

XIX. How I Met the President

Several years ago, when there was a small war going on in South Africa and a great fuss going on in England, when it was by no means so popular and convenient to be a Pro-Boer as it is now, I remember making a bright suggestion to my Pro-Boer friends and allies, which was not, I regret to say, received with the seriousness it deserved. I suggested that a band of devoted and noble youths, including ourselves, should express our sense of the pathos of the President's and the Republic's fate by growing Kruger beards under our chins. I imagined how abruptly this decoration would alter the appearance of Mr. John Morley; how startling it would be as it emerged from under the chin of Mr. Lloyd-George. But the younger men, my own friends, on whom I more particularly urged it, men whose names are in many cases familiar to the readers of this paper--Mr. Masterman's for instance, and Mr. Conrad Noel--they, I felt, being young and beautiful, would do even more justice to the Kruger beard, and when walking down the street with it could not fail to attract attention. The beard would have been a kind of counterblast to the Rhodes hat. An appropriate counterblast; for the Rhodesian power in Africa is only an external thing, placed upon the top like a hat; the Dutch power and tradition is a thing rooted and growing like a beard; we have shaved it, and it is growing again. The Kruger beard would represent time and the natural processes. You cannot grow a beard in a moment of passion.

.....

After making this proposal to my friends I hurriedly left town. I went down to a West Country place where there was shortly afterwards an election, at which I enjoyed myself very much canvassing for the Liberal candidate. The extraordinary thing was that he got in. I sometimes lie awake at night and meditate upon that mystery; but it must not detain us now. The rather singular incident which happened to me then, and which some recent events have recalled to me, happened while the canvassing was still going on. It was a burning blue day, and the warm sunshine, settling everywhere on the high hedges and the low hills, brought out into a kind of heavy bloom that HUMANE quality of the landscape which, as far as I know, only exists in England; that sense as if the bushes and the roads were human, and had kindness like men; as if the tree were a good giant with one wooden leg; as if the very line of palings were a row of good-tempered gnomes. On one side of the white, sprawling road a low hill or down showed but a little higher than the hedge, on the other the land tumbled down into a valley that opened towards the Mendip hills. The road was very erratic, for every true English road exists in order to lead one a dance; and what could be more beautiful and beneficent than a dance? At an abrupt turn of it I came upon

a low white building, with dark doors and dark shuttered windows, evidently not inhabited and scarcely in the ordinary sense inhabitable--a thing more like a toolhouse than a house of any other kind. Made idle by the heat, I paused, and, taking a piece of red chalk out of my pocket, began drawing aimlessly on the back door--drawing goblins and Mr. Chamberlain, and finally the ideal Nationalist with the Kruger beard. The materials did not permit of any delicate rendering of his noble and national expansion of countenance (stoical and yet hopeful, full of tears for man, and yet of an element of humour); but the hat was finely handled. Just as I was adding the finishing touches to the Kruger fantasy, I was frozen to the spot with terror. The black door, which I thought no more of than the lid of an empty box, began slowly to open, impelled from within by a human hand. And President Kruger himself came out into the sunlight!

He was a shade milder of eye than he was in his portraits, and he did not wear that ceremonial scarf which was usually, in such pictures, slung across his ponderous form. But there was the hat which filled the Empire with so much alarm; there were the clumsy dark clothes, there was the heavy, powerful face; there, above all, was the Kruger beard which I had sought to evoke (if I may use the verb) from under the features of Mr. Masterman. Whether he had the umbrella or not I was too much emotionally shaken to observe; he had not the stone lions with him, or Mrs. Kruger; and what he was doing in that dark shed I cannot imagine, but I suppose he was oppressing an Outlander.

I was surprised, I must confess, to meet President Kruger in Somersetshire during the war. I had no idea that he was in the neighbourhood. But a yet more arresting surprise awaited me. Mr. Kruger regarded me for some moments with a dubious grey eye, and then addressed me with a strong Somersetshire accent. A curious cold shock went through me to hear that inappropriate voice coming out of that familiar form. It was as if you met a Chinaman, with pigtail and yellow jacket, and he began to talk broad Scotch. But the next moment, of course, I understood the situation. We had much underrated the Boers in supposing that the Boer education was incomplete. In pursuit of his ruthless plot against our island home, the terrible President had learnt not only English, but all the dialects at a moment's notice to win over a Lancashire merchant or seduce a Northumberland Fusilier. No doubt, if I asked him, this stout old gentleman could grind out Sussex, Essex, Norfolk, Suffolk, and so on, like the tunes in a barrel organ. I could not wonder if our plain, true-hearted German millionaires fell before a cunning so penetrated with culture as this.

.....

And now I come to the third and greatest surprise of all that this strange old man gave me. When he asked me, dryly enough, but not without a certain steady

civility that belongs to old-fashioned country people, what I wanted and what I was doing, I told him the facts of the case, explaining my political mission and the almost angelic qualities of the Liberal candidate. Whereupon, this old man became suddenly transfigured in the sunlight into a devil of wrath. It was some time before I could understand a word he said, but the one word that kept on recurring was the word "Kruger," and it was invariably accompanied with a volley of violent terms. Was I for old Kruger, was I? Did I come to him and want him to help old Kruger? I ought to be ashamed, I was... and here he became once more obscure. The one thing that he made quite clear was that he wouldn't do anything for Kruger.

"But you ARE Kruger," burst from my lips, in a natural explosion of reasonableness. "You ARE Kruger, aren't you?"

After this innocent CRI DE COEUR of mine, I thought at first there would be a fight, and I remembered with regret that the President in early life had had a hobby of killing lions. But really I began to think that I had been mistaken, and that it was not the President after all. There was a confounding sincerity in the anger with which he declared that he was Farmer Bowles, and everybody knowed it. I appeased him eventually and parted from him at the door of his farmhouse, where he left me with a few tags of religion, which again raised my suspicions of his identity. In the coffee-room to which I returned there was an illustrated paper with a picture of President Kruger, and he and Farmer Bowles were as like as two peas. There was a picture also of a group of Outlander leaders, and the faces of them, leering and triumphant, were perhaps unduly darkened by the photograph, but they seemed to me like the faces of a distant and hostile people.

I saw the old man once again on the fierce night of the poll, when he drove down our Liberal lines in a little cart ablaze with the blue Tory ribbons, for he was a man who would carry his colours everywhere. It was evening, and the warm western light was on the grey hair and heavy massive features of that good old man. I knew as one knows a fact of sense that if Spanish and German stockbrokers had flooded his farm or country he would have fought them for ever, not fiercely like an Irishman, but with the ponderous courage and ponderous cunning of the Boer. I knew that without seeing it, as certainly as I knew without seeing it that when he went into the polling room he put his cross against the Conservative name. Then he came out again, having given his vote and looking more like Kruger than ever. And at the same hour on the same night thousands upon thousands of English Krugers gave the same vote. And thus Kruger was pulled down and the dark-faced men in the photograph reigned in his stead.