

CHAPTER III.

LANGALIBALELE.

AFTER all, however, I did not remain very long at Pinetown. When I had been working there for about three months I received a summons from the Colonel to join him immediately at Fort Napier, and offering me a post which was not only infinitely superior to that of a road-overseer, but was the one which now I would have chosen before all others. The Colonel told me in his note that he was about to start upon an expedition up-country, and wished me to accompany him upon it. I joyfully gave over my road-party and instructions concerning them to the man sent down to relieve me, and started off without any loss of time for Pietermaritzburg.

Of the two modes of travelling open to me, as I had no horse of my own,—namely, the “bus” and

the post-cart,—I chose the former, although the least to my taste, because I could not tell whether, if I let the 'bus pass at 8.30 A.M., I should find a place vacant in the post-cart at 1 P.M. I did not wish to lose a day in obeying my Chief's summons. Accordingly, I resigned myself to the terrible ordeal, which eight hours' jolting and semi-suffocation in that closely-packed and uneasy vehicle proved to be. The 'bus was as full as it could well be, without allowing for a well-grown and vivacious little child of about two years, whose remarkably pretty face and winning ways were an amusement to the company generally, but whose restless activity must have been sorely fatiguing to the tired, sad-looking young mother who held her upon her knee.

My travelling companions were all strangers to me ; and, with an Englishman's usual taciturnity under like circumstances, I kept myself very much to myself for some time, amusing myself with taking notes of the people and of their conversation. The latter soon became general, and strongly political from a colonial point of view. All things colonial having

as yet the charm of novelty in my eyes, I listened with considerable interest. On one side of the low, narrow, hard-seated vehicle sat two members of the Legislative Council, a Transvaal farmer, and a very little Roman Catholic priest, accompanied by two tall young ladies, who appeared to be travelling in his charge, and who, I concluded from their deferential manner towards their priestly friend, must be scholars from the convent school in Durban. On the other side sat the pretty young mother and child (by the way, I do not think I mentioned before that the mother was pretty as well as the child), a respectable-looking old gentleman, who appeared from the conversation to hold some civic authority in Pietermaritzburg, two more farmers or transport-riders, a half-coloured St. Helena woman, and myself. Two men on the box with the driver completed the party.

During the first hour's drive my attention was chiefly occupied, and my indignation excited, by what I conceived to be the uncivil treatment received by the aforesaid coloured woman. Fresh from civilised lands as I was, and as yet uncontaminated by colonial

prejudices of race, I was keenly alive to anything like ill-usage or discourtesy to a coloured person merely for their colour's sake; and it seemed to me to be shameful that this woman, who was clean and well-dressed, talking good English, and distinguished only by her brown skin, should be snubbed and browbeaten by the whiter passengers, and thrust into a corner and neglected while paying the same as the rest of us at the wayside inns.

I think so still, and that the latter proceeding especially was dishonest as well as unchristian. But I am bound to confess that the result of my constituting myself in a small way the champion of this particular dark lady, by making a point of giving civil answers to a remark or two made by her to the company generally, and completely ignored by our fellow-passengers, was such as to make me more cautious for the future. I had no particular desire to be on familiar terms with any strangers, black, white, or brown; but, after once exchanging only the very smallest of civilities with my St. Helena friend, I found that there was no shaking her off at all for

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the rest of the day. She seemed to consider that I had taken charge of her altogether, appealed to me upon every occasion with the most embarrassing frankness, and favoured me occasionally during the remainder of the journey with short disconnected passages from her private history, delivered in an alarmingly sudden manner at every pause which occurred in the general conversation, so that the fragments of interesting information which she gave me concerning herself were comically out of keeping with what came before and after.

As I have already remarked, the conversation had a strong political flavour, and I listened to it with some curiosity and a desire to know a little more of popular feeling in Natal than I had as yet had any opportunity of doing.

The expedition against the native chief, Langa-libalele, in which my Chief had been severely wounded, was not long over, and was constantly alluded to. With but one exception the speakers adopted a tone concerning it which would in itself have prejudiced any Englishman against the colonial side of the

question ; vindictive expressions against the unfortunate captive, eagerness for his death, and, if that could be, for the still more complete destruction of his unhappy tribe prevailed. I did not then know much about the matter, and put a few questions to the man next me as to the crimes for which this wicked old chief was so detested, expecting to hear that he was a second Nana Sahib, or, at the very least, that he had made a murderous assault upon some defenceless homestead or other. But neither then nor on any subsequent occasion was I ever able to discover that he had done anything worse than run away in a fright, a fault which, if worthy of death in a British soldier, is hardly deserving of so severe a correction in a poor untaught heathen.

“What has the man done ?” I asked of my next-door neighbour in the 'bus.

“Done ! why, he has rebelled against the government ! He is a bloodthirsty old rebel !” was the somewhat indignant reply that I received.

“Yes, so I hear,” was my quiet rejoinder. “But, what I want to know is in what way he has shown

his bloodthirsty rebellious disposition. What has he *done?*”

“Done! done! why, don’t you hear me tell you that he is a *rebel!*” exclaimed the farmer to whom I had addressed myself, looking very hot indeed.

“I have heard you *say* it, but I have not heard you *prove* it, my dear sir,” I replied. “What proof is there? What has convinced you that this man is what you say he is?”

“Why, why,” stammered the man, completely taken aback, “he is a rebel because everybody knows that he is. Didn’t he run away!”

“Oh! I see,” said I, in a tone of the most complete conviction. “Thank you; I am a stranger here, and only asked for information.”

“And I’ll tell you what it is, sir,” exclaimed a man opposite me, bringing down his clenched fist upon his knee with a resounding thump, “when you have been as long in the colony as I have you’ll know a little more about it. If I’d been the Governor a few months ago, the rebel chief should have been tried by court-martial, and have paid the penalty of his crimes,

either by cord or bullet, at once. I'd have given no ear to the Exeter Hall cry of pseudo-philanthropists. The man was taken red-handed [*Anglicè*, running away?—A. W.], and he should have been put to death with all the men of his tribe who resisted us. The others should be put to hard labour, and the women and children put out to service. That's what I would have done, and made it a good thing for the colony too."

A moment's silence ensued upon this burst of legislative eloquence, and immediately my St. Helena friend remarked to me from the other end of the vehicle: "My mistress gave me six new pair of stockings and this dress that I have on before I left."

I hardly knew how to receive this and similar pieces of information, while the other members of the party appeared unaware that anyone had spoken, and the other Legislative Councillor took up his colleague's speech with emphasis.

"The whole thing has been bungled," he said. "All that was needed to make the farce complete was that a verdict of 'Not guilty' should have been given

at the trial. Who would then have been responsible for the thousands of cattle that have been taken and sold by us, for the huts burnt down, and the property destroyed, for the blood shed on both sides, I should like to know! You are quite right, X——; there should have been no trial at all; the old fellow should just have been strung up at once. But this playing at justice has made the whole affair contemptible.”

I thought so too, when I came to know a little more about it, though not quite in the sense that the speaker meant. However, I made no further remark at the time, nor did I think it worth while to point out the confusion of ideas between that most just of all courts, a court-martial, and “no trial at all,” as displayed by the last two speakers.

A house on the roadside was next pointed out to me where lived a man who ran out to spit in the face of the captive chief when he, a manacled prisoner, was on his way to Durban and when the cart in which he was being conveyed stopped to change horses. It appears that there was no one present upon that occasion who possessed manhood enough to knock the scoundrel

down, nor has he since been lynched, or in any way taught what Englishmen think of such dastardly actions. I must also say that the deed, although censured by my fellow-passengers of the 'bus, seemed to excite nothing more than mild disapprobation amongst the speakers, with the exception of the respectable old citizen of Pietermaritzburg before alluded to. I am bound to observe that the old man came out with a speech which displayed a manly and Christian spirit for which I honoured him.

I had not wished to embroil myself with my chance companions, and had therefore checked the indignant words which rose to my lips, although, in old Scripture phrase, "it was pain and grief to me." But the aforesaid citizen spoke in my stead. He declared boldly that he looked upon Langalibalele as an injured man, who had done nothing to deserve the treatment that he had received, which was a disgrace to the colony. He went on to say that amongst them all there was but one man who had been wise enough to see the truth, and bold enough to declare it, although very much to his own injury, as he (the

speaker) well knew. "This one man," he said, "was doing all in his power to save the colony from the consequences of the fatal mistakes that had been made. He was Natal's best friend, both to black and white, but got nothing but abuse from the latter. And," he concluded, "you all know whom I mean,—the Bishop of Natal."

I have said that only one of the *speakers* seemed to feel for the oppressed tribe. But there was one other present who, although perfectly silent, evidently took a vivid interest in the subject. This was one of the young ladies in charge of the Roman Catholic priest; and I had observed her with some attention as the rapid changes in her countenance evinced her intense dissent from the harsh sentiments enunciated, her indignation against the cowardly attack upon the prisoner, and her pleasure in the old man's defence. Now, when the Bishop was spoken of so highly,—he had been alluded to already although not by name, in terms far from flattering in connection with this affair,—she leant forwards to look at the speaker, with heightened colour in her face. It was manifestly as

much as she could do to keep silence, but it was as evident that it would not be well for a lady to take part in a discussion with these rough men, and she sank back into her place, contenting herself with a whispered remark to her priestly escort, who, indeed, seemed to be rather nervous, and excessively anxious to keep her quiet. I could not help thinking that, if that young lady were to take the reins into her own hands, and speak out her mind, the priest would be rather like a hen with ducklings. However, she seemed submissive enough. I observed that an awkward silence fell upon the party after this direct mention of the Bishop, and wondered what could be the cause. A few minutes later we stopped to change horses, and I chanced to overhear a little conversation which took place between the same lady and the last speaker. He stood by the 'bus door to help her out; and, as she gave him her hand, she said to him, "I do not know who you are, sir, but I cannot refrain from thanking you for the way in which you have just spoken of my father." "Ah!" he replied, "my name is — ; of course you know me now?" My

own private impression is that the name conveyed not the slightest information to her ; but the momentary blank expression which crossed her face was instantly banished, and she replied promptly, " Oh ! Mr. —, of course, I beg your pardon." " Indeed," he said, " I feel that I ought to beg yours for speaking of the Bishop before you at all."

I thought to myself, " Bravo, old gentleman, there's true delicacy of feeling ; *you* feel that it is not quite the thing to speak of her father in her presence, even in his praise, while these other fellows make no scruple of hinting abuse pretty freely."

Before we started again I inquired of one of the legislators who had exchanged remarks with me before, who were the two young ladies with the Roman Catholic clergyman. His reply was, " that one is one of Bishop Colenso's daughters, the other I don't know, but I believe she has something to do with the convent school in Durban." So that my original guess was right about one of the two, though not about both.

Welch's Half-way House, where we dined, is

certainly as good an inn as one can wish to find in a colony. It is neat and clean, and its mistress is thoroughly the mistress of the art of plain-cooking. A cheerful incident occurred on our leaving Welch's, which seemed to enliven the journey a little, and to give me an insight into the method of horse-breaking in vogue in Natal. We were driving six horses, and one of the wheelers put in this time seemed to take an unusual number of men to hold and harness him. On inquiring I was told, "Oh! he's only been in harness once before. We're breakin' of 'im in."

Accordingly, the ragged-looking native grooms having let go the six horses' heads, we started. No! I mean we tried to start. Five animals bounded forwards, but our unbroken steed took a direction of his own, not contemplated by the rest of the party, and in two seconds he was down, all four legs kicking in the air, and then rolled beneath the 'bus. The passengers were requested to descend, the horse was dragged out and righted, and then we submissively got in again and tried once more. This

time we made a fair start, though a rapid one, and tore along the road at a great pace for a mile or two, after which the wild horse settled down to his work, and the pace became more moderate. I was surprised at the *sang froid* exhibited by the women of our party, and concluded that rough travelling must be too common an occurrence in Natal to excite remark or alarm. Even the baby-girl did not seem at all frightened, although much concerned as to whether the "poor little horsie" was hurt or not.

During this stage of the journey one of the young ladies getting rather faint, as well she might, from the suffocating heat within the 'bus, was given a place in front by the driver, where she could enjoy the breeze. The men, though a rough-looking set, were civil enough in this matter; and the driver, a young fellow in corduroys, with his head tied up in a handkerchief, took great care about covering her dress from the dust with a cloak, and fastening the latter securely down. I was sitting next to the driver inside, and could hear every word that passed above me. I was at once struck with the perfectly

free-and-easy style of his speech. He was not rude, and did not mean to be so, but he evidently considered himself completely on an equality with any passenger who might be in his charge. The young lady by his side, indeed, appeared a little surprised, and it was plain enough that this was a new experience to her; but she took it all in good part, seeing, I suppose, that the youth intended nothing but politeness, although her replies were slightly monosyllabic. For some time he entertained her with short accounts of the conduct of his passengers on such and such occasions of danger, and his own driving experiences, delivered in a spasmodic and occasional manner, in the intervals of controlling his horses, and making a point of telling her not to be frightened whenever he had time to think of it, that is to say, whenever there was the least occasion. To do her justice she did not seem to require the advice. He next expatiated upon a topic highly interesting and gratifying to me, namely, the great change and improvement in the condition of the roads since they had come under my Chief's supervision. Never before had they been

kept in such excellent order. At last, after a short silence, the driver, turning to his fair companion, inquired, "Have you such a thing as a pin about you?" There was an astonished look from a pair of blue eyes, and then, after a moment's deliberation, the pin was produced from some mysterious fold or other, and gravely presented in silence. It was immediately used as a toothpick, the young man remarking the while, "I've got a tooth here that has been bothering me all day." After which he proposed to return it. My young friend of the blue eyes, however, did not seem to view the proposition with favour, and replied, "Had you not better keep it in case you should require it again?" Whereupon he stuck it into his coat-sleeve.

I was wondering whether such familiarities were matters of course in Natal between young ladies and omnibus-drivers, when I became aware that she at all events did not look upon them as such, for her face, turned perseveringly away as though she were intently observing the scenery, showed signs of so much amusement that her final victory over her

sense of the ridiculous, struck me as highly commendable. At the next wayside inn the driver pulled up, dropped his reins into her hands with the words, "Just hold them a minute, will you?" and was off the box in a second. I heard her murmur to herself, "Suppose they go on!" The next time we changed horses, she resumed her place inside.