

The Storyteller.

AN AFFAIR OF OUTPOSTS.

I.

It was a black day for the Border Guides when, after a skirmish in the beautiful Stormberg country, they came to number their casualties. The men, sturdy young colonists most of them, had signed for three months. The three months were just up, and, seeing that they had lost their commander almost all their officers, and two-thirds of their men, there seemed nothing for it but to disband the corps.

The men stood about in the shadow of the kopje at whose foot their camp was pitched. Most of them leant against their horses' sides, and stared dismally before them. They felt something in the position of the man whom circumstances have turned out of his house, and who stands, homeless and forlorn, in the road outside. The fierce joy of battle had faded to a re-action deadly cold and depressing: the long, low mound to their right hid thirty-two of the gay comrades of yesterday; their wounded even now journeyed groaning in the ambulance waggons towards the nearest railway station. Dead and wounded disposed of, there appeared nothing left for the remainder to do but to return to their homes or to attach themselves to such other volunteer corps as would accept their services.

There was nothing else to do, and yet it was not strange that the thought of either of these alternatives should strike a cold chill to their hearts. Nothing draws men closer to each other than campaigning does; nothing breeds comradeship so fast as the rough-and-tumble of the hardships and dangers of life on the veld. The idea of separating, of forming new ties and new companionships, presented itself to their minds as an inexplicably dreary one, so that the youngest of them all, little Dickie Smith, of the Aliwal district, was moved to exclaim bitterly: 'They might just as well have killed the lot!'

Yesterday such a speech, as calculated to damp the general spirits, would have been received with unqualified indignation; to-day, if his hearers moved at all, it was only to glance at the mal-content and mutter that they agreed with him. Dickie had lost his cousin and bosom-friend in the fight that morning, so perhaps a little grumbling was excusable. But Luiz Basto, a slim swarthy Portuguese, who had been one of the first to present himself at the recruiting office in Queenstown, turned his head and stared at Dickie with an indescribable expression. Long afterwards Dickie remembered the smooth dark face and its strange look. Even now it made him wonder a little.

After making his protest he strolled away to where some of the men were busy over the grave of their comrades; his bony horse followed him, whinneying, its nose over his shoulder. The men were roughly tracing, in stones or cartridge-cases, the names of some of those whose bodies lay beneath, and Dickie stood watching them. After a little he collected pebbles and added his cousin's name to the list.

Presently the quarter-master crawled out of his tent, hugging to his bosom a small sack of tobacco, at sight of which the eyes nearest him brightened perceptibly. 'The last,' he announced with a cheerfulness somewhat strained. 'It'll easy go round—now.' Then he stopped, dismayed at what he had said; but the general spirits were already so low that they could not be brought lower, and his mistake passed unobserved.

The first pipe was not half smoked and there was still some daylight, when suddenly the figure of a horseman appeared on the rising ground to the left of the camp. By virtue of long usage, 70 men sprang to their arms in a flash, and were ready for whatever might occur, though a sense of rest and security was over them all, and the armistice which had been arranged for the burial of the dead had still an hour to run.

The first horseman drew rein as he reached the top of the rise; and now he was joined by a second, whom the men at once recognised as one of their own pickets. The other was as obviously a Boer—an elderly man with a beard that reached his waist, and clothes in the last stage of dirt and disorder. In this last respect the Border Guides were not in a position to be critical, most of them being themselves attired, as they put it, in 'rags held together with clay.'

The old Boer came quietly riding down towards them. He looked about him, as he came, from under shaggy grey eyebrows, and they saw that he carried his left arm in a sling, and his reins lay loosely in his right hand.

Luke Carnaby, who had been second in command of the ill-fated guides, came out of a tent and went forward to meet him. Carnaby was older than most of the others; he had in fact reached the ripe age of 31, and was looked upon in consequence as a person of vast experience. He was an immense favorite with his corps, a born leader of men and as perfect a rifle-shot and horseman as a border farmer may be, and that is saying a great deal.

He saluted gravely as the Boer rode up, and the old man dropped his rein to pull off his battered hat; after replacing which he held out his hand and shook Luke Carnaby's in a matter-of-fact way.

'You speak in my language,' he began in Dutch. 'Yes, of course, you are an Afrikaner; we are all Afrikaners here.'

He glanced at the young faces about him, and his eyes came back to Luke Carnaby.

'I should know you,' he said. 'You are kin to James Carnaby, of the Eastern Frontier; his son, is it not so?'

'Yes, his son,' said Luke.

The old fellow gravely held out his hand again.

'I am Gert van Reenen, and I knew your father well,' he said. 'We fought side by side against the Galekas, in the early days on

the Frontier. And now'—he smiled whimsically, and came to an expressive pause: presently adding, 'This world is a very strange place. Have you any tobacco?'

A dozen pouches were thrust forward; he took the nearest and, in filling a pipe as deplorable as the rest of his outfit. The old man stood about him, waiting for him to speak again; but until the pipe was filled and lit he uttered no further word, though all the time his eyes did not cease to wander from face to face, from tent to tent, from the rocky slopes of the kopje to the mound at its foot. At last he said:

'I see that my son is not here—unless he lies yonder.'

He nodded towards the grave, and smoked calmly, awaiting his answer.

'He cannot be there,' Luke hastened to say. 'It is some comrades of ours only who are buried there. Will you off-saddle and drink a cup of coffee?'

But Gert van Reenen shook his head and gathered up his reins.

'I must find my son,' he said. 'Since the fight this morning we missed him. He is young—scarcely turned 16; and his mother was loth to let him come.' He was moving away, when a thought seemed to strike him and he turned a wistful face on Luke Carnaby. 'My boy is your first cousin,' he said. 'I thought at first I would not tell you. I married your father's sister, Luke.'

Luke stared, remembering the young aunt who had married a Dutch farmer, and gone away with him to live in the Orange Free State, nearly 20 years before; soon after which event Luke's father died, and intercourse between the two families by degrees grew slighter, and at last ceased altogether. Luke had almost forgotten that he had an aunt or cousins, and he looked at his new-found uncle in something like dismay.

'Good-day,' said the old man, once more preparing to depart.

Luke pulled himself together.

'But you are not going like that,' he cried, his hand on the bridle. 'Tell me more about my cousin, how he looks, and how you missed him. And get off and rest yourself; you are hurt, mynheer.'

Old Gert glanced down at his bandaged arm, and smiled.

'Hurt? Yes,' he said. 'To-morrow, they say, my arm must come off; but I will find my son first. Yonder is your comrade who hit me; I saw his face as he rode on. It was a good shot.' He looked across at Dickie, and nodded and smiled encouragingly: 'A very good shot,' he repeated.

'What is your son like?' Luke asked again. 'Let me help you down.'

'Do you remember your aunt?' the old man asked.

'I was a child when she went away, but I think I do,' said Luke a little doubtfully.

'Then you will know Christian when you see him. No, I will not get down. Good-day to you all.'

He shook Luke's hand again, and rode slowly away in the direction in which he had come, while they stood silently watching him out of sight.

The stars still shone in the sky the next morning, and Luke was rolled comfortably in his blanket, when a despatch-rider came into camp with a letter from a very great personage indeed. Drowsy Luke tore it open in a great hurry, to find that it authorised one Luke Carnaby, a lieutenant in the Border Guides, to organise a corps of not more than 100 men: himself to be in command thereof.

Luke sprang to his feet with a beating heart; and outside the tent 70 men awaited him.

And that was how the Border Guides became known far and near in the Stormberg country as Carnaby's Scouts.

II.

In the days that followed, Captain Carnaby had small leisure to think of his own affairs. His little band of men crept slowly and steadily northward, feeling the way for the mighty army that followed them, living a life of toil and privation and danger, for which, such is the nature of man, the hot excitement of their days more than atoned.

One night the Fortune of War, against which no commissariat arrangements can be expected adequately to provide, decreed that Carnaby's Scouts should find themselves, tentless and foodless, spending a miserable night in a kloof amongst the hills of the South-Eastern Free State. They had ridden through a burning day, and in the late afternoon there had arisen such a storm as only the Free State is capable of. A lightning flash had killed two horses, the drenching rain had soaked every man of them to his shivering skin, and converted the veldt into a kind of shallow lake and the track into a rushing rivulet. A fire could not have been allowed under any circumstances, even had other fuel been at hand than soaked brushwood and mimosa-scrub. And, to crown all their miseries, there was not a pipeful of tobacco between them. Carnaby's Scouts repaired up one side of the kloof to the highest and driest spot available, and sat about hugging their knees for comfort, and envying the horses cropping their fill of the coarse veldt grass.

They had, however, been in worse straits than this, and they were too tired to be kept awake by a little discomfort. So they crawled under rocks and slept like the dead; and when, in the grey dawn, the noise of rifle shots awakened them, the general feeling was that to rouse one at such an hour from the sider-down of mud and pebbles and mimosa twigs showed a certain want of consideration on the part of the enemy.

A scout came galloping into camp. As he topped the rise and his figure showed out for a moment against the saffron sky, his horse came to a sudden stop. Then horse and rider fell in a heap, from which presently the latter emerged and came running, glancing back nervously over his shoulder at every few yards.

Other guards rolled in, and now the crack of the rifles was nearer and the bullets were whistling overhead. The grassy slope