

CHAPTER XII.

A SNOW STORM.

ON the morning of the 29th we started once more upon our travels towards what was to be the scene of our last and most arduous mountain labours,—namely, the Bushman's River Pass.

I was particularly anxious to see with my own eyes the spot where my Chief had fought the year before, and over which so many bloodless battles of words had since been waged. Of course I took myself the only view of the matter which I had ever heard propounded by men of my own cloth who had seen the ground,—namely, that the position taken up by the Colonel was clearly defensible, and could have been held long enough to serve all requisite purposes had he been followed by twenty regulars who knew what is meant by discipline and obedience, two

qualities quite as necessary to the making of a good soldier as the mere courage which we are all supposed to possess. My knowledge of my Chief was all that was necessary to convince me that even his valour had not outstripped his judgment, as pretended by those whose interest it was to throw the blame of the failure upon one who, according to the rules of the Service, could not speak in his own defence. Nevertheless, I wanted to see the place with my own eyes, and to be able to say that I had done so. Consequently I set forth with renewed energy, although but for this special subject of interest I might have begun to feel that I had had about enough of frozen passes, rugged mountains, and perpetual climbing, with the monotonous round of newly-discovered passes, scarped works, and boulder walls.

It is curious how very little the number and nature of these mountain-passes is known to those whose interest, nay, whose duty it is to keep them in mind. Not half of them are set down in any map, or have any names save those given by us while working their destruction. Determined to do

thoroughly the work entrusted to him, the Colonel gave rewards to the finders of new passes, and the result was excellent for the object we had in view at the time. To give one instance only; everyone who knows anything about Natal knows also that there is a "Bushman's Pass" in the Draakensberg range, and some few may likewise be aware that there are two, the "Old Bushman's Pass" and the "Bushman's River Pass," some fifty miles apart. But how many Natal Government officials,—how many Natalians,—are aware that round about the Bushman's River Pass alone there are six several smaller ones, all of which we destroyed as thoroughly as the only one upon our original list?

After leaving Cathkin we soon found ourselves in the deserted location of the unfortunate Putini tribe. A fertile valley, well watered by the Little Tugela river which takes its rise in the Kathlamba range, lay before us. But nine months ago this pleasant spot had been the happy tranquil home of the then well-to-do tribe, numbering some five thousand souls. Here they had spent many peaceful

years, cultivating their land, and bringing up their children to be, like their fathers, simple and honest, though untaught, savages. And here, while so unsuspecting of approaching evil that not a man had taken up arms nor a woman fled, they were surprised by the Government forces. Their habitations were pillaged and burnt, their cattle seized, and themselves carried off prisoners, with no knowledge on the part of the victims as to what their offence might be. It was said indeed that some women of their tribe, who had married amongst Langalibalele's people, had taken refuge in the huts of their fathers and brothers from the assegais of the murderous loyal native force. The women were not turned out by these near relatives to meet a bloody death, or, still worse, a dishonourable captivity; and the Government forces promptly taught the whole tribe that family affection and common humanity may be accounted as crimes; or, shall we rather say, that it is dangerous for a well-to-do and prosperous little community to lie right in the path of an armed, rapacious, and disappointed mob?

A little later the authorities themselves acknowledged that the capture of the Putini tribe, and confiscation of its property, was a complete mistake. Nevertheless, at the time of which I write, eight months after the affair, the Putini women were still living under strict surveillance, the men still working as convicts upon the roads. The only improvement in their condition was the hope of regaining their freedom through my Chief's energetic interference on their behalf, and by their own painful labour and perilous exposure. Nothing but the childlike trust and confidence which these poor creatures plainly put in the master under whom they served, and who shared their perils and sufferings to the full, could have carried them through their work.

We had marched over much savage country, through wild and uninhabited districts, but in all our travels we had never reached a spot which struck me with such a sense of desolation as did this smiling fruitful valley. On every gentle slope and every rounded knoll were to be seen the charred and blackened remains of ruined kraals, strewed round

with broken utensils of native manufacture. A silence as of the grave reigned over the deserted land. No voice of child nor low of cattle could be heard, but only the long sigh of the wind amongst the neglected gardens, as the feathery heads of the stately maize waved slowly in the breeze, and the sharp trickling sound of the brooks that fed the Little Tugela river, distinctly audible through the clear atmosphere and the perfect stillness of the vale.

The mealie and amabele gardens which lay on every side were green and young when fire and steel swept through the land in the spring-time of the year. Their soft green blades, if crushed down and trampled upon for awhile, had risen again with the elasticity possessed by all young things, and the grain was now ripe and ready to gather. There were none, however, to reap the crops, save the wild deer or "bucks" as I learnt to call them in Natal, and the many thousand birds which perched on every stem and took flight in clouds as we passed by. The little feathered rascals, indeed, were enjoying an unwonted feast, undisturbed by the children whose

business it should have been to sit all day long upon little wattle stages or scaffolds, shouting to each other and to the winged robbers, much as country lads are set to do at home in England. Our horses and cattle, too, enjoyed a meal of their favourite food, these deserted gardens furnishing excellent provender for them.

I could not help wondering, as we marched through this valley, what might be the sentiments of our poor pioneers, the rightful dwellers upon the soil. Did the joy with which the hope,—certainly unlooked for,—of a return to their old homes ere long predominate, or did their souls rise indignantly against the cruel injustice which had dragged them away; and did they wonder why they should not be allowed to return at once, now, while their crops were still safe and whole, instead of being forced to leave them to be carried off by anyone who chose to take possession of them? The crops were gone to the last grain before they returned as free men once more; nor, but for the strenuous exertions and determination of my Chief, would they then have

reached their homes in time to plant their next year's crop.

On the 30th June, after a fatiguing march over a very broken country, we camped in a valley near a stream of beautiful cold water. The march had been so severe that there were many stragglers from our lines, some of whom, as night fell, lost our track, and had considerable difficulty in finding their way to camp. Indeed they might have slept in the veldt that night, a recreation for which the weather was far too cold, had not Mr. Mansel ridden back some miles to find them.

Next day we reached the Bushman's River Valley, and having formed a general depôt in a most picturesque and well-wooded spot, with the Bushman's River flowing close by, we followed the course of the stream towards its source, and encamped late that afternoon about a mile from the foot of the pass.

About sunset we all prophesied snow, from the appearance of the sky ; but later on the night cleared, and when we turned in we had good hopes of a

fine morrow. It was a lovely night; a great big moon, like a harvest-moon at home, rose splendidly into a cloudless sky, lighting up the berg above us, and performing for us the meaner functions of many lamps, whereby we greatly profited, avoiding tumbles over tent-lines and such like impedimenta.

Our hopes, however, proved to be delusive. Waking up, about three o'clock next morning, I became aware that snow was falling fast, mixed with little lumps of ice, which pattered on my tent like hail, although hail it was not. It was deadly cold, and further sleep was out of the question in such an atmosphere. I lay and shivered beneath the blankets through the long hours that yet remained before the tardy winter's dawn, and was glad enough when at last it broke, enabling me to get up and try what moving about and then crouching by the first-lit fire would do towards thawing my frozen blood.

On comparing notes at breakfast-time I learnt that one or two of our party had been wise enough to carry off hot stones to bed with them as foot-warmers, and had thus been able to defy the intense cold of the

past night. Their experience was so satisfactory as compared with ours that for the future hot stones became the order of the day, or rather night. Our breakfast-party presented an odd enough appearance upon that snowy morning. A bleak hill-side surrounded by other hills as bleak, and the berg frowning above, the whole white with snow,—such was the background to the scene. For foreground objects we had our fire enclosed by a sod-wall tipped with heather, with figures seated round it wrapped to the eyes. Upon the fire were sundry pots and kettles, and busy over them a British soldier, with a scarlet nightcap on his head, as ministering angel to our wants, which indeed he supplied luxuriously with partridge curry, mutton-chops, coffee, bread and butter, so that we could hardly complain of starvation in addition to the cold. Snow fell fast the while into the plates and cups, so that we eat as quickly as possible, and then huddled over the fire to talk, getting up occasionally to shake the accumulating snow from off our backs, and sitting down again as speedily as possible to keep our camp-stools dry.

We discussed our present prospects, and rather shook our heads over them. Should there be any truth in the saying that bad weather once set in lasts with the waning moon, it was rather a bad look-out for us. No work was possible for that day save the erection of certain turf-walls around the principal tents, as a shelter from the biting wind,—a wise precaution seeing that we might be detained for some days by the fall of snow, which, should it block the pass, would entirely prevent our work for the present. Meanwhile, every man who could do so remained in his tent and in his blanket. The British soldier is but a helpless creature when thus exposed to hardships, and seems to be too idle to make himself a shelter under which he can eat in warmth and comfort. He prefers to lie about under shelter and be cold. Upon this occasion, too, our native force seemed rather inclined to follow the example of the white, and no man in camp was to be seen beyond his tent, except those on duty at the time.

About noon Mr. Mansel and his mounted policemen took their departure, in spite of driving snow

and wind, on their return to their own camp, having been ordered into Estcourt. Their commander evidently left us with extreme unwillingness, liking the life we led in the wilds far better than his camp at Estcourt; but his sense of duty took him away without delay. Poor Shot, too, his favourite spaniel dog, who invariably accompanied his master on patrol, looked very melancholy at having to leave a camp on such a day. He had been enjoying himself immensely, alternately lying in the warmth of our fire and dashing out to have a game with the snow, which was a novel and apparently a welcome, play-fellow for him. There was no fear of starvation for the party this time, for we sent them off well-provisioned for some days to come.

It was by no means a cheerful day upon the whole. The Colonel sat in his tent writing letters and despatches, busy as usual; but the rest of us did not do much besides talk and smoke and endeavour to keep ourselves warm. At four o'clock a slight distraction occurred in the arrival of fresh supplies of pumpkins, mealies, and wood from the

depôt below. The snow still fell fast, and the long string of horses and oxen, with packs upon their backs, looked like a train of ghosts as they approached, winding round the hills, and white with the snow which filled the air so thickly that all objects at a little distance became dim and indistinct to view.

At sundown, however, the weather cleared again. We trusted that the snow was over, and made all our arrangements for work upon the following day before we went to bed.

What was my dismay, on awaking at about two o'clock, at hearing once more the soft sound of fast-falling snow and the howl of the rising wind! "No work to-day!" thought I, and turned to sleep again. Useless attempt! The wind howled louder and louder, while the cold grew ever more intense. In another hour a perfect hurricane was blowing, which drove the snow, or rather frozen dust, right through the tents, which were made of cotton stuff instead of canvas, as well as under their walls. Soon the tents were full of snow, and the sleepers covered with a frozen winding-sheet of the same.

It beat in at the tent-doors, and there froze into a mass of ice. We might almost as well have been lying in the open air; it was indeed a bitter night for us all.

When daylight appeared I went out to see how matters stood, and found the Colonel out before me, looking at a couple of tents which had been blown down, the occupants of which were huddled round a fire. They had a screen-wall round them, without which they could not have kept their fire alight, and very miserable indeed they looked.

I saluted my Chief, and asked for orders; but the wind blew so strong that we could scarcely stand against it, and forced the icy dust into our faces until it was difficult to draw breath. The ice morsels froze upon one's hair, one's coat, and beard, until one had all the appearance of a snow-man. They collected at the back of one's head, beneath the forage-caps which we all wore, and froze there into a solid mass, which we were obliged to submit to the influence of the fire before we could get rid of it. Such a bitter day I never experienced before

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or since. Even the Colonel looked grave and anxious over our plight; although his resolute courage and endurance carried him,—in spite of the exhaustion consequent upon long ill-health and yet unhealed wounds,—through what tried the fortitude of the strongest man amongst us.

The pioneers lay in their tents, covered with snow, and nothing would induce them to stir. They utterly refused to get up, to light their fires and cook their food, to do anything, in short,—begging only to be allowed to die where they were. There was no doing anything with them, even for their own comfort. Nor were the Basutos and white men in a much better condition. We endured this state of things until noon, hoping for a change in weather; but the only change was from bad to worse, for by twelve o'clock the snow was driving in such clouds that we could not see a yard in any direction. The Basutos now became terribly alarmed, fearing that we should be snowed up altogether. So, yielding to dire necessity only, the Colonel decided to beat a retreat from the elements.

Accordingly he directed the Basutos to go down into the valley where we had left our horses and cattle, and to send up all the men and horses there to help us shift the camp equipage as speedily as possible. Off started the Basutos, in such a hurry that they left their tents standing; and the Colonel turned his attention towards the Putini young men, over whose heads he had to have the tents pulled down, in order to induce them to stir. Even then they did not move, but lay under their fallen tents, crying: "Let us die, 'Nkos; only let us die!"

That not being his object, however, he proceeded next to pull them out. They were perfectly helpless, paralysed, their brown skins *white* with cold. Finally, with the greatest difficulty they were started off down the mountain in the tracks of the Basutos. Once fairly off, they made no delay, until they reached the warm valley beneath, and hid themselves in the old bushmen's lanes with which the place abounds. The South African is certainly unable to endure severe cold, and these men would have died had they been

kept upon the mountain, or allowed to remain stupefied in their tents.

Meanwhile the Colonel waited with the —th and with ourselves for the pack-animals. It was getting late before these began to arrive. A Basuto boy, whom the Colonel had taken for an after-rider, was the first to appear, driving seven pack-horses before him. These animals were immediately loaded up and sent off again, and then, as each horse or ox appeared, he was taken and loaded by white men ;—for the native drivers were helpless and could only cower over the fire. At last the work was done, our last tent struck, and the last animal loaded. Nothing remained upon the ground save the tents of the pioneers and Basutos and our frozen selves, and we made the best of our way down the mountain-side.

I had been wishing all day that the Colonel would leave us, for I feared the effect of the intense cold upon him ; but, after all, it is mental rather than physical strength which “ carries men through.” He was as active and energetic as usual throughout that trying day, and no power on earth would have taken