

CHAPTER XX

THE GREAT MAN

Completely overcome by this last remark, Hans collapsed like a jelly-fish out of water, and reflected in his worthless old heart that Frank Muller was indeed "a devil of a man." By this time they had reached the door of the little house, and were dismounting, and in another minute Hans found himself in the presence of one of the leaders of the rebellion.

He was a short, ugly person of about fifty-five, with a big nose, small eyes, straight hair, and a stoop. The forehead, however, was good, and the whole face betrayed a keenness and ability far beyond the average. The great man was seated at a plain deal table, writing something with evident difficulty upon a dirty sheet of paper, and smoking a very large pipe.

"Sit, Heeren, sit," he said, when they entered, waving the stem of his pipe towards a deal bench. Accordingly they sat down without even removing their hats, and, pulling out their pipes, proceeded to light them.

"How, in the name of God, do you spell 'Excellency'?" asked the General presently. "I have spelt it in four different ways, and each one looks worse than the last."

Frank Muller gave the required information. Hans in his heart thought he spelt it wrong, but he did not dare to say so. Then came another pause, only interrupted by the slow scratching of a quill across the dirty paper, during which Hans nearly went to sleep; for the weather was very hot, and he was tired with his ride.

"There!" said the writer presently, gazing at his handwriting with an almost childish air of satisfaction, "that is done. A curse on the man who invented writing! Our fathers did very well without it; why should not we? Though, to be sure, it is useful for treaties with the Kafirs. I don't believe you have told me right now about that 'Excellency,' nephew. Well, it will have to serve. When a man writes such a letter as that to the representative of the English Queen he needn't mind his spelling; it will be swallowed with the rest," and he leaned back in his chair and laughed softly.

"Now, Meinheer Coetzee, what is it? Ah, I know; the prisoners. Well, what did you do?"

Hans told his story, and was rambling on when the General cut him short.

"So, cousin, so! You talk like an ox-waggon--rumble and creak and jolt, a devil of a noise and turning of wheels, but very little progress. They will give up their twelve prisoners for our four, will they? That is about a fair proportion. No, it is not, though: four Boers are better

than twelve Englishmen any day--ay, better than forty!" and he laughed again. "Well, the men shall be sent in as you arranged; they will help to eat up their last biscuits. Good-day, cousin. Stop, though; one word before you go. I have heard about you at times, cousin. I have heard it said that you cannot be trusted. Now, I don't know if that is so. I don't believe it myself. Only, listen; if it should be true, and I should find you out, by God! I will have you cut into rimpis with afterox sjambocks, and then shoot you and send in your carcass as a present to the English." As he spoke thus he leaned forward, brought down his fist upon the deal table with a bang that produced a most unpleasant effect upon poor Hans's nerves, and a cold gleam of sudden ferocity flickered in the small eyes, very discomfiting for a timid man to behold, however innocent he knew himself to be.

"I swear----" he began to babble.

"Swear not at all, cousin; you are an elder of the church. There is no need for it, besides. I told you I did not believe it of you; only I have had one or two cases of this sort of thing lately. No, never mind who they were. You will not meet them about again. Good-day, cousin, good-day. Forget not to thank the Almighty God for our glorious victories. He will expect it from an elder of the church."

Poor Hans departed crestfallen, feeling that the days of him who tries, however skilfully and impartially, to sit upon two stools at once are not happy days, and sometimes threaten to be short ones. And supposing

that the Englishmen should win after all--as in his heart he hoped they might--how should he then prove that he had hoped it? The General watched him waddle through the door from under his pent brows, a half-humorous, half-menacing expression on his face.

"A windbag; a coward; a man without a heart for good or for evil. Bah! nephew, that is Hans Coetzee. I have known him for years. Well, let him go. He would sell us if he could, but I have frightened him now, and, what is more, if I see reason, he shall find I never bark unless I mean to bite. Well, enough of him. Let me see, have I thanked you yet for your share in Majuba? Ah! that was a glorious victory! How many were there of you when you started up the mountain?"

"Eighty men."

"And how many at the end?"

"One hundred and seventy--perhaps a few more."

"And how many of you were hit?"

"Three--one killed, two wounded, and a few scratches."

"Wonderful, wonderful! It was a brave deed, and because it was so brave it was successful. He must have been mad, that English general. Who shot him?"

"Breytenbach. Colley held up a white handkerchief in his hand, and Breytenbach fired, and down went the general of a heap, and then they all ran helter-skelter down the hill. Yes, it was a wonderful thing! They could have beat us back with their left hand. That is what comes of having a righteous cause, uncle."

The general smiled grimly. "That is what comes of having men who can shoot, and who understand the country, and are not afraid. Well, it is done, and well done. The stars in their courses have fought for us, Frank Muller, and so far we have conquered. But how is it to end? You are no fool; tell me, how will it end?"

Frank Muller rose and walked twice up and down the room before he answered. "Shall I tell you?" he asked, and then, without waiting for a reply, went on: "It will end in our getting the country back. That is what this armistice means. There are thousands of rooibaatjes there at the Nek; they cannot therefore be waiting for soldiers. They are waiting for an opportunity to yield, uncle. We shall get the country back, and you will be President of the Republic."

The old man took a pull at his pipe. "You have a long head, Frank, and it has not run away with you. The English Government is going to give in. The stars in their courses continue to fight for us. The English Government is as mad as its officers. They will give in. But it means more than that, Frank; I will tell you what it means. It means"--and

again he let his heavy hand fall upon the deal table--"the triumph of the Boer throughout South Africa. Bah! Burgers was not such a fool after all when he talked of his great Dutch Republic. I have been twice to England now and I know the Englishman. I could measure him for his veldtschoens (shoes). He knows nothing--nothing. He understands his shop; he is buried in his shop, and can think of nothing else. Sometimes he goes away and starts a shop in other places, and buries himself in it, and makes it a big shop, because he understands shops. But it is all a question of shops, and if the shops abroad interfere with the shops at home, or if it is thought that they do, which comes to the same thing, then the shops at home put an end to the shops abroad. Bah! they talk a great deal there in England, but, at the bottom of it, it is shop, shop, shop. They talk of honour, and patriotism too, but they both give way to the shop. And I tell you this, Frank Muller: it is the shop that has made the English, and it is the shop that will destroy them. Well, so be it. We shall have our slice: Africa for the Africanders. The Transvaal for the Transvaalers first, then the rest. Shepstone was a clever man; he would have made it all into an English shop, with the black men for shop-boys. We have changed all that, but we ought to be grateful to Shepstone. The English have paid our debts, they have eaten up the Zulus, who would otherwise have destroyed us, and they have let us beat them, and now we are going to have our turn again, and, as you say, I shall be the first President."

"Yes, uncle," replied the younger man calmly, "and I shall be the second."

The General looked at him. "You are a bold man," he said; "but boldness makes the man and the country. I dare say you will. You have the head; and one clear head can turn many fools, as the rudder does the ship, and guide them when they are turned. I dare say that you will be President one day."

"Yes, I shall be President, and when I am I will drive the Englishmen out of South Africa. This I will do with the help of the Natal Zulus. Then I will destroy the natives, as T'Chaka destroyed, keeping only enough for slaves. That is my plan, uncle; it is a good one."

"It is a big one; I am not certain that it is a good one. But good or bad, who shall say? You may carry it out, nephew, if you live. A man with brains and wealth may carry out anything if he lives. But there is a God. I believe, Frank Muller, that there is a God, and I believe that God sets a limit to a man's doings. If he is going too far, God kills him. If you live, Frank Muller, you will do these things, but perhaps God will kill you. Who can say? You will do what God wills, not what you will."

The elder man was speaking seriously now. Muller felt that this was none of the whining cant people in authority among the Boers find it desirable to adopt. It was what he thought, and it chilled Muller in spite of his pretended scepticism, as the sincere belief of an intellectual man, however opposite to our own, is apt to chill us

into doubt of ourselves and our opinions. For a moment his slumbering superstition awoke, and he felt half afraid. Between him and that bright future of blood and power lay a dark gulf. Suppose that gulf should be death, and the future nothing but a dream--or worse! His face fell as the idea occurred to him, and the General noticed it.

"Well," he went on, "he who lives will see. Meanwhile you have done good service to the State, and you shall have your reward, cousin. If I am President"--he laid emphasis on this, the meaning of which his listener did not miss--"if by the support of my followers I become President, I will not forget you. And now I must up-saddle and ride back. I want to be at Laing's Nek in sixty hours, to wait for General Wood's answer. You will see about the sending in of those prisoners;" and he knocked out his pipe and rose.

"By the way, Meinheer," said Muller, suddenly adopting a tone of respect, "I have a favour to ask."

"What is it, nephew?"

"I want a pass for two friends of mine--English people--in Pretoria to go down to their relations in Wakkerstroom district. They sent a message to me by Hans Coetzee."

"I don't like giving passes," answered the General with some irritation.

"You know what it means, letting out messengers. I wonder you ask me."

"It is a small favour, Meinheer, and I do not think that it will matter. Pretoria will not be besieged much longer; I am under an obligation to the people."

"Well, well, as you like; but if any harm comes of it, you will be held responsible. Write the pass; I will sign it."

Frank Muller sat down and wrote and dated the paper. Its contents were simple: "Pass the bearers unharmed."

"That is big enough to drive a waggon along," said the General, when it was handed to him to sign. "It might mean all Pretoria."

"I am not certain if there are two or three of them," answered Muller carelessly.

"Well, well, you are responsible. Give me the pen," and he scrawled his big coarse signature on the paper.

"I propose, with your permission, to escort the cart down with two other men. As you are aware, I go to take over the command of the Wakkerstroom district to-morrow."

"Very good. It is your affair; you are responsible. I shall ask no questions, provided your friends do no harm to the cause;" and he left

the room without another word.

When the great man had gone, Frank Muller sat down again on the bench and looked at the pass, and communed with himself, for he was far too wise to commune with anybody else. "The Lord hath delivered mine enemy into mine hand," he said with a smile, and stroked his golden beard.

"Well, well, I will not waste His merciful opportunities as I did that day out buck-shooting. And then for Bessie. I suppose I shall have to kill old Croft too. I am sorry for that, but it can't be helped; besides, if anything should happen to Jess, Bessie will take Mooifontein, and that is worth having. Not that I want more land; I have enough. Yes, I will marry her. It would serve her right if I didn't; but, after all, marriage is more respectable; also one has more hold of a wife. Nobody will interfere for her. Then, she will be of use to me by-and-by, for a beautiful woman is a power even among these fellow-countrymen of mine, if only a man knows how to bait his lines with her. Yes, I shall marry her. Bah! that is the way to win a woman--by capture; and, what is more, they like it. It makes her worth winning too. It will be a courtship of blood. Well, the kisses will be the sweeter, and in the end she will love me the more for what I have dared for her.

"So, Frank Muller, so! Ten years ago you said to yourself: 'There are three things worth having in the world--first, wealth; secondly, women, if they take your fancy, or, better still, one woman, if you desire her above all others; thirdly, power.' Now, you have got the wealth, for one

way or another you are the richest man in the Transvaal. In a week you will have the woman you love, and who is sweeter to you than all the world besides. In five years' time you will have the power--absolute power. That old man is clever; he will be President. But I am cleverer. I shall soon take his seat, thus"--and he rose and seated himself in the General's chair--"and he will go down a step and take mine. Ay, and then I will reign. My tongue shall be honey and my hand iron. I will pass over the land like a storm. I will drive these English out with the help of the Kafirs, and then I will kill the Kafirs and take their country. Ah!"--and his eyes flashed and his nostrils dilated as he said it to himself--"then life will be worth living! What a thing is power! What a thing it is to be able to destroy! Take that Englishman, my rival: to-day he is well and strong; in three days he will be gone utterly, and I--I shall have sent him away. That is power. But when the time comes that I have only to stretch out my hand to send thousands after him!--that will be absolute power; and then with Bessie I shall be happy."

And so he dreamed on for an hour or more, till at last the fumes of his untutored imagination actually drowned his reason in a spiritual drunkenness. Picture after picture rose and unrolled itself before his mind's eye. He saw himself as President addressing the Volksraad, and compelling it to his will. He saw himself, the supreme general of a great host, defeating the forces of England with awful carnage, and driving them before him; ay, he even selected the battle-ground on the slopes of the Biggarsberg in Natal. Then he saw himself again, sweeping

the natives out of South Africa with the relentless besom of his might, and ruling unquestioned over a submissive people. And, last of all, he saw something glittering at his feet--it was a crown!

This was the climax of his dream. Then there came an anticlimax. The rich imagination which had been leading him on as a gaudy butterfly does a child, suddenly changed colour and dropped to earth; and there rose up in his mind the memory of the General's words: "God sets a limit to a man's doings. If he is going too far, God kills him."

The butterfly had settled on a coffin!