

CHAPTER XIII

FRANK MULLER SHOWS HIS HAND

Presently Muller turned round. "Do you know why I have told you all this, Oom Silas?" he asked.

"No."

"Because I want you to understand that you and all the Englishmen in this country are in a very dangerous position. The war is coming, and whether it goes for you or against you, you must suffer. You Englishmen have many enemies. You have got all the trade and own nearly half the land, and you are always standing up for the black people, whom the Boers hate. It will go hard with you if there is a war. You will be shot and your houses will be burnt, and if you lose the day those who escape will be driven out of the country. It will be the Transvaal for the Transvaalers, then, and Africa for the Afrianders."

"Well, Frank Muller, and if all this should come to pass, what of it? What are you driving at, Frank Muller? You don't show me your hand like this for nothing."

The Boer laughed. "Of course I don't, Oom Silas. Well, if you want to know, I will tell you what I mean. I mean that I alone can protect you and your place and people in the bad times which are coming. I have more

influence in the land than you know of. Perhaps even, I could stave off the war, and if it suited me to do so I would do it. At the least I could keep you from being harmed, that I know. But I have my price, Oom Silas, as we all have, and it must be money down and no credit."

"I don't understand you and your dark sayings," said the old man coldly.

"I am a straightforward man, and if you will tell me what you mean I will give you my answer; if not, I don't see the good of our going on talking."

"Very well; I will tell you what I mean. I mean Bessie. I mean that I love your niece and want to marry her--ay, I mean to marry her by fair means or foul--and that she will have nothing to say to me."

"And what have I to do with that, Frank Muller? The girl is her own mistress. I cannot dispose of her in marriage, even if I wished it, as though she were a colt or an ox. You must plead your own suit and take your own answer."

"I have pleaded my suit and I have got my answer," replied the Boer with passion. "Don't you understand, she will have nothing to say to me? She is in love with that damned rooibaatje Niel whom you have brought up here. She is in love with him, I say, and will not look at me."

"Ah," replied Silas Croft calmly, "is it so? Then she shows very good taste, for John Niel is an honest man, Frank Muller, and you are not."

Listen to me," he went on, with a sudden outburst of passion; "I tell you that you are a dishonourable man and a villain. I tell you that you murdered the Hottentot Jantje's father, mother, and uncle in cold blood when you were yet a lad. I tell you that the other day you tried to murder John Niel, pretending to mistake him for a buck! And now you, who petitioned for this country to be taken over by the Queen, and have gone round singing out your loyalty at the top of your voice, come and tell me that you are plotting to bring about an insurrection, and to plunge the land into war, and ask me for Bessie as the price of your protection! But I will tell you something in answer, Frank Muller," and the old man rose up, his keen eyes flashing in wrath, and, straightening his bent frame, he pointed towards the door. "Go out of that door and never come through it again. I rely upon God and the English nation to protect me, and not on such as you, and I would rather see my dear Bessie dead in her coffin than married to a knave and traitor and a murderer like Frank Muller. Go!"

The Boer turned white with fury as he listened. Twice he tried to speak and failed, and when the words did come they were so choked and laden with passion as to be scarcely audible. When thwarted he was liable to these accesses to rage, and, speaking figuratively, they spoilt his character. Could he have kept his head, he would have been a perfect and triumphant villain, but as it was, the carefully planned and audacious rascality of years was always apt to be swept away by the sudden gale of his furious passion. It was in such an outburst of rage that he had assaulted John in the inn yard at Wakkerstroom, and thereby put him on

his guard against him, and now it mastered him once more.

"Very well, Silas Croft," he said at last, "I will go; but mark this, I will come back, and when I come it shall be with men armed with rifles. I will burn this pretty place of yours, that you are so proud of, over your head, and I will kill you and your friend the Englishman, and take Bessie away, and very soon she shall be glad enough to marry Frank Muller; but then I will not marry her--no, not if she goes on her knees to me--and she shall go on her knees often enough. We will see then what God and the English nation will do to protect you. God and the English nation! Call on the sheep and the horses; call on the rocks and the trees, and you will get a better answer."

"Go!" thundered the old man, "or by the God you blaspheme I will put a bullet through you," and he reached towards a rifle that hung over the mantelpiece, "or my Kafirs shall whip you off the place."

Frank Muller waited no more. He turned and went. It was dark now, but there was still some light in the sky at the end of the blue-gum avenue, and against it, as he rode away, he discovered Bessie's tall and graceful form softly outlined upon the darkening night. John had left her to see about some pressing matter connected with the farm, and there she stood, filled with the great joy of a woman who has found her love, and loth as yet to break its spell by entering again into the daily round of common life.

There she stood, a type and symbol of all that is beautiful and gracious in this rough world, the lovelights shining in her blue eyes and thoughts of happy gratitude to the Giver of all good rising from her heart to Heaven, drawn up thither, as it were, by the warmth of her pure passion, as the dew mists of the morning are drawn upward by the sun. There she was, so good, so happy, and so sweet; an answer to the world's evil, a symbol of the world's joy, and an incarnation of the world's beauty! Who but a merciful and almighty Father can create children such as she, so lovely, so lovable, and set them on the world as He sets the stars upon the sky to light it and make beholders think of holy things, and who but man could have the heart to turn such as she to the base uses whereto they are daily turned?

Presently she heard the horse's hoofs, and looked up, so that the faint light fell full upon her face, idealising it, and making its passion-breathing beauty seem more of Heaven than of earth. There was some look upon it, some indefinable light that day--such is the power that Love has to infuse all human things with the tint of his own splendour--that it went even to the heart of the wild and evil man who adored her with the deep and savage force of his dark nature. Was it well to meddle with her, and to build up plans for her overthrow and that of all to whom she clung? Would it not be better to let her be, to go his way and leave her to go hers in peace? She did not look quite like a woman standing there, but more like something belonging to another world, some subject of a higher rule. Men of powerful but undisciplined intellect like Frank Muller are never entirely free

from superstition, however free they may be from religion, and he grew superstitious as he was apt to do. Might there not be an unknown penalty for treading such a flower as that into the mire--into mire mixed perchance with the blood of those she loved?

For a few seconds he hesitated. Should he throw up the whole affair, leave the rebellion to look after itself, marry one of Hans Coetzee's daughters, and trek to the old colony, or Bechuanaland, or anywhere? His hand began to tighten on his bridle-rein and the horse to answer to the pressure. As a first step towards it he would turn away to the left and avoid her, when suddenly the thought of his successful rival flashed into his mind. What, leave her with that man? Never! He had rather kill her with his own hand. In another second he had sprung from his horse, and, before she guessed who it was, he was standing face to face with her. The strength of his jealous desire overpowered him.

"Ah, I thought he had come after missie," said Jantje, who, pursuing his former tactics, was once more indulging his passion for slinking about behind trees and in tufts of grass. "Now what will missie say?"

"How are you, Bessie?" said Muller in a quiet voice, but she, looking into his face, saw that it belied the voice. It was alive with evil passions that seemed to make it positively lurid, an effect that its undoubted beauty only intensified.

"I am quite well, thank you, Mr. Muller," she answered as she began to

move homewards, commanding her voice as well as she could, but feeling dreadfully frightened and lonely. She knew something of her admirer's character, and feared to be left alone with him so far from any help, for nobody was about now, and they were more than three hundred yards from the house.

He stood before her so that she could not pass without actually pushing by him. "Why are you in such a hurry?" he said. "You were standing still enough just now."

"It is time for me to be going in. I want to see about the supper."

"The supper can wait awhile, Bessie, and I cannot wait. I am starting for Paarde Kraal to-morrow at day-break, and I want to say good-bye to you first."

"Good-bye," she said, more frightened than ever at his curious constrained manner, and she held out her hand.

He took it and retained it.

"Please let me go," she said.

"Not till you have heard what I have to say. Look here, Bessie, I love you with all my heart. I know you think I am only a Boer, but I am more than that. I have been to the Cape and seen the world. I have brains,

and can see and understand things, and if you will marry me I will lift you up. You shall be one of the first ladies in Africa, though I am only plain Frank Muller now. Great things are going to happen in the country, and I shall be at the head of them, or near it. No, don't try to get away. I tell you I love you, you don't know how. I am dying for you. Oh! can't you believe me? my darling! my darling! Yes, I will kiss you," and in an agony of passion, that her resistance only fired the more, he flung his strong arms round her and drew her to his breast, fight as she would.

But at this opportune moment an unexpected diversion occurred, of which the hidden Jantje was the cause. Seeing that matters were becoming serious, and being afraid to show himself lest Frank Muller should kill him then and there, as indeed he would have been quite capable of doing, he hit upon another expedient, to the service of which he brought a ventriloquistic power that is not uncommon among natives. Suddenly the silence was broken by a frightful and prolonged wail that seemed to shape itself into the word "Frank," and to proceed from the air just above the struggling Bessie's head. The effect produced upon Muller was something wonderful.

"Allemachter!" he cried, looking up, "it is my mother's voice!"

"Frank!" wailed the voice again, and he let go of Bessie in his perplexity and fear, and turned round to try and discover whence the sound proceeded--a circumstance of which that young lady took advantage

to beat a rapid if not very dignified retreat.

"Frank! Frank! Frank!" wailed and howled the voice, now overhead, now on this side, now on that, till at last Muller, thoroughly mystified and feeling his superstitious fears rising apace as the moaning sound flitted about beneath the dark arch of the gum-trees, made a rush for his horse, which was snorting and trembling in every limb. It is almost as easy to work upon the superstitious fears of a dog or a horse as upon those of a man, but Muller, not being aware of this, took the animal's alarm as a clear indication of the uncanny nature of the voice. With a single bound he sprang into his saddle, and as he did so the woman's voice wailed out once more--

"Frank, thou shalt die in blood as I did, Frank!"

Muller turned livid with fear, and the cold perspiration streamed from his face. He was a bold man enough physically, but this was too much for his nerves.

"It is my mother's voice, they are her very words!" he called out aloud, then, dashing his spurs into his horse's flanks, he went like a flash far from the accursed spot; nor did he draw rein till he came to his own place ten miles away. Twice the horse fell in the darkness, for there was no moon, the second time throwing him heavily, but he only dragged it up with an oath, and springing into the saddle again fled on as before.

Thus the man who did not hesitate to plot and to execute the cruel slaughter of unoffending men cowered beneath the fancied echo of a dead woman's voice! Truly human nature is full of contradictions.

When the thunder of the horse's hoofs grew faint Jantje emerged from one of his hiding-places, and, throwing himself down in the centre of the dusty road, kicked and rolled with delight, shaking all the while with an inward joy to which his habits of caution would not permit him to give audible vent. "His mother's voice, his mother's words," he quoted to himself. "How should he know that Jantje remembers the old woman's voice--ay, and the words that the devil in her spoke too? Hee! hee! hee!"

Finally he departed to eat his supper of beef, which he had cut off an unfortunate ox which that morning had expired of a mysterious complication of diseases, filled with a happy sense that he had not lived that day in vain.

Bessie fled without stopping till she reached the orange-trees in front of the verandah, where, reassured by the lights from the windows, she paused to consider. Not that she was troubled by Jantje's mysterious howling; indeed, she was too preoccupied to give it a second thought. What she debated was whether she should say anything about her encounter with Frank Muller. Young ladies are not, as a rule, too fond of informing their husbands or lovers that somebody has kissed them; first,

because they know it will force them to make a disturbance and possibly to place themselves in a ridiculous position; and, secondly, because they fear lest suspicious man might take the story with a grain of salt, and suggest even that they, the kissed, were themselves to blame. Both these reasons presented themselves to Bessie's practical mind, also a further one, namely, that he had not kissed her after all. So on a rapid review of the whole case she came to the decision to say nothing to John about it, and only enough to her uncle to make him forbid Frank Muller the house--an unnecessary precaution, as the reader will remember. Then, after pausing for a few seconds to pick a branch of orange blossom and to recover herself generally, which, not being hysterically inclined, she very soon did, she entered the house quietly as though nothing had happened. The very first person she met was John himself, who had come in by the back way. He laughed at her orange-blossom bouquet, and said that it was most appropriate, then proceeded to embrace her tenderly in the passage; and indeed he would have been a poor sort of lover if he had not. It was exactly at this juncture that old Silas Croft happened to open the sitting-room door and became the spectator of this surprising and attractive tableau.

"Well, I never!" said the old gentleman. "What is the meaning of all this, Bessie?"

Of course there was nothing for it but to advance and explain the facts of the case, which John did with much humming and ha-ing and a general awkwardness of manner that baffles description, while Bessie stood by,

her hand upon her lover's shoulder, blushing as red as any rose.

Mr. Croft listened in silence till John had finished, a smile upon his face and a kindly twinkle in his keen eyes.

"So," he said, "that is what you young people have been after, is it? I suppose that you want to enlarge your interests in the farm, eh, John? Well, upon my word, I don't blame you; you might have gone farther and fared worse. These sort of things never come singly, it seems. I had another request for your hand, my dear, only this afternoon, from that scoundrel Frank Muller, of all men in the world," and his face darkened as he said the name. "I sent him off with a flea in his ear, I can tell you. Had I known then what I know now, I should have referred him to John. There, there! He is a bad man, and a dangerous man, but let him be. He is taking plenty of rope, and he will hang himself one of these days. Well, my dears, this is the best bit of news that I have heard for many a long year. It's time you got married, both of you, for it is not right for man to live alone, or woman either. I have done it all my life, and that is the conclusion I have come to after thinking the matter over for somewhere about fifty years. Yes, you have my consent and my blessing too, and you will have something more one day before so very long. Take her, John, take her. I have led a rough life, but I have seen somewhat of women for all that, and I tell you that there is not a sweeter or a prettier girl in South Africa than Bessie Croft, and in wanting to marry her you have shown your sense. God bless you both, my dears; and now, Bessie, come and give your old uncle a kiss. I hope that

you won't let John quite drive me out of your head, that's all, for you see, my dear, having no children of my own, I have managed to grow very fond of you in the last twelve years or so."

Bessie kissed the old man tenderly.

"No, uncle," she answered, "neither John nor anybody nor anything in the world can do that," and it was evident from her manner that she meant what she said. Bessie had a large heart, and was not at all the person to let her lover drive her uncle and benefactor out of his share thereof.