

JURIE TAAIMAN'S REVOLUTION

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THE country was as flat as a map, and Jurie Taaiman could see for miles from the seat of the Caterpillar tractor which he worked, day in and day out, all winters, pulling a great maize harvester.

This winter the restlessness which was in the district brought no new feeling among the harvesters which farmer Fourie had hired. They were Jurie Taaiman, the driver, owner, and operator of this machinery, and his two men, Nathan and Sam, to whom Jurie never spoke except to give orders and who never spoke to each other except to impart vital information:

"This is where we sleep tonight."

"Uh . . . Food?"

"They bought meat today. Ready?"

"Yes."

Then they would go for a drink of water, or back to the machine, or to sleep.

Beyond the fence, away from the field in which the big machine was working, Jurie Taaiman could see that things were not so simple. A gang of fifty harvesters was not easy to keep in order. The women had their babies to attend to, every time they returned to the beginning of the field. The youths were constantly brawling. There were two tall ones in bright yellow shirts whom Jurie had often noticed in the last few days. Now they were standing in the short grass of the headland, arguing with the farmer. Even if their voices had been raised, as the farmer's was, Jurie would not have heard them over the roar of his tractor. Like his men, mounted on the machine, Jurie was cut off from most human sounds. The African women in the next field sang as they worked and as they trailed along the path to their huts at the half-dark end of each day, but Jurie had not heard these songs since he was a child. He had forgotten that unmechanical time.

Jurie Taaiman tolerated the folly of those farmers who still employed gangs of men, women and boys for the harvest. It gave him satisfaction to watch the slow toil of the people, and to think contemptuously of their labours. There were always enough men of sense, like farmer Fourie here, to hire Jurie's quick, efficient machine.

"What do you do in the summer?" asked Fourie that night, talking to Jurie at drink-time, before they went in to eat.

"There are always late or early crops somewhere, if a man goes to look for them. I've taken some as early as January. Sometimes I go down to the Cape, though, to cut hay."

Jurie did not explain that he spent his midsummers in Cape Town itself, in much the same way as a foreign sailor would spend leave in this port. He boarded up somewhere, drank, and amused himself with women. In mid-January or so, if his money held until then, he would hitch-hike back to his brother's farm to recover the machinery and the two men he had laid up there.

Jurie Taaiman was not a ready talker, not even a very good listener, and did not attend much to Fourie's stories about the difficulties they were having in the district with their labourers.

"We have no farm gaol here, you understand, and there is no Reserve near. The main railway to Johannesburg comes through this district, and they go there to get work. Nothing seems to stop them. Last week all Van Niekerk's gang left him."

That night the two youths in yellow shirts were dismissed by Fourie's neighbour, and ordered to leave his farm. He paid them what was due to them, and they went to the station to try to buy tickets to Johannesburg. They remained there, having a 'nice time' at the home of the station porter, until the following morning. Only then did they hear the news, which surprised them as much as it did the porter.

"All the men from Van der Merwe's, Fourie's, and Smith's farms are coming here."

"Your pals from Kaalkoppen are walking. They have no carts."

"At Soutpan they are staying. They have crops there and some cattle. They will not move."

On Fourie's lands that day the harvesting continued. Jurie Taaiman, his tractor, his machine and his men, went to work before dawn as usual. It was some hours after sunrise when Jurie finally realised that there was no gang of labourers to be seen anywhere near. He did not keep looking for them, but concentrated on his work, and watched the crop as it fell before his machinery. A hare bolted across the front of the tractor, but he did not see whether the tracks had crushed it.

In the middle of the morning Jurie came to the headland again and stopped to check various points on the machine. His men went to the bushes for privacy and Jurie looked carefully at the belts, at some greasecups, and at the troublesome gears of one of

the conveyors. The lorry in which Fourie's son had been taking grain from the machine to the farm drew up beside Jurie's tractor. Fourie himself got out of the lorry, leaving its engine stopped, and came to speak to Jurie Taaiman.

"Where are your kaffirs?" Fourie bawled.

When Jurie understood him he explained that they had gone into the bushes to relieve themselves. They would be back when Jurie wanted to start.

"Are you sure now, man! Are you sure now, man?" shouted Fourie, and began to tell Jurie what had happened. He explained that there had been some sort of strike, on the next farm. More than that, a walk-out. His own staff had gone—not merely stayed away from work. The compound was empty. Apparently they had all gone to the station, where they were trying to buy tickets to Johannesburg. They had announced that, if they could not go to Johannesburg, they would go anywhere else rather than back to these farms. Fourie had gone there to try to talk to his "boys", but they were not interested.

"As far as labour is concerned, this district has had it", declared Fourie. "I've seen it coming for a long time."

Fourie was speaking almost against silence now, for they had walked away from the tractor and the machine in order to talk.

Jurie Taaiman looked troubled, but not angry. This was newspaper news, he thought, and probably not very important. To Fourie he said:

"Don't worry, man, my machine will get your crop in. We can work at night and speed it up a bit, if you like."

Fourie looked at Jurie for a moment, then at the machine, standing idle at the edge of the harvest.

"Where are your kaffirs?" Fourie asked again.

Jurie looked. The pedestals on the machine were empty: they were not there. He looked along the headland: they were not coming along. He walked to the machine and round it and round the tractor, whose hooter he sounded twice. He thought of their names, turned off the engine of the tractor, and called them. Nathan and Sam did not come.

Jurie Taaiman stood by the seat of his silent tractor. He looked at the vast fields of maize about him. He could see the white rich harvest for miles on every side. Here and there were clusters of trees with the iron roofs of houses shining through. From some of the chimneys there was smoke coming. A cow

bellowed, and Jurie realised that the sound must have come a long way. He saw Fourie standing on the ground below him, watching with a puzzled and worried face, waiting.

Suddenly a tremendous excitement overcame Jurie Taaiman. He shouted, took off his hat and waved it around, stamped his foot on the hard metal of the tractor and then vaulted over the side, over the tracks, to face Fourie below.

"It's our land, man! It's our land." He was elated, and Fourie's face brightened at this elation.

"We can work it. We can work it with the machine. In America they can do it! They work the land themselves with the machines, and we'll do it too. This is your crop. We'll take it. What are you waiting for?"

Fourie shook Jurie by the hand. Jurie clapped him on the back. The lunacy seized them both, and they called Fourie's son out of the lorry to share their joy. Jurie took them eagerly to the machine, and explained what had to be done. Fourie thought he could do the two jobs together, and mounted in excitement to try, while his son returned to the lorry.

"We'll try, anyway, we'll try," Fourie shouted, and Jurie, springing up onto the tractor, waved a vigorous arm.

They roared off to a fine start, Jurie steering the tractor and looking back and waving encouragement to the others. Fourie was intent as a child with a new toy, and a little careful of what to do, but the machine settled down to its steady pace. They could see the stalks falling and being carried up the conveyors under the farmer's eyes. Soon the grain streaming into the lorry had filled it. Fourie cut off the stream and signalled. His son drove off, hooting a message of triumph, to deposit the new load. Jurie Taaiman, full of pride, waved again to Fourie. He had not bothered to look about him, and he did not see the thin line of figures assembling at the edge of the neighbouring field. The colour of the uniforms of the police was easy to distinguish, and Jurie did not know that in the dull days coming they would always be there.

When Nathan and Sam eventually attracted Jurie's attention, he did not greet them.