

The Mauser

She missed the Karoo. It is always beautiful to those who live there and who understand its subtleties. She was one of those. It beckoned to her, relentlessly at times, the dryness, the smells, the plants. All she could do then was to mount her horse and ride out into the Free State veld and imagine the sandy, semi-desert, heat-drenched open spaces she had loved so well around the Karoo farm. Today was just such a day and called for a long, hard ride. She was growing to appreciate the beauties of the Free State landscapes, and found exploring the veld on horseback to be a rewarding outing. Cresting the hill on her return, wind swirling her long hair around her face, horse panting and sweating from his work out, she let her gaze roam over their land. Looking down on the farmstead a moment of disbelief followed by pounding panic engulfed her. Smoke? Smoke! Yes, that was thick black smoke rising from the Voorwaarts homestead.

No, no she screamed in her head, not my house too. Damn you British, damn Kitchener, damn the war, no, no, no! Kitchener's Scorched Earth policy had devastated many farmsteads in the area. Women and children were not harmed, but were dragged outside to watch as all they had worked for was reduced to smouldering, acrid smelling, black ash. Animals were slaughtered to ensure that the families of the Afrikaner farmers were left completely destitute. This was the Achilles heel of these Boer guerillas. They could not fight the invaders, and at the same time protect their homes

Alarmed, she urged her horse on, raced down the hill onto the long, potholed sandy strip which passed as a road, towards her home. Devastation ... children gathered outside between the karoo bushes, Mina, the kitchen help trying to comfort them, dogs barking, chickens clucking, mayhem wherever she looked - yet in her mind a deathly silence. A silence that screamed at her: British, British, donnerse British, another homestead razed to the ground, this time hers. No thought for possessions, survival, humanity, just British soldiers fulfilling Lord Kitchener's orders.

Johanna had the indomitable spirit of the true Afrikaner. Her overriding thoughts were that her people would stand together and no British Government, Lord

Kitchener, Cecil Bloody John Rhodes or anyone else would bring them to their knees. Immediate action was required.

Roosman was sent on horseback to the nearest farm to prepare them for the arrival of the Pretorius family. Animals that had been freed when the first reports arrived on the farm, had been chased into bushes, chickens gathered and hidden behind the koppie, and any other livestock they could find had been moved to the shelters which hopefully would not be spotted by the adrenalin driven British troops. In short whatever animals and birds had survived, was all that the family had, other than the pile of acrid, smouldering, cinders.

Feeling in her apron pocket she found the hard, crumbed end of a rusk. Her eyes filled with unshed tears. This was from the last food supply she had packed for Stephanus, her husband who had joined the Boers' latest guerilla attack against the British. Wives knew little of the activities of their men, they packed padkos: dried sausage, biltong, rusks (beskuit) which together with dried fruit was their ration kit for survival, and of course the dried seeds for what passed for coffee. Occasionally the men added meat – anything they could catch or shoot, for the pot.

Maria Steenkamp, worried and distracted, hurriedly sorted out sleeping space for the Pretorius children; workers chased the chickens into chicken coops, enclosed whatever livestock had been salvaged, and set the servants up in their own quarters. Maria holding a mug of coffee to her lips, stared at Johanna's shocked face thinking, "Heavens, how are we going to help these people, and protect ourselves?"

"I never thought this devil's fireworks would stretch to our part of the world, Maria, my head is spinning, I have so many things to do, nothing to do them with, and I don't even know where to start. I don't know where Stefanus is, if he will be returning, and if he does, all he is coming home to is dusty ashes, and arid farmlands." Tears of anger, frustration and disbelief rolled over Johanna's dust covered cheeks, gathered under her chin, and dripped down into her washed-out blue blouse.

Mesmerised, Maria watched the damp patch growing, and growing. For some strange reason this reminded her of a similar situation in another part of the Free State. What does one say? She clearly remembered that experience. Devastation – her cousin was left with nothing, the family lived outdoors in make-shift shelters. Sick children were taken to nearby families to be nursed, while the rebuilding of the dwelling started.

“My friend, don’t stress ...you know that we people from the Karoo are all ‘family’ and will share what we have, and help each other. When our men are back they will work out how to start re-building your home. In the meantime, you are all staying here with us.”

Johanna looked at her in disbelief, “But we have nothing, absolutely nothing. How can we all stay with you?”

“Now listen to me Johanna, this is nonsense. You have your children, some of your animals, the rest will be fetched by Rooiman and my outside workers, and we will all work together. To start with, the vegetable garden needs attention; each child will be allocated a job, and we will pull together. We will pool our livestock and live as one family. ”

And so it was that the two anxious women sat and planned a list on how to survive until their men returned home.

First up, the valuables from the Steenkamp household were packed in trunks and buried underground. Food was gathered, rationed and stored in different places – tumble-down outbuildings that had not been used in many years, but ... that did have storage. Outlooks were posted during the days and the nights, not that they could do much other than act as an early warning system, giving them enough time to hide , and to prepare themselves. Does one ever prepare oneself for just such an occasion thought Johanna. As she worked with Maria her grief turned to anger, then to rage, an inner burning fire reflecting the remains of their home.

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The Boers knew their countryside intimately. With their farm workers they could track and shoot for the pot with ease. Fighting for their lands, which were their over-riding passion, they became adept at guerilla warfare. They won some skirmishes, lost others, but were fearsome adversaries.

“I do miss this companionship Maria, we wives only meet at nagmaal.” She slammed and kneaded and thumped her bread dough around.

“Heavens Johanna, that loaf will either rise to the heavens, or descend to hell the way you are bashing it about – frustrations?”

“More than frustration, anger, rage, I am so furious I can hardly contain my feelings.”

“ Well about nagmaal all boer women feel this way, its only at nagmaal that we can really get together and catch up ... yes Rooiman?”

“Sjoe, sjoe, sjoe. aaai, aaai miesies sjoe miesies.”

“Ja Rooiman praat nou laat ons hoor.” (Yes Rooiman, speak, we are listening)

‘Die boere, ons manne het die stryd net langs die Koringberg gewen, die Ingilse, hê hê hê hulle ry op die perde, hulle hardloop, hulle kruip, hulle ontsnap, maar Mnr Snyman het nou vir hulle kaptein, ja ja ja hy het hom. Hy loop met die perd, hulle gaan na Mnr Snyman se plaas toe.’

(The Boers, our men won the battle near the Koringberg. The English, ha ha ha they ride on the horses, they run, they crawl, they escape, but Mr Snyman has their Captain, yes, yes, yes, he has him. He walks with the horse, they go to Mr Snyman’s farm).

“En Baas Pretorius en Baas Steenkamp?” vra al twee vrouens saam.

(And Mr Pretorius and Mr Steenkamp?)

“Neeeeee hulle is goed, goed, ja goed. Niks makeer hulle nie.”

(Noooo they are good, good, yes good. Nothing wrong with them)

Later that night Veld Kommandant Snyman called on the two women.

“Evening ladies. Another dreadful burning. Aaai Mevrouw, I am so, so sorry for the loss of your

home, and livestock. We Afrikaners stand together at times like this and plans will be made to help those in need.

“Mrs Pretorius,” he looked at her intently, “could you help us out?”

“Well ... I ... what is it Veld Kommandant?”

“We have captured the English captain, but need someone to guard him tonight. We are on the last phase of our planned ambush, and cannot spare a man.”

“But why me?”

“Stop this Johanna, you can do anything for our cause ... you are brave and strong, and if the Veld Kommandant wants you to do this ... then you must help out.”

It was then that the Veld Kommandant walked to where Johanna was sitting, whispered something in her ear, and leaving said, “We will expect you at 21h00.”

Later that night Johanna found herself sitting in a comfortable wooden rocker, a blanket around her shoulders, knitting in her hands, Mauser across her lap, staring hard at Captain Cooper who was uncomfortably bound to a kitchen chair.

The eyes that met his were cold as ice, hard as nails, and fearless. He wondered about this. Easy enough to overpower a woman, but ... he had heard that the Boer women were excellent marksmen and could use weapons as easily as they did kitchen utensils.

When his desperation to relieve himself became too great he nodded at Johanna, “I need the bathroom.”

She understood him perfectly well, but pretended not to understand. Squirming in the chair he pointed to his nether regions, "I need to pee!"

Without a word Johanna got up, moved around to the back of his chair, loosened the first knot and indicated that he could now free himself, all the while standing behind him, aiming the Mauser directly at the middle of his back.

Instinctively he felt this, moved outside, she following and looking on as he relieved himself.

Looking at her he said, "Now what?" She indicated with the Mauser, back inside.

As he moved to run, he was aware of the careful aim she was taking, and then the bullet whizzed passed his left ear, deafening him as it sped on its way.

"Holy Hell!" he thought, "that was bloody close. Best get back inside." There she indicated that he should tie his legs to the chair, put his hands behind the chair, and fast as lightning she had tied him up again.

They both knew he could escape, but that bloody Mauser in the hands of this angry Boer woman did nothing to calm his nerves. So he sat ... and sat She knitted ... and knitted, until dawn.

"Morning Mev, everything ok here?" The Veld Kommandant's voice was somewhat surprised.

"Still here then Captain?"

"Well ... yes, shouldn't I be?"

"You are one lucky man. I thought I would return and find you dead on the doorstep."

"How so?"

"You bloody British idiot, the house you burned down some time ago belonged to Mrs Pretorius," pointing to the woman, "and she had my permission to kill you.

She is the hottest shot amongst all the Boer women, can kill game for the pot as well as any man, and could have killed you in an instant.”

“Had she decided to kill you, we would not have turned a hair, in fact we would have regarded it as ‘just desserts’.”

Julia Hattingh