

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PUTINI TRIBE AGAIN.

DESPATCHES received from the Colonel detained me at the camp some days longer than I had expected, and it was not until the 23rd of August that I returned to Fort Napier, where my Chief received me with his usual hospitable kindness. When off duty his manner to me was uniformly that of a friend rather than master, and by this time I had learnt to be thoroughly at home at his quarters, where my dog, my horse, and I were his guests as long as we remained in Pietermaritzburg.

Upon the morning after my return we had just finished breakfast when a native servant appeared at the door, and called the Colonel's attention to him by the usual salute, " 'Nkos ! "

" Well, John, what is it ? " inquired his master.

“Putini men come ; want speak Inkos,” replied John in his broken English.

“Putini men !” echoed the Colonel in some surprise. “What can they have come down again for, I wonder !” and immediately went out to make the inquiry. I, of course, followed to hear what was going on.

Outside the garden-gate waited some half-dozen natives, who, upon being summoned by John, came in, and crouched down in the usual native attitude of respect, exclaiming “’Nkos ! Baba !” as they did so.

With the aid of John as interpreter they then gave the Colonel a piece of information which astonished us both considerably, and which brought the momentary expression into his eyes which I had learnt to recognise as the one sign of his being greatly moved which he could not altogether repress. The men said that they had come back because they and all their tribe, with the exception of the ninety pioneers, had been told by their magistrate that their having been set at liberty was a mistake. There was no such order from Government, they were told. Only

the ninety were pardoned, and all the others must go and live upon white men's farms as servants. In fact they must be "given out" again. They had now come, said the men, to ask their own "Inkos," in the name of the tribe, what they were to do next.

The Colonel's temporary answer to this question was to hand the envoys over to John, with orders to feed them and to keep them with the native servants of the establishment until further notice. He made no comment to me upon what we had just been told, but I heard him ejaculate: "This will reflect the deepest discredit upon the Government." And then he ordered his horse, and rode away towards the town, with an expression of countenance that made me avoid asking questions, or getting in the way to offer officious services of any description whatsoever.

For my own part I spent an idle morning. The Colonel had not yet set me to work, and, as I had not a single acquaintance in the town, there was not much open to me in the way of amusement beyond what the Colonel's precincts afforded. I had no

wish to make acquaintances, or my Chief would readily have introduced me to the officers of the regiment stationed in Pietermaritzburg. My old disinclination to bring the fact that I had lost my proper place in the world before the notice of others of my own kind clung to me still, in spite of the Colonel's kindness in entirely ignoring my antecedents. I could not face the inevitable inquiries concerning myself and comments upon my career, which my introduction into Pietermaritzburg society would certainly involve.

“Wylde? Atherton Wylde? Who is he?”

“He has been in the Service, has he? the Engineers?”

“Oh! *that* Wylde! I've heard of the man. He made a fool of himself, and came to awful grief at Gib. in such a year.”

Such would have been the remarks made upon my name, and I did not care to encounter them. I should have clerical work to do for the Colonel shortly, but he had left me no orders on this particular morning except to look after myself, and to remember that

there would be luncheon upon the table at half-past one. I believe I spent the greater part of my leisure in the company of Jack and Charlie, the two baboons who had an establishment of their own in the courtyard, and were a never-failing source of amusement to me. Each of them had a pole of his own with a cross-bar at the top, to which he was attached by a long chain fastened at one end to a collar round his neck, and by the other to a ring which slid easily up and down the pole. They had each a brick-lined bath or well of water for their own use, and the stump of a tree beside it as a seat or table. Jack was a huge fellow who was pleased to be very friendly with me, and would throw somersaults for the reward of a peach or apple almost as readily at my command as at that of his master. But Charlie, who was rather smaller, and was an older inhabitant of the yard than Jack, would have nothing to say to me, nor, as far as I ever saw, to any other stranger, reserving all his marks of regard for the Colonel, to whom he was greatly attached. The length of their chains gave them ample room for exercise and

amusement, and, being well out of the way of all tormentors, they appeared as happy as possible. Nevertheless, upon the one or two occasions when Master Charlie got loose, he showed all the inclination of his kind for mischief, and was with the greatest difficulty prevented from stripping the house of slates. Looking at Jack's great teeth and powerful limbs, and remembering my experiences at Windvogel's Pass, I came to the conclusion that I very much preferred the company of a couple of chained baboons to that of some hundreds of wild ones at large.

When I was tired of Jack and Charlie, I returned to the Colonel's sitting-room (or office, for it did duty as both), and taking a book from the shelves, I deposited myself in a remarkably comfortable lounging-chair for a quiet read. My book was a novel, the scene of which was partly laid in Hong Kong. I had just come to the conclusion that the writer was a woman, and had never been out of England in her life, when I fell asleep, and was only roused from my slumbers by the clank of the Colonel's spurs as he entered the room at half-past one.

I believe I first stammered something about the monkeys and Hong Kong; but, quickly recovering my senses, I sprang out of my chair with apologies for my want of manners. The Colonel picked up the book, which had fallen from my hand to the ground when I was overcome by sleep, but made no remark except to ask me whether I was ready for my luncheon, and we presently sat down to table.

I noticed that he looked grave and anxious; but as the impatient expression which had kept me aloof in the morning had entirely vanished, I ventured to put some questions concerning the results of his inquiries.

He told me then what I could hardly have believed possible,—that, having seen and questioned most of the officials present at Government House upon the day on which the Putini tribe was released, he found that they by no means agreed in their recollection as to how far the Governor's clemency had extended, and as to whether the whole tribe, or only the ninety pioneers, had been set free. Some supported his views as to the universality of the pardon;

others asserted that the pioneers only had received their liberty; while others, again, pleaded uncertainty upon the matter, on the grounds that they had arrived late upon the spot, and had not heard all that had passed.

“Surely, sir,” I exclaimed with much heat, “you cannot believe a word of that? No one who was present at all can have the slightest doubt as to what occurred, or that the whole tribe was set free?”

“Since these gentlemen say so, I cannot do otherwise than believe it,” replied my Chief, with just a *soupeçon* of reproof in his tone, which reminded me that I had been speaking of the officials of a Government under which he himself was serving at present. “My own impressions are quite clear, I admit,” he continued; “and I must do all I can for these people, for my honour is concerned in the matter. I, at least, know that I have promised them liberty in the name of the Government, and that promise must be redeemed or——” But he did not say what would be the consequences.

“What shall you do next, sir?” I inquired.

“I must write to the acting head of the native department, who is at present away, and who himself gave me the letter to Mr. —— (the magistrate). Then all I can do is to await his answer or return.”

And “wait” indeed we did, for another month, to the inevitable detriment of the Putini people’s crops. Meanwhile all was in confusion and uncertainty in the location, and many of the people were given out afresh as servants to the white families up-country.

During this month I spent my days between the two offices belonging to my Chief, as colonial and as commanding engineer, and in taking long rides, either alone or in company with the Colonel. In the latter case we were usually bound for some road-party or other which he wished to inspect; for he never left them longer than he could help to their own devices, knowing that sudden and unexpected visits to his workmen were highly conducive to industry and order. But although I was leading a busy and contented life, I resolutely refused to make any acquaintances; so that when I left the colony a month or two later, I had not one farewell to make save to my Chief, to his

human and four-footed dependents, and to my own horse and dog.

At last the acting secretary for native affairs returned, and the Colonel immediately had an interview with him. It then appeared that Mr. —, the magistrate, had only acted under orders, as a second letter had been sent to him within twenty-four hours of the first which was given to the Colonel, entirely contradicting the contents of that as far as it referred to any besides the ninety pioneers. Of this second despatch no mention whatever had been made to my Chief, so that from the 5th of August to the 24th,—when the Putini men began to return,—he was left under the impression that the promises made by Government, and through himself, were duly being carried into effect. The acting head of the native department was at first inclined to dispute the fact that the whole tribe had ever been pardoned, or that he had translated anything of the sort to the pioneers. But the Colonel reminded him of all that had passed in so exact and detailed a manner, that he finally withdrew his objections. And now, impelled thereto

by the Colonel's energetic and forcible representations, he wrote upon the spot another order to the location magistrate, contradicting the second letter, and repeating the instructions contained in the original despatch. This order, without any reference to his Excellency the Lieutenant-Governor, he signed and gave to the Colonel, who, having only waited to obtain it before going up-country again, started at two o'clock the same day, bearing the message of freedom, and attended of course by me and his usual Basuto after-riders.

We took our old course across country to the Bushman's River Pass, sending a messenger from Hlubi's to Mr. — with the precious despatch, and arriving at our old camp about midday upon the 22nd of September.

The next day was spent by the Colonel in inspecting the passes, which were now all closed, every possible loophole having been rendered impracticable. He got through the whole business in one day, which astonished even me, accustomed as I was by this time to his rapid movements and amazing

capacity for work. Indeed he could not spare one unnecessary hour, for his hands were full of other colonial works, and he had as much to get through from one month to another as he could possibly manage. He expressed himself satisfied with the present condition of the passes, and upon the 24th of September we finally broke up our camp, and left the Bushman's River for the last time.

I confess that I felt a lively regret at taking my final departure from this place. Great as had been the hardships which we had encountered upon the mountains, I had come to regard our camp beside the Bushman's River as something more like home than any other spot within the colony of Natal. The shanty, which we left standing for the use of any future benighted travellers who might pass that way, had a friendly homelike look to me. All its little comforts and conveniences were our own contrivances and the work of our own hands, and we had an affection for them not to be shared by ordinary doors and windows, tables, chairs, and chimneys. Never again were those who had sat round the blazing

shanty fire, and who, thanks to mutual difficulties and endurance, had grown into close companionship there, likely to meet under such circumstances. For my own part, I had been less lonely amongst those wild deserted hills than there was any probability of my being elsewhere in Natal ; for I could not hope to be constantly with my Chief in future ; and of other friends I had not one. Here I had had work, a position of trust and responsibility, the goodwill of all our party, black and white, to most of whom the mere fact of my being the Colonel's aide-de-camp, as I might style myself, was enough to secure me respect and attention ; and, more than all, I had had, during the greater part of every day, the companionship and confidence of my Chief. All this I might not find in any other part of the colony.

So that it was with a somewhat heavy heart and dejected mien that I turned from a last look at our deserted camping-ground and followed the Colonel, who was already riding far ahead on his way down the valley of the Bushman's River.