

CHAPTER XVII. THE MARRIAGE

I was awakened on my wedding morning by the crash and bellowing of a great thunderstorm. The lightning flashed fearfully all about us, killing two oxen quite near to my wagon, and the thunder rolled and echoed till the very earth seemed to shake. Then came a wail of cold wind, and after that the swish of torrential rain. Although I was well accustomed to such natural manifestations, especially at this season of the year, I confess that these sights and sounds did not tend to raise my spirits, which were already lower than they should have been on that eventful day. Hans, however, who arrived to help me put on my best clothes for the ceremony, was for once consoling.

"Don't look sick, baas," he said, "for if there is storm in the morning, there is shine at night."

"Yes," I answered, speaking more to myself than to him, "but what will happen between the storm of the morning and the peace of the night?"

It was arranged that the commission, which, counting the native after-riders, consisted of over a hundred people, among them several boys, who were little more than children, was to ride at one hour before noon. Nobody could get about to make the necessary preparations until the heavy rain had passed away, which it did a little after eight o'clock. Therefore when I left the wagon to eat, or try to eat some

breakfast, I found the whole camp in a state of bustle.

Boers were shouting to their servants, horses were being examined, women were packing the saddle-bags of their husbands and fathers with spare clothes, the pack-beasts were being laden with biltong and other provisions, and so forth.

In the midst of all this tumult I began to wonder whether my private business would not be forgotten, since it seemed unlikely that time could be found for marriages. However, about ten o'clock when, having done everything that I had to do, I was sitting disconsolately upon my wagon box, being too shy to mix with that crowd of busy mockers or to go to the Prinsloos' camp to make inquiries, the vrouw herself appeared.

"Come on, Allan," she said, "the commandant is waiting and swearing because you are not there. Also, there is another waiting, and oh! she looks lovely. When they see her, every man in the camp will want her for himself, whether he has got a wife or not, for in that matter, although you mayn't think so just now, they are all the same as the Kaffirs. Oh! I know them, I know them, a white skin makes no difference."

While she held forth thus in her usual outspoken fashion, the vrouw was dragging me along by the hand, just as though I were a naughty little boy. Nor could I get free from that mighty grip, or, when once her great bulk was in motion, match my weight against it. Of course, some of the younger Boers, who, knowing her errand, had followed her, set up a shout

of cheers and laughter, which attracted everybody to the procession.

"It is too late to hang back now, Englishman." "You must make the best of a bad business." "If you wanted to change your mind, you should have done it before," men and women roared and screamed with many other such bantering words, till at length I felt myself turn the colour of a red vlei lily.

So we came at last to where Marie stood, the centre of an admiring circle. She was clothed in a soft white gown made of some simple but becoming stuff, and she wore upon her dark hair a wreath woven by the other maidens in the camp, a bevy of whom stood behind her.

Now we were face to face. Our eyes met, and oh! hers were full of love and trust. They dazzled and bewildered me. Feeling that I ought to speak, and not knowing what to say, I merely stammered "Good morning," whereon everyone broke into a roar of laughter, except Vrouw Prinsloo, who exclaimed:

"Did any one ever see such a fool?" and even Marie smiled.

Then Piet Retief appeared from somewhere dressed in tall boots and rough riding clothes, such as the Boers wore in those days. Handing the roer he was carrying to one of his sons, after much fumbling he produced a book from his pocket, in which the place was marked with a piece of grass.

"Now then," he said, "be silent, all, and show respect, for remember I am not a man just now. I am a parson, which is quite a different thing, and, being a commandant and a veld cornet and other officers all rolled into one, by virtue of the law I am about to marry these young people, so help me God. Don't any of you witnesses ever say afterwards that they are not rightly and soundly married, because I tell you that they are, or will be." He paused for breath, and someone said, "Hear, hear," or its Dutch equivalent, whereon, having glared the offender into silence, Retief proceeded:

"Young man and young woman, what are your names?"

"Don't ask silly questions, commandant," broke in Vrouw Prinsloo; "you know their names well enough."

"Of course I do, aunt," he answered; "but for this purpose I must pretend not to know them. Are you better acquainted with the law than I am? But stay, where is the father, Henri Marais?"

Someone thrust Marais forward, and there he stood quite silent, staring at us with a queer look upon his face and his gun in his hand, for he, too, was ready to ride.

"Take away that gun," said Retief; "it might go off and cause disturbance or perhaps accidents," and somebody obeyed. "Now, Henri

Marais, do you give your daughter to be married to this man?"

"No," said Marais softly.

"Very well, that is just like you, but it doesn't matter, for she is of age and can give herself. Is she not of age, Henri Marais? Don't stand there like a horse with the staggers, but tell me; is she not of age?"

"I believe so," he answered in the same soft voice.

"Then take notice, people all, that this woman is of age, and gives herself to be married to this man, don't you, my dear?"

"Yes," answered Marie.

"All right, now for it," and, opening the book, he held it up to the light, and began to read, or, rather, to stumble, through the marriage service.

Presently he stuck fast, being, like most Boers of his time, no great scholar, and exclaimed:

"Here, one of you help me with these hard words."

As nobody volunteered, Retief handed the book to me, for he knew that Marais would not assist him, saying:

"You are a scholar, Allan, being a clergyman's son. Read on till we come to the important bits, and I will say the words after you, which will do just as well and be quite according to law."

So I read, Heaven knows how, for the situation was trying enough, until I came to the crucial questions, when I gave the book back.

"Ah!" said Retief; "this is quite easy. Now then, Allan, do you take this woman to be your wife? Answer, putting in your name, which is left blank in the book."

I replied that I did, and the question was repeated to Marie, who did likewise.

"Well then, there you are," said Retief, "for I won't trouble you with all the prayers, which I don't feel myself parson enough to say. Oh! no, I forgot. Have you a ring?"

I drew one off my finger that had been my mother's--I believe it had served this same purpose at the wedding of her grandmother--and set the thin little hoop of gold upon the third finger of Marie's left hand. I still wear that ring to-day.

"It should have been a new one," muttered Vrouw Prinsloo.

"Be silent, aunt," said Retief; "are there any jewellers' shops here in the veld? A ring is a ring, even if it came off a horse's bit. There, I think that is all. No, wait a minute, I am going to say a prayer of my own over you, not one out of this book, which is so badly printed that I cannot read it. Kneel down, both of you; the rest may stand, as the grass is so wet."

Now, bethinking herself of Marie's new dress, the vrouw produced her vatdoek from a capacious pocket, and doubled up that dingy article for Marie to kneel on, which she did. Then Pieter Retief, flinging down the book, clasped his hands and uttered this simple, earnest prayer, whereof, strangely enough, every word remains fast in my mind. Coming as it did, not from a printed page, but from his honest and believing heart, it was very impressive and solemn.

"O God above us, Who sees all and is with us when we are born, when we are married, when we die, and if we do our duty for all time afterwards in Heaven, hear our prayer. I pray Thee bless this man and this woman who appear here before Thee to be wed. Make them love each other truly all their lives, be these long or short, be they sick or well, be they happy or in sorrow, be they rich or poor. Give them children to be reared up in Thy Word, give them an honest name and the respect of all who know them, and at last give them Thy Salvation through the Blood of Jesus the Saviour. If they are together, let them rejoice in each other. If they are apart, let them not forget each other. If one of them dies and the other lives, let that one who lives look forward to the day of

reunion and bow the head to Thy Will, and keep that one who dies in Thy holy Hand. O Thou Who knowest all things, guide the lives of these two according to Thy eternal purpose, and teach them to be sure that whatever Thou doest, is done for the best. For Thou art a faithful Creator, Who wishes good to His children and not evil, and at the last Thou wilt give them that good if they do but trust in Thee through daylight and through darkness. Now let no man dare to put asunder those whom Thou hast joined together, O Lord God Almighty, Father of us all. Amen."

So he prayed, and all the company echoed that Amen from their hearts. That is all except one, for Henri Marais turned his back on us and walked away.

"So," said Retief, wiping his brow with the sleeve of his coat, "you are the last couple that ever I mean to marry. The work is too hard for a layman who has bad sight for print. Now kiss each other; it is the right thing to do."

So we kissed, and the congregation cheered.

"Allan," went on the commandant, pulling out a silver watch like a turnip, "you have just half an hour before we ride, and the Vrouw Prinsloo says that she has made you a wedding meal in that tent there, so you had best go eat it."

To the tent we went accordingly, to find a simple but bounteous feast prepared, of which we partook, helping each other to food, as is, or was, the custom with new-wedded folk. Also, many Boers came in and drank our healths, although the Vrouw Prinsloo told them that it would have been more decent to leave us alone. But Henri Marais did not come or drink our healths.

Thus the half-hour went all too swiftly, and not a word did we get alone. At last in despair, seeing that Hans was already waiting with the horses, I drew Marie aside, motioning to everyone to stand back.

"Dearest wife," I said in broken words, "this is a strange beginning to our married life, but you see it can't be helped."

"No, Allan," she answered, "it can't be helped; but oh! I wish my heart were happier about your journey. I fear Dingaan, and if anything should chance to you I shall die of grief."

"Why should anything chance, Marie? We are a strong and well-armed party, and Dingaan looks on us peacefully."

"I don't know, husband, but they say Hernan Pereira is with the Zulus, and he hates you."

"Then he had better mind his manners, or he will not be here long to hate anybody," I answered grimly, for my gorge rose at the thought of

this man and his treacheries.

"Vrouw Prinsloo," I called to the old lady, who was near, "be pleased to come hither and listen. And, Marie, do you listen also. If by chance I should hear anything affecting your safety, and send you a message by someone you can trust, such as that you should remove yourselves elsewhere or hide, promise me that you will obey it without question."

"Of course I will obey you, husband. Have I not just sworn to do so?" Marie said with a sad smile.

"And so will I, Allan," said the vrouw; "not because I have sworn anything, but because I know you have a good head on your shoulders, and so will my man and the others of our party. Though why you should think you will have any message to send, I can't guess, unless you know something that is hidden from us," she added shrewdly. "You say you don't; well, it is not likely you would tell us if you did. Look! They are calling, you must go. Come on, Marie, let us see them off."

So we went to where the commission was gathered on horseback, just in time to hear Retief addressing the people, or, rather, the last of his words.

"Friends," he said, "we go upon an important business, from which I hope we shall return happily within a very little time. Still, this is a rough country, and we have to deal with rough people. Therefore my

advice to all you who stay behind is that you should not scatter, but keep together, so that in case of any trouble the men who are left may be at hand to defend this camp. For if they are here you have nothing to fear from all the savages in Africa. And now God be with you, and good-bye. Come, trek, brothers, trek!"

Then followed a few moments of confusion while men kissed their wives, children and sisters in farewell, or shook each other by the hand. I, too, kissed Marie, and, tumbling on to my horse somehow, rode away, my eyes blind with tears, for this parting was bitter. When I could see clearly again I pulled up and looked back at the camp, which was now at some distance. It seemed a peaceful place indeed, for although the storm of the morning was returning and a pall of dark cloud hung over it, the sun still shone upon the white wagon caps and the people who went to and fro among them.

Who could have thought that within a little time it would be but a field of blood, that those wagons would be riddled with assegais, and that the women and children who were moving there must most of them lie upon the veld mutilated corpses dreadful to behold? Alas! the Boers, always impatient of authority and confident that their own individual judgment was the best, did not obey their commandant's order to keep together. They went off this way and that, to shoot the game which was then so plentiful, leaving their families almost without protection. Thus the Zulus found and slew them.

Presently as I rode forward a little apart from the others someone overtook me, and I saw that it was Henri Marais.

"Well, Allan," he said, "so God has given you to me for a son-in-law. Who would have thought it? You do not look to me like a new-married man, for that marriage is not natural when the bridegroom rides off and leaves the bride of an hour. Perhaps you will never be really married after all, for God, Who gives sons-in-law, can also take them away, especially when He was not asked for them. Ah!" he went on, lapsing into French, as was his wont when moved, "qui vivra verra! qui vivra verra!" Then, shouting this excellent but obvious proverb at the top of his voice, he struck his horse with the butt of his gun, and galloped away before I could answer him.

At that moment I hated Henri Marais as I had never hated anyone before, not even his nephew Hernan. Almost did I ride to the commandant to complain of him, but reflecting to myself, first that he was undoubtedly half mad, and therefore not responsible for his actions, and secondly that he was better here with us than in the same camp with my wife, I gave up the idea. Yet alas! it is the half-mad who are the most dangerous of lunatics.

Hans, who had observed this scene and overheard all Marais's talk, and who also knew the state of the case well enough, sidled his horse alongside of me, and whispered in a wheedling voice:

"Baas, I think the old baas is kransick and not safe. He looks like one who is going to harm someone. Now, baas, suppose I let my gun off by accident; you know we coloured people are very careless with guns! The Heer Marais would never be troubled with any more fancies, and you and the Missie Marie and all of us would be safer. Also, you could not be blamed, nor could I, for who can help an accident? Guns will go off sometimes, baas, when you don't want them to."

"Get out," I answered. Yet if Hans's gun had chanced to "go off," I believe it might have saved a multitude of lives!