

CHAPTER XVI

PRETORIA

Jess was not very happy at Pretoria previous to the unexpected outbreak of hostilities. Most people who have made a great moral effort, and after some severe mental struggle have entered on the drear path from self-sacrifice, experience the reaction that will follow as certainly as the night follows the day. It is one thing to renounce the light, to stand in the full glow of the setting beams of our imperial joy and chant out our farewell, and quite another to live alone in the darkness. For a little while memory may support us, but memory grows faint. On every side is the thick, cheerless pall and that stillness through which no sound comes. We are alone, quite alone, cut off from the fellowship of the day, unseeing and unseen. More especially is this so when the dungeon is of our own making, and we ourselves have shot its bolts. There is a natural night that comes to all, and in its unwavering course swallows every mortal hope and fear, for ever and for ever. To this we can more easily resign ourselves, for we recognise the universal lot and bow ourselves beneath the all-effacing hand. The earth does not pine when the daylight passes from its peaks; it only sleeps.

But Jess had buried herself and she knew it. There was no absolute need for her to have sacrificed her affection to her sister's: she had done so of her own will, and at times not unnaturally she was regretful. Self-denial is a stern-faced angel. If only we hold him fast and wrestle

with him long enough he will speak us soft words of happy sound, just as, if we wait long enough in the darkness of the night, stars will come to share our loneliness. Still this is one of those things that Time hides from us and only reveals at his own pleasure; and, so far as Jess was concerned, his pleasure was not yet. Outwardly, however, she showed no sign of her distress and of the passion which was eating at her heart. She was pale and silent, it is true, but then she had always been remarkable for her pallor and silence. Only she gave up her singing.

So the weeks passed very drearily for the poor girl, who was doing what other people did--eating and drinking, riding, and going to parties like the rest of the Pretoria world, till at last she began to think that she had better be returning home again, lest she should wear out her welcome. And yet she dreaded to do so, mindful of her daily prayer to be delivered from temptation. As to what was happening at Mooifontein she was in almost complete ignorance. Bessie wrote to her, of course, and so did her uncle once or twice, but they did not tell her much of what she wanted to know. Bessie's letters were, it is true, full of allusions to what Captain Niel was doing, but she did not go beyond that. Her reticence, however, told her observant sister more than her words. Why was she so reticent? No doubt because things still hung in the balance. Then Jess would think of what it all meant for her, and now and again give way to an outburst of passionate jealousy which would have been painful enough to witness if anybody had been there to see it.

Thus the time went on towards Christmas, for Jess, having been warmly

pressed to do so, had settled to stay over Christmas and return to the farm with the new year. There had been a great deal of talk in the town about the Boers, but she was too much preoccupied with her own affairs to pay much attention to it. Nor, indeed, was the public mind greatly moved; they were so much accustomed to Boer scares at Pretoria, and hitherto these had invariably ended in smoke. But all of a sudden, on the morning of the eighteenth of December, came the news of the proclamation of the Republic. The town was thrown into a ferment, and there arose a talk of going into laager, so that, anxious as she was to get away, Jess could see no hope of returning to the farm till the excitement was over. Then, a day or two later, Conductor Egerton came limping into Pretoria from the scene of the disaster at Bronker's Spruit, with the colours of the 94th Regiment tied round his middle, and such a tale to tell that the blood went to her heart and seemed to stagnate there as she listened.

After that there was confusion worse confounded. Martial law having been proclaimed, the town, which was large, straggling, and incapable of defence, was abandoned, the inhabitants being ordered into laager on the high ground overlooking the city. There they were, young and old, sick and well, delicate women and little children, all crowded together in the open under the cover of the fort, with nothing but canvas tents, waggons, and sheds to shelter them from the fierce summer suns and rains. Jess shared a waggon with her friend and her friend's sister and mother, and found it rather a tight fit even to lie down. Sleep with all the noises of the camp going on round her was almost impossible.

It was about three o'clock on the day following that first miserable night in the laager when, by the last mail that passed into Pretoria, she received Bessie's letter, announcing her engagement to John. She took her letter and went some way from the camp to the side of Signal Hill, where she was not likely to be disturbed, and, finding a nook shaded by mimosa-trees, sat down and broke the envelope. Before she had reached the foot of the first page she saw what was coming and set her teeth. Then she read the long epistle through from beginning to end without flinching, though the words of affection seemed to burn her. So it had come at last. Well, she expected it, and had plotted to bring it about, so really there was no reason in the world why she should feel disappointed. On the contrary, she ought to rejoice, and for a little while she really did rejoice in her sister's happiness. It made her glad to think that Bessie, whom she so dearly loved, was happy.

And yet she felt angry with John with that sort of anger which we feel against those who have blindly injured us. Why should it be in his power to hurt her so cruelly? Still she hoped that he would be happy with Bessie, and then she hoped that these wretched Boers would take Pretoria, and that she would be shot or otherwise put out of the way. She had no heart for life; all the colour had faded from her sky. What was she to do with her future? Marry somebody and busy herself with rearing a pack of children? It would be a physical impossibility to her. No, she would go away to Europe and mix in the great stream of life and struggle with it, and see if she could win a place for herself among the

people of her day. She had it in her, she knew that; and now that she had put herself out of the reach of passion she would be more likely to succeed, for success is to the impassive, who are also the strong. She would not stop on the farm after John and Bessie were married; she was quite determined as to that; nor, if she could avoid it, would she return there before they were married. She would see him no more, no more! Alas, that she had ever seen him.

Feeling somewhat happier, or at any rate calmer, in this decision, she rose to return to the noisy camp, extending her walk, however, by a detour towards the Heidelberg road, for she was anxious to be alone as long as she could. She had been walking some ten minutes when she caught sight of a cart that seemed familiar to her, with three horses harnessed in front of it and one tied behind, which were also familiar. There were many men walking alongside the cart all talking eagerly.

Jess halted to let the little procession go by, when suddenly she perceived John Niel among these men and recognised the Zulu Mouti on the box. There was the man whom she had just vowed never to see again, and the sight of him seemed to take all her strength out of her, so that she felt inclined to sink down upon the veldt. His sudden appearance was almost uncanny in the sharpness of its illustration of her impotence in the hands of Fate. She felt it then; all in an instant it seemed to be borne in upon her mind that she could not help herself, but was only the instrument in the hands of a superior power whose will she was fulfilling through the workings of her passion, and to whom her

individual fate was a matter of little moment. It was inconclusive reasoning and perilous doctrine, but it must be allowed that the circumstances gave it a colour of truth. And, after all, the border-line between fatalism and free-will has never been quite authoritatively settled, even by St. Paul, so perhaps she was right. Mankind does not like to admit it, but it is, at the least, a question whether we can oppose our little wills against the forces of a universal law, or derange the details of an unvarying plan to suit the petty wants and hopes of individual mortality. Jess was a clever woman, but it would take a wiser head than hers to know where or when to draw that red line across the writings of our lives.

On came the cart and the knot of men, then suddenly John looked up and saw her gazing at him with those dark eyes that at times did indeed seem as though they were the windows of her soul. He turned and said something to his companions and to the Zulu Mouti, who went on with the cart, then he came towards her smiling and with outstretched hand.

"How do you do, Jess?" he said. "So I have found you all right?"

She took his hand and answered, almost angrily, "Why have you come? Why did you leave Bessie and my uncle?"

"I came because I was sent, also because I wished it. I wanted to bring you back home before Pretoria was besieged."

"You must have been mad! How could you expect to get back? We shall both be shut up here together now."

"So it appears. Well, things might be worse," he added cheerfully.

"I do not think that anything could be worse," she answered with a stamp of her foot, then, quite thrown off her balance, she burst incontinently into a flood of tears.

John Niel was a very simple-minded man, and it never struck him to attribute her grief to any other cause than anxiety at the state of affairs and at her incarceration for an indefinite period in a besieged town that ran the daily risk of being taken vi et armis. Still he was a little hurt at the manner of his reception after his long and most perilous journey, which is not, perhaps, to be wondered at.

"Well, Jess," he said, "I think that you might speak a little more kindly to me, considering--considering all things. There, don't cry, they are all right at Mooifontein, and I dare say that we shall win back there somehow some time or other. I had a nice business to get here at all, I can tell you."

Suddenly she stopped weeping and smiled, her tears passing away like a summer storm. "How did you get through?" she asked. "Tell me all about it, Captain Niel," and accordingly he did.

She listened in silence while he sketched the chief events of his journey, and when he had done she spoke in quite a changed tone.

"It is very good and kind of you to have risked your life like this for me. Only I wonder that you did not all of you see that it would be of no use. We shall both be shut up here together now, that is all, and that will be very sad for you and Bessie."

"Oh! So you have heard of our engagement?" he said.

"Yes, I read Bessie's letter about a couple of hours ago, and I congratulate you both very much. I think that you will have the sweetest and loveliest wife in South Africa, Captain Niel; and I think that Bessie will have a husband any woman might be proud of;" and she half bowed and half curtsied to him as she said it, with a graceful little air of dignity that was very taking.

"Thank you," he answered simply; "yes, I think I am a very lucky fellow."

"And now," she said, "we had better go and see about the cart. You will have to find a stand for it in that wretched laager. You must be very tired and hungry."

A few minutes' walk brought them to the cart, which Mouti had outspanned close to Mrs. Neville's waggon, where Jess and her friends were living,

and the first person they saw was Mrs. Neville herself. She was a good, motherly colonial woman, accustomed to a rough life, and one not easily disturbed by emergencies.

"My goodness, Captain Niell!" she cried, as soon as Jess had introduced him. "Well, you are plucky to have forced your way through all those horrid Boers! I am sure I wonder that they did not shoot you or beat you to death with sjambocks, the brutes. Not that there is much use in your coming, for you will never be able to take Jess back till Sir George Colley relieves us, and that can't be for two months, they say. Well, there is one thing; Jess will be able to sleep in the cart now, and you can have one of the patrol-tents and camp alongside. It won't be quite proper, perhaps, but in these times we can't stop to consider propriety. There, there, you go off to the Governor. He will be glad enough to see you, I'll be bound; I saw him at the other end of the camp five minutes ago. We will have the cart unpacked and arrange about the horses."

Thus adjured, John departed, and when he returned half an hour afterwards, having told his eventful tale, which did not, however, convey any information of general value, he was rejoiced to find that the process of "getting things straight" was almost complete. What was better still, Jess had fried him a beefsteak over the camp fire, and was now employed in serving it on a little table by the waggon. He sat down on a stool and ate his meal heartily enough, while Jess waited on him and Mrs. Neville chattered incessantly.

"By the way," she said, "Jess tells me that you are going to marry her sister. Well, I wish you joy. A man wants a wife in this country. It isn't like England, where in five cases out of six he might as well go and cut his throat as get married. It saves him money here, and children are a blessing, as Nature meant them to be, and not a burden, as civilisation has made them. Lord, how my tongue does run on! It isn't delicate to talk about children when you have only been engaged a couple of weeks; but, you see, that's what it comes to after all. She's a pretty girl, Bessie, and a good one too--I don't know her much--though she hasn't got the brains of Jess here. That reminds me; as you are engaged to Bessie, of course you can look after Jess, and nobody will think anything of it. Ah! if you only knew what a place this is for talk, though their talk is pretty well scared out of them now, I'm thinking. My husband is coming round presently to the cart to help to get Jess's bed into it. Lucky it's big. We are such a tight fit in that waggon that I shall be downright glad to see the last of the dear girl; though, of course, you'll both come and take your meals with us."

Jess heard all this in silence. She could not well insist upon stopping in the crowded waggon; it would be asking too much; and, besides, she had passed one night there, and that was quite enough for her. Once she suggested that she should try to persuade the nuns to take her in at the convent, but Mrs. Neville suppressed the notion instantly.

"Nuns!" she said; "nonsense. When your own brother-in-law--at least he

will be your brother-in-law if the Boers don't make an end of us all--is here to take care of you, don't talk about going to a parcel of nuns. It will be as much as they can do to look after themselves, I'll be bound."

As for John, he ate his steak and said nothing. The arrangement seemed a very proper one to him.