

## CHAPTER XV.

### HLUBI AND HIS HOUSEHOLD.

By the end of July, hardships and fatigue had greatly told upon our pioneers. The poor fellows were gaunt and worn-looking, suffering much from chest complaints, and from the effects of the frost and snow upon their feet, large portions of the soles of which had begun in many cases to come away. My chief decided to replace them by a fresh working-party, and to start with them at once for Pietermaritzburg, in order to obtain for them there in person that promised reward of freedom which he considered they had fairly earned. He hoped also to procure the release of the whole of this innocent and ill-used tribe. But, although he would not for a moment allow that there was any fear of his failing in this latter object, yet I could tell that he was anxious, and especially that he was

annoyed by the apparent impossibility of extracting from Government any definite answer to his despatches on the subject in question. Now, however, he considered that the time had arrived for putting an end to all doubts and delays; and with this view he ordered up two parties of men who had been employed for some time under civilian overseers upon Colonial road-works, and who arrived in camp on the 27th July. The white men in charge of them had been directed to see that they joined us fully equipped in every respect. Nevertheless, when they made their appearance, they were practically deficient in everything, and had to be supplied with necessaries by us. However, their strong and healthy appearance was undeniable, and in that respect the contrast between them and our trusty pioneers was painfully marked.

We found one of the fresh road-parties at our camp when we returned to it on the evening of the 27th; and the Colonel, having received the overseer's report, directed him to turn out the cooks of his party at five A.M. next morning, and to see that their breakfast was ready by six, and that

the whole body of men marched at seven for the pass, such being our own daily custom.

The overseer stared on receiving these orders, but said nothing in reply, and retired with a salute. But a little later on that evening I happened to be standing before our kitchen-fire with my Chief, when the man approached again and addressed the latter. He said that he desired to inform the Colonel that it would be utterly impossible for him to get the cooks of his party up, or to make the men eat their breakfast at that early hour. Also that none of them would go up the mountain at all unless they got extra pay, while as for himself, he thought he might manage to get up once a week, but not oftener, as he did not think his health would allow of it.

Upon hearing this audacious speech I felt much the same inclination to run away as I experienced in the Pinetown stables upon my first visit to them. Curiosity prevailing, however, I stood my ground and waited for the result.

My Chief looked at the overseer steadily but calmly, and as though the man who could venture

to dispute his orders to his face for self and party were a natural curiosity worth observing. He then simply repeated his former orders in a quiet tone of voice, adding these words: "Go back to your party, and tell your people that I will flog the first man, be he black or be he white, who disobeys orders. You yourself will also parade at seven o'clock with your horse saddled and bridled, when you will leave the camp, and proceed to your own residence, where you will remain until the work upon which these people are employed is finished, as you are perfectly useless here. I should dismiss you from the service of the Government were it not that you have been employed for so many years that I am disposed to overlook your shortcomings for this time."

The worthy man looked somewhat astonished, but did not attempt to remonstrate, and my Colonel, turning to me, remarked: "It is better that that man should live in idleness and away from here for the next two months, than that he should remain here, where his example is sufficient to corrupt the natives who would work under his directions. He is morally

and physically unfit for the work, and would be perfectly useless; that is quite clear."

The morning of our departure,—for I, of course, was to follow my Chief,—broke bright and clear, and as the sun rose higher in the cloudless sky, the very sight of its brilliancy seemed to impart that sensation of warmth which, in very truth, his rays had little power to produce, even at midday, amongst those ice-bound, snow-clad hills. Our gaunt and toil-worn pioneers were early paraded for their return march to Pietermaritzburg, only one of the party being unable to make the journey on foot. He, by the Colonel's orders, was mounted upon a spare pack-horse, to the sufferer's own great satisfaction.

All the men, the soles of whose feet had been cracked by the frost, were provided with sandals of ox-hide, which had been fitted to them under the supervision of our excellent soldier-cook, to whose strong broth no doubt many of these unfortunates owed their lives. Every man of the party had provided himself with a long walking-staff cut from the mountain-bush, without which no native seems to

consider himself fully equipped for a journey. The cortège started, led by the corporal of infantry, who had been in charge of them ever since they had been employed under my Chief, and who, by his kindness, firmness, and strict justice combined, had gained their entire confidence. I was glad to see the hearty manner in which the few soldiers left in camp gave them their parting good wishes, as it showed that a kindly feeling had resulted from their intimate companionship of the last few months, and that our red-coats, to whom naturally I am partial, had good hearts amongst them.

As soon as the pioneers had left, with the corporal at their head, upon his stubborn Basuto pony which no one but himself could ride, we returned to camp, to make arrangements for our own departure. A few hours later my Chief, attended by myself and a small party of Basuto horsemen, started in our turn for Pietermaritzburg, which, if the pioneers made good marches, we hoped to reach in three days' time.

Our way led us through a new country, and the Basutos were our proper guides, for we were to spend

our first night at Hlubi's house, and our second at that of Jabez, to the solemn delight of these strange, undemonstrative, independent people, who certainly showed their devotion to the Colonel by deeds rather than by words. The Basutos were always very friendly to me, and I think that they took me for some relative of the Colonel's, especially after they discovered that he commonly addressed me by my christian-name, which they evidently looked upon as a mark of relationship amongst Europeans, although using no such distinctions themselves.

The morning had been brilliantly fine, though cold ; but towards noon the clouds rose and began to bank up with every appearance of a heavy snow-storm impending. We escaped, indeed, with but a slight sprinkling of snow, but came in for what was far more unpleasant, namely, a severe hail-storm, which, beating in our faces, left painful effects for some days after.

Late in the afternoon, after a twenty-four miles' ride, we reached the village over which presided Hlubi, the chief of this small section of the Basuto nation,

who possessed land of his own in this part of Natal. Hlubi had sent word to his people beforehand of the honour which was to be done them by his white Chief, and we were received upon our arrival with the utmost hospitality. Two sheep and an ox were presented to the Colonel, according to the custom amongst these people upon the reception of honoured guests. That is to say, the animals, having been accepted, were there and then returned to the donors to be slaughtered and eaten by the retainers of the guest and the hosts themselves, who in our case were one and the same party.

We were at once shown into our lodgings for the night, namely, the young chief's own dwelling-house. This was a square two-roomed building, surrounded by a verandah. It had a thatched roof, and doors and windows upon the European pattern; in fact it was quite a civilised habitation, and all as clean as a new pin. The furniture was certainly not abundant, but the substantial table and form of which it consisted were as white as scrubbing could make them. The table was covered with a clean white cloth, upon which was



speedily placed an excellent repast. Tea, eggs, a pair of capital fowls, and some good bread, flanked by a bottle of brandy and another of gin, showed the ideas of our coloured friends upon the tastes of white men. As we had now had a long fast and an equally long ride, we were quite ready to do justice to the provisions set before us.

When our meal was over we received a visit from Hlubi's wives, who came to pay their respects. They were three in number, each living in a house of her own; but one was the favourite, and decidedly the best looking. She led by the hand a boy of about eighteen months old, the most precocious infant I ever saw, and evidently the pride and delight of both parents.

Our lady visitors did not attempt to enter the house. They sat upon their heels, with their knees also touching the ground, outside, where my Chief received them and conversed with them. Amongst the natives of South Africa the sitting posture is that of an inferior, and denotes respect. In the presence of their king, for instance, no Zulu would dare to

stand without express permission; and the wild native invariably sits, or rather crouches down, the moment he comes into the presence of a superior.

These women were dressed alike, in leather petticoats, embroidered or studded in pretty patterns with what had the appearance of brass-headed nails without the spikes, and had their shoulders covered with shawls or gaudy-coloured blankets. Round their necks they wore heavy necklaces of brass, medallions made in the shape of quoits; bracelets of brass upon the arms, and a bright handkerchief upon the head completed a decidedly picturesque costume.

The precocious infant soon attracted general attention, and we were much amused by his proceedings. At one moment he was clinging to his father's knee, and sharing with him a bowl of *tshwala*; at the next, running to his mother, who remained seated upon her heels, he applied to her for his natural nourishment, with which, indeed, she supplied him without appearing at all disconcerted by our presence.

“Have you any more children, Hlubi?” inquired my Chief.

“No, *Amarail*, only this one,” replied Hlubi.

“He is a fine boy. What is his name?” asked the Colonel.

Hlubi hesitated a little before replying that the child's name was *Major*, and explained that he had been so called because he had received his name while his father was following the Colonel,—then Major,—to the wars.

A long story followed of how Hlubi had had the honour of some talk, during the expedition of 1873, with the head of the native department, who had been graciously pleased to inquire after Hlubi's family. Upon hearing that he had a son and heir, who had not yet received a name, he had himself proposed to bestow upon him that of Benjamin Shepstone, in honour of the two great chiefs of the colony, one the ruler of the whites, and the other of the blacks. So Hlubi brought the news of the great man's condescension home to his wife. But, as usual, there was no counting upon a woman's fancy. Mrs. Hlubi would have nothing whatever to say to Benjamin Shepstone. She knew nothing of those two names, nor of the

chiefs who bore them, and they were not pretty names. *One* white chief she had seen, and he was a leader of soldiers, whose look made bad men and cowards afraid, but warriors and women rejoice. Had not her people, when they returned from the fight, told her that he was not a man like other men, but one made of steel? Yet had he not spoken kindly to her and some other women when he passed through their land before? His name was Major, so she understood; and Major her child should be, or he should not have a name at all. There was nothing more for Hlubi to say, as he was evidently a little under petticoat government to this favourite wife; so Major the child was called, and Major he remained.

After this explanation, the Colonel evidently felt bound to look upon the boy in the light of a godson, and asked the mother to say what present he should send him from Pietermaritzburg. After some consideration, she decided upon a little suit of clothes, in order, she said, that the boy might look like his father. She would like him to have a little coat, trousers, and waistcoat, and particularly she desired

that he should have a cap with a tassel to it. Of this she made a great point.

The aged grandmother now appeared upon the scene, bearing upon her head a pot of special *tshwala*, which she placed at the feet of the "Major," by which title the Colonel was still universally known amongst the natives. The old lady signified to him that she begged his acceptance of her gift, which he received with his accustomed courtesy. I have since observed that it is a special mark of respect for the grandmother, *the old woman* of the tribe, to present this pot of *tshwala*; but I am not sufficiently acquainted with the habits and customs of the natives to explain the origin or meaning of the ceremony.

By this time it was quite dark and becoming uncommonly cold, yet none of our pioneers had arrived. We had taken a different line across country from theirs, and had seen nothing of them since they started in the morning, and we now began to feel a little anxious on their account. At the Colonel's request, a couple of mounted men were despatched from the village to look for them, and to guide them

by the shortest way in. Meanwhile, great preparations were made by the Basutos for the entertainment of the weary travellers. Fires were lit in all directions, large masses of *isijingi*,—mealie meal and pumpkin boiled together,—were prepared, and an ox was killed for their consumption. At the same time the occupants of the different houses arranged amongst themselves how the pioneers should be billeted among them for the night; and all was ready for them by the time the corporal reported the safe arrival of himself and party.

Very shortly all were seated round the blazing fires, and, encouraged and assisted by their Basuto hosts, were soon enjoying their meal of *isijingi* and meat, the latter just warmed through,—I cannot call the process cooking,—according to the native taste.

When my Chief was thoroughly satisfied that all was well with his men, he retired with me to the house set apart for our use, where he was attended by Hlubi and all the heads of families in the village. They sat down upon the ground around us, while we

placed ourselves upon the form, quite prepared for what was sure to ensue, the inevitable *indaba* or "talk." Under our present relations of guests and hosts the Colonel not only permitted but encouraged the good people to talk; and, knowing how dear to the heart of the native is a palaver, he indulged them in a lengthy one. At last, however, they departed to join in the festivities going on without, and we were glad to prepare our beds for the night, consisting simply of blankets laid upon the smooth clay floor. The floor of a house is by no means so comfortable a sleeping-place as the open field, for in the latter a man who knows what a bivouac should be never fails to put himself into an easy position by scratching hollows for both hip and shoulder.

However, we were too much fatigued by our long ride to cavil at any warm resting-place. Even I, strong and healthy though I was, felt excessively tired. And my Chief, upon whom the two months' hardships had greatly told,—although when questioned about himself he always gave the same cheerful answer that he was "all right,"—had the unmistakable look upon

his face of deadly weariness which even he could not entirely conceal. For my own part I slept soundly, and woke next morning thoroughly refreshed, and quite ready for another long day's journey.