

CHAPTER VII

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM

After waiting a few minutes, Jess said "Good-night," and went straight to Bessie's room. Her sister had undressed, and was sitting on her bed, wrapped in a blue dressing-gown that suited her fair complexion admirably, and with a very desponding expression on her beautiful face. Bessie was one of those people who are easily elated and easily cast down.

Jess came up to her and kissed her.

"What is it, love?" she said. And Bessie could never have divined the gnawing anxiety that was eating at her heart as she said it.

"Oh, Jess, I'm so glad that you have come. I do so want you to advise me--that is, to tell me what you think," and she paused.

"You must tell me what it is all about first, Bessie dear," she said, sitting down opposite to her in such a position that her face was shaded from the light. Bessie tapped her naked foot against the matting with which the little room was carpeted. It was an exceedingly pretty foot.

"Well, dear old girl, it is just this--Frank Muller has been here to ask me to marry him."

"Oh," said Jess, with a sigh of relief. So that was all? She felt as though a ton-weight had been lifted from her heart. She had expected this bit of news for some time.

"He wanted me to marry him, and when I said I would not, he behaved like--like----"

"Like a Boer," suggested Jess.

"Like a brute," went on Bessie with emphasis.

"So you don't care for Frank Muller?"

"Care for him! I loathe the man. You don't know how I loathe him, with his handsome bad face and his cruel eyes. I always loathed him, and now I hate him too. But I will tell you all about it;" and she did, with many feminine comments and interpolations.

Jess sat quite still, and waited till she had finished.

"Well, dear," she said at last, "you are not going to marry him, and so there is an end of it. You can't detest the man more than I do. I have watched him for years," she went on, with rising anger, "and I tell you that Frank Muller is a liar and a traitor. That man would betray his own father if he thought it to his interest to do so. He hates uncle--I am

sure he does, although he pretends to be so fond of him. I am certain that he has tried often and often to stir up the Boers against him. Old Hans Coetzee told me that he denounced him to the Veld-Cornet as an uitlander and a verdomde Engelsmann about two years before the annexation, and tried to get him to persuade the Landrost to report him as a law-breaker to the Raad; while all the time he was pretending to be so friendly. Then in the Sikukuni war it was Frank Muller who caused them to commandeer uncle's two best waggons and spans. He gave none himself, nothing but a couple of bags of meal. He is a wicked fellow, Bessie, and a dangerous fellow; but he has more brains and more power about him than any man in the Transvaal, and you will have to be very careful, or he will do us all a bad turn."

"Ah!" said Bessie; "well, he can't do much now that the country is English."

"I am not so sure of that. I am not so sure that the country is going to stop English. You laugh at me for reading the home papers, but I see things there that make me doubtful. The other party is in power now in England, and one does not know what they may do; you heard what uncle said to-night. They might give us up to the Boers. You must remember that we far-away people are only the counters with which they play their game."

"Nonsense, Jess," said Bessie indignantly. "Englishmen are not like that. When they say a thing, they stick to it."

"They used to, you mean," answered Jess with a shrug, and got up from her chair to go to bed.

Bessie began to fidget her white feet over one another.

"Stop a bit, Jess dear," she said. "I want to speak to you about something else."

Jess sat or rather dropped back into her chair, and her pale face turned paler than ever; but Bessie blushed very red and hesitated.

"It's about Captain Niel," she said at length.

"Oh," answered Jess with a little laugh, and her voice sounded cold and strange in her own ears. "Has he been following Frank Muller's example, and proposing to you too?"

"No-o," said Bessie, "but"--and here she rose, and, sitting on a stool by her elder sister's chair, rested her forehead against her knee--"but I love him, and I believe that he loves me. This morning he told me that I was the prettiest woman he had seen at home or abroad, and the sweetest too; and do you know," she said, looking up and giving a happy little laugh, "I think he meant it."

"Are you joking, Bessie, or are you really in earnest?"

"In earnest! ah, but that I am, and I am not ashamed to say it. I fell in love with John Niel when he killed that cock ostrich. He looked so strong and savage as he fought with it. It is a fine thing to see a man put out all his strength. And then he is such a gentleman!--so different from the men we meet round here. Oh yes, I fell in love with him at once, and I have got deeper and deeper in love with him ever since, and if he does not marry me I think that it will break my heart. There, that's the truth, Jess dear," and she dropped her golden head on to her sister's knees and began to cry softly at the thought.

But the sister sat there on the chair, her hand hanging idly by her side, her white face set and impassive as that of an Egyptian Sphinx, and the large eyes gazing far away through the window, against which the rain was beating--far away out into the night and the storm. She heard the surging of the storm, she heard her sister's weeping, her eyes perceived the dark square of the window through which they appeared to look, she could feel Bessie's head upon her knee--yes, she could see and hear and feel, and yet it seemed to her that she was dead. The lightning had fallen on her soul as it fell on the pillar of rock, and it was as the pillar is. And it had fallen so soon! there had been such a little span of happiness and hope! And so she sat, like a stony Sphinx, and Bessie wept softly before her, like a beautiful, breathing, loving human suppliant, and the two formed a picture and a contrast such as the student of human nature does not often get the chance of studying.

It was the eldest sister who spoke first after all.

"Well, dear," she said, "what are you crying about? You love Captain Niel, and you believe that he loves you. Surely there is nothing to cry about."

"Well, I don't know that there is," said Bessie, more cheerfully; "but I was thinking how dreadful it would be if I lost him."

"I do not think that you need be afraid," said Jess; "and now, dear, I really must go to bed, I am so tired. Good-night, my dear; God bless you! I think that you have made a very wise choice. Captain Niel is a man whom any woman might love, and be proud of loving."

In another minute she was in her room, and there her composure left her, for she was but a loving woman after all. She flung herself upon her bed, and, hiding her face in the pillow, burst into a paroxysm of weeping--a very different thing from Bessie's gentle tears. Her grief absolutely convulsed her, and she pushed the bedclothes against her mouth to prevent the sound of it penetrating the partition wall and reaching John Niel's ears, for his room was next to hers. Even in the midst of her suffering the thought of the irony of the thing forced itself into her mind. There, separated from her only by a few inches of lath and plaster and some four or five feet of space, was the man for whom she mourned thus, and yet he was as ignorant of it as though he

were thousands of miles away. Sometimes at such acute crises in our lives the limitations of our physical nature do strike us after this fashion. It is strange to be so near and yet so far, and it brings the absolute and utter loneliness of every created being home to the mind in a manner that is forcible and at times almost terrible. John Niel sinking composedly to sleep, his mind happy with the recollection of those two right and left shots, and Jess, lying on her bed, six feet away, and sobbing out her stormy heart over him, are indeed but types of what is continually happening in this remarkable world. How often do we understand one another's grief? And, when we do, by what standard can we measure it? More especially is comprehension rare, if we chance to be the original cause of the trouble. Do we think of the feelings of the beetles it is our painful duty to crush into nothingness? Not at all. If we have any compunctions, they are quickly absorbed in the pride of our capture. And more often still, as in the present case, we set our foot upon the poor victim by pure accident or venial carelessness.

Presently John was fast asleep, and Jess, her paroxysm past, was walking up and down, down and up, her little room, her bare feet falling noiselessly on the carpeting as she strove to wear out the first bitterness of her woe. Oh that it lay in her power to recall the past few days! Oh that she had never seen his face, which must now be ever before her eyes! But for her there was no such possibility, and she felt it. She knew her own nature well. Her heart had spoken, and the word it said must roll on continually through the spaces of her mind. Who can recall the spoken word, and who can set a limit on its echoes? It is not

so with most women, but here and there may be found a nature where it is so. Spirits like this poor girl's are too deep, and partake too much of a divine immutability, to shift and suit themselves to the changing circumstances of a fickle world. They have no middle course; they cannot halt half-way; they set all their fortune on a throw. And when the throw is lost their hearts are broken, and their happiness passes away like a swallow.

For in such a nature love rises like the wind on the quiet breast of some far sea. None can say whence it comes or whither it blows; but there it is, lashing the waters to a storm, so that they roll in thunder all the long day through, throwing their white arms on high, as they clasp at the evasive air, till the darkness that is death comes down and covers them.

What is the interpretation of it? Why does the great wind stir the deep waters? It does but ripple the shallow pool as it passes, for shallowness can but ripple and throw up shadows. We cannot tell, but this we know--that deep things only can be deeply moved. It is the penalty of depth and greatness; it is the price they pay for the divine privilege of suffering and sympathy. The shallow pools, the looking-glasses of our little life, know nought, feel nought. Poor things! they can but ripple and reflect. But the deep sea, in its torture, may perchance catch some echo of God's voice sounding down the driven gale; and, as it lifts itself and tosses its waves in agony, may perceive a glow, flowing from a celestial sky that is set beyond the

horizon that bounds its being.

Suffering, or rather mental suffering, is a prerogative of greatness, and even here there lies an exquisite joy at its core. For everything has its compensations. Nerves such as these can thrill with a high happiness, that will sweep unfelt over the mass of men. Thus he who is stricken with grief at the sight of the world's misery--as all great and good men must be--is at times lifted up with joy by catching some faint gleam of the almighty purpose that underlies it. So it was with the Son of Man in His darkest hours; the Spirit that enabled Him to compass out the measure of the world's suffering and sin enabled Him also, knowing their purposes, to gaze beyond them; and thus it is, too, with those deep-hearted children of His race, who partake, however dimly, of His divinity.

Thus, even in this hour of her darkest bitterness and grief, a gleam of comfort struggled to Jess's breast just as the first ray of dawn was struggling through the stormy night. She would sacrifice herself to her sister--that she had determined on; and hence came that cold gleam of happiness, for there is happiness in self-sacrifice, whatever the cynical may say. At first her woman's nature had risen in rebellion against the thought. Why should she throw her life away? She had as good a right to this man as Bessie, and she knew that by the strength of her own hand she could hold him against Bessie in all her beauty, however far things had gone between them; and she believed, as a jealous woman is prone to do, that they had gone much farther than was the case.

But by-and-by, as she pursued that weary march, her better self rose up, and mastered the promptings of her heart. Bessie loved him, and Bessie was weaker than she, and less suited to bear pain, and she had sworn to her dying mother--for Bessie had been her mother's darling--to promote her happiness, and, come what would, to comfort and protect her by every means in her power. It was a wide oath, and she was only a child when she took it, but it bound her conscience none the less, and surely it covered this. Besides, she dearly loved her--far, far more than she loved herself. No, Bessie should have her lover, and she should never know what it had cost her to give him up; and as for herself, well, she must go away like a wounded buck, and hide till she got well--or died.

She laughed a drear little laugh, and stayed to brush her hair just as the broad lights of the dawn came streaming across the misty veldt. But she did not look at her face again in the glass; she cared no more about it now. Then she threw herself down to sleep the sleep of utter exhaustion before it was time to go out again and face the world and her new sorrow.

Poor Jess! Love's young dream had not overshadowed her for long. It had tarried just three hours. But it had left other dreams behind.

"Uncle," said Jess that morning to old Silas Croft as he stood by the

kraal-gate, where he had been counting out the sheep--an operation requiring much quickness of eye, and on the accurate performance of which he greatly prided himself.

"Yes, yes, my dear, I know what you are going to say. It was very neatly done; it isn't everybody who can count out six hundred running hungry sheep without a mistake. But then, I oughtn't to say too much, for you see I have been at it for fifty years, in the old colony and here. Now, many a man would get fifty sheep wrong. There's Niel for instance----"

"Uncle," said she, wincing a little at the name, as a horse with a sore back winces at the touch of the saddle, "it wasn't about the sheep that I was going to speak to you. I want you to do me a favour."

"A favour? Why, God bless the girl, how pale you look!--not but what you are always pale. Well, what is it now?"

"I want to go up to Pretoria by the post-cart that leaves Wakkerstroom to-morrow afternoon, and to stop for a couple of months with my schoolfellow, Jane Neville. I have often promised to go, and I have never gone."

"Well, I never!" said the old man. "My stay-at-home Jess wanting to go away, and without Bessie too! What is the matter with you?"

"I want a change, uncle--I do indeed. I hope you won't thwart me in

this."

Silas looked at her steadily with his keen grey eyes.

"Humph!" he said; "you want to go away, and there's an end of it. Best not ask too many questions where a maid is concerned. Very well, my dear, go if you like, though I shall miss you."

"Thank you, uncle," she said, and kissed him; then turned and went.

Old Croft took off his broad hat and polished his bald head with a red pocket-handkerchief.

"There's something up with that girl," he said aloud to a lizard that had crept out of the crevices of the stone wall to bask in the sun. "I am not such a fool as I look, and I say that there is something wrong with her. She is odder than ever," and he hit viciously at the lizard with his stick, whereon it promptly bolted into its crack, returning presently to see if the irate "human" had departed.

"However," he soliloquised, as he made his way to the house, "I am glad that it was not Bessie. I couldn't bear, at my time of life, to part with Bessie, even for a couple of months."