The Story of an African Farm

Continued from First Page

Bonaparte, standing by him and pointing with the end of his whip to the medley of wheels and hinges.

The boy muttered something inaudible and half spread his hand over the thing.

"But this seems to be a very ingenious little machine," said Bonaparte, seating himself on the ant heap and bending down over it with deep interest. "What is it for, my lad?"

"Shearing sheep."

"It is a very nice little machine," said Bonaparte. "How does it work, now? I have never seen anything so ingenious!"

There was never a parent who heard deception in the voice that praised his child, his firstborn. Here was one who liked the thing that had been created in him. He forgot everything. He showed how the shears would work with a little guidance, how the sheep would be held and the wool fall into the trough. A flush burst over his face as he spoke.

"I tell you what, my lad," said Bonaparte emphatically when the explanation was finished, "we must get you a patent. Your fortune is made. In three years' time there'll not be a farm in this colony where it isn't working. You're a genius: that's what you are!" said Bonaparte, rising.

"If it were made larger," said the boy, raising his eyes, "it would work more smoothly. Do you think there would be any one in this colony would be able to make it?"

"I'm sure they could," said Bonaparte, "and, if not, why I'll do my best for you. I'll send it to England. It must be done somehow. How long have you worked at it?"

"Nine months," said the boy.

"Oh, it is such a nice little machine," said Bonaparte, "one can't help feeling an interest in it. There is only one little improvement, one very little improvement, I should like to make."

Bonaparte put his foot on the machine and crushed it in the sand. The boy looked up into his face.

"Looks better now," said Bonaparte, "doesn't it? If we can't have it made in England, we'll send it to America. Goodby; ta, ta" he added. "You're a great genius, a born genius, my dear boy. There's no doubt about it."

He mounted the gray mare and rode off. The dog watched his retreat with cynical satisfaction, but his master lay on the ground with his head on his arms in the sand, and the little wheels and chips of wood lay on the ground around him. The dog jumped on his back and snapped at the black curls till, finding that no notice was taken, he walked off to play with a black beetle. The beetle was hard at work trying to roll home a great ball of dung it had been collecting all the morning, but Doss broke the ball and eat the beetle's hind legs and then bit off its head. And it was all play, and no one could tell what it had lived and worked for—a striving and a striving and an ending in nothing.

CHAPTER XI.

HE SNAPS.

"I have found something in the loft," said Em to Waldo, who was listlessly piling cakes of fuel on the kraal wall a week after. "It is a box of books that belonged to my father. We thought that Tant' Sannie had burned them."

The boy put down the cake he was raising and looked at her.

"I don't think they are very nice, not stories," she added, "but you can go and take any you like."

So saying, she took up the plate in which she had brought his breakfast and walked off to the house.

After that the boy worked quickly. The pile of fuel Bonaparte had ordered him to pack was on the wall in half an hour. He then went to throw salt on the skins laid out to dry. Finding the pot empty, he went to the loft to refill it.

Bonaparte Blenkins, whose door opened at the foot of the ladder, saw the boy go up and stood in the doorway waiting for his return. He wanted his boots blacked. Doss, finding he could not follow his master up the round bars, sat patiently at the foot of the ladder. Presently he looked up longingly, but no one appeared. Then Bonaparte looked up also and began to call, but there was no answer. What could the boy be doing? The loft was an unknown land to Bonaparte. He had often wondered what was up there. He liked to know what was in all locked up places and out of the way corners, but he was afraid to climb the ladder. So Bonaparte looked up and, in the name of all that was tantalizing, questioned what the boy did up there. The loft was used only as a lumber room. What could the fellow find up there to keep him so long?

Could the Boer woman have beheld Waldo at that instant any lingering doubt which might have remained in her mind as to the boy's insanity would instantly have vanished, for, having filled the salt pot, he proceeded to look for the box of books among the rubbish that filled the loft. Under a pile of sacks he found it—a rough packing case, nailed up, but with one loose plank. He lifted that and saw the even backs of a row of books. He knelt down before the box and ran his hand along its rough edges, as if to assure himself of its existence. He stuck his hand in among the books and pulled out two. He felt them, thrust his fingers in among the leaves and crumpled them a little, as a lover feels the hair of his mistress. The fellow gloated over his treasure. He had had a dozen books in the course of his life. Now here was a mine of them opened at his feet. After awhile he began to read the titles and now and again opened a book and read a sentence; but he was too excited to catch the meanings distinctly. At last he came to a dull brown volume. He read the name, opened it in the center and where he opened began to read. 'Twas a chapter on property that he fell upon. "Communism, Fourierism, St. Simonism," in a work on political economy. He read down one page and turned over to the next; he read down that without changing his posture by an inch; he read the next and the next, kneeling up all the while with the book in his hand and his lips parted.

All he read he did not fully understand. The thoughts were new to him. But this was the fellow's startled joy in the book—the thoughts were his; they belonged to him. He had never thought them before, but they were his.

He laughed silently and internally, with the still intensity of triumphant joy.

So, then, all thinking creatures did not send up the one cry: "As thou, dear Lord, hast created things in the beginning, so are they now, so ought they to be, so will they be, world without end, and it doesn't concern us what they are. Amen." There were men to whom not only "kopjes" and stones were calling out imperatively, "What are we, and how came we here? Understand us and know us," but to whom even the old, old relations between man and man and the customs of the ages called and could not be made still and forgotten.

The boy's heavy body quivered with excitement. So he was not alone, not alone. He could not quite have told any one why he was so glad and this warmth had come to him. His cheeks were burning. No wonder that Bonaparte called in vain and Doss put his paws on the ladder and whined till three-quarters of an hour had passed. At last the boy put the book in his breast and buttoned it tightly to him. He took up the salt pot and went to the top of the ladder. Bonaparte, with his hands folded under his coattails, looked up when he appeared and accosted him.

"You've been rather a long time up there, my lad," he said as the boy descended with a tremulous haste, most unlike his ordinary slow movements. "You didn't hear me calling, I suppose?"

Bonaparte whisked the tails of his coat up and down as he looked at him. He (Bonaparte Blenkins) had eyes which were very farseeing. He looked at the pot. It was rather a small pot to have taken three-quarters of an hour in the filling. He looked at the face. It was flushed. And yet Tant' Sannie kept no wine. He had not been drinking. His eyes were wide open and bright. He had not been sleeping. There was no girl up there. He had not been making love. Bonaparte looked at him sagaciously. What would account for the marvelous change in the boy coming down the ladder from the boy going up the ladder? One thing there was. Did not Tant' Sannie keep in the loft "bultongs" and nice smoked sausages? There must be something nice to eat up there. Aha! That was it!

Bonaparte was so interested in carrying out this chain of inductive reasoning that he quite forgot to have his boots blacked.

He watched the boy shuffle off with the salt pot under his arm. Then he stood in his doorway and raised his eyes to the quiet blue sky and audibly propounded this riddle to himself:

"What is the connection between the naked back of a certain boy with a greatcoat on and a salt pot under his arm and the tip of a horsewhip? Answer: No connection at present, but there will be soon."

Bonaparte was so pleased with this sally of his wit that he chuckled a little and went to lie down on his bed.

There was bread baking that afternoon, and there was a fire lighted in the brick oven behind the house, and Tant' Sannie had left the great wooden elbowed chair in which she passed her life and waddled out to look at it. Not far off was Waldo, who, having thrown a pail of food into the pigsty, now leaned over the sod wall looking at the pigs. Half of the sty was dry, but the lower half was a pool of mud, on the edge of which the mother sow lay with closed eyes, her ten little ones sucking. The father pig, knee deep in the mud, stood running his snout into a rotten pumpkin and wriggling his curled tail.

Waldo wondered dreamily as he stared why they were pleasant to look at. Taken singly, they were not beautiful; taken together, they were. Was it not because there was a certain harmony about them? The old sow was suited to the little pigs and the little pigs to their mother, the old boar to the rotten pumpkin and all to the mud. They suggested the thought of nothing that should be added, of nothing that should be taken away. And, he wondered on vaguely, was not that the secret of all beauty, that you who look on— So he stood dreaming and leaned farther and farther over the sod wall and looked at the pigs.

All this time Bonaparte Blenkins was sloping down from the house in an aimless sort of way, but he kept one eye fixed on the pigsty, and each gyration brought him nearer to it. Waldo stood like a thing asleep when Bonaparte came close up to him.

In old days, when a small boy playing in an Irish street gutter, he (Bonaparte) had been familiarly known among his comrades under the title of Tripping Ben, this from the rare ease and dexterity with which, by merely projecting his foot, he could precipitate any unfortunate companion on to the crown of his head. Years had elapsed, and Tripping Ben had become Bonaparte, but the old gift was in him still. He came close to the pigsty. All the defunct memories of his boyhood returned on him in a flood as with an adroit movement he inserted his leg between Waldo and the wall and sent him over the pigsty.

The little pigs were startled at the strange intruder and ran behind their mother, who sniffed at him. Tant' Sannie smote her hands together and laughed, but Bonaparte was far from joining her. Lost in reverie, he gazed at the distant horizon.

The sudden reversal of head and feet had thrown out the volume that Waldo carried in his breast. Bonaparte picked it up and began to inspect it as the boy climbed slowly over the wall. He would have walked off sullenly, but he wanted his book and waited till it should be given him.

"Ha!" said Bonaparte, raising his eyes from the leaves of the book which he was examining. "I hope your coat has not been injured. It is of an elegant cut. An heirloom, I presume, from your paternal grandfather? It looks nice now."

"O Lord, O Lord," cried Tant' Sannie, laughing and holding her sides, "how the child looks—as though he thought the mud would never wash off! O Lord, I shall die! You, Bonaparte, are the funniest man I ever saw."

Bonaparte Blenkins was now carefully inspecting the volume he had picked up. Among the subjects on which the darkness of his understanding had been enlightened during his youth political economy had not been one. He was not, therefore, very clear as to what the nature of the book might be, and, as the name of the writer, J. S. Mill, might, for anything he knew to the contrary, have belonged to a venerable member of the British and Foreign Bible society, it by no means threw light upon the question. He was not in any way sure that political economy had nothing to do with the cheapest way of procuring clothing for the army and navy, which would be certainly both a political and an economical subject.

But Bonaparte soon came to a conclusion as to the nature of the book and its contents by the application of a simple rule now largely acted upon, but which, becoming universal, would save much thought and valuable time. It is of marvelous simplicity, of infinite utility, of universal applicability. It may easily be committed to memory and runs thus:

Whenever you come into contact with any book, person or opinion of which you absolutely comprehend nothing, declare that book, person or opinion to be immoral. Bespatter it, vituperate against it, strongly insist that any man or woman harboring it is a fool or a knave, or both. Carefully abstain from studying it. Do all that in you lies to annihilate that book, person or opinion.

Acting on this rule, so wide in its comprehensiveness, so beautifully simple in its working, Bonaparte approached Tant' Sannie with the book in his hand. Waldo came a step nearer, eying it like a dog whose young has fallen into evil hands.

"This book," said Bonaparte, "is not a fit and proper study for a young and immature mind."

Tant' Sannie did not understand a word and said:

"What?"

"This book," said Bonaparte, bringing down his finger with energy on the cover, "this book is sleg, sleg, davel, davel!"

Tant' Sannie perceived from the gravity of his countenance that it was no laughing matter. From the words sleg and davel she understood that the book was evil and had some connection with the prince who pulls the wires of evil over the whole earth.

"Where did you get this book?" she asked, turning her twinkling little eyes on Waldo. "I wish that my legs may be as thin as an Englishman's if it isn't one of your father's. He had more sins than all the Kaffirs in Kaffirland, for all that he pretended to be so good all those years and to live without a wife because he was thinking of the one that was dead! As though ten dead wives could make up for one fat one with arms and legs!" cried Tant' Sannie, snorting.

"It was not my father's book," said the boy savagely. "I got it from your loft."

"My loft! My book! How dare you?" cried Tant' Sannie.

"It was Em's father's. She gave it me," he muttered, more sullenly.

"Give it here. What is the name of it? What is it about?" she asked, putting her finger upon the title.

Bonaparte understood.

"Political economy," he said slowly.

"Dear Lord!" said Tant' Sannie. "Cannot one hear from the very sound what an ungodly book it is? One can hardly say the name. Haven't we got curses enough on this farm?" cried Tant' Sannie eloquently—"my best imported Merino ram dying of nobody knows what, and the Shorthorn cow casting her two calves, and the sheep eaten up with the scab and the drought? And is this a time to bring ungodly things about the place, to call down the vengeance of Almighty God to punish us more? Didn't the miuister tell me when I was confirmed not to read any book except my Bible and hymnbook; that the devil was in all the rest? And I never have read any other book," said Tant' Sannie, with vigorous energy, "and I never will!"

Waldo saw that the fate of his book was sealed and turned sullenly on his heel.

"So you will not stay to hear what I say!" cried Tant' Sannie. "There, take your polity-gollity-gominy, your devil's book!" she cried, flinging the book at his head with much energy.

It merely touched his forehead on one side and fell to the ground.

"Go on!" she cried. "I know you are going to talk to yourself. People who talk to themselves always talk to the devil. Go and tell him all about it. Go, go! Run!" cried Tant' Sannie.

But the boy neither quickened nor slackened his pace and passed sullenly round the back of the wagon house.

Books have been thrown at other heads before and since that summer afternoon by hands more white and delicate than those of the Boer woman; but whether the result of the process has been in any case wholly satisfactory may be questioned. We love that with a peculiar tenderness, we treasure it with a peculiar care, it has for us quite a fictitious value, for which we have suffered. If we may not carry it anywhere else, we will carry it in our hearts and always to the end.

Bonaparte Blenkins went to pick up the volume, now loosened from its cover, while Tant' Sannie pushed the stumps of wood farther into the oven. Bonaparte came close to her, tapped the book knowingly, nodded and looked at the fire. Tant' Sannie comprehended and, taking the volume from his hand, threw it into the back of the oven. It lay upon the heap of coals, smoked, flared and blazed, and the political economy was no more—gone out of existence, like many another poor heretic of flesh and blood.

Bonaparte grinned and to watch the process brought his face so near the oven door that the white hair on his eyebrows got singed. He then inquired if there were any more in the loft.

Learning that there were, he made signs indicative of taking up armfuls and flinging them into the fire. But Tant' Sannie was dubious. The deceased Englishman had left all his personal effects specially to his child. It was all very well for Bonaparte to talk of burning the books. He had had his hair spiritually pulled, and she had no wish to repeat his experience.

She shook her head. Bonaparte was displeased. But then a happy thought occurred to him. He suggested that the key of the loft should henceforth be put into his own safe care and keeping, no one gaining possession of it without his permission. To this Tant' Sannie readily assented, and the two walked lovingly to the house to look for it.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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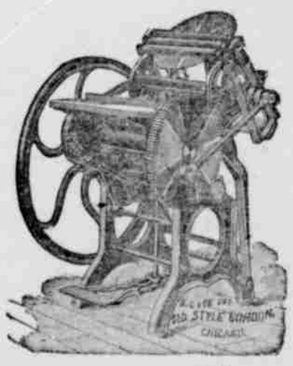

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