

## JACOB MEYER

More than three weeks had gone by when one morning Benita, who slept upon the cartel or hide-strung bed in the waggon, having dressed herself as best she could in that confined place, thrust aside the curtain and seated herself upon the voorkisse, or driving-box. The sun was not yet up, and the air was cold with frost, for they were on the Transvaal high-veld at the end of winter. Even through her thick cloak Benita shivered and called to the driver of the waggon, who also acted as cook, and whose blanket-draped form she could see bending over a fire into which he was blowing life, to make haste with the coffee.

"By and by, Missie--by and by," he answered, coughing the rank smoke from his lungs. "Kettle no sing yet, and fire black as hell."

Benita reflected that popular report painted this locality red, but without entering into argument sat still upon the chest waiting till the water boiled and her father appeared.

Presently he emerged from under the side flap of the waggon where he slept, and remarking that it was really too cold to think of washing, climbed to her side by help of the disselboom, and kissed her.

"How far are we now from Rooi Krantz, Father?" she asked, for that was

the name of Mr. Clifford's farm.

"About forty miles, dear. The waggon cannot make it to-night with these two sick oxen, but after the midday outspan we will ride on, and be there by sundown. I am afraid you are tired of this trekking."

"No," she answered. "I like it very much; it is so restful, and I sleep sound upon that cartel. I feel as though I should like to trek on for the rest of my life."

"So you shall if you wish, dear, for whole months. South Africa is big, and when the grass grows, if you still wish it, we will take a long journey."

She smiled, but made no answer, knowing that he was thinking of the place so far away where he believed that once the Portuguese had buried gold.

The kettle was singing now merrily enough, and Hans, the cook, lifting it from the fire in triumph--for his blowing exertions had been severe--poured into it a quantity of ground coffee from an old mustard tin. Then, having stirred the mixture with a stick, he took a red ember from the fire and dropped it into the kettle, a process which, as travellers in the veld know well, has a clearing effect upon the coffee. Next he produced pannikins, and handed them up with a pickle jar full of sugar to Mr. Clifford, upon the waggon chest. Milk they had none, yet

that coffee tasted a great deal better than it looked; indeed, Benita drank two cups of it to warm herself and wash down the hard biscuit. Before the day was over glad enough was she that she had done so.

The sun was rising; huge and red it looked seen through the clinging mist, and, their breakfast finished, Mr. Clifford gave orders that the oxen, which were filling themselves with the dry grass near at hand, should be got up and inspanned. The voorlooper, a Zulu boy, who had left them for a little while to share the rest of the coffee with Hans, rose from his haunches with a grunt, and departed to fetch them. A minute or two later Hans ceased from his occupation of packing up the things, and said in a low voice:

"Kek! Baas"--that is "Look!"

Following the line of his outstretched hand, Benita and her father perceived, not more than a hundred yards away from them, a great troop of wilderbeeste, or gnu, travelling along a ridge, and pausing now and again to indulge in those extraordinary gambols which cause the Boers to declare that these brutes have a worm in their brains.

"Give me my rifle, Hans," said Mr. Clifford. "We want meat."

By the time that the Westley-Richards was drawn from its case and loaded, only one buck remained, for, having caught sight of the waggon, it turned to stare at it suspiciously. Mr. Clifford aimed and fired.

Down went the buck, then springing to its feet again, vanished behind the ridge. Mr. Clifford shook his head sadly.

"I don't often do that sort of thing, my dear, but the light is still very bad. Still, he's hit. What do you say? Shall we get on the horses and catch him? A canter would warm you."

Benita, who was tender-hearted, reflected that it would be kinder to put the poor creature out of its pain, and nodded her head. Five minutes later they were cantering together up the rise, Mr. Clifford having first ordered the waggon to trek on till they rejoined it, and slipped a packet of cartridges into his pocket. Beyond the rise lay a wide stretch of marshy ground, bordered by another rise half a mile or more away, from the crest of which--for now the air was clear enough--they saw the wounded bull standing. On they went after him, but before they could come within shot, he had moved forward once more, for he was only lightly hurt in the flank, and guessed whence his trouble came.

Again and again did he retreat as they drew near, until at length, just as Mr. Clifford was about to dismount to risk a long shot, the beast took to its heels in earnest.

"Come on," he said; "don't let's be beat," for by this time the hunter was alive in him.

So off they went at a gallop, up slopes and down slopes that reminded

Benita of the Bay of Biscay in a storm, across half-dried vleis that in the wet season were ponds, through stony ground and patches of ant-bear holes in which they nearly came to grief. For five miles at least the chase went on, since at the end of winter the wilderbeeste was thin and could gallop well, notwithstanding its injury, faster even than their good horses. At last, rising a ridge, they found whither it was going, for suddenly they were in the midst of vast herds of game, thousands and tens of thousands of them stretching as far as the eye could reach.

It was a wondrous sight that now, alas! will be seen no more--at any rate upon the Transvaal veld; wilderbeeste, blesbok, springbok, in countless multitudes, and amongst them a few quagga and hartebeeste. With a sound like that of thunder, their flashing myriad hoofs casting up clouds of dust from the fire-blackened veld, the great herds separated at the appearance of their enemy, man. This way and that they went in groups and long brown lines, leaving the wounded and exhausted wilderbeeste behind them, so that presently he was the sole tenant of that great cup of land.

At him they rode till Mr. Clifford, who was a little ahead of his daughter, drew almost alongside. Then the poor maddened brute tried its last shift. Stopping suddenly, it wheeled round and charged head down. Mr. Clifford, as it came, held out his rifle in his right hand and fired at a hazard. The bullet passed through the bull, but could not stop its charge. Its horns, held low, struck the forelegs of the horse, and next instant horse, man, and wilderbeeste rolled on the veld together.

Benita, who was fifty yards behind, uttered a little cry of fear, but before ever she reached him, her father had risen laughing, for he was quite unhurt. The horse, too, was getting up, but the bull could rise no more. It struggled to its forefeet, uttered a kind of sobbing groan, stared round wildly, and rolled over, dead.

"I never knew a wilderbeeste charge like that before," said Mr. Clifford. "Confound it! I believe my horse is lamed."

Lamed it was, indeed, where the bull had struck the foreleg, though, as it chanced, not badly. Having tied a handkerchief to the horn of the buck in order to scare away the vultures, and thrown some tufts of dry grass upon its body, which he proposed, if possible, to fetch or send for, Mr. Clifford mounted his lame horse and headed for the waggon. But they had galloped farther than they thought, and it was midday before they came to what they took to be the road. As there was no spoor upon it, they followed this track backwards, expecting to find the waggon outspanned, but although they rode for mile upon mile, no waggon could they see. Then, realizing their mistake, they retraced their steps, and leaving this path at the spot where they had found it, struck off again to the right.

Meanwhile, the sky was darkening, and at about three o'clock in the afternoon a thunderstorm broke over them accompanied by torrents of icy rain, the first fall of the spring, and a bitter wind which chilled them

through. More, after the heavy rain came drizzle and a thick mist that deepened as evening approached.

Now their plight was very wretched. Lost, starved, soaked to the skin, with tired horses one of which was lame, they wandered about on the lonely veld. Only one stroke of fortune came to them. As the sun set, for a few moments its rays pierced the mist, telling them in what direction they should go. Turning their horses, they headed for it, and so rode on until the darkness fell. Then they halted a while, but feeling that if they stood still in that horrible cold they would certainly perish before morning, once more pushed on again. By now Mr. Clifford's horse was almost too lame to ride, so he led it, walking at his daughter's side, and reproaching himself bitterly for his foolishness in having brought her into this trouble.

"It doesn't matter, Father," she answered wearily, for she was very tired. "Nothing matters; one may as well die upon the veld as in the sea or anywhere else."

On they plodded, they knew not whither. Benita fell asleep upon her saddle, and was awakened once by a hyena howling quite close to them, and once by her horse falling to its knees.

"What is the time?" she said at last.

Her father struck a match and looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock;

they had been fifteen hours away from the waggon and without food. At intervals Mr. Clifford, who had remounted, fired his rifle. Now there was but one cartridge left, and having caught sight of his daughter's exhausted face by the light of the match, he fired this also, though in that desperate wilderness there was little hope of its bringing succour.

"Shall we stop or go on?" he asked.

"I do not care," she answered. "Only if I stop I think it will be for ever. Let us go on."

Now the rain had ceased, but the mist was as dense as before. Also they seemed to have got among bush, for wet leaves brushed their faces. Utterly exhausted they stumbled forward, till suddenly Benita felt her horse stop as though a hand had seized its bridle, and heard a man's voice, speaking with a foreign accent, say:

"Mein Gott! Where are you going?"

"I wish I knew," she answered, like one in a dream.

At this instant the moon rose above the mists, and Benita saw Jacob Meyer for the first time.

In that light his appearance was not displeasing. A man of about forty years of age, not over tall, slight and active in build, with a pointed



black beard, regular, Semitic features, a complexion of an ivory pallor which even the African sun did not seem to tan, and dark, lustrous eyes that appeared, now to sleep, and now to catch the fire of the thoughts within. Yet, weary though she was, there was something in the man's personality which repelled and alarmed Benita, something wild and cruel. She felt that he was filled with unsatisfied ambitions and desires, and that to attain to them he would shrink at nothing. In a moment he was speaking again in tones that compelled her attention.

"It was a good thought that brought me here to look for you. No; not a thought--what do you call it?--an instinct. I think your mind must have spoken to my mind, and called me to save you. See now, Clifford, my friend, where you have led your daughter. See, see!" And he pointed downwards.

They leaned forward and stared. There, immediately beneath them, was a mighty gulf whereof the moonlight did not reveal the bottom.

"You are no good veld traveller, Clifford, my friend; one more step of those silly beasts, and down below there would have been two red heaps with bits of bones sticking out of them--yes, there on the rocks five hundred feet beneath. Ah! you would have slept soundly to-night, both of you."

"Where is the place?" asked Mr. Clifford in a dazed fashion. "Leopard's Kloof?"

"Yes; Leopard's Kloof, no other. You have travelled along the top of the hill, not at the bottom. Certainly that was a good thought which came to me from the lady your daughter, for she is one of the thought senders, I am sure. Ah! it came to me suddenly; it hit me like a stick whilst I was searching for you, having found that you had lost the waggon. It said to me, 'Ride to the top of Leopard's Kloof. Ride hard.' I rode hard through the rocks and the darkness, through the mist and the rain, and not one minute had I been here when you came and I caught the lady's bridle."

"I am sure we are very grateful to you," murmured Benita.

"Then I am paid back ten thousand times. No; it is I who am grateful--I who have saved your life through the thought you sent me."

"Thought or no thought, all's well that ends well," broke in Mr. Clifford impatiently. "And thank Heaven we are not more than three miles away from home. Will you lead the way, Jacob? You always could see in the dark?"

"Yes, yes," and he took hold of Benita's bridle with his firm, white hand. "Oh! my horse will follow, or put your arm through his rein--so. Now come on, Miss Clifford, and be afraid no more. With Jacob Meyer you are safe."

So they began their descent of the hill. Meyer did not speak again;

all his attention seemed to be concentrated upon finding a safe path on which the horses would not stumble. Nor did Benita speak; she was too utterly exhausted--so exhausted, indeed, that she could no longer control her mind and imagination. These seemed to loose themselves from her and to acquire new powers, notably that of entering into the secret thoughts of the man at her side. She saw them pass before her like living things, and yet she could not read them. Still, something she did understand--that she had suddenly grown important to this man, not in the way in which women are generally important to men, but otherwise. She felt as though she had become interwoven with the objects of his life, and was henceforth necessary to their fulfilment, as though she were someone whom he had been seeking for years on years, the one person who could give him light in his darkness.

These imaginings troubled her, so that she was very thankful when they passed away as swiftly as they had arisen, and she knew only that she was half dead with weariness and cold; that her limbs ached and that the steep path seemed endless.

At length they reached level ground, and after travelling along it for a while and crossing the bed of a stream, passed through a gate, and stopped suddenly at the door of a house with lighted windows.

"Here is your home at last, Miss Clifford," said the musical voice of Jacob Meyer, "and I thank the Fate which rules us that it has taught me to bring you to it safely."

Making no answer she slid from the saddle, only to find that she could not stand, for she sank into a heap upon the ground. With a gentle exclamation he lifted her, and calling to two Kaffirs who had appeared to take the horses, led her into the house.

"You must go to bed at once," he said, conducting her to a door which opened out of the sitting-room. "I have had a fire lit in your chamber in case you should come, and old Tante Sally will bring you soup with brandy in it, and hot water for your feet. Ah! there you are, old vrouw. Come now; help the lady, your mistress. Is all ready?"

"All, Baas," answered the woman, a stout half-breed with a kindly face.

"Come now, my little one, and I will undress you."

Half an hour later Benita, having drunk more brandy than ever she had done in her life before, was wrapped up and fast asleep.

When she awoke the sun was streaming through the curtained window of her

room, and by the light of it she saw that the clock which stood upon the mantelpiece pointed to half-past eleven. She had slept for nearly twelve hours, and felt that, notwithstanding the cold and exposure, save for stiffness and a certain numb feeling in her head--the result, perhaps, of the unaccustomed brandy--she was well and, what was more, quite hungry.

Outside on the verandah she heard the voice of Jacob Meyer, with which she seemed already to have become familiar, telling some natives to stop singing, as they would wake the chieftainess inside. He used the Zulu word Inkosi-kaas, which, she remembered, meant head-lady or chieftainess. He was very thoughtful for her, she reflected, and was grateful, till suddenly she remembered the dislike she had taken to the man.

Then she looked round her room and saw that it was very pretty, well furnished and papered, with water-colour pictures on the walls of no mean merit, things that she had not expected in this far-off place. Also on a table stood a great bowl of arum lilies. She wondered who had put them there; whether it were the old half-breed, Sally, or Jacob Meyer. Also she wondered who had painted the pictures, which were all of African scenery, and something told her that both the flowers and the pictures came from Jacob Meyer.

On the little table by her bed was a handbell, which presently she rang. Instantly she heard the voice of Sally calling for the coffee "quick," and next minute the woman entered, bringing a tray with it, and bread and butter--yes, and toast and eggs, which had evidently been made ready for her. Speaking in English mixed with Dutch words, she told Benita that her father was still in bed, but sent her his love, and wished to know how she did. Then, while she ate her breakfast with appetite, Sally set her a bath, and subsequently appeared carrying the contents of the

box she had used upon the waggon, which had now arrived safely at the farm. Benita asked who had ordered the box to be unpacked, and Sally answered that the Heer Meyer had ordered it so that she might not be disturbed in her sleep, and that her things should be ready for her when she woke.

"The Heer Meyer thinks a great deal about other people," said Benita.

"Ja, ja!" answered the old half-breed. "He tink much about people when he want to tink about them, but he tink most about himself. Baas Meyer, he a very clever man--oh! a very clever man, who want to be a great man too. And one day, Missee, he be a great man, great and rich--if the Heer God Almighty let him."