

CHAPTER XXI

JESS GETS A PASS

About half-past ten on the morning following her interview with Hans Coetzee, Jess was at "The Palatial" as usual, and John was just finishing packing the cart with such few goods as they possessed. There was little chance of his labour proving of material use, for he did not in the slightest degree expect that they would get the pass; but, as he said cheerfully, it was as good an amusement as any other.

"I say, Jess," he called out presently, "come here."

"What for?" asked Jess, who was seated on the doorstep mending something, and looking at her favourite view.

"Because I want to speak to you."

She rose and went, feeling rather angry with herself for going.

"Well," she said tartly, "here I am. What is it?"

"I have finished packing the cart, that's all."

"And you mean to tell me that you have brought me round here to say that?"

"Yes, of course I have; exercise is good for the young." Then he laughed, and she laughed too.

It was all nothing--nothing at all--but somehow it was very delightful. Certainly mutual affection, even when unexpressed, has a way of making things go happily, and can find entertainment anywhere.

Just then, who should arrive but Mrs. Neville, in a great state of excitement, and, as usual, fanning herself with her hat.

"What do you think, Captain Niel? The prisoners have come in, and I heard one of the Boers in charge say that he had a pass signed by the Boer general for some English people, and that he was coming over to see about them presently. Who can it be?"

"It is for us," said Jess quickly. "We are going home. I saw Hans Coetzee yesterday, and begged him to try and get us a pass, and I suppose he has."

"My word! going to get out: well, you are lucky! Let me sit down and write a letter to my great-uncle at the Cape. You must post it when you can. He is ninety-four, and rather soft, but I dare say he will like to hear from me," and she hurried into the house to give her aged relative--who, by the way, laboured under the impression that she was still a little girl of four years of age--as minute an account of the

siege of Pretoria as time would allow.

"Well, John, you had better tell Mouti to put the horses in. We shall have to start presently," said Jess.

"Ay," he said, pulling his beard thoughtfully, "I suppose that we shall;" adding, by way of an afterthought, "Are you glad to go?"

"No," she said, with a sudden flash of passion and a stamp of the foot. Then she turned and entered the house again.

"Mouti," said John to the Zulu, who was lounging about in a way characteristic of that intelligent but unindustrious race, "inspan the horses. We are going back to Mooifontein."

"Koos!" said the Zulu unconcernedly, and started on the errand as though it were the most everyday occurrence to drive off home out of a closely beleaguered town. That is another beauty of the Zulu race: you cannot astonish them. No doubt they consider that extraordinary mixture of wisdom and insanity, the white man, to be capable du tout, as the agnostic French critic said in despair of the prophet Zerubbabel.

John stood and watched the inspanning absently. In truth, he, too, was conscious of a sensation of regret. He felt ashamed of himself for it, but there it was; he was sorry to leave the place. For the last week or so he had been living in a dream, and everything outside that dream was

blurred, indistinct as a landscape in a fog. He knew the objects were there, but he could not quite appreciate their relative size and position. The only real thing was his dream; all else was as vague as those far-off people and events that we lose in infancy and find again in old age.

Now there would be an end of dreaming; the fog would lift, and he must face the facts. Jess, with whom he had dreamed, would go away to Europe and he would marry Bessie, and all this Pretoria business would glide away into the past like a watch in the night. Well, it must be so; it was right and proper that it should be so, and he for one would not flinch from his duty; but he must have been more than human had he not felt the pang of awakening. It was all so very unfortunate.

By this time Mouti had got up the horses, and asked if he was to inspan.

"No; wait a bit," said John. "Very likely it is all nonsense," he added to himself.

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth when he caught sight of two armed Boers of a peculiarly unpleasant type and rough appearance, riding across the veldt towards "The Palatial" gate. With them was an escort of four carbineers. At the gate they all stopped, and one of the Boers dismounted and walked to where John was standing by the stable-door.

"Captain Niel?" he said interrogatively, in English.

"That is my name."

"Then here is a letter for you," and he handed him a folded paper.

John opened it--it had no envelope--and read as follows:

"Sir,--The bearer of this has with him a pass which it is understood that you desire, giving you and Miss Jess Croft a safe-conduct to Mooifontein, in the Wakkerstroom district of the Republic. The only condition attached to the pass, which is signed by one of the honourable Triumvirate, is that you must carry no despatches out of Pretoria. Upon your giving your word of honour to the bearer that you will not do this he will hand you the pass."

This letter, which was fairly written and in good English, had no signature.

"Who wrote this?" asked John of the Boer.

"That is no affair of yours," was the curt reply. "Will you pass your word about the despatches?"

"Yes."

"Good. Here is the pass;" and he handed over that document to John. It was in the same handwriting as the letter, but signed by the Boer general.

John examined it, and then called to Jess to come to translate it, who, having heard the voice of the Boer, was on her way round the corner of the house.

"It means, 'Pass the bearers unharmed,'" she said, "and the signature is genuine. I have seen Paul Kruger's signature before."

"When must we start?" asked John of the Boer.

"At once, or not at all."

"I must drive round by the headquarter camp to explain my departure. They will think that I have run away."

To this the Boer demurred, but finally, after going to the gate to consult his companion, he consented and the two rode back to the headquarter camp, saying that they would wait for the cart there, whereupon the horses were inspanned.

In five minutes everything was ready, and the cart was standing on the roadway in front of the little gate. After he had looked to all the

straps and buckles, and seen that the baggage was properly packed, John went to call Jess. He found her by the doorstep, looking out at her favourite view. Her hand was placed sideways against her forehead, as though to shade her eyes from the sun. But where she was standing there was no sun, and John could not help guessing why she was shading her eyes. She was crying at leaving the place in that quiet and harrowing way which some women indulge in; that is to say, a few big tears were rolling down her face. John felt a lump rise in his own throat at the sight, and not unnaturally relieved his feelings by rough language.

"What the deuce are you after?" he asked. "Are you going to keep the horses standing all day?"

Jess did not resent this. The probability is that she guessed its reason. Besides, it is a melancholy fact that women rather like being sworn at than otherwise, provided that the swearer is the man whom they are attached to. But he must only swear on state occasions. At this moment, too, Mrs. Neville plunged out of the house, licking an envelope as she ran.

"There," she said, "I hope you weren't waiting for me. I haven't told the old gentleman half the news; in fact, I've only taken him down to the time when the communications were cut, and I dare say he has seen all that in the papers. But he won't understand anything about it, and if he does he will guess the rest; besides, for all I know, he may be dead and buried by now. I shall have to owe you for the stamp. I think

it's threepence. I'll pay you when we meet again--that is, if we ever do meet again. I'm beginning to think that this siege will go on for all eternity. There, good-bye, my dear! God bless you! When you get out of it, mind you write to the Times, in London, you know. There, don't cry. I am sure I should not cry if I were going to get out of this place;" for at this point Jess took the opportunity of Mrs. Neville's fervent embrace to burst out into a sob or two.

In another minute they were in the cart, and Mouti was scrambling up behind.

"Don't cry, old girl," said John, laying his hand upon her shoulder.

"What can't be cured must be endured."

"Yes, John," she answered, and dried her tears.

At the headquarter camp John went in and explained the circumstances of his departure. At first the officer who was temporarily in command--the Commandant having been wounded at the same time that John was hit--rather demurred to his going, especially when he learned that he had passed his word not to carry despatches. Presently, however, he thought better of it, and said he supposed that it was all right, as he could not see that their departure could do the garrison any harm: "rather the reverse, in fact, because you can tell people how we are getting on in this God-forsaken hole. I only wish that somebody would give me a pass, that's all." So John shook hands with him and left, to

find an eager crowd gathered outside.

The news of their good luck had gone abroad, and everybody was running down to hear the truth of it. Such an event as a departure out of Pretoria had not happened for a couple of months and more, and the excitement was proportionate to its novelty.

"I say, Niel, is it true you are going?" halloed a burly farmer.

"How the deuce did you get a pass?" put in another man with a face like a weasel. He was what is known as a Boer vernuker (literally a "Boer cheater"), that is, a travelling trader whose business it is to beguile the simple-minded Dutchman by selling him worthless goods at five times their value. "I have loads of friends among the Boers. There is hardly a Boer in the Transvaal who does not know me"--("To his cost," put in a bystander with a grunt)--"and yet I have tried all I know"--("And you know a good deal," said the same rude man)--"and I can't get a pass."

"You don't suppose those poor Boers are going to let you out once they have got you in?" went on the tormentor. "Why, man, it's against human nature. You've got all their wool: now do you think they want you to have their skin too?"

Whereupon the weasel-faced individual uttered a howl of wrath, and pretended to make a rush at the author of these random gibes, waiting halfway for somebody to stop him and prevent a breach of the peace.

"Oh, Miss Croft!" cried out a woman in the crowd, who, like Jess, had been trapped in Pretoria while on a flying visit, "if you can, do send a line to my husband at Maritzburg, to tell him that I am well, except for the rheumatism from sleeping on the wet ground; and tell him to kiss the twins for me."

"I say, Niel, tell those Boers that we will give them a d--d good hiding yet, when Colley relieves us," sang out a jolly young Englishman in the uniform of the Pretoria Carbineers. He little knew that poor Colley--kind-hearted English gentleman that he was--lay sleeping peacefully under six feet of ground with a Boer bullet in his brain.

"Now, Captain Niel, if you are ready, we must trek," said one of the Boers in Dutch, suiting the action to the word by giving the near wheeler a sharp cut with his riding sjambock that made him jump nearly out of the traces.

Away started the horses with a plunge, scattering the crowd to the right and left, and, amid a volley of farewells, they were off upon their homeward journey.

For more than an hour nothing particular happened. John drove at a fair pace, and the two Boers cantered along behind. At the end of this time, however, just as they were approaching the Red House, where Frank Muller had obtained the pass from the General on the previous day, one of the

Boers rode up and told them, roughly enough, that they were to outspan at the house, where they would find some food. As it was past one o'clock, they were by no means sorry to hear this, and John drew up the cart about fifty yards from the place, where they outspanned the horses, and, having watched them roll and drink, they went up to the house.

The two Boers, who had also off-saddled, were already sitting on the verandah, and when Jess looked inquiringly towards them one of them pointed with his pipe towards the little room. Taking the hint, they entered, and found a Hottentot woman just setting some food upon the table.

"Here is dinner; let us eat it," said John; "goodness knows when we will get any more;" and accordingly he sat down.

As he did so the two Boers came in, and one of them made some sneering remark that caused the other to look at them and laugh insultingly.

John flushed, but took no notice. Indeed he thought it safest not, for, to tell the truth, he did not much like the appearance of these two worthies. One of them was a big, smooth, pasty-faced man, with a peculiarly villainous expression of countenance and a prominent tooth that projected in ghastly isolation over his lower lip. The other was a small man, with a sardonic smile, a profusion of black beard and whiskers on his face, and long hair hanging on to his shoulders. Indeed, when he smiled more vigorously than usual, his eyebrows came down and

his whiskers advanced, and his moustache went up till there was scarcely any face left, and he looked more like a great bearded monkey than a human being. This man was a Boer of the wildest type from the far borders of Zoutpansberg, and did not understand a word of English. Jess nicknamed him the Vilderbeeste, from his likeness to that ferocious-looking and hairy animal. His companion, on the other hand, understood English perfectly, for he had passed many years of his life in Natal, having left that colony on account of some little indiscretion about thrashing Kafirs which had brought him into collision with the penal laws. Jess named him the Unicorn, on account of his one gleaming tusk.

The Unicorn was an unusually pious person, and on arriving at the table, to John's astonishment, gently but firmly he grasped the knife with which he was about to cut the meat.

"What's the matter?" said John.

The Boer shook his head sadly. "No wonder, you English are an accursed race, and have been given over into our hands as the great king Agag was given into the hands of the Israelites, so that we have hewed you to pieces. You sit down to meat and give no thanks to the dear Lord," and he threw back his head and sang out a portentously long Dutch grace through his nose. Not content with this, he set to work to translate it to English, which took a good time; nor was the rendering a very finished one in the result.

The Vilderbeeste grinned sardonically and put in a pious "Amen," and then at last they were allowed to proceed with their dinner, which, on the whole, was not a pleasant meal. But they could not expect much pleasure under the circumstances, so they ate their food and made the best of a bad business. After all, it might have been worse: they might have had no dinner to eat.