

ST. JOHN, N. B., SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9, 1899.

Domestic Life of the Boers.

I have been asked to write an account of the domestic life of the South African Boer. If the term 'Boer' be used to signify, as it sometimes is, the entire population of South Africa which is descended from the early Dutch settlers of two or three hundred years ago, and of the French Huguenots, who, driven from their native land in the seventeenth century, landed in South Africa and mingled their blood with that of the earlier settlers, the task would not be an easier one than to write a description of the domestic life of the whole American people. For the Afrikaners, as the Dutch-French-Huguenot descendants now call themselves, are not at the present day less complex and many graded than the Americans themselves. In our cities and towns they form a large proportion of our most cultured and brilliant citizens, whose domestic life differs not at all from that of other cultured South Africans, English, French or Germans in descent. Many of our most brilliant lawyers and able politicians and professional men are of this race; and year by year the names both of men and women of this race increasingly fill our lists of successful university students.

If, however the term 'Boer' be taken, as it should be, to signify only that portion of the race who have remained farmers (the word 'Boer' literally means a farmer) and who, in the outlying districts of Cape Colony, the Orange Free State, Natal and the Transvaal have preserved uncharged the language, manners and ideas of their forefathers of the seventeenth century, then the task is far more easy. For this wonderful and virile folk—driven into the wilds of Africa a couple of centuries ago—are not merely domestic and in their public life by old ideals and methods, but a strange uniformity exists everywhere.

Whether we find the primitive Boer on the wide grass plains of the Transvaal and Free State, the Karroo plains of central and western Cape Colony, or the bush lands nearer the coast, in appearance, ideas and above all, in habits and the arrangement of his domestic life, a complete and unique conformity exists.

The typical South African Boer lives on his own land, a farm, covering a stretch of country, it may be six, twelve, eighteen or more miles in length. On the spot where his homestead now stands, it may be that a few generations ago his grandfather or great-grandfather, on his first journey into the wilds in search of a new home, drew up his great ox-wagon beside some slowly oozing fountain, or on the banks of some stream with inexhaustible pools, which had never yet been visited by the foot of white man, and determined here to fix his home. He called the place perhaps Jackals Fountain, from the number of jackals which came down to drink or watch for prey the first night; 'Wilde Kats Draai,' from the wildcat which he killed the next day; or 'Tjier Kloof,' from the huge tiger-leopard killed in the ravine beyond the fountain; and there, after a longer or shorter struggle with wild beasts or poisoned-arrow-shooting bushmen, he built his house and kraals, and settled himself and his descendants.

Here as the years passed, and leopard, lion and wild dog became exterminated, and the wild bucks on whose flesh in early days he lived became more rare, he raised his little square or oblong house of rough stones or unburnt bricks; behind his house surrounded by walls of rough stone or high piled branches of the mimosa thorn, he built his kraals (or enclosure for the stock to sleep in at night), which were always placed very close to the house, that they might be more easily protected from wild beasts and savages.

By and by he generally built a dam, larger or smaller, as the case might be, for catching rain-water, which in rainy seasons floods the plains, or which might be fed by his fountain, if strong enough. Here his stock came to drink at evening; and if the supply of water were large enough, he often enclosed a small patch of land below the dam with a stone wall, planted a few fig and peach trees and made a small garden.

Behind the house was built a large brick oven, often whitewashed on the outside, where the goodwife (who in earlier days had had to content herself with a hollowed-

out sn'heap as an oven) might bake her bread. Behind the house was raised a large wagon-house, open on the side from which least rain came, where the great ox-wagon and cart, if there were one, might stand sheltered from sun and rain; and then the typical Boer homestead, as we know it, and as it exists to the present day was complete.

As sons and daughters grew up and married, additional rooms were often built on for them to the old farmhouse, or small houses were built near, or at a few miles distance on the same farm, where at some other fountain the stock was watered. But in each case the new homestead repeated the features of the old.

If one travel across some great African plain today, the hoofs of one's horse sinking step by step into the red sand, or crunching the gravel on some rocky ridge far off across the plain one may mark some distant flat topped table mountains rising up against the sky on the horizon; for the rest, a vast, silent, undulating plain, broken, it may be, by small hillocks, or 'kopjes,' of ironstones, stretches about one everywhere. After travelling five or six miles farther, one may discern, at the foot of some distant kopje, a small white or dark speck; as one approaches nearer, the practised eye perceives it is a homestead.

As one approaches nearer along the sandy wagon-track, slowly all the details of the place become clear—the house, the dam, almost or quite dry, if it be the end of a long, thirsty season; the little patch of dark green contrasting with the miles of red brown veld about it, the wagon-house and the great, dark square patches, which are the kraals. And yet, so clear is the air, making objects distinctly visible at a long distance, that one may ride on for an hour before the road, which has led straight as an arrow across the plain, takes a little turn, and the farmhouse is reached.

If it be the middle of a hot summer's afternoon, a great stillness will reign about the place; not a soul will be seen stirring the doors and the wooden shutters of the windows will be closed; a few hens may be scratching about in the red sand on the shady side of the house, and a couple of large Boer dogs will rise slowly from the shadow of the wagon house, and come toward you silently, with their heads down. If a colored servant should appear from the back of the house, or a little face peep out from behind the oven, it will be well to call to them to call off the dogs, for the African Boer dog is a peculiar species of mastiff, with a touch of the bull, celebrated for his silent savagery.

After the dogs have been called off, the servant or child will go into the house to rouse the master of the house, who, with the rest of the family, is still taking his afternoon siesta, made necessary to all by the intense warmth of summer and by the early rising which is the invariable rule on an African farm. Presently the upper half of the front door opens, and then the lower, and the master of the house appears his eyes a little blinded by the glare of the afternoon sun after the cool darkness of the house.

He will step down from the low, raised stone platform before the door, and come to meet you—a tall, powerful man of over six feet in height, large-boned and massive, with large hands and feet, a long brown beard and keen, steady, somewhat deep-set eyes. He will extend his hand to you with the greatest courtesy, inquire your name, and whether you do not wish to off-saddle, and will call a servant to take your horse.

When you have entered the house with him, you will find yourself in a square room, large as compared with the whole size of the house. The floor is generally earth—soil forming the huge ant-heaps which cover the plains being generally taken for this purpose, which, damped with water and well pounded down, forms an exceedingly hard floor. In the centre of the room is a bare, square table, neatly finished off, but often of home construction, having been made by the father or grandfather of the present owner. Round the sides of the room are arranged some chairs and a long wooden sofa of the same make, the seats of which are formed, not

of cane, but of thin thongs of leather interlaced.

At one side of the room against the wall stands a small, square table. On it stands the great coffee-urn, and the work of the housemother. Beside it, in her elbow-chair, in which she has hastily seated herself to welcome the stranger, she herself sits, dressed in black, often with a little black shawl across her shoulders, and a white handkerchief round her throat.

At her feet is a little square wooden stove, with a hollow inside, in which may be put a small brazier of live coals in cold weather, the heat arising through small, ornamental holes cut in the wood of the top. Exactly such wooden stoves may be seen in the painting of Flemish interiors by the old Dutch artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The goodwife politely extends her hand to you, asks you to be seated, and you take your place on the wooden sofa. Except the tables and chairs, the room contains little or nothing. On the wall may be a rough gun-rack, containing a half-dozen guns, from the old clumsy flint lock guns of a century ago—which may have brought down many an elephant and lion in the old days and defended the lives of wives and children—to the most elegant modern Mauser or Martini-Henry. But the guns are more often kept in the bedroom, on the wall near the head of the bed.

One thing however is never missing. Either in a little closed window with a crochet cloth thrown over it, on the housemother's little table, on the centre-table, or in a little cupboard in the wall is always to be found the great family Bible. It holds a place altogether unique in the economy of the Boer life. It is not alone that on its front pages are to be found solemnly inscribed the names of his ancestors, the births, deaths or marriages of his children, and often a brief record of the date of the most momentous events in his own or his family's history; it is not alone that for generations this book has represented the sole tie between his solitary and often nomadic family and the intellectual life of culture of mankind; it is not alone that any culture or knowledge he possesses other than that gained from the material world about him, has been all spelled out of its pages, but the visible external volume forms the Lares and Penates of the household the sacred central point.

It is treated with respect; no other book is ever laid upon it; it is opened reverentially; it is carried wherever he wanders; it is consulted not merely as a moral, but also as a material guide. The pages are solemnly opened and the finger brought down upon a passage, which is spelled out, and recovery or death of a child, and even such matters as the whereabouts of lost cattle, are believed to be indicated by its contents; as Enoch Arden's wife believed, when she brought her fingers down on the passage about the palm-tree, that it indicated Enoch's death.

After we have been seated for a few moments the other members of the family will troop in, one by one, and shake hands and seat themselves on the chairs round the room; nine or ten children between the ages of eighteen and two years, and perhaps a married son and daughter in law, and an old grandmother, who has her own elbow chair near the window. For the Boer idea of family life is patriarchal, and two or three generations are often housed under one roof. Presently the eldest daughter makes coffee in the urn, a little Kafir maid bringing in a small brazier of live coals to place under it. Then coffee is poured out in cups, or basins, and handed round to each person.

By the time coffee has been drunk, the afternoon is beginning to grow old; the heat is rapidly lessening and the soft evening breeze beginning to stir the air. The farmer lights his pipe, and invites you to fill yours from his large tobacco bag, made of coney-skin or little kid's. Then he invites you to accompany him to the kraals, toward which from different points on the plain the flocks may already be seen tending. Then comes the busy and delightful hour—sunset on an African farm.

Everywhere there is bustle and stir; in the

cow-kraal the calves are bleating and putting their noses through the gate to get through to their mothers as they are being milked, one by one; the sheep and goats are being counted in at the gates of the great kraals.

The Kafir maids are busy preparing the churn for the fresh milk, and lighting the kitchen fire for supper. The children are romping outside, inspired by the cool evening wind; even the old grandmother seats herself on the back doorstep to watch the stir, and to see the pink sunset slowly deepened into gray as the night comes down. The dark gatters quickly, and soon the whole family are again gathered in the great front room.

On really old fashioned farms, a little Kafir maid then comes in with a tub of hot water and a cloth, and washes the feet of old and young, after which the family sit down to the evening meal, generally composed of boiled mutton, bread and coffee. After supper, it is not long before the whole family retire for the night into the small bedrooms opening to the right and left of the sitting room and by eight o'clock often the whole household is in bed and asleep, the old Boer dog, stealing softly round the house, being the only creature moving, and the occasional bleating of sheep and goats being the only sounds that breaks the stillness.

At half past three or four the next morning, however, you will be early aroused by the sound of bustling and movement. Everyone is getting up. The Kafir maid has already made the fire, and by the time you enter the sitting room the eldest daughter is already pouring out coffee at the little table, by the light of a candle although the gray dawn light is already creeping in at the door.

As soon as he has had his coffee the Boer with his sons goes out to the kraals to let out the stock. Long before the sun rises the flocks are already wending their way across the plains to their different pastures, with their Kafir herdsmen behind them.

Then, if you be the typical African traveller, anxious to get on his way before the heat of rises the day you will have another cup of coffee, bidding good-bye to your host, by the time the sun rises, you will be already on your way across the plain, and the farmhouse with its kraals and dam be already but a small speck behind you.

The time was March, 1867. The place was a farm near the banks of the Orange River, in South Africa and the principal characters were a Boers children who had gathered a heap of stones and started to play house. At the most exciting stage of the game there appeared on the scene one John O'Reilly, who had been hunting and wanted to rest and eat. But O'Reilly was not too tired to notice the children, and presently one of their "pretty pebbles" caught his eye. The harder he looked at it, the better he liked it. After a time he talked to the parent Boer and got permission to take it and see if it was worth anything. It proved to be worth twenty five hundred dollars.

This is one story of the discovery of diamonds in South Africa. Within a year or two from the date of O'Reilly's visit, adventurers had spread all over the "diamondiferous" area, the territory embraced on the north, west and south between the wide fork formed by the junction of the Vaal and Orange Rivers. Yet it took these people three years to learn that diamonds were not to be found, as in Brazil, on river banks and in old river beds, but that they were really to be mined, like any other mineral.

The richest of the mines, that at Kimberley, six hundred and fifty miles from Cape Town, was discovered in July, 1871. When the miners founded their town, naming it for the British colonial secretary, the locality was almost a desert. Water had to be conveyed to the Vaal river, fourteen miles away, and a sheet iron hut was the most luxurious edifice wealth could command. Speedily the miners staked out all the available ground in claims thirty one feet square.

On the surface of the ground was red sand, to the depth of several feet. Then

came a layer of lime. Under this was fifty or sixty feet of yellow earth, disintegrated quartz sand and under this again blue quartz, to an unknown depth. This blue quartz, kimberlite, is found nowhere else, and even experienced diggers did not know how to treat it. A lazy or philosophical Boer found the way when he uncovered his claim, soaked it with water and let it lie. Moisture and air decomposed the stone, so that the diamonds could be picked out.

These early years of the Kimberley mines were productive of trouble, as well as diamonds. Three thousand little claims were crowded into an area a mile and a half square. When a miner had dugged down a hundred feet or so, the sides of his claim—and his neighbors—began to crumble in on him. He did not dare to buy expensive machinery or build properly constructed shafts, even if he had the means, for he did not know how soon he would come to the end of the diamond-bearing quartz. It was time for a great corporation to do what individuals could not do.

Then came forward Cecil Rhodes, son of an English clergyman, who had been interested in the Kimberley mines almost from beginning, and who owned a number of mines. He divided miles, principally of desert, remained to be traversed by ox-teams or on foot. The first stamp-mill in the Rand was erected in December, 1885 and this and all other machinery had to be dragged over the plains until 1892 when the railroad reached Johannesburg. As late as 1889, the average cost of transporting goods from the coast to Johannesburg was one hundred and fifty dollars a ton.

In spite of everything, the population grew. Prospecting was difficult and expensive, because many important reef outcrops were covered by a thick layer of red clay, sand and loam. But fuel was accessible and cheap, the ores were simple in composition and readily treated, the mines were easily drained, and the yield was unusually regular and uniform. In 1895, when Johannesburg was only nine years old, more than forty thousand natives a plan to unite the mines under one management, and interested the Rothschilds. The result was the organization of the DeBeers Consolidated Company, Limited, of which Rhodes was made managing director for life, at a salary three times as large as that of the President of the United States.

The DeBeers company has sunk shafts to the depth of more than fifteen hundred feet. Sixty-five hundred Kafirs, hired by contract, panned in a 'compound' and regularly searched to ensure their honesty, do its manual labor. The quartz they excavate is taken to the surface, spread out, hallowed, and then left for three months or more to disintegrate, under the eyes of an armed guard.

Then it goes through the crushing works, is washed in acid and rolled by machinery, and the diamonds are picked out by hand.

The yield of these Kimberley mines is said to average about fifty-five hundred carats a day. They furnish ninety-five per cent. of the world's diamonds. Mr. Kunz, of Tiffany's, estimates that so far nine and a half tons, worth three hundred million dollars in the rough and double that when polished have been taken out of the Kimberley 'yellow' and 'blue.' On a nominal capital of less than twenty millions, the DeBeers company pays annual dividends of fifty per cent.

But the record of Kimberley should not obscure the fact that elsewhere in South Africa there are 'finite riches in a little room.' For instance, the largest diamond known to exist was found at Jagersfontein eighty miles away—a gem two and a half inches long, one and a quarter inches thick and two inches wide, weighing nine hundred and seventy-one carats, or nearly half a pound avoirdupois. And in many parts of South Africa gold is plentiful, notably in the Witwatersrand region of the Transvaal.

Witwatersrand (white water ridge), the watershed of two great river systems, is the highest ridge of an extensive plateau in the southern part of the Transvaal, which stretches almost due east and west

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