

THE STORY OF AN AFRICAN FARM



BY OLIVE SCHREINER

A TALE OF LIFE IN THE BOER REPUBLIC.

(Continued From Last Week.)

And the hunter took them both in his arms, for he said: "They are surely of the beautiful family of Truth."

shall have gathered by the hands of men and shall have been woven into a cord, and the cord into a net, that in that net Truth may be captured. Nothing but Truth can hold Truth."

Summer crept away into the woods, and it was evening about him.

At every word the stranger spoke the fellow's eyes flashed back on him, and yes, and yes! The stranger smiled. It was almost worth the trouble of exerting oneself, even on a lazy afternoon, to win these passionate flashes, more thirsty and glowing than the love glances of a woman.

"He wandered on and on," said the stranger, "and the shade grew deeper. He was on the borders now of the land where it is always night. They stepped into it, and there was no light there. With his hands he groped, but each branch as he touched it broke off, and the earth was covered with cinders. At every step his foot sank in, and a fine cloud of impalpable ashes flew up into his face, and it was dark. So he sat down upon a stone and buried his face in his hands to wait in that Land of Negation and Denial till the light came."

"And it was night in his heart also. "Then from the marshes to his right and left cold mists arose and closed about him. A fine, imperceptible rain fell in the dark, and great drops gathered on his hair and clothes. His heart beat slowly, and a numbness crept through all his limbs. Then, looking up, two merry whisp lights came dancing. He lifted his head to look at them. Nearer, nearer they came, so warm, so bright, they danced like stars of fire. They stood before him at last. From the center of the radiating flame in one looked out a woman's face, laughing, dimpled, with streaming yellow hair. In the center of the other were merry, laughing ripples, like the bubbles on a glass of wine. They danced before him."

"Who are you," asked the hunter, "who alone come to me in my solitude and darkness?" "We are the twins Sensuality!" they cried. "Our father's name is Human Nature, and our mother's name is Excess. We are as old as the hills and rivers, as old as the first man, but we never die, they laughed."

"I will pour my hot life into you," said the second. "Your brain is numb and your limbs are dead now, but they shall live with a fierce free life. Oh, let me pour it in!" "Oh, follow us," they cried, and live with us. Nobler hearts than yours have sat here in this darkness to wait, and they have come to us and we to them, and they have never left us, never. All else is a delusion, but we are real, we are real. Truth is a shadow, the valleys of superstition are a farce, the earth is of ashes, the trees all rotten, but we—feel us—we live! You cannot doubt us. Feel us. How warm we are! Oh, come to us! Come to us!"

"Nearer and nearer round his head they hovered, and the cold drops melted on his forehead. The bright light shot into his eyes, dazzling him, and the frozen blood began to run. And he said: "Yes, why should I die here in this awful darkness? They are warm; they melt my frozen blood! And he stretched out his hands to take them."

"Then in a moment there arose before him the image of the thing he had loved, and his hand dropped to his side. "Oh, come to us," they cried. "But he buried his face. "You dazzle my eyes," he cried, "you make my heart warm, but you cannot give me what I desire. I will wait here—till I die. Go!"

"He covered his face with his hands and could not listen, and when he looked up again they were two twinkling stars, that vanished in the distance. "And the long, long night rolled on. "All who leave the valley of superstition pass through that dark land, but some go through it in a few days, some linger there for months, some for years, and some die there."

BEST FOR THE BOWELS

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"This great work ended!" "At last he came out upon the top, and he looked about him. Far below rolled the white mist over the valleys of Superstition, and above him towered the mountains. They had seemed low before. They were of an immense, unbreakable height now, from crown to foundation surrounded by walls of rock that rose tier above tier in mighty circles. Upon them played the eternal sunshine. He uttered a wild cry. He bowed himself on to the earth, and when he rose his face was white. In absolute silence he walked on. He was very silent now. In those high regions the rarefied air is hard to breathe by those born in the valleys. Every breath he drew hurt him, and the blood oozed out from the tips of his fingers. Before the next wall of rock he began to work. The height of this seemed infinite, and he said nothing. The sound of his tool rang night and day upon the iron rocks into which he cut steps. Years passed over him, yet he worked on, but the wall towered up always above him to heaven. Sometimes he prayed that a little moss or lichen might spring up on those bare walls to be a companion to him, but it never came."

The stranger watched the boy's face. "And the years rolled on. He counted them by the steps he had cut—a few for a year, only a few. He sang no more. He said no more. I will do this or that," he only worked. And at night when the twilight settled down there looked out at him from the holes and crevices in the rocks many strange wild faces."

"Stop your work, you lonely man, and speak to us," they cried. "My salvation is in work. If I should stop but for one moment, you would creep down upon me," he replied. And they put out their long necks farther."

"Look down into the crevice at your feet," they said. "See what lies there—white bones! As brave and strong a man as you climbed to these rocks. And he looked up. He saw there was no use in striving. He would never hold Truth, never see her, never find her. So he lay down here, for he was very tired. He went to sleep forever. He put himself to sleep. Sleep is very tranquil. You are not lonely when you are asleep, neither do your hands ache nor your heart. And the hunter laughed between his teeth."

"Have I torn from my heart all that was dearest? Have I wandered alone in the land of night? Have I resisted temptation? Have I dwelt where the voice of my kind is never heard and labored alone to lie down and be food for you, ye harpies?" "He laughed fiercely, and the echoes of despair slunk away, for the laugh of a brave, strong heart is a death blow to them."

"Nevertheless they crept out again and looked at him. "Do you know that your hair is white, they said, that your hands begin to tremble like a child's? Do you see that the point of your shuttle is gone? It is cracked already. If you should ever climb this stair," they said, "it will be your last. You will never climb another."

"And he answered, 'I know it!' and worked on. "The old, thin hands cut the stones ill and jaggedly, for the fingers were stiff and bent. The beauty and the strength of the man were gone."

"At last an old, wisened, shrunken face looked out above the rocks. It saw the eternal mountain rise with walls to the white clouds, but its work was done. "The old hunter folded his tired hands and lay down by the precipice where he had worked away his life. It was the sleeping time at last. Below him over the valleys rolled the thick white mist. Once it broke, and through the gap the dying eyes looked down on the trees and fields of his childhood. From afar seemed borne to him the cry of his own wild birds, and he heard the noise of the people singing as they danced, and he thought he heard among them the voices of his old comrades, and he saw afar off the sunlight shine on his early home, and great tears gathered in the hunter's eyes."

"Ah, they who die there do not die alone," he cried. "Then the mists rolled together again, and he turned his eyes away. "I have sought," he said, "for long years I have labored, but I have not found her. I have not rested, I have not repined, and I have not seen her. Now my strength is gone. Where I lie down worn out other men will stand young and fresh. By the steps that I have cut they will climb; by the stairs that I have built they will mount. They will never know the name of the man who made them. At the clumsy work they will laugh; when the stones roll, they will curse me. But they will mount, and on my work; they will climb, and by my stairs. They will find her, and she will be mine."

will find her, and she will be mine. And so man lives to himself, and so man dies to himself."

"The tears rolled from beneath the shriveled, quivering eyes. Truth had appeared above him in the clouds now, he could not have seen her—the mist of death was in his eyes. "My soul bears their glad step coming in," he said, "and they shall mount, they shall mount!" He raised his shriveled hand to his eyes."

"Then slowly, from the white sky above, through the still air, came something falling, falling, falling. Softly it suttered down and dropped on to the breast of the dying man. He felt it with his hands. It was a feather. He died holding it."

The boy had shaded his eyes with his hand. On the wood of the carving great drops fell. The stranger must have laughed at him or remained silent. He did so. "How did you know it?" the boy whispered at last. "It is not written there, not on that wood. How did you know it?"

"Certainly," said his stranger, "the whole of the story is not written here, but it is suggested. And the attribute of all true art, the highest and the lowest, is this—that it says more than it says and takes you away from itself. It is a little door that opens into an infinite hall where you may find what you please. Men, thinking to detract, say, 'People read more in this or that work of genius than was ever written in it,' not perceiving that they pay the highest compliment. If we pick up the finger and nail of a real man, we can decipher a whole story—could almost reconstruct the creature again from head to foot. But half the body of a Mumbo-jumbo idol leaves us utterly in the dark as to what the rest was like. We see what we see, but nothing more. There is nothing so universally intelligible as truth. It has a thousand meanings and suggests a thousand more."

He turned over the wooden thing. "Though a man should carve it into matter with the least possible manipulation, it will yet find interpreters. It is the soul that looks out with burning eyes through the most gross fleshly filament. Whosoever should portray truly the life and death of a little flower—its birth, sucking in of nourishment, reproduction of its kind, withering and vanishing—would have shaped a symbol of all existence. All true facts of nature or the mind are related. Your little carving represents some mental facts as they really are, therefore 50 different true stories might be read from it. What your work wants is not truth, but beauty of external form, the other half of art."

He leaned almost gently toward the boy. "Skill may come in time, but you will have to work hard. The love of beauty and the desire for it must be born in a man. The skill to reproduce it he must make. He must work hard."

"All my life I have longed to see you," the boy said. "The stranger broke off the end of his cigar and lighted it. The boy lifted the heavy wood from the stranger's knee and drew yet nearer him. In the doglike manner of his drawing near there was something superbly ridiculous, unless one chanced to view it in another light. Presently the stranger said, whistling, "Do something for me?"

"The boy started up. "No; stay where you are. I don't want you to go anywhere. I want you to talk to me. Tell me what you have been doing all your life."

"The boy slunk down again. Would that the man had asked him to root up bushes with his hands for his horse to feed on, or to run to the far end of the plain for the fossils that lay there, or to gather the flowers that grew on the hills at the edge of the plain. He had had his run and been back quick enough now!

"I have done nothing," he said. "Then to know what other folks have been doing whose word I can believe. It is interesting. What was the first thing you ever wanted very much?"

The boy waited to remember, then began hesitatingly, but soon the words flowed. In the smallest past we find an inexhaustible mine when once we begin to dig at it.

A confused, disordered story, the little made large and the large small, and nothing showing its inward meaning. It is not till the past has receded many steps that before the clearest eyes it falls into co-ordinate pictures. It is not till the I we tell of has ceased to exist that it takes its place among other objective realities and finds its true niche in the picture. The present and the near past are a confusion, whose meaning flashes on us as it slinks away into the distance.

The stranger lighted one cigar from the end of another and puffed and listened with half closed eyes. "I will remember more to tell you if you like," said the fellow. "He spoke with that extreme gravity common to all very young things who

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feel deeply. It is not till 20 that we learn to be in deadly earnest and to laugh. The stranger nodded, while the fellow sought for something more to relate. He would tell all to this man of his—all that he knew, all that he had felt, his most inmost secret thought. Suddenly the stranger turned upon him. "Boy," he said, "you are happy to be here."

Waldo looked at him. Was his delightful one ridiculing him? He was with his brown earth and these low hills, while the rare wonderful world lay all beyond. Fortunate to be here! The stranger read his glance. (Continued next week.)

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