The Story of an African Farm

Continued from First Page

generally is. I thought it was that of some one else."

"Who could it be but me?" asked Gregory, seating himself on a stone at her feet.

"Do you suppose you are the only man who would find anything to attract him to this 'kopje?'"

"Oh, no," said Gregory.

He was not going to argue that point with her nor any other, but no old Boer was likely to take the trouble of climbing the "kopje," and who else was there?

She continued the study of her book.

"Miss Lyndall," he said at last, "I don't know why it is you never talk to me."

"We had a long conversation yesterday," she said without looking up.

"Yes; but you ask me questions about sheep and oxen. I don't call that talking. You used to talk to Waldo, now," he said in an aggrieved tone of voice. "I've heard you when I came in, and then you've just left off. You treated me like that from the first day, and you couldn't tell from just looking at me that I couldn't talk about the things you like. I'm sure I know as much about such things as Waldo does," said Gregory in exceeding bitterness of spirit.

"I do not know which things you refer to. If you will enlighten me, I am quite prepared to speak of them," she said, reading as she spoke.

"Oh, you never used to ask Waldo like that," said Gregory in a more sorely aggrieved tone than ever. "You used just to begin."

"Well, let me see," she said, closing her book and folding her hands on it. "There at the foot of the 'kopje' goes a Kaffir. He has nothing on but a blanket. He is a splendid fellow—six feet high, with a magnificent pair of legs. In his leather bag he is going to fetch his rations and I suppose to kick his wife with his beautiful legs when he gets home. He has a right to. He bought her for two oxen. There is a lean dog going after him, to which, I suppose, he never gives more than a bone from which he has sucked the marrow. But his dog loves him, as his wife does. There is something of the master about him in spite of his blackness and wool. See how he brandishes his stick and holds up his head!"

"Oh, but aren't you making fun?" said Gregory, looking doubtfully from her to the Kaffir herd, who rounded the "kopje."

"No; I am very serious. He is the most interesting and intelligent thing I can see just now, except, perhaps, Doss. He is profoundly suggestive. Will his race melt away in the heat of a collision with a higher? Are the men of the future to see his bones only in museums, a vestige of one link that spanned between the dog and the white man? He wakes thoughts that run far out into the future and back into the past."

Gregory was not quite sure how to take these remarks. Being about a Kaffir, they appeared to be of the nature of a joke; but, being seriously spoken, they appeared earnest, so he half laughed and half not, to be on the safe side.

"I've often thought so myself. It's funny we should both think the same. I knew we should if once we talked. But there are other things—love, new," he added. "I wonder if we would think alike about that. I wrote an essay on love once. The master said it was the best I ever wrote, and I can remember the first sentence still—'Love is something that you feel in your heart.'"

"That was a trenchant remark. Can't you remember any more?"

"No," said Gregory regretfully. "I've forgotten the rest. But tell me what do you think about love?"

A look, half of abstraction, half amusement, played on her lips.

"I don't know much about love," she said, "and I do not like to talk of things I do not understand, but I have heard two opinions. Some say the devil carried the seed from hell and planted it on the earth to plague men and make them sin, and some say that when all the plants in the garden of Eden were pulled up by the roots one bush that the angels had planted was left growing, and it spread its seed over the whole earth, and its name is love. I do not know which is right, perhaps both. There are different species that go under the same name. There is a love that begins in the head and goes down to the heart and grows slowly, but it lasts till death and asks less than it gives. There is another love that blots out wisdom, that is sweet with the sweetness of life and bitter with the bitterness of death, lasting for an hour, but it is worth having lived a whole life for that hour. I cannot tell. Perhaps the old monks were right when they tried to root love out; perhaps the poets are right when they try to water it. It is a blood red flower, with the color of sin, but there is always the scent of a god about it."

Gregory would have made a remark, but she said, without noticing:

"There are as many kinds of loves as there are flowers—everlasting that never wither, speedwells that wait for the wind to fan them out of life, blood red mountain lilies that pour their voluptuous sweetness out for one day and lie in the dust at night. There is no flower has the charm of all—the speedwell's purity, the everlasting's strength, the mountain lily's warmth. But who knows whether there is no love that holds all—friendship, passion, worship?

"Such a love," she said in her sweetest voice, "will fall on the surface of strong, cold, selfish life as the sunlight falls on a torpid winter world; there, where the trees are bare, and the ground frozen till it rings to the step like iron, and the water is solid, and the air is sharp as a two edged knife that cuts the unwary. But, when its sun shines on it, through its whole dead crust a throbbing yearning wakes. The trees feel him, and every knot and bud swells, aching to open to him. The brown seeds that have slept deep under the ground feel him, and he gives them strength till they break through the frozen earth and lift two tiny, trembling green hands in love to him. And he touches the water till down to its depths it feels him and melts, and it flows, and the things—strange, sweet things—that were locked up in it, it sings as it runs, for love of him. Each plant tries to bear at least one fragrant little flower for him, and the world that was dead lives, and the heart that was dead and self centered throbs with an upward, outward yearning, and it has become that which it seemed impossible ever to become. There, does that satisfy you?" she asked, looking down at Gregory. "Is that how you like me to talk?"

"Oh, yes!" said Gregory. "That is what I have already thought. We have the same thoughts about everything. How strange!"

"Very," said Lyndall, working with her little toe at a stone in the ground before her.

Gregory felt he must sustain the conversation. The only thing he could think of was to recite a piece of poetry. He knew he had learned many about love, but the only things that would come into his mind were the "Battle of Hohenlinden" and "Not a drum was heard," neither of which seemed to bear directly on the subject on hand.

But unexpected relief came to him from Doss, who, too deeply lost in contemplation of his crevice, was surprised by the sudden descent of the stone Lyndall's foot had loosened, which, rolling against his little front paw, carried away a piece of white skin. Doss stood on three legs, holding up the paw with an expression of extreme self commiseration. He then proceeded to hop slowly upward in search of sympathy.

"You have hurt that dog," said Gregory.

"Have I?" she replied indifferently and reopened the book, as though to resume her study of the play.

"He's a nasty, snappish little cur!" said Gregory, calculating from her manner that the remark would be indorsed. "He snapped at my horse's tail yesterday and nearly made it throw me. I wonder his master didn't take him, instead of leaving him here to be a nuisance to all of us!"

Lyndall seemed absorbed in her play, but he ventured another remark.

"Do you think now, Miss Lyndall, that he'll ever have anything in the world—that German, I mean—money enough to support a wife on, and all that sort of thing? I don't. He's what I call a soft."

She was spreading her skirt out softly with her left hand for the dog to lie down on it.

"I think I should be rather astonished if he ever became a respectable member of society," she said. "I don't expect to see him the possessor of bank shares, the chairman of a divisional council and the father of a large family, wearing a black hat and going to church twice on a Sunday. He would rather astonish me if he came to such an end."

"Yes; I don't expect anything of him either," said Gregory zealously.

"Well, I don't know," said Lyndall. "There are some small things I rather look to him for. If he were to invent wings or carve a statue that one might look at for half an hour without wanting to look at something else, I should not be surprised. He may do some little thing of that kind perhaps when he has done fermenting and the sediment has all gone to the bottom."

Gregory felt that what she said was not wholly intended as blame.

"Well, I don't know," he said sulkily. "To me he looks like a fool—to walk about always in that dead and alive sort of way, muttering to himself like an old Kaffir witch doctor! He works hard enough, but it's always as though he didn't know what he was doing. You don't know how he looks to a person who sees him for the first time."

Lyndall was softly touching the little sore foot as she read, and Doss, to show he liked it, licked her hand.

"But, Miss Lyndall," persisted Gregory, "what do you really think of him?"

"I think," said Lyndall, "that he is like a thorn tree, which grows up very quietly, without any one's caring for it, and one day suddenly breaks out into yellow blossoms."

"And what do you think I am like?" asked Gregory hopefully.

Lyndall looked up from her book.

"Like a little tin duck floating on a dish of water, that comes after a piece of bread stuck on a needle, and the more the needle pricks it the more it comes on."

"Oh, you are making fun of me now, you really are!" said Gregory, feeling wretched. "You are making fun, aren't you, now?"

"Partly. It is always diverting to make comparisons."

"Yes; but you don't compare me to anything nice, and you do other people. What is Em like, now?"

"The accompaniment of a song. She fills up the gaps in other people's lives and is always number two. But I think she is like many accompaniments—a great deal better than the song she is to accompany."

"She is not half so good as you are," said Gregory, with a burst of uncontrollable ardor.

"She is so much better than I that her little finger has more goodness in it than my whole body. I hope you may not live to find out the truth of that fact."

"You are like an angel," he said, the blood rushing to his head and face.

"Yes, probably. Angels are of many orders."

"You are the one being that I love!" said Gregory, quivering. "I thought I loved before, but I know now! Do not be angry with me. I know you could never like me. But if I might but always be near you to serve you I would be utterly, utterly happy. I would ask nothing in return. If you could only take everything I have and use it! I want nothing but to be of use to you."

She looked at him for a few moments.

"How do you know," she said slowly, "that you could not do something to serve me? You could serve me by giving me your name."

He started and turned his burning face to her.

"You are very cruel. You are ridiculing me," he said.

"No, I am not, Gregory. What I am saying is plain, matter of fact business. If you are willing to give me your name within three weeks' time, I am willing to marry you; if not, well. I want nothing more than your name. That is a clear proposal, is it not?"

He looked up. Was it contempt, loathing, pity, that moved in the eyes above? He could not tell, but he stooped over the little foot and kissed it.

She smiled.

"Do you really mean it?" he whispered.

"Yes. You wish to serve me and to have nothing in return. You shall have what you wish." She held out her fingers for Doss to lick. "Do you see this dog? He licks my hand because I love him, and I allow him to. Where I do not love I do not allow it. I believe you love me. I, too, could love so that to lie under the foot of the thing I loved would be more heaven than to lie in the breast of another. Come. Let us go. Carry the dog," she added. "He will not bite you if I put him in your arms. So—do not let his foot hang down."

They descended the "kopje." At the bottom he whispered:

"Would you not take my arm? The path is very rough."

She rested her fingers lightly on it.

"I may yet change my mind about marrying you before the time comes. It is very likely. Mark you!" she said, turning round on him. "I remember your words—you will give everything and expect nothing. The knowledge that you are serving me is to be your reward, and you will have that. You will serve me, and greatly. The reasons I have for marrying you I need not inform you of now. You will probably discover some of them before long."

"I only want to be of some use to you," he said.

It seemed to Gregory that there were pulses in the soles of his feet, and the ground shimmered as on a summer's day. They walked round the foot of the "kopje" and past the Kaffir huts. An old Kaffir maid knelt at the door of one grinding mealies. That she should see him walking so made his heart beat so fast that the hand on his arm felt its pulsation. It seemed that she must envy him.

Just then Em looked out again at the back window and saw them coming. She cried bitterly all the while she sorted the skins.

But that night when Lyndall had blown her candle out and half turned round to sleep the door of Em's bedroom opened.

"I want to say good night to you, Lyndall," she said, coming to the bedside and kneeling down.

"I thought you were asleep," Lyndall replied.

"Yes, I have been asleep, but I had such a vivid dream," she said, holding the other's hands, "and that awoke me. I never had so vivid a dream before.

"It seemed I was a little girl again, and I came somewhere into a large room. On a bed in the corner there was something lying dressed in white, and its little eyes were shut, and its little face was like wax. I thought it was a doll, and I ran forward to take it, but some one held up her finger and said: 'Hush! It is a little dead baby.' And I said, 'Oh, I must go and call Lyndall, that she may look at it also.'

"And they put their faces close down to my ear and whispered, 'It is Lyndall's baby.'

"And I said: 'She cannot be grown up yet. She is only a little girl! Where is she?' And I went to look for you, but I could not find you.

"And when I came to some people who were dressed in black I asked them where you were, and they looked down at their black clothes and shook their heads and said nothing, and I could not find you anywhere, and then I awoke.

"Lyndall," she said, putting her face down upon the hands she held, "it made me think about that time when we were little girls and used to play together, when I loved you better than anything else in the world. It isn't any one's fault that they love you. They can't help it. And it isn't your fault. You don't make them love you. I know it."

"Thank you, dear," Lyndall said. "It is nice to be loved, but it would be better to be good."

Then they wished good night, and Em went back to her room. Long after Lyndall lay in the dark thinking, thinking, thinking, and as she turned round wearily to sleep she muttered:

"There are some wiser in their sleeping than in their waking."

CHAPTER XXII.

LYNDALL'S STRANGER.

A fire is burning in the unused hearth of the cabin. The fuel blazes up and lights the black rafters and warms the faded red lions on the quilt and fills the little room with a glow of warmth and light made brighter by contrast, for outside the night is chill and misty.

Before the open fireplace sits a stranger, his tall, slight figure reposing in the broken armchair, his keen blue eyes studying the fire from beneath delicately pencled, drooping eyelids. One white hand plays thoughtfully with a heavy flaxen mustache, yet once he starts, and for an instant the languid lids raise themselves. There is a keen, intent look upon the face as he listens for something. Then he leans back in his chair, fills his glass from the silver flask in his bag and resumes his old posture.

Presently the door opens noiselessly. It is Lyndall, followed by Doss. Quietly as she enters he hears her and turns.

"I thought you were not coming."

"I waited till all had gone to bed. I could not come before."

She removed the shawl that enveloped her, and the stranger rose to offer her his chair, but she took her seat on a low pile of sacks before the window.

"I hardly see why I should be outlawed after this fashion," he said, reseating himself and drawing his chair a little nearer to her. "These are hardly the quarters one expects to find after traveling a hundred miles in answer to an invitation."

"I said, 'Come if you wish.'"

"And I did wish. You give me a cold reception."

"I could not take you to the house. Questions would be asked which I could not answer without prevarication."

"Your conscience is growing to have a certain virgin tenderness," he said in a low, melodious voice.

"I have no conscience. I spoke one deliberate lie this evening. I said the man who had come looked rough. We had best not have him in the house. Therefore I brought him here. It was a deliberate lie, and I hate lies. I tell them if I must, but they hurt me."

"Well, you do not tell lies to yourself, at all events. You are candid so far."

She interrupted him.

"You got my short letter?"

"Yes; that is why I come. You sent a very foolish reply. You must take it back. Who is this fellow you talk of marrying?"

"A young farmer."

"Lives here?"

"Yes; he has gone to town to get things for our wedding."

"What kind of a fellow is he?"

"A fool."

"And you would rather marry him than me?"

"Yes, because you are not one."

"That is a novel reason for refusing to marry a man," he said, leaning his elbow on the table and watching her keenly.

"It is a wise one," she said shortly. "If I marry him, I shall shake him off my hand when it suits me. If I remained with him for 12 months, he would never have dared to kiss my hand. As far as I wish he should come he comes and no further. Would you ask me what you might and what you might not do?"

Her companion raised his mustache with a caressing movement from his lip and smiled. It was not a question that stood in need of any answer.

"Why do you wish to enter on this semblance of marriage?"

"Because there is only one point on which I have a conscience. I have told you so."

"Then why not marry me?"

"Because if once you have me you would hold me fast. I shall never be free again." She drew a long, low breath.

"What have you done with the ring I gave you?" he said.

"Sometimes I wear it. Then I take it off and wish to throw it into the fire. The next day I put it on again, and sometimes I kiss it."

"So you do love me a little?"

"If you were not something more to me than any other man in the world, do you think"— She paused. "I love you when I see you, but when you are away from me I hate you."

"Then I fear I must be singularly invisible at the present moment," he said. "Possibly if you were to look less fixedly into the fire you might perceive me."

He moved his chair slightly so as to come between her and the firelight. She raised her eyes to his face.

"If you do love me," he asked her, "why will you not marry me?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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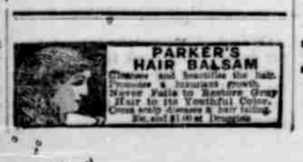

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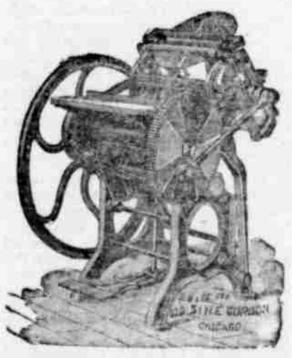

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