

## CHAPTER II

### HOW THE SISTERS CAME TO MOOIFONTEIN

"Captain Niel," said Bessie Croft--for she was named Bessie--when they had painfully limped one hundred yards or so, "will you think me rude if I ask you a question?"

"Not at all."

"What has induced you to come and bury yourself in this place?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I don't think that you will like it. I don't think," she added slowly, "that it is a fit place for an English gentleman and an army officer like you. You will find the Boer ways horrid, and then there will only be my old uncle and us two for you to associate with."

John Niel laughed. "English gentlemen are not so particular nowadays, I can assure you, Miss Croft, especially when they have to earn a living. Take my case, for instance, for I may as well tell you exactly how I stand. I have been in the army fourteen years, and I am now thirty-four. Well, I have been able to live there because I had an old aunt who allowed me 120 pounds a year. Six months ago she died, leaving me the little property she possessed, for most of her income came from an

annuity. After paying expenses, duty, &c., it amounts to 1,115 pounds. Now, the interest on this is about fifty pounds a year, and I can't live in the army on that. Just after my aunt's death I came to Durban with my regiment from Mauritius, and now they are ordered home. Well, I liked the country, and I knew that I could not afford to live in England, so I got a year's leave of absence, and made up my mind to have a look round to see if I could not take to farming. Then a gentleman in Durban told me of your uncle, and said that he wanted to dispose of a third interest in his place for a thousand pounds, as he was getting too old to manage it himself. So I entered into correspondence with him, and agreed to come up for a few months to see how I liked it; and accordingly here I am, just in time to save you from being knocked to bits by an ostrich."

"Yes, indeed," she answered, laughing; "you've had a warm welcome at any rate. Well, I hope you will like it."

Just as he finished his story they reached the top of the rise over which the ostrich had pursued Bessie Croft, and saw a Kafir coming towards them, leading the pony with one hand and Captain Niel's horse with the other. About twenty yards behind the horses a lady was walking.

"Ah," said Bessie, "they've caught the horses, and here is Jess come to see what is the matter."

By this time the lady in question was quite close, so that John was able to gather a first impression of her. She was small and rather thin, with

quantities of curling brown hair; not by any means a lovely woman, as her sister undoubtedly was, but possessing two very remarkable characteristics--a complexion of extraordinary and uniform pallor, and a pair of the most beautiful dark eyes he had ever looked on. Altogether, though her size was almost insignificant, she was a striking-looking person, with a face few men would easily forget. Before he had time to observe any more the two parties had met.

"What on earth is the matter, Bessie?" Jess said, with a quick glance at her sister's companion, and speaking in a low full voice, with just a slight South African accent, that is taking enough in a pretty woman. Thereon Bessie broke out with a history of their adventure, appealing to Captain Niel for confirmation at intervals.

Meanwhile Jess Croft stood quite still and silent, and it struck John that her face was the most singularly impassive one he had ever seen. It never changed, even when her sister told her how the ostrich rolled on her and nearly killed her, or how they finally subdued the foe. "Dear me," he thought to herself, "what a very strange woman! She can't have much heart." But just as he thought it the girl looked up, and then he saw where the expression lay. It was in those remarkable eyes. Immovable as was her face, the dark eyes were alight with life and a suppressed excitement that made them shine gloriously. The contrast between the shining eyes and the impassive face beneath them struck him as so extraordinary as to be almost uncanny. As a matter of fact, it was doubtless both unusual and remarkable.

"You have had a wonderful escape, but I am sorry for the bird," she said at last.

"Why?" asked John.

"Because we were great friends. I was the only person who could manage him."

"Yes," put in Bessie, "the savage brute would follow her about like a dog. It was just the oddest thing I ever saw. But come on; we must be getting home, it's growing dark. Mouti"--which, being interpreted, means Medicine--she added, addressing the Kafir in Zulu--"help Captain Niel on to his horse. Be careful that the saddle does not twist round; the girths may be loose."

Thus adjured, John, with the help of the Zulu, clambered into his saddle, an example that the lady quickly followed, and they set off once more through the gathering darkness. Presently he became aware that they were passing up a drive bordered by tall blue gums, and next minute the barking of a large dog, which he afterwards knew by the name of Stomp, and the sudden appearance of lighted windows told him that they had reached the house. At the door--or rather, opposite to it, for there was a verandah in front--they halted and got off their horses. As they dismounted there came a shout of welcome from the house, and presently in the doorway, showing out clearly against the light, appeared a

striking and, in its way, a most pleasant figure. He--for it was a man--was very tall, or, rather, he had been very tall. Now he was much bent with age and rheumatism. His long white hair hung low upon his neck, and fell back from a prominent brow. The top of the head was quite bald, like the tonsure of a priest, and shone and glistened in the lamplight, and round this oasis the thin white locks fell down. The face was shrivelled like the surface of a well-kept apple, and, like an apple, rosy red. The features were aquiline and strongly marked; the eyebrows still black and very bushy, and beneath them shone a pair of grey eyes, keen and bright as those of a hawk. But for all its sharpness, there was nothing unpleasant or fierce about the face; on the contrary, it was pervaded by a remarkable air of good-nature and pleasant shrewdness. For the rest, the man was dressed in rough tweed clothes, tall riding-boots, and held a broad-brimmed Boer hunting hat in his hand. Such, as John Niel first saw him, was the outer person of old Silas Croft, one of the most remarkable men in the Transvaal.

"Is that you, Captain Niel?" roared out the stentorian voice. "The natives said you were coming. A welcome to you! I am glad to see you--very glad. Why, what is the matter with you?" he went on as the Zulu Mouti ran to help him off his horse.

"Matter, Mr. Croft?" answered John; "why, the matter is that your favourite ostrich has nearly killed me and your niece here, and that I have killed your favourite ostrich."

Then followed explanations from Bessie, during which he was helped off his horse and into the house.

"It serves me right," said the old man. "To think of it now, just to think of it! Well, Bessie, my love, thank God that you escaped--ay, and you too, Captain Niel. Here, you boys, take the Scotch cart and a couple of oxen and go and fetch the brute home. We may as well have the feathers off him, at any rate, before the aasvogels (vultures) tear him to bits."

After he had washed himself and tended his injuries with arnica and water, John managed to limp into the principal sitting-room, where supper was waiting. It was a very pleasant room, furnished in European style, and carpeted with mats made of springbuck skins. In the corner stood a piano, and by it a bookcase, filled with the works of standard authors, the property, as John rightly guessed, of Bessie's sister Jess.

Supper went off pleasantly enough, and after it was over the two girls sang and played whilst the men smoked. And here a fresh surprise awaited him, for after Bessie, who apparently had now almost recovered from her mauling, had played a piece or two creditably enough, Jess, who so far had been nearly silent, sat down at the piano. She did not do this willingly, indeed, for it was not until her patriarchal uncle had insisted in his ringing, cheery voice that she should let Captain Niel hear how she could sing that she consented. But at last she did consent, and then, after letting her fingers stray somewhat aimlessly along the

chords, she suddenly broke out into such song as John Niel had never heard before. Her voice, beautiful as it was, was not what is known as a cultivated voice, and it was a German song, therefore he did not understand it, but there was no need of words to translate its burden. Passion, despairing yet hoping through despair, echoed in its every line, and love, unending love, hovered over the glorious notes--nay, possessed them like a spirit, and made them his. Up! up! rang her wild sweet voice, thrilling his nerves till they answered to the music as an Aeolian harp answers to the winds. On went the song with a divine sweep, like the sweep of rushing pinions; higher, yet higher it soared, lifting up the listener's heart far above the world on the trembling wings of sound--ay, even higher, till the music hung at heaven's gate, and falling thence, swiftly as an eagle falls, quivered, and was dead.

John sighed, and so strongly was he moved, sank back in his chair, feeling almost faint with the revulsion of feeling that ensued when the notes had died away. He looked up, and saw Bessie watching him with an air of curiosity and amusement. Jess was still leaning against the piano, and gently touching the notes, over which her head was bent low, showing the coils of curling hair that were twisted round it like a coronet.

"Well, Captain Niel," said the old man, waving his pipe in her direction, "and what do you say to my singing-bird's music, eh? Isn't it enough to draw the heart out of a man, eh, and turn his marrow to water, eh?"

"I never heard anything quite like it," he answered simply, "and I have heard most singers. It is beautiful. Certainly, I never expected to hear such singing in the Transvaal."

Jess turned quickly, and he observed that, though her eyes were alight with excitement, her face was as impassive as ever.

"There is no need for you to laugh at me, Captain Niel," she said quickly, and then, with an abrupt "Good-night," she left the room.

The old man smiled, jerked the stem of his pipe over his shoulder after her, and winked in a way that, no doubt, meant unutterable things, but which did not convey much to his astonished guest, who sat still and said nothing. Then Bessie rose and bade him good-night in her pleasant voice, and with housewifely care inquired as to whether his room was to his taste, and how many blankets he liked upon his bed, telling him that if he found the odour of the moonflowers which grew near the verandah too strong, he had better shut the right-hand window and open that on the other side of the room. Then at length, with a piquant little nod of her golden head, she went off, looking, John thought as he watched her retreating figure, about as healthy, graceful, and generally satisfactory a young woman as a man could wish to see.

"Take a glass of grog, Captain Niel," said the old man, pushing the square bottle towards him, "you'll need it after the mauling that brute



gave you. By the way, I haven't thanked you for saving my Bessie! But I do thank you, yes, that I do. I must tell you that Bessie is my favourite niece. Never was there such a girl--never. Moves like a springbuck, and what an eye and form! Work too--she'll do as much work as three. There's no nonsense about Bessie, none at all. She's not a fine lady, for all her fine looks."

"The two sisters seem very different," said John.

"Ay, you're right there," answered the old man. "You'd never think that the same blood ran in their veins, would you? There's three years between them, that's one thing. Bessie's the youngest, you see--she's just twenty, and Jess is twenty-three. Lord, to think that it is twenty-three years since that girl was born! And theirs is a queer story too."

"Indeed?" said his listener interrogatively.

"Ay," Silas went on absently, knocking out his pipe, and refilling it from a big brown jar of coarse-cut Boer tobacco, "I'll tell it to you if you like: you are going to live in the house, and you may as well know it. I am sure, Captain Niel, that it will go no further. You see I was born in England, yes, and well-born too. I come from Cambridgeshire--from the fat fen-land down round Ely. My father was a clergyman. Well, he wasn't rich, and when I was twenty he gave me his blessing, thirty sovereigns in my pocket, and my passage to the Cape;

and I shook his hand, God bless him, and off I came, and here in the old colony and this country I have been for fifty years, for I was seventy yesterday. Well, I'll tell you more about that another time, it's of the girls I'm speaking now. After I left home--some years after--my dear old father married again, a youngish woman with some money, but rather beneath him in life, and by her he had one son, and then died. Well, it was but little I heard of my half-brother, except that he had turned out very badly, married, and taken to drink, till one night some twelve years ago, when a strange thing happened. I was sitting here in this very room, ay, in this very chair--for this part of the house was up then, though the wings weren't built--smoking my pipe, and listening to the lashing of the rain, for it was a very foul night, when suddenly an old pointer dog I had, named Ben, began to bark.

"Lie down, Ben, it's only the Kafirs," said I.

"Just then I thought I heard a faint sort of rapping at the door, and Ben barked again, so I got up and opened it, and in came two little girls wrapped in old shawls or some such gear. Well, I shut the door, looking first to see if there were any more outside, and then I turned and stared at the two little things with my mouth open. There they stood, hand in hand, the water dripping from both of them; the elder might have been eleven, and the second about eight years old. They didn't say anything, but the elder turned and took the shawl and hat off the younger--that was Bessie--and there was her sweet little face and her golden hair, and damp enough both of them were, and she put her

thumb in her mouth, and stood and looked at me till I began to think that I was dreaming.

"Please, sir,' said the taller at last, 'is this Mr. Croft's house--Mr. Croft--South African Republic?'

"Yes, little Miss, this is his house, and this is the South African Republic, and I am he. And now who might you be, my dears?' I answered.

"If you please, sir, we are your nieces, and we have come to you from England.'

"What!' I holloaed, startled out of my wits, as well I might be.

"Oh, sir,' says the poor little thing, clasping her thin wet hands, 'please don't send us away. Bessie is so wet, and cold and hungry too, she isn't fit to go any farther.'

"And she set to work to cry, whereon the little one cried also, from fright and cold and sympathy.

"Well, of course, I took them both to the fire, and set them on my knees, and called for Hebe, the old Hottentot woman who did my cooking, and between us we undressed them, and wrapped them up in some old clothes, and fed them with soup and wine, so that in half an hour they were quite happy and not a bit frightened.

"And now, young ladies,' I said, 'come and give me a kiss, both of you, and tell me how you came here.'

"This is the tale they told me--completed, of course, from what I learnt afterwards--and an odd one it is. It seems that my half-brother married a Norfolk lady--a sweet young thing--and treated her like a dog. He was a drunken rascal, was my half-brother, and he beat his poor wife and shamefully neglected her, and even ill-used the two little girls, till at last the poor woman, weak as she was from suffering and ill health, could bear it no longer, and formed the wild idea of escaping to this country and of throwing herself upon my protection. That shows how desperate she must have been. She scraped together and borrowed some money, enough to pay for three second-class passages to Natal and a few pounds over, and one day, when her brute of a husband was away on the drink and gamble, she slipped on board a sailing ship in the London Docks, and before he knew anything about it they were well out to sea. But it was her last effort, poor dear soul, and the excitement of it finished her. Before they had been ten days at sea, she sank and died, and the two little children were left alone. What they must have suffered, or rather what poor Jess must have suffered, for she was old enough to feel, God only knows, but I can tell you this, she has never got over the shock to this hour. It has left its mark on her, sir.

Still, let people say what they will, there is a Power who looks after the helpless, and that Power took those poor, homeless, wandering children under its wing. The captain of the vessel befriended them,

and when at last they reached Durban some of the passengers made a subscription, and paid an old Boer, who was coming up this way with his wife to the Transvaal, to take them under his charge. The Boer and his vrow treated the children fairly well, but they did not do one thing more than they bargained for. At the turn from the Wakkerstroom road, that you came along to-day, they put the girls down, for they had no luggage with them, and told them that if they went along there they would come to Meinheer Croft's house. That was in the middle of the afternoon, and they were till eight o'clock getting here, poor little dears, for the track was fainter then than it is now, and they wandered off into the veldt, and would have perished there in the wet and cold had they not chanced to see the lights of the house. That was how my nieces came here, Captain Niel, and here they have been ever since, except for a couple of years when I sent them to the Cape for schooling, and a lonely man I was when they were away."

"And how about the father?" asked John Niel, deeply interested. "Did you ever hear any more of him?"

"Hear of him, the villain!" almost shouted the old man, jumping up in wrath. "Ay, d--n him, I heard of him. What do you think? The two chicks had been with me some eighteen months, long enough for me to learn to love them with all my heart, when one fine morning, as I was seeing about the new kraal wall, I saw a fellow come riding up on an old raw-boned grey horse. Up he comes to me, and as he came I looked at him, and said to myself, 'You are a drunkard you are, and a rogue, it's

written on your face, and, what's more, I know your face.' You see I did not guess that it was a son of my own father that I was looking at. How should I?

"Is your name Croft?' he said.

"Ay,' I answered.

"So is mine,' he went on with a sort of drunken leer. 'I'm your brother.'

"Are you?' I said, beginning to get my back up, for I guessed what his game was, 'and what may you be after? I tell you at once, and to your face, that if you are my brother you are a blackguard, and I don't want to know you or have anything to do with you; and if you are not, I beg your pardon for coupling you with such a scoundrel.'

"Oh, that's your tune, is it?' he said with a sneer. 'Well, now, my dear brother Silas, I want my children. They have got a little half-brother at home--for I have married again, Silas--who is anxious to have them to play with, so if you will be so good as to hand them over, I'll take them away at once.'

"You'll take them away, will you?' said I, all of a tremble with rage and fear.

"Yes, Silas, I will. They are mine by law, and I am not going to breed children for you to have the comfort of their society. I've taken advice, Silas, and that's sound law,' and he leered at me again.

"I stood and looked at that man, and thought of how he had treated those poor children and their young mother, and my blood boiled, and I grew mad. Without another word I jumped over the half-finished wall, and caught him by the leg (for I was a strong man ten years ago) and jerked him off the horse. As he came down he dropped the sjambock from his hand, and I laid hold of it and then and there gave him the soundest hiding a man ever had. Lord, how he did holloa! When I was tired I let him get up.

"Now,' I said, 'be off with you, and if you come back here I'll bid the Kafirs hunt you to Natal with their sticks. This is the South African Republic, and we don't care overmuch about law here.' Which we didn't in those days.

"All right, Silas,' he said, 'all right, you shall pay for this. I'll have those children, and, for your sake, I'll make their lives a hell--you mark my words--South African Republic or no South African Republic. I've got the law on my side.'

"Off he rode, cursing and swearing, and I flung his sjambock after him. This was the first and last time that I saw my brother."

"What became of him?" asked John Niel.

"I'll tell you, just to show you again that there is a Power which keeps such men in its eye. He rode back to Newcastle that night, and went about the canteen there abusing me, and getting drunker and drunker, till at last the canteen keeper sent for his boys to turn him out. Well, the boys were rough, as Kafirs are apt to be with a drunken white man, and he struggled and fought, and in the middle of it the blood began to run from his mouth, and he dropped down dead of a broken blood-vessel, and there was an end of him. That is the story of the two girls, Captain Niel, and now I am off to bed. To-morrow I'll show you round the farm, and we will have a talk about business. Good-night to you, Captain Niel. Good-night!"