

According to Willem's compass they are still travelling in a northeasterly direction.

They talk—about one thing and another—but not about what they recently left behind.

Namely the commando under leadership of Commandant Servaas Senekal.

The hero of Skeurbuikhoogte, Ben would sometimes call him—in muted tones, of course.

Hero's backside, Reitz would say.

By day the commandant could mostly be found in front of his tent, smoking. Making his fruitless plans. Unless the commando happened to be on the run, of course.

He wore a black tailcoat and top hat (like General Maroela Erasmus, the men joked). His mood was seldom good. His eyes were unfocused from smoking and narrowed with suspicion. His talent for making the wrong tactical decisions seemed boundless.

Old flathead on the loose, Reitz would mutter.

Reitz, Ben would say, the man has a responsibility to the people to make his plans.

Like hell, Reitz would reply. Or: Oh heavens. Or sometimes in an unguarded moment: The downfall of the people has already been secured.

Careful, Ben would admonish, some things are better left unsaid.

When the commando moved from one encampment to another, Ben and Reitz used the opportunity to do field work in the area. They documented their findings in their journals. These journals they took with them everywhere they went—in the event of anything unforeseen.

The other burghers spent their days sleeping in the shade, or playing cards, or gambling. Few of them still read, or wrote regular letters home to fill the dragging hours.

The past weeks have seen Ben and Reitz become increasingly disillusioned with the course of the war. (Neither had ever been a passionate believer in the cause—Ben even less so than Reitz.)

Is there still a leader worth his salt, Ben? Reitz asked. And Ben replied: You're asking the wrong man. Or the wrong question.

Over which hill or low ridge, from which direction, Reitz wondered, would the harbinger of good news appear—to present them with an order, or the possibility of a way out?

Commandant Senekal's judgment had not improved since they were obliged to join his commando in the early autumn of the previous year. In fact, it seemed clear he was losing what remained of it. Moreover, he had a weakness for female flesh and any accompanying form of intoxication: whether obtained from the bottle, from tobacco, or some other substance.

Accordingly the movements of the commando were determined by the availability of the above, rather than the whereabouts of the enemy.

At Norraspoort, with the commandant in hot pursuit of a certain widow, they narrowly escaped being lured into a fatal ambush. Fine examples of sills formed by intrusive rock, Reitz just had time to notice in passing.

At Skeurbuikhoogte and at Allesverloren shortly afterwards they had a quick brush with the enemy and did not come out of it well, but at Droogleegte—about three weeks ago—after two days of bloody battle they buried fifteen men in the late afternoon, including the able scout Faan Oosthuizen, and young Abraham's older brother. The confrontation at Droogleegte could have been avoided—Faan himself had strongly advised Senekal against engaging with the Khakis in that specific spot.

That evening Reitz's gaze swept across the graves, across the sandstone plains, and he thought: I've had my fill of bloodshed.

We've lost a good man here, Reitz, Ben spoke quietly beside him. One of the last good ones.

Willem stood facing them, his pale blue eyes grimly searching the sky. As if in anticipation of a vision or a sign.

At Droogleegte young Abraham's brother fell by his side. His head and chest blown away. For hours Abraham sat with his dead brother in his arms—until Willem led him away, subsequently taking him under his wing. The fallen brother had been his friend.

After this, young Abraham's condition deteriorated. He lay curled up in the tent next to Reitz and Ben's. He never spoke coherently again—he uttered gibberish, unrelated phrases, confused cries; at night he suffered nightmares and delusions. He did not eat, he did not move. His body was rigid, like a corpse.

It was there—at Droogleegte, in the evenings beside the cooking fires—that Reitz and Ben began to confer with Willem in monosyllables and undertones.

A word here, a remark there. At first Willem said: The brother's blood is calling for revenge. Forget revenge, Ben replied, this is neither the time nor the place for revenge.

Finally they decided: There was no other way. Willem had to get young Abraham away from Senekal's laager and take him to his mother, where he could be cared for,

and Reitz and Ben would accompany them, for Willem would not cope on his own with the debilitated, bewildered young man.

In the meantime Ben—more so than Reitz—had begun to consider laying

down arms, signing the oath, going back to his wife and children. Reitz said: You know what the Boers do with traitors.

The plan was to take young Abraham back to his mother in Ladybrand. From there Ben would visit his wife and children in his home town Burgershoop, southwest of Ladybrand. (It has been more than a year since he last saw his family.) Then he and Reitz would perforce join another commando. They would not, however, be returning to Commandant Senekal's laager. Time would tell, but they certainly weren't going back to Senekal.

Reluctantly Senekal gave them leave to take Abraham home, and one morning seven days ago the four departed, carrying with them the letter and the map. ■

**“WITH THIS EXCELLENT NOVEL INGRID WINTERBACH PROVES AGAIN THAT SHE IS ONE OF OUR MOST ORIGINAL NOVELISTS.”**

**—LOUIS VILJOEN**