

CHAPTER XII

OVER IT

On leaving the house Bessie and John took their way down the long avenue of blue gums. This avenue was old Silas Croft's particular pride, since although it had only been planted for about twenty years, the trees, which in the divine climate and virgin soil of the Transvaal grow at the most extraordinary rate, were for the most part very lofty, and as thick in the stem as English oaks of a hundred and fifty years' standing. The avenue was not over wide, and the trees were planted quite close one to another, with the result that their brown, pillar-like stems shot up for many feet without a branch, whilst high overhead the boughs crossed and intermingled in such a way as to form a leafy tunnel, through which the landscape beyond appeared as though through a telescope.

Down this charming avenue John and Bessie walked, and on reaching its limit they turned to the right and followed a little footpath winding in and out of the rocks that built up the plateau on the hillside whereon the house stood. Presently this led them through the orchard; then came a bare strip of veldt, a very dangerous spot in a thunderstorm, but a great safeguard to the stead and trees round it, for the ironstone cropped up here, and from the house one might often see flash after flash striking down on to it, and even running and zigzagging about its surface. To the left of this ironstone were some cultivated lands, and in front of them the plantation, in which John was anxious to inspect

the recently planted wattles.

They walked up to the copse without saying a word. It was surrounded by a ditch and a low sod wall, whereon Bessie seated herself, remarking that she would wait there till he had looked at the trees, as she was afraid of the puff-adders, whereof a large and thriving family were known to live in this plantation.

John assented, observing that the puff-adders were brutes, and that he must have some pigs turned in to destroy them, which the pigs effect by munching them up, apparently without unpleasant consequences to themselves. Then he departed on his errand, wending his way gingerly through the feathery black wattles. It did not take long, and he saw no puff-adders. When he had finished looking at the young trees, he returned, still walking delicately like Agag. On reaching the border of the plantation, he paused to look at Bessie, who was some twenty paces from him, perched sideways on the low sod wall, and framed, as it were, in the full rich light of the setting sun. Her hat was off, for the sun had lost its burning force, and the hand that held it hung idly by her, while her eyes were fixed on the horizon flaming with all the varied glories of an African sunset. He gazed at her sweet face and lissom form, and some lines that he had read years before floated into his mind--

The little curls about her head

Were all her crown of gold,

Her delicate arms drooped downwards
In slender mould,
As white-veined leaves of lilies
Curve and fold.
She moved to measures of music,
As a swan sails the stream--

He had got thus far when she turned and saw him, and he abandoned poetry in the presence of one who might well have inspired it.

"What are you looking at?" she said with a smile; "the sunset?"

"No; I was looking at you."

"Then you might have been better employed with the sky," she answered, turning her head quickly. "Look at it! Did you ever see such a sunset? We sometimes get them like that at this time of year when the thunderstorms are about."

She was right; it was glorious. The heavy clouds which a couple of hours before had been rolling like celestial hearses across the azure deeps were now aflame with glory. Some of them glowed like huge castles wrapped in fire, others with the dull red heat of burning coal. The eastern heaven was one sheet of burnished gold that slowly grew to red, and higher yet to orange and the faintest rose. To the left departing sunbeams rested lovingly on grey Quathlamba's crests, even firing the

eternal snows that lay upon his highest peak, and writing once more upon their whiteness the record of another day fulfilled. Lower down the sky floated little clouds, flame-flakes fallen from the burning mass above, and on the earth beneath lay great depths of shadow barred with the brightness of the dying light.

John stood and gazed at it, and its living, glowing beauty seemed to fire his imagination, as it fired earth and heaven, in such sort that the torch of love lit upon his heart like the sunbeams on the mountain tops. Then from the celestial beauty of the skies he turned to look at the earthly beauty of the woman who sat there before him, and found that also fair. Whether it was the contemplation of the glories of Nature--for there is always a suspicion of melancholy in beautiful things--or whatever it was, her face had a touch of sadness on it that he had never seen before, and which certainly added to its charm as a shadow adds to the charm of the light.

"What are you thinking of, Bessie?" he asked.

She looked up, and he saw that her lips were quivering a little. "Well, do you know," she said, "oddly enough, I was thinking of my mother. I can only just recall her, a woman with a thin, sweet face. I remember one evening she was sitting in front of a house while the sun was setting as it is now, and I was playing by her, when suddenly she called me to her and kissed me, then pointed to the red clouds that were gathered in the sky, and said, 'I wonder if you will ever think of

me, dear, when I have passed through those golden gates?' I did not understand what she meant, but somehow I have remembered the words, and though she died so long ago, I do often think of her;" and two large tears rolled down her face as she spoke.

Few men can bear to see a sweet and pretty woman in tears, and this little incident was too much for John, whose caution and doubts all went to the winds together.

"Bessie," he said, "don't cry, dear; please, don't! I can't bear to see you cry."

She looked up as though to remonstrate at his words, then she looked down again.

"Listen, Bessie," he went on awkwardly enough, "I have something to say to you. I want to ask you if--if, in short, you will marry me. Wait a bit, don't say anything yet; you know me pretty well by now. I am no chicken, dear, and I have knocked about the world a good deal, and had one or two love affairs like other people. But, Bessie, I never met such a sweet woman, or, if you will let me say it, such a lovely woman as you are, and if you will have me, dear, I think that I shall be the luckiest man in South Africa;" and he stopped, not knowing exactly what else to say, and feeling that the time had not come for action, if indeed it was to come at all.

When first she understood the drift of his talk Bessie had flushed up to the eyes, then the blood sank back to her breast, and left her as pale as a lily. She loved the man, and they were happy words to her, and she was satisfied with them, though perhaps some women might have thought that they left a good deal to be desired. But Bessie was not of an exacting nature.

At last she spoke.

"Are you sure," she asked, "that you mean all this? You know sometimes people say things of a sudden, upon an impulse, and afterwards they wish they never had been said. Then it would be rather awkward supposing I were to say 'yes,' would it not?"

"Of course I am sure," he said indignantly.

"You see," went on Bessie, poking at the sod wall with the stick she held in her hand, "perhaps in this place you might be putting an exaggerated value on me. You think I am pretty because you see nobody but Kafir and Boer women, and it would be the same with everything. I'm not fit to marry such a man as you," she went on, with a sudden burst of distress; "I have never seen anything or anybody. I am nothing but an ignorant, half-educated farmer girl, with nothing to recommend me, and no fortune except my looks. You are different to me; you are a man of the world, and if ever you went back to England I should be a drag on you, and you would be ashamed of me and my colonial ways. If it had been

Jess now, it would have been different, for she has more brains in her little finger than I have in my whole body."

Somehow this mention of Jess jarred upon John's nerves, and chilled him like a breath of cold wind on a hot day. He wanted to put Jess out of his mind just now.

"My dear Bessie," he broke in, "why do you suppose such things? I can assure you that, if you appeared in a London drawing-room, you would put most of the women into the shade. Not that there is much chance of my frequenting London drawing-rooms again," he added.

"Oh, yes! I may be good-looking; I don't say that I am not; but can't you understand, I do not want you to marry me just because I am a pretty woman, as the Kafirs marry their wives? If you marry me at all I want you to marry me because you care for me, the real me, not my eyes and my hair. Oh, I don't know what to answer you! I don't indeed!" and she began to cry softly.

"Bessie, dear Bessie!" said John, who was pretty well beside himself by this time, "just tell me honestly--do you care about me? I am not worth much, I know, but if you do all this goes for nothing," and he took her hand and drew her towards him, so that she half slipped, half rose from the sod wall and stood face to face with him, for she was a tall woman, and they were very nearly of a height.

Twice she raised her beautiful eyes to his to answer and twice her courage failed her; then at last the truth broke from her almost with a cry:

"Oh, John, I love you with all my heart!"

And now it will be well to drop a veil over the rest of these proceedings, for there are some things that should be sacred, even from the pen of the historian, and the first transport of the love of a good woman is one of them.

Suffice it to say that they sat there side by side on the sod wall, and were happy as people ought to be under such circumstances, till the glory departed from the western sky and the world grew cold and pale, till the night came down and hid the mountains, and only the stars and they were left to look out across the dusky distances of the wilderness of plain.

Meanwhile a very different scene was being enacted up at the house half a mile away.

Not more than ten minutes after John and his lady-love had departed on that fateful walk to look at the young trees, Frank Muller's stalwart form, mounted on his great black horse, was to be seen leisurely

advancing towards the blue-gum avenue. Jantje was lurking about between the stems of the trees in the peculiar fashion that is characteristic of the Hottentot, and which doubtless is bred into him after tens of centuries of tracking animals and hiding from enemies. There he was, slipping from trunk to trunk, and gazing round him as though he expected each instant to discover the assegai of an ambushed foe or to hear the footfall of some savage beast of prey. Absolutely there was no reason why he should behave in this fashion; he was simply indulging his natural instincts where he thought nobody would observe him. Life at Mooifontein was altogether too tame and civilised for Jantje's taste, and he needed periodical recreations of this sort. Like a civilised child he longed for wild beasts and enemies, and if there were none at hand he found a reflected satisfaction in making a pretence of their presence.

Presently, however, whilst they were yet a long way off, his quick ear caught the sound of the horse's footfalls, and he straightened himself and listened. Not satisfied with the results, he laid himself down, put his ear to the earth, and gave a guttural sound of satisfaction.

"Baas Frank's black horse," Jantje muttered to himself. "The black horse has a cracked heel, and one foot hits the ground more softly than the others. What is Baas Frank coming here for? After Missie I think. He would be mad if he knew that Missie went down to the plantation with Baas Niel just now. People go into plantations to kiss each other" (Jantje was not far out there), "and it would make Baas Frank mad if he

knew that. He would strike me if I told him, or I would tell him."

The horse's hoofs were drawing near by now, so Jantje slipped as easily and naturally as a snake into a thick tuft of rank grass which grew between the blue gums, and waited. Nobody would have guessed that this tuft of grass hid a human being; not even a Boer would have guessed it, unless he had happened to walk right on to the spy, and then it would have been a chance but that the Hottentot managed to avoid being trodden on and escaped detection. Again there was no reason why he should hide himself in this fashion, except that it pleased him to do so.

Presently the big horse approached, and the snakelike Hottentot raised his head ever so little and peered out with his beady black eyes through the straw-like grass stems. They fell on Muller's cold face. It was evident that he was in a reflective mood--in an angrily reflective mood. So absorbed was he that he nearly let his horse, which was also absorbed by the near prospect of a comfortable stall, put his foot in a big hole that a wandering antbear had amused himself on the previous night by digging exactly in the centre of the road.

"What is Baas Frank thinking of, I wonder?" said Jantje to himself as horse and man passed within four feet of him. Then rising, he crossed the road, and slipping round by a back way like a fox from a covert, was standing at the stable-door with a vacant and utterly unobservant expression of face some seconds before the black horse and its rider had reached the house.

"I will give them one more chance, just one more," thought the handsome Boer, or rather half-breed--for it will be remembered that his mother was English--"and if they won't take it, then let their fate be upon their own heads. To-morrow I go to the bymakaar at Paarde Kraal to take counsel with Paul Kruger and Pretorius, and the other 'fathers of the land,' as they call themselves. If I throw in my weight against rebellion there will be no rebellion; if I urge it there will be, and if Oom Silas will not give me Bessie, and Bessie will not marry me, I will urge it even if it plunge the whole country in war from the Cape to Waterberg. Patriotism! Independence! Taxes!--that is what they will cry till they begin to believe it themselves. Bah! those are not the things that I would go to war for; but ambition and revenge, ah! that is another matter. I would kill them all if they stood in my way, all except Bessie. If war breaks out, who will hold up a hand to help the 'verdomde Englesmann'? They would all be afraid. And it is not my fault. Can I help if I love that woman? Can I help it if my blood dries up with longing for her, and if I lie awake hour by hour of nights, ay, and weep--I, Frank Muller, who saw the murdered bodies of my father and my mother and shed no tear--because she hates me and will not look favourably upon me?

"Oh, woman! woman! They talk of ambition and of avarice and of self-preservation as the keys of character and action, but what force is there to move us like a woman? A little thing, a weak fragile thing--a toy from which the rain will wash the paint and of which the rust will

stop the working, and yet a thing that can shake the world and pour out blood like water, and bring down sorrow like the rain. So! I stand by the boulder. A touch and it will go crashing down the mountain-side so that the world hears it. Shall I send it? It is all one to me. Let Bessie and Oom Silas judge. I would slaughter every Englishman in the Transvaal to gain Bessie--ay! and every Boer too, and throw all the natives in;" and he laughed aloud, and struck the great black horse, making it plunge and caper gallantly.

"And then," he went on, giving his ambition wing, "when I have won Bessie, and we have kicked all these Englishmen out of the land, in a very few years I shall rule this country, and what next? Why, then I will stir up the Dutch feeling in Natal and in the old Colony, and we will push the Englishmen back into the sea, make a clean sweep of the natives, only keeping enough for servants, and have a united South Africa, like that poor silly man Burgers used to prate of, but did not know how to bring about. A united Dutch South Africa, and Frank Muller to rule it! Well, such things have been, and may be again. Give me forty years of life and strength, and we shall see----"

Just then he reached the verandah of the house, and, dismissing his secret ambitions from his mind, Frank Muller dismounted and entered. In the sitting-room he found Silas Croft reading a newspaper.

"Good-day, Oom Silas," he said, extending his hand.

"Good-day, Meinheer Frank Muller," replied the old man very coldly, for John had told him of the incident at the shooting-party which so nearly ended fatally, and though he made no remark he had formed his own conclusions.

"What are you reading about in the Volkstem, Oom Silas--about the Bezuidenhout affair?"

"No; what was that?"

"It was that the volk are rising against you English, that is all. The sheriff seized Bezuidenhout's waggon in execution of taxes, and put it up to sale at Potchefstroom. But the volk kicked the auctioneer off the waggon and hunted him round the town; and now Governor Lanyon is sending Raaf down with power to swear in special constables and enforce the law at Potchefstroom. He might as well try to stop a river by throwing stones. Let me see, the big meeting at Paarde Kraal was to have been on the fifteenth of December, now it is to be on the eighth, and then we shall know if it will be peace or war."

"Peace or war?" answered the old man testily. "That has been the cry for years. How many big meetings have there been since Shepstone annexed the country? Six, I think. And what has come of it all? Just nothing but talk. And what can come of it? Suppose the Boers did fight, what would the end of it be? They would be beaten, and a lot of people would be killed, and that would be the end of it. You don't suppose that England

would give in to a handful of Boers, do you? What did General Wolseley say the other day at the dinner in Potchefstroom? Why, that the country would never be given up, because no Government, Conservative, Liberal, or Radical, would dare to do it. And now this new Gladstone Government has telegraphed the same thing, so what is the use of all the talk and childishness? Tell me that, Frank Muller."

Muller laughed as he answered, "You are all very simple people, you English. Don't you know that a government is like a woman who cries 'No, no, no,' and kisses you all the time? If there is noise enough your British Government will eat its words and give Wolseley, and Shepstone, and Bartle Frere, and Lanyon, and all of them the lie. This is a bigger business than you think for, Oom Silas. Of course all these meetings and talk are got up. The people are angry because of the English way of dealing with the natives, and because they have to pay taxes; and they think, now that you British have paid their debts and smashed up Sikukuni and Cetewayo, that they would like to have the land back. They were glad enough for you to take it at first; now it is another matter. But still that is not much. If they were left to themselves nothing would come of it except talk, for many of them are very glad that the land should be English. But the men who pull the strings are down in the Cape. They want to drive every Englishman out of South Africa. When Shepstone annexed the Transvaal he turned the scale against the Dutch element and broke up the plans they have been laying for years to make a big anti-English republic of the whole country. If the Transvaal remains British there is an end of their hopes, for only the Free State is left,

and it is hemmed in. That is why they are so angry, and that is why their tools are stirring up the people. They mean to make them fight now, and I think that they will succeed. If the Boers win the day, they will declare themselves; if not, you will hear nothing of them, and the Boers will bear the brunt of it. They are very cunning people the Cape 'patriots,' but they look well after themselves."

Silas Croft looked troubled, but made no answer, and Frank Muller rose and stared out of the window.