

Hans Smit—Boer.

A SHORT COMPLETE STORY OF THE TRANSVAAL.

I first made the acquaintance of old Hans Smit during the latter part of 1896. Smit is a common name in the Transvaal, and Hans was a fair specimen of the family. He is—or rather was, for Hans has recently joined his forefathers—a typical stolid, bleary-eyed, narrow-minded septuagenarian of the Dopper brand of Dutchman; highly religious, parsimonious, and the very man to keep a keen eye on over a dead in stock, mealies, or forage.

I had to make a journey up into the northern districts on preparatory business in connection with an important engineering scheme, and it was during this trip I first struck the old farmer. During a severe thunderstorm I was forced to seek shelter at a farm I spied just off the main track, not from choice, but from sheer necessity, as the nearest store was ten miles ahead. It chanced to be the homestead of Hans Smit. He eyed me suspiciously from his sheltered seat on the stoep as I rode up and craved permission for a temporary shelter for myself and beast. As soon as I had opened my mouth and displayed a lamentable ignorance of the taal (the Dopper vernacular), and some hesitation in expressing myself, he commenced to curse volubly in his language (it's a way most religious Dutchmen have), and swore that never a rooinek should cross his threshold, and ostentatiously called for his rifle. Then two of his sons appeared from within, and in broken English—so I might understand a little of what was meant, I presume—joined in the tirade. I waited until they were seemingly exhausted, and then politely and diplomatically referred to my hapless, soaked condition, and mentioned something about being connected with a railway which might benefit the farm should it be found practicable to construct in the locality. I also had a flask of gin, plenty of tobacco, and would pay handsomely for accommodation. They wavered for just a minute, and after a whispered consultation between the trio, I was graciously allowed to descend, and a Kafir called to attend the horse. The outcome, of it all was, they eventually made a big hole in my tobacco, polished off the gin, and borrowed a sovereign in advance to send to a store for another round, which in some mysterious manner failed to turn up. As the rain still kept on, and the day was already far advanced, I was ultimately obliged to accept their hospitality for the night. And such a night! At sundown we supped on a fuddle of Boer meal brensd and bil-tong, washed down with a weak, greasy fluid I learned to be coffee. At seven we retired. The farm-house consisted only of a general living-room and a stuffy loft above, reached from the outside by means of a rickety ladder.

His two sons' wives and their eight lantern-jawed, pale-faced daughters, of ages ranging from six to twenty, occupied the lower apartment, depositing themselves on the single bedstead of the establishment, and when that was replete, about the floor on skins and sacks. I had the pleasure of sharing the upper storey with old Hans and his sons and their male progeny. Hans had sort of half-apologised for the limited accommodation at his disposal, for his family circle was temporarily extended. The prevalence of rinderpest and Government restriction of ox transport had rendered them unable to proceed as usual to Pretoria for nocturnal (a national religious festival celebrated periodically), and therefore they had gathered together at the farm that Saturday night to worship the following day on their own account. And they did it. Shortly after three I was aroused from a fitful slumber by someone below picking out the notes of a hymn tune, with painful musical effect on a wheezy concertina; the shrill voices of the children and women folk joining in in questionable time and melody. Then Jan, one of the sons, rose from his couch alongside me, and informed me that the festival had commenced, and that we should descend. It had to be suffered, I told myself; but the sight was one I am glad now I was enabled to witness. The entire family gathered together in the gray, chilly dawn, with stern-set faces (old illiterate Hans in the centre, with a greasy-thumbed family Bible upon his knees—open only for the sake of appearance and useless for reference—giv-



A SORTIE COLUMN CLEARING THEIR WAY BACK TO LADYSMITH.

