

CHAPTER IX

JANTJE'S STORY

Shortly after the old Boer had gone, John went into the yard of the hotel to see to the inspanning of the Cape cart, where his attention was at once arrested by the sight of a row in active progress--at least, from the crowd of Kafirs and idlers and the angry sounds and curses which proceeded from them, he judged that it was a row. Nor was he wrong in his conclusion. In the corner of the yard, close by the stable-door, surrounded by the aforesaid crowd, stood Frank Muller; a heavy sjambock in his raised hand, as though in the act to strike. Before him, a very picture of drunken fury, his lips drawn up like a snarling dog's, so that the two lines of white teeth gleamed like polished ivory in the sunlight, his small eyes all shot with blood and his face working convulsively, was the Hottentot Jantje. Nor was this all. Across his face was a blue wheal where the whip had fallen, and in his hand a heavy white-handled knife which he always carried.

"Hullo! what is all this?" said John, shouldering his way through the crowd.

"The swartsel (black creature) has stolen my horse's forage, and given it to yours!" shouted Muller, who was evidently almost off his head with rage, making an attempt to hit Jantje with the whip as he spoke. The latter avoided the blow by jumping behind John, with the result that the

tip of the sjambock caught the Englishman on the leg.

"Be careful, sir, with that whip," said John to Muller, restraining his temper with difficulty. "Now, how do you know that the man stole your horse's forage; and what business have you to touch him? If there was anything wrong, you should have reported it to me."

"He lies, Baas, he lies!" yelled out the Hottentot in tremulous, high-pitched tones. "He lies; he has always been a liar, and worse than a liar. Yah! yah! I can tell things about him. The land is English now, and Boers can't kill the black people as they like. That man--that Boer, Muller, he shot my father and my mother--my father first, then my mother; he gave her two bullets--she did not die the first time."

"You yellow devil!--You black-skinned, black-hearted, lying son of Satan!" roared the great Boer, his very beard curling with fury.

"Is that the way you talk to your masters? Out of the light, rooibaatje"--this was to John--"and I will cut his tongue out of him. I'll show him how we deal with a yellow liar;" and without further ado he made a rush for the Hottentot.

As he came, John, whose blood was now thoroughly up, put out his open hand, and, bending forward, pushed with all his strength on Muller's advancing chest. John was a very powerfully made man, though not a large one, and the push sent Muller staggering back.

"What do you mean by that, rooibaatje?" shouted Muller, his face livid with fury. "Get out of my road or I will mark that pretty face of yours. I owe you for some goods as it is, Englishman, and I always pay my debts. Out of the path, curse you!" and he again rushed for the Hottentot.

This time John, who was now almost as angry as his assailant, did not wait for the man to reach him, but, springing forward, hooked his arm around Muller's throat and, before he could close with him, with one tremendous jerk managed not only to stop his wild career, but to reverse the motion, and then, by interposing his foot with considerable neatness, to land him--powerful as he was--on his back in a pool of drainage that had collected from the stable in a hollow of the inn-yard. Down he went with a splash, amid a shout of delight from the crowd, who always like to see an aggressor laid low, his head bumping with considerable force against the lintel of the door. For a moment he lay still, and John was afraid that the man was really hurt. Presently, however, he rose, and, without attempting any further hostile demonstration or saying a single word, tramped off towards the house, leaving his enemy to compose his ruffled nerves as best he could. Now John, like most gentlemen, hated a row with all his heart, though he had the Anglo-Saxon tendency to go through with it unflinchingly when once it began. Indeed, the incident irritated him almost beyond bearing, for he knew that the story with additions would go the round of the countryside, and what is more, that he had made a powerful and implacable enemy.

"This is all your fault, you drunken little blackguard!" he said, turning savagely on the Tottie, who, now that his excitement had left him, was snivelling and drivelling in an intoxicated fashion, and calling him his preserver and his Baas in maudlin accents.

"He hit me, Baas; he hit me, and I did not take the forage. He is a bad man, Baas Muller."

"Be off with you and get the horses inspanned; you are half-drunk," John growled, and, having seen that operation advancing to a conclusion, he went to the sitting-room of the hotel, where Bessie was waiting in happy ignorance of the disturbance. It was not till they were well on their homeward way that he told her what had passed, whereat, remembering the scene she had herself gone through with Frank Muller, and the threats that he had then made use of, she looked very grave. Her old uncle, too, was very much put out when he heard the story on their arrival home that evening.

"You have made an enemy, Niel," he said, as they sat upon the verandah after breakfast on the following morning, "and a bad one. Not but what you were right to stand up for the Hottentot. I would have done as much myself had I been there and ten years younger, but Frank Muller is not the man to forget being put upon his back before a lot of Kafirs and white folk too. Perhaps that Jantje is sober by now. I will go and call him, and we will hear what this story is about his father and his

mother."

Presently he returned followed by the ragged, dirty-faced little Hottentot, who, looking very miserable and ashamed of himself, took off his hat and squatted down on the drive, in the full glare of the African sun, to the effects of which he appeared to be totally impervious.

"Now, Jantje, listen to me," said the old man. "Yesterday you got drunk again. Well, I'm not going to talk about that now, except to say that if I hear of your being drunk once more--you leave this place."

"Yes, Baas," said the Hottentot meekly. "I was drunk, though not very; I only had half a bottle of Cape smoke."

"By getting drunk you made a quarrel with Baas Muller, so that blows passed between Baas Muller and the Baas here on your account, which was more than you are worth. Now when Baas Muller had struck you, you said that he had shot your father and your mother. Was that a lie, or what did you mean by saying it?"

"It was no lie, Baas," answered the Hottentot excitedly. "I have said it once, and I will say it again. Listen, Baas, and I will tell you the story. When I was young--so tall"--and he held his hand high enough to indicate a Tottie of about fourteen years of age--"we, that is, my father, my mother, my uncle--a very old man, older than the Baas" (pointing to Silas Croft)--"were bijwoners (authorised squatters) on

a place belonging to old Jacob Muller, Baas Frank's father, down in Lydenburg yonder. It was a bush-veldt farm, and old Jacob used to come down there with his cattle from the High veldt in the winter when there was no grass in the High veldt, and with him came the Englishwoman, his wife, and the young Baas Frank--the Baas we saw yesterday."

"How long was all this ago?" asked Mr. Croft.

Jantje counted on his fingers for some seconds, and then held up his hand and opened it four times in succession. "So," he said, "twenty years last winter. Baas Frank was young then, he had only a little down upon his chin. One year when Oom Jacob went away, after the first rains, he left six oxen that were too poor (thin) to go, with my father, and told him to look after them as though they were his children. But the oxen were bewitched. Three of them took the lung-sick and died, a lion got one, a snake got one, and one ate 'tulip' and died too. So when Oom Jacob came back the next year all the oxen were gone. He was very angry with my father, and beat him with a yoke-strap till he was all blood, and though we showed him the bones of the oxen, he said that we had stolen them and sold them.

"Now Oom Jacob had a beautiful span of black oxen that he loved like children. Sixteen of them there were, and they would come up to the yoke when he called them and put down their heads of themselves. They were tame as dogs. These oxen were thin when they came down, but in two months they grew fat and began to want to trek about as oxen do. At this

time there was a Basutu, one of Sequati's people, resting in our hut, for he had hurt his foot with a thorn. When Oom Jacob found that the Basutu was there he was very angry, for he said that all Basutus were thieves. So my father told the Basutu that the Baas said that he must go away, and he went that night. Next morning the span of black oxen were gone too. The kraal-gate was down, and they had gone. We hunted all day, but we could not find them. Then Oom Jacob went mad with rage, and the young Baas Frank told him that one of the Kafir boys had said to him that he had heard my father sell them to the Basutu for sheep which he was to pay to us in the summer. It was a lie, but Baas Frank hated my father because of something about a woman--a Zulu girl.

"Next morning when we were asleep, just at daybreak, Oom Jacob Muller and Baas Frank and two Kafirs came into the hut and pulled us out, the old man my uncle, my father, my mother, and myself, and tied us up to four mimosa-trees with buffalo-hide reims. Then the Kafirs went away, and Oom Jacob asked my father where the cattle were, and my father told him that he did not know. Then Oom Jacob took off his hat and said a prayer to the Big Man in the sky, and when he had done Baas Frank came up with a gun and stood quite close and shot my father dead, and he fell forward and hung quiet over the reim, his head touching his feet. Then he loaded the gun again and shot the old man my uncle, and he slipped down dead, and his hands stuck up in the air against the reim. Next he shot my mother, but the bullet did not kill her, and cut the reim, and she ran away, and he ran after her and killed her. When that was done he came back to shoot me; but I was young then, and did not

know that it is better to be dead than to live like a dog, and I cried and prayed for mercy while he was loading the gun.

"But the Baas only laughed, and said he would teach Hottentots how to steal cattle, and old Oom Jacob prayed out loud to the Big Man and said he was very sorry for me, but it was the dear Lord's will. And then, just as Baas Frank lifted the gun, he dropped it again, for there, coming softly, softly over the brow of the hill, in and out between the bushes, were all the sixteen oxen! They had got out in the night and strayed away into some kloof for a change of pasture, and came back when they were full and tired of being alone. Oom Jacob turned quite white and scratched his head, and then fell upon his knees and thanked the dear Lord for saving my life; and just then the Englishwoman, Baas Frank's mother, came down from the waggon to see what the firing was at, and when she saw all the people dead and me weeping, tied to the tree, and learnt what it was about, she went quite mad, for sometimes she had a kind heart when she was not drunk, and said that a curse would fall on them, and that they would all die in blood. And she took a knife and cut me loose, though Baas Frank wanted to kill me, so that I might tell no tales; and I ran away, travelling by night and hiding by day, for I was very much frightened, till I reached Natal, and there I stopped, working in Natal till this land became English, when Baas Croft hired me to drive his cart up from Maritzburg; and living by here I found Baas Frank, looking bigger but just the same except for his beard.

"There, Baas, that is the truth, and all the truth, and that is why

I hate Baas Frank, because he shot my father and mother, and why Baas Frank hates me, because he cannot forget that he did it and because I saw him do it, for, as our people say, 'one always hates a man one has wounded with a spear.'"

Having finished his narrative, the miserable-looking little man picked up his greasy old felt hat that had a leather strap fixed round the crown, in which were stuck a couple of frayed ostrich feathers, and jammed it down over his ears. Then he fell to drawing circles on the soil with his long toes. His auditors only looked at one another. Such a ghastly tale seemed to be beyond comment. They never doubted its truth; the man's way of telling it carried conviction with it; indeed, two of them at any rate had heard such stories before. Most people have who live in the wilder parts of South Africa, though they are not all to be taken for gospel.

"You say," remarked old Silas at last, "that the Englishwoman said that a curse would fall on them, and that they would die in blood? She was right. Twelve years ago Oom Jacob and his wife were murdered by a party of Mapoch's Kafirs down on the edge of that very Lydenburg veldt. There was a great noise about it at the time, I remember, but nothing came of it. Baas Frank was not there. He was away shooting buck, so he escaped, and inherited all his father's farms and cattle, and came to live here."

"So!" said the Hottentot, without showing the slightest interest or

surprise. "I knew it would be so, but I wish I had been there to see it. I saw that there was a devil in the woman, and that they would die as she said. When there is a devil in people they always speak the truth, because they can't help it. Look, Baas, I draw a circle in the sand with my foot, and I say some words so, and at last the ends touch. There, that is the circle of Oom Jacob and his wife the Englishwoman. The ends have touched and they are dead. An old witch-doctor taught me how to draw the circle of a man's life and what words to say. And now I draw another of Baas Frank. Ah! there is a stone sticking up in the way. The ends will not touch. But now I work and work and work with my foot, and say the words and say the words, and so--the stone comes up and the ends touch now. Thus it is with Baas Frank. One day the stone will come up and the ends will touch, and he too will die in blood. The devil in the Englishwoman said so, and devils cannot lie or speak half the truth only. And now, look, I rub my foot over the circles and they are gone, and there is only the path again. That means that when they have died in blood they will be quite forgotten and stamped out. Even their graves will be flat," and Jantje wrinkled up his yellow face into a smile, or rather a grin, and then added in a matter-of-fact way:

"Does the Baas wish the grey mare to have one bundle of green forage or two?"