

The White Flag

By S. Baring-Gould

A percentage of the South African Boers—how large or how small that percentage is has not been determined—is possessed of a rudimentary conscience, much as the oyster has incipient eyes, and the snake initiatory articulations for feet, which in the course of long ages may, under suitable conditions, develop into an active faculty.

If Jacob Van Heeren possessed any conscience at all it was the merest protoplasm of one.

He occupied Heerendorp, a ramshackle farmhouse under a kopje, and had cattle and horses, also a wife and grownup sons and daughters.

When the war broke out Jacob hoisted the white flag at the gable, and he and his sons indulged their sporting instincts by shooting down such officers and men of the British army as went to the farm, unsuspecting treachery.

Heerendorp by this means obtained an evil notoriety, and it was ordered to be burnt, and the women of Jacob's family to be transferred to a concentration camp where they would be mollycoddled at the expense of the English taxpayer. Thus Jacob and his sons were delivered from all anxiety as to their womankind, and were given a free field in which to exercise their mischievous ingenuity. As to their cattle and horses that had been commandeered, they held receipts which would entitle them to claim full value for the beasts at the termination of hostilities.

Jacob and his sons might have joined one of the companies under a Boer general, but they preferred independent action, and their peculiar tactics, which proved eminently successful.

That achievement in which Jacob exhibited most slimness, and of which he was pre-eminently proud, was as follows: feigning himself to be wounded, he rolled on the ground, waving a white kerchief, and crying out for water. A young English lieutenant at once filled a cup and ran to his assistance, when Jacob shot him through the heart.

When the war was over Van Heeren got his farm rebuilt and restocked at the expense of the British taxpayer, and received his wife and daughters from the concentration camp, plump as partridges.

So soon as the new Heerendorp was ready for occupation, Jacob took a large knife and cut seventeen notches in the doorpost.

“What is that for, Jacob?” asked his wife.

“They are reminders of the Britishers I have shot.”

“Well,” said she, “if I hadn't killed more Rooineks than that, I'd be ashamed of myself.”

“Oh, I shot more in open fight. I didn't count them; I only reckon such as I've been slim enough to befool with the white flag,” said the Boer.

Now the lieutenant whom Jacob Van Heeren had killed when bringing him a cup of cold water, was Aneurin Jones, and he was the only son of his mother, and she a widow in North Wales. On Aneurin her heart had been set, in him was all her pride. Beyond him she had no ambition. About him every fibre of her heart was entwined. Life had to her no charms apart from him. When the news of his death reached her, unaccompanied by particulars, she was smitten with a sorrow that almost reached despair. The joy was gone out of her life, the light from her sky. The prospect was a blank before her. She sank into profound despondency, and would have welcomed death as an end to an aimless, a hopeless life.

But when peace was concluded, and some comrades of Aneurin returned home, the story of how he had met his death was divulged to her.

Then the passionate Welsh mother's heart became as a live coal within her breast. An impotent rage against his murderer consumed her. She did not know the name of the man who had killed him, she but ill understood where her son had fallen. Had she known, had she been able, she would have gone out to South Africa, and have gloried in being able to stab to the heart the man who had so treacherously murdered her Aneurin. But how was he to be identified?

The fact that she was powerless to avenge his death was a torture to her. She could not sleep, she could not eat, she writhed, she moaned, she bit her fingers, she chafed at her incapacity to execute justice on the murderer. A feverish flame was lit in her hollow cheeks. Her lips became parched, her tongue dry, her dark eyes glittered as if sparks of unquenchable fire had been kindled in them.

She sat with clenched hands and set teeth before her dead grate, and the purple veins swelled and throbbled in her temples.

Oh! if only she knew the name of the man who had shot her Aneurin!

Oh! if only she could find out a way to recompense him for the wrong he had done!

These were her only thoughts. And the sole passage in her Bible she could read, and which she read over and over again, was the story of the Importunate Widow who cried to the judge, "Avenge me of mine adversary!" and who was heard for her persistent asking.

Thus passed a fortnight. She was visibly wasting in flesh, but the fire within her burned only the fiercer as her bodily strength failed.

Then, all at once, an idea shot like a meteor through her brain. She remembered to have heard of the Cursing Well of St. Elian, near Colwyn. She recalled the fact that the last "Priest of the Well," an old man who had lived hard by, and who had initiated postulants into the mysteries of the well, had been brought before the magistrates for obtaining money under false pretences, and had been sent to gaol at Chester; and that the parson of Llanelian had taken a crowbar and had ripped up the wall that enclosed the spring, and had done what lay in his power to destroy it and blot out the remembrance of the powers of the well, or to ruin its efficacy.

But the spring still flowed. Had it lost its virtues? Could a parson, could magistrates bring to naught what had been for centuries?

She remembered, further, that the granddaughter of the "Priest of the Well" was then an inmate of the workhouse at Denbigh. Was it not possible that she should know the ritual of St. Elian's spring?—should be able to assist her in the desire of her heart?

Mrs. Winifred Jones resolved on trying. She went to the workhouse and sought out the woman, an old and infirm creature, and had a conference with her. She found the woman, a poor, decrepit creature, very shy of speaking about the well, very unwilling to be drawn into a confession of the extent of her knowledge, very much afraid of the magistrates and the master of the workhouse punishing her if she had anything to do with the well; but the intensity of Mrs. Jones, her vehemence in prosecuting her inquiries, and, above all, the gift of half a sovereign pressed into her palm, with the promise of another if she assisted Mrs. Winifred in the prosecution of her purpose, finally overcame her scruples, and she told all that she knew.

"You must visit St. Elian's, madam," said she, "when the moon is at the wane. You must write the name of him whose death you desire on a pebble, and drop it into the water, and recite the sixty-ninth Psalm."

"But," objected the widow, "I do not know his name, and I have no means of discovering it. I want to kill the man who murdered my son."

The old woman considered, and then said: "In this case it is different. There is a way under these circumstances. Murdered, was your son?"

"Yes, he was treacherously shot."

"Then you will have to call on your son by name, as you let fall the pebble, and say: 'Let him be wiped out of the book of the living. Avenge me of mine adversary, O my God.' And you must go on dropping in pebbles, reciting the same prayer, till you see the water of the spring boil up black as ink. Then you will know that your prayer has been heard, and that the curse has wrought."

Winifred Jones departed in some elation.

She waited till the moon changed, and then she went to the spring. It was near a hedge; there were trees by it. Apparently it had been unsought for many years. But it still flowed. About it lay scattered a few stones that had once formed the bounds.

She looked about her. No one was by. The sun was declining, and would soon set. She bent over the water—it was perfectly clear. She had collected a lapful of rounded stones.

Then she cried out: "Aneurin! come to my aid against your murderer. Let him be blotted out of the book of the living. Avenge me on my adversary, O my God!" and she dropped a pebble into the water.

Then rose a bubble. That was all.

She paused but for a moment, then again she cried:

"Aneurin! come to my aid against your murderer. Let him be blotted out of the book of the living. Avenge me on my adversary, O my God!"

Once more a pebble was let fall. It splashed into the spring, but there was no change save that ripples were sent against the side.

A third—then a fourth—she went on; the sun sent a shaft of yellow glory through the trees over the spring.

Then someone passed along the road hard by, and Mrs. Winifred Jones held her breath, and desisted till the footfall had died away.

But then she continued, stone after stone was dropped, and the ritual was followed, till the seventeenth had disappeared in the well, when up rose a column of black fluid boiling as it were from below, the colour of ink; and the widow pressed her hands together, and drew a sigh of relief; her prayer had been heard, and her curse had taken effect.

She cast away the rest of the pebbles, let down her skirt, and went away rejoicing.

It so fell out that on this very evening Jacob Van Heeren had gone to bed early, as he had risen before daybreak, and had been riding all day. His family were in the outer room, when they were startled by a hoarse cry from the bedroom. He was a short-tempered, imperious man, accustomed to yell at his wife and children when he needed them; but this cry was of an unusual character, it had in it the ring of alarm. His wife went to him to inquire what was the matter. She found the old Boer sitting up in bed with one leg extended, his face like dirty stained leather, his eyes starting out of his head, and his mouth opening and shutting, lifting and depressing his shaggy, grey beard, as though he were trying to speak, but could not utter words.

"Pete!" she called to her eldest son, "come here, and see what ails your father."

Pete and others entered, and stood about the bed, staring stupidly at the old man, unable to comprehend what had come over him.

"Fetch him some brandy, Pete," said the mother; "he looks as if he had a fit."

When some spirits had been poured down his throat the farmer was revived, and said huskily: "Take it away! Quick, take it off!"

"Take what away?"

"The white flag."

"There is none here."

"It is there—there, wrapped about my foot."

The wife looked at the outstretched leg, and saw nothing. Jacob became angry, he swore at her, and yelled: "Take it off; it is chilling me to the bone."

"There is nothing there."

"But I say it is. I saw him come in—"

"Saw whom, father?" asked one of the sons.

"I saw that Rooinek lieutenant I shot when he was bringing me drink, thinking I was wounded. He came in through the door—"

"That is not possible—he must have passed us."

"I say he did come. I saw him, and he held the white rag, and he came upon me and gave me a twist with the flag about my foot, and there it is—it numbs me. I cannot move it. Quick, quick, take it away."

"I repeat there is nothing there," said his wife. "Pull off his stocking," said Pete Van Heeren; "he has got a chill in his foot, and fancies this nonsense. He has been dreaming."

"It was not a dream," roared Jacob; "I saw him as clearly as I see you, and he wrapped my foot up in that accursed flag."

"Accursed flag!" exclaimed Samuel, the second son. "That's a fine way to speak of it, father, when it served you so well."

"Take it off, you dogs!" yelled the old man, "and don't stand staring and barking round me."

The stocking was removed from his leg, and then it was seen that his foot—the left foot—had turned a livid white.

"Go and heat a brick," said the housewife to one of her daughters; "it is just the circulation has stopped."

But no artificial warmth served to restore the flow of blood, and the natural heat.

Jacob passed a sleepless night.

Next morning he rose, but limped; all feeling had gone out of the foot. His wife vainly urged him to keep to his bed. He was obstinate, and would get up; but he could not walk without the help of a stick. When clothed, he hobbled into the kitchen and put the numbed foot to the fire, and the stocking sole began to smoke, it was singed and went to pieces, but his foot was insensible to the heat. Then he went forth, aided by the stick, to his farmyard, hoping that movement would restore feeling and warmth; but this also was in vain. In the evening he seated himself on a bench outside the door, whilst his family ate supper. He ordered them to bring food to him. He felt easier in the open air than within doors.

Whilst his wife and children were about the table at their meal, they heard a scream without, more like that of a wounded horse than a man, and all rushed forth, to find Jacob in a paroxysm of terror only less severe than that of the preceding night.

"He came on me again," he gasped; "the same man, I do not know from whence—he seemed to spring out of the distance. I saw him first like smoke, but with a white flicker in it; and then he got nearer and became more distinct, and I knew it was he; and he had another of those white napkins in his hand. I could not call for help—I tried, I could utter no sound, till he wrapped it—that white rag—round my calf, and then, with the cold and pain, I cried out, and he vanished."

“Father,” said Pete, “you fell asleep and dreamt this.”

“I did not. I saw him, and I felt what he did. Give me your hand. I cannot rise. I must go within. Good Lord, when will this come to an end?”

When lifted from his seat it was seen that his left leg dragged. He had to lean heavily on his son on one side and his wife on the other, and he allowed himself, without remonstrance, to be put to bed.

It was then seen that the dead whiteness, as of a corpse, had spread from the foot up the calf.

“He is going to have a paralytic stroke, that is it,” said Pete. “You, Samuel, must ride for a doctor to-morrow morning, not that he can do much good, if what I think be the case.”

On the second day the old man persisted in his determination to rise. He was deaf to all remonstrance, he would get up and go about, as far as he was able. But his ability was small. In the evening, as the sun went down, he was sitting crouched over the fire. The family had finished supper, and all had left the room except his wife, who was removing the dishes, when she heard a gasping and struggling by the fire, and, turning her head, saw her husband writhing on his stool, clinging to it with his hands, with his left leg out, his mouth foaming, and he was snorting with terror or pain.

She ran to him at once.

“Jacob, what is it?”

“He is at me again! Beat him off with the broom!” he screamed. “Keep him away. He is wrapping the white flag round my knee.”

Pete and the others ran in, and raised their father, who was falling out of his seat, and conveyed him to bed.

It was now seen that his knee had become hard and stiff, his calf was as if frozen; the whiteness had extended upwards to the knee.

Next day a surgeon arrived. He examined the old man, and expressed his conviction that he had a stroke. But it was a paralytic attack of an unusual character, as it had in no way affected his speech or his left arm and hand. He recommended hot fomentations.

Still the farmer would not be confined to bed; he insisted on being dressed and assisted into the kitchen.

One stick was not now sufficient for him, and Samuel contrived for him crutches. With these he could drag himself about, and on the fourth evening he laboriously worked his way to a cowstall to look at one of his beasts that was ill.

Whilst there he had a fourth attack. Pete, who was without, heard him yell and beat at the door with one of his crutches. He entered, and found his father lying on the floor, quivering with terror, and spluttering unintelligible words. He lifted him, and drew him without, then shouted to Samuel, who came up, and together they carried him to the house.

Only when there, and when he had drunk some brandy, was he able to give an account of what had taken place. He had been looking at the cow, and feeling it, when down out of the hayloft had come leaping the form of the Rooinek lieutenant, which had sprung in between him and the cow, and, stooping, had wrapped a white rag round his thigh, above the knee. And now the whole of his leg was dead and livid.

“There is nothing for it, father, but to have your leg amputated,” said Pete. “The doctor told me as much. He said that mortification would set in if there was no return of circulation.”

“I won’t have it off! What good shall I be with only one leg?” exclaimed the old man.

“But father, it will be the sole means of saving your life.”

“I won’t have my leg off!” again repeated Jacob.

Pete said in a low tone to his mother: "Have you seen any dark spots on his leg? The doctor said we must look for them, and, when they come, send for him at once."

"No," she replied, "I have not noticed any, so far."

"Then we will wait till they appear."

On the fifth day the farmer was constrained to keep his bed.

He had now become a prey to abject terror. So sure as the hour of sunset came, did a new visitation occur. He listened for the clock to sound each hour of the day, and as the afternoon drew on he dreaded with unspeakable horror the advent of the moment when again the apparition would be seen, and a fresh chill be inflicted. He insisted that his wife or Pete should remain in the room with him. They took it in turns to sit by his bedside.

Through the little window the fire of the setting sun smote in and fell across the suffering man.

It was his wife's turn to be in attendance.

All at once a gurgling sound broke from his throat. His eyes started from his face, his hair bristled, and with his hands he worked himself into a sitting posture, and he heaved himself on to his pillow, and would have broken his way through the backboard of his bed, could he have done so.

"What is it, Jacob?" asked his wife, throwing down the garment which she was mending, and coming to his assistance. "Lie down again. There is nothing here."

He could not speak. His teeth were chattering, and his beard shaking, foam-bubbles formed on his lips, and great sweatdrops on his brow.

"Pete! Samuel!" she called, "come to your father."

The young men ran in, and they forcibly laid the old Boer in bed, prostrate.

And now it was found that the right foot had turned dead, like the left.

On the evening of the seventeenth day after the visit to the well of Llanelian, Mrs. Winifred Jones was sitting on the side of her bed in the twilight. She had lighted no candle. She was musing, always on the same engrossing topic, the wrong that had been done to her and her son, and thirsting with a feverish thirst for vengeance on the wrongdoer.

Her confidence in the expedient to which she had resorted was beginning to fail. What was this recourse to the well but a falling in with an old superstition that had died out with the advance of knowledge, and under the influence of a wholesome feeling? Was any trust to be placed in that woman at the workhouse? Was she deceiving her for the sake of the half-sovereign? And yet—she had seen a token that her prayer would prove efficacious. There had risen through the crystal water a column of black fluid.

Could it be that a widow's prayer should meet with no response? Was wrong to prevail in the world? Were the weak and oppressed to have no means of procuring the execution of justice on the evildoers? Was not God righteous in all His ways? Would it be righteous in Him to suffer the murderer of her son to thrive? If God be merciful, He is also just. If His ear is open to the prayer for help, He must as well listen to the cry for vengeance.

Since that evening at the spring she had been unable to pray as usual, to pray for herself—her only cry had been: "Avenge me on my adversary!" If she tried to frame the words of the Lord's Prayer, she could not do so. They escaped her; her thoughts travelled to the South African veldt. Her soul could not rise to God in the ecstasy of love and devotion; it was choked with hate—an overwhelming hate.

She was in her black weeds; the hands, thin and white, were on her lap, nervously clasping and unclasping the fingers. Had anyone been there, in the grey twilight of a summer night, he would

have been saddened to see how hard and lined the face had become, how all softness had passed from the lips, how sunken were the eyes, in which was only a glitter of wrath.

Suddenly she saw standing before her, indistinct indeed, but unmistakable, the form of her lost son, her Aneurin, and he held a white napkin in his right hand, and this napkin emitted a phosphorescent glow.

She tried to cry out; to utter the beloved name; she tried to spring to her feet and throw herself into his arms! But she was unable to stir hand, or foot, or tongue. She was as one paralysed, but her heart bounded within her bosom.

“Mother,” said the apparition, in a voice that seemed to come from a vast distance, yet was articulate and audible—“Mother, you called me back from the world of spirits, and sent me to discharge a task. I have done it. I have touched him on the foot and calf and knee and thigh, on hand and elbow and shoulder, on one side and on the other, on his head, and lastly on his heart, with the white flag—and now he is dead. I did it in all sixteen times, and with the sixteenth he died. I chilled him piecemeal with the white flag; the sixteenth was laid on his heart, and that stopped beating.”

Then she lifted her hands slightly, and her stiffened tongue relaxed so far that she was able to murmur: “God be thanked!”

“Mother,” continued the apparition, “there is a seventeenth remaining.”

She tried to clasp her hands on her lap, but the fingers were no longer under her control; they had fallen to the side of the chair-bed, and hung there lifeless. Her eyes stared wildly at the spectre of her son, but without love in them; love had faded out of her heart, and given place to hate of his murderer.

“Mother,” proceeded the vision, “you summoned me, and even in the world of spirits the soul of a child must respond to the cry of a mother, and I have been permitted to come back and to do your will. And now I am suffered to reveal something to you: to show you what my life would have been had it not been cut short by the shot of the Boer.”

He stepped towards her, and put forth a vaporous hand and touched her eyes. She felt as though a feather had been passed over them. Then he raised the luminous sheet and shook it. Instantly all about her was changed.

Mrs. Winifred Jones was not in her little Welsh cottage; nor was it night. She was no longer alone. She stood in a court, in full daylight. She saw before her the judge on his seat, the barristers in wig and gown, the press reporters with their notebooks and pens, a dense crowd thronging every portion of the court. And she knew instinctively, before a word was spoken, without an intimation from the spirit of her son, that she was standing in the Divorce Court. And she saw there as co-respondent her son, older, changed in face, but more altered in expression. And she heard a tale unfolded—full of dishonour, and rousing disgust.

She was now able to raise her hands—she covered her ears; her face, crimson with shame, sank on her bosom. She could endure the sight, the words spoken, the revelations made, no longer, and she cried out: “Aneurin! Aneurin! for the Lord’s sake, no more of this! Oh, the day, the day, that I have seen you standing here.”

At once all passed; and she was again in her bedroom in Honeysuckle Cottage, North Wales, seated with folded hands on her lap, and looking before her wonderingly at the ghostly form of her son.

“Is that enough, mother?”

She lifted her hands deprecatingly.

Again he shook the glimmering white sheet, and it was as though drops of pearly fire fell out of it.

And again—all was changed.

She found herself at Monte Carlo; she knew it instinctively. She was in the great saloon, where were the gaming-tables. The electric lights glittered, and the decorations were superb. But all her attention was engrossed on her son, whom she saw at one of the tables, staking his last napoleon.

It was indeed her own Aneurin, but with a face on which vice and its consequent degradation were written indelibly.

He lost, and turned away, and left the hall and its lights. His mother followed him. He went forth into the gardens. The full moon was shining, and the gravel of the terraces was white as snow. The air was fragrant with the scent of oranges and myrtles. The palms cast black shadows on the soil. The sea lay still as if asleep, with a gleam over it from the moon.

Mrs. Winifred Jones tracked her son, as he stole in and out among the shrubs, amid the trees, with a sickening fear at her heart. Then she saw him pause by some oleanders, and draw a revolver from his pocket and place it at his ear. She uttered a cry of agony and horror, and tried to spring forward to dash the weapon from his hand.

Then all changed.

She was again in her little room in the dusk, and the shadowy form of Aneurin was before her.

“Mother,” said the spirit, “I have been permitted to come to you and to show to you what would have been my career if I had not died whilst young, and fresh, and innocent. You have to thank Jacob Van Heeren that he saved me from such a life of infamy, and such an evil death by my own hand. You should thank, and not curse him.” She was breathing heavily. Her heart beat so fast that her brain span; she fell on her knees.

“Mother,” the apparition continued, “there were seventeen pebbles cast into the well.”

“Yes, Aneurin,” she whispered.

“And there is a seventeenth white flag. With the sixteenth Jacob Van Heeren died. The seventeenth is reserved for you.”

“Aneurin! I am not fit to die.”

“Mother, it must be, I must lay the white flag over your head.”

“Oh! my son, my son!”

“It is so ordained,” he proceeded; “but there are Love and Mercy on high, and you shall not be veiled with it till you have made your peace. You have sinned. You have thrust yourself into the council-chamber of God. You have claimed to exercise vengeance yourself, and not left it to Him to whom vengeance in right belongs.”

“I know it now,” breathed the widow.

“And now you must atone for the curses by prayers. You have brought Jacob Van Heeren to his death by your imprecations, and now, fold your hands and pray to God for him—for him, your son’s murderer. Little have you considered that his acts were due to ignorance, resentment for what he fancied were wrongs, and to having been reared in a mutilated and debased form of Christianity. Pray for him, that God may pardon his many and great transgressions, his falsehood, his treachery, his self-righteousness. You who have been so greatly wronged are the right person to forgive and to pray for his soul. In no other way can you so fully show that your heart is turned from wrath to love. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.”

She breathed a “Yes.”

Then she clasped her hands. She was already on her knees, and she prayed first the great Exemplar's prayer, and then particularly for the man who had wrecked her life, with all its hopes.

And as she prayed the lines in her face softened, and the lips lost their hardness, and the fierce light passed utterly away from her eyes, in which the lamp of Charity was once more lighted, and the tears formed and rolled down her cheeks.

And still she prayed on, bathed in the pearly light from the summer sky at night. Without, in the firmament, twinkled a star; and a night-bird began to sing.

“And now, mother, pray for yourself.”

Then she crossed her hands over her bosom, and bowed her head, full of self-reproach and shame; and as she prayed, the spirit of her son raised the White Flag above her and let it sail down softly, lightly over the loved head, and as it descended there fell from it as it were a dew of pale fire, and it rested on her head, and fell about her, and she sank forward with her face upon the floor. R.I.P.