

CHAPTER XIV

JOHN TO THE RESCUE

The important domestic events described in the last chapter took place on December 7, 1880, and for the next twelve days or so everything went as happily at Mooifontein as things should go under the circumstances. Every day Silas Croft beamed with an enlarged geniality in his satisfaction at the turn that matters had taken, and every day John found cause to congratulate himself more and more on the issue of his bold venture towards matrimony. Now that he came to be on such intimate terms with his betrothed, he perceived a hundred charms and graces in her nature which before he had never suspected. Bessie was like a flower: the more she basked in the light and warmth of her love the more her character opened and unfolded, shedding perfumed sweetness around her and revealing unguessed charms. It is so with all women, and more especially with a woman of her stamp, whom Nature has made to love and be loved as maid and wife and mother. Her undoubted personal beauty shared also in this development, her fair face taking a richer hue and her eyes an added depth and meaning. She was in every respect, save one, all that a man could desire in his wife, and even the exception would have stood to her credit with many men. It was this: she was not an intellectual person, although certainly she possessed more than the ordinary share of intelligence and work-a-day common sense. Now John was a decidedly intellectual man, and, what is more, he highly appreciated that rare quality in the other sex. But, after all, when one is just

engaged to a sweet and lovely woman, one does not think much about her intellect. Those reflections come afterwards.

And so they sauntered hand in hand through the sunny days and were happy exceedingly. Least of all did they allow the rumours which reached them from the great Boer gathering at Paarde Kraal to disturb their serenity. There had been so many of these reports of rebellion that folk were beginning to regard them as a chronic state of affairs.

"Oh, the Boers!" said Bessie, with a pretty toss of her golden head, as they were sitting one morning on the verandah. "I am sick to death of hearing about the Boers and all their got-up talk. I know what it is; it is just an excuse for them to go away from their farms and wives and children and idle about at these great meetings, and drink 'square-face' with their mouths full of big words. You see what Jess says in her last letter. People in Pretoria believe that it is all nonsense from beginning to end, and I think they are perfectly right."

"By the way, Bessie," asked John, "have you written to Jess telling her of our engagement?"

"Oh yes, I wrote some days ago, but the letter only went yesterday. She will be pleased to hear about it. Dear old Jess, I wonder when she means to come home again. She has been away long enough."

John made no answer, but went on smoking his pipe in silence, wondering

if Jess would be pleased. He did not understand her yet. She had gone away just as he was beginning to understand her.

Presently he observed Jantje sneaking about between the orange-trees as though he wished to call attention to himself. Had he not wanted to do so he would have moved from one to the other in such a way that nobody could have seen him. His partial and desultory appearances indicated that he was on view.

"Come out of those trees, you little rascal, and stop slipping about like a snake in a stone wall!" shouted John. "What is it you want--wages?"

Thus adjured, Jantje advanced and sat down on the path, as usual in the full glare of the sun.

"No, Baas," he said, "it is not wages. They are not due yet."

"What is it, then?"

"No, Baas, it is this. The Boers have declared war on the English Government, and they have eaten up the roibaatjes at Bronker's Spruit, near Middleburg. Joubert shot them all there the day before yesterday."

"What!" shouted John, letting his pipe fall in his astonishment. "Stop,

though, that must be a lie. You say near Middleburg, the day before yesterday: that would be December 20. When did you hear this?"

"At daybreak, Baas. A Basutu told me."

"Then there is an end of it. The news could not have reached here in thirty-eight hours. What do you mean by coming to me with such a tale?"

The Hottentot smiled. "It is quite true, Baas. Bad news flies like a bird," and he picked himself up and slipped off to his work.

Notwithstanding the apparent impossibility of the thing, John was considerably disturbed, knowing the extraordinary speed with which tidings do travel among Kafirs, more swiftly, indeed, than the fleetest mounted messenger can bear them. Leaving Bessie, who was also somewhat alarmed, he went in search of Silas Croft, and, finding him in the garden, told him what Jantje had said. The old man did not know what to make of the tale, but, remembering Frank Muller's threats, he shook his head.

"If there is any truth in it, that villain Muller has a hand in it," he said. "I'll go to the house and see Jantje. Give me your arm, John."

He obeyed, and, on arriving at the top of the steep path, they perceived the stout figure of old Hans Coetzee, who had been John's host at the shooting-party, ambling along on his fat little pony.

"Ah," said Silas, "here is the man who will tell us if there is anything in it all."

"Good-day, Oom Coetzee, good-day!" he shouted out in his stentorian tones. "What news do you bring with you?"

The jolly-looking Boer rolled awkwardly off his pony before answering, and, throwing the reins over its head, came to meet them.

"Allemachter, Oom Silas, it is bad news. You have heard of the bymakaar at Paarde Kraal. Frank Muller wanted me to go, but I would not, and now they have declared war on the British Government and sent a proclamation to Lanyon. There will be fighting, Oom Silas, the land will run with blood, and the poor rooibaatjes will be shot down like buck."

"The poor Boers, you mean," growled John, who did not like to hear her Majesty's army talked of in terms of regretful pity.

Oom Coetzee shook his head with the air of one who knew all about it, and then turned an attentive ear to Silas Croft's version of Jantje's story.

"Allemachter!" groaned Coetzee, "what did I tell you? The poor rooibaatjes shot down like buck, and the land running with blood! And

now that Frank Muller will draw me into it, and I shall have to go and shoot the poor rooibaatjes; and I can't miss, try as hard as I will, I can't miss. And when we have shot them all I suppose that Burgers will come back, and he is kransick (mad). Yes, yes; Lanyon is bad, but Burgers is worse," and the comfortable old gentleman groaned aloud at the troubles in which he foresaw he would be involved, and finally took his departure by a bridle-path over the mountain, saying that, as things had turned out, he would not like it to be known that he had been calling on an Englishman. "They might think that I was not loyal to the 'land,'" he added in explanation; "the land which we Boers bought with our blood, and which we shall win back with our blood, whatever the poor 'pack oxen' of rooibaatjes try to do. Ah, those poor, poor rooibaatjes, one Boer will drive away twenty of them and make them run across the veldt, if they can run in those great knapsacks of theirs, with the tin things hanging round them like the pots and kettles to the bed-plank of a waggon. What says the Holy Book? 'One thousand shall flee at the rebuke of one, and at the rebuke of five shall ye flee,' at least I think that is it. The dear Lord knew what was coming when He wrote it. He was thinking of the Boers and the poor rooibaatjes," and Coetzee departed, shaking his head sadly.

"I am glad that the old gentleman has made tracks," said John, "for if he had gone on much longer about the poor English soldiers he would have fled 'at the rebuke of one,' I can tell him."

"John," said Silas Croft suddenly, "you must go up to Pretoria and fetch

Jess. Mark my words, the Boers will besiege Pretoria, and if we don't get her down at once she will be shut up there."

"Oh no," cried Bessie, in sudden alarm, "I cannot let John go."

"I am sorry to hear you talk like that, Bessie, when your sister is in danger," answered her uncle rather sternly; "but there, I dare say that it is natural. I will go myself. Where is Jantje? I shall want the Cape cart and the four grey horses."

"No, uncle dear, John shall go. I was not thinking what I was saying. It seemed--a little hard at first."

"Of course I must go," said John. "Don't fret, dear, I shall be back in five days. Those four horses can go sixty miles a day for that time, and more. They are fat as butter, and there is lots of grass along the road if I can't get forage for them. Besides, the cart will be nearly empty, so I can carry a muid of mealies and fifty bundles of forage. I will take that Zulu boy, Mouti, with me. He does not know very much about horses, but he is a plucky fellow, and would stick by one at a pinch. One can't rely on Jantje; he is always sneaking off somewhere, and would be sure to get drunk just as one wanted him."

"Yes, yes, John, that's right, that's right," said the old man. "I will go and see about having the horses got up and the wheels greased. Where is the castor-oil, Bessie? There is nothing like castor-oil for these

patent axles. You ought to be off in an hour. You had better sleep at Luck's to-night; you might get farther, but Luck's is a good place to stop, and they will look after you well there, and you can be off by three in the morning, reaching Heidelberg by ten o'clock to-morrow night, and Pretoria by the next afternoon," and he bustled away to make the necessary preparations.

"Oh, John," said Bessie, beginning to cry, "I don't like your going at all among all those wild Boers. You are an English officer, and if they find you out they will shoot you. You don't know what brutes some of them are when they think it safe to be so. Oh, John, John, I can't endure your going."

"Cheer up, my dear," said John, "and for Heaven's sake stop crying, for I cannot bear it. I must go. Your uncle would never forgive me if I did not, and, what is more, I should never forgive myself. There is nobody else to send, and we can't leave Jess to be shut up there in Pretoria--for months perhaps. As for the risk, of course there is a little risk, but I must take it. I am not afraid of risks--at least I used not to be, but you have made a bit of a coward of me, Bessie dear. There, give me a kiss, old girl, and come and help me to pack my things. Please God I shall get back all right, and Jess with me, in a week from now."

Whereon Bessie, being a sensible and eminently practical young woman, dried her tears, and with a cheerful face, albeit her heart was heavy

enough, set to work with a will to make every possible preparation.

The few clothes John was to take with him were packed in a Gladstone bag, the box fitted underneath the movable seat in the Cape cart was filled with the tinned provisions which are so much used in South Africa, and all the other little arrangements, small in themselves, but of such infinite importance to the traveller in a wild country, were duly attended to by her careful hands. Then came a hurried meal, and before it was swallowed the cart was at the door, with Jantje hanging as usual on to the heads of the two front horses, and the stalwart Zulu, or rather Swazi boy, Mouti, whose sole luggage appeared to consist of a bundle of assegais and sticks wrapped up in a grass mat, and who, hot as it was, was enveloped in a vast military great-coat, lounging placidly alongside.

"Good-bye, John, dear John," said Bessie, kissing him again and again, and striving to keep back the tears that, do what she could, would gather in her blue eyes. "Good-bye, my love."

"God bless you, dearest," he said simply, kissing her in answer; "good-bye, Mr. Croft. I hope to see you again in a week," and he was in the cart and had gathered up the long and intricate-looking reins. Jantje let go the horses' heads and uttered a whoop. Mouti, giving up star-gazing, suddenly became an animated being and scrambled into the cart with surprising alacrity; the horses sprang forward at a hand gallop, and were soon hidden from Bessie's dim sight in a cloud of dust.

Poor Bessie, it was a hard trial, and now that John had gone and her tears could not distress him, she went into her room and gave way to them freely enough.

John reached Luck's, a curious establishment on the Pretoria road, such as are to be met with in sparsely populated countries, combining the characteristics of an inn, a shop, and a farm-house. It was not an inn and not a farm-house, strictly speaking, nor was it altogether a shop, although there was a "store" attached. If the traveller is anxious to obtain accommodation for man and beast at a place of this stamp he has to proceed warily, so to say, lest he should be requested to move on. He must advance, hat in hand, and ask to be taken in as a favour, as many a stiff-necked wanderer, accustomed to the obsequious attentions of "mine host," has learnt to his cost. There is no such dreadful autocrat as your half-and-half innkeeper in South Africa, and then he is so completely master of the situation. "If you don't like it, go and be d--d to you," is his simple answer to the remonstrances of the infuriated voyager. Then you must either knock under and look as though you liked it, or trek on into the "unhostelled" wilderness. But on this occasion John fared well enough. To begin with, he knew the owners of the place, who were very civil people if approached in a humble spirit, and, furthermore, he found everybody in such a state of unpleasurable excitement that they were only too glad to get another Englishman with whom to talk over matters. Not that their information amounted to much, however. There was a rumour of the Bronker's Spruit disaster and other rumours of the investment of Pretoria, and of the advance of large

bodies of Boers to take possession of the pass over the Drakensberg, known as Laing's Nek, but there was no definite intelligence.

"You won't get into Pretoria," said one melancholy man, "so it's no use trying. The Boers will just catch you and kill you, and there will be an end of it. You had better leave the girl to look after herself and go back to Mooifontein."

But this was not John's view of the matter. "Well," he answered, "at any rate I'll have a try." Indeed, he had a sort of bull-dog nature about him which led him to believe that if he made up his mind to do a thing, he would do it somehow, unless he should be physically incapacitated by circumstances beyond his own control. It is wonderful how far a mood of the kind will take a man. Indeed, it is the widespread possession of this sentiment that has made England what she is. Now it is beginning to die down and to be legislated out of our national character, and the results are already commencing to appear in the incipient decay of our power. We cannot govern Ireland. It is beyond us; let Ireland have Home Rule! We cannot cope with our Imperial responsibilities; let them be cast off: and so on. The Englishmen of fifty years ago did not talk in this "weary Titan" strain.

Well, every nation becomes emasculated sooner or later, that seems to be the universal fate; and it appears that it is our lot to be emasculated, not by the want of law but by a plethora thereof. This country was made, not by Governments, but for the most part in despite of them by the

independent efforts of generations of individuals. The tendency nowadays is to merge the individual in the Government, and to limit or even forcibly to destroy personal enterprise and responsibility. Everything is to be legislated for or legislated against. As yet the system is only in its bud. When it blooms, if it is ever allowed to bloom, the Empire will lose touch of its constituent atoms and become a vast soulless machine, which will first get out of order, then break down, and, last of all, break up. We owe more to sturdy, determined, unconvinced Englishmen like John Niel than we know, or, perhaps, should be willing to acknowledge in these enlightened days. "Long live the Caucus!" that is the cry of the nineteenth century. But what will Englishmen cry in the twentieth?[*]

[*] These words were written some ten years ago; but since then, with all gratitude be it said, a change has come over the spirit of the nation, or rather, the spirit of the nation has re-asserted itself. Though the "Little England" party still lingers, it exists upon the edge of its own grave. The dominance and responsibilities of our Empire are no longer a question of party politics, and among the Radicals of to-day we find some of the most ardent Imperialists. So may it ever be!--H. R. H. 1896.

John resumed his perilous journey more than an hour before dawn on the following morning. Nobody was stirring, and as it was practically impossible to arouse the slumbering Kafirs from the various holes and

corners where they were taking their rest--for a native hates the cold of the dawning--Mouti and he were obliged to harness the horses and inspan them without assistance--an awkward job in the dark. At last, however, everything was ready, and, as the bill had been paid overnight, there was nothing to wait for, so they clambered into the cart and made a start. But before they had proceeded forty yards, however, John heard a voice calling to him to stop. He did so, and presently, holding a lighted candle which burnt without a flicker in the still damp air, and draped from head to foot in a dingy-looking blanket, appeared the male Cassandra of the previous evening.

He advanced slowly and with dignity, as became a prophet, and at length reached the side of the cart, where the sight of his illuminated figure and of the dirty blanket over his head nearly made the horses run away.

"What is it?" said John testily, for he was in no mood for delay.

"I thought I'd just get up to tell you," replied the draped form, "that I am quite sure that I was right, and that the Boers will shoot you. I should not like you to say afterwards that I have not warned you," and he held up the candle so that the light fell on John's face, and gazed at it in fond farewell.

"Curse it all," said John in a fury, "if that was all you had to say you might have kept in bed," and he brought down his lash on the wheelers and away they went with a bound, putting out the prophet's candle and

nearly knocking the prophet himself backwards into the sluit.