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THE STORY OF AN AFRICAN FARM

BY
OLIVE
SCHREINER.

★★★
A TALE OF LIFE IN THE
BOER REPUBLIC.

[CONTINUED.]

"No, it never seems so to me," she answered.

The sun had dipped now below the hills, and the boy, suddenly remembering the ewes and lambs, started to his feet.

"Let us also go to the house and see who has come," said Tam as the boy shuffled away to rejoin his flock, while Doss ran at his heels, snapping at the ends of the torn trousers as they fluttered in the wind.

CHAPTER III.
I WAS A STRANGER, AND YE TOOK ME IN.

As the two girls rounded the side of the "kopje" an unusual scene presented itself. A large group was gathered at the back door of the homestead.

On the doorstep stood the Boer woman, a hand on each hip, her face red and fiery, her head nodding fiercely. At her feet sat the yellow Hottentot maid, her satellite, and around stood the black Kafir maids, with blankets twisted round their half naked figures. Two, who stamped meales in a wooden block, held the great stampers in their hands and stared stupidly at the object of attraction. It certainly was not to look at the old German overseer, who stood in the center of the group, that they had all gathered together. His salt and pepper suit, grizzled black beard and gray eyes were as familiar to every one on the farm as the red gables of the homestead itself, but beside him stood the stranger, and on him all eyes were fixed. Ever and anon the newcomer cast a glance over his pendulous red nose to the spot where the Boer woman stood and smiled faintly.

"I'm not a child," cried the Boer woman in low Cape Dutch, "and I wasn't born yesterday. No; by the Lord, no! You can't take me in! My mother didn't wean me on Monday. One wink of my eye, and I see the whole thing. I'll have no tramps sleeping on my farm!" cried Tant' Sannie, blowing. "No, by the devil, no, not though he had 60 times six red noses!"

There the German overseer mildly interposed that the man was not a tramp, but a highly respectable individual, whose horse had died by an accident three days before.

"Don't tell me!" cried the Boer woman. "The man isn't born that can take me in. If he'd had money, wouldn't he have bought a horse? Men who walk are thieves, liars, murderers, Rome's priests, seducers! I see the devil in his nose!" cried Tant' Sannie, shaking her fist at him. "And to come walking into the house of this Boer's child and shaking hands as though he came on horseback—oh, no, no!"

The stranger took off his hat, a tall battered chimney pot, and disclosed a bald head, at the back of which was a little fringe of curled white hair, and he bowed to Tant' Sannie.

"What does she remark, my friend?" he inquired, turning his crosswise looking eyes on the old German.

The German rubbed his hands and hesitated.

"Ah—well—ah—the—Dutch—you know—do not like people who walk—in this country—ah!"

"My dear friend," said the stranger, laying his hand on the German's arm. "I should have bought myself another horse, but crossing, five days ago, a full river, I lost my purse—a purse with £500 in it. I spent five days on the bank of the river trying to find it—couldn't; paid a Kaffir £9 to go in and look for it at the risk of his life—couldn't find it."

The German would have translated this information, but the Boer woman gave no ear.

"No, no! He goes tonight. See how he looks at me, a poor, unprotected female! If he wrongs me, who is to do me right?" cried Tant' Sannie.

"I think," said the German in an undertone, "if you didn't look at her quite so much it might be advisable. She—ah—she—might—imagine that you liked her too well—in fact—ah—"

"Certainly, my dear friend, certainly," said the stranger, "I shall not look at her."

Saying this, he turned his nose full upon a small Kaffir 2 years of age. That small naked son of Ham became instantly so terrified that he fled to his mother's blanket for protection, howling horribly.

Upon this the newcomer fixed his eyes pensively on the stamp block, folding his hand on the head of his cane. His boots were broken, but he still had the cane of a gentleman.

"You vagabonds se Engelschman!" said Tant' Sannie, looking straight at him.

This was a near approach to plain English, but the man contemplated the block abstractedly, wholly unconscious that any antagonism was being displayed toward him.

"You might not be a Scotchman or anything of that kind, might you?" suggested the German. "It is the English that she hates."

"My dear friend," said the stranger, "I am Irish, every inch of me, rather Irish, mother Irish. I've a drop of English blood in my veins, but you might as well ask me if I'm a Kaffir."

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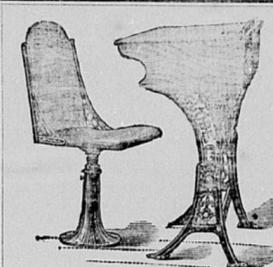
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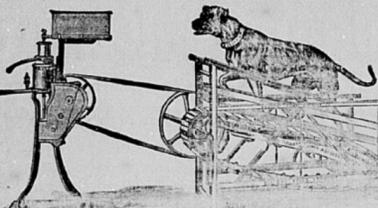
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Laten people do not like those who are not married."

"Ah," said the stranger, looking tenderly at the block, "I have a dear wife and three sweet little children, two lovely girls and a noble boy."

This information having been conveyed to the Boer woman, she, after some further conversation, appeared slightly mollified, but remained firm to her conviction that the man's designs were evil.

"For, dear Lord," she cried, "all Englishmen are ugly! But was there ever such a red rag nose thing with broken boots and crooked eyes before? Take him to your room!" she cried to the German. "But all the sin he does I lay at your door."

The German having told him how matters were arranged, the stranger made a profound bow to Tant' Sannie and followed his host, who led the way to his own little room.

"I thought she would come to her better self soon," the German said joyously. "Tant' Sannie is not wholly bad—far from it, far." Then, seeing his companion cast a furtive glance at him, which he mistook for one of surprise, he added quickly: "Ah, yes, yes, we are all a primitive people here—not very lofty. We deal not in titles. Every one is Tanta and Oom—aunt and uncle. This may be my room," he said, opening the door. "It is rough; the room is rough—not a palace, not quite. But it may be better than the fields, a little better," he said, glancing round at his companion. "Come in, come in. There is something to eat, a mouthful, not the fare of emperors or kings, but we do not starve, not yet," he said, rubbing his hands together and looking round with a pleased, half nervous smile on his old face.

"My friend, my dear friend," said the stranger, seizing him by the hand, "may the Lord bless you, the Lord bless and reward you—the God of the fatherless and the stranger. But for you I would this night have slept in the fields, with the dew of heaven upon my head."

Late that evening Lyndall came down to the cabin with the German's rations. Through the tiny square window the light streamed forth, and without knocking she raised the latch and entered. There was a fire burning on the hearth, and it cast its ruddy glow over the little dingy room, with its worn eaten rafters and mud floor and broken, whitewashed walls, a curious little place, filled with all manner of articles. Next to the fire was a great tool box; beyond that the little bookshelf with its well worn books; beyond that, in the corner, a heap of filled and empty grain bags. From the rafters hung down straps, "reins," old boots, bits of harness and a string of onions. The bed was in another corner, covered by a patchwork quilt of faded red lions and divided from the rest of the room by a blue curtain, now drawn back. On the mantelshelf was an endless assortment of little bags and stones, and on the wall hung a map of south Germany, with a red line drawn through it to show where the German had wandered. This place was the one home the girls had known for many a year. The house where Tant' Sannie lived and ruled was a place to sleep in, to eat in, not to be happy in. It was in vain she told them they were grown too old to go there. Every morning and evening found them there. Were there not too many golden memories hanging about the old place for them to leave it?

Long winter nights, when they had sat round the fire and roasted potatoes and asked riddles and the old man had told of the little German village where, 50 years before, a little German boy had played at snowballs and had carried home the knitted stockings of a little girl who afterward became Waldo's mother, did they not seem to see the German peasant girls walking about with their wooden shoes and yellow, braided hair and the little children eating their suppers out of little wooden bowls when the good mothers called them in to have their milk and potatoes?

And were there not yet better times than these—moonlight nights, when they romped about the door, with the old man, yet more a child than any of them, and laughed till the old roof of the wagon house rang?

Or, best of all, were there not warm, dark, starlight nights, when they sat together on the doorstep, holding each other's hand, singing German hymns, their voices rising clear in the still night air, till the German would draw away his hand suddenly to wipe quickly a tear the children must not see? Would they not sit looking up at the stars and talking of them—of the dear Southern Cross; red, fiery Mars; Orion, with his belt, and the Seven Mysterious Sisters—and fall to speculating over them? How old are they? Who dwell in them? And the old German would say that perhaps the souls we loved lived in them. There, in that little, twinkling point, was perhaps the little girl whose stockings he had carried home, and the children would look up at it lovingly and call it "Uncle Otto's star." Then they would fall to deeper speculations—of the times and seasons wherein the persons shall be