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The Secret Of the Well

How a Boer Boy Proved to His Grandfather That He Was No Coward.

A STORY OF THE TRANSVAAL.
By P. Y. Black.

LITTLE PAUL REITER was busy with his herd of wild horned oxen—far more busy than usual. The cattle wondered why on earth he did not let the water after him, as usual, among the richer, juicier grasses. Paul could not. He was doing double duty. The cattle had to feed or lose value, but also the house had to be watched closely lest the Boer hunters who were so expert were remorselessly kept to the shorter grass near the farm buildings. As Paul now called to an obstreperous cow and again looked back at the quiet, deserted farm there suddenly came to his startled ears an alarmingly excited cry from inside the farmhouse: "Kunje—verdamt! Come back! Thief! Robber! Paul!"

Paul left the oxen to their own devices and dashed to the house, whence came the angry yell, his bare, freckled legs leaping across thorns and pebbles and rocks with a reckless born of a lifelong disregard for shoe wear. He sprang into the main room, and there in a great, old fashioned chair sat a tall, white-headed old man, whose pale face was distorted now with rage and dismay. It was evident he was very ill, and it was noticeable that he moved his head very stiffly and his hands still more stiffly, while his legs, which rested on a stool, seemed quite unable to move at all. "What is it?" cried Paul, running to him. "What is he?" "The ungrateful dog! The jackal! Kunje—robber!" the old Oom Hendrick spluttered, quite unable to explain by reason of his huge indignation. "What is it? What has Kunje done? Where is he?" "Shoot him! He came in just now and grinned and said he was going back to his kraal—did not want to fight the English! Shoot him quick! I taught you to shoot!" "Shoot Kunje—the last servant to stay with us!"

"He has taken my watch—it belonged to my grandfather—and your uncle's rifle and your father's best coat! Quick! He went out through the yard a minute ago. There is no place for him to hide—it is open veldt. Quick! Shoot!"

Young Paul grabbed a rifle from the wall and ran out. Certain that he was away, there was the recent Kaffir servant, a big black Swazi man, walking off with his master's churchgoing coat on his back and his master's rifle over his shoulder—walking off very serenely, because he knew that he had only one of the old paralyzed Boer farmer and a young Boer boy. So indignant was Paul at the sight that he rested his rifle—already loaded—on the stone wall of the yard and took aim and fired, young though he was, still, like all Boers, a marksman and able to shoot straight would next instant have dropped the Kaffir when his heart failed him. He had shot at the Kaffir, but a man, even a Kaffir, can do something very different. Paul raised his voice and shouted:

"Kunje! Wacht en beetje! Come back, or my father will lay his sjambok on your back! Come, and I'll speak for you!"

Kunje looked back, saw the rifle and, like a springbok, took to his heels and in a moment was beyond Paul's shooting range. "Did you shoot?" cried the old man. "Did you kill him?" "No, grandfather," said Paul, putting away the rifle. "I was afraid to kill a man." At that the old Boer, who in battle had killed many men, black and white, nearly choked with wrath and so railed at Paul that the boy was dazed and frightened. "Coward!" cried Oom Hendrick. "Afraid! You are a pretty boy to call yourself a Boer! You to defend your country, you to be a soldier, of which you have blustered so much! When I was your age, already I had fought the Zulus and shot them down! Wait till your father gets back from Pretoria, and he will thrash you—yes, with his sjambok, and he will thrash you—when I tell him you are no Boer, you coward, who lets his house be robbed!"

Paul went back then to his staid oxen without (for he had been brought up to reverence ago) a word of reply. But he was heartened, for in his ears the insects buzzed the word "Coward" and the loving knee bood "Coward" and the birds flying above him sang "Coward" so that by the banks of the stream he lay down and wept, for now he who had wished to be strong and big and a good marksman, like his grandfather and father, able to fight back the warlike Kaffir tribes and the invading English, was a "coward, coward," who had let his own house be robbed.

Now, at that time all South Africa was in a burly fury. The Zulu war with the English was over, but English soldiers were everywhere, especially on the Natal frontier, where bands of irregular volunteer cavalry were constantly patrolling. The Reuter farm lay in the Transvaal close to Natal, and, as already more war was talked of between the Boers and the English, Reuter, Paul's father, was in an awkward position—between two fires, as it might be said. His Kaffir servant, last of all Kunte, had left him from sheer fear of being drawn into the fight, and Reuter had gone to Pretoria, the capital, to get the real facts and be advised what to do. His wife was dead, and Oom Hendrick and Paul were left alone. The old, once grimly fighting Boer was now helpless, so on little Paul devolved great responsibility, which his father, always proud of him, had yielded him with a smile. "You are head of the family now, Paul," said he, riding away, "and remember, you are in charge—even of the well."

And his father would come back from Pretoria to find his house not fit to trust. For a long time Paul wept by the stream. He was roused from his misery by a great tramping of feet of horses in the distance and hoarse, loud voices and a peculiar jingle-jangle of steel against steel which, like the rattle of the snake, is the warning note of the approach of a cavalry command. Before Paul made up his mind what to do—drive his cattle as far away as possible, or run to the house to warn his grandfather—the troop came in sight at the trot from round a corner of the wood. The captain, riding ahead,

saw Paul with a quick, an exultant cry. With a wave backward of his gauntleted hand he fell to a walk, and at once the men behind him did the same, and then at the word "Halt!" the company remained still and mute, and the officer beckoned Paul to his horse's side. Paul went with great awe and trepidation, for there is something terrifying to even a grown peasant at the unfamiliar sight of many sobered soldiers of strange dress and manner and speech. "Whose cattle are these, my boy?" said the officer. "I must have some." Paul's face lengthened so that the soldier laughed and reached down and patted his head. "Don't be frightened, lad," said he. "My men are short of fresh meat, and I want two fat steers, but you will get a fair price for them and cash down at that. Are they your father's?" "Yes, sir," Paul answered, somewhat reassured, "but he is not at home, and grandfather is, but he's sick. That's our house."

"Take me to see your grandfather then." He told a sergeant to have the men dismounted, and he himself dismounted to follow Paul. The boy watched the agile men obey the order as if touched by one spring, and then suddenly Paul saw something which made him cry out in alarm. "It's Kunje!" he shouted, for, now the men were off their horses, he could see at the back of the column the big black Swazi bound with a rope in charge of a soldier.

"Hello, my boy! Do you know that Kaffir?" the officer asked in surprise. "This is Kunje, our servant, who ran off this morning and stole a rifle and watch and other things." "Oh, was that it?" the soldier laughed. "It was the gun that got him into trouble. We don't approve of armed natives in these times who can't give an account of themselves. So he's a thief, is he? I don't know but that shooting would be the best thing for him. Bring that fellow here, corporal!" The corporal moved forward to obey, when with such sudden quickness that the soldiers had no time to see what was intended Kunje gave a jugglinglike twist of his almost naked body, the rope fell from him, and he dashed away among the trees and the cattle and into the brush by the stream. "Shoot!" yelled the officer. "Mount and after him!" One or two men fired wildly at the beetle flying form, and two men followed at a gallop, but soon came back. It was impossible, even on horseback, to catch that agile, low running savage, soon lost in the bush.

"A poor piece of work, whoever tied him to the tree for this matter!" rasped Jo. Boy, there's your rifle and watch, just as you said. We took them from him. Now, let's see your grandfather about the cattle."

Oom Hendrick was sternly polite to the beetle flying form, and thirty odd years ago he had fought and for whom he had his racial antipathy, but the English officer was young and jovial, and not yet had the Boers and English come to actual warfare, so a fair price was paid down, and the soldiers rode off, driving their cattle, to the camp where their regiment lay, not many miles off. Then Oom Hendrick took the rope and the watch and the rifle and hid his recovered belongings, an enormous heavy silver watch, which one would have to carry, one would think in an overcoat side pocket, carefully beside them.

"No thank you to you," said he to poor Paul, "I have my grandfather's gift again. Some day I will give it to you, if you grow up a true Boer and not a coward. Your father told you, as you know, where to place these things that neither Kaffir nor English can find them."

Paul's head hung low; his face was pained. He did not answer at all, but the bitter words of the old warrior—most heroic to the boy among men—cut sorely to his soul. He looked carefully around. Everything was silent. The bed of noon had driven bird and insect to shelter. Even the hum of the insect world was stilled. The clatter of the cavalry was far gone, and not a soul, not a single servant, was in sight. At the back of the farmhouse, among an orchard of orange trees, there rose, peeping up from the grasses, moss grown, a circle of stones. Paul walked to them and stood for a minute, looking down into a deep old well, unexcavated, but whose bottom was hidden by black water. Once more the boy looked all round, but there was no one to see. He disappeared and reappeared again quickly and went back to his neglected cattle.

Twilight in the Transvaal is brief. The sun touches the peaks of his purple mountains, and yet it is day; the sun is low behind them, and in a few minutes it is night. Paul took his oxen driven home and stalled and the cows milked, and he was very weary, for the day had been most exciting. He got a simple supper for Oom Hendrick and himself and ate, in spite of his hard day's work, very heartily, and a long speech still sore and still. When the ducks by the pond waddled to their nests, their croaking quacks said, "Coward, coward, coward!"

He was still eating when the door opened straight from the yard to the living room was flung inward without any previous knock or sound of voice and two big men strode in and closed it behind them. The old Boer, with a great angry roar, like an insulted bull, almost rose to his feet in wrath and astonishment, but sank back, shaking and spluttering. Paul did jump to his feet and with one leap was at the wall where his father's rifle hung, but at once, quiet as he, one of the men was upon him and swung him far into a corner of the room. "None of that, my little Dutchman!" cried the man, standing over the boy threateningly. "Mind you, my blooming little nigger, there's your father's rifle, almost rose to his feet in wrath and astonishment, but sank back, shaking and spluttering. Paul did jump to his feet and with one leap was at the wall where his father's rifle hung, but at once, quiet as he, one of the men was upon him and swung him far into a corner of the room. 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