

CHAPTER VI

THE STORM BREAKS

"Do you know, you are a very odd person, Miss Jess," John said presently, with a little laugh. "I don't think you can have a happy mind."

She looked up. "A happy mind?" she said. "Who can have a happy mind? Nobody who feels. Supposing," she went on after a pause--"supposing one puts oneself and one's own little interests and joys and sorrows quite away, how is it possible to be happy, when one feels the breath of human misery beating on one's face, and sees the tide of sorrow and suffering creeping up to one's feet? You may be on a rock yourself and out of the path of it, till the spring floods or the hurricane wave come to sweep you away, or you may be afloat upon it: whichever it is, it is quite impossible, if you have any heart, to be indifferent."

"Then only the indifferent are happy?"

"Yes, the indifferent and the selfish; but, after all, it is the same thing: indifference is the perfection of selfishness."

"I am afraid that there must be lots of selfishness in the world, for certainly there is plenty of happiness, all evil things notwithstanding. I should have said that happiness springs from goodness and a sound

digestion."

Jess shook her head as she answered, "I may be wrong, but I don't see how anybody who feels can be quite happy in a world of sickness, suffering, slaughter, and death. I saw a Kafir woman die yesterday, and her children crying over her. She was a poor creature and had a rough lot, but she loved her life, and her children loved her. Who can be happy and thank God for His creation when he has just seen such a thing? But there, Captain Niel, my ideas are very crude, and I dare say very wrong, and everybody has thought them before: at any rate, I am not going to inflict them on you. What is the use of it?" and she went on with a laugh: "what is the use of anything? The same old thoughts passing through the same human minds from year to year and century to century, just as the same clouds float across the same blue sky. The clouds are born in the sky, and the thoughts are born in the brain, and they both end in tears and re-arise in blind, bewildering mist, and this is the beginning and end of thoughts and clouds. They arise out of the blue; they overshadow and break into storms and tears, then they are drawn up into the blue again, and the story begins afresh."

"So you don't think that one can be happy in this world?" he asked.

"I did not say that--I never said that. I do think that happiness is possible. It is possible if one can love somebody so hard that one can quite forget oneself and everything else except that person, and it is possible if one can sacrifice oneself for others. There is no true

happiness outside of love and self-sacrifice, or rather outside of love, for it includes the other. This is gold, and all the rest is gilt."

"How do you know that?" he asked quickly. "You have never been in love."

"No," she answered, "I have never been in love like that, but all the happiness I have had in my life has come to me from loving. I believe that love is the secret of the world: it is like the philosopher's stone they used to look for, and almost as hard to find, but if you find it it turns everything to gold. Perhaps," she went on with a little laugh, "when the angels departed from the earth they left us love behind, that by it and through it we may climb up to them again. It is the one thing that lifts us above the brutes. Without love man is a brute, and nothing but a brute; with love he draws near to God. When everything else falls away the love will endure because it cannot die while there is any life, if it is true love, for it is immortal. Only it must be true--you see it must be true."

He had penetrated her reserve now; the ice of her manner broke up beneath the warmth of her words, and her face, usually impassive, had caught life and light from the eyes above, and acquired a certain beauty of its own. John looked at it, and understood something of the untaught and ill-regulated intensity and depth of the nature of this curious girl. He met her eyes and they moved him strangely, though he was not an emotional man, and was too old to experience spasmodic thrills at the chance glances of a pretty woman. He moved towards her, looking at her

curiously.

"It would be worth living to be loved like that," he said, more to himself than to her.

Jess did not answer, but she let her eyes rest on his. Indeed, she did more, for she put her soul into them and gazed and gazed till John Niel felt as though he were mesmerised. And as she gazed there rose up in her breast a knowledge that if she willed it she could gain this man's heart and hold it against all the world, for her nature was stronger than his nature, and her mind, untrained though it be, encompassed his mind and could pass over it and beat it down as the wind beats down the tossing seas. All this she learnt in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye: she could not tell how she knew it, but she did know it as surely as she knew that the blue sky stretched overhead, and, what is more--for the moment, at any rate--he knew it too. This strange strong certainty came on her as a shock and a revelation, like the tidings of some great joy or grief, and for a moment left her heart empty of all things else.

Jess dropped her eyes suddenly.

"I think," she said quietly, "that we have been talking a great deal of nonsense, and that I want to finish my sketch."

He rose and left her, for he was wanted at home, saying as he went that he thought there was a storm coming up; the air was so quiet, and the

wind had fallen as it does before an African tempest. Presently on looking round she saw him slowly climbing the precipitous ascent to the table-land above the gulf.

It was one of those glorious afternoons that sometimes come in the African spring, although it was so intensely still. Everywhere appeared the proofs of evidences of life. The winter was over, and now, from the sadness and sterility of its withered age, sprang youth and lovely summer clad in sunshine, bediamonded with dew, and fragrant with the breath of flowers. Jess lay back and looked up into the infinite depths above. How blue they were, and how measureless! She could not see the angry clouds that lay like visible omens on the horizon. Look, there, miles above her, was one tiny circling speck. It was a vulture, watching her from his airy heights and descending a little to see if she were dead, or only sleeping.

Involuntarily she shuddered. The bird of death reminded her of Death himself also hanging high up yonder in the blue and waiting his opportunity to fall upon the sleeper. Then her eyes fell upon a bough of the glorious flowering bush under which she rested. It was not more than four feet above her head, but she lay so still and motionless that a jewelled honeysucker came and hovered over the flowers, darting from one to another like a many-coloured flash. Thence her glance travelled to the great column of boulders that towered above her, and that seemed to say, "I am very old. I have seen many springs and many winters, and have looked down on many sleeping maids, and where are they now?"

All dead--all dead," and an old baboon in the rocks with startling suddenness barked out "all dead" in answer.

Around her were the blooming lilies and the lustiness of springing life; the heavy air was sweet with the odour of ferns and the mimosa flowers. The running water splashed and musically fell; the sunlight shot in golden bars athwart the shade, like the memory of happy days in the grey vista of a life; away in the cliffs yonder, the rock-doves were preparing to nest by hundreds, and waking the silence with their cooing and the flutter of their wings. Even the grim old eagle perched on the pinnacle of the peak was pruning himself, contentedly happy in the knowledge that his mate had laid an egg in that dark corner of the cliff. All things rejoiced and cried aloud that summer was at hand and that it was time to bloom and love and nest. Soon it would be winter again, when things died, and next summer other things would live under the sun, and these perchance would be forgotten. That was what they seemed to say.

And as Jess lay and heard, her youthful blood, drawn by Nature's magnetic force, as the moon draws the tides, rose in her veins like the sap in the budding trees, and stirred her virginal serenity. All the bodily natural part of her caught the tones of Nature's happy voice that bade her break her bonds, live and love, and be a woman. And lo! the spirit within her answered to it, flinging wide her bosom's doors, and of a sudden, as it were, something quickened and lived in her heart that was of her and yet had its own life--a life apart; something that sprang

from her and another, which would always be with her now and could never die. She rose pale and trembling, as a woman trembles at the first stirring of the child that she shall bear, and clung to the flowery bough of the beautiful bush above, then sank down again, feeling that the spirit of her girlhood had departed from her, and another angel had entered there; knowing that she loved with heart and soul and body, and was a very woman.

She had called to Love as the wretched call to Death, and Love had come in his strength and possessed her utterly; and now for a little while she was afraid to pass into the shadow of his wings, as the wretched who call to Death fear him when they feel his icy fingers. But the fear passed, and the great joy and the new consciousness of power and of identity that the inspiration of a true passion gives to some strong deep natures remained, and after a while Jess prepared to make her way home across the mountain-top, feeling as though she were another being. Still she did not go, but lay there with closed eyes and drank of this new intoxicating wine. So absorbed was she that she did not notice that the doves had ceased to call, and that the eagle had fled away for shelter. She was not aware of the great and solemn hush which had taken the place of the merry voice of beast and bird and preceded the breaking of the gathered storm.

At last as she rose to go Jess opened her dark eyes, which, for the most part, had been shut while this great change was passing over her, and with a natural impulse turned to look once more on the place where her

happiness had found her, then sank down again with a little exclamation. Where was the light and the glory and all the happiness of the life that moved and grew around her? Gone, and in its place darkness and rising mist and deep and ominous shadows. While she lay and thought, the sun had sunk behind the hill and left the great gulf nearly dark, and, as is common in South Africa, the heavy storm-cloud had crept across the blue sky and sealed the light from above. A drear wind came moaning up the gorge from the plains beyond; the heavy rain-drops began to fall one by one; the lightning flickered fitfully in the belly of the advancing cloud. The storm that John had feared was upon her.

Then came a dreadful hush. Jess had recovered herself by now, and, knowing what to expect, she snatched up her sketching-block and hurried into the shelter of a little cave hollowed by water in the side of the cliff. And now with a rush of ice-cold air the tempest burst. Down came the rain in a sheet; then flash upon flash gleaming fiercely through the vapour-laden air; and roar upon roar echoing along the rocky cavities in volumes of fearful sound. Then another pause and space of utter silence, followed by a blaze of light that dazed and blinded her, and suddenly one of the piled-up columns to her left swayed to and fro like a poplar in a breeze, to fall headlong with a crash which almost mastered the awful crackling of the thunder overhead and the shrieking of the baboons scared from their crannies in the cliff. Down it rushed beneath the stroke of that fiery sword, the brave old pillar that had lasted out so many centuries, sending clouds of dust and fragments high up into the blinding rain, and carrying awe and wonder to the heart of the girl who

watched its fall. Away rolled the storm as quickly as it had come, with a sound like the passing of the artillery of an embattled host; then a grey rain set in, blotting the outlines of everything, like an endless absorbing grief, dulling the edge and temper of a life. Through it Jess, scared and wet to the skin, managed to climb up the natural steps, now made almost impassable by the prevailing gloom and the rush of water from the table-top of the mountain, and on across the sodden plain, down the rocky path on the farther side, past the little walled-in cemetery with the four red gums planted at its corners, in which a stranger who had died at Mooifontein lay buried, and so, just as the darkness of the wet night came down like a cloud, home at last. At the back-door stood her old uncle with a lantern.

"Is that you, Jess?" he called out in his stentorian tones. "Lord! what a sight!" as she emerged, her sodden dress clinging to her slight form, her hands torn with clambering over the rocks, her curling hair which had broken loose hanging down her back and half covering her face.

"Lord! what a sight!" he ejaculated again. "Why, Jess, where have you been? Captain Niel has gone out to look for you with the Kafirs."

"I have been sketching in Leeuwen Kloof, and got caught in the storm. There, uncle, let me pass, I want to take these wet things off. It is a bitter night," and she ran to her room, leaving a long trail of water behind her as she passed. The old man entered the house, shut the door, and blew out the lantern.

"Now, what is it she reminds me of?" he said aloud as he groped his way down the passage to the sitting-room. "Ah, I know, that night when she first came here out of the rain leading Bessie by the hand. What can the girl have been thinking of, not to see the thunder coming up? She ought to know the signs of the weather here by now. Dreaming, I suppose, dreaming. She's an odd woman, Jess, very." Perhaps he did not quite know how accurate his guess was, and how true the conclusion he drew from it. Certainly she had been dreaming, and she was an odd woman.

Meanwhile Jess was rapidly changing her clothes and removing the traces of her struggle with the elements. But of that other struggle she had gone through she could not remove the traces. They and the love that arose out of it would endure as long as she endured. It was her former self that had been cast off in it and which now lay behind her, an empty and unmeaning thing like the shapeless heap of garments. It was all very strange. So John had gone to look for her and had not found her. She was glad that he had gone. It made her happy to think of him searching and calling in the wet and the night. She was only a woman, and it was natural that she should feel thus. By-and-by he would come back and find her clothed and in her right mind and ready to greet him. She was glad that he had not seen her wet and dishevelled. A girl looks so unpleasant like that. It might have set him against her. Men like women to look nice and clean and pretty. That gave her an idea. She turned to her glass and, holding the light above her head, studied her own face attentively. She was a woman with as little vanity in her composition as

it is possible for a woman to have, and till now she had not given her personal looks much consideration. They had not been of great importance to her in the Wakkerstroom district of the Transvaal. But to-night all of a sudden they became very important; and so she stood and looked at her own wonderful eyes, at the masses of curling brown hair still damp and shining from the rain, at the curious pallid face and clear-cut determined mouth.

"If it were not for my eyes and hair, I should be very ugly," she said to herself aloud. "If only I were beautiful like Bessie, now." The thought of her sister gave her another idea. What if John were to prefer Bessie? Now she remembered that he had been very attentive to Bessie. A feeling of dreadful doubt and jealousy passed through her, for women like Jess know what jealousy is in its bitterness. Supposing that it was in vain, supposing that what she had given to-day--given utterly once and for all, so that she could not take it back--had been given to a man who loved another woman, and that woman her own dear sister! Supposing that the fate of her love was to be like water falling unalteringly on the hard rock that heeds it not and retains it not! True, the water wears the rock away; but could she be satisfied with that? She could master him, she knew; even if things were so, she could win him to herself, she had read it in his eyes that afternoon; but could she, who had promised to her dead mother to cherish and protect her sister, whom till this day she had loved better than anything in the world, and whom she still loved more dearly than her life--could she, if it should happen to be thus, rob that sister of her lover? And if it should be so,

what would her life be like? It would be like the great pillar after the lightning had smitten it, a pile of shattered smoking fragments, a very heaped-up debris of a life. She could feel it even now. No wonder, then, that Jess sat there upon the little white bed holding her hand against her heart and feeling terribly afraid.

Just then she heard John's footsteps in the hall.

"I can't find her," he said in an anxious tone to some one as she rose, taking her candle with her, and left the room. The light of it fell full upon his face and dripping clothes. It was white and anxious, and she was glad to see the anxiety.

"Oh, thank God! here you are!" he said, catching her hand. "I began to think you were quite lost. I have been right down the Kloof after you, and got a nasty fall over it."

"It is very good of you," she said in a low voice, and again their eyes met, and again her glance thrilled him. There was such a wonderful light in Jess's eyes that night.

Half an hour afterwards they sat down as usual to supper. Bessie did not put in an appearance till it was a quarter over, and then sat very silent through it. Jess narrated her adventure in the Kloof, and everybody listened, but nobody said much. There seemed to be a shadow over the house that evening, or perhaps it was that each party was

thinking of his own affairs. After supper old Silas Croft began talking about the political state of the country, which gave him uneasiness. He said that he believed the Boers really meant to rebel against the Government this time. Frank Muller had told him so, and he always knew what was going on. This announcement did not tend to raise anybody's spirits, and the evening passed as silently as the meal had done. At last Bessie got up, stretched her rounded arms, and said that she was tired and going to bed.

"Come into my room," she whispered to her sister as she passed. "I want to speak to you."