THE TRAITRESS.

Continued from First Page.

Dear Girl—I take you all the more for the solitude with which you seem to me to shield you call my danger, but how could I, my dear, even if I desired to, leave my post at this late day? All that you say of the Transvaal's preparations may be true. Still what can untrained farmers do against the trained troops we have? It will be one brush, and they will see their folly. Then there will be quick peace, and you and I will meet again, as in the happy days when I first met you in Cape Town. To that time! Your own,

NED VENABLE.

P. S.—My dear, your news is very interesting, but is it not dangerous—dangerous for you—to write such things? This goes by your own Kaffir messenger.

"And that Kaffir is pretty well thrashed to death!" cried the Boer, ripping the letter furiously and stamping on the scraps. "So, by my fathers, would you be, girl, if you were not a girl and my vrouw's child!"

"Father, father, I meant no wrong!" cried his daughter and clasped her hands and wrung them, sobbing.

She had come in from her chamber dressed for her enforced journey. She did not look like the traitress they denounced her as, although undoubtedly she had given information to an officer of the enemy's army. She was of the best Boer type—almost of the old Dutch, save that her cheeks were more flushed with the kiss of the sun and her blue eyes were usually, though not now, clear with the light of freedom. Her yellow hair was neatly coiled on her white neck. Even now in her grief and humiliation there was in her walk and her carriage the grace of a woman accustomed from childhood to run on the veldt, to gallop across it bareback, to take part in many of the exercises which had helped to make of her father, Oom Jan, the physically grand man who now stood glaring upon her.

"Father, father, I meant no wrong!" she cried.

"No wrong!" he repeated and pointed almost pathetically to the torn paper at his feet. "Has all your education in Cape Town not taught you what treachery means? Is it no wrong to send secret messages of the 'Transvaal's preparations,' to send 'news which might be dangerous,' to an officer in the army of invaders? Is it no wrong to love a man, and be an Englishman, and never tell your mother as a good Boer girl would?"

His voice was now more reproachful than furious, and she was encouraged by that to look up at him with pleading. Her eyes were as guileless as a child's.

"I cannot see yet where it was wrong," she said simply. "I am his betrothed wife, but because he was English we thought it better to say nothing until peace had come. As to the rest, father, I saw so much when I was with you among the soldiers that I was afraid for him. They think so lightly of the danger they are running into. I wrote to him to prevent him coming with the English soldiers."

"So you told him our plans!" he cried bitterly. "And by this time he has reported to his general."

"My private letter"— she cried ingenuously, but he would not listen.

"Traitress!" he cried, and his eyes gleamed dangerously, and he took her by the shoulders and pushed her from the house of her fathers, while her mother's voice rose up to the old time darkened roof in a long scream of agony and pity.

Martha staggered forward, and the door closed with a crash behind her. The girl's cheeks were white now as milk, but there was in her eyes no anger or fear, merely a sense of dazed wonder, as if the world itself had been left behind. She was utterly alone. The women stood at their doors silent; children peeped from behind their mothers' skirts, frightened, yet curious, as at sight of a bogy. For a moment Martha glanced up the street and down. The village was very still. In the orchards, sloping upward behind, the houses on either side the narrow street, there was no sign of life—no pickers, no pruners. In the broad park below the clear brook bubbled through the trees, and the oxen fed as usual, but the merry herders were not there. Only the thinly piping voices of two very small urchins rose up from the meadows. The church was deserted; the store was closed. Nowhere were there any but two very old men at their stoeps. Even the boys of fair size were away.

Even to her bewildered brain the absence of the men folk and the consequent lack of noise, of sound of work, struck strangely. Then she remembered; they were commandeered, her father's and her brother's brethren, the Boers. Every one of them was now away, with his faithful gun, to the army, and by the morrow probably many would be dead—many of her own people, many of her lover's people, perhaps her father or brother, perhaps her betrothed. Her lip trembled, but she looked up bravely and met the eyes of the silent women. She pitied them. She knew what they were, as she herself might have been if these happy years of school life in Cape Town had never come to her—stolid, ignorant of all things save their Bibles, unable to judge their enemy, only to hate him. Yet they were grand in their faith and simplicity, trusting in the Lord for victory on the next day. She, too, although she knew what the red soldiers could do, feared—yes, feared—that her countrymen would win, for if they did, foretelling a crushing blow, she guessed the fate of her daring lover, so conscious of his own men's fighting powers, so contemptuous of those of the farmer soldiers.

So she looked bravely into the eyes of the Boer women. They might call her "traitress" and groan as they did now, but she had done the best she knew, the only thing she could do, to warn Venable that he was fighting against no foe to laugh at. "Let God judge," she murmured, "if I was a traitress. Could it be treachery to try to save the life of the beloved?" Very simple she was, very innocent of the grander motives of heroines, for all her studies—little better than a child, acting by heart's impulse and love's prompting, and these alone. This she had done, but now her father called her "traitress," and that was bitter, and her home was closed forever against her, and the women whom she had played and worked among booted her. A small boy threw a stone, and her brother cried sullenly to her to hurry.

When they had driven out of the village and out of the quiet valley and were on the rolling lines crossing the veldt, she looked at him gently, for he was younger than she, a boy of 16, and asked:

"Where are you taking me, Peter?"

He never looked at her as he answered sullenly: "To old Van Belt's farm. It is out of the line of fighting, and there you can get to the frontier on a horse. Father gave me this money to give to you. With it you can get easily among your friends in your own country."

"But the—the Transvaal is my country, Peter."

"Never!" cried the boy with a ferocious sternness bred of his father's blood. "Never again! If you were a man, it would be your country—to be shot and buried in. You are lucky that my father and not the general discovered your treason, spy."

Martha shivered, and the veldt swam in her eyes. Oom Jan cried "Traitress," and Peter, her own young brother, called her "spy."

"Brother, brother," she stammered piteously, "I told him alone—the man who is to marry me."

Peter laughed loudly.

"Marry! Marry you! When that verdomter uitlander knows he has got out of you all the information he ever can get, he will—despise you."

The boy was not naturally brutal any more than her father. Jan de Kalb, had ever before been harsh with her. Martha at her brother's words began to realize for the first time how great was her sin in the eyes of her own kinsfolk. She had hidden her love from her mother. That was an offense, but trivial.

She had loved an Englishman. That was serious. She had sent news of the army to her English lover. That was more than unpardonable. Henceforth she was an outcast. "God, country, home"—all had been sinned against. No Boer could forget that; no Boer could ever forgive that.

"At least let us part in kindness, brother Peter," she cried in despair, and he answered, without looking at her:

"You have no brother!"

It was dark when they drove into old Van Belt's farmyard, but lanterns were moving about in the shadows, and voices were calling to each other in subdued excitement. The farmer himself came up to the cart in surprise, a very old man.

"Are the rooineks in Springbokfontein?" he asked, with alarm. "Has Martha come to me for safety?"

"No, no, Oom," Peter answered hurriedly. "She needs a good horse. She has far to go. Oom Jan, my father, sends her on important business. No one else can go—every man from the village is with the army, and I must burry back to join them."

"Our maidens are brave!" cried the old man proudly. "When God gives even the girls such strength of heart, we shall surely conquer in his name. You shall have my best horse, Martha, but wait and have your coffee first."

Martha tried to press Peter's hand in recognition of the unexpected kindness with which he had saved her from more shame, but he roughly drew it away, as if himself ashamed at displaying so much mercy. They went into the house, and there a surprise awaited them. Old Van Belt's only son lay on a bed grievously wounded. The farmer spoke of him with solemn quietude.

"They just brought him home before you came," said the old man, who had bled many a time himself for fatherland and was now content to offer up his boy at the altar. "The fighting has begun. There have been one or two skirmishes. Stephen here is badly hurt, and one or two patriots are dead, but for every one of ours God has smitten three of the invaders."

Martha did not hear the last sentences. She had stepped swiftly to the bedside, leaning over the patient.

"Where, Stephen—where—how—how did you come by this?"

She touched an embroidered kerchief tied round the young soldier's arm stained with his blood. The man opened his eyes and smiled recognition.

"Martha de Kalb," he said, "you women are doing good work among the wounded. That? Oh, that I crawled over to when I was shot down and took from a dead Englishman's neck. You see, I was bleeding bad and had to take the first thing I saw."

She knew it. She had embroidered it herself. She had given it to Lieutenant Venable. She drew back without fainting, but now with a dumbness at her heart that was more deathly than her previous despair.

She was away at last. Peter, her brother, helped her in that. He was anxious to be done with this work—a kind of executioner's work. Besides, like every young Boer, he was eager to get back to his father and the leaders in the decisive fight which, they all knew, must be close at hand and show the older heroes of the people that their younger brothers in arms were made of the same stern stuff as the fathers.

The farmer had done as he promised and given her an excellent horse, wishing her godspeed on what he presumed was a secret mission. Neither did anybody express fear of possible danger for her. They knew she was veldt bred, acquainted with the country and a good horsewoman. Peter handed her a revolver at the last moment. She looked in his eyes as she took it, but he turned away, yet she knew the thought which was in the iron minded Boer boy's soul, and perhaps, she meditated, that would be best. Father, mother, brother, country and lover all lost in one day—a traitress, a spy. Surely it would be best so to do with herself out there in the night on the lonely veldt.

There was but a quarter moon; its light and that of the stars served only to make the solitude of the veldt more shadowy and fearful to a stranger. Martha was no stranger to night in the bush. Very often in slow ox wagons, or in the swifter cart behind her father's horses, or, as now, in the saddle she had traveled guideless, save for the star marks, along long, rough treks. Tonight there were about her soul darker shadows of more unhappy portent than ever were cast upon the plain to affright the wanderer.

If she meant to use the money Peter had thrust at her, she knew the safe road to the frontier, and thence to the colony and her school day friends. But she did not now argue that matter. The thought of going to Cape Town did not enter her mind. The sight of the kerchief had in an instant killed all notion of seeking the English. What were English people to her now? Her lover dead, all England was a dream. And that dream gone, the blessing reality was before her eyes again. She was the spy, the traitor, the outcast.

The thought of turning the pistol on herself came again more than once, but she was a girl never given to morbidness at any time, and now, in spite of the stunning blows which that day had confounded her, the reaction, more physical than mental, began, and instinctively she commenced, though almost unconsciously, to question what might be done. Venable was dead, and she needed comfort. To whom could she go for that save to her mother, and by what means could she reach again old Tante's breast? How could she turn aside her father's wrath?

She had left the reins to the horse, and the beast was following a path which did not lead to the frontier. Suddenly a distant crackling of musketry made the animal prick his ears and start. The noise which thus broke the gloomy silence of the veldt awoke Martha to a clearer sense of where she was. She sat more straightly in the saddle and listened. They came again, not in volleys, but in the scattered reports of skirmish firing, the sounds of many guns. There was her father, there by now might be Peter, holding back the invader. There, if she had had the luck, she thought, to have been born a boy, should she be. She halted and her eyes shone in the darkness. Why should she not be? Why not prove to her people that she was, if a traitress, not one with intended malice? She could shoot almost as well as Peter; she was more active than men of older age. For full five minutes she remained at a halt, and then, swinging her horse off the trail, she galloped to the right straight across country, following no path or trek, save the sure guide of her native knowledge of the land.

By dawn the veldt was alive with strange noises and unwonted visitors. Trumpets were calling across its grasses. The clatter of steel scabbards against spurs and stirrup irons rang out in the quiet air. Drums were beating. The loud and sharp commands came swiftly from the mouths of alert sergeants. The English camp was struck, and the first rays of the sun glanced from the buttons and bayonets of the invading army as it formed column and marched into the heart of the coveted land. Swinging along with the practiced, never faltering step of long drilled soldiers, the army passed, with here and there a bronzed horseman darting from front to rear and rear to front with orders, and dying above it the proud banner that has been so infrequently lowered.

So they passed the gay group of general and staff in front, chatting and laughing, until in a moment their talk and laughter ceased, and swiftly the chief sent his aids galloping back along the column with sharp orders to close up. Down the lines with grim faces, came slowly to retreat the advance guard, the scouts, bearing with them wounded men and dead.

"The enemy here in force," they said, "but they won't stand. They are here, there and everywhere over the veldt, behind anthills and trees, behind rocks on the kopjes, always keeping at a distance and picking off our men every shot at long range."

A stronger guard was sent to the front. Scouts were sent out on either flank, and the column again moved forward. Now the laughing and talking ceased, and vexation and wrath were on the face of the chief and were reflected on the faces of his aids, for the number of soldiers being sent to the surgeons in the rear was increasing, and nothing could be seen of the Boers but distant horsemen or rapidly moving squads far off or occasional sharpshooters many yards away or perpetual puffs of smoke above bowlders and behind the scrubby trees. Little drilled in battle line and hollow square, the farmer soldiers were defending their country in their own way. So the column passed on. So the Boers retreated, harassing front and flank, and the English general growled and grumbled:

"The beggars are in force. Why don't they stand up and fight?"

And a little boy, riding alongside his father to see the fun, so sure were the English that it would be little more than a sham battle, looked up at the officer and asked with surprise:

"Pa, isn't it time yet to begin to lick them?"

Meanwhile the patriots had moving among them their pastors, and before the fight commenced their day had begun with prayer to the Lord of Hosts. Theirs was not the trim and soldierly appearance of the invaders. Old men were there in the clothes in which they followed the plow; boys were there in the garb in which they herded the cattle or guided the long ox trains. Their visage was grimly solemn—man and boy. As they retreated along the trek's flanks, holding together in squads, undisciplined save by the force engendered by each man's love of land, each man's determination to follow to the end a common purpose, officers galloped among them, cheerily and earnestly encouraging them. Among these officers was old Oom Jan, and for all his years his eye was as bright and his form as erect in the saddle as those of his people 30 years younger than he. He scanned as he rode the faces of those sharpshooters whom he passed, delivering a deadly fire upon the enemy, and many he knew and many he spoke to. But one he knew and yet knew not, for the face puzzled him until, finding Peter, his son, eager eyed and busy, he pointed the stranger out and asked if Peter knew who he was and from what district he came; then, looking at his boy's face, he smiled and said:

"He's not unlike you, my son."

So Peter, finding an opportunity as they moved position, drew close to the stranger and at once knew who it was, although the yellow hair was closely cut and the trim, Cape made dress had given place to the rude dress of a Boer farmer's lad.

"Martha!" he cried.

She looked at him with a smile.

"Is there any other way or better way in which I can prove I did not mean treason?" she asked.

He was bewildered.

"Where did you get these clothes?"

"Cousin Hofmeyr is sick, and I went to his farm and took them."

He said nothing more for awhile, then asked:

"Do you know that Lieutenant Venable is with them?"

"He is dead," she said.

"Martha," he said after a long pause, "father and I were furious last night. But—but—this makes things"—

From in front came a prolonged call—the Boer bugle call—and there was no time to seek Oom Jan. A high hill was at hand, and the Boers' plan of battle was nearing its complete development. It was Majuba hill. The Boers retired, and their relentless sharpshooting slackened. The unfortunate English general seized the chance to occupy the hill. It was a vain move. The soldiers were almost unprotected. The Boers swarmed about in force, and their firing became more destructive than ever. In desperate fashion the English charged down the steep, rocky side. They dropped before they reached the foe. But they held on with metal grimness and determination. The Boers gave vent at last to shouts of triumph. They had the enemy in a trap—such a trap as Martha had warned her lover was imminent. The general died by his own hand, fearful of disgrace. The little boy was dead with his father, but the awful torrent of bullets from these soldier hunters poured in relentlessly.

Now and again as desperate Englishmen formed and charged in a sort of forlorn hope they and the Boers came face to face and hand to hand, and more than once when this happened the traitress was there, her gun and her revolver doing their work. Peter was apart, too busy to think of her. Oom Jan did not know she was there. In the hurry and the scurry of the day nobody but Peter had recognized her. At last there came down the hill with a cheer a company of Englishmen, led by a young officer, revolver in one hand and sword in the other. At sight of that officer Martha forgot her dress. She dropped her arms and uttered a shrill scream of dismay.

"Ned! Ned," she cried.

At that the officer checked himself, dropping the point of his sword. He looked round wildly, and, as if a ghost had spoken, he answered wonderingly:

"Martha?"

The traitress had left the Boer ranks. She was dashing wildly up the hill. She threw herself into Venable's arms, and for one instant they were breast to breast. Then among the storm of bullets one found a tragic mark. It struck the Boer maiden between the shoulders, and, passing through her body and his, they fell dead together.

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