

## CHAPTER XVIII

### AND AFTER

In front of the door of "The Palatial" was a garden-bed filled with weeds and flowers mixed up together like the good and evil in the heart of a man, and to the right-hand side of this bed stood an old and backless wooden chair. No sooner had John limped outside the door of the cottage than he became sensible that, what between one thing and another--weariness, loss of blood from his wound, and intense mental emotion--if he did not sit down somewhere quickly, he should follow the example set by Jess and faint away. Accordingly he steered for the old chair and sank into it with gratitude. Presently he saw Mrs. Neville running up the path with a bottle of brandy in her hand.

"Ah!" he thought to himself, "that will just come in handy for me. If I don't have a glass of brandy soon I shall roll off this infernal chair--I am sure of it."

"Where is Jess?" panted Mrs. Neville.

"In there," he said; "she has recovered. It would have been better for us both if she hadn't," he added to himself.

"Why, bless me, Captain Niel, how queer you look!" said Mrs. Neville, fanning herself with her hat; "and there is such a row going on at the

camp there; the volunteers swear that they will attack the military for deserting them, and I don't know what all; and they simply wouldn't believe me when I said you were not shot. Why, I never! Look! your boot is full of blood! So you were hit after all."

"Might I trouble you to give me some brandy, Mrs. Neville?" said John faintly.

She filled a glass she had brought with her half full of water from a little irrigation furrow that ran down from the main sluic by the road, and then topped it up with brandy. He drank it, and felt decidedly better.

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Neville, "there are a pair of you now. You should just have seen that girl go down when she saw the body coming along the road! I made sure that it was you; but it wasn't. They say that it was poor Jim Smith, son of old Smith of Rustenburg. I tell you what it is, Captain Niel, you had better be careful; if that girl isn't in love with you she is something very like it. A girl does not pop over like that for Dick, Tom, or Harry. You must forgive an old woman like me for speaking out plain, but she is an odd girl is Jess, just like ten women rolled into one so far as her mind goes, and if you don't take care you will get into trouble, which will be rather awkward, as you are going to marry her sister. Jess isn't the one to have a bit of a flirt to pass away the time and have done with it, I can tell you;" and she shook her head solemnly, as though she suspected him of trifling with his future

sister-in-law's young affections, then, without waiting for an answer, she turned and went into the cottage.

As for John, he only groaned. What could he do but groan? The thing was self-evident, and if ever a man felt ashamed of himself that man was John Niel. He was a strictly honourable individual, and it cut him to the heart to think that he had entered on a course which, considering his engagement to Bessie, was not honourable. When a few minutes before he had told Jess he loved her he had said a disgraceful thing, however true it might be. And that was the worst of it; it was true; he did love her. He felt the change come sweeping over him like a wave as she stood looking at him in the room, utterly drowning and overpowering his affection for Bessie, to whom he was bound by every tie of honour. It was a new and a wonderful experience this passion that had arisen within him, as a strong man armed, driving every other affection away into the waste places of his mind; and, unfortunately, as he already guessed, it was overmastering and enduring. He cursed himself in his shame and anger as he sat recovering his equilibrium on the broken chair and tying a handkerchief tightly round his wounded leg. What a fool he had been! Why had he not waited to see which of the two he really loved? Why had Jess gone away like that and thrown him into temptation with her pretty sister? He was sure now that she had cared for him all along. Well, there it was, and a bad business too! One thing he was clear about; it should go no farther. He would not break his engagement to Bessie; it was not to be thought of. But, all the same, he felt sorry for himself, and sorry for Jess too.

Just then, however, the bandage on his leg slipped, and the wound began to bleed so fast that he was fain to hobble into the house for assistance.

Jess, who had apparently quite recovered from her agitation, was standing by the table talking to Mrs. Neville, who was persuading her to swallow some of the brandy she had been at such pains to fetch. The moment she caught sight of John's face, which had now turned ghastly white, and saw the red line trickling down his boot, she took up her hat that was lying on the table.

"You had better lie down on the old bedstead in the little room," she said; "I am going for the doctor."

Assisted by Mrs. Neville he was only too glad to take this advice, but long before the doctor arrived John had followed Jess's example, and gone off into a dead faint, to the intense alarm of Mrs. Neville, who was vainly endeavouring to check the flow of blood, which had now become copious. On the arrival of the doctor it appeared that the bullet had grazed the walls of one of the arteries on the inside of his thigh without actually cutting them, which had now given way, rendering it necessary to tie the artery. This operation, with the assistance of chloroform, he proceeded to carry out successfully, announcing afterwards that a great deal of blood had already been lost.

When at last it was over Mrs. Neville asked about John being moved up to the hospital, but the doctor declared that he must lie where he was, and that Jess must stop and help to nurse him, with the assistance of a soldier's wife whom he would send to her.

"Dear me," said Mrs. Neville, "that is very awkward."

"It will be more awkward if you try to move him at present," was the grim reply, "for the silk may slip, in which case the artery will probably break out again, and he will bleed to death."

As for Jess, she said nothing, but set to work to make preparations for her task of nursing. As Fate had once more thrown them together she accepted the position gladly, though it is fair to say that she would not have sought it.

In about an hour's time, just as John was beginning to recover from the painful effects of the chloroform, the soldier's wife who was to assist her in nursing arrived. As Jess soon discovered, she was not only a low stamp of woman, but both careless and ignorant into the bargain, and all that she could be relied on to do was to carry out some of the rougher work of the sick-room. When John woke up and learned whose was the presence that was bending over him, and whose the cool hand that lay upon his forehead, he groaned again and went to sleep. But Jess did not go to sleep. She sat by him there throughout the night, till at last the cold lights of the dawn came gleaming through the window and fell upon

the white face of the man she loved. He was still sleeping soundly, and, as the night was exceedingly hot and oppressive, she had left nothing but a sheet over him. Before she went to rest a little herself she turned to look at him once more, and as she looked she saw the sheet grow suddenly red with blood. The artery had broken out fresh.

Calling to the soldier's wife to run across to the doctor, Jess shook her patient till he awoke, for he was sleeping quite soundly, and would, no doubt, have continued to do so till he glided away into a still deeper sleep; and then between them they did what they could to quench that dreadful pumping flow, Jess knotting her handkerchief round his leg and twisting it with a stick, while he pressed his thumb upon the severed artery. But, strive as they would, they were only partially successful, and Jess began to think that he would die in her arms from loss of blood. It was agonising to wait there minute after minute and see his life ebbing away.

"I don't think I shall last much longer, Jess. God bless you, dear!" he said. "The place is beginning to go round and round."

Poor soul! she could only set her teeth and wait for the end.

Presently John's pressure on the wounded artery relaxed, and he fainted off, and, oddly enough, just then the flow of blood diminished considerably. Another five minutes, and she heard the quick step of the doctor coming up the path.

"Thank God you have come! He has bled dreadfully."

"I was out attending a poor fellow who was shot through the lung, and that fool of a woman waited for me to come back instead of following me. I have brought you an orderly in place of her. By Jove, he has bled! I suppose the silk has slipped. Well, there is only one thing for it. Orderly, the chloroform."

Then followed another long half-hour of slashing and tying and horror, and when at last the unfortunate John opened his eyes again he was too weak to speak, and could only smile feebly. For three days after this he lay in a dangerous state, for if the artery had broken out for the third time the chances were that, having so little blood left in his veins, he would die before anything could be done for him. At times he was very delirious from weakness, and these were the critical hours, for it was almost impossible to keep him still, and every moment threw Jess into an agony of terror lest the silk fastenings of the artery should break away. Indeed there was only one fashion in which she could quiet him, and that was by placing her slim white hand upon his forehead or giving it to him to hold. Oddly enough, this had more effect upon his fevered mind than anything else. For hour after hour she would sit thus, though her arm ached, and her back felt as if it were about to break in two, till at last she was rewarded by seeing his wild eyes cease their wanderings and close in peaceful sleep.

Yet with it all that week was perhaps the happiest time in her life. There he lay: the man she loved with all the intensity of her deep nature, and she ministered to him, and felt that he loved her, and depended on her as a babe upon its mother. Even in his delirium her name was continually on his lips, and generally with some endearing term before it. She felt in those dark hours of doubt and sickness as though they two were growing life to life, knit up in a divine identity she could not analyse or understand. She felt that it was so, and she believed that, once being so, whatever her future might be, that communion could never be dissolved, and therefore was she happy, though she knew that his recovery meant their lifelong separation. For though Jess, when thrown utterly off her balance, had once given her passion way, it was not a thing she meant to repeat. She had, she knew, injured Bessie enough already in taking her future husband's heart. That she could not help now, but she would take no more. John should go back to her sister.

And so she sat and gazed at that sleeping man through the long watches of the night, and was happy. There lay her joy. Soon they must part and she would be left desolate; but whilst he lay there he was hers. It was passing sweet to her woman's nature to place her hand upon him and see him sleep, for this desire to watch the sleep of a beloved object is one of the highest and strangest manifestations of passion. Truly, and with a keen insight into the human heart, has the poet said that there is no joy like the joy of a woman watching what she loves asleep. As Jess sat and gazed those beautiful and tender lines came floating to her mind,



and she thought how true they were:

For there it lies, so tranquil, so beloved,  
All that it hath of life with us is living;  
So gentle, stirless, helpless, and unmoved,  
And all unconscious of the joy 'tis giving;  
All it hath felt, inflicted, passed and proved,  
Hushed into depths beyond the watcher's diving;  
There lies the thing we love with all its errors  
And all its charms, like death without its terrors.

Ay! there lay the thing she loved.

The time went on, and the artery broke out no more. Then at last came a morning when John opened his eyes and watched the pale earnest face bending over him as though he were trying to remember something. Presently he shut them again. He had remembered.

"I have been very ill, Jess," he said after a pause.

"Yes, John."

"And you have nursed me?"

"Yes, John."

"Am I going to recover?"

"Of course you are."

He closed his eyes again.

"I suppose there is no news from outside?"

"No more; things are just the same."

"Nor from Bessie?"

"None: we are quite cut off."

Then came a pause.

"John," said Jess, "I want to say something to you. When people are delirious, or when delirium is coming on, they sometimes say things that they are not responsible for, and which had better be forgotten."

"Yes," he said, "I understand."

"So," she went on, in the same measured tone, "we will forget everything you may fancy that you said, or that I did, since the time when you came in wounded and found that I had fainted."

"Quite so," said John. "I renounce them all."

"We renounce them all," she corrected, and gave a solemn little nod of her head and sighed, and thus they ratified that audacious compact of oblivion.

But it was a lie, and they both knew that it was a lie. If love had existed before, was there anything in his helplessness and her long and tender care to make it less? Alas! no; rather was their companionship the more perfect and their sympathy the more complete. "Propinquity, sir, propinquity," as the wise man said;--we all know the evils of it.

It was a lie, and a very common and everyday sort of lie. Who, being behind the scenes, has not laughed in his sleeve to see it acted?--Who has not admired and wondered at the cold and formal bow and shake of the hand, the tender inquiries after the health of the maiden aunt and the baby, the carelessly expressed wish that we may meet somewhere--all so palpably overdone? That the heroine of the impassioned scene at which we had unfortunately to assist an hour ago! Where are the tears, the convulsive sobs, the heartbroken grief? And that the young gentleman who saw nothing for it but flight or a pistol bullet! There, all the world's a stage, and fortunately most of us can act at a pinch.

Yes, we can act; we can paint the face and powder the hair, and summon up the set smile and the regulation joke and make pretense that things are as things were, when they are as different as the North Pole from

the Torrid Zone. But unfortunately, or fortunately--I do not know which--we cannot bedeck our inner selves and make them mime as the occasion pleases, and sing the old song when their lips are set to a strange new chant. Of a surety there is within us a spark of the Eternal Truth, for in our own hearts we cannot lie. And so it was with these two. From that day forward they forgot that scene in the sitting-room of "The Palatial," when Jess put out her strength and John bent and broke before it like a reed before the wind. Surely it was a part of the delirium! They forgot that now, alas! they loved each other with a love which did but gather force from its despair. They talked of Bessie, and of John's marriage, and discussed Jess's plans to go to Europe, just as though these were not matters of spiritual life and death to each of them. In short, however for one brief moment they might have gone astray, now, to their honour be it said, they followed the path of duty with unflinching feet, nor did they complain when the stones cut them.

But it was a living lie, and they knew it. For behind them stood the irrevocable Past, who for good or evil had bound them together in his unchanging bonds, and with cords that never can be broken.