

Zeitschrift: Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle
Band: 23 (1955)
Heft: 4

Artikel: Karroo farm
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-568986>

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Karoo Farm

by Paul Peters

Wearily I looked at my watch, and saw that it was almost five o'clock. The sun still burnt strongly, and after driving from early morning through the torrid heat of the Karroo, I was tired and sweaty and looking forward to the night's stop and a bath. One must have travelled over this stretch of country to appreciate the deadening monotony of nearly six hundred kilometers of barrenness, where dorps are usually from a hundred to a hundred and fifty kilometers apart, and from farmhouse to farmhouse is often half an hour by car. The country is practically flat, with but few small hills, and the only vegetation consists of thorn trees and small thorn bushes. Yet surprisingly enough this little growth sustains the vast herds of sheep which thrive in this arid country. I was hoping to reach Worcester by nightfall, for the trip from there to Capetown passes through some of the loveliest scenery in this country.

I had been driving unthinkingly, bored and dejected, when the slight wobble in the steering told me that I had a puncture. I climbed out and saw that the left rear wheel was practically flat. That was when I looked at my watch. Since the heat was extremely uncomfortable and there was not a sign of man nor beast, I took off my shirt, opened up the boot of the car and took out the tools and the spare wheel. I had been working on the changing of the tyre for about twenty minutes when I heard the sound of a galloping horse, and glancing round, saw a rider come up to the fence that ran beside the road. As the horseman pulled up his steed I saw that he was about 25 years old. He wore a slouch hat, khaki shirt and shorts. The hair peering out from under his hat was fair, his skin bronzed by many long days in the sun.

«Can I help you?» he asked, and when I gladly accepted, he climbed off his horse, fastened the reins to the fence and vaulted over.

«Nice place to have a puncture in», he said with a grin, and I felt a glow of warmth within me at his friendly, open smile. I told him that I was worn out with the heat and monotony of the trip and since the delay would make it even later before I reached Worcester, still hours away, I wondered whether there was any place nearer where I could spend the night. —

«Come and stay at our farm», he said, and smiled again.

«Thanks, but won't your family mind if you bring a stranger along».

«They would not mind, but as it happens they are in Worcester on a visit and I am alone at home. You will come, won't you, for it is lonely there, and»

He hesitated and looked at me so earnestly that I immediately consented to spend the night at the farmhouse.

«It is three miles down the road to the turn-off where you will see the signpost. Follow the gravel road for about two miles and I shall be waiting for you at the gate. Before I could say anything more he was off, climbed onto his horse and galloped off. I followed his instructions and soon came to the farm gate where he awaited me.

The farmhouse was old but neat, white bricks under an iron roof. A number of trees, a small lawn and garden indicated a good well, and on the other side of the house I could hear the motor of a pump «chugging» away noisily. I picked up my shirt which I had not put on again, and taking my over-night bag, I followed him into the house where he led the way to a sunny bright bedroom. It was simply furnished and contained two beds.

«You take that bed. It was my brothers's, but he is married now and lives on his own farm».

«I should like to have a wash, if I may, and then get into some clean clothes — a bath would also be welcome, if that's possible».

«Have a wash now, and then we can have a swim in the small concrete dam at the side of the house, — and you don't need a costume.»

Five minutes later I had washed and we were getting undressed. We wrapped towels around our waists and then went through a side door, across a vegetable garden to a concrete tank, some 10 metres square, on the far side of which was a nice stretch of lawn. Here we laid down our towels and stretched ourselves out to enjoy a cigarette before our swim. For the first time I was able to study him properly. He had fair slightly wavy hair, steel-grey eyes and a clean smooth face. His whole body was tanned a deep bronze, he was lean and quite muscular. His chest was covered with a soft down of golden hair. His stomach was flat and his loins and well shaped legs suggested both strength and speed. When relaxed his expression was almost one of sadness but his smile was spontaneous and wonderfully friendly.

For an hour we lay in the sun and swam in the pool and as the sun started sinking in the west and the shadows lengthened, we went inside, put on clean open neck shirts and shorts and went to the shady verandah to enjoy a tankard of beer.

Whilst we were at the swimming pool he had told me something of his life, of his happy days at school and at the agricultural college he had attended, but now at home his life was lonely and monotonous. His father was rather old-fashioned and very severe, living and thinking only of the farm, whilst his mother to whom he was devoted, was completely dominated by his father.

Supper was served by an old shrivelled native servant who had been in the family since she was a child, and who, in typical native fashion, treated both her master and her master's son with a peculiar mixture of familiarity and respect. Afterwards we returned to the verandah to talk for an hour or two before retiring early.

In the bedroom Dennis lit the lamp and we undressed in silence. I took out my tooth brush, and, as I turned to go into the bathroom and was about to ask Dennis whether he was also ready, I saw him look at me with a peculiarly tender look, and he said in a voice, which was a little unsteady:

«Must you really leave tomorrow morning?»

«No. I am free for three weeks and have no fixed plans, except that if I do not go on to Capetown I must let my friends know. Why do you ask?»

«It has been so nice this evening, and it is a bit lonely here. I am wondering whether you could not stay on for a day or so». «I should love that. I live in a city and Capetown is just another city, although at the seaside. A brief stay at a farm would be a wonderful change, and I too enjoyed this evening very much.»

He came over to me, and placing his hand on my arm, smiled that cheery smile I had grown to like.

«Thanks, I am delighted.»

I put my hand on his shoulder and gave it a little squeeze.

«Come on. Bedtime, and we must clean our teeth. We farmers must get up early!»

When we had returned to the room I lay down naked on the bed for the heat of the day was still present in the room under the iron roof. Dennis put down the lamp and came and sat down on the edge of the bed.

«Tomorrow morning I must mend the gate and after that I want to start painting the doors and the windows -- would you like to help me or do you want to have a rest?»

«To enjoy my holiday completely I want to keep myself busy, and what could be nicer than to work with you.»

My one hand lay upon his thigh, and then I put my other hand on his shoulder and looked at him. Slowly he relaxed and his strong warm body pressed down on mine. The lamp flickered and threw shadows upon the walls of the room. The night was still save for the chirping of crickets and the buzz of insects. Much later we turned off the light and Dennis went over to his bed . . . all was peaceful and beautiful.

When I awoke next morning Dennis's bed was empty, but a moment later he came into the room clad only in a pair of shorts and bearing a tray with two cups of tea.

«Come on, lazybones. Farmers don't lie in bed all day». As he put down the tray, he sat on the edge of the bed, smiled at me and added . . . «and thanks, for the most wonderful night of my life».

. . . His parents returned ten days later and as we found out we got on well together, I spent the rest of my holiday on the farm. For three months afterwards Dennis and I wrote regularly to each other.

Then came that telegram . . .

«Deeply regret to inform you Dennis died this morning result of riding accident . . . Thompson».

Sitting here at my desk I look at the only tangible remains of a wonderful friendship . . . a bundle of letters and a large picture of Dennis sitting smilingly at the swimming tank in a small bathing slip . . . but there are also my memories that will not fade.

The Zeybekikos

It was raining in Athens that evening, and I was waiting for my friend Andreas in Zonar's Bar, the international haunt near the «Grande Bretagne» where «everybody» meets. There were some yank sailors, a few scholarly looking Englishmen, a beautiful Greek girl