

AS SEEN THROUGH WOMAN'S EYES.

How Boer Children are Brought Up.

By D. G. RICARD.

The way in which I came to pass the greater part of a year on the farm of which I write was owing to one of those strange chances which occur at times in everybody's life. I had started, with two friends, on a shooting trip into Mashonaland. When we arrived at Rhodes' Drift, I was taken ill with my old enemy, malarial fever. We pitched camp here, and I tried to pull myself round with the contents of our small medicine chest, but I got steadily worse. In this emergency a good Samaritan, in the person of Jan Potgieter, a Transvaal Boer, came along on his wagon, homeward bound. Potgieter took in the situation at a glance. "This man is going to die up here," he said; "put him on my wagon and I will take him back with me." The offer was too good to be refused, and I returned with him to his farm. The change to the dry, bracing air of the Transvaal soon made itself felt, and I decided on the pressing invitation of Potgieter and his wife to settle down on the farm until such time as I regained my health. In return for this I engaged to act, as far as lay in my power, as tutor to the children.

Potgieter's farm was situated about 25 miles from the main road leading from Potchefstroom to Klerksdorp. It was a typical Boer farm, and the inmates were in all respects typical Boers. The family consisted of Potgieter and his wife, a daughter eighteen years of age, two girls of four and seven respectively, and a boy of five. All the duties of the household devolved on the eldest daughter, who was assisted by three Kaffir girls. One of these girls attended to the children, while the other two helped in the house and kitchen. The Boer is a great believer in "hardening" children, and a Boer child is brought up in such a rough and ready way as appears a person accustomed to our own methods. None of these children as much as possessed a pair of shoes when I first arrived on the farm, though later on, when the boy attained his tenth birthday, the father went over to the store and purchased him a pair as a birthday present.

At daylight every morning the Kaffir girl went with a bowl of milk into the little-lean-to-room where the three children slept, and then dressed the two girls, who went to play outside. At seven o'clock the others had breakfast, after which the children took their, in company with the native girls. The idea of allowing children to mix so closely with natives is that they may learn the Kaffir language, which is so essential in this part. The children's breakfast consisted of maize meal porridge. Their dinner at mid-day was composed of milled pumpkins, brown bread and milk. For supper they again had the maize meal. This, with a bowl of milk at seven, when they went to bed, was their regular fare. The Boer eats largely of meat himself, but he does not consider it good for children.

In the morning I used to take the elder of the little girls and the boy into my room, and try and instil the rudiments of English into them, but it was at first heart-breaking work. Both could speak Kaffir fluently—more fluently, indeed, than they could speak the Taal; but they did not understand a word of English. The progress was at first doubtfully slow, though after a time we got along better. The other little girl would sit outside in company with her nurse, her feet in the stream, playing with the remarkably tame ducks, while the two visitors, as they soon came to consider themselves, were in my charge.

The Boer is a great believer in the regular use of medicine. One of the most prominent items in every country store is the medicine shelves, where all kinds of patent medicines,

got up in gaudy wrappers specially prepared for the Boer trade, are to be seen. Every Saturday night the children had to take their weekly dose. This consisted of a table-spoonful of magnesia, with a dash of some kind of patent medicine in it. This concoction had been recommended to Potgieter by a "travelling doctor," as he described some wandering tramp whom he had once accommodated with a "shakedown." "What is it good for?" I asked him on one occasion. "Oh, everything," he replied, vaguely. "Yes," said his wife. "It is good for everything except the smallpox; only the good Lord can cure that." "But the children are all

right; there's nothing the matter with them," I protested. "That's because they take the medicine regularly," said Mrs Potgieter, and I subsided. One of the most necessary health preservatives we know of is personal cleanliness; the Boer knows nothing of this. Every Sunday morning the Kaffir girl washed the children's hands and faces, and combed their hair. Then they went into the large room. Potgieter took his seat at the head of the table, and, with his Bible before him, held "service." This lasted for about an hour, after which the children were allowed to go out into the "land" again and get into their usual dishevelled condition.

The Boers—though the statement may be questioned by those who do not know them intimately—suffer terribly from nervousness. This is due to a number of causes, the principal of which are no doubt dyspepsia and monotony. The maldy descends to the children, who exhibit it very early. The elder of the two little girls was already a victim, and Potgieter questioned me on the subject. "What's the best thing for her?" he asked. "Give her more nourishing food," I said; "let her have meat and eggs, and plenty of milk." "Oh," said his wife, "you do not understand children. If we gave her meat and eggs she would get the fever at once"; and then she went on to describe the case of a cousin of hers, which ended in this way, owing, as she supposed, to her having been treated in the manner I suggested.

The duty of keeping the children clothed fell on the elder daughter, who cut down her parents' clothing for this purpose. Each of the little girls had for everyday wear a black dress and a jacket made out of part of one of their father's coats, which had been first cut in half. These jackets were sleeveless. They had no hats, and I used to wonder at times if the nervousness from which one of them suffered was not aggravated by constant exposure to the hot sun. On Sundays the girls wore their best clothes, also home-made, but composed of material obtained from the store specially for them. The boy was always dressed in one of his father's cast-off suits of corduroy, cut down for him.

Another illness to which Boer children are very subject is toothache. This, however, is not confined to the Transvaal, but is prevalent all over South Africa, and is supposed to be due to the climate. The youngest girl had been suffering from this distressing pain for some time. One day Potgieter got out the cart and took her into Klerksdorp to have the tooth extracted. The doctor was away at the time, and a man employed at the local hotel, who said he was an expert at pulling teeth, undertook to relieve the child. He broke the tooth, and, in probing for it with his knife, played havoc with the poor child's mouth. The little girl could sit all without a murmur, and her parents were immensely proud of this. The fact of the child's mouth having been cut about in such a wanton manner did not seem to appeal to them in the least, though they were in no sense heartless, but were really deeply attached to their children. This ability to bear pain without exhibiting any emotion is one of the strangest attributes of the Boers and seems to be born in them.

The eldest daughter, who had been educated in Pretoria, and was engaged to be married to a cousin, used to complain bitterly of the monotony of her surroundings, to the great annoyance of her mother, who could not understand any one being dissatisfied so long as they had a good home.

When the quarterly prayer-meetings came round Mr and Mrs Potgieter and the eldest daughter would go into the village to attend service, and always brought back some simple presents for the children. I am afraid, however, that their pleasure at receiving these was tempered by noticing that the big blue medicine bottle, which was always taken into the dorp to be refilled, was invariably brought out at the same time as the gifts, and put in its accustomed place on the side-table. Had they been English children, I wonder if they would have allowed this hated object to rest securely when they were alone with it?

Once the children got over the first start in their education they made fair progress, and soon began to hold a conversation with me. My health had come back in the meantime, and in connection with the young lady of the house, I began to weary of the tedium of my daily life; so one morning, nine months after my first



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