

CHAPTER XIX.

CONCLUSION.

WE camped that night ten miles away, not far from some ruined kraals which had been destroyed at the time of the expedition. When we came in sight of the blackened desolate remains, the Colonel told me of a scene which he had witnessed there when on patrol, shortly after the place had been quitted by the Government forces. It appeared that on exploring a kraal and entering a hut which was still standing, he had come upon a shocking sight. A native woman,—or rather a young unmarried girl, as was evident from the fashion in which her hair was dressed,—upon her knees in the centre of the hut, was the sole occupant of this deserted spot. Did she fear the return of the native attacking force, who, in their permitted violence, spared neither sex, nor age, nor youth? Was she im-

ploring the protection of the merciful white man, who had found her there alone? Not so; the spoiler and destroyer had no more terrors for her, and she was safe in the hands of the Father of all Mercies;—for she was dead. A reim was round her neck; she had been hanged, or had been driven to hang herself, from the centre-pole of the hut!

Nor was this all. A yet more sickening proof of the scenes of awful violence which must have taken place was found in a cattle-kraal hard by;—a human leg, not merely severed from the body, but dragged out at the hip-joint by main force!

Enough of such horrors; one's blood runs cold at the repetition of them, but burns with shame and indignation at the thought that they were inflicted in the name of an English Government upon an innocent and helpless people.

Next day we were marching through the Putini location again, where the people were beginning to settle, the brown beehive huts to reappear, and the thin blue smoke of their fires to rise once more into the moist spring air. The Colonel had sent word

beforehand to the men of the tribe to meet him on his way through their location. Accordingly they all flocked round him during the day's march, when he repeated to them his original caution as to their conduct, and assured them that their freedom was now a settled thing. It is worthy of remark that from this time forwards there were always from one hundred to one hundred and fifty men of the Putini tribe at work upon the roads who voluntarily engaged themselves as labourers, whereas it is a well-known fact that, with this one exception, all the road-parties in the colony are supplied with forced labour.

We spent the night of the 25th at Cathkin,—where old Mr. —— was loud in his praises of the quiet and orderly behaviour of those very “rebels” whom he had feared so much when they were first marched up to the mountains;—and a few days later we were at Estcourt.

Here I met with one last incident of the feeling up-country concerning the coloured races. It happened that the Basuto Jabez, who was still in

attendance upon the Colonel, had been sent down by him to the Estcourt inn with a note to the landlord, requesting a supply of certain provisions required by our party. Jabez, who was a stranger in the place, went to the door of the taproom, and, seeing a white man within,—the landlord in question,—he entered to give him the note. The landlord, looking up at his entrance, immediately called out : “ Get out, you! No black man comes in here. Go round to the back-door.” Jabez, however, who looked upon the paper in his hand as a safe-conduct anywhere, and naturally supposed that the man did not perceive it, still advanced, holding out the note to be taken. Whereupon the landlord, without more ado, rushed upon the harmless messenger, struck him, and pushed him out of doors.

Now Jabez is a man of spirit, and in a fair fight would dearly have liked to avenge the unmerited insult put upon him ; but he is also a man of sense, and knows but too well that fair fight between white and black there will never be in his time. So he returned to the Colonel, and reported what had

befallen him while upon his master's errand. The Colonel was never likely to allow his helpless dependents to be injured; and on this occasion he immediately went down to the inn himself, and inquired of the landlord what he meant by striking his servant. The man was civil enough in speaking to my Chief, but stuck to his point. It was his custom. No black man could be allowed to enter by that door without paying for his presumption.

The Colonel remonstrated. "How is a strange black man to know your regulations?" he said.

To which the landlord's only reply was: "Can't help it! That's my rule. They can go to the back-door."

Whereupon the Colonel, finding it of no avail to talk to the fellow, left him, saying: "I do not allow my servants to be beaten with impunity, and shall have the matter brought before the resident magistrate."

Unfortunately for us the next day was a public holiday, and there was no magistrate's court sitting. The Colonel could stay no longer, for he was obliged

to return to Pietermaritzburg, where his Excellency was anxious to see him upon business. He put Jabez's affairs into the hands of a friend, asking him to attend the court and to see that justice was done. He then saw the acting resident magistrate (our old acquaintance Mr. —), so as to leave nothing undone which could assist his servant's cause. The old gentleman in his turn promised to do justice in the case, and we started for Pietermaritzburg, leaving behind the disconsolate Jabez, who, indeed, implored his master to take him with him, saying that he knew very well that he should get no satisfaction. The Colonel, however, hoped better things, and would not allow him to relinquish the case. But poor Jabez's apprehensions proved quite correct, for, when the case came on, the magistrate decided in favour of the white man, saying that he had a perfect right to make and to keep rules in his own house. So much for our second attempt at getting justice done to a native at Estcourt.

Well! we were once more at Fort Napier. My

Chief had carried the main point for which he had laboured and suffered through the winter months of 1874, and the people whom he had rescued were at peace. The chief point was settled, although he had yet to insist upon the justice of restitution, or at all events upon the immediate wants of the tribe being supplied by Government until their first year's crops should have ripened;—and there remained also the question of the restitution of cattle to be settled.* All this the Colonel hoped to effect in time, but I was

* RESTITUTION TO THE PUTINI TRIBE.—Since writing the above I have learnt the following facts:—Sir Garnet Wolseley, when he “settled” Natal, being unable to obtain any certain information concerning the amount of cattle taken from the Putini tribe, decided to restore to them £12,000, the estimated value of 4,000 head, which was half of the sum realised by Government by the sale of the cattle of both tribes. This would seem to be a fair decision, but for the fact that it was put down in black and white by the military authorities at the time that over 8,000 head of cattle, besides horses, sheep, and goats, were taken from the Putini tribe alone. But even this meagre £12,000 has not as yet been really paid. I understand that £3,000 were voted by the Legislative Council as compensation to the Putini tribe for 1875, and for the following year an additional sum of £1,500 under the head of “*Relief in cases of individual distress amongst the natives.*” And this is all that they have yet received. Will fuller justice ever be done?

not to see the fulfilment of his purpose ; for my life in Natal, and my connection with my Chief was just at an end when I returned to Pietermaritzburg. The winter was fairly over ; the grass began to have the appearance of green velvet, owing to its black underlying layer of last year's burnt crop ; the lengthening days grew hot, and the short hours of the night were warm and pleasant ; my existence in the colony was about to vanish like the winter's snow upon the Draakensberg.

An English mail had just arrived, and my letters awaited me at the Colonel's quarters. Amongst them was one from my father, full of affection for his prodigal son, and begging me to return home by the first steamer from Natal. It seems that my letters to him had convinced him of the welcome fact that I had thoroughly forsaken my old wild and thoughtless ways, and had really settled down into a steady useful member of society. It so happened that a warm friend of my father's, General ——, having a post to fill up "for a young man of sense and energy," bethought himself of his friend's son, whom he had

known as a lad. He had a conversation with my father, the result of which was that he promised to give me the post in question, on condition that I reached England by a certain date, and that I brought with me a satisfactory letter from Colonel Durnford, my present Chief, as to my steadiness and general good conduct while working under him.

There could not be the slightest doubt in the mind of any sensible individual as to what my course should be on receipt of this letter. Here was such a chance for me as I was never likely to meet with again,—a return home, and restoration to my proper place amongst my fellow-men. It was now in my own power to wipe out and cancel by an honourable future the foolish reckless past. My wildest hopes of advancement had never reached such a height as the opening now offered me. Surely no man in his senses could hesitate? Yet hesitate I did, and the cause of my hesitation was the tie, single but powerful, which bound me to Natal;—the regard I had for my Chief. Could I have been assured of remaining in his service to my life's end, I would have asked for nothing

better, even although I should remain a small colonial official for the rest of my days,—so long as I worked under and with him.

There was no time given me for consideration. I must either go at once or not at all, for no later mail would reach England in time for me to take up the appointment. I had read my letter, sitting opposite to the Colonel, who was similarly engaged, in his room after dinner that evening of our return from Estcourt. When I had finished reading, I sat watching him, and thinking over the question before me, until he laid down his last paper and looked up at me.

Something in the intentness of my gaze must have attracted his notice, for with his usual ready attention he said, “ Well, Atherton, what is it ? ”

For all answer, I handed him my father’s letter in silence.

When he had read it he very naturally began to offer me his warm congratulations upon my good fortune, but stopped short in amazement at my dissatisfied look.

“What is the matter now?” he inquired; “does not the offer please you?”

I could not say that it did. I could not tell him why at first, and I think he began to suspect me of having committed the folly of falling in love in the colony, before it dawned upon him that he himself was the attraction. I believe the discovery took him very much by surprise. Not the undemonstrative Basutos themselves had been more chary of expression of devotion than I. I had obeyed my Chief implicitly, and had done all that he desired me to the very best of my ability. But probably he put all that down to my natural disposition, and had no idea that it had taken all his influence and all my desire to win his approbation to transform me, from the idle good-for-nothing youngster that I had once been, to the steady trustworthy man I can honestly say that I had now become.

While I blundered on from one incoherent sentence to another, saying that I had no such friends anywhere as I had in Natal, yet admitting in the same breath that I hardly knew a soul to speak to

except himself, that I preferred the work here to any other as long as I served under him, and so on ; growing more and more confused and annoyed with myself for a sentiment which I feared would appear absurd in his eyes ; he looked at me almost in silence with an expression which gradually softened from its original bewildered astonishment to one of great kindness. And then I fairly broke down, and implored him to keep me in his service, in however humble a capacity it might be, assuring him that indeed I cared to serve under no other than himself.

Doubtless I was supremely ridiculous in my fancy, and was old enough to have grown out of such romantic notions. Nevertheless, my Chief had saved me, and had made a new man of me, and my life was at his command.

He, at all events, did not despise or laugh at my devotion. It seemed to me that it touched and did not displease him.

A moment's silence followed upon my outburst, and then he put out his hand, and laid it upon my shoulder.

“Look here, Atherton,” he said, “I should be doing excessively wrong were I to keep you with me now, although there are not so many to care whether one lives or dies in this solitary place that one can afford to throw away a friend. But for your own sake it is impossible that I should do what you ask.”

I made a gesture of impatient dissent.

“No ; listen to me,” he went on, checking the folly that I was about to utter. “Supposing that I were to consent to your throwing away this excellent offer, and staying on as you are now, what would be the result ? My action in the Putini affair will lose me my present post of colonial engineer. In another year, at the utmost, the appointment will be filled up from England, and then all I could do for you would be to recommend you to the favourable notice of my successor. That, I imagine, would hardly meet your wishes. Well, I shall probably receive orders for some other station soon after my colonial appointment ceases, and our connection will come to an end as surely as though you had taken the chance now offered you,—with the difference that, in the one case, you remain

in a subordinate position in a colony which I am never likely to revisit, whereas in the other you will return to the life and condition to which we both properly belong. No, Atherton; there is not even a choice before you, although, even if there were, you should choose the right, and do your duty;—which is, obviously, to make up to your poor old father for all that he has suffered on your account, and, if only for his sake, to regain the position which you have lost.”

I had not a word to say in answer to this reasoning. It was perfectly conclusive,—everything upon one side, nothing but sentiment upon the other. I was silent, feeling somewhat abashed; and my Chief continued with increasing kindness of tone: “Don’t think that I undervalue your regard, my boy. Perhaps I have not given you sufficient credit for it hitherto; but, believe me, now that you have given me so conclusive a proof of it, I shall not forget it. What has passed between us this evening will leave me with one pleasant thought at least connected with a place which has not been a particularly gay one to me.” The rare softening of a nature which was

usually so self-repressed, and which was capable of being so stern, touched me greatly, and those few words from my Chief were recompense enough for a life's devotion, had fate allowed me to bestow it.

But, being both Englishmen, we naturally found sentiment, expressed between ourselves, a most awkward and inconvenient circumstance. I had recovered my self-possession, and, highly as I valued each word that he said, it was an actual relief to me when, suddenly resuming his ordinary tone and manner, he said: "And now, about your arrangements. There is no time to lose, for you must go down to Durban by post-cart to-morrow."

He literally packed me up and sent me off next day, for with his natural administrative faculty he settled and attended to everything himself. He sent me into the town early next morning with a list of necessary purchases made out by himself; and, with an apparent utter distrust of my own powers in that line, he sat by and superintended the packing of my portmanteau by his servant.

To the last it was, "Now, Atherton, have you a

good brandy-flask? No. Then take this one of mine!" or "Where is that rug of yours? You will want it on the voyage." "Now, are you sure that you have money enough to take you home comfortably?" and so on. For once in my life I made a start without forgetting anything.

I was but just in time to catch the steamer, and had no leisure for regrets until I stood upon the deck; and watching the blue lines of the shore fading away as we left it, I thought that, with all its faults, Natal will always be dear to me, for the sound of its name must ever be connected in my mind with that of—
MY CHIEF.

THE END.

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