

Cleft Mountain



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transcribed by Carol Wajnberg

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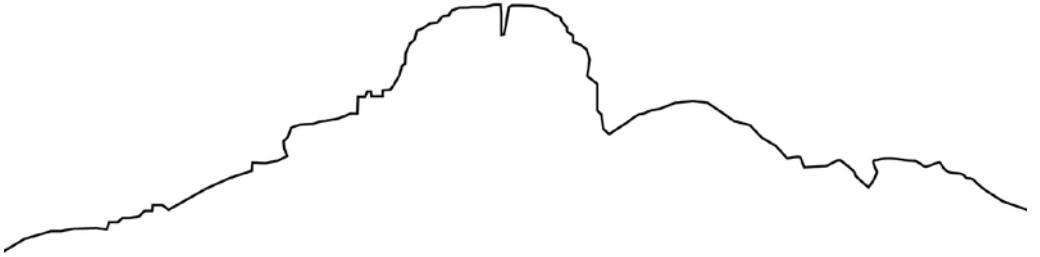


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Cover photograph of Towerkop (Cleft Mountain) by Vivian Highman

Cleft Mountain



by Flora Behrmann

reproduced by Carol Wajnberg

INTRODUCTION

My Grandmother, Flora Behrmann (1887–1973) was born in the village of Ladismith in the Cape. Her parents, Sarah and Solomon Gordon, had immigrated to South Africa via England from a small village in Lithuania called Neustadt Sugind. Selina was the eldest of the three children born in England and Flora was the eldest of the five born in the Cape.

Ladismith is a attractive small village in the Little Karoo with the Klein-Swartberge Mountains acting as a backdrop, the tallest peak rising to 3000 feet. An enormous rock sits on top of this peak which has a huge cleft in the middle and is known as ‘Toverkop’ or ‘Witch’s Head’. There is a legend about this rock which says that one night a witch was going home in a storm and the rock barred her way, so she smote the rock and made a cleft in it large enough for her to pass through. Flora originally called her book ‘Toverkop’, as the mountain was ever present in her childhood, but I thought that for those readers who do not speak Afrikaans, I would rename the book “Cleft Mountain”. This is the only change I have made in the book as I regard it as Flora’s book and therefore not mine to alter.

Flora’s matriculation studies were supervised by the poet C. J. Langenhoven (the author of “Die Stem”, South Africa’s national anthem). Her studies were somewhat irregular and unorthodox. Lagenhoven instructed his four pupils in Latin and Mathematics and told them to do the rest of their subjects on their own at home. They all passed. She continued her education at Stellenbosch, specialising in music.

In 1906, Flora married Abraham Behrmann and her sister Selina married Jacob Behrmann who were brothers, repeating a previous family event a generation prior. Abe and Flora went to live in Johannesburg. My grandfather Abe, together with another brother, Louis Harris, opened a firm called ‘LH and A Behrmann’ which became one of the major property firms in South Africa. Flora described Johannesburg as a hive of activity, tin and wooden shacks being pulled down while brick and stone buildings seemed to arise overnight. One favourite spot to take the children for a picnic was Cook’s Farm, now Killarney.

Flora and Abe had four children, two boys and two girls, my father Cecil, being the oldest son. She was a very demanding mother, especially to my father. He told the story that one day he was at school and he got an urgent call to go home. With his heart in his mouth, he ran all the way, thinking the worst. When he arrived, Flora was fiddling with their new radio and couldn't find the station where King George the Fifth was due to give a speech. He found it for her and went back to school for the rest of his lessons, exhausted!

Once her children were old enough to occupy themselves, Flora took up public work. Her first venture was the Reform Club, which at the time was fighting for women's suffrage - it was later called the Vanguard Club. Through the Club she visited many exclusive homes and was inspired to start a collection of beautiful antiques, china and glass, from which she derived much pleasure.

In 1929, she started the first South African Hebrew Kindergarten under the auspices of the Berea Hebrew Congregation in Johannesburg. She was one of the founders of the Union of Jewish Women in November 1931. During World War 11 she started the organisation known as the Fireside Cottage in Fordsburg for soldiers' children.

Over the years Flora embraced the study of music, art and literature and encouraged others to do the same. I have included her pamphlet on 'Culture in the Home' as I think this shows her at her very best.

"There is a range of mountains in Ladismith" said Flora. "The highest peak is called Towerkop. it is always covered with clouds. When I was a child I thought that was the place where God lived. I have since discovered God in Many places."

Carol Wajnberg
February 2010

CHAPTER 1



“I have decided. We’re going to live on the farm.” Solomon Cohen spoke heavily, looking straight ahead, thus avoiding the stricken look that he knew would dawn in the eyes of his wife Sarah, communicating its grief to her other features until the lines that had only appeared since he first mooted the idea some three weeks ago became more deeply etched than ever.

“No, Pa, not to live! Oh, no, not to live,” cried Rose his daughter, in great distress.

“To live, I tell you,” replied Solomon more harshly than he knew. Did his wife and family think it would be easy for him to give up his way of life, a sedentary life where he sat for hours in his own special chair, immersed in sonic philosophical treatise, oblivious of the world around him?

“Come for a walk,” Sarah would urge at times. “One must have exercise.”

“Exercising my mind is all the exercise I need,” was the laconic reply while another page was flipped over. Having delivered his ultimatum, Solomon left the dining room table where they had just completed their midday meal, dinner, showing that, as far as he was concerned, the subject was closed.

Rose feared her father more than anyone or anything on earth and erased all expression from her eyes, her face, but it was a crust beneath which her emotions surged and pressed like the lava in a volcano on the point of erupting. She gazed at the other members seated at the table, her mother, her sister Lena, and her ten-year-old brother Ben, and speculated on their reactions to her father’s decision.

Sarah sighed heavily as she replied to Rose’s unspoken question: “Why must we go and *live* on the farm?” “Pa isn’t making a living from the shop,

too many new ones and so we have no choice, we must go to the farm. With ostrich feathers such a high price we should make more than a living, we might even become rich.”

Sarah’s dejected demeanor belied her hopeful words while her expression shrieked aloud her thoughts: An ostrich farm! Those stupid birds rushing into the wires that enclosed their camps, breaking bones, brittle bones that splintered and thus could never knit! How could Solomon even think of coping with the incessant turmoil of an ostrich farm!

Also the Coloureds on the farm, how long before they realised that Solomon was no hard taskmaster. A week, no more, and every one of them would be grinning at the ease with which her learned husband could be cheated, robbed almost to his face!

“Rose, you know what?” It was Ben whispering in her ear as he pocketed his marbles and gathered up his satchel, “I can’t go and live on the farm, I’ve got to go to school. But no more Hebrew, no more music! Hooray!” And he whistled gaily as he ran off.

A spurt of deep resentment pervaded Rose’s whole being. Ben was a member of the superior sex and his life was mapped out, would go along set lines. He would matriculate, be articled to a lawyer, probably in Cape Town and then on to a partnership ending up with marriage to the senior partner’s daughter while they, buried on the farm, would lose touch with him, would vanish from his memory.

“Leningke, my child, you’ll go back to Johannesburg.” It was a statement not a question. Rose noted with a pang of acute jealousy how the emotions of love and concern struggled for mastery on her mother’s face as she observed the ugly lines that were developing around Lena’s mouth. Soon they would be ineradicably engraved there for all to see. Her idolized daughter, twenty-six years old and not yet married. What ailed the men of Johannesburg?

“Explain it to me, Leningke; in that great city there are so many men, hundreds, yet not one has proposed to you. I can’t understand it.”

“Please don’t call me Leningke, it’s so foreign, I just can’t bear it. Please mother.”

Sarah Cohen stood in great awe of her learned daughter, the first Jewish girl to graduate from the South African College in Cape Town, the only one in the whole of South Africa and the homely expression had slipped out involuntarily. Her whole being ached with love and compassion for Lena and it just had to overflow by way of her mouth, even though she knew how utterly Lena disliked it.

With a grimace of disgust Lena replied haughtily, "I can foretell the future with cards and they tell me each time I must not worry for my Prince Charming is on the way."

"A Prince!" echoed Sarah incredulously. "Never mind a Prince, let him only be a good business man." Lena shrugged the matter aside.

How grand Lena had become mused Rose. Gone was the homely 'Ma', now it was 'Mother'. She smiled wryly as she thought of her own rejoicing if only her mother had addressed her so lovingly. She writhed as she noted Sarah's hurt expression, one she was unable to disguise.

As she found the gloom that seemed to fill every corner of the room unbearable, Rose made her way to the quince hedge that bordered the erf, the plot of ground on which their house was built.

As she listened to the hum of the bees sucking the nectar from the blossoms of the quince and watched the butterflies flitting hither and thither across the sturdy lucerne bushes whose grey buds were unfolding into a soft, misty blue, it engendered a deep harmony that had a calming effect no matter how turbulent, how disturbed were her emotions.

Soon Spring would merge with Summer, the quince blossom would fall away and the fruit, greenish grey, would appear; and now the gentle rains would be replaced by violent thunderstorms, while the branches that formerly had swayed so softly, so voluptuously, would shoot back and forth belabouring each other, apparently engaged in violent battle.

But it was in the Autumn that the quince hedge shone forth in all its glory. Each day as she returned from school Rose would halt at the sight of the setting sun's rays blazing down on the golden fruit, the heavily laden branches sweeping down to the very earth under the weight of their abundant harvest.

Her mind circled endlessly around the dread words her father had uttered so decisively: "I've decided, we're going to live on the farm."

A farm in the Karroo, the desert where it seldom rained and new faces were hardly ever seen. No pretty frocks, the planning and designing of which entailed many visits to the dressmaker, filling her with alternate hopes and fears that perhaps the style she had chosen would not be quite so becoming as had appeared in the fashion books.

Pretty frocks on a farm? How often had she not gazed with pity on the outmoded dresses worn by the wives and daughters of the farmers at the 'Outspans', as the wayside inns were called. She smiled as she recalled the old South African proverb: "Better dead than out of fashion." It did not apply to these simple folk who went serenely about their everyday tasks, seemingly unaware that such a thing as 'fashion' existed.

Rose paced restlessly backwards and forward with ever-increasing urgency but stopped dead as she realised that, of course, there would be no library on the farm and thus no new books, no newspapers, for all the world as though she were dead and buried.

Mond van Piet's Rivier, Mouth of Piet's River, Solomon's farm, was sixteen miles away which meant that it would take four hours driving there and four hours back again - quite a journey - and she realised that life on a farm, so far off the beaten track, meant the cessation of her friendship with John Carston, the new magistrate. Friendship? Oh no, it had progressed far beyond friendship. Slowly she retraced her footsteps and her gaze lit upon 'Toverkop', Bewitched Head, which dominated the Swartberg range and the village of Ladismith and, compared with the neighbouring straggling hills was as a giant surrounded by pygmies.

At this distance the peak appeared to be one solid mass with a deep cleft in the middle but, in reality, there were two pinnacles, so wide apart an ox-wagon with sixteen oxen inspanned could easily turn there. As one travelled towards Laingsberg, the nearest railway station, the peak changed in appearance and thus earned its name.

Rose loved the rugged mountain and always, whether she viewed it in the early morning when its outline was shrouded in swirls of pearly mistiness

or, at midday, when the blazing heat of the Karroo left it stark and sternly naked or, in the evening, as the setting sun bathed it in all the colours of the rainbow, much as a lover might drape his beloved, she would indulge in strange fantasies. It was God's vantage point from whence He was enabled to keep an eye on everyone in the village, irrespective of colour or creed.

As a child she had shivered with apprehension whenever a cloud appeared on Toverkop and when the mist had trailed down the side of the mountain, she had hastened to the middle of the road from where she could see the Dutch Reformed Church, praying that she would be fortunate enough to see Him enter His house, the only one in Ladismith, dedicated to His worship. It was large and squat and dazzlingly white due to its many coats of whitewash and was regarded by all sections of the community as 'Our Church'. At weddings or funerals, Jews and Gentiles sat together to rejoice or mourn when one of the prominent members of the village was involved while the Coloureds gathered respectfully in the organ loft. At such times, the whole community, be their skins white or brown, felt they belonged together, their welfare, their interest common cause, all part of a homogeneous whole.

As Rose made her way into the house she gazed resentfully at her father and wondered that he could sit so calmly in the chair always reserved for him, reading and smoking after the turmoil he had precipitated but with a pang she noticed that the cigarette had not been lit nor did he turn a page – he was staring into vacancy as though bewildered by what had befallen.