

The Lonely Farm.

By HENRY MEYER.

A Weird and Terrible Story From the Transvaal.

HERE was something wonderfully pathetic about the slim, frail-looking lady as, with simple dignity, she slowly mounted the steps leading on to the verandah running round the low Dutch homestead.

I had travelled many miles that day, under a fierce sun, for the greater part of the journey through sparsely-timbered country, where the advantages of shade had been reduced to a minimum.

How welcome this habitation was, therefore, the reader can realise. The miles, urged on by the masterful hand of the driver, put forth a final effort, until, panting and with dripping flanks, they came to a standstill about thirty yards from the farmhouse.

The undulating nature of the ground screened my approach from the lady until I was making preparations to descend from the cart. Then she perceived me, and a strange look of surprise and fear spread itself over her features as she made an attempt to rise from the chair upon which, a few seconds ago, she had seated herself.

I apologised to her for appearing so suddenly and with so little ceremony, explaining that official business was taking me through that part of the country, and, as a storm appeared imminent, I had, under direction from my Kaffir boy, driven somewhat out of my way to crave her hospitality for the night, it being quite impossible to reach Roo-drift that evening.

As I explained she appeared to grow visibly ill an ease, and, whilst accepting the position of hostess, did so in a spirit that seemed to lack the whole-heartedness that is usually characteristic of those cut off from communication with the distant towns.

Her age I supposed to be about forty, which I afterwards ascertained, was correct within a few years. Her manner in regard to the subtleties of etiquette, no less than her perfectly modulated and concise utterances, spoke indubitably of culture and refinement.

With a request that I would pardon her absence for a few minutes, uttered in a strangely determined manner—almost as if she feared I would overstep the limits of courtesy and raise an objection to being left on the now rapidly darkening veranda—she entered the house.

Quite twenty minutes elapsed when an apology broke in on my ear as I leaned over the veranda-rail watching the storm, and my hostess stood beside me.

She motioned to me to follow her, and we entered a low, long room, essentially Dutch, in the centre of which stood a table set for two.

Except for a desultory conversation—merely monosyllabic on her part—we ate in silence; I had therefore better opportunity of studying the features of Mrs D'Arcy. This name, I felt sure, for what reason I cannot explain, was an assumed one. One thing I noticed with surprise. When, at times, I appeared intent on my food, she always fell into a listening attitude, as one who listens for a sound of someone moving stealthily in some other part of the house. Her lapses into this attitude were so frequent that I, who am nothing if not curious, felt an uncontrollable desire to ascertain the reason for her meanness.

Immediately upon our concluding the meal she again excused herself, in the same quietly determined manner, and left me alone.

When she re-entered the room she seemed more at ease, and presently commenced quite an interesting discussion on books and art. Eventually, however, her conversation became disconnected, and I saw once more, with a little irritation, that she was merely lending me a fraction of her attention.

I was on the point of asking her consent to my withdrawal when she anticipated me by rising from her chair

with a statement to the effect that my room was in order if I wished to retire.

I acknowledged this to be my desire, so, without more ado, she took a lamp in her hand and I followed her down a long passage to a room at the extreme end, where she placed the light on a bracket beside the door and bade me good night.

The bedroom was comfortably furnished with the massive, old-fashioned Dutch furniture. An ancient muzzle-loading gun hung over a commodious fireplace, and a few Scriptural texts in Dutch adorned the walls.

For a few moments I sat down by the window. The storm had passed overhead, and now only fitful flashes of lightning came stabbing from out, the dis-

ing eyes roved round and round the room, as if in search of some thing or person, and presently he entered.

On the wall in the room—I forgot to mention it before—there hung an oil-painting of a fair young face, which might have been taken for the daughter of my hostess.

As my horrible visitor passed this I noticed he cowered and shrank back against the bed, on the farther side of which I sat in the high-backed chair, pressing myself back as far as possible. Then, ambling over to a chest standing in a corner of the room, he opened a drawer, and with an attenuated arm drew therefrom a pair of riding leggings and a heavy whip. The former he gravely proceeded to put on, the condition of his legs making an awful contrast to the width of the leggings.

This done he grasped the whip, and, with a low guttural cry, threw his leg over an imaginary horse. His eyes glowing like fire, he started to slash and cut at the animal which his distorted mind led him to believe he was riding.

Presently—horror of horrors!—he seemed to become aware of the fact that he was not alone, for his eyes roved suspiciously around the room until they rested on me.

He stopped his antics, his eyes shone

As she approached, so he crawled back over the bed, furtively glancing at her with the mein of a thrashed dog treacherously waiting, yet afraid, to spring from behind.

Mrs D'Arcy, having replaced the book, turned and left the room again, at the same even pace, though I noticed with thankfulness that her face bore only a steady look of sympathy. The madman was now beside the door, some three yards in front of her, and, as she advanced, so he fell back step by step along the passage.

I rose from my chair and walked into line with the door, watching the pair. Never shall I behold such another scene.

The reader must visit the low-lying fever districts of Africa; he must see the dark and clammy malarial mist shrinking back before the rays of the morning sun. Then only can he conceive the picture of this loathsome creature reluctantly giving way, foot by foot, as the lady advanced, until he finally retired into what I supposed was his own room.

Suddenly the reflection that this might be but a temporary respite, and that in all probability, immediately Mrs D'Arcy had gone, he might creep back to pay me a second visit, flashed over me. This had no sooner crossed my mind that I followed immediately behind the somnambulist, keeping as close to her as caution would permit. Thus I passed the room of the poor wretch, noticing with a shiver as I did so, two eyes, like balls of fire, glaring savagely out of the darkness within.

I gained the dining-room and, securely locking the door behind me, lit a match. By its light I moved across to a couch, on which I threw myself, giving way to so prolonged a period of trembling that I felt ashamed of myself.

Then I fell into a troubled sleep and dreamed of Dante's Inferno. Half an hour could not have elapsed before I was sitting bolt upright, listening to the most blood-curdling cries imaginable. At intervals shrieks of insane laughter would echo out, gradually merging into a sob or wail. Finally, to my horror, thin streaks of fire appeared round the door-jamb, waning and glowing.

When I summoned up sufficient courage to open the door a thick cloud of smoke drove me temporarily back into the room.

Out again into the passage I dashed, groping for the room of my hostess. I found it; it was unlocked. Fervently striking a match, I discerned her lying unconscious on the bed, apparently overcome by the choking fumes.

It was the work of a second to seal the window and shatters flying outward, and I soon stood with her out in the cool night air.

My first duty seemed to my hostess, so I left to my driver and Kaffir servant—who, disturbed from their sleep, were gazing foolishly on the hopeless task of subduing the conflagration.

It soon became apparent that my efforts to restore her to consciousness could avail nothing at the moment, so, making her as comfortable as was possible in one of the outhouses, I turned my attention to the now rapidly disappearing homestead.

The walls of the room which had been the scene of my terrible experience had fallen in, and only the front portion of the house withstood the fury of the flames.

The three of us worked like Trojans, but the chilly air of the June morning found us standing out on the velvet looking at a mass of charred debris—all that was left of the homestead.

About midday I insinuated the mules into my Cape-cart and, placing Mrs D'Arcy, who was still unconscious—upon a heap of thick rugs at the bottom, set out for the nearest town, a small place called Klipdorp, some forty miles away.

Before leaving I searched among the ruins of the homestead. In one corner I found the madman's charred bones, and a feeling of thankfulness came over me.

Strange to say, one of the few things to escape the fire was a book—the very one Mrs D'Arcy had placed to her lips. I glanced at the title-page, and saw it was a copy of Shakespeare's works. At the flyleaf were the words, still quite legible:—

"To Ruth from Johannes. December, 1887."

Below this a woman's hand had written:—



"He started to cut and slash at the animal which his distorted mind led him to believe he was riding."

trance, fighting up the vellit and making the neighbouring kopjes stand out grim and harsh against the sky.

Soon, however, the storm died away, and the world outside became quite dark save for the starlight.

Idly I took up some old school-books belonging to my hostess, and wondered what chain of circumstance had buried "Ruth Folkus, Grahamstown Convent" away in the back vellit, practically cut off from all communication with the outside world.

I must have dozed off in the chair, when a stealthy turning of the door-knob brought me back to a thoroughly-awakened state. Then, very quietly the door opened, and a human head appeared! I pray Heaven that I may never see such a spectacle again.

The creature's face was practically gone; the bones stood out through the skin with livid distinctness. His lips—it was a man, or had been—had disappeared, and blackened stumps of teeth chattered and gnashed continually.

Even my enemies cannot account me a coward, but this ghastly object, seen at dead of night, terrified me. Thus far he had not seen me, though his glitter-

angrily, and, repeating some unintelligible gibberish, he came crawling over the snowy counterpane towards me.

It was all like some horrible dream. My legs and tongue refused their office, and I simply sat spellbound, watching his slow advance.

Then, through a sort of haze, just as the loathsome creature was reaching out a claw-like hand to touch me, something passed between us and the light. There stood Mrs D'Arcy, a white robe draping her slight form, her feet bare, hands clasped loosely in front of her, and a look of unutterable anguish and despair stamped on every line of her sweet face. Her eyes stared fixedly before her, and not a tremor disturbed the evenness of her gaze. Wonderingly I perceived that she was asleep.

A book—luckily one I had not disturbed—was lying on the low shelf, and this, with an indescribably tender action, she took up, lovingly kissed, and placed back again.

All my sense of danger, all my fear of the maniac, seemed to vanish at her approach. Even the natural instinct to protect her from the creature seemed wanting, for it appeared unnecessary.