

CHAPTER XVII

THE TWELFTH OF FEBRUARY

John soon settled down into the routine of camp life in Pretoria, which, after one became accustomed to it, was not so disagreeable as might have been expected, and possessed, at any rate, the merit of novelty. Although he was an officer of the army, having several horses to ride and his services not being otherwise required, John preferred, on the whole, to enrol himself in the corps of mounted volunteers, known as the Pretoria Carbineers. This, in the humble capacity of a sergeant, he obtained leave to do from the officer commanding the troops. He was an active man, and his duties in connection with the corps kept him fully employed during most of the day, and sometimes, when there was outpost duty to be done, during a good part of the night too. For the rest, whenever he returned to the cart--by which he had stipulated he should be allowed to sleep in order to protect Jess in case of any danger--he always found her ready to greet him, and every little preparation made for his comfort that was possible under the circumstances. Indeed, as time went on, they thought it more convenient to set up their own little mess instead of sharing that of their friends. So every day they used to sit down to breakfast and dine together at a little table contrived out of a packing-case, and placed under an extemporised tent, for all the world like a young couple picnicking on their honeymoon. Of course, the situation was very irksome in a way, but it is not to be denied that it had a charm of its own.

To begin with, once thoroughly known, Jess was one of the most delightful companions possible to a man like John Niel. Never, till this long tete-a-tete at Pretoria, had he guessed how powerful and original was her mind, or how witty she could be when she liked. There was a fund of dry and suggestive humour about her, which, although it would no more bear being written down than champagne will bear standing in a tumbler, was very pleasant to listen to, more especially as John soon discovered that he was the only person so privileged. Her friends and relations had never suspected that Jess was humorous. Another thing which struck him as time went on, was that she was growing quite handsome. She had been very pale and thin when he reached Pretoria, but before a month was over she had become, comparatively speaking, stout, which was an enormous gain to her appearance. Her pale face, too, gathered a faint tinge of colour that came and went capriciously, like star-light on the water, and her beautiful eyes grew deeper and more beautiful than ever.

"Who would ever have thought that it was the same girl!" said Mrs. Neville to him, holding up her hands as she watched Jess solemnly surveying a half-cooked mutton chop. "Why, she used to be such a poor creature, and now she's quite a fine woman. And that with this life, too, which is wearing me to a shadow and has half-killed my dear daughter."

"I suppose it is being in the open air," said John, it having never occurred to him that the medicine that was doing Jess so much good might

be happiness. But so it was. After her first struggles came a lull, and then an idea. Why should she not enjoy his society while she could? He had been thrown into her way through no wish of hers. She had no desire to wean him from Bessie; or, if she had the desire, it was one which she was far too honourable a woman to entertain. He was perfectly innocent of the whole story; to him she was the young lady who happened to be the sister of the woman he was going to marry, that was all. Why should she not pluck her innocent roses whilst she might? Jess forgot that the rose is a flower with a dangerous perfume, and one that is apt to confuse the senses and turn the head. So she gave herself full swing, and for some weeks went nearer to knowing what happiness really meant than she ever had before. What a wonderful thing is the love of a woman in its simplicity and strength, and how it gilds all the poor and common things of life and even finds a joy in service! The prouder the woman the more delight does she extract from her self-abasement before her idol. Only not many women can love like Jess, and when they do almost invariably they make some fatal mistake, whereby the wealth of their affection is wasted, or, worse still, becomes a source of misery or shame to themselves and others.

It was after they had been incarcerated in Pretoria for a month that a bright idea occurred to John. About a quarter of a mile from the outskirts of the camp stood a little house known, probably on account of its diminutive size, as "The Palatial." This cottage, like almost every other house in Pretoria, had been abandoned to its fate, its owner, as it happened, being away from the town. One day, in the course of a walk,

John and Jess crossed the little bridge that spanned the sluit and went in to inspect the place. Passing down a path lined on either side with young blue gums, they reached the little tin-roofed cottage. It consisted of two rooms--a bedroom and a good-sized sitting-room, in which still stood a table and a few chairs, with a stable and a kitchen at the back. They went in, sat down by the open door and looked out. The garden of the cottage sloped down towards a valley, on the farther side of which rose a wooded hill. To the right, too, was a hill clothed in deep green bush. The grounds themselves were planted with vines, just now loaded with bunches of ripening grapes, and surrounded by a beautiful hedge of monthly roses that formed a blaze of bloom. Near the house, too, was a bed of double roses, some of them exceedingly lovely, and all flowering with a profusion unknown in this country. Altogether it was a delightful spot, and, after the noise and glare of the camp, seemed a perfect heaven. So they sat there and talked a great deal about the farm and old Silas Croft and a little about Bessie.

"This is nice," said Jess presently, putting her hands behind her head and looking out at the bush beyond.

"Yes," said John. "I say, I've got a notion. I vote we take up our quarters here--during the day, I mean. Of course we shall have to sleep in camp, but we might eat here, you know, and you could sit here all day; it would be as safe as a church, for those Boers will never try to storm the town, I am sure of that."

Jess reflected, and soon came to the conclusion that it would be a charming plan. Accordingly, next day she set to work and made the place as clean and tidy as circumstances would allow, and they commenced house-keeping.

The upshot of this arrangement was that they were thrown more together even than before. Meanwhile the siege dragged its slow length along. No news whatever reached the town from outside, but this did not trouble the inhabitants very much, as they were sure that Colley was advancing to their relief, and even got up sweep-stakes as to the date of his arrival. Now and then a sortie took place, but, as the results attained were very small, and were not, on the whole, creditable to our arms, perhaps the less said about them the better. John, of course, went out on these occasions, and then Jess would endure agonies that were all the worse because she was forced to conceal them. She lived in constant terror lest he should be among the killed. However, nothing happened to him, and things went on as usual till the twelfth of February, when an attack was made on a place called the Red House Kraal, which was occupied by Boers near a spot known as the Six-mile Spruit.

The force, which was a mixed one, left Pretoria before daybreak, and John went with it. He was rather surprised when, on going to the cart in which Jess slept, to get some little thing before saddling up, he found her sitting on the box in the night dews, a cup of hot coffee which she had prepared for him in her hand.

"What do you mean by this, Jess?" he asked sharply. "I will not have you getting up in the middle of the night to make coffee for me."

"I have not got up," she answered quietly; "I have not been to bed."

"That makes matters worse," he exclaimed; but, nevertheless, he drank the coffee and was glad of it, while she sat on the box and watched him.

"Put on your shawl and wrap something over your head," he said, "the dew will soak you through. Look, your hair is all wet."

Presently she spoke. "I wish you would do something for me, John," for she called him John now. "Will you promise?"

"How like a woman," he said, "to ask one to promise a thing without saying what it is."

"I want you to promise for Bessie's sake, John."

"Well, what is it, Jess?"

"Not to go on this sortie. You know you can easily get out of it if you like."

He laughed. "You little silly, why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. Don't laugh at me because I am nervous. I am afraid that--that something might happen to you."

"Well," he remarked consolingly, "every bullet has its billet, and if it does I don't see that it can be helped."

"Think of Bessie," she said again.

"Look here, Jess," he answered testily, "what is the good of trying to take the heart out of a fellow like this? If I am going to be shot I can't help it, and I am not going to show the white feather, even for Bessie's sake; so there you are, and now I must be off."

"You are quite right, John," she said quietly. "I should not have liked to hear you say anything different, but I could not help speaking. Good-bye, John; God bless you!" and she stretched out her hand, which he took, and went.

"Upon my word, she has given me quite a turn," reflected John to himself, as the troop crept on through the white mists of dawn. "I suppose she thinks that I am going to be plugged. Perhaps I am! I wonder how Bessie would take it. She would be awfully cut up, but I expect that she would get over it pretty soon. Now I don't think that Jess would shake off a thing of that sort in a hurry. That is just the difference between the two; the one is all flower and the other is all root."

Then he fell to wondering how Bessie was, and what she was doing, and if she missed him as much as he missed her, and so on, till his mind came back to Jess, and he reflected what a charming companion she was, and how thoughtful and kind, and breathed a secret hope that she would continue to live with them after they were married. Unconsciously they had arrived at that point of intimacy, innocent in itself, when two people become absolutely necessary to each other's daily life. Indeed, Jess had travelled a long way farther, but of this John was of course ignorant. He was still at the former stage, and was not himself aware how large a proportion of his daily thoughts were occupied by this dark-eyed girl or how completely her personality overshadowed him. He only knew that she had the knack of making him feel thoroughly happy in her company. When he was talking to her, or even sitting silently by her, he became aware of a sensation of restfulness and reliance that he had never before experienced in the society of a woman. Of course to a large extent this was the natural homage of the weaker nature to the stronger, but it was also something more. It was a shadow of the utter sympathy and complete accord that is the surest sign of the presence of the highest forms of affection, which, when it accompanies the passion of men and women, as it sometimes though rarely does, being more often to be found in perfection in those relations from which the element of sexuality is excluded, raises it almost above the level of the earth. For the love where that sympathy exists, whether it is between mother and son, husband and wife, or those who, whilst desiring it, have no hope of that relationship, is an undying love, and will endure till the night of Time has swallowed all things.

Meanwhile, as John reflected, the force to which he was attached was moving into action, and soon he found it necessary to come down to the unpleasantly practical details of Boer warfare. More particularly did this come home to his mind when, shortly afterwards, the man next to him was shot dead, and a little later he himself was slightly wounded by a bullet which passed between the saddle and his thigh. Into the details of the fight that ensued it is not necessary to enter here. They were, if anything, more discreditable than most of the episodes of that unhappy war in which the holding of Potchefstroom, Lydenburg, Rustenburg, and Wakkerstroom are the only bright spots. Suffice it to say that they ended in something very like an utter rout of the English at the hands of a much inferior force, and that, a few hours after he had started, the ambulance being left in the hands of the Boers, John found himself on the return road to Pretoria, with a severely wounded man behind his saddle, who, as they went painfully along, mingled curses of shame and fury with his own. Meanwhile exaggerated accounts of the English defeat had reached the town, and, amongst other things, it was said that Captain Niel had been shot dead. One man who came in stated that he saw him fall, and that he was shot through the head. This Mrs. Neville heard with her own ears, and, greatly shocked, started to communicate the intelligence to Jess.

As soon as it was daylight, as was customary with her, Jess had gone over to the little house which she and John occupied, "The Palatial," as it was called ironically, and settled herself there for the day. First

she tried to work and could not, so she took a book that she had brought with her and began to read, but it was a failure also. Her eyes would wander from the page and her ears strain to catch the distant booming of the big guns that came from time to time floating across the hills.

The fact of the matter was that the poor girl was the victim of a presentiment that something was going to happen to John. Most people of imaginative mind have suffered from this kind of thing at one time or other in their lives, and have lived to see the folly of it; and there was more in the circumstances of the present case to excuse indulgence in the luxury of presentiments than as usual. Indeed, as it happened, she was not far out--only a sixteenth of an inch or so--for John was very nearly killed.

Not finding Jess in camp, Mrs. Neville made her way across to "The Palatial," where she knew the girl sat, crying as she went, at the thought of the news that she had to communicate, for the good soul had grown very fond of John Niel. Jess, with that acute sense of hearing which often accompanies nervous excitement, caught the sound of the little gate at the bottom of the garden almost before her visitor had passed through it, and ran round the corner of the house to see who was there.

One glance at Mrs. Neville's tear-stained face was enough for her. She knew what was coming, and clasped at one of the young blue gum trees that grew along the path to prevent herself from falling.

"What is it?" she said faintly. "Is he dead?"

"Yes, my dear, yes; shot through the head, they say."

Jess made no answer, but clung to the sapling, feeling as though she were going to die herself, and faintly hoping that she might do so. Her eyes wandered vaguely from the face of the messenger of evil, first up to the sky, then down to the cropped and trodden veldt. Past the gate of "The Palatial" garden ran a road, which, as it happened, was a short cut from the scene of the fight, and down this road came four Kafirs and half-castes, bearing something on a stretcher, behind which rode three or four carbineers. A coat was thrown over the face of the form on the stretcher, but its legs were visible. They were booted and spurred, and the feet fell apart in that peculiarly lax and helpless way of which there is no possibility of mistaking the meaning.

"Look!" she said, pointing.

"Ah, poor man, poor man!" said Mrs. Neville, "they are bringing him here to lay him out."

Then Jess's beautiful eyes closed, and down she went with the bending tree. Presently the sapling snapped, and she fell senseless with a little cry, and as she fell the men with the corpse passed on.

Two minutes afterwards, John Niel, having heard the rumour of his own

death on arrival at the camp, and greatly fearing lest it should have reached Jess's ears, cantered up hurriedly, and, dismounting as well as his wound would allow, limped up the garden path.

"Great heavens, Captain Niel!" exclaimed Mrs. Neville, looking up; "why--we thought that you were dead!"

"And that is what you have been telling her, I suppose," he said sternly, glancing at the pale and deathlike face; "you might have waited till you were sure. Poor girl! it must have given her a turn!" and, stooping down, he placed his arms under Jess, and, lifting her with some difficulty, staggered to the house, where he laid her down upon the table and, assisted by Mrs. Neville, began to do all in his power to revive her. So obstinate was her faint, however, that their efforts were unavailing, and at last Mrs. Neville started for the camp to get some brandy, leaving him to go on rubbing her hands and sprinkling water on her face.

The good lady had not been gone more than two or three minutes when Jess suddenly opened her eyes and sat up, slipping her feet to the ground. Her eyes fell upon John and dilated with wonder; he thought that she was about to faint again, for even her lips blanched, and she began to shake and tremble all over in the extremity of her agitation.

"Jess, Jess," he said, "for God's sake don't look like that, you frighten me!"

"I thought you were--I thought you were----" she said slowly, then suddenly burst into a passion of tears and fell forward upon his breast and lay there sobbing her heart out, her brown curls resting against his face.

It was an awkward and a most moving position. John was only a man, and the spectacle of this strange woman, to whom he had lately grown so much attached, plunged into intense emotion, awakened, apparently, by anxiety about his fate, stirred him very deeply--as it would have stirred anybody. Indeed, it struck some chord in him for which he could not quite account, and its echoes charmed and yet frightened him. What did it mean?

"Jess, dear Jess, pray stop; I can't bear to see you cry so," he said at last.

She lifted her head from his shoulder and stood looking at him, her hand resting on the edge of the table behind her. Her face was wet with tears and looked like a dew-washed lily, and her beautiful eyes were alight with a flame that he had never seen in the eyes of woman before. She said nothing, but her whole face was more eloquent than any words, for there are times when the features can convey a message in that language of their own which is more suitable than any tongue we talk. There she stood, her breast heaving with emotion as the sea heaves when the fierceness of the storm has passed--a very incarnation of the intensest

love of woman. And as she stood something seemed to pass before her eyes and blind her; a spirit took possession of her that absorbed all her doubts and fears, and she gave way to a force that was of her and yet compelled her, as, when the wind blows, the sails compel a ship. Then, for the first time, where her love was concerned, she put out all her strength. She knew, and had always known, that she could master him, and force him to regard her as she regarded him, did she but choose. How she knew it she could not say, but it was so. Now she yielded to an unconquerable impulse and chose. She said nothing, she did not even move, she only looked at him.

"Why were you in such a fright about me?" he stammered.

She did not answer, but kept her eyes upon his face, and it seemed to John as though power flowed from them; for, while she looked, he felt the change come. Everything melted away before the almost spiritual intensity of her gaze. Bessie, honour, his engagement--all were forgotten; the smouldering embers broke into flame, and he knew that he loved this woman as he had never loved any living creature before--that he loved her even as she loved him. Strong man as he was, he shook like a leaf before her.

"Jess," he said hoarsely, "God forgive me! I love you!" and he bent forward to kiss her.

She lifted her face towards him, then suddenly changed her mind, and

laid her hand upon his breast.

"You forget," she said almost solemnly, "you are going to marry Bessie."

Crushed by a deep sense of shame, and by a knowledge of the calamity that had overtaken him, John turned and limped from the house.