

CHAPTER VIII

JESS GOES TO PRETORIA

That day, at dinner, Jess suddenly announced that she was going on the morrow to Pretoria to see Jane Neville.

"To see Jane Neville!" said Bessie, opening her blue eyes wide. "Why, it was only last month you said that you did not care about Jane Neville now, because she had grown so vulgar. Don't you remember when she stopped here on her way down to Natal last year, and held up her fat hands, and said, 'Ah, Jess--Jess is a genius! It is a privilege to know her'? And then she asked you to quote Shakespeare to that lump of a brother of hers, and you told her that if she did not hold her tongue she would not enjoy the privilege much longer. And now you want to go and stop with her for two months! Well, Jess, you are odd. And, what's more, I think it is very unkind of you to run away for so long."

To all of which prattle Jess said nothing, but merely reiterated her determination to go.

John, too, was astonished, and, to tell the truth, not a little disgusted. Since the previous day, when he had that talk with her in Lion Kloof, Jess had assumed a clearer and more definite interest in his eyes. Before that she was an enigma; now he had guessed enough about her to make him anxious to know more. Indeed, he had not perhaps realised

how strong and definite his interest was till he heard that she was going away for a long period. Suddenly it struck him that the farm would be very dull without this very fascinating woman moving about the place in her silent, resolute way. Bessie was, no doubt, delightful and charming to look on, but she had not her sister's brains and originality; and John Niel was sufficiently above the ordinary run to thoroughly appreciate intellect and originality in a woman, instead of standing aghast at it. She interested him intensely, to say the least of it, and, man-like, he felt exceedingly annoyed, and even sulky, at the idea of her departure. He looked at her in protest, and, with an awkwardness begotten of his irritation, knocked down the vinegar cruet and made a mess upon the table; but she evaded his eyes and took no notice of the vinegar. Then, feeling that he had done all that in him lay, he went to see about the ostriches; first of all hanging about a little in case Jess should come out, which she did not do. Indeed, he saw nothing more of her till supper time. Bessie told him that she said she was busy packing; but, as one can only take twenty pounds weight of luggage in a post-cart, this did not quite convince him that it was so in fact.

At supper Jess was, if possible, even more quiet than she had been at dinner. After it was over, he asked her to sing, but she declined, saying that she had given up singing for the present, and persisting in her statement in spite of the chorus of remonstrance it aroused. The birds only sing whilst they are mating; and it is, by the way, a curious thing, and suggestive of the theory that the same great principles

pervade all nature, that now when her trouble had overtaken her, and that she had lost the love which had suddenly sprung from her heart--full-grown and clad in power as Athena sprang from the head of Jove--Jess had no further inclination to use her divine gift of song. Probably it was nothing more than a coincidence, although a strange one.

The arrangement was, that on the morrow Jess was to be driven in the Cape cart to Martinus-Wesselstroom, more commonly called Wakkerstroom, there to catch the post-cart, which was timed to leave the town at mid-day, though when it would leave was quite another matter. Post-carts are not particular to a day or so in the Transvaal.

Old Silas Croft was to drive her with Bessie, who wished to do some shopping in Wakkerstroom, as ladies sometimes will; but at the last moment the old man felt a premonitory twinge of the rheumatism to which he was a martyr, and could not go. So, of course, John volunteered, and, though Jess raised some difficulties, Bessie furthered the idea, and in the end his offer was accepted.

Accordingly, at half-past eight on a beautiful morning up came the tented cart, with its two massive wheels, stout stinkwood disselboom, and four spirited young horses; to the heads of which the Hottentot Jantje, assisted by the Zulu Mouti, clad in the sweet simplicity of a moocha, a few feathers in his wool, and a horn snuffbox stuck through the fleshy part of the ear, hung on grimly. In they got--John first, then Bessie next to him, then Jess. Next Jantje scrambled up behind; and

after some preliminary backing and plunging, and showing a disposition to twine themselves affectionately round the orange-trees, off went the horses at a hand gallop, and away swung the cart after them, in a fashion that would have frightened anybody, not accustomed to that mode of progression, pretty well out of his wits. As it was, John had as much as he could do to keep the four horses together, and to prevent them from bolting, and this alone, to say nothing of the rattling and jolting of the vehicle over the uneven track, was sufficient to put a stop to any attempt at conversation.

Wakkerstroom is about eighteen miles from Mooifontein, a distance that they covered well within the two hours. Here the horses were outspanned at the hotel, and John went into the house whence the post-cart was to start and booked Jess's seat, and then joined the ladies at the Kantoor or store where they were shopping. When their purchases were made, they went back to the inn together and ate some dinner; by which time the Hottentot driver of the cart began to tune up lustily, but unmelodiously, on a bugle to inform intending passengers that it was time to start. Bessie was out of the room at the moment, and, with the exception of a peculiarly dirty-looking coolie waiter, there was nobody about.

"How long are you going to be away, Miss Jess?" asked John.

"Two months, more or less, Captain Niel."

"I am very sorry that you are going," he said earnestly. "It will be dull at the farm without you."

"You will have Bessie to talk to," she answered, turning her face to the window, and affecting to watch the inspanning of the post-cart in the yard on to which it looked.

"Captain Niell!" she said suddenly.

"Yes?"

"Mind you look after Bessie while I am away. Listen! I am going to tell you something. You know Frank Muller?"

"Yes, I know him, and a very disagreeable fellow he is."

"Well, he threatened Bessie the other day, and he is a man who is quite capable of carrying out a threat. I can't tell you anything more about it, but I want you to promise me to protect Bessie if any occasion for it should arise. I do not know that it will, but it might. Will you promise?"

"Of course I will; I would do a great deal more than that if you asked me to, Jess," he answered tenderly, for now that she was going away he felt curiously drawn towards her, and was anxious to show it.

"Never mind me," she said, with an impatient little movement. "Bessie is sweet enough and lovely enough to be looked after for her own sake, I should think."

Before he could say any more, in came Bessie herself, saying that the driver was waiting, and they went out to see her sister off.

"Don't forget your promise," Jess whispered to him, bending down as he helped her into the cart, so low that her lips almost touched him, and her breath rested for a second on his cheek like the ghost of a kiss.

In another moment the sisters had embraced each other, tenderly enough; the driver had sounded once more on his awful bugle, and away went the cart at full gallop, bearing with it Jess, two other passengers, and her Majesty's mails. John and Bessie stood for a moment watching its mad career, as it fled splashing and banging down the straggling street towards the wide plains beyond; then they turned to enter the inn again and prepare for their homeward drive. At that moment, an old Boer, named Hans Coetzee, with whom John was already slightly acquainted, came up, and, extending an enormously big and thick hand, bid them "Gooden daag." Hans Coetzee was a very favourable specimen of the better sort of Boer, and really came more or less up to the ideal picture that is so often drawn of that "simple pastoral people." He was a very large, stout man, with a fine open face and a pair of kindly eyes. John, looking at him, guessed that he could not weigh less than seventeen stone, and that estimate was well within the mark.

"How are you, Captain?" he said in English, for he could talk English well, "and how do you like the Transvaal?--must not call it South African Republic now, you know, for that's treason," and his eye twinkled merrily.

"I like it very much, Meinheer," said John.

"Ah, yes, it's a beautiful veldt, especially about here--no horse sickness, no 'blue tongue,'[*] and a good strong grass for the cattle. And you must find yourself very snug at Oom Croft's there; it's the nicest place in the district, with the ostriches and all. Not that I hold with ostriches in this veldt; they are well enough in the old colony, but they won't breed here--at least, not as they should do. I tried them once and I know; oh, yes, I know."

[*] A disease that is very fatal to sheep.

"Yes, it's a very fine country, Meinheer. I have been all over the world almost, and I never saw a finer."

"You don't say so, now! Almighty, what a thing it is to have travelled! Not that I should like to travel myself. I think that the Lord meant us to stop in the place He has made for us. But it is a fine country, and" (dropping his voice) "I think it is a finer country than it used to be."

"You mean that the veldt has got 'tame', Meinheer?"

"Nay, nay. I mean that the land is English now," he answered mysteriously, "and though I dare not say so among my volk, I hope that it will keep English. When I was Republican, I was Republican, and it was good in some ways, the Republic. There was so little to pay in taxes, and we knew how to manage the black folk; but now I am English, I am English. I know the English Government means good money and safety, and if there isn't a Raad (assembly) now, well, what does it matter? Almighty, how they used to talk there!--clack, clack, clack! just like an old black koran (species of bustard) at sunset. And where did they run the waggon of the Republic to--Burghers and those damned Hollanders of his, and the rest of them? Why, into the sluit--into a sluit with peaty banks; and there it would have stopped till now, or till the flood came down and swept it away, if old Shepstone--ah! what a tongue that man has, and how fond he is of the kinderchies! (little children)--had not come and pulled it out again. But look here, Captain, the volk round here don't think like that. It's the 'verdomde Britische Gouvernement' here and the 'verdomde Britische Gouvernement' there, and bymakaars (meetings) here and bymakaars there. Silly folk, they all run one after the other like sheep. But there it is, Captain, and I tell you there will be fighting before long, and then our people will shoot those poor rooibaatjes of yours like buck, and take the land back. Poor things! I could weep when I think of it."

John smiled at this melancholy prognostication, and was about to explain

what a poor show all the Boers in the Transvaal would make in front of a few British regiments, when he was astonished by a sudden change in his friend's manner. Dropping his enormous paw on to his shoulder, Coetzee broke into a burst of somewhat forced merriment, the cause of which, though John did not guess it at the moment, was that he had just perceived Frank Muller, who was in Wakkerstroom with a waggon-load of corn to grind at the mill, standing within five yards, and apparently intensely interested in flipping at the flies with a cowrie made of the tail of a vilderbeeste, but in reality listening to Coetzee's talk with all his ears.

"Ha, ha! nef (nephew)," said old Coetzee to the astonished John, "no wonder you like Mooifontein--there are other mooi (pretty) things there beside the water. How often do you opsit (sit up at night) with Uncle Croft's pretty girl, eh? I'm not quite as blind as an ant-bear yet. I saw her blush when you spoke to her just now. I saw her. Well, well, it is a pretty game for a young man, isn't it, nef Frank?" (this was addressed to Muller). "I'll be bound the Captain here 'burns a long candle' with pretty Bessie every night, eh, Frank? I hope you ain't jealous, nef? My vrouw told me some time ago that you were sweet in that direction yourself;" and he stopped at last, out of breath, looking anxiously towards Muller for an answer, while John, who had been somewhat overwhelmed at this flood of bucolic chaff, gave a sigh of relief. As for Muller, he behaved in a curious manner. Instead of laughing, as the jolly old Boer had intended that he should, although Coetzee could not see it, his face had been growing blacker and blacker;

and now that the flow of language ceased, with a savage ejaculation which John could not catch, but which he appeared to throw at his (John's) head, he turned on his heel and went off towards the courtyard of the inn.

"Almighty!" said old Hans, wiping his face with a red cotton pocket-handkerchief; "I have put my foot into a big hole. That stink-cat Muller heard all that I was saying to you, and I tell you he will save it up and save it up, and one day he will bring it all out to the volk, and call me a traitor to the 'land' and ruin me. I know him. He knows how to balance a long stick on his little finger so that the ends keep even. Oh, yes, he can ride two horses at once, and blow hot and blow cold. He is a devil of a man, a devil of a man! And what did he mean by swearing at you like that? Is it about the missie (girl), I wonder? Almighty! who can say? Ah! that reminds me--though I'm sure I don't know why it should--the Kafirs tell me that there is a big herd of buck--vilderbeeste and blesbok--on my outlying place about an hour and a half (ten miles) from Mooifontein. Can you hold a rifle, Captain? You look like a bit of a hunter."

"Oh, yes, Meinheer!" said John, delighted at the prospect of some shooting.

"Ah, I thought so. All you English are sportsmen, though you don't know how to kill buck. Well now, you take Oom Croft's light Scotch cart and two good horses, and come over to my place--not to-morrow, for my wife's

cousin is coming to see us, and an old cat she is, but rich; she has a thousand pounds in gold in the waggon-box under her bed--nor the next day, for it is the Lord's day, and one can't shoot creatures on the Lord's day--but Monday, yes, Monday. You will be there by eight o'clock, and you shall see how to kill vilderbeeste. Almighty! now what can that jackal Frank Muller have meant? Ah! he is the devil of a man," and, shaking his head ponderously, the jolly old Boer departed, and presently John saw him riding away upon a fat little shooting-pony which cannot have weighed much more than himself, but that cantered off with him on his fifteen-mile journey as though he were a feather-weight.