

Vagabonds.

A TALE OF A BOER DEFEAT.

By BASIL MARNAN.



I. WITHOUT a doubt they were vagabonds. It was writ large in their attire, their careless aspect of disreputableness, their bland enjoyment of sleep in the shelter of a stranger's gate. Yet Major Brand, of the Cape Frontier Corps, when his horse shied at them in the ghostly shadow of moonbeams and the cross-bars of the gate, gave a gasp that betokened anything but disapproval. In fact, it suggested some shadow—a starlit shadow, perhaps—of comforting fellowship.

Major Brand as he rode homeward was thinking of a son—of a son snatched ruthlessly from him when but three months old. In a way too he was resenting the destiny that denied him any further child, and though he was a fervent Catholic, almost alone as such in a land of hypocritical egoism, he felt that the rod was being pressed too keenly to his lips. He adored his wife, and she—well, she was an Irish girl in love with her husband. It might be admitted then that she was not dilatory in returning his affection. A little woman, *svelte* like all Colonials, raven-haired, with black arched brows, with scarlet child-lips and eyes grey as the sea, she had a winsome, gentle, somewhat grave manner that bespoke love of all living things, and attracted especially the love and confidence of little children—a feature which rendered her husband's longing for a son almost bitter in its passion.

Lean, somewhat lanky for all the squareness of his

shoulders, John Brand, with his close-cropped iron-grey hair, his stubby grey moustaches, his broad nose, rugged chin, and wide blue eyes, presented an almost heroic type of a frontier yeoman-farmer. As he rode in through the gate of his compound, this particular night of April, 1895, his thoughts had been, as I have indicated, somewhat bitter. His cattle, his homestead, his increasing crops—what use were they without a child to work them for? His mood seemed well answered as a low, snarling growl greeted the sudden jibbing of his horse. He looked down and rested motionless, his hand gripping hard on the quivering curb.

There, coiled up in the corner of the gate, were two forms, a child and a yellow dog! Tattered, torn, veldt-stained, thorn-searched,



"THEY WERE VAGABONDS."

the twain, even in the dim starlit shadows, were indubitably vagabonds. Yet, in the child's upturned, tranquil, dreaming face there was something that drew a sharp breath from John Brand and made him leap swiftly from the saddle. The yellow dog growled menacingly as he approached, showing a flash of keen white fangs. Yet some instinct of the invader's kindness withheld him, and, though somewhat grudgingly, he permitted the Major to lift the sleeping child into his arms. And when John Brand mounted on his horse bearing on his breast the sleepy, nodding, golden-haired head, the dog followed his course, whimpering a little, ever glancing upwards, yet evidently half-contented. So the Vagabonds came to Greendip Farm.

Beneath the feverish excitement of Katie Brand's wonder and surmise the boy awoke. His eyes, almost black for all their blue glint, looked squarely into her face. The child-lips quivered manfully. He could not be more than five, thought Katie Brand, as she hugged him suddenly, passionately, to her breast. He was so sweet with his lithe, graceful limbs, drooping inertly in tired abandon, with his white, bare chest gleaming through the ragged shirt, with his curly locks, his gracious, shy smile, with the timid, pearly dimples accentuating the scarlet, smooth curve of his lips. And the wonder in his eyes, the vague defiance, the gleam of certain trust dawning through the shadowy fear! It went to her heart, and made the Major, watching her, turn away, swearing softly.

"Who are you, dear?" she whispered, coaxingly.

"Jackie!" he replied; and—as if that embraced all details—added, "Where's Tinker?"

The yellow dog answered for himself. At the mention of his name he leapt up, his fore-paws on the knees of the woman, his nose shoved gently, caressingly, against the wondering, flushed face of his master. The boy's hand fell lovingly on the yellow, bony head, and his eyes closed sleepily.

"Dear old Tinks!" he murmured.

Then, nestling his hand into the throat of Katie's dress, he snuggled softly towards her, and smiling divinely—a little tired, happy smile—settled into sleep, with the yellow dog gazing with deep brown, wistful, grateful eyes, now at the woman, now at his fellow-wanderer.

And it was thus the Vagabonds gained a home in the heart of Katie Brand, while her husband, regarding them under lowered lids,

smoked many strong pipes and thought many strange thoughts.

II.

STRICTLY speaking, John Brand was a farmer. His title of Major applied only to his position in the Rifle Corps of his district. It was on the borders of the Orange Free State that his farm lay, being some thirty miles south-west of the angle formed by the river and that State's western boundary. In older days he had belonged to an Artillery corps in the home district, but domestic reasons had led him to seek a livelihood on the veldt.

His first venture had been at the Diamond Fields, and it was in the neighbourhood of Kimberley he had first met his wife. The daughter of an Irish settler, her beauty had brought her many admirers. Her father had most favoured the suit of one Paul Jansen, a Boer farmer of considerable wealth. But from the first moment of Brand's arrival Katie had yielded her heart unconditionally. Brand's cold show of contempt for his rival, whom he knew to be a profligate of the shadiest honesty, had roused in the Boer a feeling of savage hatred for the young Englishman. This feeling was not lessened when, chiefly on Brand's evidence, he was exposed for illicitly trading in diamonds with the Kaffir employés, and only evaded punishment by flight.

John Brand, in the happiness of marrying Kate and meeting with much luck, laughed at the threats which Jansen had breathed against him. Yet when, after amassing a comfortable fortune, he set out South, with his wife and infant and his pile carefully bestowed in his waggon, he was soon destined to remember the Boer's menace.

Lung sickness having broken out in his team, he obstinately refused to go on farther with the three other waggons that formed the caravan, and having given them a day's start, trekked slowly in their rear. One dark night as he was fording the Modder a sudden shot rang out, and Brand felt himself falling wildly into the yellow maze of water. When he recovered consciousness it was to find himself lying on the banks of the stream a hundred yards below the waggon, with his wife and driver bending over him.

Even as he had struggled to his feet a shout from the boy in charge of the team attracted their attention. The sight they saw held them paralyzed. By the dusky flare of the lantern ever swung in the tent they saw a man leap from the tail-board. At his waist was the yellow bag containing the treasured diamonds, and in his left arm



"THEY SAW A MAN LEAP FROM THE
TAIL-BOARD."

was a glistening bundle of white robes enveloping their infant son. The man leapt on to his horse, and as John Brand staggered forward, with a hoarse cry, shook his sjambok mockingly at the horrified group, dug his spurs into the animal, and galloped off into the night.

All search, all inquiry, had proved unavailing, and six months later John Brand had settled down, a soured, hopeless man, on a little farm he had luckily purchased in Kimberley before departing.

With the advent of the Vagabonds, however, the life at the little homestead began to twinkle into an atmosphere of radiant cheerfulness. The Major whistled for no assignable cause. When his collar would not button, and he heard Jackie's voice ringing in greeting to his dog, he forgot—the first time in many years—to swear. His wife, too, began to sing again, and as she had a

soft, sweet voice, with a touch of lilting brogue in it, the sound of her songs smote on the Major's heart-strings to new, strange echoes of youth.

He had naturally deemed it his duty to search for the child's relations. But he was unfeignedly glad that his efforts proved fruitless. The child was literally a very vagabond of the veldt, borne out of the great reaches of darkness and shadow, with none to claim or care for him. Beyond the assertion that he had come many days in a waggon, and run away from a bad man who whipped him, Jackie could tell nothing. Even of the dog he could only say it had always been his friend, fought his battles, shared his crusts and whippings, and in the dark stolen away with him from the dreaded waggon.

The boy grew into the Major's heart. He would look at him till his heart seemed to beat through its

scared crust, and his eyes would blink softly. He was such a fearless, healthy, thorough boy, just such as his own son At that point he would pause, swear, and romp with the Vagabond.

For the dog! It was an impossible beast. Outside the two brown depths of its mournful, loving eyes it was a dull dead yellow, from the tip of its tail to the end of its nose, the colour of a clay-pit. Half of its left ear was bitten away, leaving but a tasselled edge. Its hard, bony skull was seamed with scars; its shoulders were dented deep with teeth-marks: its left hind-leg had a great hole in it, which lent it a permanent kink and a ridiculous limp. It was evidently a fearless warrior, and in a quiet, sneaking way—with its tongue edgeways, licking—it was given to vain and proud dreams of its wounds.

For real pride in him, however, Tinker had no chance against Jackie. The boy loved the dog, and with the passion of five years he adored without discrimination. It was yellow, ugly, deformed, lean, with a limp, without a grace; but it was Tinker, his friend, faithful, loyal; and the boy's

heart, recognising kinship of ideal, demanded no more.

When Major Brand and he fell out, and the occasions were not infrequent, for Jackie was something of a Turk, Katie was sure to find him later, his bare, brown arms circling the yellow, knotty neck of the hound—the child sound asleep, the dog lazily watchful, suspicious though friendly.

So things went on for four years. Then came the bugle-call—Kruger's voice defying the stars in their courses. And Major Brand joined his corps and went to the front with Methuen's fighting division. He had tried hard to induce his wife to go to Cape Town. But with true Colonial tenacity she pleaded her duty to him and the farm, averring that with the farm hands she could always hold the homestead against marauding patrols—an opinion which Jackie stoutly shared.

The boy had grown a handy, intelligent little fellow, with a language composed of a strange medley of words—English, Kaffir, and Taal alternating indiscriminately. There was not much of the country within fifteen or twenty miles of the homestead that Jackie had not explored, his brown bare legs astride of a pony and Tinker ever at heel. His boast to keep a sharp look-out was, therefore, accepted by the Major with becoming gravity.

Strangely enough, the most despondent member of the household on Brand's departure was the yellow dog. Like most Englishmen, he had ever had a loving hand for the ugly, faithful cur, and Tinker's appreciation of the fact had only been equalled by his evident wonder.

For days after the Major's departure the dog wandered restless and unhappy about the house; sniffing curiously at the doors, and, as night grew near, whimpering, ill at ease and anxious. His perturbation reached a crisis when the booming of the big guns away towards the Orange River broke the sultry stillness of the air round Greendip Farm. When the first boom reached the little homestead Jackie and the dog were sitting on the stoep, engaged in the genial occupation of teasing the pet monkey. With his one and a half ears pricked upright Tinker sat listening, every now and then giving vent to a snarling whimper as the dull roll of the echoes faded and swelled and died among the outlying kopjes.

Jackie, flinging his arm round his friend's neck, tried to comfort him by many an in-

genious trick of teasing. But for the first time in his experience Tinker took no notice of him. His eyes had a red glitter in them; his scarred, ugly nose sniffed persistently at the wind; ever and again a quick tremor ran through his limbs. Then, almost before Jackie was aware of it, the dog, with a melancholy whine, had slipped from his side and, with tail erect and snout to ground, was racing northwards over the veldt.

The boy was after him in a minute, his mind alert at the thought of rock-rabbits, his brown legs twinkling feverishly among the long grasses. But it was a hopeless pursuit. The dog, giving no heed to his voice, kept ever straight on in a long, tireless stride, which finally took him out of sight. Exhausted and resentful, Jackie picked his way slowly back. He thought he had lost Tinker for good and all, and his little figure quivered with passionate anger, as some two hours later he related his loss to Katie, and declaimed against the ingratitude of all living things, especially yellow dogs.

III.

TEN o'clock sounded from the little clock hung on the wall in the large round hut that served Katie Brand for drawing-room. A log fire slumbered in the open hearth, the lamp on the table had burnt low and was smoking lazily. Mrs. Brand lay asleep in the cushioned cane chair, a book open on her knees.

She had wearied of Jackie's complaints for the loss of the dog, and sending him early to bed had indulged in the luxury of solitude. The almost oppressive stillness of the night had made her drowsy, and so it was that she never heard a faint whimpering and scratching at the door, and that the swift patter of feet from the communicating door had passed her unheeded. Even the opening of the door and Jackie's low gurgle of joyous welcome as he knelt by the side of his panting yellow friend failed to rouse her.

Suddenly Jackie, with a low cry of alarm, started back and dragged the dog to the dim light. His hands and nightgown were stained with little red flecks like red snowflakes, and Tinker seemed like a piece of crazy patchwork—here a daub of mud, here a streak of natural yellow, and everywhere daubs of that flaky, damp, staining red. The dog, with a low whimper, licked at his master's face, and then, seizing his nightgown, dragged him towards the door again. Jackie, a little perplexed, snatched his gown away and watched with curious gaze the

antics of the dog. First he ran out, then paused, yelping softly. Then back he came again, and again seized the boy's gown, and, dragging him a little way towards the gate, paused again and whined, looking up at him with speaking, beseeching eyes.

Jackie began to tremble with excitement. He felt he was on the brink of an adventure. He glanced at his "mother," and then whispered, eagerly, "All right! I'll come!" He fled back on tip-toes to his room, and dressed himself—that is to say, he put on his slippers, drew on his breeches, tucking in his nightdress and girding the whole with his knotted braces, and hastily scrambling into a jacket crept back to the door.

The dog greeted him with a sharp yelp of joy, and bounded away towards the gate. The boy snatched up a whip and bridle and paused to look at the sleeping form.

Katie Brand was moving uneasily, muttering. Jackie sneaked to her side and touched her hand with his lips. He was very fond of his "little mudder," as he called her, and he felt rather mean in leaving her. He found consolation in her whispered dream-words,

albeit they thrilled him with a certain fear :—

"Find him! O Jackie! He is lying there wounded. I see the blood—the blood!"

Jackie felt a sudden cold push on his leg, and turned with a start to find Tinker gazing at him in evident disapproval. He waited no longer, but, following the dog, swiftly bridled his pony in the adjacent kraal, and with Tinker leading galloped over the veldt.

The night was fine and starlit, and the brooding stillness of the air lent added mystery to the adventure. As the dog led unflinching ever on a sense of fear gripped at the boy's heart. Where was the dog taking him? And for what? Yet every now and again, as the ugly yellow face looked back at him, he derived new courage and confidence from the look of mute intelligence and purpose in the faithful brown eyes.

Presently, after some three hours' riding, away to the right he saw lights gleaming and the ghostly shining of a vast array of tents. Then his pony commenced to shy, and, looking down, he turned pale. His way was strewn with dead horses, and here and there

a white, ghastly face stared up from the grass.

But the dog never halted, and Jackie, setting his teeth, followed, looking resolutely away from the ground, for the most part, indeed, keeping his eyes tight shut.

Suddenly his horse, with a frightened whinny, halted dead, pitching him forward on his neck. Losing his balance, he slid on to the ground, to find the dog at his feet, his nose pushed over the edge of a steep kraanz.

With an intelligent glance at his master Tinker crawled over the brink, following a small goat-track down the face of the cliff. Jackie's nerves were accustomed to dizzy depths, and with his hand gripping hard on the dog's collar, his footsteps picked a sure



"FIND HIM! O JACKIE!"

way. About twelve feet down the path, taking a sharp turn, opened out on to a fairly wide ledge, and then Tinker, with a plaintive howl, ran forward and reached the object of his errand. There, lying half unconscious, his khaki coat smeared and stained with blood, lay Major Brand.

Jackie, with a thrill of fear and horror, knelt by his head, while the dog gazed from the one to the other, a curious gleam, as of complacent questioning, shining in his eyes.

The Major, opening his eyes, gazed at the two of them as in a dream, for a moment believing his mind was wandering. Jackie dispelled the illusion. He flung his arms suddenly round the Major's neck, crying out, "Father, father: you are not dead then, after all!"

Though the stiff pain of the bullet wound in his shoulder was not improved by the generous pressure of Jackie's encircling arms, the Major managed to smile.

"Devil a bit, my son," he said, almost cheerfully.

He had made up his mind to die in this nook where he had fallen, and the relief of this friendly pressure was great. "But how on earth did you come here?"

"It was dear old Tinks," replied Jackie, with fond pride; to which Tinker blinked his appreciation, extravagantly thumping his ridiculous yellow tail against the hard rock. "He ran away this morning and came back and brought me. And mother was asleep, and I got out of bed and dressed myself and saddled Brownie, and Tinker showed the way, and Brownie's up above, and now you must please get up and come home."

It was with a dizzy effort the Major, in answer to this breathless narration, staggered to his feet. His arm was broken. He was exhausted with loss of blood. He leant heavily against the rock, feeling the earth swimming in rainbow circles round him.

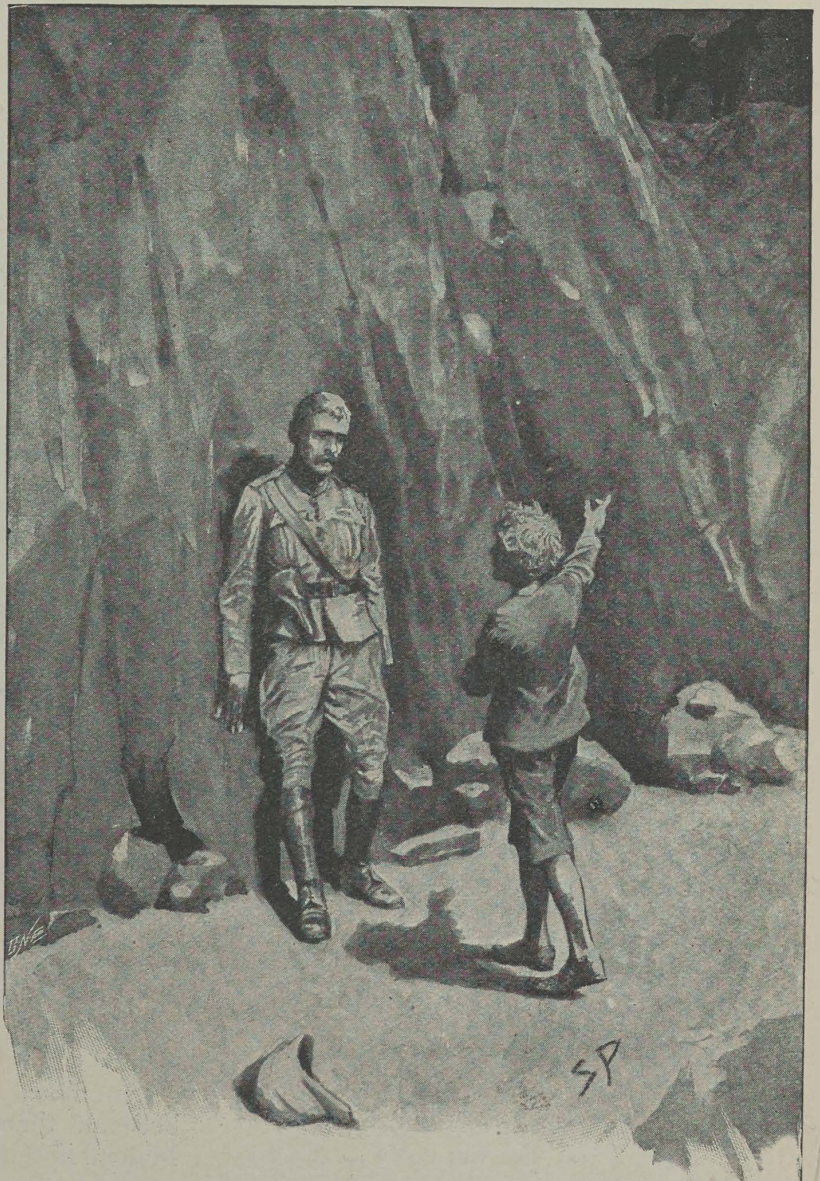
"It's no go, Jackie," he gasped. "I should topple over the edge if I tried to crawl up there. Trot away to camp, little man, and bring a couple of men with a rope."

Jackie, after one critical, comprehending glance, turned on his heel and fled, sure-footed as a buck, up the path.

IV.

It seemed to the Major, sitting painfully propped up on the ledge, that Jackie was a very long time in returning. True, he did not know exactly where his comrades were now camped. But as victory had been a certainty at the moment when he had been struck, he felt pretty sure they were not far off.

The delay, indeed, was not due to any dilatoriness on the part of the boy. When he had gained the veldt, with Tinker hard at



"'IT'S NO GO, JACKIE,' HE GASPED."

his heels, he had sped off with all the haste of his excitement in direction of the twinkling lights of the camp. The starlit distances were treacherous, however, and the camp was a good seven miles away. The boy's speed slowly slackened, and little by little he began to stumble rather than run. Suddenly a low, fierce snarl from the dog brought him to a halt. But it was too late. From out of the hollows of the night four burly forms rose, and a rough hand seized the boy's shoulder.

"What do you here?" someone asked.

"Down, 'Tinker!" called Jackie, imperiously, as the dog, with a low growl, lanced out at the detaining hand. Then turning to the man, in all unconsciousness that he was a Boer and an enemy, he speedily explained his errand and his father's predicament. A few whispered words passed between the men, and then Jackie felt a thong passed over his wrists, and his captor gruffly said:—

"Your father shall be looked to. For

you, you must come to the Commandant. You may be all right, but you may be a spy of these cursed rooineks."

It was an hour later when Jackie, with the dog curiously, sullenly, quiet at his heels, stood in a little tent on the hillside beyond the river, facing a burly man, whose coarse, red-bearded face and small, narrow eyes offered little inspiration of confidence.

As the boy's eyes searched the man's face they filled with a vague, troubled fear. The dog, too, seemed suddenly irritated. The short, yellow hair on his neck bristled angrily, and a red, fierce glow grew into his eyes, while his lips were drawn back in an ugly, mute, vicious snarl, more expressive of menace than many growls. It was obvious he did not like the Commandant.

He, Paul Jansen by name, eyed the two furtively, curiously, looking ever and again from the boy to the dog. Then a nasty smile as of recognition quivered for a moment on his lips.

"Ah, my little friend," he said, "you have come back to Oom Paul again, eh? Playing spy for the rooineks, are you? Ah, well, we shall see how a little sjambok agrees with you."

"It is a lie!" cried the child. "I am not a spy. I came to seek my father when your men caught me."

"Of course," said the man, with a sneer. "And who might your father be?"

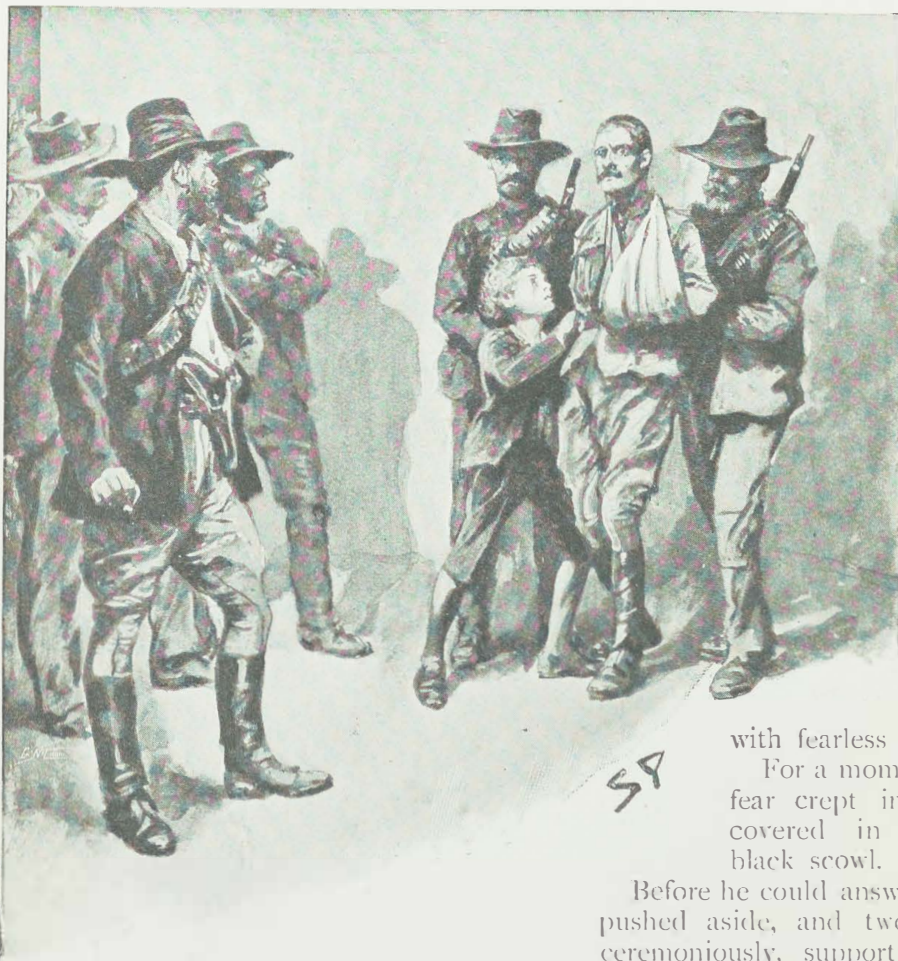
"Major Brand," replied Jackie,

with fearless pride.

For a moment a look almost of fear crept into the man's face, covered in an instant by a black scowl.

Before he could answer the tent door was pushed aside, and two men entered unceremoniously, supporting, not untenderly, between them the tottering form of the Major himself.

Jackie sprang towards him with a glad cry.



"YOU ARE A PRISONER OF WAR, AND WILL BE FORWARDED AT ONCE TO THE REAR."

The Major hardly noticed him. His eyes were fixed on the face of the Commandant, whose eyes were roving uneasily around.

"Paul Jansen! Ah, at last!" ejaculated the Major.

"Yes, Paul Jansen!" retorted the other, with a sudden change to defiance. "You are a prisoner of war, and will be forwarded at once to the rear. For that brat there, he is a spy, and will meet a spy's death. At dawn he shall be shot."

A low guttural murmur of disapproval ran through the group of Boers in the tent. Jansen turned on them furiously.

"One such evidence of mutiny again," he cried, hoarsely, "and I will pistol the first who dares it."

The men shrugged their shoulders and turned away.

John Brand had become very white.

"You will never dare it," he said, in a harsh whisper. "It would be murder. If you must shoot anyone, shoot me."

"He is a spy!" retorted Jansen, viciously, "and shot he shall be. I know him. He was in my service till lately, and he ran away to serve you. He was the son of my servant-maid."

As the man spoke the words his furtive eyes glanced quickly, cunningly, at the other to note the effect.

Something in that glance illumined the Major's mind with a sudden light. He felt his heart beating in his throat. He turned to Jackie.

"Is it true?" he said. "Were you ever with this brute?"

Jackie nodded.

The Major felt the blood burn swiftly to his face and as swiftly recede. His eyes were glued on the child's erect, graceful form and features—the curling, gold-brown hair, the wide, fearless eyes, the tender curve of the lips, so like, so absurdly like, Katie's. What a blind fool he had been! He turned suddenly and walked up to Jansen.

"You are a liar!" he said. "The boy is my son, the child you stole nine years ago. Bandit and thief and highway robber as you are, you shall not be permitted to do this thing. I will see your general this night."

Jansen's face grew white, but as swiftly turned to a livid look of fiendish triumph.

"You are too late!" he snarled, pointing to the whitening sky without. "It is dawn already. You shall stay and see the execution."

The Major with a swift movement lifted his hand and smote the ruffian full on the mouth.

Jansen reeled back, recovered himself, wiped his bleeding lip, and smiled. "That we will settle later," he said. Then turning to his men: "Blindfold the boy, place him twelve paces from the door of my tent. Bind this man and place him there, facing the boy. You, Bothe, and you, Meth, take your rifles, and when I give the word fire, and see to it that you don't miss."

Five minutes later the livid sunlight smote on the fair curls of the child, as, erect and beautiful in his graceful, supple curve of limb, he stood on the side of the bronzed veldt, facing the levelled barrels of the two Boer sharpshooters. The Major, bound hand and foot, stood with white, strained face, and eyes lurid with passion, gazing on Jansen, who, revolver in either hand, stood at the back of his two men.

He did not notice the look that glanced and met and was understood by each as at his word the men stood ready.

"Fire!" he snarled, hoarsely.

The Major with a bitter curse bowed his head.

Two shots rang out in the clear air, and Jackie felt the singing hiss of two bullets whizz one at either side of his head.

"Curse you!" yelled the Commandant; "you have missed."

"Yah!" grunted in the same breath the two men. "Missed we have, and miss we shall if you keep us here till Christmas."

And with cool courage they loaded their rifles, spitting phlegmatically after the rejected cartridges.

With an oath Jansen hurled them aside, and, levelling his revolver, took steady aim at the boy. But even as he fired a flash of dirty yellow lanced athwart the sunlight, and Tinker, who till that moment had crouched unobserved at the Major's feet, flew at the levelled hand of the Commandant.

The report of the pistol was followed by a long, unearthly howl, and the dog sank bleeding to the earth as Jansen, shaken and upset, recoiled in startled fear.

At the sound of that howl Jackie, till then motionless, sprang forward and, tearing the bandage from his eyes, flung himself on the dog.

"Who did it? Who did it?" he cried.

Something in the imperious blazing of the child's eyes awed Bothe into responding by a silent nod in the direction of his Commandant.

With a cry of rage he sprang to his feet and literally flung himself on Jansen, grasping at the still smoking revolver. Even as

he did so the clatter of horses' hoofs was heard. Round the corner of the tent swept a cavalcade, and Bothe and Meth sprang to attention, ejaculating, "The General!"

The unlooked-for arrival of the dreaded Cronje in person startled the Commandant

denly forward, shot through the heart, falling face downward on the boy.

The explanation that followed was short and to the point, the two troopers bearing manful evidence on the child's behalf.

The Boer General glanced coldly on the still twitching face of the Commandant.

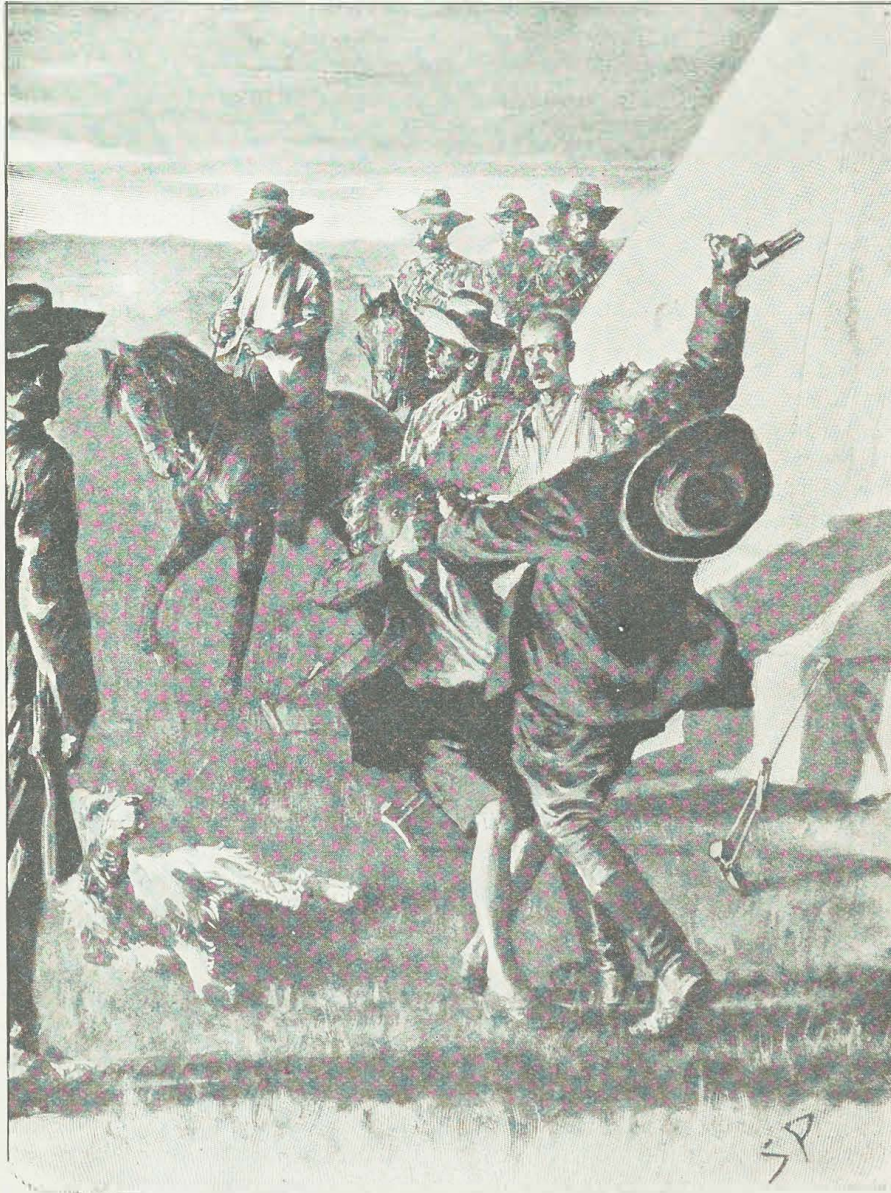
"He was a dog!" he said, shortly, "and died like a dog. He is well served. As for you, child, get you home. We war not with children."

"I won't go without my father," said the boy, stoutly, facing the General.

Cronje smiled grimly.

"Take your father, then," he said, "and be off. You, there, see them through the lines."

It was some seven hours later that Major Brand reached home. Jackie had prevailed on the two good-natured Boers to make a litter and bear the dog along. And when the Major, later, after telling his wife the true identity of the boy they had so strangely found, visited with



"THERE WAS A FLASH, A REPORT."

into a swift recoil, staying his uplifted fist. In his hand he clasped the barrel of his revolver, and as he dragged it back the child's sturdy fingers, clinging to the butt, locked suddenly on the trigger. There was a flash, a report, and Jansen lurched sud-

denly forward, shot through the heart, falling face downward on the boy.