of being on the best of terms with himself and with the world in general. Friends without number had Philip, for his very faults were such as might be condoned or smiled at, while his open and very real generosity was sufficient to silence the carping of such as might have cavilled at the hidden peccadilloes of which he was more than suspected.

Still laughing, as he turned from the group of dusky forms, he advanced to meet the girls with his hat in his hand and his crisp brown hair bared to the sunlight. Whipping this pipe from his mouth, he bent and tenderly kissed his wife.

“Glad to see you back, darling,” he said and the tone of his voice was in itself a caress. “Did you enjoy yourself? I nearly came over for you last night.”

His wife received him but coldly.

1 Good-looking.

"This is Miss Gray," she said somewhat ungraciously, in the queerly repressed manner which had fallen once more upon her.

"I hope Miss Gray will be happy here," returned the man with a winning smile as he took the girl's hand in a firm, pleasant clasp, and looked with undisguised admiration at the delicately coloured face.

They moved slowly towards the back door, the group of dusky forms dispersing from before them. One of the dancers had slunk into the kitchen, but the other, a good-looking girl clad with some pretension in figured muslin which now hung damp and limp about her, stood her ground, her hands resting upon her hips, her eyes fixed boldly upon the white women, with more than a suspicion of insolence in their gaze. Although she stood immediately in their path to the door, she made no movement, and Maisie, in whose way she was directly placed, was obliged perforce to take a step behind the others. The quick blood mantled in the girl's cheeks, and in a flash of temper she said as she passed the strongly redolent figure:

"*Sakubona, nkosigazi.*"²

An insolent laugh answered her as she walked on in the wake of the husband and wife. Lulu was looking up at her spouse, a very passion of protest blazing from her eyes.

"I thought I asked you not to bring her here," she uttered in a fierce, impassioned whisper. "Have you no feeling? My God have you no conscience?"

A shamed expression crossed the man's face – the look a child involuntarily assumes when caught in some boyish misdemeanour. He flushed to the roots of his sunny brown hair.

"H-sh!" he whispered below his breath, glancing over the shoulder at the girl. Two pink spots burned in his wife's thin cheeks for an instant, and her lips trembled beyond control as she crossed the threshold. He stood aside and let the guest pass in before him, then stepped out to the yard again, and said a few rapid words to the *kolwa*³ girl who still stood defiant and insolent. She gave a short mirthless laugh as he spoke, but picking up her scarlet head-dress from the ground, she turned and left for the open road.

Maisie looked about her with frankly inquisitive eyes when they had entered the darkened interior of the house, for the closed doors and the shaded windows, from which the green blinds had not been raised – seemingly from very neglect – gave a curiously unhomelike note to the place. She followed Lulu down a passage which led to the front of the house, and into a large

2 Good-morning, Madame.

3 Christianised.

untidy bedroom to the right. Before removing her hat Lulu raised the window-blinds with a clatter, and threw up the sashes to their full extent.

"Take your things off, Maisie," she said then, turning her pale face to the girl with a faint smile," and I shall send in some spring water to cool your hands and face. You do look so very warm."

"I *am* hot," agreed the girl, drawing off her long gloves, finger by finger, "but it's mostly temper. I should have loved to knock that girl down. You look as pale as a ghost, and as cool as a cucumber. I see now the sense of those long white gowns of yours.

"Yes!" said the woman hastily, and left the room.

A few minutes later, Maisie heard her voice speaking in low, angry tones, in the midst of a clatter of dishes from the kitchen. The maid, who had slunk into the house at the approach of her mistress, appeared presently with a large jug of fresh water, clear and cool, which she emptied into the basin.

"*Sakubona nkosasana!*"⁴ she said respectfully, and barely awaiting the "*Ehe!*" with which her greeting was acknowledged, she hurried from the room again. The *umfaan*, who had so lately acted as a musician, passed the open bedroom door with a tray of dirty dishes, hurrying kitchenwards, and shortly reappeared with a broom and duster in his hands, making for the room opposite, whence he could soon be heard knocking the furniture as he swept vigorously. Maisie's lips had taken a grave setting, and the pretty, impertinent expression had died out of her eyes as she slowly removed her huge hat and then bathed face and arms. But when Lulu entered the room again, her gloves in her hand, and a troubled frown on her brow, she turned with a laugh, the water dripping from the hair around her forehead.

"This is delicious, Lulu," she said passing her hand over her wet face. "I do believe it comes from a real spring, for there's a leaf of cress in the water."

"Yes, dear, we have a real spring in a kloof near by. The water is nearly ice cold, and it is covered with cresses."

"I love water-cress," said Maisie, with a plaintive suggestiveness, as she picked up a towel.

"You shall have some for your dinner," Lulu assured her with a little smile.

"Thanks, dear! Will that be very long?"

A quick laugh parted Lulu's lips, and sent the frown from her brow.

"It will be a good while yet," she said; "but we shall have a cup of tea presently."

4 "Good-morning, miss."

"Thanks," repeated the girl demurely. "It seems hours ago since we had breakfast, and we have walked miles since then."

"One mile and a quarter," supplemented Lulu, brushing her hair before the glass; "but I shall be glad of the tea, too".

When they crossed the passage into the little sitting-room, the boy had already reduced the place to some semblance of order, and only a fine mist of dust which was settling on the chairs and tables, testified to the recent hasty cleansing which the room had experienced. Lulu was drawing out a little rocking-chair for the girl's behoof when her husband appeared in the doorway, with a tin of cake in one hand, and a paper package in the other. He threw them hastily upon the table and hurried forward.

"Let me do that, *hartje*,"⁵ he said, quickly taking the chair from her. "You shouldn't pull things about like that," he added, below his breath in the Dutch language.

His wife turned away from him silently, though a quiver passed over her face – perhaps at the sublime tenderness of his tone. Maisie's blue eyes were shadowed for an instance as she sank into the chair, and she looked at the fair, boyish face of her young host with something akin to pity and sympathy in her gaze.

A quick flush mounted to his brow as he met the kindly look, and he smiled into the pretty blue eyes.

5 Sweetheart.

CHAPTER VII

The soft rustle of a maiden's gown

THE AFTERNOON was well advanced when Cornelius Meyer, and his cousin, Philip the younger, arrived at the store to take charge of Maisie on her homeward way. The sun was nearing the western horizon as, after an hour's recreation, which the breezy, happy personality of their young host had made to pass swiftly and pleasantly, they left for the old farm.

Lulu and her husband parted from their Sunday guests with some reluctance.

"Come again very soon, dearie," said Lulu as she kissed the girl's pretty, rounded cheek.

"Come soon, Miss Gray," echoed Philip, shaking her warmly by the hand. "You have done Lulu a world of good," he added in an undertone. "I am most grateful to you."

They strolled gently homewards, across the waving veld grass. When they passed through the small gate, and turned while Philip made it fast once more with the piece of broken wire that served as a latch, they stood as with one accord, and looked backward at the scene they were to leave upon entering the plantation.

The sun shone obliquely across the broken country, which, for hundreds of miles square, lay between them and the distant horizon – hills and vales, and kopjes and krantzes innumerable, with here and there a mountain that rose sheer from the depths of a valley, its southern slope covered with wild vegetation and bush, its northern side bare and unfertile. A bluish haze hung over all, with the curious hushed silence of the country Sabbath, broken at intervals by the tinkle of a goatbell or the bleat of a motherless lamb at a native kraal hard by, though not within sight. No picturesque herds of native cattle met the eye, and no lowing of kine greeted the ear, for the destructive tick fever had swept the location bare, and forced the young men out to work for the price of their wives.

The big white main road, by the side of which stood the store of galvanised iron, with its dwelling-house attached, lay for many miles as a boundary-line between the rugged, broken ground which constituted the native location and was termed "half-thorn veld," and the richer, pleasanter, and more pastoral country upon which they were entering.

They stood silent a while, the older man gazing across the valley, the younger looking with intent, kindly eyes at the girl who seemed unaware of his very existence. A subdued expression settled upon her face as she gazed at the lights and shades of the scene before her; then she quoted softly:

*There was a wide wandering for the greediest eye
To peer upon variety;
Far round the horizon's crystal air to skim,
And trace the dwindled edgings of its brim.*

Cornelius brought his gaze from the far distance to the sweet, serious face at his side. She lifted her eyes to his, and it might have been a certain shy appeal in their depths which prompted him in a momentary spirit of mischief to continue:

*Were I in such a place, I sure would pray
That naught less sweet might call my thoughts away
Than the soft rustle of a maiden's gown
Fanning away the dandelion's down;
Than the light music of her nimble toes
Patting against the sorrel as she goes.*

"There's no sorrel here," remarked Philip gravely, his brown eyes turning from one to the other. "It grows well nearer the coast, but here it doesn't ripen properly."

Cornelius looked kindly at the young fellow, and he smiled with affectionate good-humour. "I'm afraid you are material-minded, Phil," said he, with quiet humour.

But Maisie had turned petulantly away from him, and he glanced ruefully from her averted profile to his cousin's inscrutable face.

"You are, then, a lover of Keats?" she asked, glancing up at the elder man with keen appreciation. "A copy of his poems was sent to me on my last birthday by a very dear friend whom I have not seen since I was a little child."

"A copy was lent me many years ago," said he, looking past her at the rays of sunshine which fell aslant across the valley, "and I – never returned it."

A momentary shade crossed his face, and it might have been a sigh which he checked with a quick breath, as he turned to the plantation. His glance strayed no more to the prettily coloured face under the flapping chip hat, and he kept studiously in the background during the pleasant walk home, leaving to Philip the willing task of whiling the way with cheerful, desultory chat.

Late that night Cornelius had occasion to go to his cousin's room. "Why, what on earth are you up to?" he asked in astonishment.

The lad sat, divested of coat and boots, his braces hanging loosely over his breeches. His head was held between his hands as he studied intently an old ragged volume which lay open on the table before him.

"What are you doing?" repeated Cornelius, looking over the boy's shoulders at the battered coverless Longfellow.

"I'm learning poetry," he replied ruefully, and somewhat shamefacedly, glancing up at the splendid face above him in the half fear that he might be laughed at. But the older man would rather have struck him. He put his hand kindly on his cousin's shoulder. "Does it take you that way, my son?" he asked, and there was no smile in his eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

And make her bear the penance of her tongue

"I MUST look for music pupils now," said Maisie with a sigh as she set down her empty cup at the breakfast-table the next morning.

The young host, from his seat at the head of the board, looked quickly and expectantly at the old lady seated on the right.

"There is no need for music pupils," said Tanta brusquely; "and I want you here myself."

The girl's face clouded.

"Tanta is very good," she said quietly, "but I would be very much happier if I might work. I was trained for it, and I understood Tanta to say that Mrs Andries Meyer was willing to give me her children as music pupils."

"That could easily be cancelled," said Philip hastily; "and I am like Tanta – I don't see the need of your teaching at all."

"You are very kind," replied she, smiling, "but indeed there is need."

"Are you so fond of work?" asked Cornelius from across the table, his brown eyes looking quizzically at the doubtful face.

"No," she replied with a quick laugh, "I hate work, but – I have a grasping nature."

"I see," returned he gravely.

"What does that mean?" asked the old lady, whose knowledge of the English language was strictly limited.

"It means," said Maisie in the Taal, "that I am lazy, but I have to work because I love to get money and save it up."

"I am glad that you are careful of the *geld*,¹ *mijn kind*," returned Tanta in all good faith. "Young people nowadays spend too much money on clothes, and when I saw your white dresses, and your hats, and all the useless *goedjes*² that came out of your boxes, I feared you might be wasteful too."

Two pairs of masculine eyes regarded the girl's flushed face with open amusement. She flashed back a scornful defiance at them.

"I am sure Miss Gray is very saving," remarked Cornelius smoothly. "She wouldn't spend money if she had it."

1 Money.

2 Little things.

"Not on diamond rings, anyhow, snapped that young lady with a glare at the solitaire which adorned the last speaker's little finger.

"I said so," murmured he meekly.

"But about my music pupils," she resumed with a pointed disregard of the last remark. "How far is it to Andries Meyer's, and how many children has he?"

"One mile, and nine," replied Cornelius, folding his serviette.

"That makes ten, I should say," returned she sharply.

"Not so," drawled Cornelius. "You asked two questions."

"He means," interposed Philip, "that Andries lives one mile from here, and he has nine children."

"But there's only four of the children that go to school," explained Tanta. "The others are too big and too little. Lena teaches them lessons; she is the eldest after Conrad. But if you take my advice you'll stay at home and be my daughter, and leave the teaching alone."

"I can be Tanta's daughter just the same," she returned, placing her hand upon the big forearm beside her. "And I must do something to justify my existence. Tanta will remember that I always got into mischief when I had nothing to do."

"You did," said the old woman, feelingly, "and when you worked as well. You took the iron once and burned a hole in my man's best white breast-shirt, when my back was turned only for a moment. And another time you turned on the tap and let all the water run out of the tank in winter time, because you took a fancy to clean the brick drain. That was at your own home, and the *amakolwas*³ had to carry all the water from the *spruit* half a mile away, at the bottom of the hill, till the rainy season came on. *Mijn lieve land!* they did bless you, but" – in a tone of rich satisfaction – "it did their souls good, the lazy *duivels*."

Her three listeners tittered irrepressibly, but almost before the laugh had subsided, the old lady was bending solemnly over the empty place, in the attitude of devotion. "Thank the Lord," she said, low and fervently, "for His goodness and mercy, and the rich blessings He has showered upon us. Amen."

As they rose with one accord, she said to the men: "I see no harm in letting the child have her way. If she really wishes to work, it is a proper spirit, and one we have no right to interfere with. But I have the butter to wash, and the

3 Christianised natives.

week's clothes to give out, so I can't take her. Have you to go to the *kantoor*⁴ to-day Cornelius?"

"No, Tanta. I take over to-morrow from Mr Ross."

"Well, go and get your hat, child, and put on a pair of thick *hand-moffjes*; the sun will be very hot. Cornelius will walk over with you."

The girl's eyebrows were raised quizzically to the man at the arbitrary ordering of his pursuits. He smiled back at her.

"We are both going with you, Miss Gray," he said with an answering gesture. "Philip has to see Andries about a dog, or a gun, or something."

A few minutes later they were walking in single file along the narrow path which led past the stables, and across the veld to their destination. The grass was of the rough, *koperdraat*⁵ variety, clumpy and unpleasant to walk upon, hard and unnutritious for the stock. Philip walked in front, the girl going between.

"I'm going to plough up this whole *bult*," he called back to Cornelius, "and put it under *paspalum*."

"The sooner the quicker," replied the latter, flicking the wiry spikes with the long native walking-stick which he carried.

"When did you see Andries last?" resumed the leader over his shoulder.

"Ages – nearly fifteen years – ago," was the reply.

"Well," Philip stepped out of the path, and came abreast with the girl, lowering his voice as he spoke, "take my advice and be rather careful. Andries is a bit peculiar. He is an ambitious man – as proud as Lucifer – and yet more religious than a parson. He has managed to fall out with every magistrate we have had during the past ten years, and has ridden pretty roughshod over some of them, so it would behove you to mind your p's and q's, for no relationship would restrain Andries if once he took offence."

"I have heard about him, of course," returned Cornelius. "He is somewhat of a patriot, isn't he?"

"Somewhat?" echoed Philip. "You underestimate our cousin. He is a red-hot racist, and can see good in nothing that has British blood in its veins. Above all, he is a stickler for the Taal, and pounces on any Boer who speaks a word of English in the house. So it will be well for you to remember that; speak Russian, or German, or Hebrew if you like, but leave English alone. He

4 Court.

5 Wiry.

spoke his mind to the *predikant* once because his children said ‘good morning’ to him, instead of ‘*goede morgen*.’”

“What a pleasant sort of man Andries must be,” remarked the girl thoughtfully.

“He can be very unpleasant, Miss Gray, and he is prejudiced against the British language. I am glad you speak Dutch so well,” he added, his eyes resting on her with quiet delight.

“So am I,” she said, with a quick smile. “I have some dear friends among the Dutch, whom I would not exchange for a whole shipload of Britishers from overseas; and I am glad to know their language.”

Midway between the two farms they reached the summit of the hill and emerged upon a well-used by-road, with the tracks of wheels on either side and the usual middle ridge of grass in the centre. Maisie eyed with some disfavour the ruts made by the wagon wheels, then chose, herself, the Kaffir footpath running parallel with the road. A red-brick house of some pretension to style stood back from the highway to their left, a couple of furlongs ahead, a well-kept drive leading up to the outhouses and then on to the front door.

“Now that’s what I can’t understand in you Afrikanders,” said she, waving a comprehensive hand towards the homestead before her. “You nearly always come to the stables and wagon sheds before you reach the house. What’s that for?”

“Because you off-saddle at the stable, of course,” said Cornelius, with lofty condescension; “and then you go on to the house. You don’t expect your horse to be shown into the best *zitkamer*, surely? I am surprised at your ignorance.”

“You had better not make any remarks like that before Andries,” interposed Philip here.

“This is a new house, and they are all very proud of it.”

“That’s why it looks so nasty and bare then,” she said. “I wondered why there were no trees to be seen. Whose farm is that across the *spruit*?”

“That’s their old home,” replied he; “but the house is low and old-fashioned, so they moved to this side and set up the new place.”

“Well each one to his own taste,” said Maisie serenely. “I’m beginning to like your Cousin Andries more and more.”

A very little later, they were hailed in the clean farmyard by a chorus of barks from a crowd of pointers and terriers that snapped around their heels, all indifferent to the shouts and admonitions of the native servants. A number of children ran across the yard, and dived head foremost into the back door of the house, from which presently issued a tall, angular man of loose limbs,

wearing a suit of striped tweed. As he advanced towards them, and while he was being introduced to her as the master of the homestead, Maisie took keen stock of the man. He bore a curious resemblance to his brother whom she had met yesterday, and, in a lesser degree, to his cousins at her side. Curious, because with the same cast of feature, the same rich brown of the eye, the same splendid proportion of form, the expression of the whole man, the dominant note of his being, was in every regard different. The somewhat ragged, dark moustache failed utterly to conceal a mouth around whose corners a sneer of some insolence lurked. It was the face of a disciplinarian and an arrogant egoist in one.

He shook hands with both men, then turned again to the girl.

"My wife and daughter will be pleased to see you," he said in Dutch, and it might have been Maisie's own prejudice which led her to dislike most intensely the way in which the man regarded her. She smiled rapidly, and made no reply.

They turned to the front of the house, which was the side farthest from them. Andries, with a by no means ill grace, opened the front door into a well-appointed little hall, and then stood aside to let his guests precede him into a drawing-room at the right hand. Somewhat to the girl's surprise, she found herself in a room which showed every evidence of a refined and very dainty taste. The apartment was lofty and well-ventilated, and if the furniture was new and unused, it was good in itself and very well chosen. A few copies of well-known pictures adorned the walls, and several handsome vases filled with flowers stood on the tables, while two or three palms and some beautiful ferns were placed about the room.

Strangely incongruous to his surroundings looked Andries Meyer, as he seated himself on the chair nearest the door, and placed his felt hat upon his crossed knees. He questioned Cornelius at some length on the subject of his advent among them, warning him *en passant* to show no foolish weakness in his dealings with the native race, or he would fall upon the rock on which his predecessor – who had shown a reprehensible leniency in regard to native crime – had perished.

"You must remember," he remarked, "that for one European resident in this division, we have three hundred natives, and if you come here with any mission-station sentiments about you, there'll be no room to hold you."

"Miss Gray was brought up on a mission station," returned Cornelius mildly, while Philip flushed to the roots of his hair.

Andries turned with a smile to the girl, and she noted that the show of his teeth lent a peculiarly unpleasant – almost a sinister – expression to his face.

"Miss Gray will understand," he said, still in his own language, "that even in her presence I must speak the truth about mission stations."

She looked at him blankly, her pretty blue eyes wide and questioning.

"When I speak of mission stations," he resumed, more distinctly, "I mean nothing personal."

She gazed at him with a puzzled frown. "I beg your pardon," she said innocently.

The two men who had brought her shifted uneasily in their chairs, and glanced, the one at the other, in some concern.

"I thought you spoke Dutch," said her host somewhat sharply in very excellent English; "at least I understood as much from Tanta."

"Oh yes! I always understand Tanta," she replied, with a stupid repetition of his words.

He looked at her with some pardonable irritation, but recollecting himself in time he resumed in interpretation.

"I was saying that I mean nothing personal, although I disapprove strongly of mission-station sentiments. I believe myself in the doctrine of the *sjambok* and the wagon wheel. In the old days when we had fewer laws and restrictions we had better servants. Teach a native that he has a soul, and he thinks himself as good as his master."

"Oh!"

The little exclamation of distress interrupted him somewhat sharply. She had turned to the other two men.

"I thought," she said indignantly to Philip, "I thought you told me your cousin was a deacon of the Church?"

Philip stared at her in an agony of surprise and consternation. Cornelius stroked his moustache, and rejoiced basely that he was well out of the fray.

But she turned on him in innocent inquiry. "Didn't he say so, Mr Meyer?" she asked in soft surprise. "Didn't he particularly impress upon us that his cousin was a deacon of the Church, and a leader of the meetings round here?"

He gasped in wonder at her impertinent audacity, and murmured something inaudible, which broke into a positive gush of welcome as he sprang to his feet and greeted the appearance of his hostess in the doorway. The rocking-chair he had discarded rushed itself backwards and forwards in a perfect frenzy of delirium as he advanced to take the outstretched hand of his cousin's wife.

"I remember you perfectly," he gasped effusively, as he wrung her hand with a grip that brought the tears to her eyes. "I am Cornelius – your Cousin Cornelius."

She was a stout little lady, with a large expanse of bust, and a round, bullet-shaped head from which the hair was drawn tightly back into a small screw at the nape of the short neck. A good little woman was Mrs Andries Meyer, kind and gentle, and possessing not one enemy on the face of the earth. Her complexion was somewhat dark, and her eyes were small, and quick, and bead-like, in strange contrast to the mountain of flesh over which they looked out upon the world. Her mouth was a mobile, laughing one, which parted over even teeth, and beamed upon Cornelius as she cordially returned his greeting.

She smelled strongly of scented soap, and bore the unmistakable air of having but recently changed her dress. To Philip, as to one whom she met daily, she accorded only a cursory greeting, but she turned to Miss Gray with a different air, and kissed the girl heartily upon the lips.

"I have heard much of you from *Tant' Salmina*," she said kindly, "and I hope you will have a happy time in this district."

"Thank you, Mrs Meyer, I am sure, I shall," said Maisie quickly, finding no difficulty, this time, in understanding the Taal. Over her hostess's shoulder, her eye met those of a tall girl who stood behind her.

"This is my daughter, Miss Meyer," said the lady, moving aside. "Miss Gray, Lena."

The new-comer only bowed haughtily, and then turned to the two men. The daughter of the house was slightly above medium height, with a figure in such sharp contrast to that of her mother that it seems almost angular in comparison. In appearance, she decidedly favoured her paternal parent, her general air giving the impression that she was an important personage who would be accepted at her own valuation, or at none other. She also bore the unmistakable air of having but recently changed her gown for the white embroidered one which now clung around her form in ultra-fashionable folds.

They were barely seated again before a native girl entered, carrying a tray of well-filled tea-cups. When the tea was handed round with no other accompaniment than the necessary milk and sugar, and the maid had left the room there was a short, speaking silence.

Lena turned then to the new-comer.

"Have you come to see about the children, Miss Gray?" she asked with some condescension and much importance.

"Yes!" returned the other slowly. "I came to see Mrs Meyer about them."

"I teach the children," returned Lena with lofty hauteur. "Their education is completely in my hands."

Maisie looked steadily and stonily at her, conveying the idea in her air that she was trying to fix the thought in her understanding. But she said nothing.

"In any case you wouldn't mind my supervising the piano lessons, I hope," continued Lena, with some asperity. "I have been teaching the children myself for so long. What is your charge for music pupils?"

"My charge?" For one instant an old story she had heard of an enterprising Scotsman to whom such a query had been propounded flashed hysterically across Maisie's brain, and a wild desire to giggle aloud took possession of her as she recalled the answer: "What'll ye gie?" with which he had met the demand. Instead, she managed with great decorum to look grave and reply: "It depends upon the pupils."

"Upon the pupils!" Lena's dark eyebrows raised themselves in some wonder and not a little contempt. "Oh!"

There was a painful silence in the room while the catechism was resumed.

"Who is your composer?"

"My composer?" with a delicate puckering of the forehead.

"Yes, of music" explained Lena, with some impatience.

"I haven't got one." The blue eyes looked with friendly confidence into the astonished brown ones. "I just buy my music when I want it – and have money enough."

Lena leaned back in her chair in hopeless bewilderment at the crass stupidity of the English girl. She turned her head deliberately again, and explain with some slow emphasis.

"I meant your *favourite* composer. Your favourite composer of music."

"You didn't say so," objected Maisie with nervous indignation. "Well," she looked round in an exasperating way, "I like Harry Lauder – the man you hear on the gramophone, you know."

Philip, on catching sight of Lena's face, shifted uneasily in his chair, but Cornelius sprang to his feet and examined with great fervour and some loquacity an excellent copy of the "The Two Crowns."

"Perhaps," said Lena coldly, "perhaps we should consider matters carefully before we decide upon the lessons you would give our children."

"It would be as well," agreed Maisie with alacrity.

"I, personally, care only for the classics in music," she resumed slowly, "and Mozart and Beethoven are my favourite composers."

Maisie looked at her. "You play then yourself?" she asked gently.

"Certainly!" with a resumption of condescension. "But I can't instruct music well."

"I should suppose not!" The words were spoken with such a wealth of feeling that again Philip involuntarily squirmed in his seat, the drops of perspiration breaking out on his brow; and Cornelius moved to another picture.

Very little later, the party headed for the old farm once more. A silence, deep and profound, characterised its progress till the by-road had been left behind, and they were upon the home veld once more.

"Well!" said Cornelius, flicking at the grass as they all three walked abreast, the girl having possession of the path, "I hope you are properly ashamed of yourself."

He had looked at nobody in particular, but she replied instantly:

"Being ashamed won't help matters, will it? Here endeth the first chapter of the 'Failures of Mariamne.'"

"What did you do it for?" demanded Philip in some perplexity.

"How do I know?" she asked pettishly. "Is it my fault? I only knew straight away that I couldn't teach that man's children. I half knew it before I got there."

"You behaved very badly," remarked Cornelius severely.

"Well who says I didn't?" she demanded in some wrath. "I tell you what it is," she resumed tartly, "neither of you will ever gain a prize for minding your own business."

"Who said we would?" asked Cornelius indignantly.

"And after all, it is only Lena's way," remarked Philip à propos of nothing. "She is really good at heart, but she puts on 'side' a little, and likes to sit and pose."

"And I should like to sit and smack her," replied the girl vindictively.

"What are you going to do now?" It was Philip who propounded the query.

"Do? I'm going to bite the dust – and become Tanta's daughter."

She looked innocently and hungrily up at them. "I wonder," she surmised with some concern, "I wonder what there'll be for dinner!"

They stared at her in wonder, aghast for the moment at her cool impertinence and wicked unrepentance. Then they all three burst simultaneously into a long loud laugh that echoed round the hill.

"I give you up," said Cornelius. "You are the very limit."

"Who is going to tell Tanta?" asked Philip in some perturbation.

"Nobody's going to tell her," replied the culprit with airy assurance. "They'll tell her themselves."

CHAPTER IX

To wish myself much better

IT was unfortunate for Andries that when he rode over to the old farm in the late afternoon to voice his opinion of Miss Gray and her attainments to Tanta, the old lady was busy examining the damp clothes that had just returned from the wash at the *spruit*. More unfortunate still that the women had been in haste to complete the work and attend a beer drink at an adjacent kraal, and had therefore not only skimped the work, but had decamped, and so shirked the inevitable, and richly deserved, scolding.

"A bar of soap wasted," she muttering aloud, as she surveyed the white articles on the table at the back veranda. "A whole bar of soap, and enough blue to have served a week's washing for the country! They thought, the black hussies, that they would dye the sheets and pillow-cases blue to hide the dirt; and now nothing but boiling and paraffin will ever make them white again!"

Andries, with his toilet of the morning supplemented by a greasy felt hat somewhat the worse for wear, rode up at this juncture upon an old, steady farm horse of powerful build. He threw the reins off the animal's neck to the ground before him, and greeted the old woman, without observing any formality connected with his headgear. She continued her work of sorting out the clothes as she returned his courtesies, and pointed to a wooden chair for his accommodation.

"All well at home?" she asked absently, for her thoughts were engaged by the work on hand.

"*Ja, dankie*, all well. How goes it with Tanta?"

"*Goed dankie!*" she replied briefly, and called to the kitchen-maid to bring a cup of coffee for the visitor.

It was after the coffee had been dispatched that Andries dispensed with generalities, and came to the point of his visit.

"Where is the English girl?" he asked then, putting down his cup.

"She's inside somewhere," replied she, "doing a bit of handwork for me. Did you want to speak to her?"

"No, not particularly," he replied with cold disapproval in his tone. "Tanta can tell her that we shall not require her services for the children."

The old lady looked at him in blank astonishment, "You don't want her services for the children?" she repeated, her large face settling in rigid lines of dismay.

"No! Lena says she is not competent enough," he replied. "She doesn't understand the music as she should, to be able to teach it."

The old woman sat down and stared at him.

"But she was piano teacher at College," she said slowly; "and only came away because her father thought the work too much for her."

"Ja!" said he with a disagreeable smile. "She might very well do for a Natal school, but Lena was educated at the Cape, and she wants the children properly prepared before they go there."

His companion continued to stare at him, stolidly and silently.

"To tell you the truth, Tanta," he resumed, "I am very much disappointed in this girl, and so is Lena. Martha likes her, but then she likes everybody. I thought it a mistake all along that you should bring an English girl here. She can only be a burden to you, and no help whatever — Now, after seeing her, I am more against it than ever. She is either very stupid, or she was unpardonably *parmantig*¹ to Lena."

A light dawned across the old lady's senses.

"She was *parmantig* to Lena, was she?"

A grim smile played around her lips. "Did Lena put on any of the fine-lady airs that she brought back from the Cape with her?"

"I don't know what Tanta means by 'fine-lady airs,'" he said, his mouth parting over his teeth in a manner peculiarly unpleasant. "Lena is a lady, and she only wished to put the girl in her place. If she had behaved properly Lena would have made a friend of her."

The last sentence was lost to the old lady, who was chuckling audibly.

"She wished to put her in her place? My dear earth! and she never was one that would let anybody tramp on her toes."

Andries scowled momentarily.

"And she pretended," he resumed coldly, "not to know our language, and made us repeat everything to her in English."

Tanta looked grave.

"That was foolish of the child," she said sternly, "for she knows the book *Hollandsch*, as well as the spoken Taal; and she knows them both better than Engelsche or Zulu."

1 Impertinent.

“And she twitted me with being a deacon of the *kerk*.”

“*Ach!*” she must have been upside-down to do that,” Tanta shook her head, “for she comes from a godly home, and her father is a true Christian. I shall speak to her.”

“No, Tanta! You must send her back. Send her back to her own people, or her College – or anywhere; but don’t keep her here.” His voice quivered with rage.

“*Zoo!*”

The ejaculation came in a long-drawn-out breath from between the firm old lips.

“*Ja!*” he repeated angrily, and again his mouth parted over his teeth, and in parting gave the sardonic expression to his face. “We want no *schuim*² here who refuse to show respect to their betters, or to speak the Taal that, by rights, belongs to the country.”

The old woman rose ponderously to her feet, and towered above him.

“As for that, Andries Meyer,” she said in a raised voice, “you are a liar; she is as good as you are, and better than your daughter. She no more refuses to speak the Taal than I do; but she is not going to be trodden upon by you or yours. As for her being the *schuim*, I wonder the word doesn’t choke you in the throat. Her mother was a saint upon earth, and her father is a man you might take pattern by. Talk of *schuim*!”

He rose angrily to his feet.

“I’ll say nothing more,” he rasped, “but I take nothing back of what I said, and I advise Tanta to rid the place of her, for she’ll get no pupils to teach here, and she’ll work mischief wherever she is.”

“And who are you that you should play *baas* over my house, and say who will come into it, or go out of it?” demanded the outraged lady. “*Mijn Hemel!* because you are a deacon and wear a long coat on Sunday and a big black hat, you think to act as if you have the rights of Satan!”

Before he could reply the cause of the disturbance herself stood in the doorway.

“Good afternoon, Mr Meyer,” she said quietly.

“*Middag!*” he responded briefly, turning away and moving to the horse that stood, with its head low, patiently waiting. The two watched him ride at a brisk tripple out of the yard. The old woman turned to the girl.

2 Scum.

"You have offended Andries, Maisie," she said severely, "and he is a man who bears a grudge long and fiercely."

"I should have thought so," acknowledged the culprit. "I heard him trying to persuade Tanta to drive me away *anywhere*, to gratify his own private spite. Nice sort of a church officer he is!"

"You could kick Christians like Andries out from behind any *gras pol*,"³ said the old lady shortly. "But that's no reason why you should go about making enemies for yourself," she added. "Andries has a big influence in this district, for he is the richest man hereabouts, so you can put your head down that you'll get no *kinders* now to teach the piano to."

"I shall have to go back to College," said Maisie plaintively, "unless papa agrees to let me go to Aunt Hester when she comes out to the Cape next month."

The old lady looked genuinely alarmed.

"You must not go to Hester," she said in quick decisive tones. "The *Heere* only knows what would become of you then. You will stay with me and let stand the music *kinders* — *Ach! lievjje*, can you not be content to stay with the old *mensh*."⁴ If it is too quiet for you here, you can ride over to the magistracy sometimes — Philip will take you — and they are very gay there. Two or three times every year they have concerts, and once a month there is church. It isn't so still as you might think here, either, for we have visitors every Sunday, rain or fine."

"*Moeder lief*," said the girl, smiling brightly, though her eyes glistened with quick tears, "it isn't that I fear any dullness — I don't think I could be dull with you if you would allow me to help a little with the work, but I was educated to earn my own living, and I should not like to be a burden to you, and I am so very full of faults —"

"So you are, *mijn schaapje*,"⁵ agreed the old friend tenderly; "but so we all are. And my late old man answered for you at the font, and loved you like his own flesh, so it behoves me to care for you — for his sake, and for your dear mother's. About the money you will need —"

"We shan't talk of money, Tanta, please," said the girl, flushing painfully. "Let me stay with you for a few months, quietly here, and then we shall talk things over again."

Across Tanta's face a grim smile flickered for an instant.

3 Grass patch.

4 Person.

5 My little sheep.

“When it was settled that I should stay on here with Philip,” she said stolidly, “he thought that I should have company with me in the daytime, and when he had to be away at nights. Mimpie van Groot Lewis, she offered to come for four pounds a month. I said that was too much, but she could come for three. But then you wrote about teaching the *klavier*⁶ in this place, so I stopped Mimpie. I wanted you, child. *Ach!* how I wanted you — And now, if you like to do what Mimpie would have done — look after the pot-plants, and help in the dairy, and see that the maids do their work about the house, I shall be glad and thankful to have no *kinders* coming about the place practising all day on the piano, and you shall have your little monies to save up every month! Just call Kaatje here, *mijn kind*, and let her put these clothes in the outside *kamer*,” she added in a tone which forbade further discussion of the first topic. “Not a stitch will I fold before they are taken out of my sight, and brought home clean.

6 Piano.

CHAPTER X

Life's fitful fever

"HAVE you a headache, dear?"

Philip Meyer looked across the small, plainly furnished breakfast-table at his wife, who, clad in a faded dressing-gown, her hair carelessly dressed, and the air of grim self-repression lurking about the corners of her tightly set lips, was even more silent than usual.

"Have you a headache?" he repeated. "You are eating nothing."

"I have no headache," she replied coldly, a flash of resentment lighting her eyes, perhaps at the tenderly caressing tone. "And I can't eat these tinned sausages – I am tired of tinned things altogether." Her tone was fretful and uncompromising.

Philip looked at her with some surprise.

"I hate tinned foods, too," he remarked, as he ate stolidly on. "But I didn't like to say so, because you have given us so many of them lately."

"They are handy," she replied, pushing her plate away with the almost untasted food upon it. "I just get them from the store."

"There are eggs to be had in the store also," he remarked again, "and good, imported bacon."

"Oh, if you want to argue— " she said wearily.

He looked at her in real concern.

"My darling!" said he impulsively, and with an air of deep and very great contrition. "I wish you would try to be happier. I wish I could see you once more, just your bright pretty self as you were –" His voice broke and he rose from the table, his brows drawn together.

She sat unresponsive, even when he came round to her and placed his hand gently upon her bowed head.

"I will do anything for you, Lulu," he whispered above her. "If you promise me to be cheerful – if you will try and to love me anew – I will – I will give up everything that can possibly displease you."

He leant over her, and brought her slowly round towards him, pressing her white face against his breast, and stroking her thin cheek with a tenderly loving hand.

“Do you understand me, Lulu? I will be a true husband! As there is a heaven above us, I will keep true and faithful to you. I will try to be a worthy father to our little child—”

She shuddered heavily.

“It is too late,” she muttered, her throat throbbing. “I understand – but it is too late.”

He bent and kissed her sorrowfully. “You are hard, Lulu,” he said, his face paling. “You are very hard.”

“If,” she said somewhat tremulously, “if I had been the one to sin, would you – could you – have forgiven me, and taken me back to my former place in your heart? Could you have forgiven me?” She emphasised the pronouns as he released her hand and walked quietly back to his place at the head of the table.

“The cases are not parallel,” he said coldly. “What is merely indiscreet, if sinful, in a man, would be unnameable in a woman. But you are hard, Lulu – hard and unforgiving – and I shall make no more appeals to you, even for the sake of the little child yet coming.”

A flood of colour surged over her face. “I appealed to you on behalf of our first child, and again on behalf of our little snowdrop daughter – to listen to me and become a good, true man, worthy of them,” she whispered thickly. “You know how you responded. You told me the last time I spoke to mind my own business; to go my way and you would go yours.”

“I have been sorry for that ever since,” he interposed quickly; “and I said so almost immediately after the words were spoken.”

“But you went your own way,” she reminded him, in cold reproach.

He gulped the cup of lukewarm coffee which stood at his elbow, then rose to his feet.

“I have prepared a pleasant surprise for you,” he said in a business-like tone which was completely devoid of sentiment. “I went over to Philip’s yesterday, and found that Miss Gray had got into trouble with Andries, and had lost all chance of employment from him. (You must ask Cornelius to tell you the story next time you see him. It’s about the richest thing I have heard yet – the way she flouted Andries in his own house.) She seemed grieved at having lost the pupils, anyhow, so I arranged with her to come here daily. You used to long for advanced music lessons, when there seemed no chance of the wish ever being gratified.”

“But I should have been consulted first,” she interrupted sharply. “I have no desire whatever to begin practising again – and, besides the piano would be distinctly heard in the store.”

“By the Kafir customers,” he added indifferently. “Well, if you decide not to take lessons, you are at liberty to please yourself. But the child looked moped a little – she distinctly misbehaved in the matter of Andries’ children, I understand – and she was very eager to fall in with the idea of coming here. I paid for the first quarter in advance, so if you don’t want the lessons, at least keep the little girl with you for a few hours daily. It would be a great charity.”

His wife’s eyes leaped to his with a startled inquiry in their depths. He met the look and recoiled.

“Not that, Lulu,” he said in quick pain. “My God, not that! Can you find room for nothing but evil in me?”

“Forgive me Philip.” She was humble and contrite in an instant. “I am suspicious and – wicked. Let Maisie come by all means, but the child will find me only a dull companion.”

A look of intense relief crossed the man’s face as he turned to the door.

“She will begin on Monday,” he said with assumed indifference. “Tanta will let Kaatje bring her through the plantation every morning, on condition that you send her back with one of your girls.”

He left the room and strode through the back door, on his way to the store. Immediately without he came upon two natives squatting upon their haunches, in evident anticipation of his egress, for they rose to their feet as he would have passed and accosted him. Both were in native dress, and wore the *nkehle*¹ which proclaimed them elderly men, but one was old, somewhat decrepit in appearance, with white tufts of wool upon his head and round his chin, and thin skeleton-like limbs. He raised his sticks and saluted respectfully. The other copied him in a more stolid fashion.

A look of apprehension, or fear, or guilt – perhaps an admixture of all three – leaped to the young man’s eyes, and a flood of dark colour surged over his face as he returned the greeting. “Where do you go?” he asked the older man.

“*Inkosi*, we come here,” returned the latter.

“What would you have?”

“We would have the *lobola* cattle for my daughter,” said the old man simply, “and we would talk to your *nkosigazi*.”²

“You may not talk with the *nkosigazi*” Philip spoke hastily. “But come this way, and we shall discuss your *indaba*.”³

1 Head-ring.

2 Lady.

3 Business.

He walked rapidly before them, they following in measured fashion, round the projecting end of the wood and iron building, and to the front of the store, which stood barely a dozen yards back from the main road. A group of native customers stood upon the wide, earthen-floored veranda examining, with critical inspection, the hardware goods in the shape of hoes, bill-hooks, and other implements which hung suspended from the walls.

"These *celembes*⁴ are not the best kind," remarked shrilly one elderly woman with a yellow, shrewish face, and a long *kehle* that might have weighted her head backwards by the size of it.

"You ask two shillings for them and I could get the same from the Suluman's for a shilling and sixpence."

"Go to the Suluman's then," said he savagely, "or go to the devil."

The *amakolwa* girls who stood at the window with its display of discoloured muslins and tawdry silks, turned to look at him in astonishment. Sweet-tempered to a degree, he was wont to meet complaint, and even insolence, with imperturbable good-humour, spending a ready jest, or emitting a sally of quick wit, that would turn a roar of laughter against his antagonist. As he strode into the shop, looking neither to the right nor the left, with no evident consciousness of the greetings which met him upon either side, the girls looked at one another in slow surprise. Then they caught sight of the two elderly natives who followed him, and a quick understanding came to them. They laughed aloud, with the persistent "Eh-he-he" which gives so palpable a note of derision to their mirth, when such is their desire.

"*Yege, Phelep!*" one of them remarked, with a show of white, perfect teeth.

The sound of their laughter came to him in the store, and he scowled heavily. The counter at the left was devoted to the sale of European goods, the shelves at the back making a pretentious show of provisions, while the adjacent window displayed racks of pipes, stationery, bridles, and other etceteras of saddlery. Before this counter stood several high, cane-bottomed chairs.

The right-hand portion of the wide, long room was kept sacred to articles dear exclusively to the native heart. A wooden partition, barely breast-high, divided this, the plebeian half of the establishment, with its cheap blouses, shoddy suits, and trashy petticoats, from the aristocratic side. Along the middle wall, opposite the door, ranged a substantial counter for the dispensing of soft goods (of generally inferior texture) which were provided for the delectation of white and black alike. The European residents preferred, as a rule, to deal for

4 Bush knives.

their wearing materials at the village store some seven or eight miles distant, so it fell out that Philip, like other country storekeepers, stocked the cheaper fabrics that would find the readiest sale.

The European portion of the apartment was empty, but behind the counter of the native section a dressed Zulu was plying a busy trade in beads and mirrored snuff-boxes with some girls in orthodox costume. He was a fine-looking man with a short, pointed beard, and an expression of great intelligence on his well-featured face.

He addressed his master in the Zulu tongue, referring to him some dispute between the swarthy customers and himself, anent the price of some article of apparel. The matter was dismissed in a few sharp words, and then Philip addressed the man in English.

"Don't let anybody disturb me in the office," he said in a low tone. "I have to speak to these old bounders."

"Very well, sir," returned the servant in perfect English, and in a curiously, well-modulated voice. The whole bearing of the man was singularly superior, and yet entirely respectful.

As a matter of fact David Magoma was college-bred, and had been educated upon liberal principles by a friendly missionary whose ambition it had been to see his protégé enter one of the professions. The death of his benefactor had left David stranded and friendless, possessing a fine knowledge of the English language and a love for literature, together with enlightenment sufficient to discern and realize the bitter portion of him who, being of an inferior race, would rise above his compeers. His lot was indeed a chequered one. The kraal life of his former home had become impossible for him, the companionship of his fellows wholly distasteful. Avoiding in his gentle, deprecatory way any intimacy with the native of average intelligence, he yet dared not offer to associate with individuals of the superior races. With a hearty distaste to the imparting of knowledge to others, he left the college where he had received his training, refusing the position of teacher which had been offered him, and thus offending those who might have been constrained to befriend him. When he drifted to the centres of civilisation he found himself in an acutely analogous position. Often it chanced that he was kicked or spurned with ignominy by European men as far beneath him in mental endowments as they were supremely above and beyond him in the eyes of the world. As a riksha puller, a hewer of wood, or a son of Gibeon in any sense, there was place for him; but as a man of education, a reasoning, thinking individual, there was no position in the universe for such as he. He had once obtained, at half the customary

salary, a place as clerk on the premises of a struggling solicitor, till the latter's clients threatened to withdraw their patronage from a professional man who employed a native in his office. Upon another occasion he had lost his place as body-servant to a rich financier on the Rand, because he had been discovered devouring, surreptitiously, the books of biography and travel in his master's library. After that experience he had carefully concealed any evidence of his education, wrapping up his knowledge of book-lore as a thief would hide the treasures he had stolen. Mourning continuously for the one friend who had prepared so thorny a path for his faltering feet, he wandered from place to place, never satisfied, and finding no inclination to indulge in the vices to which the ubiquitous town native is so readily given.

From one vicissitude to another he had wandered until, tired and somewhat heart-sick, he had returned to the vicinity of his early home, where he had taken the situation of salesman, book-keeper, and practically manager of Philip Meyer's store. For the latter, with his sunny disposition and laughter-loving nature, was imbued with a certain aversion to anything in the shape of industry, as applied to himself. With a perfect genius in the matter of holiday making and holiday taking, he gladly placed the onus of solid work upon any back convenient enough to shoulder the burden.

As the master would have passed through the door at the back of the counter, with the old men behind him, the servant remarked, still in the English language, which was evidently used as being unintelligible to the others present:

"Shall I get Cousin Absolom to assist me for an hour or two, sir? There will be a crowd here presently, and I don't think I could manage alone. He is outside there, and I would answer for his behavior."

"All right, David, returned Philip hastily. "Do just as you like."

CHAPTER XI

*For often a man's own angry pride
Is cap and bells for a fool*

“WELL, now speak! What would you have?” Philip Meyer sat in his revolving office chair and surveyed the two natives who had slowly and laboriously deposited themselves upon the floor, and placed their sticks before them. The room was a large, bare one, lined with varnished planks, and well lighted.

The old man caressed slowly his lean brown shins, and blinked up at the white man with grave deliberation. Philip's expression was haggard and stern.

“No, *nkosi*. There is naught to speak of.”

“Well, said Philip impatiently, “what do you *hlupa*¹ me for? What do you want here?”

“We only want the *lobola* for my daughter Christina,” returned the old man, folding his arms around his knees. “She is the *nkosi*'s wife, and the white child she possesses belongs also to the *nkosi*. Her betrothed has returned from the *Gold*,² and he spurns her. He would have back the cattle he has already paid for her.”

“Where are the cattle?”

“The cattle, *nkosi*, were not cattle. Mjiba paid the price of seven cattle in money. He gave me twice ten pounds, and eight more. I paid my debts to the *nyanga*³ for treating my wife, and to the white man for mealies bought, and the interest thereupon; and with the pounds that were over I bought food and blankets. And now Mjiba would have his money, and it is gone!”

Philip took rapid counsel with himself. By reimbursing this sum of money he would take the deserved blame upon his shoulders, and lay himself open, before the *Kerkraad*, to the charge of breaking a certain commandment; for it would be idle to hope for secrecy once he saddled himself with the guilt. To do him justice, the payment of the sum required was the consideration that had least weight with him, and the withholding of the money would be a heavy ban upon his conscience. The problem was the most difficult one it had ever been his lot to solve, for not least painful for all the aspects of the affair, was

1 Bother.

2 Johannesburg.

3 Native doctor.

the thought of the woman in the house next door – the woman who was his cherished wife, and whom he truly loved with every fibre of his being, but whose life he had irrevocably embittered.

“I don’t know what you talk of,” he said roughly and suddenly to the old man. “I don’t know your daughter, I! She is nothing to me, nor have I aught to do with you.”

The native recoiled as though he had been struck, then looked up at the white, angry face before him with startled eyes.

“But the *baas* gave her presents – courted her with gifts from the store – and told her he loved her. All the world knows she loves the *baas*!” His voice quivered with distress.

“I have nothing to do with her loves,” said Philip tersely. He had taken his cue and meant to hold on to it now with set teeth. “I may have been kind to her when she worked for the *nkosigazi*, but I know nothing more of her.”

“But – the child is yours. Christina has herself acknowledged it.”

“She may tell what lies she likes,” returned Philip, drawing in his breath sharply, “But she must have a care, or I will land her in jail.”

The other native now spoke for the first time.

“Be still, my father!” he said pointedly. “I will now speak. Perhaps the *baas* will tell us where the girl got the child. She worked here at the time.”

“How do I know?” asked Philip angrily. “This is a public store, is it not? Many people come and go.”

“Is that your answer?” The younger native rose to his feet, and turned deliberately to the door.

“Come,” he said, as his companion picked up his sticks, “we go to the *nkosigazi*.”

“Wait!” ordered Philip sharply. “If you dare go to the *nkosigazi* with any of your lies I’ll break every bone in your body and trample on you.” He turned to the girl’s father. “Your daughter is known to be light of character,” he said shortly, “and it would behove you to be careful how you repeat charges that she makes against white men. As for the money you require for Mjiba, I will lend you this sum, and you may return it when you can.”

“For work my time has passed,” returned the old man in acute depression; “and I have no children but this one whom the *abulungu* have made a Believer, and then ruined. I know not, I, when I could repay this large sum and its interest.”

“There would be no interest,” said Philip more kindly. In his heart he determined that there would be no principal to return, either. But his hearers

could not know that, and they left the room silently, without the customary salute. As Philip's eyes followed them and rested upon the stooping form of the tall old man, with the sinews and veins standing out like whipcords upon his thin, shrunken limbs, a feel of sharp compunction struck him to the quick.

"Thank Heaven that is over," he whispered inwardly, with a long breath of relief. "But – oh God! to undo it all!"

CHAPTER XII

However we brave it out, we men are a little breed

THE DISAPPOINTED natives, emerging from the office, took their slow way through the now crowded store, and made for the wide-open door. They were followed by the inquisitive glances of more than one present, and the expression of David was grave and almost sorrowful as he noted their depression of mien. His fellow-salesman standing behind the grocery counter, where everything was easier to understand than in the soft goods department, also stared with interested curiosity at the old men as they passed through the store. He was a short, slight Zulu of the dressed class, light in colour, and sharp featured for one of his race. A dandy in his dress, he looked as impudent and presumptuous as he, in reality, was. The very embodiment of the most objectionable, swaggering type of educated native, he was a living presentment of the altruism that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing." With an unholy craving for the white man's liquor, he had been known to write, and deliver personally, notes signed by fictitious names for supplies of rum which he had duly enjoyed in the society of boon companions of his own stamp. The vigilance of the town police, who had come to suspect certain of his sharp practices, had sent Absolom in some trepidation out of Durban and back to his home in the location. At the mission station, which had provided the knowledge now so well misused, he was wont to swagger of a Sunday, appearing at church in spotless tennis costume, which included white canvas shoes and straw hat, with a cheap umbrella. Come rain or shine, the umbrella was always in requisition, and, when the exchequer allowed, a cheroot of villainous, evil-smelling properties was invariably between his lips.

Immediately without the store, the old men were joined by a young Zulu in native dress, who had been standing, his sticks in his hand, close by the doorway. He was a stalwart, grandly formed young animal of magnificent proportions and supple, beautiful body, which last was bare, save for the *mutsha* and ornaments of beads which plentifully besprinkled his form. The trio moved a few yards away from the building, and as though by common consent sat down and deposited their sticks upon the ground.

"*Ange shiela*,¹ my child," said the younger Xeku in the curiously gently voice which a native will employ upon occasion.

The young man emptied a portion of the mixture in his snuff-box into the open palm of the other. The performance was repeated for the benefit of the older man, and some minutes were passed in quiet refreshment.

"Well," said the young giant then, "what says the son-in-law of my father?"

"No, my child," returned the other slowly, and in a tone of resigned misery. "He says that my daughter is no wife of his, and he knows her not."

Mjiba laughed aloud – a short, hard laugh that showed to the full his square white teeth and the stretch of protruding red gum above them.

"And he could not tell you whose bastard she carried on her back?" he queried with unlimited scorn. "But I want my money, I. I take no outcast of a white man's favour for my wife, and I wish to *lobola* again."

Your money you will receive, my son!" returned the other slowly. "Philip has offered to lend the money to me, and if you come tomorrow, you shall receive it."

The young man laughed again.

"He'll 'lend' you money, will he?" he repeated with bitter scorn. "And will he 'lend' enough to pay for your daughter's prostitution? Will he lend me something for the sweetheart I have lost?"

He rose to his feet and shook the dust from his back covering of calf-hide, but as he faced the valley a softer mood came upon him.

"She was as beautiful to look upon as the sun when he rises in his morning splendour," he broke out in a voice of poignant regret. "She was as graceful in form as the lily that grows by the waterside in the green *vlei*. The birds were happy to fly above her. The trees were grateful to shed their shadow upon her path, and waved their branches as she passed ... And what has she become? Only the tool of a white man's desire; the plaything of a moon, to be cast aside and spat upon when another form more favoured, though less beautiful, shall catch his covetous eye. A bearer of bastards! – creatures without place in the world; scorned by the white men whose blood they share, despised by the *abantu* of whose nation they are not—"

"*Maiye!*" whispered the unhappy father, dropping his chin upon his bony knees, his head shaking as though with palsy, "*Maiye!*"

"She was to have been my *nkosigazi*,² the principal wife of my kraal," resumed the disappointed lover in trenchant tones; "and her sons would have

1 Give me snuff.

2 Head wife.

been the heirs to all my flocks and herds. She was lovely as a doe, round of limb, and comely of body. The hills were grateful to bear the weight of her foot. Now," he spat upon the ground, "the whole world knows what she has become – a thing without a name – the pastime of a white profligate."

The old man shook his head in silent agony, while a great tear stole down his withered cheek.

"As for you, my father, you will chew your *nkoba*³ in bitterness of spirit, and when your *nxolo-bana*⁴ is empty, your wife will pluck the lily leaves for your daily food. No pleasant lowing of cattle will great your ears, and no gourd of grateful *amasi*⁵ will slake your thirst or give appetite to your hunger. No broiled goat flesh will relieve the cravings of your appetite when you have drunk the beer of your neighbours. For the blossom of your old age has been plucked, and blighted, and cast aside by the white man. My father, I have sorrow for you."

The old man groped blindly for his sticks.

"Let us go hence, my child," said he, as his fingers grasped the polished weapons. "There is a Great One above us all—"

"There is not!" retorted the youngster stolidly. "These little people who come from over the seas, they try to teach us of a Great White God Who is all mercy and love, and cares for all the nations, both black and white. Then they show us the ways of the devil who, they say, lives in his own hell and is as black as midnight and as treacherous as they themselves are."

"What's to do here?"

A horseman had been slowly approaching on the down grade, but had been only subconsciously noted by the natives in their abstraction. As he came abreast of the group he pulled up and asked again:

"What's the matter, Makubalo?"

The old men rose slowly to their feet and saluted the new-comer, Andries Meyer, with the customary signs of respect to the European. Mjiba merely raised his sticks, but he took upon himself the task of answering the question.

"The matter is," said he sullenly, "that Philip has made a mother of the daughter of Makubalo, and now refuses to pay her *lobola*!"

"My good Lord!" whispered the man beneath his breath, his face turning white. He dismounted slowly, and, throwing the rein over his arm, he advanced to the group and mechanically raised his fist.

3 Boiled hard mealies.

4 Grain hut.

5 Sour milk.

The young Zulu stolidly stood his ground.

"She was my bride," he added, as Andries' arm dropped to his side "and they taught her in the schools to love the ways of the white people, and to dress in their garb. When I went to the gold places, two years ago, she was young, and innocent, and good. When I return this week I find her clothed in dresses, and a white man's child astride her back. Yesterday she told me that your brother is her husband, and the child is his!"

"It's a lie," ejaculated Andries, but not too loudly, for the veranda was full of interested spectators who were straining every nerve to overhear the conversation. "It's all a cursed lie!"

"Sonto (whom they now name Christina) is not the only one who proclaims herself the wife of Phelep, your brother," remarked the third man who had hitherto spoken but little.

"You are base liars, every one of you," returned Andries, white of face, and filled with a certain gnawing at his vitals that proclaimed his hideous fear of the open truth. "Liars! And if one of you dares to repeat what you have just said to a soul on this earth, I'll have you thrown in jail for your lifetime. You hear?"

The old men cowered, but Mjiba held his head aloft with marked insolence.

"We hear," he said slowly, but we heed not, for you, Baas Andries, know that we speak the truth. You know well what manner of man your brother is, and you are aware that he spares no chastity when it is covered by a black skin. But you, for the honour of your *abulungu* race, you would put us in jail for speaking the truth. That's the justice of the white man!" He laughed aloud, with such cruel intonation as might have rejoiced the hordes in hell. "The justice of Satan!"

"I'll give you the justice of the cart-wheel just now," roared Andries, throwing discretion to the winds, to the no small delectation of the veranda audience.

"*Yebo!* That's the justice I spoke of. You rob me of my bride, and make a strumpet of her. Then you would give me the cart-wheel when I proclaim my wrongs."

"I have not robbed you of your accursed *ntombi*," replied Andries, livid from fury.

"You, or your brother. It is the same," returned the native indifferently. "Among you she has become an outcast – a thing to be pointed at by her sisters ... And you talk of the *sjambok* and the wagon-wheel when I cry out at the wrong done to her nation and to me. Yet if one of my kind dares to raise

his eyes to a woman of your race, he is thrown in your jails, with hard labour and Government porridge as his portion, and stripes upon his back.” He spat upon the ground, and glared at his landlord (as Andries was), a very passion of hate and pain in his miserable eyes. “And you arrest the white woman who has perhaps committed only once the sin that you have done over and over again – and yet again. And you throw her in jail, too, and jeer at her, and hold up your hands in scorn. And you forbid her to enter your doors for fear she might corrupt the sons you have yourselves corrupted before their birth ... But you let no hand touch the daughter of a *Kafila*⁶ who prostitutes herself for you and yours. No! You would have no protection for her that would save her from yourselves. Oh! he! it is well to be a white man!”

“You *verbrande* Kafir!” Andries was quivering with a rage that almost choked the words in his throat. “You black Satan, whom do you think you are talking to?”

“To the brother of Phelep I talk,” returned Mjiba indifferently, as he made for the valley by a footpath directly before him. “But,” he added quietly over his shoulder, “I shall talk also to all the *abulungu* who will listen to me.”

6 Kafir.

CHAPTER XIII

Not as other men

“COME on now! Out with the truth.”

Andries had found his brother in the back office, leaning heavily over his desk in bitter self-abasement.

“I always knew you were more or less of a disgrace to your family, but I gave you credit for being better than you are. How much of it is true?”

Philip shuddered slightly. His brother had repeated, word for word, exactly what the injured natives had said.

“You have no business to interfere,” he said sullenly. “You are not my keeper.”

“No, I am not your keeper; but if I were, as surely as Cain killed Abel, I would also kill you, if you had done what those black devils accuse you of.”

Philip turned upon him in sudden wrath. “What have you to do with me?” he asked in passionate protest. “What business have you to interfere in my concerns? What have you ever done but criticise and chide me, and abuse my wife behind her back? You lent me money in my need once, but you nullified the kindness of the act by proclaiming it far and near, and taking all the praise, like the Pharisee you are, for the good you had done me. And you never told your followers that you exacted interest – heavy interest – for the sum, up to the very day on which I paid you back. Go on now, and get all the sympathy, you can for being my brother.”

“Then it is true?” Andries drew a long breath. “Oh, you blackguard! Oh, you vile blackguard! To think that my innocent family should be dragged down to the dirt by you! What is the use of all my years of upright living – all my abstinence from sin and worldly things – if I am to be shamed before the world through you?”

“No use at all,” said Phillip brutally. “I always thought you prayed and preached more for your own glory before your fellows than for the glory of God. Now I know it. Get out of my office; quick! The place reeks of you.”

“The judgment of God will fall upon you,” thundered Andries. “Nothing but evil will come to you, for ‘a scorner loveth not one that reprove him.’ You were always a scorner and a scoffer. Now you are an ungrateful dog as well.”

"I am all that," retorted Philip quickly, "but I don't care if I break every commandment and lose every atom of character I ever possessed, so long as I'm not a hypocrite."

"I knew you were a mocker of religion," spluttered Andries, "but I did not think you were a fool as well. The Bible says 'a good name is better than precious ointment,' and yet you would brag of your infamy."

"I would brag of that sooner than of a relationship to you," returned his brother quickly. "Come, get out of it! I want my office to myself."

"This comes of marrying a Romanist," said Andries bitterly, as he turned to the door. "You were brought up in a godly faith, and placed upon the narrow path; yet you marry a Papist woman, and go straight to the devil. I knew all along that it was a mistake, and I told you so. 'Be ye not unequally yoked with unbelievers.'"

Philip sprang to his feet with an oath, but Andries strode out, banging the door behind him.

He mounted his horse and took the short route home, passing the house with no glance towards it, and making for the plantation with white, tense face and trembling lips. Truth to tell, Andries was sincerely to be pitied, for the disgrace which had come upon him and his family seared him to the very soul. There were people who treated lightly and indulgently such indiscretions as his brother had committed; but to do him justice, Andries was not that stamp of man. To him such a sin was a vile thing, calling for punishment, drastic and condign – punishment without mercy. Small blame to him that the downfall to himself and to his own pride of place should weigh heavier, in the present instance, than any consideration, for in all the countryside Andries Meyer was acknowledged to be the best and most religious member of the community. Son of a man who had been chief elder of the Church for a quarter of a century, and had amassed a large substance by strictly enforcing his just dues (with that honesty which is the best policy), by showing mercy to few and tolerance to none, he was a worthy son of a worthier father. Chosen at an early age as deacon of the Church, Andries had ever since been one of its most firm-standing pillars, foremost when the good of his church was at issue, head of the list when a public subscription had come around. He was a stern, self-repressed man, who waged lifelong war with the devil and his works as existent in his neighbours' characters. Of well-grounded education, he centred his learning upon the narrow outlook which he created for himself, following rigidly the precept of Holy Scriptures, as embodied in the Old Testament, and requiring counsel of none.

In his home he ruled with stern precision, proving a good, if undemonstrative, husband to the quiet, subdued little woman who so sincerely worshipped and gloried in him. His many children found him just and liberal, if not kind or indulgent. Family worship, morn and eve, was rigidly adhered to, and if the devotion, extempore and eloquent, were prolonged till tender young knees ached upon the hard, polished floor, and little limbs quivered with the cramp of the position in which no movement could be made, the suffering only went to prove to the full the great religious zeal of the parent who had begotten them.

The phantom of his life passed before his vision as he threaded his horse's way through the rows of trees, his hand unconsciously guiding the bridle rein, while his vision looked far backward over the past. He was wont to describe himself in his nightly worship as a miserable sinner, a vile worm; but deep down in his inner consciousness Andries knew all the time that he was a credit to his Maker, a praiseworthy example for his fellows to copy. Providence knew it, too, and in his heart of hearts, under all the very real ache and the wound to his pride, Andries felt that he had been ill-used, that his merits had not received their just due.

"Good morning, Mr Meyer!"

He brought his eyes back from the far distance to regard the interrupter of his agonized introspection. It was the English girl, cool and sweet and pretty in a lilac-besprigged muslin gown, with a laughing light in her blue eyes, and an impertinent assurance in her mien. She and her attendant native maid had moved from the path to allow him horse-room, and stood behind the row of trees that belted the track.

"*Mora!*" he said curtly, and pressed the horse forward.

Only a few hundred yards farther on, he came upon his eldest son Conrad, a loose-limbed, huge young fellow of twenty-two or thereabouts, hurrying up the path on a pony that seemed too small and weak to support his big frame.

"Where are you going?" his father sternly interrogated. "I thought I left you in charge of the *scoffers*?"¹

The lad looked sheepish and shamefaced. He lacked, most singularly, the air of exaggerated gentility with which Lena was wont to envelop herself. Simple-minded and honest, his education had fallen far short of that accorded to his sister, and his appearance by no means belied his upbringing.

"I was going over to Oom Philip's pa," stammered the boy, flushing to the roots of his hair.

¹ Weeders.

“Now you lie,” retorted his father grimly. “You were going after the English girl. Get back home!”

“*Ja*, pa!” and he fell in with his father’s wake.

CHAPTER XIV

Life's trivial round

IF Lulu knew aught of the misery which had come upon her husband's life, she made no sign, and, as far as the community was concerned, but very meager details leaked out to satisfy the overwhelming curiosity which an affair of the kind was likely to create. Philip Meyer, with this usual good-fortune in such case, had managed effectually to hush the matter.

For Maisie the months went pleasantly by. Part of each day was spent with Lulu, ostensibly with the object of giving her music lessons; but more often than not Lulu was content to have the girl amuse herself about the house, and entertain her with the happy, irresponsible chatter that she brought, like a ray of sunshine, with her. Insensibly the interior of the home at the store took on a different complexion. The girl who, in her dainty restless way, was really the soul of neatness and order, took upon herself the duties of lady-help as well as music mistress for the very liberal salary that Philip, in his generous gratitude, forced upon her. Flowers from the garden at the old farm invariably brightened the small sitting-room, and bedecked the dining-table, while pretty pieces of china and silver that had been stuffed out of sight, through pure neglect, were rummaged out of sideboard drawers, polished, and put to their proper use. To tempt Lulu's capricious appetite many a little dainty was begged from Tanta, and many an attempt made to follow elaborate directions in an old cookery book for the fashioning of delicacies, which, as often as not, were successful in their aim. The curtains at the windows were clean, and looped back with the least glaring of the ribbons which the store afforded; and the windows themselves stood open night and day to the breezes of heaven. More than once Maisie brought back the *umfaan* by the ear, laughing as she held him wide apart from contact with her skirts, and stood sentinel while he did over again the work which he had shirked earlier in the day. Better than all, Philip's wife partly shook off the lethargy which had paralysed her spirit, and even took, at times, an active interest in the house which she had for many long months so wilfully neglected. Upon occasion Maisie, moved by her restless spirit of mischief, would make a raid upon the store, and come back laden with spoil, when she would sit munching chocolates and toffees, and even sweet biscuits, in turn, for an hour on end, to the no small amusement of her hostess, who

found in all the girl's vagaries only a refreshing break upon the deadly routine of her life. Philip rarely intruded upon the hours of their happy intercourse, but when he joined them at the midday meal, his laughing bonhomie, and the chivalrous tenderness he always displayed to his wife, together with his keen appreciation of any trifle that contributed to his comfort, made the hour pass pleasantly and cheerfully.

The week-end invariably brought Cornelius, the magistrate, over from the comfortless Residency some eight or ten miles distant, to spend the day of rest at the old farm; and just as invariably he and Philip the younger, and often Conrad, joined Maisie in an afternoon walk to the store, whence, after an informal meal of tea and cake, they would stroll home in the cool of the evening.

It soon became apparent to Philip the elder, and also to his wife, that the two younger men lived only for the smiles of the English girl, Conrad in his boyish, boorish manner assuming a self-confident air of assured conquest that would have been irritating if not so wholly laughable. Philip, quiet, grave and sensitive, would watch her every movement with appreciative brown eyes, which never for an instant lost sight of the fact that the quick light that would sparkle in her pretty, flower-like face was not kindled at his approach. Cornelius, easy of bearing, handsome, nonchalant man of the world, treated her as a spoilt child would be treated by a good-humoured elder brother, making of himself a convenience at all times for the furtherance of Philip's wooing, never noticing, in his unconceit, that it was his own approach which caused the soft colour to come and go in the girl's face.

Upon occasion, Lena would join the afternoon party at the store, but that was the exception rather than the rule, for between the two girls there was an armed neutrality which had arisen, to do Lena justice, not of her seeking, but of that of the English girl.

CHAPTER XV

*Only a baby small
Dropped from the skies*

“ARE you awake, *nkosasana*!”

The words were spoken in a hoarse whisper, as Maisie sprang up in bed, her heart leaping to her throat in terror, while she stared in wild fear across the room at the door.

“Who is it?” she gasped.

“I, *nkosasana*. It is I, Kaatje.” The black girl smiled across the lighted candle she held, at the startled face. She was draped in her gaily striped sleeping blanket, and in her left hand carried the small block of blackened wood that served as her pillow. She placed the latter on the floor as she entered the room, and set the candle on the washstand.

“The *nooi* has gone,” she said then, dropping on the floor and sitting upright, with her legs in a straight line before her, “and she said I had to sleep here in your room and look after you.”

“But where has she gone?”

Maisie, scarcely recovered from the fright she had received, sat upright in bed, clutching with her left hand at the lace over her breasts.

“She’s gone to Baas Phelep’s place,” answered the girl, her face shining and friendly. “He came himself for her. His *nona* is sick.”

“Sick?” Maisie was repeating the words foolishly.

“Yes! she’s going to have a baby.”

Maisie dropped back among the bedclothes.

“What time is it?” she asked abruptly.

“It has struck two, *nkosasana*, and it’s as dark as the *muti* you write with.”

“Did the *nooi* have to walk?”

“No, *nkosasana*. Baas Phelep came himself with the carriage for her, and they have gone round by the road. They took the stable lantern with them.”

Kaatje was in a talkative mood, and did not wait to be questioned again, so obviously eager was she to offer her views upon life in general, and the entry of the human unit upon it, in particular. She chatted in the very friendliest mood for a short time, and found that no response came from the figure on the bed. The eyes were closed, and the breath was coming gently and evenly.

Her confidence broke off midway.

"Strange how these white people slumber," she said to herself with an even smile. "They go to bed before we have finished our kitchen work at night, and when we take their morning coffee in, it often gets cold before they wake up and drink it."

She curled herself in her blanket, and putting her neck across the narrow wooden block, she reached up and snuffed the light out between her finger and thumb.

The blue eyes which had been so persistently closed now opened wide, and stared at the darkness for what seemed a long, long time. At almost interminable intervals the eight-day timepiece in the distant dining-room would strike the half-hour, and when day broke at five o'clock, it was the white girl who aroused the heavily sleeping maid.

"Get up, Kaatje," she said, bending over her in the early dawn, as she shook the dark shoulder. "Get up, it's time to make the coffee, and there might be news from Baas Phelep. Go and see."

But when Kaatje returned, half an hour later, with a cup of delicious, steaming coffee in her hand, she had no news to tell. Maisie was sitting at the window fully dressed, and staring at the shafts of early sunlight playing among the trees. The face she turned to the maid was pale and somewhat wan.

"Why is the *nkosasana* up so early?" asked the latter. "There is nothing to do. I have to boil eggs for the breakfast, so there is no work."

Maisie smiled. "You don't really need my help Kaatje?" she asked.

"No, *nkosasana*. Unless," she added as an afterthought, "you would like to put the cream in the churn, and strain the milk that goes into the separator. The *nooi* never allows us to do that."

"I will come with you now." And Maisie rose with alacrity.

"And the *nkosasana*'s coffee?"

"I can drink that in the dairy."

The early-morning work was pleasant and congenial in the cool, sweet-smelling dairy, and she took a real delight in performing the various tasks as the capable, cleanliness-loving mistress would have had them done. The cream had been poured in the cool wet churn, and Kaatje had already begun to turn the handle when the great milk buckets, covered with white cloths, came in from the kraal. Behind them strode Philip.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed, his face lighting with joy at the sight of her. "What are you doing here? Where's your beauty sleep?"

"Shows what you know," she said with lofty scorn. "You don't have your beauty sleep in the *morning*."

"I never have any at all," he returned with a quietly quizzical smile. "I don't need any."

"And you think I do? All right Mister Philip."

He laughed at the tilt of her chin as he took a bucket of milk from the waiting boy and poured it into the strainer above the separator.

"It's too early to be cross," he remarked, "and also – you look too pretty."

"Do I? Since when have you learned to pay compliments, pray?"

"Since I have known Mariamne Gray," returned he, regarding her with open delight.

"Oh!" She turned hastily away from him. "I am going to pick a huge bunch of Tanta's sweet-peas." And before he was aware of her intention she had darted through the open door.

When they met at the breakfast-table an hour later, they chatted merrily over their plates of mealie meal porridge.

"You have heard the news, I suppose?" he asked as he passed the egg cruet to her.

She quivered slightly, and avoided meeting his eyes.

"No!" she said. "What is it?"

"Lena is coming over here to stay for a few days with you."

She dropped the egg on her plate with a little clatter.

"Lena is coming here," she exclaimed in genuine dismay. "What on earth for?"

"Tanta says she is not coming home for a week or two, and you must have company."

"But Lena!" In her consternation she almost whimpered. "We shan't get on for ten minutes together."

"Why not?" asked he cheerfully. "Just make up your mind to like her."

"Don't be silly," she snapped. "'Just make up my mind to like her!' I *won't* like her, and she doesn't like me."

"Well, fight it out," he advised with imperturbable good-humour.

"Oh 'fight it out'!" she repeated, with fine sarcasm. "Do you want us to fight it out for a *week*?"

"Lord, no! I don't want you to fight at all," he interposed meekly. "I merely suggested it."

She withered him with a look.

“What else did Tanta write?” she asked presently, feeling, if the truth must be told, a little sore at having to receive her instructions second-hand.

“Oh, Tanta never wrote at all,” he replied, spreading butter with a lavish hand upon his slice of brown bread. “Philip wrote. He says that Lulu has had a little daughter, and Tanta is going to remain there for a few days. Hallo! what’s up?” She had pushed her plate away with impetuous hands.

“A little daughter,” she repeated, softly and gladly. “Oh I *am* so happy.”

“Are you?” asked he, and suggested: “Have some honey!”

“I shall ask her to call the baby after me,” she continued. “Mariamne, of course, and I shall never allow them to give her a nickname of any sort – far less one that reminds you of green mealies. Mariamne is a beautiful name, don’t you think?”

“A beautiful name,” he agreed, meeting her direct gaze. “It is the most beautiful name in all the world. Have some honey.”

She helped herself to a generous supply.

“Oh, Lena can come,” she conceded with a burst of generosity. “I don’t mind anything now.”

“She’ll come right enough,” remarked her companion, with a laugh.

“But I’ll be civil to her,” she supplemented, somewhat sharply.

“Oh that,” returned he, passing his empty cup across the table to her, “is another thing. But I was quite forgetting that there’s a message for you in the letter.”

He removed the missive from his pocket, opened it, and handed the sheet to her.

She put his cup down and read aloud:

“P.S. Tanta says that you must take great care of Maisie, and on no account allow her to come here before she gets permission. Lulu is well, I believe, but I have not been permitted to see her nor our little daughter yet.”

CHAPTER XVI

*When woman errs and then regrets
Her sun of hope for ever sets,
And life is hung in deepest gloom*

THE PRESENCE of Lena in the household was far less disturbing than Maisie, in her petulant prejudice, had allowed herself to hope. Indeed, when she permitted herself to forget the importance of her own attainments – for she could play on the piano and organ, paint flowers almost from Nature, and landscapes from copy – Lena was really a person of some discrimination. Too much the child of her father to be more than passively agreeable to her associates, she yet inherited his good qualities of sterling honesty of purpose. And if the purpose were apt to be warped, and distorted, and narrow in view, the fault could lie only in the upbringing which had lauded the pharisaical in profession and the severe in religion – perhaps also, in a degree, with mother Nature herself.

In reality, when Lena chose to set aside the assumed languor of manner which she had brought back from the Cape as the finishing touch of her education, she proved herself a person of sound common sense, and no mean business woman. Since her emancipation from school life, she had laid herself out to please Tanta, and it would be invidious and carping to hint that so amiable a quality could be traced to any base desire to secure a place in the old lady's inheritance. Of a cold, somewhat unresponsive nature, she yet worshipped her father with a devotion that was blind in its intensity. For her mother she nourished a protecting, almost patronizing love which was shared equally with the younger children of the family; but for Conrad, her elder brother, she expressed little save contempt – a contempt which stung the boy to the quick, and rendered him strangely awkward and loutish in her presence.

But of a surety Lena was an excellent house-wife, and if she was prone to over-dress upon all occasions, and to make coiffures of the most elaborate at what seemed unseasonable times, that fact in no wise prejudiced the smooth running of the household wheels. She filled Tanta's place as to the manner born, and a week had passed by no means unpleasantly, when Maisie remarked to her one afternoon:

"I have a good mind to go over to the store and see Tanta. I might take Lulu a bunch of flowers; she loves them so and – it is just possible that Tanta will allow me to see her."

Lena looked up from the tray-cloth she was embroidering.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," she said quietly, and not unkindly. "I would go with you, but I am anxious to send this away to-morrow; otherwise it will be too late for the bazaar."

An hour later, and Maisie with a huge bunch of brilliant carnations in her hand, stood on the earthen-floored veranda at the door of the store-house, and turned the handle. Before she had time to open the door, however, it swung rapidly and quietly back on its hinges, and Tanta stood blocking the way – Tanta with a frown on her face and no welcoming smile in her eyes.

"What do you want here, child?" she asked sternly. "Go back at once; this is no place for you."

The girl looked up with startled eyes, the smile fading from her lips.

"Is she – dying?" she faltered, her face paling with emotion.

"Dying?" repeated the old lady shortly. "*Ach neen!* No such good luck. She is going to live for – oh the dear God knows how many years."

A low cry that was like a gasp of pain from an animal in torment, came from the open window.

"Is it the baby who is ill?" She asked the question fearfully.

"Is that Maisie, Tanta?" called a faint voice from the bedroom. "Let her come in, please. Come, Maisie!"

A frown crossed the troubled old face as the girl with an apologetic gesture passed her and entered the passage door.

"I meant to see you to-day, Lulu," she said with a smile of greeting as she bent and kissed the eagerly raised face, "but Tanta was so strict about it. She has never looked at me so angrily. See!" She held her bunch of flowers aloft. "Aren't they lovely? I robbed the garden of all the colours you love best."

She laid them gently upon the thin hand that was convulsively plucking at the fringe of the counterpane then sat down upon the chair at the bedside, drawing out the long hatpins, and removing, uninvited, the big shady hat. She had tossed it carelessly aside, and turned again to the bed before she noticed the silence of her friend, and the awful agony in the brown eyes that followed her every movement with a strange yearning in their depths.

The girl's mood suddenly changed.

"You look terribly ill, Lulu," she said in quick concern, "and I have been so rough and unsympathetic. It's a wonder Tanta hasn't turned me out. Have I been very loud?"

A smile flickered for an instant across the woman's drawn lips as she shook her head, but the habitual gravity quickly settled into place again.

"Tell me all about yourself darling," she said in her subdued voice. "I have been longing for a sight of you once more. Have you and Lena fallen out again."

"No." The girl's quick, fresh young laugh was good to hear. "Strange to say, we have been as sweet as apple-pie to each other. She has helped me to make a blouse, and I have taught her how to do Hardanger work; and we have been as polite as you please. Lena isn't really half bad after all, and of course it was mostly my fault that we didn't get on, wasn't it?"

"Yes!" agreed the quiet voice. "You were very rude to Lena just at first."

"Oh, as to that –" and the fair face flushed somewhat resentfully. "It was her own fault, you know. How dared she ask my 'charges' for teaching, before Mr Cornelius Meyer, just as if I were a coolie Mary selling vegetables? I shouldn't have minded Philip a bit, but – as it was I had to choke her off. Now don't lecture about the slang," she added hastily, as the other opened her lips to speak. "I know quite well all about that. But I want to see the baby, and I am to be her godmother, please."

"Wait a bit, Maisie!" The thin hand was raised in quick alarm as the girl would have moved towards the curtained cot that stood by the farther window.

She sat down in open surprise.

"I didn't mean to wake her," she said reproachfully.

"Wait till Tanta comes." There was a strange appeal in the woman's voice. "Just talk to me, dearest. I have been longing to hear your voice."

It occurred to Maisie only afterwards that twice during the interview her friend had used endearing terms in addressing her. She had never done so before – nor did she ever again.

Half an hour passed in desultory chat. A cup of coffee and a dish of cake were brought to Maisie, and it was only when Tanta came in that the girl realized that she had been talking all the time, her friend only listening, with large brown eyes, mute and expressioned like a dog's, intent upon her face.

"It is getting late, Maisie," remarked the old lady, placing her fine firm hand upon the girl's shoulder. The displeasure had left her brow, and only a look of ineffable tenderness filled the faded eyes as she looked into the innocent,

upturned face. "Kaatje says it will soon be dark in the plantation, and she is afraid of the *nswelaboyas*¹. You must go home, *hartje*."

"Ja, Tanta." She reached for her hat, and as she pinned it to her head asked: "But may I not see the baby? I am to be her godmother, and I want Lulu to call her Mariamne, after me." She smiled from one to the other, and noted with surprise that each avoided her eyes.

A quick, meaning look was hastily interchanged between the two women, then the elder moved to the cot at the window side.

"Come and see then, Mariamne," said she, a strange, stern note in her voice.

The girl moved forward with a nervous smile. She bent over the tiny bed, and removing the thin mosquito netting from its head, looked long at the small, sleeping occupant.

A dazed feeling of horror crept across her senses and froze the blood in her veins, while a strange tingling in her ears caused a curious swelling at the throat. For the space of a second or two a lethargy crept over and about her, then she turned slowly, with a white, stricken face.

"It's – it's a Kafir baby," she whispered, her eyes wide with horror.

The woman on the bed cowered among the sheets, and covered her shamed head with the counterpane.

Tanta looked grimly from one to the other.

"That's it!" she said dryly. "A Kafir baby!"

"And not Lulu's?" The girl's pale lips formed the question that her dry throat could scarcely give utterance to.

"Yes! Lulu's too, and—" But Mariamne had sunk to her knees, overcome.

"I told you not to go in", said Tanta severely as she held a glass of cold water to the girl's trembling mouth; "and I felt glad of the chance to shake you when you wanted to faint inside there. You see now what comes of disobedience?"

"But – but, Tanta, what does it all mean? What will they do to her?"

"Do? They'll put her in jail, of course, where she belongs. David, her paramour, is already there, and he richly deserves the lashes he'll get. Though I must admit," she added with some reluctance, "that as far as a Kafir can behave, he has behaved well. The lies that Satan's offspring has told, to take all the blame on himself and spare her, would send a saint to perdition."

"And why then—"

"Why then? Well, she spoke the truth, and took her just share of the blame. Are you well enough to start for home, *liefste*?"

¹ Robbers; wicked ones.

“Ja, Tanta.”

They signed to the waiting-maid to precede them towards the plantation. The old lady, watching her charge with ill-concealed anxiety, paced over the strip of veld at her side to the little horse-gate.

They turned then, simultaneously, and looked across the slope at the iron building, and farther afield at the great valley with the long shadow of the western hills dark across its depth.

“Does her husband know?” asked Maisie then, bringing her eyes back to the kindly face above her.

“Yes, he knows, child, and he has gone mad, I think. He went himself and laid the information to the police. *Ach, mijn Heere!* to think a white woman could bring herself so low down!”

“But – her husband, Tanta —”

“Well, *schaapje*, he has been none of the best himself by all accounts, but he did expect his wife to be a decent woman. And you can’t blame him either! He’ll get a divorce from her when she goes to prison, and then I suppose he’ll marry somebody else; for a man can be as bad as Beelzebub and he’ll still get a wife. But *she’s* done for.”

“Oh, Tanta,” and tears coursed down the white cheeks. “I can’t forget her face. I – I couldn’t ever go near her again” – she shuddered and shrank within herself; “but if her own husband has forsaken her, and if you, Tanta, feel so bitter about her sin, *where* must she turn for help and sympathy?”

“I don’t know, child,” said the old woman gloomily, pushing back the lappets of her *kappje* to let the cool breeze about her massive brow. I have no thought nor sympathy for a white woman who so debases herself; and I can give her no word of comfort.”

The girl broke into bitter weeping for a short, silent space. “Is there no one who would help her?” she gasped. “Is there no other woman who has sinned and would now come and say a kind word to her? Oh, Tanta! Oh, *Tanta* —”

“There is none,” said the old woman, her own eyes moist. “There is no woman in this division who would not consider herself defiled by coming near her.”

“There is someone who would know just what to do, and how to help and comfort her.” The girl lifted her head eagerly. “But,” she added sorrowfully, “you disapprove of her and don’t like me to mention her name.”

“You mean Hester?”

“Ja, Tanta.”

The old bosom heaved a great sigh.

“Ah well, child, I had great love for her once; but there is little good in a woman who runs away and leaves her husband, and then writes wicked books.”

“But, Tanta—” The tears were suddenly dried at their source in her eager anxiety. “My father says that Aunt Hester is a good woman – the best and strongest woman he has ever known. And her books are not wicked; they are only true.”

“Well, child, the truth is often far wickeder than lies,” said Tanta decisively. “Besides, Hester can’t help us. She is lost somewhere in the great world – the dear God only knows where.”

“She is not!” The white, slim fingers closed around the big red forearm with a quick, fast grip. “Tanta is quite mistaken. Aunt Hester is now at the Cape, staying with some of her relations there. And she is so honoured – so loved by all who know her! I had a letter from her last week, and she said that if ever I needed her I had only to wire ‘come’ and she would come to me – even from the ends of the earth – for my dear mother’s sake. I need her *now* Tanta, *lief*.” She looked with anxious pleading into the large old face.

“Well, child,” and another heavy sigh was checked in its birth, “do as you will. I had great love for her once. It is getting dusk. I shall wait here till you and Kaatje are out of hearing. By that time Philip will surely be looking out for you or listening for your footsteps. Run away, *mijn lamie*.”

Thus it came about that as soon as the village post office was open the following morning, a message sent to “Mrs Buchanan,” at a well-known Cape Town address, went flashing over the wires. The wording was simple, if abrupt, for it read:

“Aunt Hester, come!”

CHAPTER XVII

*Her voice is like pleasant song
Which we have not heard for very long*

A WARM welcome awaited the traveller who some three or four weeks later (for there had been a delay in the delivery of the telegram) stepped from her high seat in the dogcart at the side of Philip the younger. Tanta herself had emerged from the house to do honour to this guest whose past was so doubtful and maligned an one. The long autumn day was drawing to a close, and there was barely light enough to illumine the surroundings as the old lady, her ponderous, heavy tread less assured than it was wont to be, moved forward in the wake of the eager English girl to the dark-robed figure which advanced from the vehicle, when Philip turned his horses' heads back to the stables.

"Oh, Tanta, it is good to see you!"

The new-comer gently disengaged herself from Maisie's clinging arms, and placing both hands to the large shoulders, kissed the serious face. "I never thought to see you again on this earth."

"Ach, *mijn kind!*" and for a second the bright old eyes were dim with moisture. "I didn't want to see you myself; and may the *lieve Heere* forgive me for it. How long is it since you went away?"

"Hundreds of years," returned the woman, and added quickly, "and Tanta hasn't got a day older. The rest of us have changed, and become cold, and hard, and heart-sick. But Tanta is just the same – sweet and motherly, and wholesome."

"And yet, alone. I am always alone, Hester, since my late old man left me." Maisie had never before heard such an inflection in the voice which she knew and loved so well, and she looked from one to the other in quick wonder.

"Alone, Tanta *lief,*" repeated the woman, "but, upheld by the love of God. And think what a blessed memory you have to live upon!" She made no further remark as they led her round to the rarely used front door, with its flight of steep steps leading up to the front veranda.

"You have had a long journey, child," said the old lady as they pushed open the front door and entered the brilliantly lighted dining-room. "Maisie will take you to your room, and I'll send you a cup of tea to drink while you are taking your things off. You don't want hot water, do you?"

“No, Tanta, I don’t,” and the quick, amused laugh into the anxious old face was good to the girl to hear. “I am not a fine lady yet, and cold water – plenty of it – is good enough for me.”

Maisie led the way down the long passage at the back of the dining- and drawing-rooms to a door at the right, which opened upon the grand *vrij-kamer*¹ of the farm-house. The large, folding windows were thrown wide to the evening breeze, and revealed a full view of the flower garden blooming with a wealth of late blossoms and brilliant foliage, and also a glimpse of the orchard with its russet apples and rich, yellow peaches bending the boughs with their weight.

“What a lovely old room!” exclaimed the visitor, slowly drawing off her gloves and looking around. The furniture was of simple, stained wood, but the snowy drapings of the tables, and the purity of the great four-post bed with its white, betrimmed curtains and heap of pillows, combined with the thick, soft goat-skins that littered the bare boards, gave a peculiar, home-like welcome to the traveller. “I haven’t slept on a real feather-bed like that,” she added, looking at the billowy mass before her, “for – years and years.”

She turned with a smile to the girl who was watching her with worshipping eyes. “What have you been doing, love?” she asked, regarding her keenly. “I have already heard from Mr Meyer that you are well, bodily, of course. But – have you been in mischief of any kind?”

“Oh *no*, Aunt Hester,” said Maisie. “I have done nothing – mischievous – since I helped the girls at school to rebel against the prefects’ tyranny. I gave you my promise, you know.”

“So you did,” said the woman with a slight smile. She turned to the oval dressing-glass and removed her hat. “I must have forgotten that.”

“I sent for you, Aunt Hester, to come and help a dear friend of mine who is in dreadful trouble. But – Tanta forbade me to say a word to you about it. She says young girls mustn’t talk of such things, and she’ll tell you herself.”

“Quite right of Tanta, Maisie.”

“Yes, Aunt Hester.” The tone was puzzled if not wholly doubtful. “I suppose so. But why should men be allowed to do things like – like that, and nobody cares, while a woman is *crucified* for it, and a young girl mustn’t talk of it? If you could only control your thoughts it wouldn’t be so bad, but they keep going over it all again and again—”

1 Spare bedroom.

The woman swung around sharply. "Maisie," she said abruptly, "you should talk to me of all this another time, but remember, dear, that there are things which women must keep back from if they are to taste of any happiness this side of eternity. Do you understand? I want my girlie to keep sweet and pure, and to make a good wife in some happy home. That would have been your dear mother's prayer, just as it is my earnest wish. Leave the big issues of social things severely alone, to the men, and to such of us as are – as have paid for the knowledge."

"Very well, Aunt Hester," said Maisie with unwonted meekness. "You know best."

"I do," returned Hester, emphatically, yet kindly.

After the evening meal, while Philip indulged in a "lesson" at the piano (he, for reasons of his own, having taken to a clumsy study of that instrument), Tanta and Hester held a long, grave conference. No mention of that past of which the old lady so strongly disapproved was made – either then or even afterwards – between the two, but the old friend's manner was loving and kindly, and though no words of appreciation ever passed her lips, her eyes rested with open approval on the strong, calm face beside her.

The end of the music lesson was drawing to a close, and Philip had almost finished rendering the national anthem with separate hands, when Hester remarked:

"I have everything in my trunk, if it could be brought over from the village early enough. I always carry my uniform with me; one never knows when it will be useful.

"Your luggage will be here early," interrupted the old lady, "and I shall walk over with you myself, directly after breakfast. There is so little time to lose, and I can do nothing with her or for her. Just at first I told her how I scorned her and her sin, and now her heart is locked against me. If God had been merciful He would have allowed her to die – then – in her pain, and before—"

A white hand laid gently on hers stopped the flow of her indignant speech, as Philip ended his performance with a horrible discord

"Everything is for the best," she was assured. "The Divine mercy is over and above all, and it will yet lead her safely home."

CHAPTER XVIII

I will betake me to the past

“WHAT beautiful hair you have, Aunt Hester!”

“It is streaked with grey, Maisie.”

“It isn’t!” returned the girl stoutly. “It is beautiful, and rich and brown. How very good-looking you are, auntie!” The words were added somewhat shyly.

The other smiled at the simple *naïveté*, and picked up a brush from the toilet-table.

“Your mother had lovely hair, Maisie,” she said softly. “It was fair – almost golden – and soft and fine, and it fell in such pretty ringlets around her face.”

“Yes!” said the girl soberly. Her mother was only a memory of her childhood, a sweet, chastened thought, but one fraught with no great grief of pain. “We girls all take after mamma. We have not much hair, but what there is, is pretty.” She pushed her own stray locks back from her forehead, and looked critically in the glass, with no trace of vanity in the act. She moved the solitary candle to the side of the table, and turned to the woman.

“Let me brush your hair for the night, Aunt Hester. I should love to do it.”

The girl pushed the chair back from before the mirror, and as the other seated herself, she gathered the heavy strands of hair together, and passed the brush slowly through them.

“Aunt Hester!” she said then, softly, “have you heard that Mr John West is dead?”

“Yes, Maisie,” said the woman quietly, “I heard of it at the time – more than a year ago.”

“His wife and child were left in very poor circumstances, and she has had to get help from her own people.”

Hester raised her head in surprise. “But that is impossible, Maisie. I always understood that they were very well-to-do, indeed.”

“So did everyone else, Aunt Hester. But Mrs West was very extravagant and spent money freely, believing that her husband was far richer than he really was. You see he had neglected business for a few years, and then after his marriage he became a changed man – changed for the worse. It was freely rumoured that he had met – someone. And after that he dissipated rather

freely, when he was not morose and sour. He gambled a good deal on the stock market; and he drank heavily."

"Drank? I don't believe it!" The words came sharp and stung with pain. "I don't believe it, Maisie."

"It is true, Aunt Hester. And when he was attacked with rheumatic fever he hadn't stamina enough to fight the disease. They say he had also no desire to fight. He was willing to die."

The woman's head dropped forward a little, while the girl tenderly fingered the long dark hair.

"Then when the trustees went into his money matters, they found affairs frightfully involved. The estate was almost hopelessly bankrupt. The sale of his practice, the house, the horses, and Mrs West's beautiful motor-car, hardly realized enough to pay the debts. There was only the insurance money – a little over £1000 – left for the widow and child. Her brothers were the trustees, and they did all they could for her. The creditors gave back the furniture, and now she is settled in Durban, where she takes in paying guests during the season, and for the rest of the year keeps two or three lady teachers with her as permanent boarders.

Times were changed indeed. Hester tried to picture the little frivolous Dollie with her wild-rose skin, her dainty ways, and malicious impertinence, as one of the world's workers, striving against others, and amongst others, for her daily bread. But the mental survey was hard to take in at one glance.

"The child?" she asked. "John's boy. Have you ever seen him?"

"Oh yes, several times. I stayed with Phyllis during my holiday month last year, and Mrs West was visiting her sister who has married a sugar planter, and is a near neighbour of the Runcimans. So I saw her often, and the little boy, too. He is a very pretty child, but resembles his mother in every way. She – Mrs West – is very bitter about you. (I only tell you, so that you won't try to approach her.) She talks of you in the most malicious way before the child, to anyone who will listen to her."

"I never would have expected more from Dollie," said the other thoughtfully. "But still, I am sorry. It might have been better in every way if I had never crossed her path. I have brought nothing but heartache to all those whose lives touched mine; even to those whom I loved best. There was you mother, Maisie. I would have sacrificed a great deal to have averted one shadow from falling on her sweet face. Yet the cruellest blow she ever encountered in her gentle life was dealt her through me." She drew her breath heavily, as though wounded even in memory. "And often and often of late years I have wondered

if I failed in my duty to my – to that dead man. I have thought recently that I should never have left him.”

“Once we thought so, too, Aunt Hester. When last we were all home together at the mission station, and we were discussing your wonderful generosity to us all, Phyllis said that it grieved her to remember the wrong step you had taken, and which overshadowed her memory of you. The rest of us agreed with her, but father said you had done the only obvious thing to do – your duty to yourself. Uncle Frank thought your duty to your husband should have come first, so papa went away to his room and brought back a packet of mother’s letters that we had never seen. They were all from you, but there were some old ones of his own also. Then there was a copy of the correspondence he had had with Mr West about you and mamma. He read them all in rotation, so that we might judge just for ourselves. And then we realized how dearly you had loved our mother, and how cruelly you had been wounded through her, though in not one word did you blame your husband. If you had done so, we should have understood less, I think. You seemed sad and sick from loneliness, and your pitiful entreaties for her letters, and her love, gave us to realise something of the blank that must have come upon you when the correspondence was completely stopped by – by him. And we knew that you could not have lived such a life for ever. Aunt Ethel said she had cruelly misjudged you, and Uncle Frank looked miserable all that evening. Then papa told us things about you that we had never known. He rarely – almost never – mentions mother, but he spoke freely of her that night, and told us how true and generous a friend you had been to her, how brave and fearless you were at all times, even long ago in your girlhood. Then he let us know all that you had done since you became Margaret Buchanan; the lengths you had gone to save and rescue the fallen of your own sex. He told us that you had almost lost your own good name irretrievably once, through handling pitch that must besmire whatever it touched; but that you had willingly made even this sacrifice to bring before the public the rights of a very disgraceful affair. And then for the first time he gave us older ones permission to read your books. That was why, when Lulu was in such fearful trouble, I sent for you, Aunt Hester. Everyone seemed so helpless, and to blame her so much – I can’t help it indeed, but I shrink from going near her myself. And I thought that you alone would know what to do, would be willing to do it.”

“I fear there is little to be done, Maisie. We shall discuss it together, Tanta and I, tomorrow. But you must keep quite apart from the affair, in every way.

And now good night, darling. I think I am a little tired, and just a wee bit heart-sick. To-morrow we shall all be brighter.”

CHAPTER XIX

*We will not deplore them, the days that are past.
The gloom of misfortune is over them cast*

A CLUSTER of long-stemmed, beautiful carnations adorned the tray which brought Hester's morning coffee to her bedside. She smiled at the maid, Kaatje.

"Who picked the flowers?" she asked in the Zulu tongue.

"The *nkosasana* sent them," the girl returned with a show of very perfect teeth, "and the *nooi* says you are not to get up till we bring your boxes in. They will be here very soon, and your bath will come at the same time."

"It is good," returned Hester, lifting the dew-wet flowers from the tray, and holding them to her face. She drank the fragrant coffee handed to her, and then lay back staring at the opposite wall with wide-open, speculative eyes that saw naught of her present surroundings. Her brain went over old ground upon which a new light now shone, with a sickening regularity, and a morbid persistence that had at one time developed into a very pernicious habit. For the better part of an hour she indulged in the strange intoxication of picturing the "might have been," and contrasting it with the lonely present and the hopeless future. Ever and again the vivid past would leap up before her, with all the steps which had painted it in lurid colours on her mind.

Then with a supreme effort she brought herself back to the strange, unreal present, to the adjusting of an old, dear friend in new surroundings, and, above all, to the work in hand. Beyond all things on earth she believed in the gospel of work.

"Thank God there is plenty of work to do," had been her fervent and unceasing prayer for fifteen long years. It had never occurred to her to thank Him also for the supreme gift of health and strength, and buoyant, indomitable courage which had been bestowed upon her in so generous a measure. Those attributes belonged to herself – were herself – and she accepted them with no thought, hardly a knowledge of their possession.

A knock at the door brought her sharply back to herself and a realization of the indulgence that had been slowly creeping upon her once more.

"Come in," she called cheerfully, and two maids entered with a zinc bath half full of spring water, as clear as crystal, and almost as cold as ice.

"The *nooi* says the missis may get up now," remarked Kaatje as they carried the bath farther into the room. "The boxes have come."

Half an hour later as the family assembled in the dining-room for the simple farm-house breakfast, Hester entered the room dressed in the blue and white garb of a hospital nurse, with the dainty white muslin cap upon her head, and starched strings fastened in a symmetrical bow beneath her chin.

"Aunt Hester!" exclaimed Maisie, springing up for the morning greeting. "Why are you dressed like that? You are not a nurse!"

"Am I not?" returned her friend, kissing the uplifted face with a laugh. "Shall I give you the address of my hospital?"

The old lady, seated at the head of the table, was looking at the new-comer with anxious eyes and a somewhat puckered brow.

"I would hardly have known you last night, Hester," she said in a puzzled tone, "I found you so changed and so much older. But this morning you are so like your old self that I could believe your big bay horse stood at the door, and that imp of the Evil One, Dolph, was stealing my old man's *voorslags*¹ in the outside room."

"Where is Dolph now?" asked Hester, as she seated herself at the vacant place. "I have often wondered."

"Oh he turned out quite well – for a bastard," returned Tanta stolidly. "But wait first, child. Bless, oh God! these Thy gifts, and let us never forget Thee. Amen."

She raised her head from delivering her sonorous grace.

"*Ja!* Hester," she continued, as Maisie began to ladle out the mealie meal porridge. "I was saying that Dolph turned out not so badly. After you left Berg Vlei, Wilhelm Bastard and his family came and lived on our farm, and but for his lies and his thieving – he never could leave a bit of string, or a *riem*, or a *voorslag* – Dolph was as good as any Christian. I will say for him that he was never lazy. Old Wilhelm died a few years ago, and Dolph now lives with his wife on the mission lands. They have no children."

"Does he go out and work?" asked Hester.

"No, child, he doesn't work," responded the old lady briefly.

"But he earns his own living, Tanta," interposed Maisie. "He married Lucilla, Aunt Hester, one of the mission girls. She sews and does dressmaking for the *amakolwa* women, and Dolph breaks in young horses. He gets a pound each for them, and always has plenty to do. They are able to hire others to

¹ Strips of dressed hide.

plough their mealie gardens, and do all the rough work, and they are both saving up to buy their own oxen. It is a pity that they have no children, for they are really a good example to all the tenants on the station."

Hester smiled with real pleasure at the good account of a faithful old servant.

"But his father, Wilhelm, always fretted over you, Hester," remarked Tanta, shaking her head with unctuous solemnity. "When he was dying he took to praying and having *amkolwas* read the Bible to him. But he got impudent, and disputed with his betters whenever your name was mentioned. 'I don't care what you say,' said he, 'my *nona* is one of the Lord's own children, and she'll reach the golden gates when some of the rest you will go straight past.' But there! he's gone, and it's ill to speak evil of the dead – even when he was a bastard."

The glimmer of an amused smile flitted across Hester's face, but something like real distress paled Maisie's cheeks and shone from her eyes. Philip, noticing, seized the carving knife and fork, and, oblivious of the fact that the visitor's plate was already well supplied, said hastily:

"Allow me to help you to a little ham, Mrs—"

"Buchanan," she prompted gently, seeing the hesitation in the lad's speech, and regarding him with a kindly look. "No thank you," she added, "the *fricadelles* are delicious. I haven't tasted anything like Tanta's cookery for a very long time."

"I cured the ham myself," remarked the old lady stolidly. "Ham and *fricadelles* go well together; you should try them."

Without a word Mrs Buchanan passed her plate for a slice of ham.

You always made a glutton of me, Tanta," she said, the flush which had dyed her face fading slowly away.

"*Neen*, I never could bear a *fraat*,"² contradicted the old lady. "I gave you plenty, but I always told you when you had had enough."

A spontaneous burst of merriment from the other three had barely died away when Andries Meyer strode through the kitchen door into the dining-room. A three days' growth of beard adorned his chin, and his expression was anything but benign. He nodded a curt greeting to the inmates proper of the house, and barely acknowledged the introduction to the visitor. As he took a seat on the couch he looked openly and suspiciously from one to the other, though he allowed his gaze to barely meet the calm, grey eyes that were directly bent upon him. As Maisie poured a cup of tea for him, he turned to Philip.

2 Glutton.

"I came over to tell you that I am going to fence up the gate that leads out of my paddock," he said in a curt tone.

"I don't think you can, Andries," replied his cousin quietly. "That right-of-way was granted by the Board as a by-road, and we use it very frequently."

"You, and also your Kafirs," added Andries. "Well, I am going to close the gate, Board or no Board. I mean to plough the paddock, and I'll break the neck of the first black-hide that I catch within the fence."

"I don't think —" began Philip slowly.

"Don't you be a fool, Philip," rapped out the old lady with a large contempt. "You'll think nothing at all about it. As soon as the gate is closed you'll take an axe and chop it open. That's what you'll do. And if you don't, I shall."

The words were addressed to Philip, but the glare which accompanied them was bent, all unreservedly, upon Andries.

"We'll see about that, Tanta," returned the latter, bestowing, despite the gloom on his brow, the accustomed respect which was the old lady's due portion.

"We'll see nothing at all about it," retorted she with calm assurance, "for you'll try no tricks with the gate *nor* the fence."

And she was right, for he never did.

CHAPTER XX

*In all the world there is no room
For such as she*

EVER since the calamity of black disgrace had fallen upon his home, Philip Meyer the elder had carefully avoided his wife's society. In the first anguish of his stinging pain, he had almost lost control of his senses, and when he laid the information against her to the public prosecutor, he was well-nigh beside himself with grief and anger, and hardly capable of using his own judgment.

A dull, sullen brooding had succeeded the first frenzy, and an uncomfortable sense of having acted with a precipitation that was harsh in the extreme had begun to dog his daily life and haunt his waking hours during the long sleepless nights. Since his first glance at the child which was hers and yet not his, and the storm of bitter vituperation which he had then launched upon her, cowering away from him as she lay, so bowed with shame and lost self-respect, on the bed before him, he had rarely opened his lips in her presence. His meals were served in the dull, untidy little dining-room, while the scant nourishment of which she partook was placed on the corner of her dressing-table by a maid who regarded her with an open curiosity that was in itself an insolence.

She had never yet left the room, and day by day the pallor deepened on her face, and the eyes, once so sweet and lustrous, seemed only deeps of woe in her shrunken features. No kindly word reached her ears from the world without her doors, and she had reached a level of dejection of apathetic despondency in which no poignancy of anguish seemed now possible. What the human heart can bear in self-abasement and self-loathing she had known for many long months of agonized suspense and fearful anticipation, and she had now drained the cup of suffering to its very dregs. She knew that imprisonment and public disgrace lay before her as her just portion, but she accepted the anticipation with almost callous indifference.

She was seated, this morning, in a cane-bottomed rocking-chair, with her dark-skinned infant on her lap. Her faded, untidy dressing-gown was disarranged at the breast, for she had been feeding the child. Unconsciously she rocked to and fro, her slippered foot giving the needed impetus to the movement, while her dark, pathetic eyes gazed at the wall before her, and the few cheap prints which adorned it.

An air of palpable neglect hovered over the whole room; dust lay thickly upon the few ornaments, clothes were littered carelessly about, and the remains of a breakfast of unappetizing viands were scattered upon the table at her right hand. A china egg-cup, indifferently washed, contained a half-eaten, ill-boiled egg; a slice of thick toast had been barely touched; while a couple of flies had dropped into the cold muddy-looking tea which half filled the large breakfast-cup – the home of myriads of noxious microbes around its ears. For the discomfort of her present existence she cared little, accepting the minor ills – the covert insolence of the servants, the coarse, ill-cooked and worse-served food of which she partook mechanically when her being did not wholly recoil from it – as mere accessories to the great, boundless contempt with which her injured husband regarded her. No word of complaint passed her lips, and no look of remonstrance awarded the Kafir maid's impertinence and neglect. For her, life had come to a great, unhallowed end, and her spirit wandered in a hell of its own making which was void of the ordinary interests of existence.

The sound of voices on the veranda, almost immediately followed by the turning of the outer door, brought her back with a leap to herself. The blood went bounding along her veins as she realized that it was the voices of women that she heard. A sudden mad desire to hide, to bar the door and cower away out of sight, took possession of her, and she had already half risen to her feet when the door was quietly opened and a strange woman, clad in the garb of a nurse, stood upon the threshold. The eyes which met her own were full of a deep tenderness and a large sympathy that reached about her forlorn heart, and almost opened up the fount of tears which she had for so long thought frozen and dried.

"I am your nurse," said the new-comer, advancing into the room with her had outstretched. "Tanta brought me over, and she has gone now to tell your husband that I have arrived."

She took the thin, frail hand in both her own, and then, as by a sudden impulse, bent and kissed the white cheek.

"Don't do that!" gasped Philip's wife, recoiling. "You – you haven't seen *this*!"

She pushed the infant before her with her body, as a means of indicating its presence.

"No, I haven't" said the nurse quietly, "but I know all about it, dear, and I am more sorry for you both than tongue can tell. I feel for you especially with all my heart and soul."

"Then you are not a good woman?" Lulu's eyes were glued upon her with suspense unspeakable. "You have yourself sinned?"

"I am a divorced woman," said Hester, and then added, "My husband divorced me."

"Thank God! Oh glory be to God!" whispered the other, surrendering the bundle in her arms, and clasping her hands tightly together. "I have been so afraid of the good women. I dare not meet them; I am ashamed."

"You need not be ashamed of me," returned Hester gently, seating herself upon a low chair, and opening the shawl which covered the tiny, wizened face. "But what have you been doing to the child?" she asked sharply. "The little thing is skin and bone. She is starving."

"I know", said the mother with a helpless gesture. "She drinks and drinks all day and all night, till I get a pain that reaches through to my back; and yet she is never satisfied. And she cries nearly all the time when I take her away."

"But you are not fit for it," said Hester in sharp indignation. "It is enough to kill both of you."

Lulu said no word in reply.

"Why don't you get a bottle and feed her artificially?"

"Because" – she drew a long breath – "I couldn't ask for one."

"You are a fool," retorted Hester. "I haven't come here a moment too soon. Does that bell call your maid? Well, just touch it, please."

But when the bell had been rung twice, and no response was forthcoming, she rose from her seat and placed the child tenderly in a hollow which she pressed in the feather-bed.

She made her way to the kitchen, where she found the maid seated upon the floor, enjoying a breakfast of *sijinge*¹ which she was eating from out the pot with a silver spoon. A native *umfaan*, clad in a great-coat on top of his striped, galatea suit, and with the sleeves reaching over his wrists and into the water, stood washing dishes at a table by the window. The stove was unpolished, and the grate full of old ashes, while all else showed the same air of wilful neglect. Hester glanced from one to the other in some surprise.

"Did you not hear your mistress's bell?" she asked quietly.

"I heard," replied the girl, bending forward to scoop another spoonful of food from the pot.

"Yes – and then?"

¹ Porridge cooked with pumpkin.

"I eat," remarked the girl stolidly, filling her mouth, and then turning the spoon that she might lick the back of its bowl.

Without a word Hester turned and went out by the back door. She made her way to the store, and by the native salesman present, was shown to the master's office. Tanta's voice could be heard from within in tones of some entreaty, so she merely tapped at the door and turned the handle. A handsome man of splendid physique rose to his feet as she entered the office, and the frown on his face was barely lifted as he acknowledged the introduction which Tanta, seated in a capacious tub chair, gave in a cursory way. Her face was still heated from her walk in the sun, and her eyes, despite the obvious anxiety under which she was labouring, had a baleful light in them.

"You have had all your trouble for nothing, Hester, she said shortly. "Philip says he won't have you about the place."

"I suppose not," said Hester calmly, disregarding the gesture of expostulation which the man had made at the words, "for he will understand that I would not connive at the wicked attempt to kill his wife which is being practised."

"What do you mean?" He sprang to his feet again, and faced her with anger blazing from his miserable eyes.

"I mean, Philip Meyer, that if you were a man of common humanity you would put a bullet through your wife's brains and so end the torture which is slowly parting her, body and soul, as surely as there is a just Heaven above us."

"I have said so," murmured the old woman, "I have seen the death in her face, over and over again."

"It is a lie," said the man passionately. "You come here to work on my sympathies."

"*Your* sympathies?" Hester's voice rose in sharp temper. "What have we to do with your feelings or sympathies? I am concerned about your wife and the slow murder of that unhappy baby."

"You had better mind what you say," replied he, wincing under the strong condemnation in her eyes. "There is such a thing as libel in the land."

"There is," she conceded quickly, "and there is also such a thing as being unable to disprove the things you are accused of. I have already learned enough to know where to seek for knowledge – true and certain knowledge – that you might call libellous, but that I would be willing to pay the full price for the luxury of making public."

A look of some horror blanched his face as he regarded her with distended eyes.

"You have no business here," he muttered thickly, moistening his lips. "I believe I have heard of you before."

She nodded her head.

"I believe that too," she replied almost cheerfully. "And you must also have heard that I stop at nothing, and go to almost any length when so minded; but perhaps you don't know that I fight only when I have the right on my side. It is the truth, nevertheless."

"You stick at nothing," he replied stupidly.

"At *almost* nothing," she corrected with a slight smile. "And if you turn me away from your house to-day I swear that I shall lodge a complaint against you before the sun sets to-night – a complaint of ill-treatment, and criminal neglect of your wife."

"You could prove nothing of the sort," he said, flushing resentfully.

"Perhaps, not," she returned, unabashed, "but I could give you a deal of trouble, and set the whole countryside about your ears. And there are some other things that I could prove in the public Press. I would do it too, at whatever cost to both you and me."

"Hester always was a *duivel*," remarked Tanta placidly. "There was ever more of the old Hendrik and her vagabond father in her than of her sweet-faced mother."

Hester smiled at the old friend, and turned again to the man. He had re-seated himself at the table, and his face was now grasped in his hands, his elbows resting on the desk before him. Something in the utter dejection of his attitude, the cowering of the broad shoulders, the haggard misery of the whole figure, reminded her with a sudden pang of a face and form like his, and of the agony she had once so willingly dealt to their owner. A quick compunction seized upon her, and moving forward she laid a firm, pitying hand upon his shoulder.

"Can we not be friends, Mr Meyer?" she asked in a gentle, thrilling voice that touched some cord in the heart of the suffering sinner. "Believe me, I have come here only to help you, and will do all in my power for you both. But you must not blame me if I think first of her, because her pain is so much greater than yours, and her need is so much more urgent."

The sunny, disheveled head before her shook slowly to and fro between the hands, but she knew that it was with no gesture of dissent.

"I am rather tired," she remarked quietly, "and you have never asked me to sit down. The walk was very hot, as Tanta will tell you."

He sprang to his feet with a quick excuse, and drew forward the chair he had been sitting upon.

"Thank you," she said, sinking into the seat and leaning back. "Now we can talk comfortably."

"I shall go to Lulu," said Tanta, rising ponderously to her feet. "And then you will have to drive me home, round by the road, Philip. I have walked enough for one day."

"Just as Tanta pleases," returned the young man, opening the door.

"Is my – is she as ill as you say?" he asked abruptly, taking the chair Tanta had vacated, and pushing it somewhat into the shade. "Or are you bluffing me?"

She looked at him quietly. "I never deal in bluff," she returned, "and I have spoken the simple truth. I don't think your wife will trouble you long; you have killed her desire for life, and put her to a slow torture that a fiend might rejoice at."

"Don't talk like that," he cried sharply. "How dare you insinuate that I would wish her to die? It is my very love for her that has made life such a hell since she fell so low—"

"Is it your 'love' that sent you to lodge the complaint that is going to land her in jail?"

A cry of agony tore from the man's throat.

"It was a fiendish thing to do," she said softly. "I hope you will live to repent it."

"Repent it? I have been writhing in purgatory ever since. It is that thought that is killing me. Her pain is nothing compared to mine."

"And yet," the pitiful voice remarked softly, "she has had all the suffering, and disgrace, and open shame, and she has all the agony of public ignominy before her – the degradation of the police court, and the horror of hard, manual labour, and jail life. She has your contempt and wilful neglect to bear, and the knowledge that her sin has brought untold suffering upon you, as well as upon herself. Oh! her hell is a scorching one, believe me."

A short silence ensued.

"You will let me help her – and you?" she asked. "You will try to reclaim her – to bring her back to a desire for life?"

"You may do what you like." He pushed his chair back to the wall, and took his hand away from his swollen eyelids. "I myself can't see her."

"May God forgive you," said the woman coldly. "There will come a day when you will meet Him face to face. Perhaps in His sight your sins will be whiter than hers. They will certainly be more numerous."

"My sins are no concern of yours," said he, with a dark wave of colour over his face.

"Thank Heaven for that," said she with quick fervour. "But," in a more kindly tone, "it is useless to lose our tempers. Nothing can be gained by that, and we must come to the point. Will you give me control of your house and your servants as well as full charge of that unhappy girl? I must have this understanding quite clear."

"You can do what you please," he repeated dully.

"Thanks. I shall not detain you any longer,"

But before she reached the threshold the door was opened hurriedly from without and the *umfaan*, who had been washing dishes in the kitchen, stood there in evident perturbation.

"The *nooi* is calling the *baas* to come – quick!" he cried shrilly.

Without a word the woman and man both ran through the store and round to the house.

"What's wrong?" asked Phillip of the girl in the kitchen, as Hester hurried on.

"I know not, I – but the *nona* is screaming."

Cries of distress were distinctly heard from the passage-way, and, with a great fear at his heart, albeit a shrinking reluctance also, he made his way to his wife's room. She was struggling in the firm grasp of Tanta, her face distorted, her limbs writhing in agony, and emitting cries and shrieks that might have been wrung from a soul in a frenzy of mortal torture.

"Help me, Hester," cried the old lady in distress. "She has been trying to break her head against the wall."

"In Heaven's name what is wrong?" asked the man, aghast and trembling.

"*You* are wrong," said Hester in a low, tense voice. "Bring some brandy – sharp! Leave her to me, Tanta," she added as the man disappeared. "You are hurting her." She snatched a cup from the breakfast-tray, and half filling it with water from the toilet jug, she dashed it across Lulu's face. The dreadful cries ceased almost immediately, and the contortion of the limbs relaxed.

"Take the baby away, Tanta," urged Hester. "Quickly! before he comes back!"

The old lady picked up the bundle in the shawl and went across the passage with it. When Philip returned his wife was laying upon the bed perfectly silent

and in extreme exhaustion. Hester stood over her talking in a gentle, soothing way, and brushing back the damp hair from her forehead.

“Bring me a spoon,” she said low, as he would have handed her the glass. “You must swallow this Lulu,” she whispered gently, as she held the teaspoon to the white lips. “Your husband brought it for you, and he is never going to leave you again. He has come back to you. Do you understand? His heart is aching with love and forgiveness for you, and you are going to be happy once more.”

Slowly, spoonful by spoonful, the brandy was swallowed, and although at the blessed promise of this other woman’s words the dark eyes on the pillow never opened, their white lids quivered, and the lashes were wet with tears.

“She will do for the present,” said Hester then, turning to the man who still stood, the picture of discomfort, directly behind her. “Now go and send that Kafir girl to me – and you had better put the fear of death in her beforehand.”

But some time had elapsed, and Lulu had been gently removed to her husband’s room, before the maid, with an insolent pout on her thick lips, condescended to make her appearance. She stood then and took a nonchalant survey of the room.

“Bring a broom and a pail of hot water here, and clean this pigsty,” said Hester to her sharply. She was herself busy removing the soiled hangings about the room. The window curtains lay in a dusty heap on the floor.

“I washed the floor on Saturday” said the girl with a direct, impudent look at the stern face before her.

“You do as you are told. I am not here to listen to your remarks,” said Hester sharply.

“What you need is a dose of jail life.”

“I don’t fear the jail, I,” said the girl coolly, putting her hands behind her back. “I have been in jail before, and you have less to do there than here.”

“Yebo?” said Hester. “You know the jail, but – you don’t know me.”

Before the astounded girl knew what was happening she found herself in a grip of steel, her limbs tightly locked, and her body lying full length on the floor. For two or three seconds she gasped in agony, then she was not only released, but dragged upon her bare feet again, while the mocking voice of her tormentor assailed her.

“Do you want more?” she was asked. “And do you know me now? Will you bring that water?”

“You have killed me,” whimpered the girl, her face grey with fear. “I cannot work now.”

"Yes you can," said Hester significantly. "And if you dare question my orders another time, I'll kill you, and bury you, too."

"Dear Lord, Hester," exclaimed the old woman as she stood at a doorway farther down the passage, "have you been fighting with that hussy?"

"Not fighting, Tanta," said Hester, as the girl made for the kitchen in a dazed way. "I just threw her down, in a way that I learned in London, from a Japanese man."

"I fear you have been in bad company over there in England," returned the old lady, shaking her large head with solemn disapproval. "Not but what I am glad that you have beaten that *slechte vuiles*² of a maid."

"And now, Tanta *lief*, will you please go home and take Mr Meyer with you? I want you to send one of your maids here at once to take this baby away. The poor little mite is starving, and she is doing untold harm in this place. The air will be cleared as soon as she is safely away."

"But, Hester," expostulated the old woman in consternation, "I am not going to keep the child. You don't expect me to bring up a bastard?"

"No, I don't," said the woman, somewhat sadly. "I may do that myself. But I do think you will keep the little creature for a few days. I shall wire to Maritzburg at once and have her taken there till Dr Gray can send for her."

"But what will Philip and Lulu say?"

"Philip will say nothing, and Lulu need not be told that the child has gone to such a distance. Oh, Tanta, *lief*, can you not understand that it is Lulu's life we must fight for now?"

"It is *jammer* that she didn't die long ago," said Tanta stolidly. Hester remained silent. "Well child, I shall do as you say. But are you not coming back to-night?"

"*Neen*, Tanta. I am going to stay here for a while. Tell Maisie to send a parcel of clothes over, and to include all my aprons. And if Tanta can spare a loaf of brown bread and a little fresh butter, I shall perhaps persuade Lulu to eat a little. There is nothing fit for her here, and this place must be made decent to live in before I can attempt to cook anything."

2 Worthless dirt.

CHAPTER XXI

*Now standing apart with God and me
Thou art weakness all*

“I THINK we must look matters squarely in the face now.”

It was the evening of the same day, and Philip Meyer and his self-constituted guest were concluding their meal at a well-appointed table, the viands having come across from the farm-house. The room was as fresh and bright as liberal quantities of hot soapsuds and much elbow-grease could make it, and Philip himself had done honour to the altered conditions in that he made himself more presentable than he had appeared for a long while past. Singularly handsome and well-groomed he looked, with the full light from the lamp shining upon his bright, crisp hair, and his well-cut, boyish features.

He looked across his cup of tea at the speaker, a shade of uneasiness on his brow. “I don’t understand you, nurse,” he said.

“I think you do,” she returned gently. “I am sure you have been unaware of your wife’s real condition, and that you have been quite unwittingly cruel.”

“She refused to see a doctor,” he interrupted.

“And small wonder,” returned she, “when she feared the face of God and man alike. But now you and I are to share the work of bringing her back to life, and to hope, and to such happiness as she can ever know again this side the grave. I will do the day work. You,” she looked at him squarely in the face, “will take care of her at night.”

He pushed his chair back in perturbation. “I – I couldn’t,” he muttered thickly. “Ever since—” he broke off abruptly.

“Yes! I understand all that,” she said, rising also, “but I think you have punished her enough. You will help her now to face the ordeal you have brought upon her. You will – you will take her to your heart again. She is dying simply for the want of a kind word from you. The greatest part of your own misery is the anger you are cherishing against her – you know that yourself.”

There was a short silence.

“You have drained your own cup of bitterness to the very dregs. Hers is still overflowing,” the quiet voice resumed. “She has still so much to bear, with all the public degradation before her. Make it a little easier. Be merciful, and give her some word of forgiveness to remember when she is far away from you –

condemned to hard labour and the life of a convict for the sin against you. She is craving for you.”

Involuntarily his arms almost raised themselves with yearning, but he shook his head slowly. “I can’t go into that room,” he said with sorrowful decision.

“Lulu is alone there,” she said significantly. “The – other is gone away for ever. You will never hear of it again; it will be in the care of some good Christian people whom you will never meet. Your wife doesn’t know yet—”

“Come with me,” he said abruptly. “I am going to her.”

She accompanied him to the door, but as she heard the smothered cry that came from the bed, she returned slowly down the passage to the dining-room. In a corner of the rough, horse-hair sofa, she sat, tired out in body, and wearied in mind, thinking, thinking till far on in the night.

The morning brought its own manual duties with it, and the realisation that the kitchen-maid, aggrieved at the loss to her dignity the previous day, had deserted during the night, leaving only the untrained *umfaan* to fill the post of general servant to the household, brought with it a fresh stimulus for work.

Two or three days went quietly by, and after a couple of hours’ household drudgery, Hester had, one morning, sat down to watch her patient sip a cup of nourishing broth, when a heavy footstep sounded in the passage.

A look of alarm sprang to the sick woman’s face – so thin, so sad and yet so much calmer in its very misery than it had been one short week before.

“Don’t let anyone come in,” she cried, her eyes wide with fear. “Oh, nurse, don’t let them come near me.”

“They shan’t come here,” said Hester decisively, moving rapidly to the door, emerging and closing it behind her.

“Good morning,” she said politely to the tall, loose-limbed man who regarded her under unsmiling brows. “Do you wish to see Mr Meyer?”

Andries looked at her, and his frown deepened. “I want to see his wife,” he said coldly. “Let me pass, please.”

She held her ground.

“If you give your message to me,” she said evenly, “I shall use my discretion about passing it on to my patient.”

“Your discretion,” he repeated, with a show of his tobacco-stained teeth. “Well, I’m—” (“Damned,” she whispered for him beneath her breath, and laughed inwardly.)

“Yes, my discretion,” she reiterated. “If you bring her any comfort or good cheer, I shall gladly give it to her.”

"I have come to show her sin to her – and to pray for her," he blurted out, trembling with anger.

"She knows all about her sin," remarked Hester easily, "and you can pray for her at home."

Andries looked at the woman and breathed heavily. He had had a deal to bear; the disgrace which had come unsought and undeserved upon the good, honourable name bequeathed him, had left its mark upon his rugged frame. He was thinner, his face was more haggard than it had ever been, his spirit more bitter within him. To be confronted with the sins of his family upon every side was indeed a galling draught. Here was he following closely in his father's footsteps, eschewing pleasure, viewing life from its sternest standpoint, glorying in the mortification of the spirit which subdued every bubble of mirth, and walking strictly in that path which winds towards a conservative narrow Heaven – faced wherever he turned with a disgrace that touched his family, and seared his own soul. And then to be foiled in the exercise of his palpable duty by this woman He turned upon her in sudden anger:

"What right have you to play *baas* in my brother's house?" he asked wrathfully.

"The right he gave me," she said calmly, still standing with her back to the closed door. "Did he send you here?"

"I know who you are," he continued with a disregard of her question. "What right have you to the name of Buchanan?"

"The right of having earned it," replied she, lowering her voice as a hint to him to do the same.

"Earned it?" He repeated the words with unmitigated scorn. "Earned it by writing such trash as is unfit for publication, and by taking prominent part in a disgraceful case——"

"It was a disgraceful case," she admitted calmly; "and I took a very prominent part in it."

"For the pure love of notoriety," he ended roughly. "But I know you, Hester de Villiers. Your father was a *rondlooper*,¹ and your mother was a Scotch upstart who was not content with one man. You yourself were not even good enough for your English husband, and he divorced you."

He strode down the passage, but she followed him rapidly. As they entered the dining-room she detained him with a grasp on the arm of his riding-coat.

1 Vagrant.

“Wait one moment, Andries Meyer,” she said, her face pale with the rage that consumed her. “You have told me who I am – a divorced wife, a shameless woman who has touched filth for the love of its contact, a writer who has shrieked aloud to the world the deeds that should only be whispered of in the dark. In consideration of the pain you are in, I shall pass over the vile complexion you put upon everything connected with me; but you have omitted to explain what you consider yourself. For the sake of curiosity I should like to know that.”

“Your curiosity has nothing to do with me,” he replied, his cold eyes condemning her, as she stood before him, with something like loathing in their depths. “Nothing of mine can ever concern you, and it is not for me to tell you who and what I am.”

“That is just as well,” she said quietly, “because you would not tell the truth. You are so used to yourself, so accustomed to live within a network of lies and hypocrisies of your own weaving, that you would not know the truth if you met it face to face. You could not meet it! And as to what you are, I can tell you in a few words. You are a Christian leper. I have already heard of you, Andries Meyer, and among your own people you have the reputation of being a Pharisee. But you are not that, and only the ignorance of your friends could excuse so gross an insult to a noble body of men. You do more harm to the religion you profess than does the most blasphemous of infidels, because you proclaim yourself as a disciple of Christ – that Christ Who was all peace and love. When the two races of the Continent would settle down in amity you would stir up racial hatred with every nerve and fibre. And yet you prate at your evening worship of ‘love’ and ‘charity.’ Believe me, Mr Meyer, if the road to hell is paved with good intentions, the way to Heaven is not laid down with self-righteousness and intolerance. You are not bad enough for hell, for you do believe in Christ, and worship Him – I grant you that; but you are not good enough for Heaven, for, believing in Him, you have yet ignored His behests.”

He paled perceptibly.

“May God forgive you for a wicked woman,” he gasped in cold fury.

“But Andries Meyer never will,” she returned quickly. “I understand that. I told you,” again the smile lurked about her lips, “that you wouldn’t know the truth if you met it face to face.”

He strode away from her, and his horse’s steps soon echoed past the house.

She turned to the bedroom. Lulu sat up on bed, leaning forward with fear and anxiety straining every nerve of her trembling body.

“Oh, *nurse!*” she gasped, “I have been so frightened. If you had let him in, I should have screamed. Last time he was here he preached to me about all the bad women in the Bible, and he told me about Jezebel being thrown to the dogs, and only the palms of her hands being left. And it all haunted me for days.”

Her eyes were wide with horror.

“That was silly of you,” said Hester severely. “Why, I am a hundred times more like Jezebel than you are. There is only one woman in the Bible that I would compare you to,” she added tenderly.

“I know,” said Lulu, sinking listlessly back again among the pillows. “The one they threw the stones at.”

A quick glimmer flitted across the nurse’s face for an instant. Then: “I was thinking of Mary Magdalene,” she said softly.

CHAPTER XXII

*Give me the heart's last love,
For that is best*

CORNELIUS Meyer sat at the table in his office behind the court-room. The day was one of close sultry heat, and despite the fact that both windows were wide open the air was heavy and oppressive with the effluvia from the Zulu skin. On a form to his left sat a number of natives dressed, more or less successfully, in imitation of European garb. Before him, stiffly upright and excessively uncomfortable in a cane chair, sat a young native chief, garbed from head to foot in a long, thick overcoat of brown cloth, buttoned to the bottom, thus hiding his bare legs and *mutsha* dress from the polite eyes of the *abalungu*.¹ He was to all intents and purposes an untutored savage, yet his expression was intelligent and earnest, his bearing respectful and dignified. The discussion, dealing with the irksome restrictions of the East Coast fever laws, had been a long and tiring one, and it had reached to its close when a clerk, after a preliminary knock at the door, entered the room.

There is a lady here to see you, sir. She says it is on a matter of importance. Shall I ask her to wait?"

"No, Willis; this interview is really at an end. It would be as well to let the lady be shown in at once. *Nsele!*" he addressed the young chief. "What you have said is of importance, and I shall represent your statements to the Government. I have other work on hand for a short time, and, if you will go to my house in the meantime, my servant will give you refreshment after your long journey. When you have eaten return to me here and your pass will be ready."

"*Nkosi!*" The waiting satellites also rose to their feet, and with uplifted finger gave the salute, as they followed their chief to the door.

"Send one of the police boys down to the Residency with them, Willis, and give orders that they are to be well fed with coffee and bread and meat. Then show the lady in."

"Very good, sir."

"And leave the door open, Willis. The place is stifling."

¹ White people.

Meyer sat back in his chair trifle wearily. He had had a busy morning, and was already beginning to find out that a magistrate's life in a community of conservative farmers who each believed his own district to be the hub of the universe, and himself the lever upon which the affairs of the country turned, was not a bed of roses.

"You need not announce me, thank you," said a voice behind him at the open door. A rush of memory sent the blood coursing and bounding through his veins as he turned slowly and faced his new-comer.

"It is you – Hester!" he said, and he felt the pulse thumping in his throat. "I thought so."

She held out both her bare, ringless hands.

"Yes it is I, Cornelius. You expected me? You knew I was here?"

"I knew, of course." He transferred her two hands into one of his own, and with the other drew away from the desk the chair he had been sitting upon. He placed her gently in it, and carrying the seat the native chief had occupied round to his own place, he sat opposite to her.

"I have always known you would come back, Hester. A little while longer and I should have gone to look for you—"

His face had become very pale. She looked at him, and marveled in her own mind at the beauty of the man, and the splendid, upright dignity of his bearing.

"Then you haven't forgotten me?" Almost before the words escaped her she blushed at their childish inanity.

"Forgotten you?" he echoed.

"I beg your pardon, Cornelius," she said hastily. "It was a silly, vain thing to say. And you know I treated you very badly."

"You treated me cruelly," he agreed quietly, "very cruelly; but the lesson had been well earned."

"Where is Elsie?" The question escaped her lips, as the train of thought brought back the pretty, wistful face of a little cousin to her mind's eye.

"Elsie?" He smiled for the first time, as he regarded her. "You wouldn't know Elsie now. She married a wattle planter many years ago. She has got very stout and is somewhat short of breath. When I saw her last she was at *nachtmaal*² having her twin boys christened. There were six other children at home."

And many other children played round her door, quoted Hester softly.

"Oh! you wouldn't think of Maud Müller if you saw Elsie," retorted he quickly. "She is a most comfortable person, and worships her illiterate husband,

2 Quarterly sacrament.

who surrounds her with every luxury in the way of household service. She is one of the happiest women I know.”

“Well, I am glad of that.”

“And sorry for the punishment you gave another individual for ‘trifling with her affections.’” He looked at her quizzically.

“Well – partly. But don’t let us look backward any more, Cornelius. Madness lies that way. Let us face the problem of the present.”

“And of the future too, Hester – a little later,” he added, as she blushed like a girl.

“And the problem of the present is – Lulu,” she said softly. “You know that I am staying with her?”

“Yes, I know,” he assented. “I have heard all about the good you are doing there. You have converted Philip himself.”

“Not converted, Cornelius. I have only brought him round to realize the enormity of his own sins as compared with that of his wife. And it is about her that I have come to you to-day. Can nothing be done to avert publicity?”

“Nothing, Hester. It is a most lamentable affair all through, but the law must now take its course.”

“But, Cornelius – and this is what I have come for – the course lies in your hands. Can you not make it an easy one?” Her eyes watched his face with anxiety and pleading. “She has suffered so much already,” she resumed almost with tears. “She is completely cowed and hopeless. Don’t – don’t crucify her by a public trial.”

“It is not in my hands, Hester,” he returned gently. “Believe me, I would do very much to help you in this matter – for her sake as well as for your own – setting aside the fact that the shame and disgrace have touched us all with a red-hot brand; but I, as a near relative of the parties concerned, am not to try this case. Mr D— from the neighbouring magistracy will come here especially for the affair. He is a humane man with wide sympathies, and I shall ask him to be gentle with her. More than that I cannot do, Hester – except one thing. I can promise you that there will be no publicity. We can have the court cleared.”

“Thank you, Cornelius.” The concession was much – very much – less than she had led herself to hope for, and it may be that her tone expressed some of her chagrin. “I hope I shall be allowed to stay with her all the time?”

“I think I may promise you that Hester.” He regarded her with grave, comprehending eyes. “She has broken the law and must accept the consequences, but I give you my word that no aggravation of her just punishment will be added here.”

She rose to her feet.

"It is a wicked law, and – I am disappointed," she said somewhat bitterly.

He came and stood beside her, taking her hands in his. "I see that you are, dear. But we are here only to administer the law, not to criticize its justice. What can be done for her will be done.

"Thank you," she said again lamely. "I must go now."

"When may I come and see you?" He was still holding her hand and gazing intently at her face.

"I don't know," she said vaguely. "Whenever you like."

He laughed like a boy as he bent and kissed the palm of her hand. "That would be every day," he said.

Then he raised his head and kissed her on the mouth. She started suddenly, her face crimson with colour. The blood surged back, to leave her deadly pale. She opened her lips to speak, but left him without a word.

For the better part of an hour he sat in shameful neglect of Government business, living over and over again every moment of the interview, recalling every fold of the grey gown, every expression that had flitted across the face, and every tone of the voice that had been stilled for so many years to his hearing.

"She is the same, and yet not the same," he assured himself, almost drunk with joy as he recalled the fact that the lips he had kissed had most assuredly, for one fraction of the time, clung hungrily to his own. "She is changed. Twelve or thirteen years ago she would have boxed my ears."

At Philip's side on the homeward drive, Hester sat silent and thoughtful. Her face was still pale, and her nerves yet tingled at the memory of the impulsive caress.

"I thought I had done with that kind of thing for ever and ever," she was saying inwardly when her brain allowed for consecutive thought. "I fancied myself above carnal love and vanity since John failed. And yet – and yet! To have a home of my own, and a man of my own, once more! And perhaps a little child. Who knows – He has been true and steadfast all these long weary years. And – I believe – I could love him." She closed her eyes, and again she felt the flicker of a soft moustache across her face and the pressure of tender, loving lips upon her own.

She pulled herself together with a start, and looked around at the silent, morose figure of Philip with a guilty blush.

"God forgive me," she whispered within herself. "I had forgotten Lulu!"

CHAPTER XXIII

And they looked for Christ, and found Him – where?

SUNDAY-morning service was in full swing at the home of Philip Meyer the younger. Where every household held its own Sunday *Godsdienst*, it was yet a habit to congregate together at Tanta's where, unless some member of the community for whom she had a deep respect presented himself, the old lady herself conducted the service, supremely indifferent if not utterly contemptuous of the conventions which decreed that a woman's part in worship should be a quiescent one. Immediately upon conclusion of the eleven o'clock tea, and after a last anxious survey of the bubbling pots upon the stove (with a stern reminder to the servants that a mishap to the dinner would bring about an inevitable thwacking upon their backs) she led the way from the dining-room to the *zitkamer*,¹ arrayed in her second-best black cashmere, with a spotless apron around her ample proportions, and a white lace cap upon her head. Seated before the centre table, with her husband's great family Bible – which in its time had never been required to record the birth of a child to its owners – before her, Tanta looked her largest and greatest. Her stern eye and pursed mouth testified to her own appreciation of the solemnity of the time.

Upon the present occasion the square drawing-room was well filled. Several young gallants were attracted almost weekly by the presence of the pretty, saucily indifferent English girl, sat upon the chairs and bench which they had carried in from the veranda. Garbed in riding clothes and starched linen of spotless purity, with, for the most part, brown boots and leather leggings, startling reminiscent of the stores which had furnished them, they made, on the whole, an array of fine young manhood, somewhat sheepish under their hostess's Gorgon eye, but ready for the quick appreciation of anything approaching the hilarious. Andries, with his wife and daughter, and such of the younger fry as could be depended upon, in point of age, for good behavior, had walked across the strip of sun-baked veld for the morning tea, thus testifying, in the forgoing of his own home service, that he was willing to extend the olive branch of forgiveness to his neighbours.

Cornelius Meyer sat there, as did Hester, in her nurse's uniform, and Maisie, and the two Philips. The meeting was further augmented by a couple

¹ Drawing-room.

of neighbours – farmers who lived miles away, and had come with their wives, by a not unusual coincidence, to *kuier*² upon the same day.

With reverent, hushed voice, in which a stern sorrow lurked, Tanta read slowly and distinctly the sublime praise of the one hundred and third psalm. She looked up as her own tones died away and signed to the deacon.

“Take the service, Andries,” she said low, and but for the well-grounded reputation of cast-iron nerve in which she rejoiced, some of those present might have thought that her voice had faltered as she made the request.

After the chanting of a *gezing*, Andries took the place as his just and rightful due. Turning over the leaves of the Book before him, he announced that he would read the third chapter of the Lamentations of Jeremiah.

He read well, did Andries, and as his full, sonorous tones rang around the room, and the listeners watched the deep, aggrieved lines upon his face, it might have been his own wrongs that he proclaimed aloud, his own enemies that he denounced:

“Render Thou them a recompense, O Lord, according to the work of their hands.”

“Give them sorrow of heart, Thy curse unto them”.

“Persecute and destroy them in anger from under the heaven of the Lord.”

His subsequent prayer was long and extempore. He came before his Maker as the chief of all sinners, debased, worthless, more vile than the thief upon the Cross. But, with him, he was saved by the boundless grace that had shed the most precious of all Blood, and by the dying agony that now interceded, ceaseless and pleading, for him and his. It was a sad prayer, and a gloomy, and a heavy sigh from one or other of his hearers testified, ever and anon, to the power of the suppliant’s eloquence.

The psalm which followed upon the prayer, and marked the conclusion of the service, had barely died away, and no movement had yet been made to arise, when an unwonted voice made itself heard.

“May I speak a word here?” It was Cornelius Meyer, the magistrate, who addressed them in English and stood behind the chair he had been occupying. Every eye in the room had turned upon him, but he glanced from one to the other with a faint smile flickering across his pleasant, handsome features, the subdued light from the open window showing plainly the streaks of grey in his crisp hair. Tanta nodded slightly towards him, and Andries, his cousin, stared in stolid wonder at the apparition.

2 Visit.

“I wish to detain you for a minute or two,” continued Cornelius, “in order to discuss the question of this religion of ours. We all know and feel that Jesus Christ is the friend of sinners – the Brother, the Comforter, the Redeemer, Who gave up his earthly life upon the Cross, for all mankind. But He is more than that! Is it not time for us to remember that He is now the King of Glory, the Prince of Everlasting Power, as well as of Peace? There is a point in Christianity where the soul should be lifted above the Cross. This religion of ours is not a creed of gloom. Christ suffered it all for us – the gloom, the earthly despair, the hideous anguish – but He ascended into Heaven again, and reigns there in glory unspeakable. Can we not lift ourselves out of the morbid spirit that dwells upon the Cross and regard Him as He is? There is no need to forget that Christ died for sinners, but there is far greater occasion to remember that He has gone on high to ‘prepare a place for you.’

“Teach your children the story of the Cross, imbue in their young minds the beauty of that great Renunciation, but lift up your own hearts and break through the spell that you have cast around your souls. Soar above it! Try to realize the difference it would make to the whole world if Christians looked upwards in smiling faith and living joy, seeing the Saviour of mankind with the scars upon His hands – yes! but with grief, sorrow, anguish, gloriously overcome; triumphant, resplendent, in very love and power, God incarnate!”

His voice had risen somewhat, and he had looked beyond them at the last, as though in truth he realized himself something of that great wonder of which he spoke. His speech ended abruptly as his eyes came back to those of his Cousin Andries, and he swung his chair backward, and sat upon it.

“I don’t agree with new doctrines,” said the deacon slowly, “but I shall answer you another time.”

“This is no new doctrine, Andries,” said Cornelius pleasantly. “Merely another aspect of an old one.”

“You have said your lesson well,” commented Andries briefly.

CHAPTER XXIV

*The inner chord of every heart
Hath yearnings that are never heard*

TANTA had arisen and moved kitchenwards before there was a general dispersal of young people to the veranda, and Hester lifted up her sunshade. Cornelius joined her as she moved towards the dining-room.

“Are you going back to the store?” he asked. “Because,” he added before she could answer, “I expect you to invite me for lunch.”

“For dinner,” she corrected; “and I am not going to invite you, but you may come if you like – Maisie has gone to ask Tanta’s permission to walk with us also.”

“Poor Philip!”

“She is coming back at once,” returned the woman briefly, “and Philip will accompany her. She only walks as far as the end of the plantation, and doesn’t come to the store. She never does.”

A few minutes later they were all in the plantation. The three elders paced along the track within the trees, the men walking upon either side of Hester as she took the path. Philip the younger and Maisie walked silently in the rear, some paces behind the others.

“I have to thank you for your words, Cornelius,” Hester said, as soon as they were safely within the shadow of the bush, and she had lowered the sunshade. “There is so much to be said about our religion – or rather about its observances,” she continued thoughtfully. “We don’t show worship enough. We profess a certain amount of reverence, but it is too often not the right kind.”

“I think I understand what you mean,” Cornelius said gently. “There is a certain cheapening of Christianity that tends to lose it much of its dignity.

“Exactly! and strange to say some of the revival hymn writers are much to blame in this direction. You will have a jig-like tune set to words of commiseration over a dying Saviour; or, worse still, you will have a mournful ditty expressing to you Christ’s present agony over your own shortcomings. And oh! as you said, His agony is all past, and it is for us to work out our own redemption by the memory of that anguish; but not to live in it. It was an act of sublime renunciation on our behalf, and it is only due to Him to live in the Divine promise He made us, and to regard Him now, not as the human,

suffering man of flesh, but as God's own Son, higher and mightier than all kings, and only to be approached with reverence and worship. There is one sacred song that always makes me sad. You know it perhaps?

*Behold me standing at the door;
And hear me pleading evermore.
Say, weary child oppressed by sin,
May I come in? May I come in?*

I could weep every time I hear it. How dares any poor atom of humanity arrogate to himself the thought that God's Son – God Himself! – pleads with him? 'May I come in?' It is a request couched in the terms used by an inferior to a superior."

"And yet," interposed Philip here, "the Cross is the visible symbol of Christianity. Surely you wouldn't do away with that?"

"God forbid!" ejaculated Hester. "You know the grand old hymn:

When I survey the wondrous cross

Compare its simple dignity and grandeur of thought with such effusions set to a sailor's hornpipe tune as,

*The Lamb, the Lamb, the bleeding Lamb,
I love the sound of Jesus' name,
It sets my spirit in a flame,
Glory to the bleeding Lamb!*

"No, Philip," she resumed, reverting to his words, "we would not forget the Cross, but Christ Himself is above the Cross, and we must regard Him there. Christianity itself should be one glorious Easter morning."

"It is the millennium you would speak of, nurse."

"Perhaps so." She checked herself with a sigh, and, changing the topic of conversation, said abruptly to Cornelius:

"What did the deacon mean by saying you had repeated your lesson well?"

"I don't know," returned he, with a smile, "unless he meant that you had prompted the words."

"Oh! But do you know, Cornelius, that you have missed your vocation in life?" She turned to him, her face earnest and almost worshipful.

"You mean that I should have been a parson instead of a country magistrate?" He smiled at her seriousness.

"No, not a parson," she said quietly, "but a speaker – a public man. What good you could do out in the world! You have the personal magnetism, the force, the belief in yourself – and you have eloquence. Come with me and help to right the wrongs of the weak and oppressed – I am only a woman, and can do nothing but show the wrongs of the world. You are a man; you could right them."

"You overestimate me, Hester. But such as I am, I am yours to command – now and for ever. I always have been. Take me and do with me as you will."

"Thank you, Cornelius."

"That is hardly an answer, Hester; it is not quite definite enough, is it?" The words were light, but his voice throbbed as he spoke them.

"I think it is quite definite, Cornelius," she said, a slow colour mantling her face, and tingeing it for a moment with the glow of forgotten youth. "But – there must be no hurry."

"No hurry at all," he echoed. "I am quite willing to wait – dear! – for a month of more."

"A month or more," she repeated quickly, with a laugh that sounded to the man like an echo from the mocking past.

"I am glad you two have settled it at last," said Philip, a look almost of amusement lighting up his haggard face. "Don't mind me!" he added in quizzical vein.

"We don't," interposed his cousin, as the woman blushed brightly again. "If you know how difficult it has been to catch her you would understand. I had made up my mind to speak to her in public, if she gave me no further chance. She has been as skittish as a two-year-old."

They all laughed aloud. Hester and skittishness were so far apart – so irreconcilable.

The two walking soberly behind looked up with astonishment at the unwonted sound – unwonted in these days of stress and sorrow. Something quickened within the girl as she glanced sharply from one to the other of the group before her. Cornelius Meyer was regarding the woman with a certain air of proprietorship that could have but one meaning, and – Aunt Hester –

It dawned upon her then with a sudden cruel force that all the love and worship of which this strong man was capable were centred around the woman at his side; the woman who had been her own life-long idol, the princess of her early days, the benefactress and example to whose standard she had aspired with her maturer understanding. The knowledge, swift and piercing with its agony, shot through her stricken heart, as she realised that the half-formed

hopes and whispering belief which she had cherished had now evaporated like so many bubbles in the air.

She turned her gaze away from them in sudden pain, and met the pitying, comprehending eyes of Philip, their brown depths full of a love as deep and enduring as her own for this other man might have been. He reached out his hand and took hers, gently placing it upon his arm. She gathered her forces together with a mighty effort, and gave a little, wan smile in his direction.

"They seem—"

"Yes, he loves her," said the lad quietly. "I saw it from the very first. Indeed, he loved her many years ago, when they were both young. They say she treated him very badly then."

"I don't believe it," said the girl, her voice sharp from the hidden pain. "She never treated anyone badly in all her life. And why shouldn't he love her? She is good, and true, and beautiful. Whom else is there to *look* at when she is by?"

Her lips were white and tremulous, though her words were brave and belligerent.

A quick gush of tenderness filled the young man's heart as he lifted the little white hand hanging at her side, to his lips.

"There are others to look at," he whispered. "Darling!"

"Don't!" she cried sharply, her eyes filling suddenly with a gush of tears. "Oh, don't!"

CHAPTER XXV

When sun and stars are sunk in night

IT is an incontrovertible fact that one act, good or bad – but particularly bad – brings a chain of like events quickly in its train. It is only necessary to glance at the annals of crime to find that one single instance of criminal hardihood will be quickly followed by a series of similar offences no matter how dire or dreadful the punishment may be.

Thus it was that the example of David in becoming the *sogo*¹ of a white woman had stirred to emulation certain others of his race, the while they loudly condemned the consequences to himself.

So that although David was lying in the county jail awaiting the trial that would send him, with the marks of the cat-o'-nine-tails on his back, to work on the breakwater, his cousin Absolom was in no wise deterred from forming certain projects of social advancement on his own behalf. Though he had worked side by side with his cousin in the store, he had, like the rest of the community, received the shock of his lifetime when David owned of his own free will to having broken the law in conjunction with his master's wife. He had himself been summarily dismissed from the store, but was now in no hurry to re-engage himself elsewhere. In reality a clever servant, he knew that he had but to intimate his desire for work to have the pick of more situations than he could count upon his fingers of his two hands.

Now, however, he remained a gentleman at large, accepting the hospitality in turn of his friends and relations in the neighbourhood. Part of his earnings he invested in a complete riding outfit, in emulation of the young Boers around, and he swaggered about, showing himself superciliously to the *amakolwa* girls, receiving their adulation, but offering none in return.

It chanced that Maisie had met the native several times, as, attended by Kaatje, she had taken her afternoon airing when the heat of the day was past. She had always briefly acknowledged his greeting had passed on, unconscious almost of the encounter.

The day following the Sunday service aforementioned, Kaatje was sent over to the store with the bi-weekly supply of butter and eggs which always

1 Sweetheart.

came from the old farm. As Tanta packed the basket, and Maisie handed her the banana leaves with which to protect the butter, the latter said quietly:

"I think I'll walk with Kaatje through the wattles, Tanta. I could wait at the little gate for her while she ran down to the house."

"So you could, *mijn hartje*," agreed the old lady with a kindly glance at the pale young face before her. "You are not looking too well. Have you eaten too many peaches, do you think?"

The girl laughed involuntarily.

"No Tanta," she said, wiping her fingers on a hanging towel. "I was reading too much last night, perhaps."

"I've told you that you'll spoil your eyes," said Tanta severely. "You'll have to put spectacles on before you're forty. But run now and get your hat and *hand-moffjes* or you'll keep Kaatje waiting."

On the way through the plantation they passed Absolom, but he stood aside, and made only the ordinary salutation, barely returning Kaatje's familiar leer as he noted the droop of the white girl's head, that was so distinct from its usual proud poise.

Arrived at the gate, Maisie stood still while Kaatje passed through.

"Give my love to the *nkosigazi*," she remarked mechanically.

"*Yebo, nkosasana*. Would the *nkosasana* wait for me a little while?" she asked with some diffidence. "There is something I want to buy in the store."

"Go and buy," said Maisie kindly. "I will await you."

But Kaatje was hard to please at the store, or (which was more likely) she met a number of kindred spirits within its precincts, for a long half-hour passed and Maisie still stood over the gate watching the great blue shadows creep over the wide, rugged valley. She shaded her eyes with her hand, noting appreciatively that the tips of the low-lying kopjes, erstwhile bathed in yellow light, became gradually, one by one, submerged in the gulf of gloom, as the sun sped toward his setting. She shuddered slightly, perhaps at the influence of the far darker shadow which lay back in the plantation awaiting her, and turned around slowly. Simultaneously, she heard Kaatje's voice down below, laughing loudly.

"She's coming now," she whispered to herself. "I think I'll go quietly on, and she'll soon overtake me. Tanta will be anxious."

But she had traversed nearly half the distance home before the sound of stealthy footsteps arrested her. She turned in vague alarm, and found Absolom almost at her side. She knew suddenly that she had always disliked the native;

his air or respectful deference had ever seemed to cover a suggestion of undue familiarity and covert insolence.

Now, as he swept his tweed hat from his head, and bowed with the air of a courtier, she became vaguely angered and somewhat ill-at-ease. She would have passed silently on, but he stepped up to her and said with an evil leer, yet in his own language: "You don't acknowledge my greeting. Wherein have I done wrong?"

"I don't converse with servants," she said coldly. "But when you give the greeting which is customary from your race to mine, I will notice your presence."

"As you would notice the presence of a dog," he said, with a show of his strong white teeth.

"As I would notice a dog," she agreed. Then turning to him sharply. "And as I would say to a dog, I say to you – *voetzak!*"

She pointed with her hand down the wattle path before her, and stood aside to let him pass.

He laughed aloud.

"I am going to walk with you, *ntombi yami, ngia ku tanda.*"²

He bent forward and glared with his passionate eyes into her. His hot breath blew into her suddenly whitened face, his wide nostrils gaping as he read the dreadful terror in her eyes.

"Go!" Her tongue moistened her dry lips while she half whispered the word. "Go, or you'll die; you'll be killed —"

"Who will kill me? These little white men?" He laughed in a low, cruel tone. "Who'll kill me? The young Boer who loves you, or the Boer magistrate whom you love yourself, and who hates all women, black and white? *Whe!* Those are not men. Those are only things. I love you, I; and I am not as they are. Give me a *pass*³: the pin at your throat, or the ring around your arm, and I shall know you love me, and let you go to-day. We shall meet again, for you will be mine. Your pretty body will belong to me first. I want you, before these white men marry you and tie you down to their rooms. They cannot love, they."

"Go!" she said again, the words almost choked by the wild thudding in her breast. "Go away!"

"Not before you give me a *pass*," he said, lifting himself erect. "Give me the pin you wear above your pretty breast and I will go for to-day."

2 My sweetheart, I love you.

3 Love-token.

For one sickening second she considered in her dazed mind whether she would give the love-token demanded, and thus rid herself of the pestilent, fearsome presence. She knew well that to hand the gift over would be to brand herself with dishonour before the entire native community, and – perhaps – before a section of the European population also. Then she gathered her forces together and tried to still the heavy thumping in her throat.

“I will rather die,” she gasped, with a pant of intermingled fear and fury.

“I will not kill you,” he said savagely; “but —” With a sudden swift motion, he caught hold of her arms and pinioned them together. One dreadful shriek awoke the echoes, followed by scream upon scream as the brute for a terrible instant tried to crush her to the ground. But the long physical training which she had undergone back in the college days stood her in good stead now, and the frenzied strength, lent by her urgent, terrible need, nerved her frail form to its uttermost, as she swayed to and fro and fought to free her hands from the black vice that gripped them. The shrieking suddenly ceased, and her assailant panted expectantly, when she quickly bent forward and fastened her teeth upon the nearest black wrist. She bit hard – bit till her mouth was full of blood – and he gave a furious curse as he released her and sprang back.

“Wife of a dog!” He jumped forward again.

She felt her strength ebbing, even as her lips, with the blood trickling from them, emitted, almost without her knowledge, another long, screaming wail. His hands clutched her by the neck this time, and as the dark fingers pressed about her throat and thrust her eyes wide open to stare at the awful, hellish face above her, she felt herself sliding, sliding, sliding down a long awful abyss.

“Oh Lord! Oh Saviour of womankind! Oh Christ!”

She heard her body strike the earth as a wild, whooping cry and a loud thudding upon the turf broke on her senses without arousing them. A confusion of voices, accompanied by a succession of furious oaths, more sweet to hear than the singing of angels, seemed to create a wall of bliss and security around her. She lay full length upon the ground, just as she had been thrown from the catapult of iron fingers; not senseless, for she was alive to the blessed relief that had come her way, and her brain was shouting: “Oh God! thanks! thanks!” The clamour of the inward, persistent voice deadened for a while the sounds of the outward world around her.

Then she was lifted gently, in strong, tender arms, and a man’s voice was weeping.

“My little tender dove! My little girl! Oh damn, damn!

She opened her eyes and looked at Philip, then closed them again wearily.

"You were so long," she muttered, "so long in coming,"

"Oh God! Oh damn, damn!"

At the note of terrible grief, and the understanding that flashed upon her, a sudden strength came to her limbs, the while a warm dye of colour flooded her face and swollen throat. She raised her eyes to his, and lifted herself up in his arms.

"I am not hurt," she said. "You saved me. Oh, Philip – you – saved – me!" She sank to her knees, and would have kissed his hand in her passion of gratitude, but that he snatched it from her, his face, with the tears upon it, pale from emotion.

"I know," he said soothingly. "I know *mijn hartje*.⁴ Thank God for that!"

He placed her with her back against a wattle tree. "Here is Kaatje coming," he said hastily. "I must leave you for a few moments. Say nothing to her."

Waiting for no reply, he vaulted in his saddle and left at a hand gallop across the plantation, the creaking and breaking of the loose branches marking his way. A fugitive figure in the distance was flying through the trees, making for the boundary fence that divided the farm from the native location. Closely behind him galloped Conrad. Philip gave an inarticulate shout of approval as the lad swung the horse round and cut off the retreat by the fence. The flying figure turned and found itself faced by a yet more terrible apparition in the form of this other Dutchman whose white face was lit with deadly hate and the lust to kill.

He glanced wildly around, tried to double first to the right, then to the left, before he was ridden down from behind by Conrad. The inherent fear of the white man took a deadly grip of the brute nature, and he made but feeble resistance as Conrad bore him to the ground and placed his knee on his chest. Philip flung himself from the horse.

"Don't touch him," he said. "Leave him to me."

The younger man looked up silently at his cousin, who, like all persons of even temperament, was all the more terrible when aroused. His livid rage was horrible to see as he lifted up the flap of his saddle and removed the stirrup strap. He dropped the iron to the ground and approached the silent, watching group of two.

With a horrible fascination he eyed the quivering black form crouched on the decayed wattle leaves with its bravery of an hour or two ago, soiled and dishevelled; its bare chest; its glaring eyes; its sweatened forehead.

4 My heart.

"Do you know what I am going to do to you?" he said, low and intently. "You black curse, I'm going to kill you! To kill you by inches. Do you hear? As long as I can stand, I'm going to hammer the breath out of your vile carcase—"

"And then I'm going to finish you off," supplemented Conrad, with an additional pressure of his bony knee, as he looked from his cousin's set countenance to the agonized face beneath him. "You would dare to lift your filthy eyes to one of our womankind—"

"Give way there, Conrad," interrupted Philip sternly. "Leave him to me." You go back to her."

"Am I not to have a go at him?" asked the lad in disgust.

"Do as I tell you," muttered the man angrily, pushing Conrad off, and dragging the terrified native to his feet as he peeled the tweed coat and vest off the shrinking form. "Do you understand? Go! Get out of this."

And then something of Philip's purpose came home to Conrad. He meant to kill the native in very truth, and wanted his cousin out of the way. The lad moved slowly towards his horse.

"Go ahead!" he said sulkily. "I shan't interfere."

But he stood his ground and watched critically as the stirrup leather rose and fell with hissing, whizzing fury. The victim bore the first few strokes with clenched teeth and indrawn breath, but as the storm of blows fell with the regularity and relentless precision of a piston rod, he gave voice to the agony that was consuming him and cry upon cry, roar upon roar, bellowed through the wood. There came a time when Conrad thought the punishment sufficient, and he moved forward with some anxiety. As his protests were unheard, he tried to stay his cousin's hand, but his grip upon the arm seemed only to add more weight, to his blows.

"He's not worth hanging for, man," he shouted in an agony of fear. "Leave the *vuiles*⁵ alone."

But the storm of blows continued unchecked, and Philip could have told afterwards that he had never noticed the interference. The cries became gradually fainter, and suddenly ceased. Conrad then, in desperation threw himself between the prostate, bleeding body and the descending strap. The cruel blow caught him across his shoulder and bare neck, and he gave a cry half assumed, but half in grim earnest, as his cousin's arm was once more raised on high.

5 Dirt.

“Ugh, you brute!” he howled.

“Out of my way,” muttered the other thickly. But the youngster hid the native’s form with his own greater proportions and said nothing more.

The leather dropped from Philip’s fingers, and he stood slowly upright. He passed his hand across his eyes and then pushed the hair back from his brow.

“God forgive me,” he said looking slowly around at the gathering shade. “I feel like Cain.”

“You almost bore his mark,” returned the boy with a short laugh. “My Heaven, you are a devil!”

He sprang to his feet and felt the weal upon his neck, then turned to the huddled, sobbing shape at his feet.

“Here!” he cried indignantly, with a well-administered kick, “it’s through you that I got this cut on my back. I wish, after all, that I’d let Baas Philip kill you.”

Maisie was still seated where he had left her when they returned. Kaatje stood by, looking scared and terror-stricken, holding a broken bangle in her hand.

“Oh, *baas*,” she whimpered, “I had forgotten that the *nona* was waiting at the gate for me, but I ran all the way when I remembered.”

Philip turned on her in sharp anger. “So you are the one to blame,” he said. He seized the light *sjambok* which Conrad carried and struck her sharply once or twice across the shoulders. “You worthless baggage! Do you know that the *nkosasana* was nearly robbed of her jewellery by that thieving dog of an Absolom? If he had stolen one single article I would have made you pay for it over and over again. Get you gone!” He made a threatening gesture towards her, but she retreated backwards, crying bitterly. The *nooi* will settle with you tonight.”

He bent over the girl and lifted her to her feet. “Conrad!” he said brusquely to the lad, “this is not to be spoken of. You are to tell your people simply what I said to the maid – that the dog was demanding money from Maisie, and had already stolen her bangle. You understand?”

“I understand,” said the boy huffily. “When did you ever hear of my talking too much?”

“Never,” returned Philip with sudden compunction, and Maisie silently held out her hand to him.

“He took it awkwardly in his own great, sun-browned paw. A mist came across the boy’s eyes as he looked at her white face. “You may trust me, Miss

Gray,” he said with a big gulp. “You are as plucky as – you are— Oh hang! I’m going on with the horses, Philip.”

CHAPTER XXVI

*For I am old in anguish
And long to be at rest*

DAY by day the wife of Philip Meyer grew stronger and healthier in appearance. Her eyes had become the home of a dull, shamed misery that would never leave them until they closed upon all things earthly, but the hollows in her cheeks had filled out, and a certain assurance had come back to the limbs that had moved with such languor. The child whose little life has caused such untold misery was removed for ever from her sight, and the home breathed such comfort and cleanliness as brought a certain outward peace about her.

“Nurse,” said she one morning, “I think I am almost well enough to go and take my punishment now. My just punishment.”

Hester had been sitting beside her, a trifle of crochet lace in her hands. She looked up with a swift motion of sympathy.

“You were thinking the same, nurse?” with quick intuition.

“I was thinking of it, dear – and dreading it, but I fear they will come for you soon. They have been extremely humane and considerate hitherto.”

“Yes, nurse,” said the culprit, with a sad little nod of the head.

They were sitting out under the green-shaded veranda for the first time, the sick woman reclining in a low basket chair, an old stamp album in her lap, her feet resting upon a warm folded rug.

“I wish to tell you all about it,” she resumed slowly, “and then perhaps you will understand a little. But first, I should like to know where she – the little one – is.”

Hester’s hand fell in her lap.

“She is with very good people, Lulu,” she said gently. “A dear friend of my girlhood, up under the Berg, has a mission station; and she has gone to him and his wife.”

“Maisie’s people,” gasped Lulu distressfully.

“Yes, dear, Maisie’s people. They were so good and kind that when I wired to them to help me, Mrs Gray herself came to Maritzburg for the baby, and Cornelius sent it on to her with a trusty messenger. When she is old enough, she is coming to me, dear, and will be my care all her life long. Now are you satisfied?”

“Satisfied?” She clasped her thin fingers together.

“And,” resumed Hester hastily, “your husband and I have made all kinds of pleasant plans for you. He is selling out here, and is leaving almost immediately for farthest Rhodesia. He will change his name there, and you will join him – later – and begin life anew. It will be rough at first, for Philip will have little over after his debts are paid. Only Cornelius and I, of all your old friends, will know your new name, and we shall take you up to your home. It is going to be my hobby to prepare things for the little cottage away in the wilderness. It may be not even a cottage, Philip says: quite likely it will only be a collection of huts.”

“How ever it is,” said her listener humbly, “it will be too good for me.”

“Nonsense!” said Hester somewhat sharply. “You must get out of that morbid way of talking.

“I’m sorry,” said the other simply. “But I should like to tell you something of my past life; something that not even Philip knows. I think it would be a relief to speak about it.”

“You should tell me what you like,” said her listener, picking up her work again, “and it will be held sacred always.”

The sick woman’s fingers toyed absently with the leaves of the book on her lap, and her eyes gazed far away, beyond the low-laying veld hills, and the dark ribs of wattles that outlined them.

“I was convent-bred, as you know – and as Philip knows,” she began slowly; “but what I have always hidden from him and from everyone else is the fact that I was a daughter of sin, as well as an orphan from my earliest years. My mother was a pupil teacher in a little Irish town. I have never found out – never cared to find out – who my father was. She was very attractive, I believe, and also sweet and gentle, and she was to have married a good man who truly loved her. But before her wedding day arrived she disappeared, and it was thought significant at the time that an English hunting-party at the neighbouring, ‘big house’ broke up upon the same day on which my mother ran away. She was traced to London, and nothing more was heard of her till a year later her dead body was fished out of the Thames.

“The landlady of the poor lodging-house where I was born, identified her, and her letters were handed to the Coroner at the inquest. In one of these – evidently the last she had received – the man who had so cruelly wronged her, had covertly suggested that with her beauty it would be easy for her to live, and also to provide for her child. The letter had probably maddened her beyond endurance, but the name of the writer was a great one, and his infamy

was never made public. For all I know to the contrary my father may be one of England's greatest and best men to-day. Life is made easy for the rich – especially when they are men – and he was never brought to account for the life he had ruined.

“The good woman with whom my poor mother had lodged kept me and cared for me for some years. She was a devout Catholic and brought me up in her own faith (which had also been my mother's) but she never hid from me my own birth story. Indeed it was too well known in the cheap street where we lived for any hope of secrecy. She left her savings – and God only knows how she had scraped so much together – in trust for my education, to a local convent. There I lived in peace and happiness with the good sisters till I was seventeen. Then there came a day-girl to the school who knew my history, and life ceased to be happy, for my poor mother's shame was soon known among all the upper forms. Perhaps I was abnormally sensitive on the subject; but I could stay no longer. Then I learned that the money paid for my education had long been exhausted, and I was in reality only a charity child—”

She drew a deep breath. Her tone was even, apathetic, almost indifferent.

“When I turned eighteen the Reverend Mother consented to find a situation for me, and I was placed as nursery governess with a Catholic family that was about to embark for South Africa. I stayed with them in Durban for two years. But when they returned to England I came out here as governess to the magistrate's children. It was then that I corresponded with Maisie so regularly; I had started stamp collecting at the convent, and she was a new enthusiast, so that I was able to help her fill her album.

“Then I met Philip. Just at first his family was indignant at the idea of an engagement between us, not because of my poverty – I think there is no nation which sets so little store by money where marriage is concerned as the Dutch one – but on account of my religion. His father refused point-blank to countenance his union with a Papist, and as Philip had already run through his inheritance from his mother, there seemed no hope of our marriage. But I, who would have sold my hopes of eternity for love of Philip, consented to abjure my own religion and take his.” Her voice faltered, and she bowed her head in silence for a while.

“Philip refused to start farming again,” she resumed quietly, “so his father, at some sacrifice to pride, assisted him to open this store. We were blindly happy at first, and Philip has always loved me, just as I have loved him, before all the world. But we had been married barely a year when I discovered that he was too intimate with my kitchen-girl. I was passionately jealous, and we had

some bad scenes. Then I found out that there were others as well, and I think I broke bounds. Perhaps if I had been kinder, more forbearing, he would have behaved better, but – I don't think so."

"Nor do I," supplemented her listener quietly.

"During those two first years our little children were born, and both died early in infancy. I think I must have made home very unhappy for Philip then, for I had loved those little babies with every ache of my heart, and I blamed my own anguish of mind for the convulsions that carried them off. I know that I was very querulous and fretful, and that may be why he neglected me so at the time. I was left very much alone, and used to be almost mad with terror of a night, for we live just on the borders of a great location, and I was unused to natives as well as afraid of them. The man David saw my fear and pitied me. He is an educated man, and you may believe it or not, but he has a cultured mind. Philip left him in charge when he was away from home, and he brought me books to read – cheap copies of Dickens and Thackeray and Macaulay, and he – was kind to me. Philip neglected me, or laughed at my expostulations and kissed me—"

"Well after – afterwards I got frightened, and a very horror of myself grew upon me. I had thought that I wanted Philip to divorce me, but the very idea of that now froze me. Then I wanted to run away, but I had nowhere to go. I could not bear my husband's caresses; they stung me like living scorpions, and I thought of dreadful things, and longed for them. I imagined the fiery snake, and felt that its fangs eating into my flesh would be joy unspeakable compared to the anguish of mind I was enduring. I pictured the avalanche and the destruction it brings in its wake, and oh how I loved to think of myself among that devastation! The extermination seemed glorious, the ruin sublime, and I felt that I would face them with rapture unspeakable.

"Then I tried to take a simple dose of laudanum. I sat with it before me and tried and tried. But each time I poured it back in the phial; and it is there yet."

Her head sunk forward again, and a slow colour mantled in her face at the shamed confession of her own cowardice.

"I was afraid to die," she whispered, "afraid to meet God. It seemed so dreadful to think that He reigns always and always. This side it might be possible to run away and hide from Philip, but over there, there would be no escape, no refuge for my naked soul. God would be always there! Oh, nurse! I have been right down to the gates of hell, and they were fearful to look upon." She shuddered and shrank within herself.

“You had better say no more, dear.” said Hester gently. “I think I have understood all the time.”

“I have been afraid of the women, too; of the good women, nurse. That’s why I have been so comfortable with you. You have yourself been through – trouble. You told me at once as soon as you saw my dreadful fear, that – that your own husband had divorced you.” Her voice sank to a whisper. “I could have grovelled at your feet that day, for the comfort you brought me. I could follow you now barefoot, throughout the world, for all you have done for me since. I have told the Blessed Virgin all that is in my soul for you, ever since you turned my erring feet back on the right path. Her intercession will strengthen your own way through life, long after my voice has been stilled. She will watch and guard your footsteps till they land you safe and happy, right home to the Throne of Grace.”

Hester was touched.

“You overestimate my little help, Lulu,” she said gently. “God has been very good to me. I have never known want. The little that I have been able to do in this world is mainly owing to the fact that I have had no struggle to get my daily bread.”

“Ah!” reiterated Philip’s wife, “but if you had been one of those stainless women who have never been tempted and have never sinned, you could not have understood. It is your *understanding* sympathy that has eased the burden on my heart.”

CHAPTER XXVII

The little hearts that know not how to forgive

IT was a few days later that a large assembly, in response to an invitation from Andries Meyer, gathered together at his home for a meeting of special prayer. As was usual on such occasions, the congregation was scattered promiscuously about the house, previous to the hour set aside for worship.

Martha Andries, the mistress of the farm, sat among her own special friends – women with pleasant, sensible faces, the reflex of their cleanly, wholesome minds – in her bedroom, chatting over the state of the vegetable gardens, and the low price of butter. To her came Lena, her daughter, an anxious glitter in her eyes, and an air of much perturbation in her manner. She asked to be excused and then whispered, something rapidly to her mother.

“Mina Paul says that two mounted policemen have gone over to Oom Philip’s,” she said. “She thinks they have gone to arrest Aunt Lulu, for they refused to tell what they wanted there.”

“*Mijn lieve aarde!*”¹ ejaculated Martha aloud, her kindly heart giving a throb of pity. “*Ach!* I wish your pa had let me go and see her. But the poor thing shouldn’t have done it.”

“I was wondering,” said Lena, frowning anxiously, “if they would pass back to the *kantoor*² before the meeting begins.”

“It’s *jammer*³ that it should be to-day,” sighed her mother.

The news spread about from mouth to mouth, for Mina Paul was no fool who hid her light behind any bushel, and when she had a good thing to dispose of she let it go, giving all the impetus needed for a speedy and effective circulation.

Upon all sides much just indignation was expressed (under breath, in consideration of the house they were in) at the whole disgraceful affair. Supreme scorn for the woman who had, in lowering herself, lowered them also, found unstinted vent from the gentler half of the gathering.

“She ought to be whipped at the wagon-wheel,” remarked aloud one lady, whose own son was as a thorn in the flesh to the whole community.

1 My dear earth!

2 Court

3 A pity.

The subdued excitement had barely abated by the time the half-hour after ten struck; and the meeting, augmented at the last moment by Tanta – who was plainly unapproachable, and at daggers drawn with all around – seated itself upon the chairs and the school-room forms ranged around the walls of the drawing-room, denuded for the nonce of its thick carpet.

The preliminary silence had already fallen, and Andries, in the centre, was turning over the leaves of his book when the door opened and two women stood upon the threshold. One was dressed in a nurse's travelling uniform, and walked beside the thin, drooping form of the other, who was garbed from head to foot in black. She was the woman who should have hidden her head in shame before the face of mankind.

Yet she looked around upon the assembly, not as a culprit come for judgment, not even as one who had sinned and feared the light of day. Her brown eyes were filled with condemnation of them all as she glanced steadily from face to face, and it might have been an expression of contempt which crossed her own countenance. She was somewhat weak, and Hester would have supported her trembling body but for the slight shake of the head which forbade even this intervention. She had moved to the centre table at which sat the deacon in solitary state. She turned to him first.

"It was by your ministrations, Andries Meyer," she said low and distinctly, "that I left the church which had sheltered and nurtured me in my orphaned childhood, and joined the body that acknowledges you as one of its shining lights. May the Holy Virgin forgive me! In my bitter need, when I might have hoped for a measure of Christian charity from you – who profess the doctrines of Christ – what counsel of love did you accord an abandoned sinner? what word of Scripture did you quote – who quote so often – to comfort the lost sister whose head was bowed to the dust, whose reputation was shattered, whose happiness was stamped out of life for evermore? Did you once remember the words spoken in Samaria of old? No! you would have spurned with your foot the creature who had lowered your earthly pride in the face of the world. You did spurn her with words which were more merciless than a whiplash upon raw flesh—"

"Close that book, Andries. You are not fit for it – you are not indeed! Go away now and learn the doctrines of Jesus again. There is yet time for you to become a Christian."

She turned her back upon him and slowly surveyed the assembled worshippers, abashed and struck dumb as they were at the vast effrontery which had dared to turn the weapons of attack upon them. As her eyes met

the gaze of the women, her erstwhile friends, she smiled – a little, bitter smile which curved cruelly around her mouth, and left her eyes hard and glaring.

“You are come together to-day,” she said, her voice chill and cutting, “in the name of Christ. You would pray for all mankind, for rain to make your crops grow, for blessing upon the land; for yourselves. You would describe yourselves as miserable sinners, believing all the time that you are the chosen saints of Heaven, and hugging your secret belief close to your hearts. But you cannot cheat God; and your reward is before you.”

“I should like to know,” she regarded the women again, “which of you has said one word in extenuation, or has tried by one excuse to shield the wasted reputation of the woman who now addresses you. Surely you, Mina Paul, have been at least silent when you remember the sins of your brother Jan? You, Anna Tom, you are the mother of Lewis Meid. You, Martha Andries, you are the sister-in-law of my husband, Philip, and know all things concerning him and me. Have you said aught in defence of his wife? I hope so, Martha, for I have loved you. Tant’ Marina, you have engaged your child to the rich Englishman who has come here to farm with new notions, knowing well that before he loved your daughter he kept his Kafir maid, sharing bed and board with her —”

“Please understand that I need no pity, no forced sympathy from any one of you. I ask no justification for my sin. There is none. But you have condoned over and over again, in your men, what you condemn in me. They will go free, and honoured, and happy, though they have sinned a thousandfold. I, who am but a woman, have taken one false step, and I must expiate my shame to the very uttermost, in the sight of God and man. As a stranger I came among you, and I have received kindness from perhaps every one of you here. For that I thank you from the bottom of my heart. But in my cruel pain, when I would have asked you for bread you gave me a stone; ‘when I was hungered, you took me not in.’”

She had bowed her head, and the last words came more softly; but as though in sudden recollection of the part she had schooled herself to play, she raised her head again.

“It will interest you all to know that I am now on my way to prison,” she added coldly.

There was the sound of a smothered sob, and Tanta removed her hand before her face, which was wet with tears.

“Will none of you here do a prayer for the lost sinner?” she asked, without raising her head.

There was no answer – the assembly, to do it strict justice, being for the moment shocked out of all serenity or sequence of thought. The old woman rose ponderously to her feet and moved to the slight, black-robed figure resting against the table.

“Can you not do a little prayer for yourself, poor child?” she whispered, touching the arm nearest her.

The woman turned her hunted eyes full upon her, and then slid to her knees. The old lady dropped beside her, and encircled the weak form with her big, strong arm. A tense silence ensued, in which the aggressive ticking of the gilded clock above the piano shouted the record of the passing moments; and every head was bowed. Then the voice, of late so proud and defiant, now so humbled and broken, fell like ice upon their ears.

“Oh Lord, Saviour of mankind, Who didst of Thy gracious tenderness protect the weak and erring on the shores of Galilee, hear, I beseech Thee, the prayer of this daughter of sin. Of Thy loving kindness judge not Thou my iniquity by the standard of these, the followers of Thee. Grant even unto me the mercy Thou didst accord that other sinner whose head was bowed at Thy feet. I pray not for the present exemption of my awful crime.” The sigh which shuddered from her lips found its echo in every heart present. “I am willing and ready to pass through the cleansing fires, even to the searing of my immortal soul; but turn not Thy face away from me—”

“Holy, Mary, Queen of Heaven, mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, and mistress of the world, who foresakest no one and despisest no one, look upon me, O Lady, with an eye of pity, and entreat for me, of thy beloved Son, the forgiveness of this sin, my sin. Holy Mother of God, intercede for thy erring daughter returned to thee.”

She tottered unsteadily to her feet as the meeting raised its head, with the sharp realisation that it had been tricked into listening, and almost taking part in a Popish prayer. But Hester had come forward from her stand at the door and drawn the forlorn form tenderly away. At the threshold she turned and looked at them all with passionate reproach in her eyes.

So she passed out of the house, with the quivering figure within her arms, to join the mounted policemen who stood at the outer door awaiting them. So they mounted to the back seat of the spider together, and drove off, hand in hand, to the country jail. So they passed the night in the women’s cell, where the one mattress served for both, and words of love and brave comfort were whispered during the long night vigil.

The assembly in Andries Meyer's house had broken up in some disorder, and the unrehearsed service would be quoted afar and near for many a long month to come. "Who would have thought it of her?" had been remarked upon all sides. "She was put up to it by the other one – Hester *Rondlooper*⁴ – who calls herself Mrs Buchanan, and was divorced by her husband."

But the only prayer which was offered up that day in Andries Meyer's sitting-room was the Papist one which dropped from the lips of the fallen woman.

4 Vagrant.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Friendship needs no studied phrases

DESPITE the utmost precautions taken to prevent the true nature of the attack on Maisie becoming known, the fact leaked out, and side by side with the coming trial of Lulu, the abandoned wife of Philip Meyer, the latter became the chief topic of the hour. Absolom had betaken himself out of the province, and was in all probability skulking about the mines with a borrowed or stolen pass, but the maid, Kaatje, had understood more than she had acknowledged, and the fear of her master's *sjambok* had not been potent enough to bridle her tongue. As was natural under the circumstances, the affair grew in volume and importance in its passage from mouth to mouth, and only the one most concerned remained in ignorance of the wave of excitement that was passing over the district.

But the rumour crept into the big dailies of the province, with startling headlines, and although the names were suppressed, the disguise was thin enough to startle the girl's relations into making anguished inquiries, and to bring her father in sharp haste to the south.

He arrived unexpectedly one evening, having travelled by post-cart, and then ridden over from the magistracy on a hired animal whose spirit was willing but whose flesh was all too weak for any journey extending over a couple of furlongs.

Hester had come to pay a farewell visit to her old friend, for the trial of Philip's wife was to take place on the morrow, and it was her intention to strain every endeavour to be allowed to accompany the woman on her journey to Pretoria. Failing the necessary permission, she would at all events travel by the same train, and let her forlorn sister-woman at least realise that a friend trod step by step with her upon her way.

They were seated in the dining-room, Tanta busy upon a young child's sock, sitting in the full glare of the red-shaded lamp, Hester reclining at ease in a wide, deep armchair, with Maisie on a low stool at her feet, her cheek resting upon the right hand of the woman she loved so well. Philip, puffing reflectively at his vile Boer tobacco, occupied a cane-bottom rocking-chair, opposite the pair, and might have been engaged in committing slowly to memory every

detail of the picture before him, so intent and thoughtful was his survey of the group.

A touch upon the knob of the veranda door startled every occupant of the room into sudden alertness. Philip, removing his pipe from his mouth, strode across the room and flung the door open.

"Father!" Maisie sprang to her feet as there advanced across the threshold a tall man of bowed figure, with grey hair and sharpened features. Deep lines of sorrow and fretful repining were engraven around his mouth, and his look of relief and joy at sight of his daughter, safe and apparently unharmed, could not conceal the hint of restless sadness which filled his eyes. The girl had thrown her arms round his neck, and now clung to him as to a haven of refuge.

"Oh, papa! Oh, I am so happy to see you," she whispered as he kissed her once more, and gently released her fingers. Tanta had come forward.

"Ah! my old friend!" he said in Dutch.

"And here is another old friend," returned she, after her hearty handclasp, turning to the woman behind her, with some anxiety across her broad features.

"Hester!" He held out both hands to her. "I never thought, till two days ago, that we two should ever meet again this side eternity."

"I hoped not," said she quietly, placing her hands in his. Her lips were strangely pale; "but now – I think I am glad."

"I know I am glad," he replied after a searching look into her face, before he turned to his host.

"Sit down at once, Mr Gray," said Tanta hastily; "and Maisie will go and order them to make up the fire. You must have hunger." As the girl disappeared on light feet, she added hastily: "Don't mention that assault affair before the child. She has not been told that the papers know of it."

"Then it was Maisie!" The man's voice was hoarse with horror as he half rose to his feet.

"It was Maisie, Mr Gray," interrupted Hester with quick reassurance, "but you need not be alarmed. She is quite unhurt, and you have to thank Philip for that. He was in time to save her from anything but a bad fright, and she has almost recovered from that."

"But the papers—"

"It was all grossly exaggerated," said Philip here; "but as no names were mentioned it is best and wisest to make no comment. The girl, Kaatje, who is responsible for all the gossip, has already been made to eat her words, and she is going the rounds proclaiming herself a liar now. She lives in dread of getting jail for libel of her white people – and also she is in some fear of Tanta."

"I half choked her," interposed the old lady sententiously, "and I threatened to throttle her for good and all. She's known for a lying hussy, and had Marina Jan and Anna Thomas by the ears last year when she worked over at the doctor's."

Maisie's return from the kitchen prevented any further discussion for the moment.

"How are they all at home?" she asked eagerly; "and have you missed me very much?"

"Very much indeed," returned her father, smiling into her eager face, "and they are all well. Uncle Frank and Aunt Ethel and all the others sent love to you. To you also, Hester," he added turning to the woman, "and I am commissioned by both Frank and Ethel to bring you back with me to the Berg."

The woman shook her head and smiled evasively. "They are both very kind," she said gently.

"Very!" said he dryly.

After the traveller had been refreshed with a hastily prepared farm-house supper, an hour or two passed in desultory chat, till a broad hint from Tanta sent Maisie off to her bed with a whimsical, half-angry smile at her summary dismissal. Philip's company was dispensed with after the same manner, and then Hester turned to Paul Gray.

"Frank and his wife are taking care of the child I sent them?" she asked.

"Yes," returned he gravely. "You remember your old servant, Dolph? Well, his wife has taken charge of the little one. They are childless and already regard the baby as their own. It is amusing and yet touching to see the way they love the little thing. Dolph puts on the greatest airs of fatherly care—"

"They – Frank and his wife – have been very good," resumed Hester thoughtfully. "They have asked no questions about the child."

"They wouldn't," returned he, heaving a slight sigh. "You wished for their help, and that was enough for them."

"But I want to explain it all to you – to give you the whole horrible story, for transmission to them. And then, Mr Gray, I wish for your help, too."

He shook his head.

"I am useless, Hester, he said wearily. "I can do nothing now. Get Frank to help you. The zest of life has gone out of me."

"Nonsense!" said she impatiently, a flash of the old indignant temper coming uppermost. "I should be ashamed of myself if I had as many senses as other people, and allowed them to rust."

He sighed again audibly.

"Get on with your story, Hester," he said.

CHAPTER XXIX

*Oh, dwarfed and wronged, and stained with ill,
Behold! thou art a woman still!*

THE COURT was crowded to its utmost capacity when, the following morning, Louise, the wife of Philip Meyer, was brought up for trial. Guarded by a rifleman she entered the room from the door leading to the magistrate's office, and quietly took her seat in the dock. Though her eyes were never raised, she felt the near presence of Hester and the look of sorrow and pity which greeted her downcast face.

The magistrate, a humane man of quiet, unassuming address, who had been especially commissioned to try the case, was sitting on the Bench writing rapidly. After an interval of silence, in which the scraping of his pen could be distinctly heard throughout the room, he gathered his papers together and placed them in an orderly pile, to the side of his desk. He looked up then, and around at the assemblage.

"Clear the court," he said tersely.

Somewhat sheepishly, yet with quick, if noisy movement, the men who had hoped to form the audience lifted their hats from under the forms before them and filed out of the room. The doors were then closed, and proceedings commenced.

The sergeant of police, for the Crown, read out the charge against Louise Meyer for "contravening Section 16 of Act 31 of 1903, in that she being a European woman—"

The accused pleaded guilty in a low voice; and asked whether she had anything to say in her own defence, whispered "No!"

The magistrate, looking at the humbled, drooping head with a large compassion and a pang of regret as the thought of his own little daughters flashed across his brain, said slowly and somewhat unevenly:

"Louise Meyer, you have broken the law of the land you live in. Whether the said legislation is a fair and just one is not for you or me to decide upon. I am here to administer the law, not to criticize it; and I therefore sentence you to one year's imprisonment, with hard labour."

The prisoner looked up for one second with suffused eyes at the kindly face above her, and opened her lips as though to speak. Then her head dropped

forward again, and she shuddered slightly. A firm white hand rested tenderly and reassuringly upon her shoulder from behind the dock. Then she was led away.

The husband and wife were accorded only a short interview in the prisoner's cell, immediately after the trial. He found her calm and subdued, and infinitely relieved to know the worst. She still wore the black dress that had been purchased as mourning wear for their last child, and though her face was sad and quiet, her eyes had lost the hunted expression that had lurked in their depths for so many months. He sat down beside her on the chair that had been provided for Hester, and gathered her gently to him. No word was spoken between them till she found that he was weeping. She laid her head in the hollow of his shoulder then.

"Don't cry," she whispered. "It will soon pass, this short year; but don't give me more pain to bear than you can help. Your tears will be a bitter memory to me."

"It is your pain, and your unjust punishment that kills me," he gasped, struggling fearfully with the sobs that choked his throat. "I should be with you. For one year that you suffer, I should suffer ten."

"We shall never discuss that again, dear one," she said sweetly. "I think we shall both have expiated our sins by the fearful struggle we have undergone together. This paltry twelvemonth of jail life will mean nothing – nothing at all! – only that you will suffer so much more than I. Then" – her hand stroked the tears from his cheeks, "we shall go away together – as far away as you can, dearest! – and find God."

His chest was heaving painfully.

"Hester will arrange for us," he muttered thickly.

"Yes, I know. She told me of all the plans she had made on our behalf. You are to go away next month and find a farm up in the interior, and you are to change your name, so that none will know us or our story. She will help you to settle, and when my release comes, she will take me to you herself. And then we shall work together, so that we can repay her outlay.

"Oh, Philip! before she arrived all was so dark, and hopeless, and forlorn, and I was lost, body and soul. I was even a suicide in intent, and only my miserable cowardice saved me from taking my own life. I had no trust left; no faith in God nor man. Then she came, and she brought me the heaven of her beautiful hope, and the sunshine of her glad nature. She led me back to Christ. I told her I was ashamed for God, and dared not approach Him, for if my sin seemed so great to men, I thought it must be a thousand times worse in

His sight. She tried to convince me of my error, but she could not. Then I told her of my old belief, and of how I had bartered it for love of you. I felt that I might have confided in the Blessed Virgin, but dared not now approach her. But Hester encouraged me to take all my troubles to the Mother of Sorrows and her Divine Son, and not to heed what others said about church and sect. She told me that a great and good man had once said that ‘the churches had killed Christ.’”

“She said that out of my crime much good might come, for she would arouse her fellow-men, far and near, to better the laws of the land, and she would work herself, day and night, to accomplish this great object. And then she persuaded me to speak to the people of the district at Andries’ home, and herself upheld me with her strong will to go through that dreadful trial – for facing them that day was the greatest punishment of all that I have had to bear.”

The man’s sobs had been stilled as he listened to her. Now he laid his cheek upon her hair with an eternity of yearning.

“My girl! My girl!”

“I hope my Heavenly Father will forgive me,” she resumed humbly, “if it is largely for her sake that I should wish to live a true and good life again – for her sake, and yours, Philip.” His arm tightened around her.

“And I wish to ask one favour of you, Phillip.” She raised her face to his neck and kept it hidden there. “Till my release, let this be our last parting. I – I don’t want you to see me in the dress they will bring me just now.” A great sob burst from his throat again, and he almost hurt her in his agony. “When I come to you again – far way in the bright, dream home – I want you to forget this time, and all the shame, and the suffering, so I shall be all in white. They are knocking at the door, dear; I fear you must go—”

It is not for others to intrude upon the last words of the husband and wife. Sufficient to know that the release she spoke of came long before the allotted space of time which had been dealt out as her just due; nor was it the “release” she had hoped for, or wished for. But God, with his infinite wisdom, knows best, and Philip, in his distant, silent home, will have earned his own happy release when his wife, with shame and suffering, and time all forgotten will come to meet him “all in white.”

CHAPTER XXX

*Ah God, for a man with heart, head, hand,
Like some of the simple, great ones gone
For ever and ever by*

AS Hester emerged from the court-house, Cornelius Meyer and Paul Gray detached themselves from a group of men and came towards her.

"Twelve months' hard labour," she said in reply to their mute questioning; "and she looked so humble and so quiescent that I can't forget her face. I will never forget it."

She turned with trembling lips to Cornelius. "I feel as if my heart will break," she whispered.

"Dearest!"

They walked slowly down the street till they were opposite the post office. At a signal from Cornelius several men drew near.

"She has been sentenced to twelve months' hard labour," he said quietly. We could have expected nothing less."

"*Ach! arme ding!*"¹ The words were repeated from mouth to mouth, and gradually the various groups broke up and congregated together on the square before the post office. The tall, grave gentleman in the clergyman's garb who was so evidently a friend of Mrs Buchanan's had been talking to them while the case was in course of procedure, and a wave of poignant sympathy swept over them, and took the place of their former angry condemnation. Now, as they marked the tears raining unchecked down the face of the one woman present, a sudden kindliness and compunction took possession of their hearts.

"It doesn't seem right," said one grey-bearded man aloud, in his own language. "We should take it before the Union. Let's send a deputation to Botha."

"What could Botha do?" asked another. "The law is the law, and she broke it. But *ach! foei toch*, she was so pretty, and such a lady!"

"And a whole year—!"

"Don't you think we should hold a meeting here and now to discuss this question?" It was Cornelius who spoke. "I, as a civil servant, can take no

1 Poor thing.

active part in the matter, but surely there are enough of you to represent the district?"

"Yes! we are well enough represented as regards the farmers," said one, "but it is only due to the people of the village that they should have a voice in the matter."

"Well, call them in, women and men alike – especially women," said Cornelius. "You may have the use of the court-room during the luncheon hour."

Thus it came about that as the clock struck the hour after noon, some sixty or seventy persons, among whom was a sprinkling of the weaker sex, filed into the court-house, with grave faces and silent tongues.

The district surgeon, who was voted to the chair, opened the meeting by giving a slight résumé of the case which had that morning been tried in the hall they were now occupying. He refrained from himself expressing an opinion on the judgment given, but he would put it to the meeting to decide whether it was a just legislation, and worthy of a land governed by the picked men of two civilised races, which could convict a woman and put her to public calumny for a crime that a man could commit a thousand-fold with impunity. Whether it was right, or just, or reasonable, that a European woman should be imprisoned and degraded for a fault that in a Kafir girl would be passed by and barely commented upon? Whether it was in accordance with their vaunted sense of British fair play, that a native should be scourged and sent to the breakwater for a sin that his white master might openly indulge in? He would reserve his own remarks for later in the meeting, but now would call upon those present to express their views.

Hester, in the pause that followed, looked expectantly at Paul Gray, but he shook his head slightly.

"Nothing in the public way, Hester," he muttered. "I told you that I was worthless."

Two or three men arose in turn, and decried the legislation that meted out uneven treatment on so vital a point in the adjustment of native affairs. Then one man spoke decidedly and strongly on the undesirability of altering the law by so much as a hairbreadth. He considered that a woman who lowered herself by consorting with a savage only received her just due when she got hard labour for her pains. On the other hand it would be impracticable, as well as well-nigh impossible, to deal out a like punishment to European male offenders in the same respect. Alike with his hearers, he was sorry and grieved over the case which they were all at present bearing in mind, but he felt, nevertheless,

that both culprits had been served aright, and he, personally, would not, if he could, remit their sentence by one day. As fathers and mothers, he would remind them of their duty to their children – especially their girl children – and in this connection it was only necessary to mention the hideous danger of the ever-present black peril. Once abolish the law in question, and the black peril would assume an aspect altogether immeasurable in its evil.

The speaker had barely returned to his seat when Cornelius strode determinedly to the front.

“It comes to me with a shock of surprise,” said he, “to find Mr Jackson upholding a legislature which, in its injustice and one-sidedness, must surely stand unique among all countries over which the British flag flies aloft. I am quite aware that I have no right to lift my voice here, but I cannot remain silent and listen to such sentiments as those Mr Jackson expresses; for men who formulated such a law were a reproach to the mothers who bore them. A nation which upholds so iniquitous a legislation is a disgrace to the land which bears its weight. You would talk of the black peril? I tell you, my brothers, the black peril we need take present account of and shudder at, is the army of native girls – the maiden tribute of South Africa – that falls a helpless, if willing, victim to the wiles of our sons. When a savage brute springs out in the dusk upon one of our own cherished womenkind, the whole country shrieks aloud with horror, and there is not a man among us who would hesitate to shed his life’s best blood to avenge the honour we hold so priceless.

“But *we ourselves set the native the example of overstepping the racial bounds*. He would willingly follow suit with the women of our own privileged race. And can you upbraid him for this? He cannot easily attain his desires, for their own instinct as well as their innate chastity protects our dear ones. Only by violence and outrage can he attain his purpose. To the average South African woman the native is but a low brute, a bestial savage, hardly to be reckoned upon in the scale of humanity. And in this lies her woeful error. She admits his presence about the house, as she would admit the presence of a dog. In many cases, he is even granted access to the mistress’s bedroom where he hands her her morning coffee and dresses the children in her presence. And this is the accursed part of it – *he is no animal*, the average Zulu. He is a man, with all a man’s instincts – no more than our own, but quite as poignant – and when in town, he is apart from his own womankind. He has little religion to uphold him, and that little teaches him that he is the white man’s brother and equal in the sight of Heaven – therefore the white woman’s equal also. So he

lifts his eyes. I tell you that we have the black peril here of our own seeking and our own creation.”

As Cornelius stood down amid a tense silence, an Englishman – the solitary attorney for the division – asked the chairman if he would not invite any of the ladies present to give their view upon the subject. The matter concerned them even more than it did the sterner sex, and it would be only right that they should voice their own sentiments.

There was a movement throughout the room and an eager whisper from one to another. Two women seated directly behind Hester touched her shoulder and bent towards her. A few words of rapid persuasion and then she arose and walked to the table before which sat the chairman. He sprang to his feet with profound respect.

“Mrs Buchanan will say a few words, ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “I trust you will give her a courteous hearing.”

The applause, long and loud, had barely died away before she, looking intently and sorrowfully at her audience, said quietly:

“Have you no man among you strong enough and brave enough to fight for the right against great odds – to come out into the open and protect the weak and erring? Is there none to break through the prejudice of the ages, and make a great bold stroke on behalf of justice and the rights of your womenfolk?”

There was silence for a moment or two, then she resumed, in a level, slightly louder tone of voice:

“It has been said here to-day that the punishment meted out to the unhappy fellow-woman whose downfall we all deplore, is a just and well-deserved one. The speaker was right. The sentence was just, and very well deserved. But has anyone here reflected that the open charge and public disgrace are only a small part of the suffering which has come upon her? Can you faintly realise the horror of shame as well as the anguish of mind that has been her portion. Is that fearful isolation of despair also her just due? I think not. I think – I believe I *know* – that if even deserts were meted out, this frail woman would not be taking her journey to Pretoria alone. If even justice were given, the jails of this country would be filled to overflowing.”

Cries of “No!” and “Prove it!” came from the audience at the back.

“It would not be very difficult to prove that,” she resumed, “and you will all know where to find me at any time. However, I am only trying to endorse what Mr Meyer has but now been telling you. You would keep the native down – you do nothing to raise him to your own level, but carefully push him back when he would advance one step up the social ladder – and I am not blaming

you for that! – but you meet him on equal grounds all the same, for you sink to his level by courting the girl he would woo and win for himself. You become a rival of his, and if you outbid him in the favours you both bestow, how can you expect him to honour and respect you as a superior being? It is against nature. You would keep the black man out of your home, but you care nothing about defiling his. You tremble over the chastity of your own women, and make laws which would deter your daughters from besmirching that purity; but you pass by with a shrug of the shoulders the evil existence of some of the white men among whom you live. Why has this one-sided, iniquitous morality law been made for women only? The answer is obvious – because men only have the franchise and the making of the laws.”

A cry of “Suffragette!” came from the back of the hall, accompanied by some whistling and a loud stamping of feet.

“No! I am not a suffragist as you understand the word. I agree with you all as far as that goes, and acknowledge that home is the woman’s sphere. It is the walk in life that she is most calculated to adorn. Only a fool could doubt that. If we needed proof that such was the case, we could take any given family and deprive it of its breadwinner, the father of the household. Hard days might come; they probably would – but the home would be home while she, the guiding spirit, remained at this head. But take the mother away instead, and what remains? Only an abode, a place of probation for every member of that household – I tell you, we women *don’t want* the vote. (*Prolonged applause.*) We want just legislation.

“Give us just legislation – and keep the vote. The vast majority of women would prefer to let their men hold the burden of the law-making while they devoted themselves to their own quieter tasks. But if we are to be deprived of equal rights in the code of morality and in wage-earning, then, in Heaven’s name, let us have the franchise. We shall get it, too. Either justice from the Union Parliament, or the franchise. One or the other!”

The end of her speech was received not unfavourably, and it was decided, after further discussion, to communicate with the other divisions of the constituency, with a view to approaching the member for the country upon the question at issue.

But the strident voice from behind exclaimed: “Hang the member! He’ll do nothing for us. Let’s put in our own man at the next election!”

“Cornelius is the man! Cornelius!”

The cry was taken up upon all sides.

“Thank you, gentleman,” said Cornelius, laughing; “but as a civil servant—”

“Hang the civil service! Chuck it, and we’ll see you through.”

Later, as they walked down the street Hester said: “That wouldn’t be a bad idea, Cornelius, would it?”

“You are very ambitious, Hester,” said he quizzically. “In relinquishing the service, I might grasp the shadow and let go the substance.”

“I don’t think so,” returned she thoughtfully. “I believe they would ‘see you through,’ as they said, and there is always work to be done somewhere in case of failure. You could take up farming again.”

“In any case I should do that,” said he, “if I left the service.”

CHAPTER XXXI

My love thou surely knew'st before

A VERY few weeks later, Tanta was sitting out on the veranda in the late afternoon sunshine. Her hands were idle, and the firm old mouth was set in lines that were severe in their sadness. The tragedy of Lulu Meyer's life had struck home with a heavy blow to her large compassionate heart, and the gnawing ache in her bosom, together with the unwonted spell of deep despondency which kept her hands idle in her lap, were already telling a tale upon the fine, upright frame.

"*Ach!* it's time I was laid beside my old man," she was muttering to herself as she watched the bees humming rapidly by to their home under the loquat trees. "Three-and-seventy! It's going right against the command of the Almighty God Himself to live so long. He granted us threescore years and ten, and here am I, whom nobody wants, going right over it, and as healthy as I was twenty years ago. *Ach lieve land!*"

"Tanta! Waar is Tanta?"

Two voices were calling her, and as she answered dully, two young people came out impetuously upon the veranda from an open door and approached her. One look at them, and Tanta was electrified into sudden life, for Philip was holding Maisie's hand tightly in his own, and was regarding her with a pride and joy unspeakable, and also unmistakable. The colour was coming and going in the girl's face, and her lips were quivering slightly.

"What does it mean?" whispered the old friend tensely. "What will your father say, Marianne?"

"I spoke to him when he consented to leave her behind, Tanta," said Philip, as they bent in turn and kissed her dear face that both loved so truly, "and he was quite satisfied to give her to me."

"You never told me that," interrupted the one most concerned, in her pretty, imperious way.

"Not likely," chuckled he; "'first catch your hare,' you remember the old receipt?"

"*I'm* not a hare," protested she indignantly.

"Well, whatever you are, you're caught," returned he. "There's no mistake about that," and they laughed together, like the happy children they were.

"You have been good to me, Philip." The old woman sighed heavily. "And I will never forget your kindness to the homeless old *vrouw*."

"Tanta is talking nonsense," returned he lightly. "I owe more to Tanta than tongue can tell, and Maisie and I will have to devote our lives to trying to pay back part of the debt."

"*Neen*, Philip," she said, shaking her head despondently. "Young people must have their house to themselves, and when you bring Maisie here as a bride, I shall seek another home. It won't be for long, I pray to God."

"Then I won't get married at all," said Maisie decidedly. "I shan't mind very much, and we can be quite happy just as we were before."

"You dear little fool!" Tanta looked at the anxious face tenderly. "Do you actually think he would be content with that?"

"The long and the short of it is," interrupted Philip, "Maisie won't have me unless Tanta promises to stay."

"Never!" acquiesced the girl vehemently. "We couldn't do without you, Tanta, *lief*." She spoke now in the dear Taal. "Unless you consent to stay and take care of us, I shan't marry Philip. It would be wicked of me to do so, for I can't do anything properly, and he would be dreadfully uncomfortable. Do you remember the nasty, streaky butter I made while Tanta was away?"

"*Mijn kleintje!*"¹ The old face beamed kindness and love, and unwonted tears glistened in the steadfast eyes. "I am getting old, and when you have children of your own, you will need the place to yourself."

The girl's face flushed scarlet, and she hung her head in quick confusion. But Philip, his grave brown eyes alight with gladness and hope, drew her towards him, and smiled upon the distressed old lady.

"The place is big enough for a regiment of children," said he proudly. "And Tanta shall teach them to grow up into sweet, modest women and good men, strong and courageous and brave. We – Maisie and I – are so ignorant, and so young."

"You are young," conceded the old friend slowly, "and – well, if you think it best—".

Upon the same evening, a man and woman were walking together from the village over to the Residency. They had dismissed the chauffeur who had driven them from the country town, preferring to approach their home quietly, and alone together.

1 My little one.

“We are quite unexpected,” said he, as they entered the short avenue of blue wattles. “The boys have no idea that I am bringing an *nkosigazi* home, so there will be no wedding-feast for you.”

“Then,” said Hester, with a smile, “we shall have, ‘the dinner of herbs where love is.’”

“Where love is,” repeated he with a glad satisfaction in his voice.

They emerged to the open, and came out upon the pretty, substantial building, standing sentinel over its green lawns and the wealth of flowering borders.

“How peaceful and beautiful it looks!” She made the remark as they passed hand in hand along the gravelled pathway.

“Take care!” exclaimed he, smiling, as they approached the flight of steps reaching up to the vine-clad veranda. “You mustn’t stumble upon the threshold of your new home.”

“Looking back, my feet seem to have stumbled so often,” she replied as they reached the top step and she turned around again to regard the scene before her – the quiet, picturesque village nestling on the opposite slope, the green sward sweeping up to her own door, the nodding arums in the *vlei* lands.

“Poor feet,” said he, noting with regret the sadness in her grey eyes. “They have had a thorny path to tread. But now – oh my wife! – they will be lonely feet no longer.”

“Lonely no longer,” echoed she, and sighed from pure content. The light of the setting sun shone full upon her as she turned to him, and held out both her bare hands.

“I feel like a tired child – an old, old child – coming back home,” she whispered. “Don’t be angry dear – I can’t help it – but tell me just once more how you love me!”

He clasped her hands firmly in his own, and bent and kissed them, one after the other.

My love thou surely knew’st before.

It ne’er was less; nor can be more.

THE END

APPENDIX 1 Chapter heading epigrams in *Daughter of Sin*

- Chapter 1 H.W. Longfellow, *The Student's Tale: The Falcon of Ser Federigo*
- Chapter 2 W. Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*
- Chapter 3 H.W. Longfellow, *The Musician's Tale: The Saga of King Olaf*
- Chapter 4 W. Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*
- Chapter 5 W. Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*
- Chapter 7 John Keats, *Places of Nestling Green for Poets Made*
- Chapter 8 W. Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*
- Chapter 9 W. Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*
- Chapter 10 W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*
- Chapter 11 Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Maud*
- Chapter 12 Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Maud*
- Chapter 13 *Bible*, Luke 18.11
- Chapter 14 Rosa Nouchette Carey, *Life's Trivial Round*
- Chapter 15 Matthias Barr, *Only a Baby Small*
- Chapter 16 Ella Wheeler Wilcox, *An Erring Woman's Love*
- Chapter 17 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Past*
- Chapter 18 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Past*
- Chapter 19 Epes Sargent, *The Days that are Past*
- Chapter 20 Ella Wheeler Wilcox, *An Erring Woman's Love*
- Chapter 21 John Greenleaf Whittier, *My Soul and I*
- Chapter 22 Ella Wheeler Wilcox, *Last Love*
- Chapter 23 A.E. Lancaster, 'The little church around the corner' *The Eclectic* 3
- Chapter 24 Hamilton Drummond, *Silence*
- Chapter 25 Robert Husband, *To a Christian Lady, Mrs E.B.*
- Chapter 26 Charles MacKay, *Louise on the Door-Step*
- Chapter 27 Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Maud*
- Chapter 28 Anon., *Friendship*
- Chapter 29 John Greenleaf Whittier, *Ode to Oh Dwarfed Woman*
- Chapter 30 Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Maud*
- Chapter 31 Lord Byron, *The Bride of Abydos*

Note: Some quotations were not transcribed accurately by the author.

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The journalist Mary Elizabeth Martens (1870–1939), who had grown up in the Colony of Natal under Responsible Government, published two novels in 1911 and 1915: *A Woman of Small Account* and *A Daughter of Sin*. Like the writing of most women of her era, in the words of Valerie Letcher these novels ‘disappeared from the South African literary consciousness’.

Agreeing with Letcher that recognition is overdue, the novels were rescued by two of Martens’ great granddaughters, Lynn McMaster and Nancy Bowring, and are republished in modern format together with biographical and historical background. They contain significant social commentary on their times, portraying suffocating patriarchy in which wives and children were regarded and treated as property. White men could behave as they pleased, while white women who transgressed were regarded as ‘fallen’ and sometimes punished as criminals.

The penalties for black men who crossed racial boundaries were extreme. Of *A Woman of Small Account*, a contemporary reviewer wrote ‘The book, though it assumes the guise of a story, is a powerful plea, worthy of Olive Schreiner, for the fair treatment of the natives of South Africa, male and female’ (*The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 23 September 1911).

Recurrent moral panics were fuelled by male psychological insecurity about race and early stirrings of feminism evident in suffragism. Fear of challenge to the social order manifested itself in misogyny and racism in a rural society that was philistine and backward.

These themes emerge strongly from Martens’ writing, which required considerable courage for her time just over a century ago.



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