

## CHAPTER X. VROUW PRINSLOO SPEAKS HER MIND

Now, when the Hottentot's story was finished a discussion arose. Marais said that someone must go to see whether his nephew still lived, to which the other Boers replied "Ja" in an indifferent voice. Then the Vrouw Prinsloo took up her parable.

She remarked, as she had done before, that in her judgment Hernan Pereira was "a stinkcat and a sneak," who had tried to desert them in their trouble, and by the judgment of a just God had got into trouble himself. Personally, she wished that the lion had taken him instead of the worthy Hottentot, although it gave her a higher opinion of lions to conclude that it had not done so, because if it did it thought it would have been poisoned. Well, her view was that it would be just as well to let that traitor lie upon the bed which he had made. Moreover, doubtless by now he was dead, so what was the good of bothering about him?

These sentiments appeared to appeal to the Boers, for they remarked:

"Ja, what is the good?"

"Is it right," asked Marais, "to abandon a comrade in misfortune, one of our own blood?"

"Mein Gott!" replied Vrouw Prinsloo; "he is no blood of mine, the evil-odoured Portuguee. But I admit he is of yours, Heer Marais, being

your sister's son, so it is evident that you should be the one to go to seek after him."

"That seems to be so, Vrouw Prinsloo," said Marais in his meditative manner; "yet I must remember that I have Marie to look after."

"Ach! and so had he, too, until he remembered his own skin, and went off with the only horse and all the powder, leaving her and the rest of us to starve. Well, you won't go, and Prinsloo won't go, nor my boy either, for I'll see to that; so Meyer must go."

"Nein, nein, good vrouw," answered Meyer, "I have those children that are left to me to consider."

"Then," exclaimed Vrouw Prinsloo triumphantly, "nobody will go, so let us forget this stinkcat, as he forgot us."

"Does it seem right," asked Marais again, "that a Christian man should be left to starve in the wilderness?" and he looked at me.

"Tell me, Heer Marais," I remarked, answering the look, "why should I of all people go to look for the Heer Pereira, one who has not dealt too well with me?"

"I do not know, Allan. Yet the Book tells us to turn the other cheek and to forget injuries. Still, it is for you to judge, remembering that we

must answer for all things at the last day, and not for me. I only know that were I your age and not burdened with a daughter to watch over, I should go."

"Why should you talk to me thus?" I asked with indignation. "Why do you not go yourself, seeing that I am quite ready to look after Marie?" (Here the Vrouw Prinsloo and the other Boers tittered.) "And why do you not address your remarks to these other heeren instead of to me, seeing that they are the friends and trek-companions of your nephew?"

At this point the male Prinsloos and Meyer found that they had business elsewhere.

"It is for you to judge, yet remember, Allan, that it is an awful thing to appear before our Maker with the blood of a fellow creature upon our hands. But if you and these other hard-hearted men will not go, I at my age, and weak as I am with all that I have suffered, will go myself."

"Good," said Vrouw Prinsloo; "that is the best way out of it. You will soon get sick of the journey, Heer Marais, and we shall see no more of the stinkcat."

Marais rose in a resigned fashion, for he never deigned to argue with Vrouw Prinsloo, who was too many for him, and said:

"Farewell, Marie. If I do not return, you will remember my wishes, and

my will may be found between the first leaves of our Holy Book. Get up, Klaus, and guide me to your master," and he administered a somewhat vicious kick to the gorged and prostrate Hottentot.

Now Marie, who all this while had stood silent, touched me on the shoulder and said:

"Allan, is it well that my father should go alone? Will you not accompany him?"

"Of course," I answered cheerfully; "on such a business there should be two, and some Kaffirs also to carry the man, if he still lives."

Now for the end of the story. As the Hottentot Klaus was too exhausted to move that night, it was arranged that we should start at dawn. Accordingly, I rose before the light, and was just finishing my breakfast when Marie appeared at the wagon in which I slept. I got up to greet her, and, there being no one in sight, we kissed each other several times.

"Have done, my heart," she said, pushing me away. "I come to you from my father, who is sick in his stomach and would see you."

"Which means that I shall have to go after your cousin alone," I replied with indignant emphasis.

She shook her head, and led me to the little shanty in which she slept. Here by the growing light, that entered through the doorway for it had no window, I perceived Marais seated upon a wooden stool with his hands pressed on his middle and groaning.

"Good morning, Allan," he said in a melancholy voice; "I am ill, very ill, something that I have eaten perhaps, or a chill in the stomach, such as often precedes fever or dysentery."

"Perhaps you will get better as you walk, mynheer," I suggested, for, to tell the truth, I misdoubted me of this chill, and knew that he had eaten nothing but what was quite wholesome.

"Walk! God alone knows how I can walk with something gripping my inside like a wagon-maker's vice. Yet I will try, for it is impossible to leave that poor Hernan to die alone; and if I do not go to seek him, it seems that no one else will."

"Why should not some of my Kaffirs go with Klaus?" I asked.

"Allan," he replied solemnly, "if you were dying in a cave far from help, would you think well of those who sent raw Kaffirs to succour you when they might have come themselves, Kaffirs who certainly would let you die and return with some false story?"

"I don't know what I should think, Heer Marais. But I do know that if

I were in that cave and Pereira were in this camp, neither would he come himself, nor so much as send a savage to save me."

"It may be so, Allan. But even if another's heart is black, should yours be black also? Oh! I will come, though it be to my death," and, rising from the stool with the most dreadful groan, he began to divest himself of the tattered blanket in which he was wrapped up.

"Oh! Allan, my father must not go; it will kill him," exclaimed Marie, who took a more serious view of his case than I did.

"Very well, if you think so," I answered. "And now, as it is time for me to be starting, good-bye."

"You have a good heart, Allan," said Marais, sinking back upon his stool and resuming his blanket, while Marie looked despairingly first at one and then at the other of us.

Half an hour later I was on the road in the very worst of tempers.

"Mind what you are about," called Vrouw Prinsloo after me. "It is not lucky to save an enemy, and if I know anything of that stinkcat, he will bite your finger badly by way of gratitude. Bah! lad, if I were you I should just camp for a few days in the bush, and then come back and say that I could find nothing of Pereira except the dead hyenas that had been poisoned by eating him. Good luck to you all the same, Allan; may

I find such a friend in need. It seems to me that you were born to help others."

Beside the Hottentot Klaus, my companions on this unwelcome journey were three of the Zulu Kaffirs, for Hans I was obliged to leave in charge of my cattle and goods with the other men. Also, I took a pack-ox, an active beast that I had been training to carry loads and, if necessary a man, although as yet it was not very well broken.

All that day we marched over extremely rough country, till at last darkness found us in a mountainous kloof, where we slept, surrounded by watch-fires because of the lions. Next morning at the first light we moved on again, and about ten o'clock waded through a stream to a little natural cave, where Klaus said he had left his master. This cave seemed extremely silent, and, as I hesitated for a moment at its mouth, the thought crossed my mind that if Pereira were still there, he must be dead. Indeed, do what I would to suppress it, with that reflection came a certain feeling of relief and even of pleasure. For well I knew that Pereira alive was more dangerous to me than all the wild men and beasts in Africa put together. Thrusting back this unworthy sentiment as best I could, I entered the cave alone, for the natives, who dread the defilement of the touch of a corpse, lingered outside.

It was but a shallow cavity washed out of the overhanging rock by the action of water; and as soon as my eyes grew accustomed to its gloom, I saw that at the end of it lay a man. So still did he lie, that now I was

almost certain that his troubles were over. I went up to him and touched his face, which was cold and clammy, and then, quite convinced, turned to leave the place, which, I thought, if a few rocks were piled in the mouth of it, would make an excellent sepulchre.

Just as I stepped out into the sunlight, and was about to call to the men to collect the rocks, however, I thought that I heard a very faint groan behind me, which at the moment I set down to imagination. Still, I returned, though I did not much like the job, knelt down by the figure, and waited with my hand over its heart. For five minutes or more I stayed here, and then, quite convinced, was about to leave again when, for the second time, I heard that faint groan. Pereira was not dead, but only on the extreme brink of death!

I ran to the entrance of the cave, calling the Kaffirs, and together we carried him out into the sunlight. He was an awful spectacle, mere bone with yellow skin stretched over it, and covered with filth and clotted blood from some hurt. I had brandy with me, of which I poured a little down his throat, whereon his heart began to beat feebly. Then we made some soup, and poured that down his throat with more brandy, and the end of it was he came to life again.

For three days did I doctor that man, and really I believe that if at any time during those days I had relaxed my attentions even for a couple of hours, he would have slipped through my fingers, for at this business Klaus and the Kaffirs were no good at all. But I pulled him round, and



on the third morning he came to his senses. For a long while he stared at me, for I had laid him in the mouth of the cave, where the light was good, although the overhanging rocks protected him from the sun. Then he said:

"Allemachte! you remind me of someone, young man. I know. It is of that damned English boy who beat me at the goose shooting, and made me quarrel with Oom [uncle] Retief, the jackanapes that Marie was so fond of. Well, whoever you are, you can't be he, thank God."

"You are mistaken, Heer Pereira," I answered. "I am that same damned young English jackanapes, Allan Quatermain by name, who beat you at shooting. But if you take my advice, you will thank God for something else, namely, that your life has been saved."

"Who saved it?" he asked.

"If you want to know, I did; I have been nursing you these three days."

"You, Allan Quatermain! Now, that is strange, for certainly I would not have saved yours," and he laughed a little, then turned over and went to sleep.

From that time forward his recovery was rapid, and two days later we began our journey back to Marais's camp, the convalescent Pereira being carried in a litter by the four natives. It was a task at which they

grumbled a good deal, for the load was heavy over rough ground, and whenever they stumbled or shook him he cursed at them. So much did he curse, indeed, that at length one of the Zulus, a man with a rough temper, said that if it were not for the Inkoos, meaning myself, he would put his assegai through him, and let the vultures carry him. After this Pereira grew much more polite. When the bearers became exhausted we set him on the pack-ox, which two of us led, while the other two supported him on either side. It was in this fashion that at last we arrived at the camp one evening.

Here the Vrouw Prinsloo was the first to greet us. We found her standing in the game path which we were following, quite a quarter of a mile from the wagons, with her hands set upon her broad hips and her feet apart. Her attitude was so defiant, and had about it such an air of premeditation, that I cannot help thinking she had got wind of our return, perhaps from having seen the smoke of our last fires, and was watching for us. Also, her greeting was warm.

"Ah! here you come, Hernan Pereira," she cried, "riding on an ox, while better men walk. Well, now, I want a chat with you. How came it that you went off in the night, taking the only horse and all the powder?"

"I went to get help for you," he replied sulkily.

"Did you, did you, indeed! Well, it seems that it was you who wanted the help, after all. What do you mean to pay the Heer Allan Quatermain for

saving your life, for I am sure he has done so? You have got no goods left, although you were always boasting about your riches; they are now at the bottom of a river, so it will have to be in love and service."

He muttered something about my wanting no payment for a Christian act.

"No, he wants no payment, Hernan Pereira, he is one of the true sort, but you'll pay him all the same and in bad coin if you get the chance. Oh! I have come out to tell you what I think of you. You are a stinkcat; do you hear that? A thing that no dog would bite if he could help it! You are a traitor also. You brought us to this cursed country, where you said your relatives would give us wealth and land, and then, after famine and fever attacked us, you rode away, and left us to die to save your own dirty skin. And now you come back here for help, saved by him whom you cheated in the Goose Kloof, by him whose true love you have tried to steal. Oh, mein Gott! why does the Almighty leave such fellows alive, while so many that are good and honest and innocent lie beneath the soil because of stinkcats like you?"

So she went on, striding at the side of the pack-ox, and reviling Pereira in a ceaseless stream of language, until at length he thrust his thumbs into his ears and glared at her in speechless wrath.

Thus it was that at last we arrived in the camp, where, having seen us coming, all the Boers were gathered. They are not a particularly humorous people, but this spectacle of the advance of Pereira seated on

the pack-ox, a steed that is becoming to few riders, with the furious and portly Vrouw Prinsloo striding at his side and shrieking abuse at him, caused them to burst into laughter. Then Pereira's temper gave out, and he became even more abusive than Vrouw Prinsloo.

"Is this the way you receive me, you veld-hogs, you common Boers, who are not fit to mix with a man of position and learning like myself?" he began.

"Then in God's name why do you mix with us, Hernan Pereira?" asked the saturnine Meyer, thrusting his face forward till the Newgate fringe he wore by way of a beard literally seemed to curl with wrath. "When we were hungry you did not wish it, for you slunk away and left us, taking all the powder. But now that we are full again, thanks to the little Englishman, and you are hungry, you come back. Well, if I had my way I would give you a gun and six days' rations, and turn you out to shift for yourself."

"Don't be afraid, Jan Meyer," shouted Pereira from the back of the pack-ox. "As soon as I am strong enough I will leave you in charge of your English captain here"--and he pointed to me--"and go to tell our people what sort of folk you are."

"That is good news," interrupted Prinsloo, a stolid old Boer, who stood by puffing at his pipe. "Get well, get well as soon as you can, Hernan Pereira."

It was at this juncture that Marais arrived, accompanied by Marie. Where he came from I do not know, but I think he must have been keeping in the background on purpose to see what kind of a reception Pereira would meet with.

"Silence, brothers," he said. "Is this the way you greet my nephew, who has returned from the gate of death, when you should be on your knees thanking God for his deliverance?"

"Then go on your knees and thank Him yourself, Henri Marais," screamed the irrepressible Vrouw Prinsloo. "I give thanks for the safe return of Allan here, though it is true they would be warmer if he had left this stinkcat behind him. Allemachte! Henri Marais, why do you make so much of this Portuguese fellow? Has he bewitched you? Or is it because he is your sister's son, or because you want to force Marie there to marry him? Or is it, perhaps, that he knows of something bad in your past life, and you have to bribe him to keep his mouth shut?"

Now, whether this last unpleasant suggestion was a mere random arrow drawn from Vrouw Prinsloo's well-stored quiver, or whether the vrouw had got hold of the tail-end of some long-buried truth, I do not know. Of course, however, the latter explanation is possible. Many men have done things in their youth which they do not wish to see dug up in their age; and Pereira may have learned a family secret of the kind from his mother.

At any rate, the effect of the old lady's words upon Marais was quite remarkable. Suddenly he went into one of his violent and constitutional rages. He cursed Vrouw Prinsloo. He cursed everybody else, assuring them severally and collectively that Heaven would come even with them. He said there was a plot against him and his nephew, and that I was at the bottom of it, I who had made his daughter fond of my ugly little face. So furious were his words, whereof there were many more which I have forgotten, that at length Marie began to cry and ran away. Presently, too, the Boers strolled off, shrugging their shoulders, one of them saying audibly that Marais had gone quite mad at last, as he always thought he would.

Then Marais followed them, throwing up his arms and still cursing as he went, and, slipping over the tail of the pack-ox, Pereira followed him. So the Vrouw Prinsloo and I were left alone, for the coloured men had departed, as they always do when white people begin to quarrel.

"There, Allan, my boy," said the vrouw in triumph, "I have found the sore place on the mule's back, and didn't I make him squeal and kick, although on most days of the week he seems to be such a good and quiet mule--at any rate, of late."

"I dare say you did, vrouw," I said wrathfully, "but I wish you would leave Mynheer Marais's sore places alone, seeing that if the squeals are for you, the kicks are for me."

"What does that matter, Allan?" she asked. "He always was your enemy, so that it is just as well you should see his heels when you are out of reach of them. My poor boy, I think you will have a bad time of it between the stinkcat and the mule, although you have done so much for both of them. Well, there is one thing--Marie has a true heart. She will never marry any man except yourself, Allan--even if you are not here to marry," she added by an afterthought.

The old lady paused a little, staring at the ground. Then she looked up and said:

"Allan, my dear" (for she was really fond of me, and called me thus at times), "you didn't take the advice I gave you, namely, to look for Pereira and not to find him. Well, I will give you some more, which you will take if you are wise."

"What is it?" I asked doubtfully; for, although she was upright enough in her own way, the Vrouw Prinsloo could bring herself to look at things in strange lights. Like many other women, she judged of moral codes by the impulses of her heart, and was quite prepared to stretch them to suit circumstances or to gain an end which she considered good in itself.

"Just this, lad. Do you make a two days' march with Marie into the bush. I want a little change, so I will come, too, and marry you there; for I

have got a prayer-book, and can spell out the service if we go through it once or twice first."

Now, the vision of Marie and myself being married by the Vrouw Prinsloo in the vast and untrodden veld, although attractive, was so absurd that I laughed.

"Why do you laugh, Allan? Anyone can marry people if there is no one else there; indeed, I believe that they can marry themselves."

"I dare say," I answered, not wishing to enter into a legal argument with the vrouw. "But you see, Tante, I solemnly promised her father that I would not marry her until she was of age, and if I broke my word I should not be an honest man."

"An honest man!" she exclaimed with the utmost contempt; "an honest man! Well, are Marais and Hernan Pereira honest men? Why do you not cut your stick the same length as theirs, Allan Quatermain? I tell you that your verdomde honesty will be your ruin. You remember my words later on," and she marched off in high dudgeon.

When she had gone I went to my wagons, where Hans was waiting for me with a detailed and interminable report of everything that had happened in my absence. Glad was I to find that, except for the death of one sickly ox, nothing had gone wrong. When at length he had ended his long story, I ate some food which Marie sent over for me ready cooked, for



I was too tired to join any of the Boers that night. Just as I had finished my meal and was thinking of turning in, Marie herself appeared within the circle of the camp-fire's light. I sprang up and ran to her, saying that I had not expected to see her that evening, and did not like to come to the house.

"No," she answered, drawing me back into the shadows, "I understand. My father seems very much upset, almost mad, indeed. If the Vrouw Prinsloo's tongue had been a snake's fang, it could not have stung him worse."

"And where is Pereira?" I asked.

"Oh! my cousin sleeps in the other room. He is weak and worn out. All the same, Allan, he wanted to kiss me. So I told him at once how matters stood between you and me, and that we were to be married in six months."

"What did he say to that?" I asked.

"He turned to my father and said: 'Is this true, my uncle?' And my father answered: 'Yes, that is the best bargain I could make with the Englishman, seeing that you were not here to make a better.'"

"And what happened then, Marie?"

"Oh, then Hernan thought a while. At last he looked up and said: 'I

understand. Things have gone badly. I acted for the best, who went away to try to find help for all of you. I failed. Meanwhile the Englishman came and saved you. Afterwards he saved me also. Uncle, in all this I see God's hand; had it not been for this Allan none of us would be alive. Yes, God used him that we might be kept alive. Well, he has promised that he will not marry Marie for six months. And you know, my uncle, that some of these English are great fools; they keep their promises even to their own loss. Now, in six months much may happen; who knows what will happen?"

"Were you present when you heard all this, Marie?" I asked.

"No, Allan; I was the other side of the reed partition. But at those words I entered and said: 'My father and Cousin Hernan, please understand that there is one thing which will never happen.'

"What is that?' asked my cousin.

"It will never happen that I shall marry you, Hernan,' I replied.

"Who knows, Marie, who knows?' he said.

"I do, Hernan,' I answered. 'Even if Allan were to die to-morrow, I would not marry you, either then or twenty years hence. I am glad that he has saved your life, but henceforth we are cousins, nothing more.'

"You hear what the girl tells us,' said my father; 'why do you not give up the business? What is the use of kicking against the pricks?'

"If one wears stout boots and kicks hard enough, the pricks give way,' said Hernan. 'Six months is a long time, my uncle.'

"It may be so, cousin,' I said; 'but remember that neither six months nor six years, nor six thousand years, are long enough to make me marry any man except Allan Quatermain, who has just rescued you from death. Do you understand?'

"Yes,' he replied, 'I understand that you will not marry me. Only then I promise that you shall not marry either Allan Quatermain or any other man.'

"God will decide that,' I answered, and came away, leaving him and my father together. And now, Allan, tell me all that has happened since we parted."

So I told her everything, including the Vrouw Prinsloo's advice.

"Of course, Allan, you were quite right," she remarked when I had finished; "but I am not sure that the Vrouw Prinsloo was not also right in her own fashion. I am afraid of my cousin Hernan, who holds my father in his hand--fast, fast. Still, we have promised, and must keep our word."

