

CHAPTER XIX

HANS COETZEE COMES TO PRETORIA

Once he had turned the corner, John's recovery was rapid. Naturally of a vigorous constitution, when the artery had reunited, he soon made up for the great loss of blood which he had undergone, and in a little more than a month from the date of his wound physically, was almost as good a man as ever.

One morning--it was the 20th of March--Jess and he were sitting in "The Palatial" garden. John was lying in a lone cane deck chair that Jess had borrowed or stolen out of one of the deserted houses, and smoking a pipe. By his side, in a hole in the flat arm of the chair, fashioned originally to receive a soda-water tumbler, was a great bunch of purple grapes which she had gathered for him; and on his knees lay a copy of that journalistic curiosity, the "News of the Camp," which was chiefly remarkable for its utter dearth of news. It was not easy to run a journal in a beleaguered town.

They sat in silence: John puffing away at his pipe, and Jess, her work--one of his socks--lying idly upon her knees, her hands clasped over it, and her eyes fixed upon the lights and shadows that played with broad fingers upon the wooded slopes beyond.

So silently did they sit that a great green lizard came and basked

himself in the sun within a yard of them, and a beautiful striped butterfly perched deliberately upon the purple grapes! It was a delightful day and a delightful spot. They were too far from the camp to be disturbed by its rude noise, and the only sounds that reached their ears were the rippling of running water and the whispers of the wind, odorous with the breath of mimosa blooms, as it stirred the stiff grey leaves on the blue gums.

They were seated in the shade of the little house that Jess had learned to love as she had never loved a spot before, but around them lay the flood of sunshine shimmering like golden water; and beyond the red line of the fence at the end of the garden, where the rich pomegranate bloom tried to blush the roses down, the hot air danced merrily above the rough stone wall like a million microscopic elves at play. Peace! everywhere was peace! and in it the full heart of Nature beat out in radiant life. Peace in the voice of the turtle-doves among the willows! peace in the play of the sunshine and the murmur of the wind! peace in the growing flowers and hovering butterfly! Jess looked out at the wealth and glory which were spread before her, and thought that it was like heaven; then, giving way to the melancholy strain in her nature, she began to wonder idly how many human beings had sat and thought the same things, and had been gathered up into the azure of the past and forgotten; and how many would sit and think there when she in her turn had been utterly swept away into that gulf whence no echo ever comes! But what did it matter? The sunshine would still flood the earth with gold, the water would ripple, and the butterflies hover; and there would

be other women to sit and fold their hands and consider them, thinking the same identical thoughts, beyond which our human intelligence cannot travel. And so on for thousands upon thousands of centuries, till at last the old world reaches its journey's appointed end, and, passing from the starry spaces, is swallowed up with those it bore.

And she--where would she be? Would she still live on, and love and suffer elsewhere, or was it all a cruel myth? Was she merely a creature bred of the teeming earth, or had she an individuality beyond the earth? What awaited her after sunset?--Sleep. She had often hoped that it was sleep, and nothing but sleep. But now she did not hope that. Her life had centred itself around a new interest, and one that she felt could never die while that life lasted. She hoped for a future now; for if there was a future for her, there would be one for him, and then her day would come, and where he was there she would be also. Oh, sweet mockery, old and unsubstantial thought, bright dream set halowise about the dull head of life! Who has not dream it, but who can believe in it? And yet, who shall say that it is not true? Though philosophers and scientists smile and point in derision to the gross facts and freaks that mark our passions, is it not possible that there may be a place where the love shall live when the lust has died; and where Jess will find that she has not sat in vain in the sunshine, throwing out her pure heart towards the light of a happiness and a visioned glory whereof, for some few minutes, the shadow seemed to lie within her?

John had finished his pipe, and, although she did not know it, was

watching her face, which, now when she was off her guard, was no longer impassive, but seemed to mirror the tender and glorious hope that was floating through her mind. Her lips were slightly parted, and her wide eyes were full of a soft strange light, while on the whole countenance was stamped a look of eager thought and spiritualised desire such as he had known portrayed in ancient masterpieces upon the face of the Virgin Mother. Except as regards her eyes and hair, Jess was not even a good-looking person. But, at that moment, John thought that her face was touched with a diviner beauty than he had yet seen on the face of woman. It thrilled him and appealed to him, not as Bessie's beauty had appealed, but to that other side of his nature, of which Jess alone could turn the key. It was more like the face of a spirit than that of a human being, and it almost frightened him to see it.

"Jess," he said at last, "what are you thinking of?"

She started, and her face resumed its normal expression. It was as though a mask had been suddenly set upon it.

"Why do you ask?" she said.

"Because I want to know. I never saw you look like that before."

She laughed a little.

"You would call me foolish if I told you what I was thinking about.

Never mind, it has gone wherever thoughts go. I will tell you what I am thinking about now, which is--that it is about time we got out of this place. My uncle and Bessie must be half distracted."

"We've had more than two months of it now. The relieving column can't be far off," suggested John; for these foolish people in Pretoria laboured under a firm belief that one fine morning they would be gratified with a vision of the light dancing down a long line of British bayonets, and of Boers evaporating in every direction like storm clouds before the sun.

Jess shook her head. She was beginning to lose faith in relieving columns that never came.

"If we don't help ourselves, my opinion is that we may stop here till we are starved out, which in fact we are. However, it's no use talking about it, so I'm off to fetch our rations. Let's see, have you everything you want?"

"Everything, thanks."

"Well, then, mind you stop quiet till I come back."

"Why," laughed John, "I am as strong as a horse."

"Possibly; but that is what the doctor said, you know. Good-bye!" and Jess took her big basket and started on what John used feebly to call

her "rational undertaking."

She had not gone fifty paces from the door before she suddenly caught sight of a familiar form seated on a familiar pony. The form was fat and jovial-looking, and the pony was small but also fat. It was Hans Coetzee--none other!

Jess could hardly believe her eyes. Old Hans in Pretoria! What could it mean?

"Oom Coetzee! Oom Coetzee!" she called, as he came ambling past her, evidently heading for the Heidelberg road.

The old Boer pulled up his pony, and gazed around him in a mystified fashion.

"Here, Oom Coetzee! Here!"

"Allemachter!" he said, jerking his pony round. "It's you, Missie Jess, is it? Now who would have thought of seeing you here?"

"Who would have thought of seeing you here?" she answered.

"Yes, yes; it seems strange; I dare say that it seems strange. But I am a messenger of peace, like Uncle Noah's dove in the ark, you know. The fact is," and he glanced round to see if anybody was listening, "I have

been sent by the Government to arrange about an exchange of prisoners."

"The Government! What Government?"

"What Government? Why, the Triumvirate, of course--whom may the Lord bless and prosper, as He did Jonah when he walked on the wall of the city."

"Joshua, when he walked round the wall of the city," suggested Jess.

"Jonah walked down the whale's throat."

"Ah! to be sure, so he did, and blew a trumpet inside. I remember now; though I am sure I don't know how he did it. The fact is that our glorious victories have quite confused me. Ah! what a thing it is to be a patriot! The dear Lord makes strong the arm of the patriot, and takes care that he hits his man well in the middle."

"You have turned wonderfully patriotic all of a sudden, Oom Coetzee," said Jess tartly.

"Yes, missie, yes; I am a patriot to the bone of my back! I hate the English Government; damn the English Government! Let us have our land back and our Volksraad. Almighty! I saw who was in the right at Laing's Nek there. Ah, those poor rooibaatjes! I killed four of them myself; two as they came up, and two as they ran away, and the last one went head-over-heels like a buck. Poor man! I cried for him afterwards.

I did not like going to fight at all, but Frank Muller sent to me and said that if I did not go he would have me shot. Ah, he is a devil of a man, that Frank Muller! So I went, and when I saw how the dear Lord had put it into the heart of the English general to be a bigger fool even that day than he is every day, and to try and drive us out of Laing's Nek with a thousand of his poor rooibaatjes, then, I tell you, I saw where the right lay, and I said, 'Damn the English Government! What is the English Government doing here?' and after Ingogo I said it again."

"Never mind all that, Oom Coetzee," broke in Jess. "I have heard you tell a different tale before, and perhaps you will again. How are my uncle and my sister? Are they at the farm?"

"Almighty! you don't suppose that I have been there to see, do you? But, yes, I have heard they are there. It is a nice place, that Mooifontein, and I think that I shall buy it when we have turned all you English people out of the land. Frank Muller told me that they were there. And now I must be getting on, or that devil of a man, Frank Muller, will want to know what I have been about."

"Oom Coetzee," said Jess, "will you do something for me? We are old friends, you know, and once I persuaded my uncle to lend you five hundred pounds when all your oxen died of the lungsick."

"Yes, yes, it shall be paid back one day--when we have hunted the damned Englishmen out of the country." And he began to gather up his reins

preparatory to riding off.

"Will you do me a favour?" said Jess, catching the pony by the bridle.

"What is it? What is it, missie? I must be getting on. That devil of a man, Frank Muller, is waiting for me with the prisoners at the Rooihuis Kraal."

"I want a pass for myself and Captain Niel, and an escort. We wish to go home."

The old Boer held up his fat hands in amazement.

"Almighty!" he said, "it is impossible. A pass!--who ever heard of such a thing? Come, I must be going."

"It is not impossible, Uncle Coetzee, as you know," said Jess. "Listen! If I get that pass I will speak to my uncle about the five hundred pounds. Perhaps he would not want it all back again."

"Ah!" said the Boer. "Well, we are old friends, missie, and 'never desert a friend,' that is my saying. Almighty! I must ride a hundred miles--I will swim through blood for a friend. Well, well, I must see. It depends upon that devil of a man, Frank Muller. Where are you to be found--in the white house yonder? Good. To-morrow the escort will come in with the prisoners, and if I can get it they will bring the pass."

But, missie, remember the five hundred pounds. If you do not speak to your uncle about that I shall be even with him. Almighty! what a thing it is to have a good heart, and to love to help your friends! Well, good-day, good-day," and off he cantered on his fat pony, his broad face shining with a look of unutterable benevolence.

Jess cast a look of contempt after him, and then went on towards the camp to fetch the rations.

When she returned to "The Palatial," she told John what had taken place, and suggested that it would be as well, in case there should be a favourable reply to her request, to have everything prepared for a start. Accordingly, the cart was brought down and stood outside "The Palatial," where John unscrewed the patent caps and filled them with castor-oil, and ordered Mouti to keep the horses, which were all in health, though "poor" from want of proper food, well within hail.

Meanwhile, old Hans pursued the jerky tenour of his way for an hour or so, till he came in sight of a small red house.

Presently, from the shadow in front of the red house emerged a rider, mounted on a powerful black horse. The horseman--a stern, handsome, bearded man--put his hand above his eyes to shade them from the sun, and gazed up the road. Then he seemed suddenly to strike his spurs into the horse, for the animal bounded forward swiftly, and came sweeping towards Hans at a hand gallop.

"Ah! it is that devil of a man, Frank Muller!" ejaculated Coetzee. "Now I wonder what he wants? I always feel cold down the back when he comes near me."

By this time the plunging black horse was being reined up alongside of his pony so sharply that it reared till its great hoofs were pawing the air within a few inches of Hans' head.

"Almighty!" said the old man, tugging his pony round. "Be careful, nephew, be careful; I do not wish to be crushed like a beetle."

Frank Muller--for it was he--smiled. He had made his horse rear purposely, in order to frighten the old man, whom he knew to be an arrant coward.

"Why have you been so long? and what have you done with the Englishmen? You should have been back half an hour ago."

"And so I should, nephew, and so I should, if I had not been detained. Surely you do not suppose that I would linger in the accursed place? Bah," and he spat upon the ground, "it stinks of Englishmen. I cannot get the taste of them out of my mouth."

"You are a liar, Uncle Coetzee," was the cool answer. "English with the English, Boer with the Boer. You blow neither hot nor cold. Be careful

lest I show you up. I know you and your talk. Do you remember what you were saying to the Englishman Niel in the inn-yard at Wakkerstroom when you turned and saw me? I heard, and I do not forget. You know what happens to a 'land betrayer'?"

Hans' teeth positively chattered, and his florid face blanched with fear.

"What do you mean, nephew?" he asked.

"I--ah!--I mean nothing. I was only speaking a word of warning to you as a friend. I have heard things said about you by----" and he dropped his voice and whispered a name, at the sound of which poor Hans turned whiter than ever.

"Well," went on his tormentor, when he had sufficiently enjoyed his terror, "what sort of terms did you make in Pretoria?"

"Oh, good, nephew, good," he gabbled, delighted to find a fresh subject. "I found the Englishmen supple as a tanned skin. They will give up their twelve prisoners for our four. The men are to be in by ten to-morrow. I told their commandant about Laing's Nek and Ingogo, and he would not believe me. He thought I lied like himself. They are getting hungry there now. I saw a Hottentot I knew, and he told me that their bones were beginning to show."

"They will be through the skin before long," muttered Frank. "Well, here we are at the house. The General is there. He has just come up from Heidelberg, and you can make your report to him. Did you find out about the Englishman--Captain Niel? Is it true that he is dead?"

"No, he is not dead. By the way, I met Oom Croft's niece--the dark one. She is shut up there with the Captain, and she begged me to try and get them a pass to go home. Of course I told her that it was nonsense, and that they must stop and starve with the others."

Muller, who had been listening to this last piece of information with intense interest, suddenly checked his horse and answered:

"Did you? Then you are a bigger fool than I thought you. Who gave you authority to decide whether they should have a pass or not?"