E. C. OSONDU

E. C. Osondu was born in 1966 in Lagos, Nigeria, and worked in advertising before earning an MFA in Fiction at Syracuse University, where he was a fellow in the creative writing program. His short fiction has appeared in publications such as *Agni, Guernica, Vice, Fiction,* and *The Atlantic.* The story "Waiting" was awarded the prestigious Caine Prize for African Literature in 2009. In his collection of eighteen stories, *Voice of America,* published in 2010, Osondu dramatizes the plight of Nigerians desperate to leave the country as well as the disillusioning experiences they have upon arriving in America. He is currently a professor of English at Providence College in Rhode Island, where he teaches creative writing and a variety of other English courses.

Voice of America

(2007)

I

We were sitting in front of Ambo's provision store drinking the local gin ogogoro and Coke and listening to a program called *Music Time in Africa* on the Voice of America. We were mostly young men who were spending our long summer holidays in the village. Some of us whose parents were too poor to pay our school fees spent the period of the long vacation doing odd jobs in the village to enable us to save money to pay our school fees. Someone remarked on how clear the broadcast was, compared to our local radio broadcasts, which were
filled with static. The presenter announced that there was a special request from an American girl whose name was Laura Williams for an African song and that she was also interested in pen pals from every part of Africa, especially Nigeria. Onwordi, who had been pensive all this while, rushed to Ambo the shopkeeper, collected a pen and began to take down her address. This immediately led to a scramble among us to get the address, too. We all took it down and folded the piece of paper and put it in our pockets and promised we were going to write as soon as we got home that night.

A debate soon ensued among us concerning the girl who wanted pen pals from Africa.

"Before our letter gets to her, she would have received thousands from the big boys who live in the city of Lagos and would throw our letters into the trash can," Dennis said.

"Yes, you may be right," remarked Sunday, "and besides even if she writes you, both of you may not have anything in common to share. But the boys who live in the city go to night clubs and know the lyrics of the latest songs by Michael Jackson and Dynasty. They are the ones who see the latest movies, not the dead Chinese kung-fu and Sonny Chiba films that Fantasia Cinema screens for us in the village once every month."

"But you can never tell with these Americans, she could be interested in being friends with a real village boy because she lives in the big city herself and is probably tired of city boys." Lucky, who said this, was the oldest among us and had spent three years repeating form four.

"I once met an American lady in Onitsha where I went to buy goods for my shop," Ambo the shopkeeper said. He hardly spoke to us, only listening and smiling and looking at the figures in his Daily Reckoner notebook.

We all turned to Ambo in surprise. We knew that he traveled to the famous Onitsha market, which was the biggest market in West Africa, to buy goods every week; we could hardly believe that he had met an American lady.

Again, Onitsha market was said to be so big that half of those who came there to buy and sell were not human but spirits. It was said that a simple way of seeing the spirits when in the market was to bend down and look through your legs at the feet of people walking through. If you looked well and closely enough, you would notice that some of them had feet whose soles did not touch the ground when they walked. These were the spirits. If they got a good bargain from a trader he would discover that the money in his money box miraculously grew every day, but any trader who cheats them would find his money disappearing from his money box without any rational explanation.

"She was wearing an ordinary Ankara skirt and blouse made from local fabrics and had come to buy a leather purse and hat from the Hausa traders; she even exchanged a few words in Hausa with the traders. The way she said ina kwu ana nkwu was so sweet and melodious it was like listening to a canary singing."

"She was probably a volunteer schoolteacher in one of the girls' secondary schools around Onitsha and has lived here for so long she does not count as an American. We are talking of a real American girl living on American soil." Jekwu, who said this, was Ambo's adversary as a result of a dispute over an old debt and was permanently on the opposite side of any argument with Ambo.

"Well, what I was trying to say was that she may be interested in a village boy. Like the one I saw in Onitsha who was wearing a local dress and spoke Hausa, I am sure she will be interested in a village boy," Ambo said and buried his head in his Daily Reckoner.

Someone ordered another round of ogogoro and Coke and we all began to drink and became silent as we thought our own thoughts. The moon dipped and everywhere suddenly became dark. One by one we rose and left for our homes.
We were sitting in Ambo's shop one evening when Onwordi swaggered in holding a white envelope with a small American stamp which had an eagle painted on it on its side. He waved it in our faces and was smiling. He called for drinks and we all rushed to him trying to snatch the envelope from his hands.

"She has replied," he said, looking very proud like a man who had unexpectedly caught a big fish with a hook in the small village river. The truth was that we had all forgotten about the announcement on the radio program and I had actually washed the shorts in whose back pocket I had put the paper where I jotted down the address.

Onwordi began to read from the letter to us. The girl's name was Laura Williams. She had recently moved with her parents to a farm in Iowa from a much larger city. She had one more year before finishing high school. She was going to take a class on Africa, Its People and Culture in the fall and was curious to know more about African culture. She wanted to know whether Onwordi lived in the city or in a village. She also wanted to know if he lived close to lots of wild animals like giraffes, lions and chimpanzees. And what kind of foods did he generally eat, were they spicy? and how were they prepared? She also wanted to know if he came from a large family. She ended the letter with the phrase "Yours Laura."

"Oh my God," Lucky said, "this is a love letter. The American lady is searching for an African husband."

"Eh? Why do you say that?" Onwordi said, clearly very excited about such a prospect. Though he had read the letter over a hundred times and was hoping for such a stroke of good fortune, he had not seen any hint of such in the letter.

"See the way she ended the letter, she was practically telling you that she was yours from now on."

"I think that is the American way of ending letters," Dennis said. He was the most well read amongst us, having read the entire oeuvre of James Hadley Chase and Nick Carter. He used big words and would occasionally refer to some girl in the village as a doll and some other as a deadbeat floozy.

"But that is not even the main issue; she can become your girlfriend in due course if you know how to play your game very well. You could tell her that you have a giraffe farm and that you ride on the back of a tiger to your farm," he continued.

"But she is soon going to ask for your photograph and you know we have no giraffes here and the last we heard of a lion was when one was said to have been sighted by a hunter well over ten years ago," Jekwu said. "You should ask her to send you a ten dollar bill, tell her you want to see what it looks like and when she sends it we can change it in the 'black market' at Onitsha for one thousand naira and use the money for ogogoro." Jekwu took a drink and wiped his eyes, which were misting over from the drink.

"If you ask her for money, you are going to scare her away. White women are interested in love and romance. Write her a love letter professing your love for her and asking for her hand in marriage, tell her that you would love to come and join her in America and see what she has to say to that," Dennis said.

"Promise her you'll send her some records by Rex Jim Lawson if she can send you Dynasty's 'Do Me Right,' " Lucky added.

"A guy in my school once had a female pen pal from India, she would ask him to place her letters under his pillow when he slept. At night she would appear in his dreams and make love to him. He said he always woke up in the morning exhausted and wound out after the marathon lovemaking sessions in the dreams. We do not know how it happened, but he later found out the girl had died years back."

We were all shocked into silence by Dennis's story. Ambo turned up the volume of the radio and we began to listen to the news in special English. The war in Palestine was progressing apace, Blacks in South Africa were still ri-
oting in Soweto and children were dying of hunger in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Onwordi said nothing. He smiled at our comments, holding the letter close to his chest like somehow hugging a lover. He thanked us for our suggestions and was the first to leave Ambo’s shop that night.

III

Two weeks later, Onwordi walked into the shop again smiling and holding an envelope with an American flag stamp close to his chest once more. We circled him and began to ask him questions. She had written it down. She thanked him for his mail. She was glad to know he lived in a village. She was interested in knowing what life was like in a typical African village. What kind of house did he live in, how did he get his drinking water? What kind of school did he attend and how did he learn to write in English? She said she would love to see his photograph, though she did not have any of hers that she could share with him at the present time. Postal regulations would not permit her to send money by mail but she could take a picture of a ten dollar bill and send it to him if all he really wanted was to see what it looked like. She also said she was interested in knowing about African Talking Drums, did they really talk? She said she looked forward to hearing from him again. We were silent as we listened to him and then we all began to speak at once.

“I was right about her being interested in you; otherwise why would she request for your picture without sending you hers?”

“This shows that women all over the world are coy. She was only being cunning. She really wants to know what you look like before she gets involved with you.”

“You should go and borrow a suit from the schoolteacher and go to Sim Paul’s Photo Studio in the morning when he is not yet drunk and let him take a nice shot of you so you can send it to her.”

“How about you borrow the schoolteacher’s suit and Ambo’s shirt and Dennis’s black school tie and Lucky’s silk flower patterned shirt and Sim Paul’s shoes and tell the schoolteacher’s wife to lend you her stretching comb to straighten your hair if you can’t afford Wellastretch cream; then you’ll be like the most handsome suitor in the folk-tale.”

“Who is the most handsome suitor?” Onwordi asked. “I have never heard that folk tale.” Jekwu cleared his throat and took a sip from his ogogoro and Coke and began his story.

“Once in the land of Idu there lived a girl who was the prettiest girl in the entire kingdom. Her beauty shone like the sun and her teeth glittered like pearls whenever she smiled. All the young men in the kingdom asked for her hand in marriage but she turned them down. She turned down the men either because they were too tall or too short or too hairy or not hairy enough. She said since she was the most beautiful girl in the kingdom she could only marry the most handsome man. Her fame soon got to the land of the spirits and the most wicked spirit of them all, Tongo, heard about her and said he was going to marry her. Not only was Tongo the most wicked, he was also the most ugly, possessing only a cracked skull for a head. He was all bones and when he walked his bones rattled. Before setting out to ask for the hand of the maiden in marriage, Tongo went round the land of the spirits to borrow body parts. From the spirit with the straightest pair of legs, he borrowed a straight pair of legs and from the one with the best skin he borrowed a smooth and glowing skin. He went round borrowing body parts until he was transformed into the most handsome man there was. As soon as he walked into Idu on the market day and the maiden set eyes on him, she began following him around until he turned, smiled at her and asked for her hand in marriage. She took him to her parents and hurriedly packed her things, waved them goodbye and followed the handsome suitor.

“On their way to his home, which was across seven riv-
ers and seven hills, she was so busy admiring his handsome-
ness that she did not grow tired and was not bothered by 
the fact that they were leaving all the human habitations 
behind. It was only when they crossed into the land of the 
spirits and he walked into the first house and came out 
crooked because he had returned the straight legs to their 
owner that she began to sense that something was wrong. 
And so she continued to watch as he returned the skin, the 
arms, the hair and the other borrowed body parts so that by 
the time they got to his house, it was only his skull that was 
left. She wept when she realized she had married an ugly 
spirit but she knew it was too late to return to the land of 
living so she bided her time. When Tongo approached 
her for lovemaking, she told him to go and borrow all the 
body parts he had on when he married her. Because Tongo 
loved her headstrong nature, he agreed. Each time they 
made love he went round borrowing body parts and when 
they had a child, the child was a very handsome child and 
grew into the most handsome man.

We all laughed at the story and advised Onwoordi to 
work at transforming himself into the most handsome man. 
Ambo advised him to dress in traditional African clothes, 
that, from what he knew about white people, this was likely 
to appeal to her more.

“So what are you going to do?” we asked Onwoordi, but 
he only smiled and held his letter tightly as he drank.

The next time Music Time in Africa was on the air, we 
had our pens ready to take down the names of pen pals, but 
the few that were announced were listeners from other 
parts of Africa and we all felt disappointed.

We waited for Onwoordi to walk in with a letter but he 
did not for quite some time. We wondered what had hap-
pened. When he finally walked in after some days, he 
looked dejected and would not say a word to any of us.

“Hope you have not upset her with your last mail?” 
Lucky said. “You know white people are very sensitive and 
you may have hurt her feelings without knowing it.”

“This is why we told you to always let us see the letter

before you send it to her; when we put our heads together 
and craft a letter to her, she will pack her things and move 
into your house, leaking roof and all. As the elders say, 
‘When you piss on one spot, it is more likely to froth.’ ”

“But exactly what did you write to her that has made her 
silent?” Lucky asked. Onwordi was silent but he smiled liked 
a dumb man that had accidentally glimpsed a young wom-
an’s pointed breast and ordered more drinks. “Or have you 
started hiding her mail from us? Maybe the contents are too 
itimate for our eyes. Or now that you have become closer 
has she started kissing her letters with lipstick-painted lips 
and sealing the letters with kisses?” Ambo teased. But noth-
ing we said would make Onwoordi say a word.

Onwordi walked into Ambo’s shop after a period of three 
weeks holding the envelope that we had become used to by 
now and looking morose. We all turned to him and began 
to speak at once.

“What happened, has she confessed that she has a hus-
band or why are you looking so sad?”

“Has she fallen in love with another man? I hear white 
women fall out of love as quickly as they fall in love.”

“If you have her telephone number I can take you to the 
Post and Telegrams Office in Onitsha if you have the money 
and help you make a call to her,” Ambo suggested.

Onwordi opened the envelope and brought out a photo-
graph. We all crowded around him to take a closer look. It 
was the picture of the American girl Laura Williams. It was 
a portrait that showed only her face. She had an open 
friendly face with brown hair and slightly chubby cheeks. 
She was smiling brightly in the photograph. Our damp fin-
gers were already leaving a smudge on the face.

“She is beautiful and looks really friendly but why did 
she not send you a photograph where her legs are showing? 
That way you do not end up marrying a cripple.”

Onwordi was not smiling.

“So what did she say in her letter or have the contents 
become too intimate for you to share with us?”
"She says that this was going to be her last letter to me. She says she's done with her paper and she did very well and illustrated her paper with some of the things I had told her about African culture. But she says her parents are moving back to the city, that the farm had not worked out as planned. She also said she has become interested in Japanese haiku and was in search of new friends from Japan."

"Is that why you are looking sad like a dog whose juicy morsel fell on the sand? You should thank God for saving you from a relationship where each time the lady clears her throat you have to jump. Sit down and drink with us, forget your sorrows and let the devil be ashamed," Jekwu said.

We all laughed but Onwordi did not laugh with us, he walked away in a slight daze. From that time onwards we never saw him at Ambo's shop again. Some people who went to check in on him said they found him lying on his bed with Laura Williams's letters and picture on his chest as he stared up into the tin roof.

**Olive Schreiner**

Born in 1855 to a missionary couple at the Wesleyan Missionary Society station near Herschel, South Africa, Olive Schreiner grew up in a religious household, where she was taught discipline and self-control, but by the time she was a teenager, she had begun to renounce Christianity. She worked as a governess and in 1883 published her first and most successful novel, *The Story of an African Farm*, under a male pseudonym. Severe asthma and lack of money prevented her from pursuing her first choice of career, medicine, so she used writing to try to improve the lives of women and black South Africans. She was also a pacifist who campaigned against the events that led to the Boer War, writing *The South African Question by an English South African*. She lived in Europe during several periods of her life, returning to South Africa after World War I and dying in 1920.

**Eighteen-Ninety-Nine**

(1906)

"Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened unless it die."

**I**

It was a warm night: the stars shone down through the thick soft air of the Northern Transvaal into the dark earth, where a little daub-and-wattle house of two rooms lay among the long, grassy slopes.

A light shone through the small window of the house,
though it was past midnight. Presently the upper half of the door opened and then the lower, and the tall figure of a woman stepped out into the darkness. She closed the door behind her and walked towards the back of the house where a large round hut stood; beside it lay a pile of stumps and branches quite visible when once the eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. The woman stooped and broke off twigs till she had her apron full, and then returned slowly, and went into the house.

The room to which she returned was a small, bare room, with brown earthen walls and a mud floor; a naked deal table stood in the centre, and a few dark wooden chairs, homemade, with seats of undressed leather, stood round the walls. In the corner opposite the door was an open fireplace, and on the earthen hearth stood an iron three-foot, on which stood a large black kettle, under which coals were smouldering, though the night was hot and close. Against the wall on the left side of the room hung a gun-rack with three guns upon it, and below it a large hunting-watch hung from two nails by its silver chain.

In the corner by the fireplace was a little table with a coffeepot upon it and a dish containing cups and saucers covered with water, and above it were a few shelves with crockery and a large Bible; but the dim light of the tallow candle which burnt on the table, with its wick of twisted rag, hardly made the corners visible. Beside the table sat a young woman, her head resting on her folded arms, the light of the tallow candle falling full on her head of pale flaxen hair, a little tumbled, and drawn behind into a large knot. The arms crossed on the table, from which the cotton sleeves had fallen back, were the full, rounded arms of one very young.

The older woman, who had just entered, walked to the fireplace, and kneeling down before it took from her apron the twigs and sticks she had gathered and heaped them under the kettle till a blaze sprang up which illumined the whole room. Then she rose up and sat down on a chair before the fire, but facing the table, with her hands crossed on her brown apron.
the bushes, lay flat on their stomachs and did not move or breathe, with that strange self-preserving instinct found in the young of animals or men who grow up in the open.

She remembered how black smoke came out at the back of the wagon and then red tongues of flame through the top; and even that some of the branches of the tree under which the wagon stood caught fire. She remembered later, when the black men had gone, and it was dark, that they were very hungry, and crept out to where the wagon had stood, and that they looked about on the ground for any scraps of food they might pick up, and that when they could not find any they cried. She remembered nothing clearly after that till some men with large beards and large hats rode up on horseback: it might have been next day or the day after. She remembered how they jumped off their horses and took them up in their arms, and how they cried; but that they, the children, did not cry, they only asked for food. She remembered how one man took a bit of thick, cold roaster-cake out of his pocket, and gave it to her, and how nice it tasted. And she remembered that the men took them up before them on their horses, and that one man tied her close to him with a large red handkerchief.

In the years that came she learnt to know that that which she remembered so clearly was the great and terrible day when, at Weenen, and in the country round, hundreds of women and children and youths and old men fell before the Zulus, and the assegais of Dingaan's braves drank blood.

She learnt that on that day all of her house and name, from the grandmother to the baby in arms, fell, and that she only and the boy cousin, who had hidden with her among the bushes, were left of all her kin in that northern world. She learnt, too, that the man who tied her to him with the red handkerchief took them back to his wagon, and that he and his wife adopted them, and brought them up among their own children.

She remembered, though less clearly than the day of the fire, how a few years later they trekked away from Natal, and went through great mountain ranges, ranges in and near which lay those places the world was to know later as Laings Nek, and Amajuba, and Ingogo; Elandslaagte, Nicholson Nek, and Spion Kop. She remembered how at last after many wanderings they settled down near the Witwatersrand where game was plentiful and wild beasts were dangerous, but there were no natives, and they were far from the English rule.

There the two children grew up among the children of those who had adopted them, and were kindly treated by them as though they were their own; it yet was but natural that these two of the same name and blood should grow up with a peculiar tenderness for each other. And so it came to pass that when they were both eighteen years old they asked consent of the old people, who gave it gladly, that they should marry. For a time the young couple lived on in the house with the old, but after three years they gathered together all their few goods and in their wagon, with their guns and ammunition and a few sheep and cattle, they moved away northwards to found their own home.

For a time they travelled here and travelled there, but at last they settled on a spot where game was plentiful and the soil good, and there among the low undulating slopes, near the bank of a dry sloat, the young man built at last, with his own hands, a little house of two rooms.

On the long slope across the sloat before the house, he ploughed a piece of land and enclosed it, and he built kraals for his stock and so struck root in the land and wandered no more. Those were brave, glad, free days to the young couple. They lived largely on the game which the gun brought down, antelope and wildebeest that wandered even past the doors at night; and now and again a lion was killed: one no farther than the door of the round hut behind the house where the meat and the milk were stored, and two were killed at the kraals. Sometimes, too, traders came with their wagons and in exchange for skins and fine horns sold sugar and coffee and print and tan-cord, and such things as the little household had need of. The lands
yielded richly to them, in maize, and pumpkins, and sweet-
cane, and melons; and they had nothing to wish for. Then in
time three little sons were born to them, who grew as strong
and vigorous in the free life of the open veld as the young
lions in the long grass and scrub near the river four miles
away. Those were joyous, free years for the man and woman,
in which disease, and carking care, and anxiety played no
part.

Then came a day when their eldest son was ten years old,
and the father went out a-hunting with his Kaffir servants:
in the evening they brought him home with a wound eight
inches long in his side where a lioness had torn him; they
brought back her skin also, as he had shot her at last in the
hand-to-throat struggle. He lingered for three days and
then died. His wife buried him on the low slope to the left
of the house; she and her Kaffir servants alone made the
grave and put him in it, for there were no white men near.
Then she and her sons lived on there; a new root driven
depth into the soil and binding them to it through the grave
on the hillside. She hung her husband's large hunting-watch
up on the wall, and put three of his guns over it on the rack,
and the gun he had in his hand when he met his death she
took down and polished up every day; but one gun she al-
ways kept loaded at the head of her bed in the inner room.
She counted the stock every night and saw that the Kaffirs
ploughed the lands, and she saw to the planting and water-
ing of them herself.

Often as the years passed men of the countryside, and
even from far off, heard of the young handsome widow
who lived alone with her children and saw to her own stock
and lands; and they came a-courting. But many of them
were afraid to say anything when once they had come, and
those who had spoken to her, when once she had answered
them, never came again. About this time too the coun-
tryside began to fill in; and people came and settled as near as
eight and ten miles away; and as people increased the game
began to vanish, and with the game the lions, so that the
one her husband killed was almost the last ever seen there.

But there was still game enough for food, and when her
eldest son was twelve years old, and she gave him his fa-
ther's smallest gun to go out hunting with, he returned
home almost every day with meat enough for the house-
hold tied behind his saddle. And as time passed she came
also to be known through the countryside as a "wise
woman." People came to her to ask advice about their ill-
nesses, or to ask her to dress old wounds that would not
heal; and when they questioned her whether she thought
the rains would be early, or the game plentiful that year, she
was nearly always right. So they called her a "wise woman"
because neither she nor they knew any word in that up-
country speech of theirs for the thing called "genius." So all
things went well till the eldest son was eighteen, and the
dark beard was beginning to sprout on his face, and his
mother began to think that soon there might be a daughter
in the house; for on Saturday evenings, when his work was
done, he put on his best clothes and rode off to the next
farm eight miles away, where was a young daughter. His
mother always saw that he had a freshly ironed shirt wait-
ing for him on his bed, when he came home from the kraals
on Saturday nights, and she made plans as to how they
would build on two rooms for the new daughter. At this
time he was training young horses to have them ready to
sell when the traders came round: he was a fine rider and it
was always his work. One afternoon he mounted a young
horse before the door and it bucked and threw him. He had
often fallen before, but this time his neck was broken. He
lay dead with his head two feet from his mother's doorstep.
They took up his tall, strong body and the next day the
neighbours came from the next farm and they buried him
beside his father, on the hillside, and another root was
struck into the soil. Then the three who were left in the lit-
tle farmhouse lived and worked on as before, for a year and
more.

Then a small native war broke out and the young bur-
ghers of the district were called out to help. The second son
was very young, but he was the best shot in the district, so
he went away with the others. Three months after, the men came back, but among the few who did not return was her son. On a hot sunny afternoon, walking through a mealie field which they thought was deserted and where the dried yellow stalks stood thick, an assegai thrown from an unseen hand found him, and he fell there. His comrades took him and buried him under a large thorn tree, and scraped the earth smooth over him, that his grave might not be found by others. So he was not laid on the rise to the left of the house with his kindred, but his mother’s heart went often to that thorn tree in the far north.

And now again there were only two in the little mud-house; as there had been years before when the young man and wife first settled there. She and her young lad were always together night and day, and did all that they did together, as though they were mother and daughter. He was a fair lad, tall and gentle as his father had been before him, not huge and dark as his two elder brothers; but he seemed to ripen towards manhood early. When he was only sixteen the thick white down was already gathering heavy on his upper lip; his mother watched him narrowly, and had many thoughts in her heart. One evening as they sat twisting wicks for the candles together, she said to him, “You will be eighteen on your next birthday, my son, that was your father’s age when he married me.” He said, “Yes,” and they spoke no more then. But later in the evening when they sat before the door she said to him: “We are very lonely here. I often long to hear the feet of a little child about the house, and to see one with your father’s blood in it play before the door as you and your brothers played. Have you ever thought that you are the last of your father’s name and blood left here in the north; that if you died there would be none left?” He said he had thought of it. Then she told him she thought it would be well if he went away, to the part of the country where the people lived who had brought her up: several of the sons and daughters who had grown up with her had now grown-up children. He might go down and from among them seek out a young girl whom he liked and who liked him; and if he found her, bring her back as a wife. The lad thought very well of his mother’s plan. And when three months were passed, and the ploughing season was over, he rode away one day, on the best black horse they had, his Kaffir boy riding behind him on another, and his mother stood at the gable watching them ride away. For three months she heard nothing of him, for trains were not in those days, and letters came rarely and by chance, and neither he nor she could read or write. One afternoon she stood at the gable end as she always stood when her work was done, looking out along the road that came over the rise, and she saw a large tent-wagon coming along it, and her son walking beside it. She walked to meet it. When she had greeted her son and climbed into the wagon she found there a girl of fifteen with pale flaxen hair and large blue eyes whom he had brought home as his wife. Her father had given her the wagon and oxen as her wedding portion. The older woman’s heart wrapt itself about the girl as though she had been the daughter she had dreamed to bear of her own body, and had never borne.

The three lived joyfully at the little house as though they were one person. The young wife had been accustomed to live in a larger house, and down south, where they had things they had not here. She had been to school, and learned to read and write, and she could even talk a little English; but she longed for none of the things which she had had; the little brown house was home enough for her.

After a year a child came, but whether it were that the mother was too young, it only opened its eyes for an hour on the world and closed them again. The young mother wept bitterly, but her husband folded his arms about her, and the mother comforted both. “You are young, my children, but we shall yet hear the sound of children’s voices in the house,” she said; and after a little while the young mother was well again and things went on peacefully as before in the little home.

But in the land things were not going on peacefully. That was the time that the flag to escape from which the people
had left their old homes in the Colony, and had again left Natal when it followed them there, and had chosen to face the spear of the savage, and the conflict with wild beasts, and death by hunger and thirst in the wilderness rather than live under, had by force and fraud unfurled itself over them again. For the moment a great sullen silence brooded over the land. The people, slow of thought, slow of speech, determined in action, and unforgetting, sat still and waited. It was like the silence that rests over the land before an upcountry thunderstorm breaks.

Then words came: “They have not even given us the free government they promised”—then acts—the people rose. Even in that remote countryside the men began to mount their horses, and with their guns ride away to help. In the little mud-house the young wife wept much when he said that he too was going. But when his mother helped him pack his saddlebags she helped too; and on the day when the men from the next farm went, he rode away also with his gun by his side.

No direct news of the one they had sent away came to the waiting women at the farmhouse; then came fleet reports of the victories of Ingogo and Amajuba. Then came an afternoon after he had been gone two months. They had both been to the gable end to look out at the road, as they did continually amid their work, and they had just come in to drink their afternoon coffee when the Kaffir maid ran in to say she saw someone coming along the road who looked like her master. The women ran out. It was the white horse on which he had ridden away, but they almost doubted if it were he. He rode bending on his saddle, with his chin on his breast and his arm hanging at his side. At first they thought he had been wounded, but when they had helped him from his horse and brought him into the house they found it was only a deadly fever which was upon him. He had crept home to them by small stages. Hardly had he any spirit left to tell them of Ingogo, Laings Nek, and Amajuba. For fourteen days he grew worse and on the fifteenth day he died.

And the two women buried him where the rest of his kin lay on the hillside.

And so it came to pass that on that warm starlight night the two women were alone in the little mud-house with the stillness of the veld about them; even their Kaffir servants asleep in their huts beyond the kraal; and the very sheep lying silent in the starlight. They two were alone in the little house, but they knew that before morning they would not be alone; they were awaiting the coming of the dead man’s child.

The young woman with her head on the table groaned. “If only my husband were here still,” she wailed. The old woman rose and stood beside her, passing her hard, worn hand gently over her shoulder as if she were a little child. At last she induced her to go and lie down in the inner room. When she had grown quieter and seemed to have fallen into a light sleep the old woman came to the front room again. It was almost two o’clock and the fire had burned low under the large kettle. She scraped the coals together and went out of the front door to fetch more wood, and closed the door behind her. The night air struck cool and fresh upon her face after the close air of the house, the stars seemed to be growing lighter as the night advanced, they shut down their light as from a million polished steel points. She walked to the back of the house where, beyond the round hut that served as a storeroom, the woodpile lay. She bent down gathering sticks and chips till her apron was full; then slowly she raised herself and stood still. She looked upwards. It was a wonderful night. The white band of the Milky Way crossed the sky overhead, and from every side stars threw down their light, sharp as barbed spears, from the velvety blue-black of the sky. The woman raised her hand to her forehead as if pushing the hair farther off it, and stood motionless, looking up. After a long time she dropped her hand and began walking slowly towards the house. Yet once or twice on the way she paused and stood looking up. When she went into the house the
woman in the inner room was again moving and moaning. She laid the sticks down before the fire and went into the next room. She bent down over the bed where the younger woman lay, and put her hand upon her. “My daughter,” she said slowly, “be comforted. A wonderful thing has happened to me. As I stood out in the starlight it was as though a voice came down to me and spoke. The child which will be born of you tonight will be a man-child and he will live to do great things for his land and for his people.”

Before morning there was the sound of a little wail in the mud-house: and the child who was to do great things for his land and for his people was born.

II

Six years passed; and all was as it had been at the little house among the slopes. Only a new piece of land had been ploughed up and added to the land before the house, so that the ploughed land now almost reached to the ridge.

The young mother had grown stouter, and lost her pink and white; she had become a working-woman, but she still had the large knot of flaxen hair behind her head and the large wondering eyes. She had many suitors in those six years, but she sent them all away. She said the old woman looked after the farm as well as any man might, and her son would be grown up by and by. The grandmother’s hair was a little more streaked with grey, but it was as thick as ever, and her shoulders as upright; only some of her front teeth had fallen out, which made her lips close more softly.

The great change was that wherever the women went there was the flaxen-haired child to walk beside them holding on to their skirts or clasping their hands.

The neighbours said they were ruining the child; they let his hair grow long, like a girl’s, because it curled; and they never let him wear velschoens like other children but always shop boots; and his mother sat up at night to iron his pinafores as if the next day were always a Sunday.

But the women cared nothing for what was said; to them he was not as any other child. He asked them strange questions they could not answer, and he never troubled them by wishing to go and play with the little Kaffirs as other children trouble. When neighbours came over and brought their children with them he ran away and hid in the sloot to play by himself till they were gone. No, he was not like other children!

When the women went to lie down on hot days after dinner sometimes, he would say that he did not want to sleep; but he would not run about and make a noise like other children—he would go and sit outside in the shade of the house, on the front doorstep, quite still, with his little hands resting on his knees, and stare far away at the ploughed lands on the slope, or the shadows nearer; the women would open the bedroom window, and peep out to look at him as he sat there.

The child loved his mother and followed her about to the milk house, and to the kraals; but he loved his grandmother best.

She told him stories.

When she went to the lands to see how the Kaffirs were ploughing he would run at her side holding her dress; when they had gone a short way he would tug gently at it and say, “Grandmother, tell me things!”

And long before day broke, when it was yet quite dark, he would often creep from the bed where he slept with his mother into his grandmother’s bed in the corner; he would put his arms round her neck and stroke her face till she woke, and then whisper softly, “Tell me stories!” and she would tell them to him in a low voice not to wake the mother, till the cock crowed and it was time to get up and light the candle and the fire.

But what he liked best of all were the hot, still summer nights, when the women put their chairs before the door because it was too warm to go to sleep; and he would sit on the stoof at his grandmother’s feet and lean his head against her knees, and she would tell him on and on of the things he liked to hear; and he would watch the stars as they slowly
set along the ridge, or the moonlight, casting bright-edged shadows from the gable as she talked. Often after the mother had got sleepy and gone in to bed the two sat there together.

The stories she told him were always true stories of the things she had seen or of things she had heard. Sometimes they were stories of her own childhood: of the day when she and his grandfather hid among the bushes, and saw the wagon burnt; sometimes they were of the long trek from Natal to the Transvaal; sometimes of the things which happened to her and her grandfather when first they came to that spot among the ridges, of how there was no house there nor lands, only two bare grassy slopes when they outspanned their wagon there the first night; she told of a lion she once found when she opened the door in the morning, sitting, with paws crossed, upon the threshold, and how the grandfather jumped out of bed and reopened the door two inches, and shot it through the opening; the skin was kept in the round storehouse still, very old and mangy.

Sometimes she told him of the two uncles who were dead, and of his own father, and of all they had been and done. But sometimes she told him of things much farther off: of the old Colony where she had been born, but which she could not remember, and of the things which happened there in the old days. She told him of how the British had taken the Cape over, and of how the English had hanged their men at the "Slachters Nek" for resisting the English government, and of how the friends and relations had been made to stand round to see them hanged whether they would or no, and of how the scaffold broke down as they were being hanged, and the people looking on cried aloud, "It is the finger of God! They are saved!" but how the British hanged them up again. She told him of the great trek in which her parents had taken part to escape from under the British flag; of the great battles with Moselikatse; and of the murder of Retief and his men by Dingaan, and of Dingaan's Day. She told him how the British government followed them into Natal, and of how they trekked north and east to escape from it again; and she told him of the later things, of the fight at Laings Nek, and Ingogo, and Amajuba, where his father had been. Always she told the same story in exactly the same words over and over again, till the child knew them all by heart, and would ask for this and then that.

The story he loved best, and asked for more often than all the others, made his grandmother wonder, because it did not seem to her the story a child would best like; it was not a story of lion-hunting, or wars, or adventures. Continually when she asked what she should tell him, he said, "About the mountains!"

It was the story of how the Boer women in Natal when the English Commissioner came to annex their country collected to meet him and pointing toward the Drakens Berg Mountains said, "We go across those mountains to freedom or to death!"

More than once, when she was telling him the story, she saw him stretch out his little arm and raise his hand, as though he were speaking.

One evening as he and his mother were coming home from the milking kraals, and it was getting dark, and he was very tired, having romped about shouting among the young calves and kids all the evening, he held her hand tightly.

"Mother," he said suddenly, "when I am grown up, I am going to Natal."

"Why, my child?" she asked him; "there are none of our family living there now."

He waited a little, then said, very slowly, "I am going to go and try to get our land back!"

His mother started; if there were one thing she was more firmly resolved on in her own mind than any other it was that he should never go to the wars. She began to talk quickly of the old white cow who had kicked the pail over as she was milked, and when she got to the house she did not even mention to the grandmother what had happened; it seemed better to forget.

One night in the rainy season when it was damp and chilly they sat round the large fireplace in the front room.
Outside the rain was pouring in torrents and you could hear the water rushing in the great dry sloot before the door. His grandmother, to amuse him, had sprung some dried mealies in the great black pot and sprinkled them with sugar, and now he sat on the stool at her feet with a large lump of the sticky sweetmeat in his hand, watching the fire. His grandmother from above him was watching it also, and his mother in her elbow-chair on the other side of the fire had her eyes half closed and was nodding already with the warmth of the room and her long day's work. The child sat so quiet, the hand with the lump of sweetmeat resting on his knee, that his grandmother thought he had gone to sleep too. Suddenly he said without looking up, "Grandmother?"

"Yes."

He waited rather a long time, then said slowly, "Grandmother, did God make the English too?"

She also waited for a while; then she said, "Yes, my child; He made all things."

They were silent again, and there was no sound but of the rain falling and the fire cracking and the sloot rushing outside. Then he threw his head backwards on to his grandmother's knee and looking up into her face, said, "But, Grandmother, why did He make them?"

Then she too was silent for a long time. "My child," at last she said, "we cannot judge the ways of the Almighty. He does that which seems good in His own eyes."

The child sat up and looked back at the fire. Slowly he tapped his knee with the lump of sweetmeat once or twice; then he began to munch it; and soon the mother started wide awake and said it was time for all to go to bed.

The next morning his grandmother sat on the front doorstep cutting beans in an iron basin; he sat beside her on the step pretending to cut too, with a short, broken knife. Presently he left off and rested his hands on his knees, looking away at the hedge beyond, with his small forehead knit tight between the eyes.

"Grandmother," he said suddenly, in a small, almost shrill voice, "do the English want all the lands of all the people?"

The handle of his grandmother's knife as she cut clinked against the iron side of the basin. "All they can get," she said.

After a while he made a little movement almost like a sigh, and took up his little knife again and went on cutting.

Some time after that, when a trader came by, his grandmother bought him a spelling-book and a slate and pencils, and his mother began to teach him to read and write. When she had taught him for a year he knew all she did. Sometimes when she was setting him a copy and left a letter out in a word, he would quietly take the pencil when she set it down and put the letter in, not with any idea of correcting her, but simply because it must be there.

Often at night when the child had gone to bed early, tired out with his long day's play, and the two women were left in the front room with the tallow candle burning on the table between them, then they talked of his future.

Ever since he had been born everything they had earned had been put away in the wagon chest under the grandmother's bed. When the traders with their wagons came round the women bought nothing except a few groceries and clothes for the child; even before they bought a yard of cotton print for a new apron they talked long and solemnly as to whether the old one might not be made to do by re-patching; and they mixed much more dry pumpkin and corn with their coffee than before he was born. It was to earn more money that the large new piece of land had been added to the lands before the house.

They were going to have him educated. First he was to be taught all they could at home, then to be sent away to a great school in the old Colony, and then he was to go over the sea to Europe and come back an advocate or doctor or a parson. The grandmother had made a long journey to the next town, to find out from the minister just how much it would cost to do it all.

In the evenings when they sat talking it over the mother
generally inclined to his becoming a parson. She never told
the grandmother why, but the real reason was because par-
sons do not go to the war. The grandmother generally fa-
voured his becoming an advocate, because he might
become a judge. Sometimes they saw discussing these
matters till the candle almost burnt out.

"Perhaps, one day," the mother would at last say, "he
may yet become president!"

Then the grandmother would slowly refold her hands
across her apron and say softly, "Who knows?—who
knows?"

Often they would get the box out from under the bed
(looking carefully across the corner to see he was fast
asleep) and would count out all the money, though each
knew to a farthing how much was there; then they would
make it into little heaps, some for this, some for that,
and then they would count on their fingers how many good
seasons it would take to make the rest, and how old he
would be.

When he was eight and had learnt all his mother could
teach him, they sent him to school every day on an adjoin-
ing farm six miles off, where the people had a schoolmaster.
Every day he rode over on the great white horse his father
went to the wars with; his mother was afraid to let him ride
alone at first, but his grandmother said he must learn to do
everything alone. At four o'clock when he came back one
or other of the women was always looking out to see the
little figure on the tall horse coming over the ridge.

When he was eleven they gave him his father's smallest
gun; and one day not long after he came back with his first
small buck. His mother had the skin dressed and bound
with red, and she laid it as a mat under the table, and even
the horns she did not throw away, and saved them in the
round house, because it was his first.

When he was fourteen the schoolmaster said he could
Teach him no more; that he ought to go to some larger
school where they taught Latin and difficult things; they
had not yet money enough and he was not quite old enough
to go to the old Colony, so they sent him first to the High-
veld, where his mother's relations lived and where there
were good schools, where they taught the difficult things; he
could live with his mother's relations and come back once
a year for the holidays.

They were great times when he came.

His mother made him koekies and sasarties and nice
things every day; and he used to sit on the stool at her feet
and let her play with his hair like when he was quite small.
With his grandmother he talked. He tried to explain to her
all he was learning, and he read the English newspapers to
her (she could read in neither English nor Dutch), translat-
ing them. Most of all she liked his atlas. They would some-
times sit over it for half an hour in the evening tracing the
different lands and talking of them. On the warm nights he
used still to sit outside on the stool at her feet with his head
against her knee, and they used to discuss things that were
happening in other lands and in South Africa; and some-
times they sat there quite still together.

It was now he who had the most stories to tell; he had
seen Krugersdorp and Johannesburg, and Pretoria; he
knew the world; he was at Krugersdorp when Dr. Jameson
made his raid. Sometimes he sat for an hour, telling her of
things, and she sat quietly listening.

When he was seventeen, nearly eighteen, there was
money enough in the box to pay for his going to the Colony
and then to Europe; and he came home to spend a few
months with them before he went.

He was very handsome now; not tall, and very slight, but
with fair hair that curled close to his head, and white hands
like a town's man. All the girls in the countryside were in
love with him. They all wished he would come and see
them. But he seldom rode from home except to go to the
next farm where he had been at school. There lived little
Aletta, who was the daughter of the woman his uncle had
loved before he went to the Kaffir war and got killed. She
was only fifteen years old, but they had always been great
friends. She netted him a purse of green silk. He said he
would take it with him to Europe, and would show it to
when he came back and was an advocate; and he gave her
a book with her name written in it, which she was to show
to him.

These were the days when the land was full of talk; it
was said the English were landing troops in South Africa,
and wanted to have war. Often the neighbours from the
nearest farms would come to talk about it (there were more
farms now, the country was filling in, and the nearest rail-
way station was only a day’s journey off), and they dis-
cussed matters. Some said they thought there would be
war; others again laughed, and said it would be only Jame-
son and his white flag again. But the grandmother shook
her head, and if they asked her why, she said, “It will not be
the war of a week, nor a month; if it comes it will be the war
of years,” but she would say nothing more.

Yet sometimes when she and her grandson were walk-
ing along together in the lands she would talk.

Once she said: “It is as if a great cloud hung just
above my head, as though I wished to press it back with my
hands and could not. It will be a great war—a great war.
Perhaps the English government will take the land for a
time, but they will not keep it. The gold they have fought
for will divide them, till they slay one another over it.”

Another day she said: “This land will be a great land one
day with one people from the sea to the north—but we
shall not live to see it.”

He said to her: “But how can that be when we are all of
different races?”

She said: “The land will make us one. Were not our fa-
thers of more than one race?”

Another day, when she and he were sitting by the table
after dinner, she pointed to a sheet of exercise paper, on
which he had been working out a problem and which was
covered with algebraical symbols, and said, “In fifteen
years’ time the government of England will not have one
piece of land in all South Africa as large as that sheet of
paper.”

One night when the milking had been late and she and
he were walking down together from the kraals in the star-
light she said to him: “If this war comes let no man go to it
lightly, thinking he will surely return home, nor let him go
expecting victory on the next day. It will come at last, but
not at first.

“Sometimes,” she said, “I wake at night and it is as though
the whole house were filled with smoke—and I have to get
up and go outside to breathe. It is as though I saw my whole
land blackened and desolate. But when I look up it is as
though a voice cried out to me, ‘Have no fear!’”

They were getting his things ready for him to go away
after Christmas. His mother was making him shirts and his
grandmother was having a kaross of jackals’ skins made
that he might take it with him to Europe where it was so
cold. But his mother noticed that whenever the grand-
mother was in the room with him and he was not looking at
her, her eyes were always curiously fixed on him as though
they were questioning something. The’ hair was growing
white and a little thin over her temples now, but her eyes
were as bright as ever, and she could do a day’s work with
any man.

One day when the youth was at the kraals helping the
Kaffir boys to mend a wall, and the mother was kneading
bread in the front room, and the grandmother washing up
the breakfast things, the son of the Field-Cornet came rid-
ning over from his father’s farm, which was about twelve
miles off. He stopped at the kraal and Jan and he stood
talking for some time; then they walked down to the farm-
house, the Kaffir boy leading the horse behind them. Jan
stopped at the round store, but the Field-Cornet’s son went
to the front door. The grandmother asked him in, and
handed him some coffee, and the mother, her hands still in
the dough, asked him how things were going at his father’s
farm, and if his mother’s young turkeys had come out well,
and she asked if he had met Jan at the kraals. He answered
the questions slowly, and sipped his coffee. Then he put the
cup down on the table, and said suddenly in the same mea-
sured voice, staring at the wall in front of him, that war had broken out, and his father had sent him round to call out all fightingburghers.

The mother took her hands out of the dough and stood upright beside the trough as though paralysed. Then she cried in a high, hard voice, unlike her own, “Yes, but Jan cannot go! He is hardly eighteen! He’s got to go and be educated in other lands! You can’t take the only son of a widow!”

“Aunt,” said the young man slowly, “no one will make him go.”

The grandmother stood resting the knuckles of both hands on the table, her eyes fixed on the young man. “He shall decide himself,” she said.

The mother wiped her hands from the dough and rushed past them and out at the door; the grandmother followed slowly.

They found him in the shade at the back of the house, sitting on a stump; he was cleaning the belt of his new Mauser which lay across his knees.

“Jan,” his mother cried, grasping his shoulder, “you are not going away? You can’t go! You must stay. You can go by Delagoa Bay if there is fighting on the other side! There is plenty of money!”

He looked softly up into her face with his blue eyes. “We have all to be at the Field-Cornet’s at nine o’clock tomorrow morning,” he said. She wept aloud and argued.

His grandmother turned slowly without speaking, and went back into the house. When she had given the Field-Cornet’s son another cup of coffee and shaken hands with him, she went into the bedroom and opened the box in which her grandson’s clothes were kept, to see which things he should take with him. After a time the mother came back too. He had kissed her and talked to her until she too had at last said it was right he should go.

All the day they were busy. His mother baked him biscuits to take in his bag, and his grandmother made a belt of two strips of leather; she sewed them together herself and put a few sovereigns between the stitchings. She said some of his comrades might need the money if he did not.

The next morning early he was ready. There were two saddlebags tied to his saddle and before it was strapped the kaross his grandmother had made; she said it would be useful when he had to sleep on damp ground. When he had greeted them, he rode away towards the rise: and the women stood at the gable of the house to watch him.

When he had gone a little way he turned in his saddle, and they could see he was smiling; he took off his hat and waved it in the air; the early morning sunshine made his hair as yellow as the tassels that hang from the head of ripening mealies. His mother covered her face with the sides of her kappie and wept aloud; but the grandmother shaded her eyes with both her hands and stood watching him till the figure passed out of sight over the ridge; and when it was gone and the mother returned to the house crying, she still stood watching the line against the sky.

The two women were very quiet during the next days; they worked hard, and seldom spoke. After eight days there came a long letter from him (there was now a post once a week from the station to the Field-Cornet’s). He said he was well and in very good spirits. He had been to Krugersdorp and Johannesburg, and Pretoria; all the family living there were well and sent greetings. He had joined a corps that was leaving for the front the next day. He sent also a long message to Aletta, asking them to tell her he was sorry to go away without saying goodbye; and he told his mother how good the biscuits and biltong were she had put into his saddlebag; and he sent her a piece of “vierkleur” ribbon in the letter, to wear on her breast.

The women talked a great deal for a day or two after this letter came. Eight days after there was a short note from him, written in pencil in the train on his way to the front. He said all was going well, and if he did not write soon they were not to be anxious; he would write as often as he could.

For some days the women discussed the note too.
Then came two weeks without a letter; the two women became very silent. Every day they sent the Kaffir boy over to the Field-Cornet’s, even on the days when there was no post, to hear if there was any news.

Many reports were flying about the countryside. Some said that an English armoured train had been taken on the western border; that there had been fighting at Albertina, and in Natal. But nothing seemed quite certain.

Another week passed... Then the two women became very quiet.

The grandmother, when she saw her daughter-in-law left the food untouched on her plate, said there was no need to be anxious; men at the front could not always find paper and pencils to write with and might be far from any post office. Yet night after night she herself would rise from her bed saying she felt the house close, and go and walk up and down outside.

Then one day suddenly all their servants left them except one Kaffir and his wife, whom they had had for years, and the servants from the farms about went also, which was a sign there had been news of much fighting; for the Kaffirs hear things long before the white man knows them.

Three days after, as the women were clearing off the breakfast things, the youngest son of the Field-Cornet, who was only fifteen and had not gone to the war with the others, rode up. He hitched his horse to the post, and came towards the door. The mother stepped forward to meet him and shook hands in the doorway.

“I suppose you have come for the carrot seed I promised your mother? I was not able to send it, as our servants ran away,” she said, as she shook his hand. “There isn’t a letter from Jan, is there?” The lad said no, there was no letter from him, and shook hands with the grandmother. He stood by the table instead of sitting down.

The mother turned to the fireplace to get coals to put under the coffee to re-warm it; but the grandmother stood leaning forward with her eyes fixed on him from across the table. He felt uneasily in his breast pocket.

“Is there no news?” the mother said without looking round, as she bent over the fire.

“Yes, there is news, Aunt.”

She rose quickly and turned towards him, putting down the brazier on the table. He took a letter out of his breast pocket. “Aunt, my father said I must bring this to you. It came inside one to him and they asked him to send one of us over with it.”

The mother took the letter; she held it, examining the address.

“It looks to me like the writing of Sister Annie’s Paul,” she said. “Perhaps there is news of Jan in it”—she turned to them with a half-nervous smile—“they were always such friends.”

“All is as God wills, Aunt,” the young man said, looking down fixedly at the top of his riding whip.

But the grandmother leaned forward motionless, watching her daughter-in-law as she opened the letter.

She began to read to herself, her lips moving slowly as she deciphered it word by word.

Then a piercing cry rang through the roof of the little mud-farmhouse.

“He is dead! My boy is dead!”

She flung the letter on the table and ran out at the front door.

Far out across the quiet ploughed lands and over the veld to where the kraals lay the cry rang. The Kaffir woman who sat outside her hut beyond the kraals nursing her baby heard it and came down with her child across her hip to see what was the matter. At the side of the round house she stood motionless and openmouthed, watching the woman, who paced up and down behind the house with her apron thrown over her head and her hands folded above it, crying aloud.

In the front room the grandmother, who had not spoken since he came, took up the letter and put it in the lad’s hands. “Read,” she whispered.

And slowly the lad spelled it out.
“My Dear Aunt,

“I hope this letter finds you well. The Commandant has asked me to write it.

“We had a great fight four days ago, and Jan is dead. The Commandant says I must tell you how it happened. Aunt, there were five of us first in a position on that koppie, but two got killed, and then there were only three of us—Jan, and I, and Uncle Peter’s Frikkie. Aunt, the khakies were coming on all round just like locusts, and the bullets were coming just like hail. It was bare on that side of the koppie where we were, but we had plenty of cartridges. We three took up a position where there were some small stones and we fought, Aunt; we had to. One bullet took off the top of my ear, and Jan got two bullets, one through the flesh in the left leg and one through his arm, but he could still fire his gun. Then we three meant to go to the top of the koppie, but a bullet took Jan right through his chest. We knew he couldn’t go any farther. The khakies were right at the foot of the koppie just coming up. He told us to lay him down, Aunt. We said we would stay by him, but he said we must go. I put my jacket under his head and Frikkie put his over his feet. We threw his gun far away from him that they might see how it was with him. He said he hadn’t much pain, Aunt. He was full of blood from his arm, but there wasn’t much from his chest, only a little out of the corners of his mouth. He said we must make haste or the khakies would catch us; he said he wasn’t afraid to be left there.

“Aunt, when we got to the top, it was all full of khakies like the sea on the other side, all among the koppies and on our koppie too. We were surrounded, Aunt; the last I saw of Frikkie he was sitting on a stone with blood running down his face, but he got under a rock and hid there; some of our men found him next morning and brought him to camp. Aunt, there was a khakie’s horse standing just below where I was, with no one on it. I jumped on and rode. The bullets went this way and the bullets went that, but I rode! Aunt, the khakies were sometimes as near me as that tentpole, only the Grace of God saved me. It was dark in the night when I got back to where our people were, because I had to go round all the koppies to get away from the khakies.

“Aunt, the next day we went to look for him. We found him where we left him; but he was turned over on to his face; they had taken all his things, his belt and his watch, and the pugaree from his hat, even his boots. The little green silk purse he used to carry we found on the ground by him, but nothing it. I will send it back to you whenever I get an opportunity.

“Aunt, when we turned him over on his back there were four bayonet stabs in his body. The doctor says it was only the first three while he was alive; the last one was through his heart and killed him at once.

“We gave him Christian burial, Aunt; we took him to the camp.

“The Commandant was there, and all of the family who were with the Commando were there, and they all said they hoped God would comfort you . . .”

The old woman leaned forward and grasped the boy’s arm. “Read it over again,” she said, “from where they found him.” He turned back and reread slowly. She gazed at the page as though she were reading also. Then, suddenly, she slipped out at the front door.

At the back of the house she found her daughter-in-law still walking up and down, and the Kaffir woman with a red handkerchief bound round her head and the child sitting across her hip, sucking from her long, pendulous breast, looking on.

The old woman walked up to her daughter-in-law and grasped her firmly by the arm.

“He’s dead! You know, my boy’s dead!” she cried, drawing the apron down with her right hand and disclosing her swollen and bleared face. “Oh, his beautiful hair—Oh, his beautiful hair!”

The old woman held her arm tighter with both hands; the younger opened her half-closed eyes, and looked into the keen, clear eyes fixed on hers, and stood arrested.

The old woman drew her face closer to hers. “You . . .
do...not...know...what...has...happened!” she
spoke slowly, her tongue striking her front gum, the jaw
moving stiffly, as though partly paralysed. She loosened her
left hand and held up the curved work-worn fingers before
her daughter-in-law’s face. “Was it not told me...the night
he was born...here...at this spot...that he would do
great things...great things...for his land and his people?”
She bent forward till her lips almost touched the other’s.
“Three...bullet...wounds...and four...bayonet...stabs!” She raised her left hand high in the air. “Three...bullet...wounds...and four...bayonet...stabs!...Is it
given to many to die so for their land and their people?”

The younger woman gazed into her eyes, her own grow-
ing larger and larger. She let the old woman lead her by the
arm in silence into the house.

The Field-Cornet’s son was gone, feeling there was
nothing more to be done; and the Kaffir woman went back
with her baby to her hut beyond the kraals. All day the
house was very silent. The Kaffir woman wondered that no
smoke rose from the farmhouse chimney, and that she was
not called to churn, or wash the pots. At three o’clock she
got down to the house. As she passed the grated window
of the round outhouse she saw the buckets of milk still
standing unsifted on the floor as they had been set down at
breakfast time, and under the great soap-pot beside the
woodpile the fire had died out. She went round to the front
of the house and saw the door and window shutters still
closed, as though her mistresses were still sleeping. So she
rebuild the fire under the soap-pot and went back to her
hut.

It was four o’clock when the grandmother came out
from the dark inner room where she and her daughter-in-
law had been lying down; she opened the top of the front
doors, and lit the fire with twigs, and set the large black
kettle over it. When it boiled she made coffee, and poured out
two cups and set them on the table with a plate of biscuits,
and then called her daughter-in-law from the inner room.

The two women sat down one on each side of the table,
with their coffee cups before them, and the biscuits be-
tween them, but for a time they said nothing, but sat silent,
looking out through the open door at the shadow of the
house and the afternoon sunshine beyond it. At last the
older woman motioned that the younger should drink her
coffee. She took a little, and then folding her arms on the
table rested her head on them, and sat motionless as if
asleep.

The older woman broke up a biscuit into her own cup,
and stirred it round and round; and then, without tasting,
sat gazing out into the afternoon’s sunshine till it grew cold
beside her.

It was five, and the heat was quickly dying; the glorious
golden colouring of the later afternoon was creeping over
everything when she rose from her chair. She moved to
the door and took from behind it two large white calico bags
hanging there, and from nails on the wall she took down
two large brown cotton kappies. She walked round the ta-
ble and laid her hand gently on her daughter-in-law’s arm.
The younger woman raised her head slowly and looked up
into her mother-in-law’s face; and then, suddenly, she knew
that her mother-in-law was an old, old woman. The little
shriveled face that looked down at her was hardly larger
than a child’s, the eyelids were half closed and the lips
worked at the corners and the bones cut out through the
skin in the temples.

“I am going out to sow—the ground will be getting too
dry tomorrow; will you come with me?” she said gently.

The younger woman made a movement with her hand,
as though she said “What is the use?” and redropped her
hand on the table.

“It may go on for long, ourburghers must have food,”
the old woman said gently.

The younger woman looked into her face; then she rose
slowly and taking one of the brown kappies from her hand,
put it on, and hung one of the bags over her left arm; the
EIGHTEEN-NINETY-NINE

IN THE YEAR NINETEEN HUNDRED AND FOUR

If you look for the little farmhouse among the ridges you will not find it there today.

The English soldiers burnt it down. You can only see where the farmhouse once stood, because the stramonias and weeds grow high and very strong there; and where the ploughed lands were you can only tell because the veld never grows quite the same on land that has once been ploughed. Only a brown patch among the long grass on the ridge shows where the kraals and huts once were.
In a country house in the north of England the owner has upon his wall an old flintlock gun. He takes it down to show his friends. It is a small thing he picked up in the war in South Africa, he says. It must be at least eighty years old and is very valuable. He shows how curiously it is constructed; he says it must have been kept in such perfect repair by continual polishing for the steel shines as if it were silver. He does not tell that he took it from the wall of the little mud house before he burnt it down.

It was the grandfather's gun, which the women had kept polished on the wall.

In a London drawing room the descendant of a long line of titled forefathers entertains her guests. It is a fair room, and all that money can buy to make life soft and beautiful is there.

On the carpet stands a little dark wooden stool. When one of her guests notices it, she says it is a small curiosity which her son brought home to her from South Africa when he was out in the war there; and how good it was of him to think of her when he was away in the back country. And when they ask what it is, she says it is a thing Boer women have as a footstool and to keep their feet warm; and she shows the hole at the side where they put the coals in, and the little holes at the top where the heat comes out.

And the other woman puts her foot out and rests it on the stool just to try how it feels, and draws "How f-u-n-n-y!"

It is grandmother's stool, that the child used to sit on.

The wagon chest was found and broken open just before the thatch caught fire, by three private soldiers, and they divided the money between them; one spent his share in drink, another had his stolen from him, but the third sent his home to England to a girl in the East End of London. With part of it she bought a gold brooch and earrings, and the rest she saved to buy a silk wedding dress when he came home.

A syndicate of Jews in Johannesburg and London have bought the farm. They purchased it from the English gov-