

CHAPTER XXVI

FRANK MULLER'S FAMILIAR

The study of the conflicting elements which go to make up a character like that of Frank Muller, however fascinating it might prove, is not one which can be attempted in detail here. Such a character in its developed form is fortunately well-nigh impossible in a highly civilised country, for the dead weight of the law would crush it back to the level of the human mass around it. But those who have lived in the wild places of the earth will be acquainted with its prototypes, more especially in the countries where a handful of a superior race rule over the dense thousands of an inferior. Solitudes are favourable to the production of strongly marked individualities. The companionship of highly developed men, on the contrary, whittles individualities away; the difference between their growth being the difference between the grown of a tree on a plain and a tree in the forest. On the plain the tree takes the innate bend of its nature. It springs in majesty towards the skies; it spreads itself around, or it slants along the earth, just as Nature intended that it should, and in accordance with the power of the providential breath which bends it. In the forest it is different. There the tree grows towards the light wherever the light may be. Forced to modify its natural habit in obedience to the pressure of circumstances over which it has no command, it takes such form and height as its neighbours will allow it to, all its energies being directed to the preservation of its life in any shape and at any sacrifice.

Thus is it with us all. Left to ourselves, or surrounded only by the scrub of humanity, we become outwardly that which the spirit within would fashion us to, but, placed among our fellows, shackled by custom, restrained by law, pruned and bent by the force of public opinion, we grow as like one to another as the fruit bushes on a garden wall. The sharp angles of our characters are fretted away by the friction of the crowd, and we become round, polished, and, superficially, at any rate, identical. We no longer resemble a solitary boulder on a plain, but are as a worked stone built into the great edifice of civilised society.

The place of a man like Frank Muller is at the junction of the waters of civilisation and barbarism. Too civilised to possess those savage virtues which, such as they are, represent the quantum of innate good Nature has thought fit to allow in the mixture, Man; and too barbarous to be subject to the tenderer constraints of cultivated society, he is at once strong in the strength of both and weak in their weaknesses. Animated by the spirit of barbarism, Superstition; and almost entirely destitute of the spirit of civilisation, Mercy, he stands on the edge of both and an affront to both, as terrific a moral spectacle as the world can afford.

Had he been a little more civilised, with his power of evil trained by education and cynical reflection to defy the attacks of those spasms of unreasoning spiritual terror and unrestrainable passion that have their natural dwelling-place in the raw strong mind of uncultivated man, Frank

Muller might have broken upon the world as a Napoleon. Had he been a little more savage, a little farther removed from the unconscious but present influence of a progressive race, he might have ground his fellows down and ruthlessly destroyed them in the madness of his rage and lust, like an Attila or a T'Chaka. As it was he was buffeted between two forces he did not realise, even when they swayed him, and thus at every step in his path towards a supremacy of evil an unseen power made stumbling-blocks of weaknesses which, if that path had been laid along a little higher or a little lower level in the scale of circumstances, would themselves have been deadly weapons of overmastering force.

See him as, with his dark heart filled up with fears, he thunders along from that scene of midnight death and murder which his brain had not feared to plan and his hand to execute. Onward his black horse strides, companioned by the storm, like a dark thought travelling on the wings of Night. He does not believe in any God, and yet the terrible fears that spring up in his soul, born fungus-like from a few drops of blood, take shape and form, and seem to cry aloud, "We are the messengers of the avenging God." He glances up. High on the black bosom of the storm the finger of the lightning is writing that awful name, and again and again the voice of the thunder reads it aloud in spirit-shaking accents. He shuts his dazed eyes, and even the falling rhythm of his horse's hoofs beats out, "There is a God! there is a God!" from the silent earth on which they strike.

And so, on through the tempest and the night, flying from that which no

man can leave behind.

It was near midnight when Frank Muller drew rein at a wretched and lonely mud hut built on the banks of the Vaal, and flanked by an equally miserable shed. The place was silent as the grave; not even a dog barked.

"That beast of a Kafir is not here," he said aloud, "I will have him flogged to death. Hendrik! Hendrik!"

As he called, a form rose up at his very feet, causing the weary horse to start back so violently that he almost threw his rider to the ground.

"What in the name of the devil are you?" almost shrieked Frank Muller, whose nerves, indeed, were in no condition to bear fresh shocks.

"It is I, Baas," said the form, at the same time throwing off a grey blanket in which it was enveloped, and revealing the villainous countenance of the one-eyed witch-doctor, who had taken the letter to Bessie. For years this man had been Muller's body-servant, who followed him about like a shadow.

"Curse you, you dog! What do you mean by hiding up like that? It is one of your infernal tricks; be careful"--tapping his pistol case--"or I

shall one day put an end to you and your witchcraft together."

"I am very sorry, Baas," said the man in a whine, "but half an hour ago I heard you coming. I don't know what is the matter with the air to-night, but it sounded as though twenty people were galloping after you. I could hear them all quite clearly; first the big black horse, and then all those that followed, just as though they were hunting you. So I came out and lay down to listen, and it was not till you were quite close that one by one the others stopped. Perhaps it was the devils who galloped."

"Damn you, stop that wizard's talk," said Muller, his teeth chattering with fear and agitation. "Take the horse, groom and feed him well; he has galloped far, and we start at dawn. Stop, tell me, where are the lights and the brandy? If you have drunk the brandy I will flog you."

"They are on the shelf to the left as you go in, Baas, and there is flesh too, and bread."

Muller swung himself from the saddle and entered the hut, pushing open the cranky, broken-hinged door with a kick. He found the box of Tandstickor matches, and, after one or two attempts--due chiefly to his shaking hand--succeeded in striking fire and lighting a coarse dip such as the Boers make out of mutton fat. Near the candle were a bottle of peach brandy two thirds full, a tin pannikin and a jug of river water. Seizing the pannikin, he half filled it with spirit, added a little

water, and drank off the mixture. Then he took the meat and bread from the same shelf, and, cutting some of each with his clasp-knife, tried to eat. But he could not swallow much, and soon gave up the attempt, consoling himself instead with the brandy.

"Bah!" he said, "the stuff tastes like hell fire;" and he filled his pipe and sat smoking.

Presently Hendrik came in to say that the horse was eating well, and turned to go out again, when his master beckoned him to stop. The man was surprised, for generally his master was not fond of his society, except when he wanted to consult him or persuade him to exercise his pretended art of divination. The truth was, however, that at the moment Frank Muller would have been glad to consort with a dog. The events of the night had brought this terrible man, steeped in iniquity from his youth up, down to the level of a child frightened at the dark. For a while he sat in silence, the Kafir squatting on the ground at his feet. Presently, however, the doses of powerful spirit took effect on him, and he began to talk more unguardedly than was his custom, even with his black "familiar" Hendrik.

"How long have you been here?" he asked of his retainer.

"About four days, Baas."

"Did you take my letter to Oom Croft's?"

"Yah, Baas. I gave it to the missie."

"What did she do?"

"She read it, and then stood like this, holding on to the verandah pole;" and he opened his mouth and one eye, twisting up his hideous countenance into a ghastly imitation of Bessie's sorrow-stricken face, and gripping the post that supported the hut to give verisimilitude to his performance.

"So she believed it?"

"Surely."

"What did she do, then?"

"She set the dog on me. Look here! and here! and here!" and he pointed to the half-healed scars left by Stomp's sharp fangs.

Muller laughed a little. "I should like to have seen him worry you, you black cheat; it shows her spirit, too. I suppose you are angry, and want to have a revenge?"

"Surely."

"Well, who knows? Perhaps you shall; we are going there to-morrow."

"So, Baas! I knew that before you told me."

"We are going there, and we are going to take the place; and we are going to try Uncle Silas by court-martial for flying an English flag, and if he is found guilty we are going to shoot him, Hendrik."

"So, Baas," said the Kafir, rubbing his hands in glee, "but will he be found guilty?"

"I don't know," murmured the white man, stroking his golden beard; "that will depend upon what missie has to say; and upon the verdict of the court," he added, by way of an afterthought.

"On the verdict of the court, ha! ha!" chuckled his wicked satellite; "on the verdict of the court, yes! yes! and the Baas will be president, ha! ha! One needs no witchcraft to guess that verdict. And if the court finds Uncle Silas guilty, who will do the shooting, Baas?"

"I have not thought of that; the time has not come to think of it. It does not matter; anybody can carry out the sentence of the law."

"Baas," said the Kafir, "I have done much for you, and had little pay. I have done ugly things. I had read omens and made medicines and 'smelt out' your enemies. Will you grant me a favour? Will you let me shoot

Oom Croft if the court finds him guilty? It is not much to ask, Baas. I am a clever wizard and deserve my pay."

"Why do you want to shoot him?"

"Because he flogged me once, years ago, for being a witch-doctor, and the other day he hunted me off the place. Beside, it is nice to shoot a white man. I should like it better," he went on, with a smack of the lips, "if it were missie, who set the dog on me. I would----"

In a moment Muller had seized the astonished ruffian by the throat, and was kicking and shaking him as though he were a toy. His brutal talk of Bessie appealed to such manliness as he had in him, and, whatever his own wickedness may have been, he was too madly in love with the woman to let her name be taken in vain by a man whom, though he held his "magic" in superstitious reverence, he yet ranked lower than a dog. With his nerves strung to the highest possible state of tension, and half drunk as he was, Frank Muller was no more to be played with or irritated than is a mad bull.

"You black beast!" he yelled, "if ever you dare to mention her name again like that I will kill you, for all your witchcraft;" and he hurled him with such force against the wall of the hut that the whole place shook. The man fell and lay for a moment groaning; then he crept from the hut on his hands and knees.

Muller sat scowling from under his bent brows, and watched him go. When he was gone, he rose and fastened the door behind him, then suddenly he burst into tears, the result, no doubt, of the mingled effects of drink, mental and physical exhaustion, and the never-resting passion--one can scarcely call it love--which ate at his heart, like the worm that dieth not.

"Oh, Bessie, Bessie!" he groaned, "I have done it all for you. Surely you cannot be angry when I have killed them all for you? Oh, my darling, my darling! If you only knew how I love you! Oh, my darling, my darling!" and in an agony of passion he flung himself on to the rough pallet in the corner of the hut and sobbed himself to sleep.

It would seem that Frank Muller's evil-doing did not make him happy, the truth being that to enjoy wickedness a man must be not only without conscience, but also without passion. Now Frank Muller was tormented with a very effective substitute for the first--superstition, and by the latter his life was overshadowed, since the beauty of a girl possessed the power to dominate his wildest moods and to inflict upon him torments that she herself was incapable even of imagining.

At the first light of dawn Hendrik crept humbly into the hut to wake his master, and within half an hour they were across the Vaal and on the road to Wakkerstroom.

As the light increased so did Muller's spirits rise, till at last, when the red sun came up in glory and swept away the shadows, he felt as though all the load of guilt and fear that lay upon his heart had departed with them. He could see now that the death of the two Boers by lightning was a mere accident--a happy accident, indeed; for, had it not so chanced, he would have been forced to kill them himself, if he could not have obtained possession of the warrant by other means. As it was, he had forgotten about this document; but it did not matter much, he reflected. Nobody would be likely to find the bodies of the two men and horses under that lonely bank. Certainly they would not be found before the aasvogels had picked them clean, and these would be at work upon them now. And if they were found, the paper would have rotted or been blown away, or, at the worst, rendered so discoloured as to be unreadable. For the rest, there was nothing to connect him with the murder, now that his confederates were dead. Hendrik would prove an alibi for him. He was a useful man, Hendrik. Besides, who would believe that it was a murder? Two men were escorting an Englishman to the river; they became involved in a quarrel; the Englishman shot them, and they shot the Englishman and his companion. Then the horses plunged into the Vaal upsetting the cart, and there was an end of it. He could see now how well things had gone for him. Events had placed him beyond suspicion.

Then he fell to thinking of the fruits of his honest labours, and Muller's cheek grew warm with the mounting blood, and his eyes flashed

with the fire of youth. In two days--forty-eight hours--at the outside, Bessie would be in his arms. He could not miscarry now, for was he not in absolute command? Besides, Hendrik had read it in his omens long ago.[*] Mooifontein should be stormed on the morrow, if that were necessary, and Oom Silas Croft and Bessie should be taken prisoners; and then he knew how to deal with them. His talk about shooting on the previous night had been no idle threat. She should yield herself to him, or the old man must die, and then he would take her. There could be no legal consequences now that the British Government was in the act of surrender. It would be a meritorious deed to execute a rebel Englishman.

[*] It is not a very rare thing to meet white men in South Africa who believe more or less in the efficacy of native witchcraft, and, although such a proceeding is forbidden by law, who at a pinch will not hesitate to consult the witch-doctors.--Author.

Yes, it was all plain sailing now. How long had it needed to win her--three years? He had loved her for three years. Well, he would have his reward; and then, his passion satisfied, he would turn his mind to those far-reaching, ambitious schemes, whereof the end was something like a throne.