

## ***LIFE ON THE VELD.***

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**FROM THE HEART OF THE VELD. By Madeline Alston. (John Lane Co.; \$1.25.)**

To see South Africa as Mrs. Alston sees it is to feel that tugging at the heart-strings that summons all who have ever been there any length of time to return and taste the life that only South Africa in all the world can give. Not all of us will quite agree with Mrs. Alston in all her judgments. In fact, few of us will, for we shall lack her generosity and her vision. Her statement, fearlessly expressed, that Lord Milner was the greatest statesman South Africa ever saw, for instance, may give several of us pause. But surely no man or woman can read her book to the end and lay it down without feeling he has enjoyed a privilege. It is as if one had called on her in that sunny garden that overflows into the wilderness around her rose-bowered home on the Swaziland border, and had listened while she talked and attended to the domestic duties that spell drudgery to so many women but to her are part of the art of living. "Life on the veld," she says, "is mostly work," and proceeds to prove it, yet knowing all the while that her real work is vastly greater than any the eye can see.

The book is really a series of essays, each one dealing with her daily life from a different aspect. She explains the comfort of the veld's loneliness, the charm of its freedom and wherein that freedom lies, its appeal to the imagination, and its wholesomeness (to some

people). There enters into one chapter a vulgar little woman from Johannesburg "who spoke of her gay life in the Golden City to us poor drudges of the veld," and of whom Mrs. Alston writes, "I would much rather have a hundred fat anti-British vrouws as my neighbors than one person with a mind like hers." To love the veld and not be overcome by it calls for character far stronger and higher than the ordinary, and a scorn of the shallower things of life.

There are chapters on Rhodesia, on the drought in Matabeleland, on South African towns, and — by no means least of all — on "going home," knowing that "in good time the veld will call us back again." There is an account of Milnerton — the bankrupt, unappreciated Milnerton — near enough to Cape Town to have been famous long ago, more peaceful now and beautiful than any seaside place in Africa. Through her eyes we see old Table Mountain at night with his sides afire, and that is a sight never to be forgotten. And we meet fat Dutch women who hate the British with the fanaticism of ignorance, yet who are neighborly enough once they are understood. And Mrs. Alston understands them.

Approach this book, then, deferentially as you would the lady herself among her dahlias, poinsettias, and hibiscus. You will find its author almost bewilderingly well-read; but she has slept too often under the stars with the dew of South Africa on her pillow not to know, to quote her own words, that "the world of books and of art and politics is of secondary importance, the woman question is an absurdity — these are not the real things of life." And she proceeds to remind us what most of the real things are.

But where, after all, the book's chief interest lies is in the light it throws, all unconsciously, on the fusion taking place in South Africa to-day as surely, though doubtless as leisurely, as the mingling of two rivers. Mrs. Alston seems totally unaware of it; in fact she regrets absence of any sign of it.

But the reader will find his memory wandering back through history to Norman days, when Norman nobles and their no less purposeful ladies strove with all that was in them to make England Norman, — finally to be swallowed up and become an ingredient of a nation that does not even bear their name.

Those who doubt the ultimate emergence of a united South Africa do so only because they view the country from the same angle from which the Normans once viewed England, — as Mrs. Alston frankly does. Yet the Taal

is no more uncouth to British tongues and ears than Saxon was to Norman; and no Boer yet lived who could more outrage a British lady's sense of the proprieties and chivalry than a Saxon gentleman could offend the ears and eyes and nose of the conqueror's wife of his day.

As a conqueror's wife, who has gloried in what seemed to be the fruits of conquest, and who has seen them snatched away by careless governments and trodden under foot by fools and worse, yet who still carries a high and faithful chin and writes of all she knows and loves and thinks and believes, without acrimony, — who can still, in fact, love South Africa and all in it while being faithful to her birthright, Mrs. Alston commands both respect and gratitude. Her book deserves to be bought and kept, not borrowed.

She leaves me with only one regret — one thing to cavil at, and I will therefore make the most of it. I emphatically assert that she ought not to have killed that toad. It is true, as she says, that many women have shot rhinoceroses but no woman could kill a toad, and she did not commit the crime in person but ordered it done by native servants. Nevertheless, as one who has lived more than a little in Africa, and has known by name and fondled toads that grew fat catching flies beside the lantern put in place expressly for them night after night, I here and now indict Mrs. Alston of the crime of murder, — only condoned in her case by the otherwise unblemished conduct of her life and by the great charm of her book.

TALBOT MUNDY.