

CHAPTER V.

THE MINISTER FOR NATIVE AFFAIRS.

THE next day was Sunday, and upon the following morning I was sent up the hill to direct the non-commissioned officer in charge of the "rebels" to have them paraded at ten o'clock. It had been arranged that at that hour the head of the native department should address them, and inform them of the duties for which they were destined, promising them in the name of the Government that they should be released on their return, should they have conducted themselves to the entire satisfaction of the *Inkos* under whose orders the operations were to be carried out. I was glad of the opportunity of witnessing this ceremony; and had, besides, some little curiosity to see the minister for native affairs, whose character and

importance to the country I had often heard discussed by the colonists, amongst whom opinions varied to so great an extent that whether, as some said, he was the wisest and best man of his age, the saviour of the colony, commanding the most absolute respect and affection from the whole native population whose many years of peace were entirely due to his wise and strong government,—or whether, as others asserted, he was a crafty scheming man, bent on increasing his own power, and whose policy for years had been dishonest, unprincipled, and rotten to the core,—was an open question to my mind, and one upon which I did not venture to question the Colonel.

I had a pleasant four miles' ride through the fresh yet sunny morning air that May-day, reaching the "rebel camp" in good time for all arrangements. The hundred Putini prisoners had now been for nearly five months at work under the corporal in charge of them, and during that time he, whether by his own choice or owing to the military spirit which presided, had contrived to drill them into no despicable condition of order. They marched in sections of four, and took

up their position in line by the roadside in a manner which surprised me.

Punctual to the minute my Chief appeared on horseback, accompanied by the head of the native department, and several native chiefs and *indunas*.* There was a great deal of saluting and respectful shouting as the party rode up and dismounted, and a general condition of anxiety and excitement prevailed, from which, I am free to confess, I was by no means exempt. Chairs for the two white Chiefs were now placed in the shade at the end of the building which formed the "rebels'" barracks, the accompanying native dignitaries sitting on the ground to their right and left, whilst the "rebels" formed a semicircle at a little distance in front. As for me, I took up my position a little behind the Colonel, and as close to him as possible, determined to see and hear all that I could; although, had I been aware of how long I should stand there, and how little wiser I should be at the end of the proceedings, perhaps I might have spared myself the trouble. I understand now that the whole

* *Indunas*—*head men*; in the army, *captains*.

thing was done in true native style, and that it is the custom of the head of the native department to imitate as much as possible the habits of a Zulu chief in dealing with his people. Accordingly, he first held a consultation with his own special followers, which to my English ideas lasted a most unreasonable time, seeing that not one of them had a voice in the matter in hand, or would have ventured to do otherwise than say "Amen" to their lord and master's remarks. Certainly, there was a good deal of snuff used on both sides, the natives taking large quantities in their curious bone or horn spoons, whilst the head of the native department at intervals gravely tapped an elaborate silver snuff-box; but it did not seem to hasten matters, and might as well have been done at home as far as I could see. But then, I, being an Englishman, and once a soldier, was accustomed to a prompter method of doing business, and was not so well versed in Kaffir customs as the head of the native department. His manners were those of a paramount chief, his habits of thought evidently running in the same groove; and I confess the scene appeared to me

to be a solemn farce, and nothing more. I stole an occasional glance at my Chief, trying to read his opinion of it all in his face, but it was imperturbably calm, and not more weary-looking than usual in repose.

After a conversation with his own followers which seemed interminable, the great man at length addressed the expectant Putini people, who up to this time had preserved a decorous silence. Another lengthened parley now ensued, in which some half-dozen of the captives took a respectful part. Knowing no Zulu, of course I could not tell what passed, but the outward appearance of proceedings was as follows,—A few words fell from the lips of the great white chief, upon which a discussion took place amongst the hearers, one of whom then took upon himself to rejoin. After a pause,—with snuff,—more words of wisdom flowed from the lips of the great Chief, when the same ceremony was repeated, and so on, again and again, until, I confess, I was very weary. From tone and manner I concluded that commands and promises were being dribbled out to the poor creatures piecemeal, and that their replies were thankful acceptations

of whatever justice and mercy they might possibly receive. But why should it take so long? The prisoners had nothing to urge; there was nothing for them to talk about; they were simply to be told so and so, and there should have been an end of it. But no! Kaffir-like, the great man considered it necessary to talk. Surely the whole thing might have been settled in five minutes, instead of which it took nearly two hours!

My mind was certainly unfavourably impressed by my first experience of the official method of managing native matters in Natal. It seemed to me that I was in the midst of an assemblage of savages only, whose modes of thought and ideas were different from anything to which I had been accustomed. I could hardly believe that I saw before me the man who has for so many years controlled, in England's name, the destinies of the native races of Natal. I felt, rather, that I saw the Zulu despot in the midst of his savage retainers, and to me it has long been inconceivable that England's honour should have been entrusted, since the birth of this her colony

to one who at heart was but a Zulu chief. At last it was over, and the ruler of the blacks departed with his retainers. I looked up at my Chief and thought I saw relief painted upon his countenance.

“What was it all about, sir?” said I.

He shrugged his shoulders. “What matter so long as I carry out my plan?” said he, and turned at once to his work.

The men were sent to eat their midday meal, which had been prepared for them during the conference, and the Colonel then inspected the whole of the entrenching tools which had been laid out in order and ready for the march, directing some trifling alterations to be made, and satisfying himself that everything was in complete condition for service.

How different he was now from what he had appeared for the last two hours! Then he was silent, bored, yet quietly resigned to his fate, and to Mr. —’s tardy operations. Now he was full of life and energy, seeing into everything with his own

eyes, forgetting nothing, overlooking nothing, and doing all as rapidly as thoroughly. I stood by and took lessons, ready at any moment for an order to myself.

Presently appeared, ready to start, a procession of five two-horse carts, the leading one flying a red flag denoting danger,—and properly so, for it was laden with barrels of gunpowder to be employed in purposes of demolition.

The other carts were laden with tents, implements, and provisions, and all passed our Chief for inspection. Now the signal was given by the corporal in charge of the “rebels,” when they fell in as if on parade, each man clad in a serviceable great-coat and having a good warm blanket, rolled and worn horse-collar fashion over one shoulder and under the other. In addition every man carried his rolled sleeping-mats, and a couple of long native sticks. The Colonel narrowly inspected this party, and noticing that several of the great-coats looked worn and thin, he directed fresh ones to be given out from a supply which he had sent up for the purpose.

It was pleasing to observe the satisfaction evinced by some of the recipients, who, having come from the locality to which they were now bound, fully appreciated the sufferings from cold and exposure which they were about to encounter. My Chief further observing that ten of the men did not look so robust as he considered necessary to encounter the anticipated hardships, directed them to fall out and to remain in barracks during the absence of their comrades.

All being now ready each man shouldered his pickaxe and shovel; and, the signal being given, the party marched off apparently in high glee, and singing one of their national war-songs.

Having seen little or nothing of the natives in their wild state I felt a great curiosity and interest in them, and was somewhat struck by this war-song, which, proceeding from so many, had an impressive effect. Not that all sang, or rather shouted, together the whole time. One man, a leader, whether from his rank amongst them, or from his powers of voice, commenced, and chanted alone for a few minutes

a monotonous dirge-like song, which was presently chorussed by the whole body with a loud long shout of "Hau! Hau! Hau!" and then the solo commenced again.