News from April 1911 - Schreiner on 'oligarchic white men'

On 16 April 1911, Olive Schreiner wrote a powerful letter to the politician Jan Smuts, a friend but also a political enemy whose race politics she rejected, with the Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription of this provided below. The letter refers to her *Woman and Labour*, published a few months earlier, and also political events of the day in South Africa. In particular, Schreiner's letter contains some swingeing comments about white trade union leaders and their attempts - eventually successful - to produce white-only unions and 'protect' skilled jobs as for whites only.

Schreiner's letters to Smuts are among her most powerful and prophetic. Most of them, like this one, concern where the political changes to a significant extent spearheaded by Smuts were taking South Africa and the ethical and political consequences involved.

Archive: National Archives Repository, Pretoria
Epistolary Type: Letter
Letter Date: 16 April 1911
Address From: De Aar, Northern Cape
Address To: Jan Smuts
Other Versions

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1: de Aar
2: April 16th 1911
3:
4: Dear Neef Jan
5:
6: I note that you are a socialist – but I wonder of what kind? It must
7: break your heart to see the attempts made by a little handful of
8: oligarchic white men, who call themselves "working men" to keep down
9: the millions of their labouring fellow citizens! Verily the Farrars &
10: Philipses go into the Kingdom of Heaven before them. At least they do
11: openly confess the doctrine of "Each man for himself, & the devil for
12: us all." *Don't trouble to answer this* – I know how awfully busy
13: you are. I hope you feel physically fit.
14:
15: I was at Lily Kloof the other day; it was at Lower Lily Kloof where
16: you had the fight & the Englishman was killed – Allaman’s-fontein.
17: Curious to think you were there in my old haunts.
18:
19: Love to the wife.
20: Olive Schreiner
21:
22: I don't know if my book sells well; I hear so from people in England;
23: but have nothing to do with the sales. I sold it to the publishers.
24: Its better to have sixty pounds sure & in the hand, than the promise
25: of a thousand as a royalty; & then get nothing at all! as with some of
my other books. I certainly can’t be one of the meek, for I don’t
inherit the earth.

The recent bloody outcry on the part of some women here has at moments
made me feel as if though at least the women of South Africa were not
fit for the vote now – but when one comes to consider that there are
white men capable of almost lynching an innocent man in the streets of
Jo’burg because his skin is black, one sees, as always there is
nothing to choose between them. The longer one lives & studies human
nature the more clear it becomes that neither intellectually nor
morally is any difference between the sexes. The devil man has the
devil woman to match him - & so on & on.

I gave my husband your message. I don’t understand this de Aar
business. It doesn’t seem to me to matter one way or the other.