

The Way of the Trespasser.

An Episode on a Boer Farm, Showing How Two Travelers in the Transvaal Suffered the Loss of Their Supper.

By P. Y. BLAOK.

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There are moments and occasions when utter strangers greet with effusive heartiness and a brotherly leaping of the heart. I do not know that the apparition of my wealthiest friend would have more lightened my spirit and more quickly have dressed my face in smiles than did the presence on the roadside of that wandering extrovert of the Bechuanaland border police. He reclined, with an assured ease and a possession of confidence which, on that lonely veldt, 50 miles from an inn in a stranger peopled country, rejoiced me as with the nearness of a home. A dwarfed tree afforded him shade, a nearly dried up pan was not far off. His blanket was thrown beside him, and a billy of a convenient size reposed between the extended military breeches.

Doubtless an extra sincerity was afforded to my cordial greeting by the dainty vapors which arose from that billy as I drew near. A hot mouthful prevented him from doing more in the way of invitation than waving me to a seat on the bowlder peppered turf. It was enough. My knife was handy, and I forked from the pot by its aid a tenderly stewed bird's wing. Our eyes therefore sufficed for a space to gratify any natural curiosity, our mouths it would have been a rudeness to interrupt. The meat dispatched, the trooper pushed the billy my way, and, in the absence of spoons, I drank from it a fair share of the soup, which he promptly finished. It was then my good fortune to contribute to the repast the last cupful of coffee in my possession. At the pan I cleaned the billy and filled it with fresh water, while the trooper placed some more fuel upon the smoldering fire.

"I fear," said I, "that I have no sugar."
"This is a beast of a country," said the trooper. "I haven't had any sugar in my coffee for three days. Come to think, I haven't had much coffee either. Well, there is always tobacco somehow. I am economizing on native."

"I have yet a pipe or two of birds-eye," I was glad to say, and with that we fraternized.
It was early in the day when we slung our blankets about our shoulders and stepped out along the lonely track cheerfully, for to each some companionship was that morning the most needful thing. For nearly a week my way had been entirely one of solitude, so that my own voice had sounded startlingly in my ears if I had called out to raise a chance bird in my path. So, it appeared, had been the fortune of the stranger, and it was now a mutual delight to keep step and chatter.

He pleased me. His gray eyes twinkled humorously, his laugh rang heartily. He strode athletically forward with the frank front of one who would meet all adventures with the confident indifference of alert strength and the consciousness of a will and liver equally good; also, though he was garbed in the uniform of a private, it was no surprise to me to find him of education and breeding. He was readily catalogued—a prodigal and an exile, one of the South African army who had left his past, perhaps his name, in England, despairingly seeking a new reprieve.

"It is unnecessary," he remarked when we had exchanged names. "to ask if you are for the Rand."
"It is the loadstone," I said. "Everybody is drawing there, and for my purposes, which are pretty vague, Johannesburg is perhaps the most promising place in South Africa."

That stretch of road on the Bechuanaland side of the Transvaal—if we may flatter it by calling it "road"—is terribly monotonous, through unwooded veldt, sinking to dried up brooks, rising to dusty summits, wearily interminable. We met, I remember, in over 20 miles, not a living creature—nor Boer nor Kaffir.

We were fortunate in having cold coffee and plenty of tobacco, and it was not until we began to feel hungry that, in the proper fashion of the road, we cast about for a method of providing supper. We had not between us, it is to be thought, a sixpence. Of lodging we were well assured. Our wide bed spread all about; our blankets were ready to unfold at sundown. But the taste of the morning's stew was dead upon the palate, and our nether garments hung slackly from the waist. We chirruped not so gladly and began to reconnoiter the surrounding veldt with a yearning for the sight of a farmstead.

It neared sundown when we found what we sought, a mile and more from the trail, a house of comforting proportions wrapped in an outer cloak of woods. An oblique path led down to it, and this we took to levy wallaber's tribute upon the farmer. The sun sank rapidly as we approached, seeing nobody about, and it was dusk when we halted to consult by a large pond, a little distance from the house. By this the trooper sat him down and grinned at me.

"My dress," he said, "is obnoxious to the Boer, who has shot at such a uniform before and may again. You go alone and do your best. It does not matter if he doesn't speak English. He's pretty sure to understand you."
I left him scraping crumbs from his pockets to feed the ducks in the pond and went on to the house. Rising ground soon hid him from my sight. Following the path, I was met by a small barefooted boy, on whom I lavished my smiles. The suspicious little rascal did not pause to return them,

but turned and ran swiftly to the house door.
Now, undoubtedly, there was little in my appearance of the attractive. A week's wallaby, with a half grown beard, had possibly added to the picturesque aspect of my personality, but a Boer, least of all men, has the artist's eye. I was conscious that a new hat and a shave would have increased my farmer's liking for me. Still I trusted to what suavity of speech and manner I could muster.

My disgust was then marked when, ten yards from the threshold, I was confronted by an enormously big Boer, with a beard cut shovelwise, who bore a rifle with a very long barrel and informed me in a shout that I was a "verdamer uitlander." He told me other things probably equally discomposing, but that was all I understood, and between his legs peeped out the towhead of the youngster who had given the alarm, a face stretched in the most delightfully malicious grin I ever beheld.

I, however, was surprised by the thought of going supperless and advanced a step with a salute. Up went the gun to the Boer's hip, and his abuse poured faster. I ventured to speak. The gun went to his shoulder. I retreated, and I heard the door slam behind me.

The trooper was awaiting me with greater anxiety to haste away than I imagined his lounge by the quiet pond would have excited. He received my news very calmly.

"It's a pity the beast wouldn't give us some coffee at least," he said, "but come on."

Very sulkily I followed him through the trees, past a rude barn, where lay exposed some pumpkins and other veg-



etables on a stone floor in the shadows of the quickly falling night. When some distance away, the trooper turned to me and chuckled comfortably. He patted the blanket roll round his shoulders and smiled. Then I noticed the roll was swelled in the center, like a constrictor's stomach when it had gulped a hearty meal.

"O man," said the trooper, "these ducks were too fat. I annexed the fattest. I have frequently noticed in an unfriendly land that Providence never fails to send supper to the deserving."
"But," I said, rather alarmed, "we'll go to trouk (jail) for a certainty if we do this sort of thing. Besides, it's—"
"You talk like a recruit," said the trooper. "Kindly recollect that the Boers hate Englishmen; therefore the Transvaal is an unfriendly country; therefore foraging—foraging, please—is permissible, justifiable, according to the rules, and in every way eminently praiseworthy."

"But—"
"But a pumpkin would, as you were going to say, improve the stew greatly. It is an excellent suggestion you make, and I have still some pepper and salt."
"You want me to sit—"
"Sh! No, my dear fellow. Just slip back to that barn now it's dark enough and levy it!"

I looked at the plump duck, and my nostrils fancied grateful smells. I thought of the unceiling Boer, and I went.

"I will go on to that sprout we saw from the road," the trooper said, "and get things ready and build a fire. Bring the biggest."

It was dark and silent, moonless and still. I gained the barn, selected a pumpkin, slipped off with it cuddled in my arms and stepped out again almost on top of the towheaded boy. My gaze upon him was momentary, and I fed; he also. There was no explanation possible, and I ran without a word, clinging to my pumpkin, my supper. The child, as he darted to the house, uttered a yell which aroused the farm, even to the distant ducks, which I heard quacking on the pond's banks with, I imagine, a note of revengerful delight.

It was now quite dark, and I stumbled as I plunged along the rough road to the bed of the stream, where the trooper was to await me. Behind me came a great scrambling of feet and a blether of voice. I distinguished the farmer's easily. It had a baying note to it which was particularly menacing. I knew little of his language, but I was aware that he was calling on me to stop and probably saw me with the clearness of night vision a Boer shares with the savage.

Suddenly there was a pause in the rush behind and a cessation of his yells. In a moment I heard the crack of his gun—it sounded horribly near—and a bullet zipped over my head. I left the path then and sought the shadows of the bush, where a few trees and big rocks might render my safety more probable. Over the uneven ground I dashed, panting, and heard the shouts renewed behind me, but they seemed to keep to the road. Soon they faded away, but I did not slacken speed, and all the time I stuck obstinately to the big, fat pumpkin. It was within me a contest between fear and hunger. If

there was a sinking of the heart, there was still as powerful a sinking of the stomach. When I halted at last, listening between pants, the monster vegetable was still mine and supper yet probable.

But I was lost. In daylight the unaccustomed traveler may easily, does frequently, get lost by leaving the track to examine the bush. In the darkness of a moonless night it would be madness in ordinary cases to step off the road. At last I found the thin and trickling stream, which in that dry season represented the river of other months, and I followed it down with pain and difficulty, now stepping in a pool, now cracking my ankles against the bowlders.

An hour brought me to the ford, but there I was confused. The faint light of the moon, just peeping above the rim of the veldt, allowed me to see dimly that the road at the drift broadened out to a great width. I comprehended that the wagons, passing in the wet season, had each sought, according to the driver's judgment, the safest place to cross. In such manner are South African roads first made.

I stood at one side of the road. The other was possibly half a mile off. Whereabouts, then, in that maze of ruts and blackness, should I seek the trooper and, of more consequence to me, in my starving condition, the duck?

While I hesitated the sound of voices struck my ears once more not far from me. I could not mistake who it was; the words, "Verdamter uitlander," again came too distinctly across the trek. I slunk back up stream, not willing to stand another shot. Crawling into a little kloof in the bank, I lay still, like a hare, perhaps, considering the raid on pond and barn—a fox would be the better word—and at last I heard the voices and scrambling steps of the hunters returning. It alarmed me afresh, however, not to distinguish amid the sounds the rolling curses of the farmer.

I waited awhile and heard nothing, and then the thought of that trooper, snuggling in a cozy hidden nook somewhere near, preparing the duck for supper, overpowered me, and I rose and set out to find him, bearing my hard won pumpkin still along.

The moon passed behind clouds, and it became pitch dark. For a long time I pattered about, afraid to call out, for I knew something of a Boer's shrewdness and tenacity, and I felt more than uncertain that the farmer was dodging about, waiting a chance at me, and the fact that his voice had been absent from those of the party returning made me suspicious and nervous.

I had accidents. I fell into a pool, and I bruised my knee badly. It grew bitterly cold for that land, and the dew fell heavily, and, above all, I began to grow weak and sick from hunger after that 20 mile tramp. I began to shake and shiver, but I held on to the pumpkin.

Then came the culmination of all my woes. It began to grow darker, with a very heaviness of black, an almost tangible darkness. My feet had hitherto engaged all my attention, but I now looked up. The moon was high in the sky, but there was but little of it visible. A black shadow was stealing across it, was almost completely over it. It was in process of eclipse. Then I gave up hope of finding the trooper, of finding the trek even, in the well of blackness which was near at hand, for I was now seeking the trooper off the road. And I thought, it being now near midnight, a place to rest in and unroll my blanket.

I stumbled along toward a solitary tree, which I thought might keep off some of the dew, and by the last flicker of moonlight I saw a man seated beneath it. He had his back to me and was sitting on a stone, and I would have sworn I saw the sides of a shovel shaped beard sticking out above his shoulders. Something rested between his knees. My conjectures jumped to a certainty that it was the farmer's gun.

I was almost upon him. I was too hungry and tired and weak to look. I stepped to him stealthily with almost hysterical despair and raised the great pumpkin at arm's height and dashed it on his head with all the strength my muscles and my desperation could muster between them. He seemed to groan and fall forward, and I turned and staggered away, wondering dizzily if the blow of a pumpkin could be fatal.

Utter, horrible blackness set in, and the eclipse was complete when I dropped at last, unable to move a step farther. All that night I shivered from cold and dozed from weariness, but before break of day the cold grew so great that I had to move on or shiver to death. Somehow I staggered to the trek, though I did not know which direction I was going, and stumbled along it, afraid to remain still for a moment. I felt pretty sure, however, I was on a road, and I followed it in dumb consciousness that it would lead me somewhere, if only back whence I started in Bechuanaland.

At last I came through the blackness to a bank and assumed a stream. Die or not die, I could not ford it then and utterly collapsed on the brink. I soon fell into a stupor, from which I roused at the first cold dawn. The water lay at my feet, still and currentless. It seemed broad as I lifted my eyes—it seemed familiar. I partly choked a yell, for it was the farmer's duck pond! At the cry a figure on the other bank—a shivering, miserable, prone wretch—sat up and groaned. It was the trooper, and in his right hand he held the duck by the neck. But at the sight of me he dropped the duck and came running and threw his arms around me.

"By Jove, old man," he spluttered, "I am awfully glad to see you. I saw you running and heard that blessed beast shooting. It is rare for these fellows to miss, and I made sure you were dead, so I was going to eat the duck myself! How did you get here?"

"I don't know," I murmured in bewilderment. "I've been walking all night, dodging Boers, looking for you and a pumpkin—did you come away without a pumpkin?—then I sat down under a tree with a club I picked up to bash the Boer with if he came bothering me, and just as the moon was finally eclipsed the tree or something fell on me, and I didn't know anything more until I woke up here. I believe I thought I was somewhere near Johannesburg. I am horribly stiff and cold, and my neck's broken, I think, by that tree that fell. Did you get that pumpkin?"

"I looked at him, conscience stricken. "I lost the bally thing," I chattered, for I shivered cruelly.

"Th-then," said the trooper, chattering as badly, "we—we'll brull the duck. Wait till I get it, and I'll clear out of this neighborhood. It's t-too warm for us here."

In one sense it was, but in another I felt I would never be warm again.

Before the trooper could move I clutched him and dragged him back, and we sank down in some long grass. From the house came the towheaded boy, and the conscienceless rascal was as bright and cheerful as if he had, not been the source of all our woes. He had some corn in his hands for, apparently, the ducks, but that boy's eyes missed nothing. He saw the dead bird on the bank; he picked it up and ran with it, yelling, back to the house. The trooper and I caught at each other's hands like lost children and fled together, hungry and heartbroken.

The sun was well up when we lessened our pace and listened for the sound of the big Boer's pursuing voice, but it did not come, and we sank, exhausted.

"This is a beast of a country!" said the trooper.

An Uncommunicative Flagman.
Did you ever ask a flagman a question about some other subject than one connected with the railroad? The flagman, always smoking a pipe, will set his teeth hard on the stem, will look up the road, then down the road, then up the road again. He will not look at you. For two full minutes he will not give any indication that he has heard your question or that you are in existence. He will then look up the road and down the road again. This time he may take his pipe from his mouth, but he will not look at you. He will work the tobacco down into his pipe with his forefinger and look up the road again. Still he will not look at you. He begins, however, to give a faint sign that he has heard your question. A minute later, looking down the track, he may ask you to repeat your question. You want to know where John Brown lives. He looks up the road again, takes several strong pulls on the pipe and gazes long and earnestly down the road. He has not as yet looked at you.

"That Brown is it?" the flagman may then ask.
"John Brown."
"It's Jerry Brown you want?"
"No; John."
"Is he wid the Big Four?"
"No."

Still the flagman continues to look up the road and down the road. He takes the pipe from his mouth, never looking at you, never giving a sign that you are in existence, and says, "If he isn't wid the Big Four, how the mischief should I know 'im?"—Indianapolis News.

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