

CHAPTER XXV

THE GREAT TREK

On the morrow we began to make ready, and a month later we trekked from our much loved home. Jan tried to sell the farm, which was a very good one of over six thousand morgen, or twelve thousand English acres, well watered, and having on it a dwelling house built of stone, with large kraals and out-buildings, an orchard of fruit-trees, and twenty morgen of crop lands that could be irrigated in the dry season, well fenced in with walls built of loose stones. But no one would make a bid for it, for there were few English about, and most of the farmers were trekking, so at last he parted with it to a cowardly fellow, a Boer by birth, but, as I believe, a spy of the British Government, who gave him fifty pounds and an old waggon in exchange for the place and everything upon it except the stock which we took with us.

Some years ago I heard that this man's grandson sold that same farm for twenty thousand pounds in cash, and that now it is a place where they breed horses, angora goats, and ostriches in great numbers. It makes me mad to think that the descendant of that low spy should have profited so largely out of the land which was ours, but so it often chances that those whose hearts are small and mean reap the reward of the courage and misfortunes of braver men. Nor should we grumble indeed, seeing that the Lord has blessed us greatly in land and goods.

Ah! It was a sad home leaving. The day before we trekked Ralph rode

to visit his mother's grave for the last time, and then, following the track which he had taken as a child, he went to the kloof where Suzanne had found him, and sat down upon that stone on which as a child he had knelt in prayer, and where in after years he and his lost wife had told their love. Jan accompanied him upon this dismal journey, for to speak truth we did not like to leave him more alone than we could help, since his manner remained strange, and when he set out on his solitary rides we could not be certain that we should ever see him come back again.

Next morning we trekked away, and my eyes were so full of tears as I sat beneath the tent of the first waggon that the familiar landscape and the home where I lived for twenty years and more were blotted from my sight. But I could still hear the long-nosed spy who had bought the farm, and who as waiting to enter into possession, talking to Jan.

"Good-bye, Heer Botmar," he said, "and good fortune to you upon your journey. For my part I cannot understand you emigrants. The English Government is an accursed Government, no doubt; still I would not sell a farm and a house like this for fifty pounds and an old waggon in order to wander in the wilderness to escape from it, there to be eaten by lions or murdered by Kaffirs. Still, good-bye, and good luck to you, and I hope that you are as content with your bargain as I am with mine."

"The Lord will be our guide, as He was to the Israelites of old," answered Jan in a somewhat troubled voice.

"Yes, yes; they all say that, Heer Botmar, and I trust that they are

right, for you will need nothing less than a cloud by day and a pillar of fire in the darkness to protect you from all the dangers in your path. Also I hope that the hosts of Pharaoh, in the shape of English soldiers, will not fetch you back before you cross the border, for then, when you have sold your birthright in Egypt, and are cut off from the Promised Land, your lot will be hard, Heer Botmar."

"The Lord will guide and protect us," repeated Jan, and gave the word to trek.

In my heart at the time I was inclined to agree with that cheat's sneering words; and yet Jan was right, and not I, for of the truth the Lord did guide and protect us. Has anything more wonderful happened in the world than this journey of a few farmers, cumbered with women and children, and armed only with old-fashioned muzzle-loading guns, into a vast, unknown land, peopled by savages and wild beasts? Yet, look what they did. They conquered Moselikatse; they broke the strength of Dingaan and all his Zulu impis; they peopled the Free State, the Transvaal, and Natal. That was the work of those few farmers, and I say that of their own strength they could never have done it; the strength was given to them from above; the Sword of God was in their hand, and He guided that hand and blessed it.

Our first outspan was at the spot where Van Vooren had tried to murder Ralph and carried off Suzanne upon her wedding-day. We did not stop

there long, for the place was bad for Ralph, who sat upon the box of the waggon staring moodily at some blackened stones, which, as one of the drivers told me--the same man who accompanied them upon their wedding journey--had been brought from the kloof and used by Suzanne to set the kettle on when they took their meal together. Led by this same driver I walked to the edge of the cliff--for I had never visited the place before--and looked at the deep sea-pool, forty feet below me, into which Swart Piet had thrown Ralph after he had shot him. Also I went down to the edge of the pool and climbed up again by the path along which Zinti and Sihamba had staggered with his senseless body. Afterwards I returned to the waggons with a heart full of thankfulness and wonder that he should still be alive among us to-day, although alas, there was much for which I could not feel thankful, at least not then.

Now it is of little use that I should set down the history of this trek of ours day by day, for if I did my story would have no end. It is enough to tell that in company with other emigrants we crossed the Orange River, heading for Thaba Nchu, which had been the chief town of Maroko before Moselikatse drove him out of the Marico country. Here several bands of emigrants were to meet, and here they did meet, but not until a year or more had passed since we left the colony and wandered out into the veldt.

Ah! I tell you, my child, the veldt in those days was different indeed from what it is now. The land itself remains the same except where white men have built towns upon it, but all else is changed. Then it was black with game when the grass was green; yes, at times I have seen it so

black for miles that we could scarcely see the grass. There were all sorts of them, springbucks in myriads, blesbok and quagga and wildebeeste in thousands, sable antelope, sassaby and hartebeeste in herds, eland, giraffe and koodoo in troops; while the forests were full of elephant and the streams of sea-cow. They are all gone now, the beautiful wild creatures; the guns of the white men have killed them out or driven them away, and I suppose that it is as well that they are gone, for while the game is in such plenty the men will not work. Still I for one am sorry to lose the sight of them, and had it not been for their numbers we Boers should never have lasted through that long trek, for often and often we lived upon buck's flesh and little else for weeks together.

At Thaba Nchu we camped, waiting for other bands of emigrants, but after four or five months some of our number grew so impatient that they started off by themselves. Among these were the companies under the Heer Triegaart and the Heer Rensenburg, who wished us to accompany him, but Jan would not, I do not know why. It was as well, for the knob-nosed Kaffirs killed him and everybody with him. Triegaart, who had separated from him, trekked to Delagoa Bay, and reached it, where nearly all his people died of fever.

After that we moved northwards in detachments, instead of keeping together as we should have done, with the result that several of our parties were fallen upon and murdered by the warriors of Moselikatse. Our line of march was between where Bloemfontein and Winburg now stand in the Orange Free State, and it was south of the Vaal, not far from the

Rhenoster River that Moselikatse attacked us.

I cannot tell the tale of all this way, I can only tell of what I saw myself. We were of the party under the leadership of Carl Celliers, afterwards an elder of the church at Kronnstadt. Celliers went on a commission to Zoutpansberg to spy out the land, and it was while he was away that so many families were cut off by Moselikatse, the remainder of them, with such of their women and children as were left alive, retreating to our laager. Then Celliers returned from his commission, and we retired to a place called Vechtkop, near the Rhenoster River; altogether we numbered not more than fifty or sixty souls, including women and children.

Here we heard that Moselikatse was advancing to make an end of us, so we made our laager as strong as we could, lashing the disselboom of each waggon beneath the framework of that before it and filling the spaces beneath and between with the crowns and boughs of sharp-thorned mimosa trees, which we tied to the trek tows and brake chains so that they could not be torn away. Also in the middle of the laager we made an inner defence of seven waggons, in which were placed the women and children, with the spare food and gunpowder, but the cattle we were obliged to leave outside. Early on the morning when we had finished the laager we heard that the impi of Moselikatse was close to us, and the men to the number of over thirty rode out to look for it, leaving but a few to defend the camp.

About an hour's ride away they found the Kaffirs, thousands of them, and

a Hottentot who could speak their tongue was instructed to call to them and ask them why they attacked us. By way of answer they shouted out the name of their chief and began to charge, whereupon our men dismounted from their horses and opened fire upon them, mounting again before they could come near. So the fight went on until the laager was reached, and many Kaffirs were killed without any loss to the Boers, for luckily in those days the natives had no firearms.

I remember that we women were moulding bullets when the men rode in, and very thankful we were to find that not one of them was even wounded. While they ate something we washed out their guns, and at intervals near the places where each man must stand behind the waggons we piled little heaps of powder and bullets upon buckskins and pieces of canvas laid on the ground; also we did all we could to strengthen our defences still further by binding ox-hides over the waggon wheels and thrusting in more thorns between them.

Then, as the enemy was still preparing to attack us, the Heer Celliers called us together, and there in the laager, while all knelt around him, even to the smallest child, he put up a prayer to God asking that we might be forgiven our sins, and that He would look upon us and protect us in our great need.

It was a strange sight. There we all knelt in the quiet sunshine while he prayed in an earnest voice, and we followed his words with our hearts, every one of us, men and women, holding guns or axes in our hands. Never had human beings more need for prayer, for through the

cracks between the waggons we could see Moselikatse's Zulus, six or seven thousand of them, forming themselves into three bodies to rush upon us and murder us, and that was a dreadful sight for fifty or sixty people, of whom some were little children.

When we had finished praying, husbands and wives and parents and children kissed each other, and then the little ones and some of the women who were sick or aged were put behind the seven waggons in the centre of the laager, round which were tied the horses, while the rest of us went to our stations, men and women together. I stood behind Jan and Ralph, who fought side by side, and, assisted by a girl of fourteen years of age, loaded their spare guns. Now there was a great silence in the camp, and suddenly in the silence, Jan, who was looking through his loophole, whispered:

"Allemachter! here they come."

And come they did, with a rush and a roar from three sides at once, while men drew in their breath and set their faces for the struggle. Still no one fired, for the order was that we were to save our powder until Celliers let off his gun. Already the savages were within thirty paces of us, a countless mass of men packed like sheep in a kraal, their fierce eyes shewing white as ivory in the sunlight, their cruel spears quivering in their hands, when the signal was given and every gun, some loaded with slugs and some with bullets, was discharged point-blank into the thick of them.

Over they rolled by dozens, but that did not stop the rest, who, in spite of our pitiless fire, rushed up to the waggons and gripped them with their hands, striving to drag them apart, till the whole line of them rocked and surged and creaked like boats upon the sea, while the air grew thick with smoke rising straight up towards the sky, and through the smoke assegais flashed as thick as rain.

But although some of the heavy laden waggons were dragged a foot or more outward they held together, and the storm of spears flying over our heads did little harm. Heavens! what a fight was that, the fight of fifty against six thousand.

Not more than seven feet of space divided us from that shrieking sea of foes into which we poured bullets at hazard, for there was no need to aim, as fast as the guns could be loaded. Suddenly I heard the girl call out:

"Kek, tante, da is een swartzel!" (Look, aunt, there is a black man.)

I looked, and just at my side I saw a great savage who had forced his way through the thorns and crawled beneath the waggon into the laager. The gun in my hand was empty, but by me lay an axe which I snatched up, and as he rose to his knees I struck him with all my strength upon the neck and killed him at a blow. Yes, my child, that was the kind of work to which we wives of the voortrekkers had to put a needle.

Jan had just fired his gun, and seeing the man he sprang to help me,

whereon three more Kaffirs following on the dead soldier's path crawled out from under the waggon. Two of them gained their feet and ran at him lifting their assegais. I thought that all was lost, for one hole in our defence was like a pin prick to a bladder, but with a shout Jan dropped the empty gun and rushed to meet them. He caught them by the throat, the two of them, one in each of his great hands, and before they could spear him dashed their heads together with such desperate strength that they fell down and never stirred again. This was always thought something of a feat, for as everybody knows the skulls of Kaffirs are thick.

By this time the girl had handed Ralph his second gun loaded, and with it he shot the third Kaffir; then he also did a brave thing, for seeing that more Zulus were beginning to creep through the hole, he snatched the assegai from a dead man's hand, and stopped the gap with his own body, lying flat upon his stomach and thrusting at their heads with the spear. Soon we dragged him out with only one slight wound, pushing the bodies of the Kaffirs into his place, and over them spare branches of thorn, so that the breach was made good.

This was the turning point of the fight, for though after it one other Kaffir managed to get into the laager, where he was cut down, and two Boers, Nicholas Potgieter and Pieter Botha were killed by assegais thrown from without, from that moment the attack began to slacken. In thirty minutes from the time that Celliers had fired the first shot, Moselikatse's general, whose name was Kalipi, had given the order to retire, and his hosts drew off sullenly, for we had beaten them.

Thirty minutes! Only thirty minutes--the shadows had shifted but a few inches on the grass, and yet now that it was done with it seemed like half a lifetime. Panting and begrimed with smoke and powder, we stood looking at each other and around us. The tents of the waggons were ripped to pieces, in our own I counted more than sixty spear cuts, and the trampled turf inside the laager was like the back of an angry porcupine, for from it we gathered nearly fourteen hundred heavy assegais. For the rest, the two men lay dead where they had fallen, their faces turned towards the sky, each of them pierced through by a spear, and out of our little number twelve others were wounded, though none of them died of their wounds. Not a woman or a child was touched.

Outside the laager there was a sight to see, for there on the red grass, some lying singly and some in heaps, were over four hundred Zulu soldiers, most of them dead, and how many wounded they carried away with them I cannot tell.

Now we saw that the Kaffirs were collecting our cattle, and about twenty men under Potgieter saddled up and rode out to try and recapture them, since without oxen to draw the waggons we were helpless. Till sunset they followed them, killing many, but being so few they could not recapture the cattle, and in the end were obliged to return empty handed. Ralph went with his party, and, because of an act of mercy which he did then it came about in the end that Suzanne was found and many lives were saved. So plenteously do our good deeds bear fruit, even in

this world.

Yes, you may have thought that this tale of the battle of Vetchkop was only put in here because it is one of the great experiences of an old woman's life. But it is not so; it has all to do with the story of Ralph and of my daughter Suzanne.