

CHAPTER VI

THE COMING OF THE ENGLISHMEN

Now on hearing this Suzanne said, "Oh!" and sank back in her chair as though she were going to faint; but I burst out laughing, half because Ralph's impertinence tickled me and half at the sight of my husband's face. Presently he turned upon me in a fine rage.

"Be silent, you silly woman," he said. "Do you hear what that mad boy says? He says that he wants my daughter."

"Well, what of it?" I answered. "Is there anything wonderful in that? Suzanne is of an age to be married and pretty enough for any young man to want her."

"Yes, yes; that is true now I come to think of it," said Jan, pulling his beard. "But, woman, he says that he wants to take her away with him."

"Ah!" I replied, "that is another matter. That he shall never do without my consent."

"No, indeed, he shall never do that," echoed Jan.

"Suzanne," said I in the pause that followed, "you have heard all this talk. Tell us, then, openly what is your mind in the matter."

"My mind is, mother," she answered very quietly, "that I wish to obey you and my father in all things, as is my duty, but that I have a deeper duty towards Ralph whom God gave me out of the sea. Therefore, if you send away Ralph without a cause, if he desires it I shall follow him as soon as I am of age and marry him, or if you keep me from him by force then I think that I shall die. That is all I have to say."

"And quite enough, too," I answered, though in my heart I liked the girl's spirit, and guessed that she was playing a part to prevent her father from sending away Ralph against his will.

"All this is pretty hearing," said Jan, staring from one to the other.

"Why, now that I think of it, I never heard that you two were more than brother and sister to each other. Say, you shameless girl, when did all this come about, and why do you dare to promise yourself in marriage without my consent?"

"Because there was no time to ask it, father," said Suzanne, looking down, "for Ralph and I only spoke together this morning."

"He spoke to you this morning, and now it seems that you are ready to forsake your father and your mother and to follow him across the world, you wicked and ungrateful child."

"I am not wicked and I am not ungrateful," answered Suzanne; "it is you who are wicked, who want to send Ralph away and break all our hearts."

"It is false, miss," shouted her father in answer, "for you know well that I do not want to send him away."

"Then why did you tell him that he must go and take your roan horse and new hat?"

"For his own good, girl."

"Is it for his own good that he should go away from all of us who love him and be lost across the sea?" and choking she burst into tears, while her father muttered:

"Why, the girl has become like a tiger, she who was milder than a sheep!"

"Hush, Suzanne," broke in Ralph, "and you who have been father and mother to me, listen I pray you. It is true that Suzanne and I love each other very dearly, as we have always loved each other, though how much we did not know till this morning. Now, I am a waif and a castaway whom you have nurtured, and have neither lands nor goods of my own, therefore you may well think that I am no match for your daughter, who is so beautiful, and who, if she outlives you, will inherit all that you have. If you decide thus it is just, however hard it may be. But you tell me, though I have heard nothing of it till now, and I think that it may be but idle talk, that I have both lands and goods far away in England, and you bid me begone to them. Well, if you turn me out I must go, for

I cannot stay alone in the veldt without a house, or a friend, or a hoof of cattle. But then I tell you that when Suzanne is of age I shall return and marry her, and take her away with me, as I have a right to do if she desires it, for I will not lose everything that I love in the world at one stroke. Indeed nothing but death shall part me from Suzanne. Therefore, it comes to this: either you must let me stay here and, poor as I am, be married to Suzanne when it shall please you, or, if you dismiss me, you must be ready to see me come back and take away Suzanne."

"Suzanne, Suzanne," I interrupted angrily, for I grew jealous of the girl; "have you no thought or word, Ralph, for any save Suzanne?"

"I have thoughts for all," he answered, "but Suzanne alone has thought for me, since it seems that your husband would send me away, and you, mother, sit still and say not a word to stop him."

"Learn to judge speech and not silence, lad," I answered. "Look you, all have been talking, and I have shammed dead like a stink-cat when dogs are about; now I am going to begin. First of all, you, Jan, are a fool, for in your thick head you think that rank and wealth are everything to a man, and therefore you would send Ralph away to seek rank and wealth that may or may not belong to him, although he does not wish to go. As for you, Ralph, you are a bigger fool, for you think that Jan Botmar, your foster-father here, desires to be rid of you when in truth he only seeks your good to his own sore loss. As for you, Suzanne, you are the biggest fool of all, for you wish to fly in everybody's face, like a cat

with her first litter of kittens; but there, what is the use of arguing with a girl in love? Now listen, and I will ask you some questions, all of you. Jan, do you wish to send Ralph away with these strangers?"

"Almighty! vrouw," he answered, "you know well that I would as soon send away my right hand. I wish him to stop here for ever, and whatever I have is his; yes, even my daughter. But I seek what is best for him, and I would not have it said in after years that Jan Botmar had kept an English lad not old enough to judge for himself from his rank and wealth because he took pleasure in his company and wished to marry him to his girl."

"Good," I said. "And now for you, Suzanne; what have you to say?"

"I have nothing to add to my words," she replied; "you know all my heart."

"Good again. And you, Ralph?"

"I say, mother, that I will not budge from this place unless I am ordered to go, and if I do go, I will come back for Suzanne. I love you all, and with you I wish to live and nowhere else."

"Nay, Ralph," I answered sighing, "if once you go you will never come back, for out yonder you will find a new home, new interests, and, perchance, new loves. Well, though nobody has thought of me in this matter, I have a voice in it, and I will speak for myself. That lad

yonder has been a son to me for many years, and I who have none love him as such. He is a man as we reckon in this country, and he does not wish to leave us any more than we wish him to go. Moreover, he loves Suzanne, and Suzanne loves him, and I believe that the God who brought them together at first means them to be husband and wife, and that such love as they bear to each other will give them more together than any wealth or rank can bring to them apart. Therefore I say, husband, let our son, Ralph, stay here with us and marry our daughter, Suzanne, decently and in due season, and let their children be our children, and their love our love."

"And how about the Scotchmen who are coming with power to take him away?"

"Do you and Ralph go to the bush-veldt with the cattle to-morrow," I answered, "and leave me to deal with the Scotchmen."

"Well," said Jan, "I consent, for who can stand up against so many words, and the Lord knows that to lose Ralph would have broken my heart as it would have broken that girl's, perhaps more so, since girls change their fancies, but I am too old to change. Come here, my children."

They came, and he laid one of his big hands upon the head of each of them, saying:--

"May the God in Heaven bless you both, who to me are one as dear as the other, making you happy with each other for many long years, and may He

turn aside from you and from us the punishment that is due to all of us because, on account of our great love, we are holding you back, Ralph, from the home, the kin and the fortune to which you were born." Then he kissed each of them on the forehead and let them go.

"If there be any punishment for that which is no sin, on my head be it," said Ralph, "since never would I have gone from here by my own will."

"Aye, aye," answered Jan, "but who can take account of the talk of a lad in love? Well, we have committed the sin and we must bear the sorrow. Now I go out to see to the kraaling of the cattle, which we will drive off to the bush-veldt to-morrow at dawn, for I will have naught to do with these Scotchmen; your mother must settle with them as she wills, only I beg of her that she will tell me nothing of the bargain. Nay, do not come with me, Ralph; stop you with your dear, for to-morrow you will be parted for a while."

So he went, and did not return again till late, and we three sat together and made pretense to be very happy, but somehow were a little sad, for Jan's words about sin and sorrow stuck in our hearts, as the honest words of a stupid, upright man are apt to do.

Now on the morrow at dawn, as had been arranged, Jan and Ralph rode away to the warm veldt with the cattle, leaving me and Suzanne to look after the farm. Three days later the Scotchmen came, and then it was that for

love of Ralph and for the sake of the happiness of my daughter I sinned the greatest sin of all my life--the sin that was destined to shape the fates of others yet unborn.

I was seated on the stoep in the afternoon when I saw three white men and some Cape boys, their servants, riding up to the house.

"Here come those who would steal my boy from me," I thought to myself, and, like Pharaoh, I hardened my heart.

Now in those days my sight was very good, and while the men were yet some way off I studied them all and made up my mind about them. First there was a large young man of five-and-twenty or thereabouts, and I noted with a sort of fear that he was not unlike to Ralph. The eyes were the same and the shape of the forehead, only this gentleman had a weak, uncertain mouth, and I judged that he was very good-humoured, but of an indolent mind. By his side rode another man of quite a different stamp, and middle-aged. "The lawyer," I said to myself as I looked at his weasel-like face, bushy eyebrows, and red hair. Indeed, that was an easy guess, for who can mistake a lawyer, whatever his race may be? That trade is stronger than any blood, and leaves the same seal on all who follow it. Doubtless if those lawyers of whom the Lord speaks hard things in the Testament were set side by side with the lawyers who draw mortgage bonds and practise usury here in South Africa, they would prove to be as like to each other as are the grains of corn upon one mealie cob. Yes, when, all dressed the same, they stand together among the goats on the last day few indeed will know them apart.

"A fool and a knave," said I to myself. "Well, perhaps I can deal with the knave and then the fool will not trouble me."

As for the third man, I took no pains to study him, for I saw at once that he was nothing but an interpreter.

Well, up they rode to the stoep, the two Englishmen taking off their hats to me, after their foolish fashion, while the interpreter, who called me "Aunt," although I was younger than he was, asked for leave to off-saddle, according to our custom. I nodded my head, and having given the horses to the Cape boys, they came up onto the stoep and shook hands with me as I sat. I was not going to rise to greet two Englishmen whom I already hated in my heart, first because they were Englishmen, and secondly because they were about to tempt me into sin, for such sooner or later we always learn to hate.

"Sit," I said, pointing to the yellow-wood bench which was seated with strips of rimpi, and the three of them squeezed themselves into the bench and sat there like white-breasted crows on a bough; the young man staring at me with a silly smile, the lawyer peering this way and that, and turning up his sharp nose at the place and all in it, and the interpreter doing nothing at all, for he was a sensible man, who knew the habits of well-bred people and how to behave in their presence. After five minutes or so the lawyer grew impatient, and said something in a sharp voice, to which the interpreter answered, "Wait."

So they waited till, just as the young man was beginning to go to sleep before my very eyes, Suzanne came onto the verandah, whereupon he woke up in a hurry, and, jumping off the bench, began to bow and scrape and to offer her his seat, for there was no other.

"Suzanne," I said, taking no notice of his bad manners, "get coffee," and she went, looking less displeased at his grimaces than I would have had her do.

In time the coffee came, and they drank it, or pretended to, after which the lawyer began to grow impatient once more, and spoke to the interpreter, who said to me that they had come to visit us on a matter of business.

"Then tell him that it can wait till after we have eaten," I answered.

"It is not my habit to talk business in the afternoon. Why is the lawyer man so impatient, seeing that doubtless he is paid by the day?"

This was translated, and the lawyer asked how I knew his trade.

"In the same way that I know a weasel by its face and a stink-cat by its smell," I replied, for every minute I hated that advocate more.

At this answer the lawyer grew white with anger, and the young lord burst into a roar of laughter, for, as I have said, these English people have no manners. However, they settled themselves down again on the yellow-wood bench and looked at me; while I, folding my hands, sat

opposite, and looked at them for somewhere about another hour, as the interpreter told them that if they moved I should be offended, and, for my part, I was determined that I would not speak to them of their business until Suzanne had gone to bed.

At last, when I saw that they would bear it no longer, for they were becoming very wrathful, and saying words that sounded like oaths, I called for supper and we went in and ate it. Here again I noticed the resemblance between the young man and Ralph, for he had the same tricks of eating and drinking, and I saw that when he had done his meat he turned himself a little sideways from the table, crossing his legs in a peculiar fashion just as it always had been Ralph's habit to do.

"The two had one grandfather, or one grandmother," I said to myself, and grew afraid at the thought.