

CHAPTER IV

BESSIE IS ASKED IN MARRIAGE

In due course John Niel recovered from his sprained ankle and the other injuries inflicted on him by the infuriated cock ostrich (it is, by the way, a humiliating thing to be knocked out of time by a feathered fowl), and set to work to learn the routine of farm life. He did not find this a disagreeable task, especially when he had so fair an instructress as Bessie, who knew all about it, to show him the way in which he should go. Naturally of an energetic and hard-working temperament, he very soon fell more or less into the swing of the thing, and at the end of six weeks began to talk quite learnedly of cattle and ostriches and sweet and sour veldt. About once a week or so Bessie used to put him through a regular examination as to his progress; also she gave him lessons in Dutch and Zulu, both of which tongues she spoke to perfection; so it will be seen that John did not lack for pleasant and profitable employment. Also, as time went on he grew much attached to Silas Croft. The old gentleman, with his handsome, honest face, his large and varied stock of experience and his sturdy English character, made a great impression on his mind. He had never met a man quite like him before. Nor was this friendship unreciprocated, for his host took a wonderful fancy to John Niel.

"You see, my dear," he explained to his niece Bessie, "he is quiet, and he doesn't know much about farming, but he's willing to learn, and such

a gentleman. Now, where one has Kafirs to deal with, as on a place like this, you must have a gentleman. Your mean white will never get anything out of a Kafir; that's why the Boers kill them and flog them, because they can't get anything out of them without. But you see Captain Niel gets on well enough with the 'boys.' I think he'll do, my dear, I think he'll do," and Bessie quite agreed with him. And so it came to pass that after this six weeks' trial the bargain was struck finally, and John paid over his thousand pounds, becoming the owner of a third interest in Mooifontein.

Now it is not possible, in a general way, for a man of John Niel's age to live in the same house with a young and lovely woman like Bessie Croft without running more or less risk of entanglement. Especially is this so when the two people have little or no outside society or distraction to divert their attention from each other. Not that there was, at any rate as yet, the slightest hint of affection between them. Only they liked one another very much, and found it pleasant to be a good deal together. In short, they were walking along that easy, winding road which leads to the mountain paths of love. It is a very broad road, like another road that runs elsewhere, and, also like this last, it has a wide gate. Sometimes, too, it leads to destruction. But for all that it is a most agreeable one to follow hand-in-hand, winding as it does through the pleasant meadows of companionship. The view is rather limited, it is true, and homelike--full of familiar things. There stand the kine, knee-deep in grass; there runs the water; and there grows the corn. Also you can stop if you like. By-and-by it is different.

By-and-by, when the travellers tread the heights of passion, precipices will yawn and torrents rush, lightnings will fall and storms will blind; and who can know that they shall attain at last to that far-off peak, crowned with the glory of a perfect peace which men call Happiness? There are those who say it never can be reached, and that the halo which rests upon its slopes is no earthly light, but rather, as it were, a promise and a beacon--a glow reflected whence we know not, and lying on this alien earth as the sun's light lies on the dead bosom of the moon. Some declare, again, that they have climbed its topmost pinnacle and tasted of the fresh breath of heaven which sweeps around its heights--ay, and heard the quiring of immortal harps and the swan-like sigh of angels' wings; and then behold! a mist has fallen upon them, and they have wandered in it, and when it cleared they were on the mountain paths once more, and the peak was far away. And a few there are who tell us that they live there always, listening to the voice of God; but these are old and worn with journeying--men and women who have outlived passions and ambitions and the fire heats of love, and who now, girt about with memories, stand face to face with the sphinx Eternity.

But John Niel was no chicken, nor very likely to fall in love with the first pretty face he met. He had once, years ago, gone through that melancholy stage, and there, he thought, was an end of it. Moreover, if Bessie attracted him, so did Jess in a different way. Before he had been a week in the house he came to the conclusion that Jess was the strangest woman he had ever met, and in her own fashion one of the most attractive. Her very impassiveness added to her charm; for who is there

in this world who is not eager to learn a secret? To him Jess was a riddle of which he did not know the key. That she was clever and well-informed he soon discovered from her rare remarks; that she could sing like an angel he also knew; but what was the mainspring of her mind--round what axis did it revolve--this was the puzzle. Clearly enough it was not like most women's, least of all like that of happy, healthy, plain-sailing Bessie. So curious did he become to fathom these mysteries that he took every opportunity to associate with her, and, when he had time, would even go out with her on her sketching, or rather flower-painting, expeditions. On these occasions she would sometimes begin to talk, but it was always about books, or England or some intellectual question. She never spoke of herself.

Yet it soon became evident to John that she liked his society, and missed him when he did not come. It never occurred to him what a boon it was to a girl of considerable intellectual attainments, and still greater intellectual capacities and aspirations, to be thrown for the first time into the society of a cultivated and intelligent gentleman. John Niel was no empty-headed, one-sided individual. He had both read and thought, and even written a little, and in him Jess found a mind which, though of an inferior stamp, was more or less kindred to her own. Although he did not understand her she understood him, and at last, had he but known it, there rose a far-off dawning light upon the twilight of her heart that thrilled and changed it as the first faint rays of morning thrill and change the darkness of the night. What if she should learn to love this man, and teach him to love her? To most women such a

thought more or less involves the idea of marriage, and that change of status which for the most part they consider desirable. But Jess did not think much of that: what she did think of was the blessed possibility of being able to lay down her life, as it were, in the life of another--of at last finding somebody who understood her and whom she could understand, who would cut the shackles that bound down the wings of her genius, so that she could rise and bear him with her as, in Bulwer Lytton's beautiful story, Zoe would have borne her lover. Here at length was a man who understood, who was something more than an animal, and who possessed the god-like gift of brains, the gift that had been a curse rather than a blessing to her, lifting her above the level of her sex and shutting her off as by iron doors from the comprehension of those around her. Ah! if only this perfect love of which she had read so much would come to him and her, life might perhaps grow worth the living.

It is a curious thing, but in such matters most men never learn wisdom from experience. A man of John Niel's age might have guessed that it is dangerous work playing with explosives, and that the quietest, most harmless-looking substances are sometimes the most explosive. He might have known that to set to work to cultivate the society of a woman with such tell-tale eyes as Jess's was to run the risk of catching the fire from them himself, to say nothing of setting her alight: he might have known that to bring all the weight of his cultivated mind to bear on her mind, to take the deepest interest in her studies, to implore her to let him see the poetry Bessie told him she wrote, but which she would

show to no living soul, and to evince the most evident delight in her singing, were one and all hazardous things to do. Yet he did them and thought no harm.

As for Bessie, she was delighted that her sister should have found anybody to whom she cared to talk or who could understand her. It never occurred to her that Jess might fall in love. Jess was the last person to fall in love. Nor did she calculate what the results might be to John. As yet, at any rate, she had no interest in Captain Niel--of course not.

And so things went on pleasantly enough to all concerned in this drama till one fine day when the storm-clouds began to gather. John had been about the farm as usual till dinner time, after which he took his gun and told Jantje to saddle up his shooting pony. He was standing on the verandah, waiting for the pony to appear, and by him was Bessie, looking particularly attractive in a white dress, when suddenly he caught sight of Frank Muller's great black horse, and upon it that gentleman himself, cantering up the avenue of blue gums.

"Hullo, Miss Bessie," he said, "here comes your friend."

"Bother!" said Bessie, stamping her foot; and then, with a quick look,

"Why do you call him my friend?"

"I imagine that he considers himself so, to judge from the number of

times a week he comes to see you," John answered with a shrug. "At any rate, he isn't mine, so I am off shooting. Good-bye. I hope that you will enjoy yourself."

"You are not kind," she said in a low voice, turning her back upon him.

In another moment he was gone, and Frank Muller had arrived.

"How do you do, Miss Bessie?" he said, jumping from his horse with the rapidity of a man who had been accustomed to rough riding all his life.

"Where is the roobaatje off to?"

"Captain Niel is going out shooting," she said coldly.

"So much the better for you and me, Miss Bessie. We can have a pleasant talk. Where is that black monkey Jantje? Here, Jantje, take my horse, you ugly devil, and mind you look after him, or I'll cut the liver out of you!"

Jantje took the horse, with a forced grin of appreciation at the joke, and led him off to the stable.

"I don't think that Jantje likes you, Meinheer Muller," said Bessie, spitefully, "and I do not wonder at it if you talk to him like that. He told me the other day that he had known you for twenty years," and she looked at him inquiringly.

This casual remark produced a strange effect on her visitor, who turned colour beneath his tanned skin.

"He lies, the black hound," he said, "and I'll put a bullet through him if he says it again! What should I know about him, or he about me? Can I keep count of every miserable man-monkey I meet?" and he muttered a string of Dutch oaths into his long beard.

"Really, Meinheer!" said Bessie.

"Why do you always call me 'Meinheer'?" he asked, turning so fiercely on her that she started back a step. "I tell you I am not a Boer. I am an Englishman. My mother was English; and besides, thanks to Lord Carnarvon, we are all English now."

"I don't see why you should mind being thought a Boer," she said coolly: "there are some very good people among the Boers, and besides, you used to be a great 'patriot.'"

"Used to be--yes; and so the trees used to bend to the north when the wind blew that way, but now they bend to the south, for the wind has turned. By-and-by it may set to the north again--that is another matter--then we shall see."

Bessie made no answer beyond pursing up her pretty mouth and slowly

picking a leaf from the vine that trailed overhead.

The big Dutchman took off his hat and stroked his beard perplexedly. Evidently he was meditating something that he was afraid to say. Twice he fixed his cold eyes on Bessie's fair face, and twice looked down again. The second time she took alarm.

"Excuse me one minute," she said, and made as though to enter the house.

"Wacht een beeche" (wait a bit), he ejaculated, breaking into Dutch in his agitation, and even catching hold of her white dress with his big hand.

Drawing the dress from him with a quick twist of her lithe form, she turned and faced him.

"I beg your pardon," she said, in a tone that could not be called encouraging: "you were going to say something."

"Yes--ah, that is--I was going to say----" and he paused.

Bessie stood with a polite look of expectation on her face, and waited.

"I was going to say--that, in short, that I want to marry you!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Bessie with a start.

"Listen," he went on hoarsely, his words gathering force as he spoke, as is the way even with uncultured people when they speak from the heart. "Listen! I love you, Bessie; I have loved you for three years. Every time I have seen you I have loved you more. Don't say me nay--you don't know how I do love you. I dream of you every night; sometimes I dream that I hear your dress rustling, then you come and kiss me, and it is like being in heaven."

Here Bessie made a gesture of disgust.

"There, I have offended you, but don't be angry with me. I am very rich, Bessie; there is the place here, and then I have four farms in Lydenburg and ten thousand morgen up in Waterberg, and a thousand head of cattle, besides sheep and horses and money in the bank. You shall have everything your own way," he went on, seeing that the inventory of his goods did not appear to impress her--"everything--the house shall be English fashion; I will build a new sit-kammer (sitting-room) and it shall be furnished from Natal. There, I love you, I say. You won't say no, will you?" and he caught her by the hand.

"I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Muller," answered Bessie, snatching away her hand, "but--in short, I cannot marry you. No, it is no use, I cannot indeed. There, please say no more--here comes my uncle. Forget all about it, Mr. Muller."

Her suitor looked up; there was old Silas Croft sure enough, but he was some way off, and walking slowly.

"Do you mean it?" he said beneath his breath.

"Yes, yes, of course I mean it. Why do you force me to repeat it?"

"It is that damned rooibaatje," he broke out. "You used not to be like this before. Curse him, the white-livered Englishman! I will be even with him yet; and I tell you what it is, Bessie: you shall marry me, whether you like or no. Look here, do you think I am the sort of man to play with? You go to Wakkerstroom and ask what sort of a man Frank Muller is. See! I want you--I must have you. I could not live if I thought that I should never get you for myself. And I tell you I will do it. I don't care if it costs me my life, and your rooibaatje's too. I'll do it if I have to stir up a revolt against the Government. There, I swear it by God or by the Devil, it's all one to me!" And growing inarticulate with passion, he stood before her clinching and unclenching his great hand, and his lips trembling.

Bessie was very frightened; but she was a brave woman, and rose to the emergency.

"If you go on talking like that," she said, "I shall call my uncle. I tell you that I will not marry you, Frank Muller, and that nothing shall ever make me marry you. I am very sorry for you, but I have not

encouraged you, and I will never marry you--never!"

He stood for half a minute or so looking at her, and then burst into a savage laugh.

"I think that some day or other I shall find a way to make you," Muller said, and turning, he went without another word.

A couple of minutes later Bessie heard the sound of a horse galloping, and looking up she saw her wooer's powerful form vanishing down the vista of blue gums. Also she heard somebody crying out as though in pain at the back of the house, and, more to relieve her mind than for any other reason, she went to see what it was. By the stable door she found the Hottentot Jantje, shrieking, cursing and twisting round and round, his hand pressed to his side, from which the blood was running.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Baas Frank!" he answered--"Baas Frank hit me with his whip!"

"The brute!" said Bessie, the tears starting to her eyes with anger.

"Never mind, missie, never mind," gasped the Hottentot, his ugly face growing livid with fury, "it is only one more to me. I cut it on this stick"--and he held up a long thick stick he carried, on which were several notches, including three deep ones at the top just below the

knob. "Let him look out sharp--let him search the grass--let him creep round the bush--let him watch as he will, one day he will find Jantje, and Jantje will find him!"

"Why did Frank Muller gallop away like that?" asked her uncle of Bessie when she got back to the verandah.

"We had some words," she answered shortly, not seeing the use of explaining matters to the old man.

"Ah, indeed, indeed. Well, be careful, my love. It's ill to quarrel with a man like Frank Muller. I've known him for many years, and he has a black heart when he is crossed. You see, my love, you can deal with a Boer and you can deal with an Englishman, but cross-bred dogs are hard to handle. Take my advice, and make it up with Frank Muller."

All of which sage advice did not tend to raise Bessie's spirits, that were already sufficiently depressed.