

CHAPTER XV

A ROUGH JOURNEY

The four greys were fresh horses, in good condition and with a light load behind them, so, notwithstanding the bad state of the tracks which they call roads in South Africa, John made good progress.

By eleven o'clock that day he had reached Standerton, a little town upon the Vaal, not far from which, had he but known it, he was destined to meet with a sufficiently striking experience. Here he obtained confirmation of the Bronker's Spruit disaster, and listened with set face and blazing eyes to the tale of treachery and death which was, as he said, with a parallel in the annals of civilised war. But, after all, what does it matter?--a little square of graves at Bronker's Spruit, a few more widows and a hundred or so of orphans. England, by her Government, answered the question plainly--it matters very little.

At Standerton John was again warned that it would be impossible for him to make his way through the Boers at Heidelberg, a town about sixty miles from Pretoria, where the Triumvirate, Kruger, Pretorius, and Joubert, had proclaimed the Republic. But he answered as before, that he must go on till he was stopped, and inspanning his horses set forward again, a little comforted by the news that the Bishop of Pretoria, who was hurrying up to rejoin his family, had passed through a few hours before, also intent upon running the blockade, and that if he drove fast

he might overtake him.

On he went, hour after hour, over the great deserted plain, but he did not succeed in catching up the Bishop. About forty miles from Standerton he saw a waggon standing by the roadside, and halted to try if he could obtain any information from its driver. But on investigation it became clear that the waggon had been looted of the provisions and goods with which it was loaded and the oxen driven off. Nor was this the only evidence of violence. Across the disselboom of the waggon, its hands still clasping a long bamboo whip, as though he had been trying to defend himself with it, lay the dead body of the native driver. His face, John noticed, was so composed and peaceful, that had it not been for the attitude and a neat little blue hole in the forehead, one might have thought he was asleep, not dead.

At sunset John outspanned his now flagging horses by the roadside, and gave them each a couple of bundles of forage from the store that he had brought with him. Whilst they were eating it, leaving Mouti to keep an eye to them, he strolled away and sat down on a bit ant-heap to think. It was a wild and melancholy scene that stretched before and behind him. Miles upon miles of plain, rolling east and west and north and south like the billows of a frozen sea, only broken, far along the Heidelberg road, by some hills, known as Rooi Koppies. Nor was this all. Overhead was blazing and burning one of those remarkable sunsets which are sometimes seen in the South African summer time. The sky was full of lowering clouds, and the sullen orb of the setting sun had stained them

perfectly blood-red. Blood-red they floated through the ominous sky, and blood-red their shadows lay upon the grass. Even the air seemed red. It looked as though earth and heaven had been steeped in blood; and, fresh as John was from the sight of the dead driver, his ears yet tingling with the tale of Bronker's Spruit, it is not to be wondered at that the suggestive sight oppressed him, seated in that lonely waste, with no company except the melancholy "kakara-kakara" of an old black koran hidden away somewhere in the grass. He was not much given to such reflections, but he did begin to wonder whether this was the last journey of all the many he had made during the past twenty years, and if for him a Boer bullet was about to solve the mystery of life and death.

Then he sank to the stage of depression that most people have made acquaintance with at some time or another, when a man begins to ask, "What is the use of it? Why were we born? What good do we do here? Why should we--as the majority of mankind doubtless are--mere animals be laden up with sorrows till at last our poor backs break? Is God powerful or powerless? If powerful, why did He not let us sleep in peace, without setting us here to taste of every pain and mortification, to become acquainted with every grief, and then to perish miserably?" Old questions these, which the sprightly critic justly condemns as morbid and futile, and not to be dangled before a merry world of make-believe. Perhaps he is right. It is better to play at marbles on a sepulchre than to lift the lid and peep inside. But, for all that, they will arise when we sit alone at even in our individual wildernesses, surrounded, perhaps, by mementoes of our broken hopes and tokens of our beloved

dead, strewn about us like the bleaching bones of the wild game on the veldt, and in spirit watch the red sun of our existence sinking towards its vapoury horizon. They will come even to the sanguine, successful man. One cannot always play at marbles; the lid of the sepulchre will sometimes slip aside of itself, and we must see. True, it depends upon individual disposition. Some people can, metaphorically, smoke cigarettes and make puns by the death-beds of their dearest friends, or even on their own. We should pray for a disposition like that--it makes life more pleasant.

By the time that the horses had eaten their forage and Mouti had forced the bits into their reluctant mouths, the angry splendour of the sunset faded, and the quiet night was falling over the glowing veldt like the pall on one scarce dead. Fortunately for the travellers, there was a bright half moon, and by its light John managed to direct the cart over many a weary mile. On he went for hour after hour, keeping his tired horses to the collar as best he could, till at last, about eleven o'clock, he saw the lights of Heidelberg before him, and knew that the question of whether or no his journey was at an end would speedily be decided for him. However, there was nothing for it but to go on and take his chance of slipping through. Presently he crossed a little stream, and distinguished the shape of a cart just ahead, around which men and a couple of lanterns were moving. No doubt, John thought to himself, it was the Bishop, who had been stopped by the Boers. He was quite close to the cart when it moved on, and in another second he was greeted by the rough challenge of a sentry, and caught sight of the cold gleam of a

rifle barrel.

"Wie da?" (Who's there?)

"Friend!" he answered cheerfully, though feeling far from cheerful.

There was a pause, during which the sentry called to another man, who came up yawning, and saying something in Dutch. Straining his ears he caught the words, "Bishop's man," and this gave him an idea.

"Who are you, Englishman?" asked the second man gruffly, holding up a lantern to look at John, and speaking in English.

"I am the Bishop's chaplain, sir," he answered mildly, trying desperately to look like an unoffending clergyman, "and I want to get on to Pretoria with him."

The man with the lantern inspected him closely. Fortunately John wore a dark coat and a clerical-looking black felt hat; the same that Frank Muller had put a bullet through.

"He is a preacher fast enough," said the one man to the other. "Look, he is dressed like an old crow! What did Oom Kruger's pass say, Jan? Was it two carts or one that we were to let through? I think it was one."

The other man scratched his head.

"I think it was two," he said. He did not like to confess to his comrade that he could not read. "No, I am sure that it was two."

"Perhaps we had better send up to Oom Kruger and ask?" suggested the first man.

"Oom Kruger will be in bed, and he puts up his quills like a porcupine if one wakes him," was the answer.

"Then let us keep the damned preaching Englishman till to-morrow."

"Pray let me go on, gentlemen," said John, still in his mildest voice.

"I am wanted to preach the Word at Pretoria, and to watch by the wounded and dying."

"Yes, yes," said the first man, "there will soon be plenty of wounded and dying there. They will all be like the rooibaatjes at Bronker's Spruit. Lord, what a sight that was! But they will get the Bishop, so they won't want you. You can stop and look after our wounded if the rooibaatjes manage to hit any of us." And he beckoned to him to come out of the cart.

"Hullo!" said the other man, "here is a bag of mealies. We will commandeer that, anyhow." And he took his knife and cut the line with which the sack was fastened to the back of the cart, so that it fell

to the ground. "That will feed our horses for a week," he said with a chuckle, in which the other man joined. It was pleasant to become so easily possessed of an unearned increment in the shape of a bag of mealies.

"Well, are we to get the old crow go?" said the first man.

"If we don't let him go we shall have to take him up to headquarters, and I want to sleep." And he yawned.

"Well, let him go," said the other. "I think you are right. The pass said two carts. Be off, you damned preaching Englishman!"

John did not wait for any more, but laid the whip across the horses' backs with a will.

"I hope we did right," said the man with the lantern to the other as the cart bumped off. "I am not sure he was a preacher after all. I have half a mind to send a bullet after him." But his companion, who was very sleepy, gave no encouragement to the idea, so it dropped.

On the following morning when Commandant Frank Muller--having heard that his enemy John Niel was on his way up with the Cape cart and four grey horses--ascertained that a vehicle answering to that description had been allowed to pass through Heidelberg in the dead of night, his state of mind may better be imagined than described.

As for the two sentries, he tried them by court-martial and sent them to make fortifications for the rest of the rebellion. Now they can neither of them hear the name of a clergyman mentioned without breaking out into a perfect flood of blasphemy.

Luckily for John, although he had been delayed for five minutes or more, he managed to overtake the cart in which he presumed the Bishop was ensconced. His lordship had been providentially delayed by the breaking of a trace; otherwise, it is clear that his self-nominated chaplain would never have got through the steep streets of Heidelberg that night. The town was choked up with Boer waggons, full of sleeping Boers. Over one batch of waggons and tents John saw the Transvaal flag fluttering idly in the night breeze, marking, no doubt, the headquarters of the Triumvirate, and emblazoned with the appropriate emblem of an ox-waggon and an armed Boer. Once the cart ahead of him was stopped by a sentry and some conversation ensued. Then it went on again; and so did John, unmolested. It was weary work, that journey through Heidelberg, and full of terrors for John, who every moment expected to be stopped and dragged off ignominiously to gaol. The horses, too, were dead beat, and made frantic attempts to turn and stop at every house. But, somehow, they won through the little place, and then were halted once more. Again the first cart passed on, but this time John was not so lucky.

"The pass said one cart," said a voice.

"Yah, yah, one cart," answered another.

John again put on his clerical air and told his artless tale; but neither of the men could understand English, so they went to a waggon that was standing about fifty yards away, to fetch somebody who could.

"Now, Inkoos," whispered the Zulu Mouti, "drive on! drive on!"

John took the hint and lashed the horses with his long whip; while Mouti, bending forward over the splashboard, thrashed the wheelers with a sjambock. Off went the team in a spasmodic gallop, and it had covered a hundred yards of ground before the two sentries realised what had happened. Then they began to run after the cart shouting, but were soon lost in the darkness.

John and Mouti did not spare the whip, but pressed on up the stony hills on the Pretoria side of Heidelberg without a halt. They were, however, unable to keep up with the cart ahead of them, which was evidently more freshly horsed. About midnight, too, the moon vanished altogether, and they must creep on as best they could through the darkness. Indeed, so dark was it, that Mouti was obliged to get out and lead the exhausted horses, one of which would now and again fall down, to be cruelly flogged before it rose. Once, too, the cart very nearly upset; and on another occasion it was within an inch of rolling down a precipice.

This went on till two in the morning, when John found that it was

impossible to force the wearied beasts a yard farther. So, having luckily come to some water about fifteen miles out of Heidelberg, he halted, and after the horses had drunk, gave them as much forage as they could eat. One lay down at once, and refused to touch anything--a sure sign of great exhaustion; a second ate lying down; but the other two filled themselves in a satisfactory way. Then came a weary wait for the dawn. Mouti slept a little, but John did not dare to do so. All he could do was to swallow a little biltong (dried game flesh) and bread, drink some square-face and water, and then sit down in the cart, his rifle between his knees, and wait for the light. At last it came, lying on the eastern sky like a promise, and he once more fed the horses. And now a new difficulty arose. The animal that would not eat was clearly too weak to pull, so the harness had to be altered, and the three sound animals arranged unicorn fashion, while the sick one was fastened to the rear of the cart. Then they started again.

By eleven o'clock they reached an hotel, or wayside house, known as Ferguson's, situate about twenty miles from Pretoria. It was empty, except for a couple of cats and a stray dog. The inhabitants had evidently fled from the Boers. Here John stabled and fed his horses, giving them all that remained of the forage; and then, once more, inspanned for the last stage. The road was dreadful; and he knew that the country must be full of hostile Boers, but fortunately he met none. It took him four hours to cover the twenty miles of ground; but it was not until he reached the Poort, or neck running into Pretoria, that he saw a vestige of a Boer. Then he perceived two mounted men riding along

the top of a precipitous stone-strewn ridge, six hundred yards or so from him. At first he thought that they were going to descend it, but presently they changed their minds and got off their horses.

While he was still wondering what this might portend, he saw a puff of white smoke float up from where the men were, and then another. Next came the sharp unmistakable "ping" of a bullet passing, as far as he could judge, within some three feet of his head, followed by a second "ping," and a cloud of dust beneath the belly of the first horse. The two Boers were firing at him.

John did not wait for any more target practice, but, thrashing the horses to a canter, drove the cart round a projecting bank before they could load and fire again. After that, they troubled him no more.

At last he reached the mouth of the Poort, and saw the prettiest of the South African towns, with its red and white houses, its tall clumps of trees, and pink lines of blooming rose hedges lying on the plain before him, all set in the green veldt, made beautiful by the golden light of the afternoon, and he thanked God for the sight. John knew that he was safe now, and let his tired horses walk slowly down the hillside and across the space of plain beyond. To his left were the gaol and the barrack-sheds, and gathered about them stood hundreds of waggons and tents, towards which he drove. Evidently the town was deserted and its inhabitants were in laager. When he was within half a mile or so, a picket of mounted men rode out to meet him, followed by a miscellaneous

crowd on horseback and on foot.

"Who goes there?" shouted a voice in honest English.

"A friend who is uncommonly glad to see you," John answered, with that feeble jocosity in which we are all apt to indulge when at length a great weight is lifted from our nerves.