

A DAUGHTER OF THE VELDT

How Two Enemies Met
On "Lovers' Walk,"

About six miles from our lines I ran against a dainty little farmhouse cuddled up against the slope of a shrub covered kopje. On one side of the dwelling a trelliswork of vines broke the wind at both front and rear, while a pretty flower garden, fragrant with flowers, spread far away in front of the substantial dwelling. I was admiring these things from my horse's back, when it suddenly dawned upon me that I had possibly played the imbecile in straying so far from camp. But it was too late to hang back. If the farmer folk were friendly, I was in luck, for the inside of such a dwelling could not be ill supplied with creature comforts. If, however, they were hostile, I was at their mercy. I had no desire to match my pony's pace against the flight of a Mauser bullet, so, humming a song and thinking of a psalm, I rode forward as if certain of a kindly welcome. An elderly Boer with a kindly face met me at the door and gave me the time of day with all civility, a negro lad took hold of my bridle, and I swung myself out of the saddle just in time to receive a civil greeting from the farmer's wife—healthy, wholesome, substantial, well fed and clothed. They invited me inside, and there their four daughters introduced themselves to me. They all talked English as well as I could, and before I had been there 20 seconds I had arrived at the conclusion that I should never get a better chance to study the language of the people of our foes and determined to sacrifice myself upon the flinty shrine of duty. Three of the maidens were plain faced, good, honest looking girls, but the fourth had a face like a young preacher's first public prayer—a face that many a man would risk his life for.

So much of my whole career has been passed amid the rougher and more rugged scenes of life that a description of dainty womanhood comes awkwardly from me. But I have read so much about the ugliness and clumsiness of the Boer woman in British journals that I should like to try to describe this daughter of the veldt, although only a farmer's daughter. I do not know if she should be called short or tall, but her cheek could have been nestled comfortably on the shoulder of a fairly tall man. I don't know how much hair she had, but there was enough of it to make a fellow feel as if he didn't care a rap if half the earth was bald. It was not red nor yellow; it was like honey kissed by sunshine. She had the sort of forehead which one never sees on the face of a fool, nature's signboard for an emporium of brains. Her eyes were large, brown and fearless, not bold nor yet wavering. Her mouth was perfect—not one of those sepulchral which disfigure some feminine faces, not childishly small like a bud bursting into bloom, but a strong, true mouth, large enough for a prayer to slip through, but not big enough to swear with. Her waist would just about fill the crook of a man's arm and make him feel that there was no room for anything else under heaven. The arch of her bust was like the curve on a wave as it breaks on the beach in the bay, not the stiff lath and plaster model one is apt to see walking around the streets of cities. Her hands were shapely, brown and strong, cracked a little by wind and weather; not toy hands, but hands that could spank a baby or help husband back to paths of rectitude when all the world had damned him past redemption.

So she looked when I saw her, and I said unto my soul, "Verily, it is a good thing for his enemies' language." It was the fifth evening after that, and I had registered my fifth visit to the farm, when an event befell which put an end to my studies in Dutch for the

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time being. I had dined with the farmers, the plain sisters had made music for me. They had lifted their voices in song also, for I was an honored guest, having been enabled to do some little deeds of kindness through the favor of the courteous general to a relation of the ladies who was a prisoner in our lines. They had given me blankets and rugs for the poor beggar, and the general had handed them to the man.

The night was a beautiful one, so, lighting a cigar, I rambled down toward the quarter mile long avenue of orange trees. It was to be my last visit, for our troops were on the move at dawn. As I sauntered forward I heard the rustle of a woman's skirts amid the bushes on my right, and, looking in that direction, I saw the navy blue dress and the red gold hair of the girl who had been teaching me Dutch. I had not many seconds to look at her, but brief as the time was I had long enough to notice that one hand held the blue skirts switched up so that about a foot of white petticoat was displayed. I also noticed that she was heading toward the orange walk, which I had long since learned was known in the family as "the lovers' walk." She did not look in my direction, did not turn toward me at all, but like many another fool I was puffed up in my folly. "What harm is there in it," I mused, "if I take my lesson in Dutch in the shade of the orange trees?" Tossing my cigar away, I sauntered after the flying figure out of the flower garden, over the field, into the shady walk. I meandered like a he goat through a gap in a hedge, I walked about 50 yards and saw no one, heard no one. Then all at once I found myself looking right into the face of a big hairy savage who wore a tweed coat and a bandolier full of cartridges. In his hands he carried a handy little Mauser carbine.

"Well, Mr. Spy," said the hairy individual, "you are my prisoner."

I tried to smile, but somehow the springs in my face had got out of order and would not work.

"What did you want sneaking after me for, you beastly Englishman?" snarled the man with the gun. "I could have shot you last night and the night before that if I had liked, but I did not want to bring trouble on this farm. What do you want to hunt me for?"

I found my tongue for a moment then.

"Hunt you? I didn't know such a chap existed."

He lowered his carbine an inch or two. "Then what the devil are you doing in the lovers' walk?"

"What are you doing here?" I blurted.

We stared at each other like two grass fed calves in the starlight, and I edged a foot or two away from the gun. Just then I heard the patter of girlish feet on the gravel behind me and, turning my head, saw one of the plain sisters hurrying toward us, and almost at the same second the reddish gold head of the "beauty," the head of the girl who had been teaching me Dutch, passed from a patch of shadow into the streak of starlight where the hairy young giant was standing fondling his gun. I saw her clasp his arm, heard her hurriedly whisper something in Dutch which caused the giant to grin as if half his head ached to part company with the other half. The "beauty" pointed toward me and the plain sister, who had come to a halt beside me. The plain girl put her hand kindly on my shoulder and whispered, "Don't you think it's too chilly out here?"

Chilly was no name for it. I was as cold as Klondike. The sight of that carbine in the starlight had taken all the warmth out of the atmosphere as far as I was concerned. I turned to go, when a little hand touched mine. The girl who had been teaching me Dutch was at my side. "Before you gentlemen leave," she said, "I want you both to make a promise. You are enemies now. Some day when the war is over you may be friends. But promise not to hurt each other by talking of this meeting. Otto had no business to come. Father had forbidden him until the trouble ended with the British."

"I came out of love for you," grunted the man with the gun.

"And you came out of fondness for me," murmured the plain girl, her voice shaking with laughter that was almost choking her. I muttered the biggest lie I had ever parted with.

The hairy individual rested his gun against a tree, stepped forward and lifted his slouch hat to the plain girl, "For your sake I promise."

I lifted my helmet to the "beauty" and said something similar. A few minutes later as I was buckling my girths I heard him galloping off southward to join Olivier's commando. As I swung into my saddle the plain sister slipped away, and the "beauty" lifted her hand in farewell. As our hands met she said, "Why did you come to lovers' walk?"

"To get a lesson in Dutch," I said, with a sheepish grin.

"Well," she answered, "I hope you'll remember your lesson." And I heard the two of them laughing as I galloped out on the veldt.—Argonaut.

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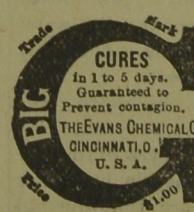
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