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THE BOER AT HOME

“The struggle (1776-1783) was a revolt against the whole mental attitude of Britain in regard to America, rather than against any one special act or set of acts.”—ROOSEVELT, “Winning of the West,” I., p. 37.

Domestic Life of the Boer To-day—Comparison between South Africa and North America

THERE are Boers and Boers. Here is mine. At the close of day, shortly after the Jameson Raid, we reached the Caledon River, which separates Basutoland from the Orange Free State. The river was swollen, and the leaders of my Cape cart floundered amidst the bowlders at the bottom of this rapid stream. The water rose above the floor of our vehicle, and for a moment it looked as though we might be swept away—horses, wagon, baggage, and all. While matters were at their worst, there appeared on the other side of the stream the figure of a long-bearded horseman, one arm waving up into the blazing sunset like a benevolent semaphore to a ship in distress. We followed his mute directions, and soon our four plucky ponies were scrambling up the steep bank—in safety, it is true, yet so banged about were we that, after escaping disaster by water, it looked as though we were reserved for a general smash in the ruts and gullies of the veldt.

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It was a venerable Boer who had signalled us to a safe crossing, and when we were face to face he inspected us critically, and asked the usual questions as to whence we had come, whither we were going, who we were, and of what nation. My companion was English, I was American, and we had come from breaking bread with the Governor of a British Protectorate. The Jameson Raid was fresh in all men's minds, and we were asking hospitality of a Boer. He wasted few words, gave an ambiguous grunt by way of telling us that we might put up at his ranch, and galloped away to tell his wife that two "tenderfeet" were on the way and she must grind a bit more coffee.

So we steered slowly in his wake across country on the open prairie, along a trail where the horses had to pick their way as they would in the foot-hills of Colorado. From an elevation the African veldt seems one vast, smooth plain, but the rider feels the gullies and other pitfalls which may break his springs or his horses' legs, albeit too insignificant for notice at a distance. The lonesome prairie was relieved here and there by strange, flat-topped, isolated mounds rising straight up out of the dead level of endless desolation, suggesting, in the deep glow of the dying sun, monster coffins resting upon a burning crust. The effect was powerful, for in Africa the sky seems nearer, the stars shine more intensely, and the setting sun burns so fiercely that the shadows of rocks and square-topped mountains run along to the eastward like streams of liquid black. Things far away seemed close at hand, and it was a long stretch of bumping to us before we reached the cabin whose wreath of

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smoke from the hospitable chimney we had followed for many miles. It was a cold reception that we got, measured by the forms laid down at dancing-school, but so far as practical details were concerned it was beyond praise. The long-bearded Boer fetched his lantern and showed us a shed where our cattle could find shelter for the night. Of course we did the manual work ourselves, in which we had silent but effective assistance from our host. After "outspanning," rubbing the horses down, and giving them a good measure of oats from the stores of our host, we were led to the pump, where we washed our hands before entering the house to make the acquaintance of his family.

Anyone who has seen the pioneer ranchman's home in the Wild West of America can readily picture to himself the sort of home a Boer farmer would have in a country where roads and even bridges are wanting; where land is cheap but everything else is dear; where houses are many miles apart; where black labor is both scarce and bad; where the white man is thrown upon his own resources to an extent wholly unknown in Europe or the settled sections of America. These surroundings are not conducive to grand pianos, billiard-tables, oil paintings, or even books. No postman raps at the ranch door, and to go shopping means the loss of a full day with a team of horses. Under such conditions men read few books, but they read them often; small-talk does not flourish, but men's minds are tempered in the fire of silence and concentrated thought. The Boer who led us into his house had come to this country as a child, with the

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Great Trek of 1836; his ancestors had come to the Cape a hundred and fifty years before that.

As he opened the door of his cabin we were greeted by his stolid and rotund wife and a flaxen-haired and very pretty daughter about eighteen years old. They did not smile or tell the conventional lie that they were delighted to see us, but each shook hands with us by way of letting us know that they intended, for that night at least, to spare us the discomfort of sleeping out on the prairie.

Nothing was said on either side, and we sat on chairs which were backed up against the wall, while mother and daughter laid the cloth—a nice clean one—and prepared supper. Several rifles were on pegs above the door; some pictures taken from Christmas numbers of illustrated weeklies brightened the walls; there was a vast, florid, old-fashioned Dutch clock, and in one corner of the room an American parlor organ of very small size. Among the few books were a Dutch Bible, Longfellow's poems, and a Shakespeare, besides a few books on cattle diseases, horse-breaking, and one or two religious books whose names I forget. Dutch was the language of the family, but all were familiar with English as well. Two or three young Boers joined the party, and these also sat silently about the room, much as though it was a corpse we were expecting, instead of a very welcome supper.

Slowly the Boer mind was absorbing us; for the Africander gives his confidence to few, and where he gives it, there it remains. I knew them well enough to know that this process of mental digestion ought

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not to be disturbed, so I played Quaker meeting in a manner designed to create the impression that this was exactly the sort of social hilarity to which I was accustomed at home.

The supper was delicious; there was plenty of milk and bread, meat, and stewed fruit. I drank about a bucket of milk, and this seemed to reassure my host, whose idea of the Outlander was of one who required "fire-water" with his food. Of course there was coffee, which, however, I did not touch. As the meal progressed, the family waxed communicative, and the old lady's heart softened when my friend informed her that I had not merely sung in the choir of my college, but had actually experimented once with Sunday-school teaching. From that moment I felt that the prodigal son could give me no further points. I felt as though I owned the place, and the daughter grew beautiful as she became unconscious of herself and joined in the chaff and laughter. With the old man I talked politics, including the Jameson Raid, and with the daughter I sang simple songs—German Volkslieder and negro melodies. At about nine o'clock the long-bearded Boer pulled the great Bible from its shelf, and with a deep, earnest voice read some verses from the Old Testament. It was about Joshua smiting the Outlanders of Palestine and fighting savagely for the preservation of a peculiar religion. I do not know whether my host selected this particular chapter for the benefit of his guests, or whether it just happened that we came in for a text which appeared to have a strange significance at that moment—for had I not been but a few days before with the leaders of

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the Outlander movement?—all of them jailed up in Pretoria!

After the Bible-reading, a hymn was sung, and then the whole family knelt in prayer, following the strong words of this grand old apostle as he appealed to the throne of God for guidance in the perplexities of life.

This is the Boer, thought I, that people in England do not see much of. He does not play at politics; he does not button-hole newspaper men; he is rarely heard save in the midst of his family. He owns no gold-mines, and is happy to grow up and die in the peaceful enjoyment of the little which Providence has allowed him to have. Such men love peace—but when they fight they keep at it a long time.

That night I slept on a hard bed, but it was clean, with white cotton sheets. The floor of my bedroom was mother earth, and the walls and ceiling were rough enough. In the morning a towel was given to me and the neighborhood of the pump was indicated—and my wash was none the worse for being in the open air.

There was plenty of roughness in these Boers, but no coarseness. Their speech was elementary, but with them I felt a wholesome nearness to nature and to things real. Civilization is a polite word for a monstrous mass of shams, and when things shall be straightened out at the Judgment Day, I make no doubt that there will be a surprise in store for those who are now satisfied that they are more civilized than my Boer friend on the borders of Basutoland.

The good people gave us coffee before we started next morning, and begged us to stop with them when

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next we travelled that road. We tried to pay for our entertainment—the mere idea was an offence to them. Of course we paid for what forage our four horses had consumed—that was quite another sort of transaction; but so far as the inside of the Boer's house was concerned, we entered it as guests, and we left it as members of his family.

I have been the guest in this fashion of many Boers—in the Transvaal as well as in the Orange Free State. There may be worse Boers and there may be better. It is not my purpose to generalize—I tell merely what I saw.