CHAPTER XI

ON THE BRINK

For a few weeks after John Niel's adventure at the shooting-party no event of any importance occurred at Mooifontein. Day followed day in charming monotony, for, whatever "gay worldlings" may think, monotony is as full of charm as a dreamy summer afternoon. "Happy is the country that has no history," says the voice of wisdom, and the same remark maybe made with even more truth of the individual. To get up in the morning conscious of health and strength, to pursue the common round and daily task till evening comes, and finally to go to bed pleasantly tired and sleep the sleep of the just, is the true secret of happiness. Fierce excitements, excursions, and alarms do not conduce either to mental or physical well-being, and it is for this reason that we find that those whose lives have been chiefly concerned with them crave the most after the quiet round of domestic life. When they get it, often, it is true, they pant for the ardours of the fray whereof the dim and distant sounds are echoing through the spaces of their heart, in the same way that the countries without a history are sometimes anxious to write one in their own blood. But that is a principle of Nature, who will allow of no standing still among her subjects, and who has ordained that strife of one sort or another shall be the absolute condition of existence.

On the whole, John found that the life of a South African farmer came well up to his expectations. He had ample occupation; indeed, what

between ostriches, horses, cattle, sheep, and crops, he was rather over than under occupied. Nor was he much troubled by the lack of civilised society, for he was a man who read a great deal, and books could be ordered from Durban and Cape Town, while the weekly mail brought with it a sufficient supply of papers. On Sundays he always read the political articles in the "Saturday Review" aloud to Silas Croft, who, as he grew older, found that the print tried his eyes, an attention which the old man greatly appreciated. Silas was a well-informed man, and notwithstanding his long life spent in a half-civilised country, had never lost his hold of affairs or his interest in the wide and rushing life of the world in one of whose side eddies he lived apart. This task of reading the "Saturday Review" aloud had formerly been a part of Bessie's Sunday service, but her uncle was very glad to effect an exchange. Bessie's mind was not quite in tune with the profundities of that learned journal, and her attention was apt to wonder at the most pointed passages.

Thus it came about, what between the "Saturday Review" and other things, that a very warm and deep attachment sprang up twixt the old man and his younger partner. John was a taking man, especially to the aged, for whom he was never tired of performing little services. One of his favourite sayings was that old people should be "let down easy," and he acted up to it. Moreover, there was a quiet jollity and a bluff honesty about him which was undoubtedly attractive both to men and women. Above all, he was a well-informed, experienced man, and a gentleman, in a country in which both were rare. Each week Silas Croft came to rely more and more

on him, and allowed things to pass more and more into his hands.

"I'm getting old, Niel," he said to him one night; "I'm getting very old; the grasshopper is becoming a burden to me: and I'll tell you what it is, my boy," laying his hand affectionately upon John's shoulder, "I have no son of my own, and you must be a son to me, as my dear Bessie has been a daughter."

John looked up into the kindly, handsome face, crowned with its fringe of snowy hair, and at the keen eyes set deep in it beneath the overhanging brows, and thought of his old father who was long since dead; and somehow he was moved, and his own eyes filled with tears.

"Ay, Mr. Croft," he said, taking the old man's hand, "that I will to the best of my ability."

"Thank you, my boy, thank you. I don't like talking much about these things, but, as I said, I am getting old, and the Almighty may require my account any hour, and if He does I rely on you to look after these two girls. It is a wild country this, and one never knows what will happen in it from day to day, and they may want help. Sometimes I wish I were clear of the place. And now I'm going to bed. I am beginning to feel as though I had done my day's work in the world. I'm getting feeble John, this is the fact of it."

After that he always called him John.

Of Jess they heard but little. She wrote every week, it is true, and gave an accurate account of all that was going on at Pretoria and of her daily doings, but she was one of those people whose letters tell one absolutely nothing of themselves and of what is passing in their minds. They ought to have been headed "Our Pretoria Letter," as Bessie said disgustedly after reading through three sheets in Jess's curious, upright handwriting. "Once you lose sight of Jess," she went on, "she might as well be dead for all you learn about her. Not that one learns very much when she is here," she added reflectively.

"She is a peculiar woman," said John thoughtfully. At first he had missed her very much, for, strange as she undoubtedly was, she had touched a new string in him, of the existence of which he had not till then been himself aware. And what is more, it had answered strongly enough for some time; but now it was slowly vibrating itself into silence again, much as a harp does when the striker takes his fingers from the strings. Had she stayed on another week or so the effect might have been more enduring.

But although Jess had gone away Bessie had not. On the contrary, she was always about him, surrounding him with that tender care a woman, however involuntarily, cannot prevent herself from lavishing on the man she loves. Her beauty moved about the place like a beam of light about a garden, for she was indeed a lovely woman, and as pure and good as she was lovely. Nor could John long remain in ignorance of her liking for

himself. He was not a vain man--very much the reverse, indeed--but neither was he a fool. And it must be said that, though Bessie never overstepped the bounds of maidenly reserve, neither did she take particular pains to hide her preference. Indeed, it was too strong to permit her so to do. Not that she was animated by the half-divine, soul-searing breath of passion, such as animated her sister, which is a very rare thing, and, take it altogether, as undesirable and unsuitable to the ordinary conditions of this prosaic and work-a-day life as it is rare. But she was tenderly and truly in love after the usual young-womanly fashion; indeed, her passion, measured by the everyday standard, would have proved to be a deep one. However this might be, she was undoubtedly prepared to make John Niel a faithful and loving wife if he chose to ask her to marry him.

And as the weeks went on--though, of course, he knew nothing of all this--it became a very serious question to John whether he should not ask her. It is not good for a man to live alone, especially in the Transvaal, and it was not possible for him to pass day by day at the side of so much beauty and so much grace without thinking that it would be well to draw the bond of union closer. Indeed, had John been a younger man of less experience, he would have succumbed to the temptation much sooner than he did. But he was neither very young nor very inexperienced. Ten years or more ago, in his green and gushing youth, as has been said, he had burnt his fingers to the bone, and a lively recollection of this incident in his career heretofore had proved a very efficient warning. Also, he had reached that period of life when

men think a great many times before they commit themselves wildly to the deep matrimonial waters. At three-and-twenty, for the sake of a pretty face, most of us are willing to undertake the serious and in many cases overwhelming burdens, risks, and cares of family life, and the responsibility of the parentage of a large and healthy brood, but at three-and-thirty we take a different view of the matter. The temptation may be great, but the per contra list is so very alarming, and we never know even then if we see all the liabilities. Such are the black thoughts that move in the breasts of selfish men, to the great disadvantage of the marriage market; and however it may lower John Niel in the eyes of those who take the trouble to follow this portion of his life's history, in the interests of truth it must be confessed that he was not free from them.

In short, sweet and pretty as Bessie might be, he was not violently in love with her; and at thirty-four a man must be violently in love to rush into the near risk of matrimony. But, however commendably cautious that man may be, he is always liable to fall into temptation sufficiently strong to sweep away his caution and make a mockery of his plans. However strong the rope, it has its breaking strain; and in the same way our power of resistance to any given course depends entirely upon the power of the temptation to draw us into it. Thus it was destined to be with our friend John Niel.

It was about a week after his conversation with old Silas Croft that it occurred to John that Bessie's manner had grown rather strange of late.

It seemed to him that she had avoided his society instead of showing a certain partiality for it, if not of courting it. Also, she had looked pale and worried, and evinced a tendency to irritation that was quite foreign to her natural sweetness of character. Now, when a person on whom one is accustomed to depend for most of that social intercourse and those pleasant little amenities which members of one sex value from another, suddenly cuts off the supply without any apparent rhyme or reason, it is enough to induce a feeling of wonder, not to say of vexation, in the breast. It never occurred to John that the reason might be that Bessie was truly fond of him, and perhaps unconsciously disappointed that he did not show a warmer interest in her. If, however, we were to examine into the facts of the case we should probably discover that here was the real explanation of this change. Bessie was a straightforward young person, whose mind and purposes were as clear as running water. She was vexed with John--though she would probably not have owned it even to herself in so many words--and her manner reflected the condition of her mind.

"Bessie," said John one lovely day, just as the afternoon was merging into evening, "Bessie"--he always called her Bessie now--"I am going down to the black wattle plantation by the big mealie patch. I want to see how those young trees are doing. If you have done your cooking"--for she had been engaged in making a cake, as young ladies, to their souls' health, often have to do in the Colonies--"I wish you would put on your hat and come with me. I don't believe that you have been out to-day."

"Thank you, Captain Niel, I don't think that I want to come out."

"Why not?" he said.

"Oh, I don't know--because there is too much to do. If I go out that stupid girl will burn the cake," and she pointed to a Kafir intombi (young girl), who, arrayed in a blue smock, a sweet smile, and a feather stuck in her wool, was vigorously employed in staring at the flies on the ceiling and sucking her black fingers. "Really," she added with a little stamp, "one needs the patience of an angel to put up with that idiot's stupidity. Yesterday she smashed the biggest dinner-dish and then brought me the pieces with a broad grin on her face and asked me to 'make them one' again. The white people were so clever, she said, it would be no trouble to me. If they could make the china plate once, and could cause flowers to grow on it, it would surely be easy to make it whole again. I did not know whether to laugh or cry or throw the pieces at her."

"Look here, young woman," said John, taking the sinning girl by the arm and leading her solemnly to the oven, which was opened to receive the cake; "look here, if you let that cake burn while the inkosikaas (lady chieftain) is away, when I come back I will cram you into the oven to burn with it. I cooked a girl like that in Natal last year, and when she came out she was quite white!"

Bessie translated this fiendish threat, whereat the girl grinned from

ear to ear and murmured "Koos" (chief) in cheerful acquiescence. A Kafir maid on a pleasant afternoon is not troubled by the prospect of being baked at nightfall, which is a long way off, especially when it is John Niel who threatened the baking. The natives about Mooifontein had taken the measure of John's foot by this time with accuracy. His threats were awful, but his performances were not great. Once, indeed, he was forced to engage in a stand-up fight with a great fellow who thought that he could be taken advantage of on this account, but after he had succeeded in administering a sound hiding to that champion he was never again troubled in this respect.

"Now," he said, "I think we have provided for the safety of your cake, so come on."

"Thank you, Captain Niel," answered Bessie, looking at him in a bewitching little way she well knew how to assume, "thank you, but I think I had rather not go out walking." This was what she said, but her eyes added, "I am offended with you; I want to have nothing to do with you."

"Very well," said John; "then I suppose I must go alone," and he took up his hat with the air of a martyr.

Bessie looked through the open kitchen door at the lights and shadows that chased each other across the swelling bosom of the hill behind the house.

"It certainly is very fine," she said; "are you going far?"

"No, only round the plantation."

"There are so many puff-adders down there, and I hate snakes," suggested Bessie, by way of finding another excuse for not coming.

"Oh, I'll look after the puff-adders--come along."

"Well," she said at last, as she slowly unrolled her sleeves, which had been tucked up during the cake-making, and hid her beautiful white arms, "I will come, not because I want to come, but because you have over-persuaded me. I don't know what is happening to me," she added, with a little stamp and a sudden filling of her eyes with tears, "I do not seem to have any will of my own left. When I want to do one thing and you want me to do another it is I who have to do what you want; and I tell you I don't like it, Captain Niel, and I shall be very cross out walking;" and sweeping past him, on her way to fetch her hat, in that peculiarly graceful fashion which angry women can sometimes assume, she left John to reflect that he never saw a more charming or taking lady in Europe or out of it.

He had half a mind to risk it and ask her to marry him. But then, perhaps, she might refuse him, and that was a contingency which he did not quite appreciate. After their first youth few men altogether relish

the idea of putting themselves in a position that gives a capricious woman an opportunity of first figuratively "jumping" on them, and then perhaps holding them up to the scorn and obloquy of her friends, relations, and other admirers. For, unfortunately, until the opposite is clearly demonstrated, many men are apt to believe that not a few women are by nature capricious, shallow, and unreliable; and John Niel, owing, possibly, to that unhappy little experience of his youth, must be reckoned among their misguided ranks.