

CHAPTER IX. THE PROMISE

Of the original thirty-five souls, not reckoning natives, who had accompanied Henri Marais upon his ill-fated expedition, there now remained but nine alive at the new Maraisfontein. These were himself, his daughter, four Prinsloos--a family of extraordinary constitution--and three Meyers, being the husband of the poor woman I had seen committed to the grave and two of her six children. The rest, Hernan Pereira excepted, had died of fever and actual starvation, for when the fever lessened with the change of the seasons, the starvation set in. It appeared that, with the exception of a very little, they had stored their powder in a kind of outbuilding which they constructed, placing it at a distance for safety's sake. When most of the surviving men were away, however, a grass fire set light to this outbuilding and all the powder blew up.

After this, for a while they supplied the camp with food by the help of such ammunition as remained to them. When that failed they dug pits in which to catch game. In time the buck came to know of these pits, so that they snared no more.

Then, as the "biltong" or sun-dried meat they had made was all consumed, they were driven to every desperate expedient that is known to the starving, such as the digging up of bulbs, the boiling of grass, twigs and leaves, the catching of lizards, and so forth. I believe that they

actually ate caterpillars and earthworms. But after their last fire went out through the neglect of the wretched Kaffir who was left to watch it, and having no tinder, they failed to relight it by friction, of course even this food failed them. When I arrived they had practically been three days without anything to eat except green leaves and grass, such as I saw the child chewing. In another seventy hours doubtless every one of them would have been dead.

Well, they recovered rapidly enough, for those who had survived its ravages were evidently now impervious to fever. Who can tell the joy that I experienced as I watched Marie returning from the very brink of the grave to a state of full and lovely womanhood? After all, we were not so far away from the primitive conditions of humanity, when the first duty of man was to feed his women and his children, and I think that something of that instinct remains with us. At least, I know I never experienced a greater pleasure than I did, when the woman I loved, the poor, starving woman, ate and ate of the food which I was able to give her--she who for weeks had existed upon locusts and herbs.

For the first few days we did not talk much except of the immediate necessities of the hour, which occupied all our thoughts. Afterwards, when Marais and his daughter were strong enough to bear it, we had some conversation. He began by asking how I came to find them.

I replied, through Marie's letter, which, it appeared, he knew nothing of, for he had forbidden her to write to me.

"It seems fortunate that you were disobeyed, mynheer," I said, to which he answered nothing.

Then I told the tale of the arrival of that letter at the Mission Station in the Cape Colony by the hand of a wandering smous, and of my desperate ride upon the swift mare to Port Elizabeth, where I just succeeded in catching the brig Seven Stars before she sailed. Also I told them of the lucky chances that enabled me to buy the wagons and find a guide to their camp, reaching it but a few hours before it was too late.

"It was a great deed," said Henri Marais, taking the pipe from his mouth, for I had brought tobacco among my stores. "But tell me, Allan, why did you do it for the sake of one who has not treated you kindly?"

"I did it," I answered, "for the sake of one who has always treated me kindly," and I nodded towards Marie, who was engaged in washing up the cooking pots at a distance.

"I suppose so, Allan; but you know she is affianced to another."

"I know that she is affianced to me, and to no other," I answered warmly, adding, "And pray where is this other? If he lives I do not see him here."

"No," replied Marais in a curious voice. "The truth is, Allan, that Hernan Pereira left us about a fortnight before you came. One horse remained, which was his, and with two Hottentots, who were also his servants, he rode back upon the track by which we came, to try to find help. Since then we have heard nothing of him."

"Indeed; and how did he propose to get food on the way?"

"He had a rifle, or rather they all three had rifles, and about a hundred charges between them, which escaped the fire."

"With a hundred charges of powder carefully used your camp would have been fed for a month, or perhaps two months," I remarked. "Yet he went away with all of them--to find help?"

"That is so, Allan. We begged him to stay, but he would not; and, after all, the charges were his own property. No doubt he thought he acted for the best, especially as Marie would have none of him," Marais added with emphasis.

"Well," I replied, "it seems that it is I who have brought you the help, and not Pereira. Also, by the way, mynheer, I have brought you the money my father collected on your account, and some £500 of my own, or what is left of it, in goods and gold. Moreover, Marie does not refuse me. Say, therefore, to which of us does she belong?"

"It would seem that it should be to you," he answered slowly, "since you have shown yourself so faithful, and were it not for you she would now be lying yonder," and he pointed to the little heaps that covered the bones of most of the expedition. "Yes, yes, it would seem that it should be to you, who twice have saved her life and once have saved mine also."

Now I suppose that he saw on my face the joy which I could not conceal, for he added hastily: "Yet, Allan, years ago I swore on the Book before God that never with my will should my daughter marry an Englishman, even if he were a good Englishman. Also, just before we left the Colony, I swore again, in her presence and that of Hernan Pereira, that I would not give her to you, so I cannot break my oath, can I? If I did, the good God would be avenged upon me."

"Some might think that when I came here the good God was in the way of being avenged upon you for the keeping of that evil oath," I answered bitterly, glancing, in my turn, at the graves.

"Yes, they might, Allan," he replied without anger, for all his troubles had induced a reasonable frame of mind in him--for a while. "Yet, His ways are past finding out, are they not?"

Now my anger broke out, and, rising, I said:

"Do you mean, Mynheer Marais, that notwithstanding the love between us, which you know is true and deep, and notwithstanding that I alone have

been able to drag both of you and the others out of the claws of death, I am never to marry Marie? Do you mean that she is to be given to a braggart who deserted her in her need?"

"And what if I do mean that, Allan?"

"This: although I am still young, as you know well I am a man who can think and act for himself. Also, I am your master here--I have cattle and guns and servants. Well, I will take Marie, and if any should try to stop me, I know how to protect myself and her."

This bold speech did not seem to surprise him in the least or to make him think the worse of me. He looked at me for a while, pulling his long beard in a meditative fashion, then answered:

"I dare say that at your age I should have played the same game, and it is true that you have things in your fist. But, much as she may love you, Marie would not go away with you and leave her father to starve."

"Then you can come with us as my father-in-law, Mynheer Marais. At any rate, it is certain that I will not go away and leave her here to starve."

Now I think that something which he saw in my eye showed him that I was in earnest. At least, he changed his tone and began to argue, almost to plead.

"Be reasonable, Allan," he said. "How can you marry Marie when there is no *prédicant* to marry you? Surely, if you love her so much, you would not pour mud upon her name, even in this wilderness?"

"She might not think it mud," I replied. "Men and women have been married without the help of priests before now, by open declaration and public report, for instance, and their children held to be born in wedlock. I know that, for I have read of the law of marriage."

"It may be, Allan, though I hold no marriage good unless the holy words are said. But why do you not let me come to the end of my story?"

"Because I thought it was ended, Mynheer Marais."

"Not so, Allan. I told you that I had sworn that she should never marry you with my will. But when she is of age, which will be in some six months' time, my will counts no longer, seeing that then she is a free woman who can dispose of herself. Also I shall be clear of my oath, for no harm will come to my soul if that happens which I cannot help. Now are you satisfied?"

"I don't know," I answered doubtfully, for somehow all Marais's casuistry, which I thought contemptible, did not convince me that he was sincere. "I don't know," I repeated. "Much may chance in six months."

"Of course, Allan. For instance, Marie might change her mind and marry someone else."

"Or I might not be there to marry, mynheer. Accidents sometimes happen to men who are not wanted, especially in wild countries or, for the matter of that, to those who are."

"Allemachte! Allan, you do not mean that I--"

"No, mynheer," I interrupted; "but there are other people in the world besides yourself--Hernan Pereira, for example, if he lives. Still, I am not the only one concerned in this matter. There is Marie yonder. Shall I call her?"

He nodded, preferring probably that I should speak to her in his presence rather than alone.

So I called Marie, who was watching our talk somewhat anxiously while she went about her tasks. She came at once, a very different Marie to the starving girl of a while before, for although she was still thin and drawn, her youth and beauty were returning to her fast under the influences of good food and happiness.

"What is it, Allan?" she asked gently. I told her all, repeating our conversation and the arguments which had been used on either side word for word, as nearly as I could remember them.

"Is that right?" I asked of Marais when I had finished.

"It is right; you have a good memory," he answered.

"Very well. And now what have you to say, Marie?"

"I, dear Allan? Why, this: My life belongs to you, who have twice saved this body of mine from death, as my love and spirit belong to you. Therefore, I should have thought it no shame if I had been given to you here and now before the people, and afterwards married by a clergyman when we found one. But my father has sworn an oath which weighs upon his mind, and he has shown you that within six months--a short six months--that oath dies of itself, since, by the law, he can no longer control me. So, Allan, as I would not grieve him, or perhaps lead him to say and do what is foolish, I think it would be well that we should wait for those six months, if, on his part, he promises that he will then do nothing to prevent our marriage."

"Ja, ja, I promise that then I will do nothing to prevent your marriage," answered Marais eagerly, like one who has suddenly seen some loophole of escape from an impossible position, adding, as though to himself, "But God may do something to prevent it, for all that."

"We are every one of us in the hand of God," she replied in her sweet voice. "Allan, you hear, my father has promised?"

"Yes, Marie, he has promised--after a fashion," I replied gloomily, for somehow his words struck a chill through me.

"I have promised, Allan, and I will keep my promise to you, as I have kept my oath to God, attempting to work you no harm, and leaving all in His hands. But you, on your part, must promise also that, till she is of age, you will not take Marie as a wife--no, not if you were left alone together in the veld. You must be as people who are affianced to each other, no more."

So, having no choice, I promised, though with a heavy heart. Then, I suppose in order to make this solemn contract public, Marais called the surviving Boers, who were loitering near, and repeated to them the terms of the contract that we had made.

The men laughed and shrugged their shoulders. But Vrouw Prinsloo, I remember, said outright that she thought the business foolish, since if anyone had a right to Marie, I had, wherever I chose to take her. She added that, as for Hernan Pereira, he was a "sneak and a stinkcat," who had gone off to save his own life, and left them all to die. If she were Marie, should they meet again, she would greet him with a pailful of dirty water in the face, as she herself meant to do if she got the chance.

Vrouw Prinsloo, it will be observed, was a very outspoken woman and, I

may add, an honest one.

So this contract was settled. I have set it out at length because of its importance in our story. But now I wish--ah! how I wish that I had insisted upon being married to Marie then and there. If I had done so, I think I should have carried my point, for I was the "master of many legions" in the shape of cattle, food and ammunition, and rather than risk a quarrel with me, the other Boers would have forced Marais to give way. But we were young and inexperienced; also it was fated otherwise. Who can question the decrees of Fate written immutably, perhaps long before we were born, in the everlasting book of human destinies?

Yet, when I had shaken off my first fears and doubts, my lot and Marie's were very happy, a perfect paradise, indeed, compared with what we had gone through during that bitter time of silence and separation. At any rate, we were acknowledged to be affianced by the little society in which we lived, including her father, and allowed to be as much alone together as we liked. This meant that we met at dawn only to separate at nightfall, for, having little or no artificial light, we went to rest with the sun, or shortly after it. Sweet, indeed, was that companionship of perfect trust and love; so sweet, that even after all these years I do not care to dwell upon the holy memory of those blessed months.

So soon as the surviving Boers began to recover by the help of my stores and medicines and the meat which I shot in plenty, of course great discussions arose as to our future plans. First it was suggested that

we should trek to Lorenzo Marquez, and wait for a ship there to take us down to Natal, for none of them would hear of returning beggared to the Cape to tell the story of their failure and dreadful bereavements. I pointed out, however, that no ship might come for a long while, perhaps for one or two years, and that Lorenzo Marquez and its neighborhood seemed to be a poisonous place to live in!

The next idea was that we should stop where we were, one which I rather welcomed, as I should have been glad to abide in peace with Marie until the six months of probation had gone by.

However, in the end this was rejected for many good reasons. Thus half a score of white people, of whom four were members of a single family, were certainly not strong enough to form a settlement, especially as the surrounding natives might become actively hostile at any moment. Again, the worst fever season was approaching, in which we should very possibly all be carried off. Further, we had no breeding cattle or horses, which would not live in this veld, and only the ammunition and goods that I had brought with me.

So it was clear that but one thing remained to be done, namely, to trek back to what is now the Transvaal territory, or, better still, to Natal, for this route would enable us to avoid the worst of the mountains.

There we might join some other party of the emigrant Boers--for choice, that of Retief, of whose arrival over the Drakensberg I was able to tell them.

That point settled, we made our preparations. To begin with, I had only enough oxen for two wagons, whereas, even if we abandoned the rest of them, we must take at least four. Therefore, through my Kaffirs, I opened negotiations with the surrounding natives, who, when they heard that I was not a Boer and was prepared to pay for what I bought, soon expressed a willingness to trade. Indeed, very shortly we had quite a market established, to which cattle were brought that I bargained for and purchased, giving cloth, knives, hoes, and the usual Kaffir goods in payment for the same.

Also, they brought mealies and other corn; and oh! the delight with which those poor people, who for months and months had existed upon nothing but flesh-meat, ate of this farinaceous food. Never shall I forget seeing Marie and the surviving children partake of their first meal of porridge, and washing the sticky stuff down with draughts of fresh, sugared milk, for with the oxen I had succeeded in obtaining two good cows. It is enough to say that this change of diet soon completely re-established their health, and made Marie more beautiful than she had ever been before.

Having got the oxen, the next thing was to break them to the yoke; for, although docile creatures enough, they had never even seen a wagon. This proved a long and difficult process, involving many trial trips; moreover, the selected wagons, one of which had belonged to Pereira, must be mended with very insufficient tools and without the help of a

forge. Indeed, had it not chanced that Hans, the Hottentot, had worked for a wagon-maker at some indefinite period of his career, I do not think that we could have managed the job at all.

It was while we were busy with these tasks that some news arrived which was displeasing enough to everyone, except perhaps to Henri Marais. I was engaged on a certain evening in trying to make sixteen of the Kaffir cattle pull together in the yoke, instead of tying themselves into a double knot and over-setting the wagon, when Hans, who was helping me, suddenly called out:

"Look! baas, here comes one of my brothers," or, in other words, a Hottentot.

Following the line of his hand, I saw a thin and wretched creature, clad only in some rags and the remains of a big hat with the crown out, staggering towards us between the trees.

"Why!" exclaimed Marie in a startled voice, for, as usual, she was at my side, "it is Klaus, one of my cousin Hernan's after-riders."

"So long as it is not your cousin Hernan himself, I do not care," I said.

Presently the poor, starved "Totty" arrived, and throwing himself down, begged for food. A cold shoulder of buck was given to him, which he

devoured, holding it in both hands and tearing off great lumps of flesh with his teeth like a wild beast.

When at last he was satisfied, Marais, who had come up with the other Boers, asked him whence he came and what was his news of his master.

"Out of the bush," he answered, "and my news of the baas is that he is dead. At least, I left him so ill that I suppose he must be dead by now."

"Why did you leave him if he was ill?" asked Marais.

"Because he told me to, baas, that I might find help, for we were starving, having fired our last bullet."

"Is he alone, then?"

"Yes, yes, except for the wild beasts and the vultures. A lion ate the other man, his servant, a long while ago."

"How far is he off?" asked Marais again.

"Oh, baas, about five hours' journey on horseback on a good road." (This would be some thirty-five miles.)

Then he told this story: Pereira with his two Hottentot servants, he

mounted and they on foot, had traversed about a hundred miles of rough country in safety, when at night a lion killed and carried off one of the Hottentots, and frightened away the horse, which was never seen again. Pereira and Klaus proceeded on foot till they came to a great river, on the banks of which they met some Kaffirs, who appear to have been Zulus on outpost duty. These men demanded their guns and ammunition to take to their king, and, on Pereira refusing to give them up, said that they would kill them both in the morning after they had made him instruct them in the use of the guns by beating him with sticks.

In the night a storm came on, under cover of which Pereira and Klaus escaped. As they dared not go forward for fear lest they should fall into the hands of the Zulus, they fled back northwards, running all night, only to find in the morning that they had lost their way in the bush. This had happened nearly a month before--or, at any rate, Klaus thought so, for no doubt the days went very slowly--during which time they had wandered about, trying to shape some sort of course by the sun with the object of returning to the camp. They met no man, black or white, and supported themselves upon game, which they shot and ate raw or sun-dried, till at length all their powder was done and they threw away their heavy rovers, which they could no longer carry.

It was at this juncture that from the top of a tall tree Klaus saw a certain koppie a long way off, which he recognised as being within fifteen miles or so of Marais's camp. By now they were starving, only Klaus was the stronger of the two, for he found and devoured some

carrion, a dead hyena I think it was. Pereira also tried to eat this horrible food, but, not having the stomach of a Hottentot, the first mouthful of it made him dreadfully ill. They sought shelter in a cave on the bank of a stream, where grew water-cresses and other herbs, such as wild asparagus. Here it was that Pereira told Klaus to try to make his way back to the camp, and, should he find anyone alive there, to bring him succour.

So Klaus went, taking the remaining leg of the hyena with him, and on the afternoon of the second day arrived as has been told.