

CHAPTER XXII

ON THE ROAD

John and Jess had finished their meal, and were about to leave the table, when suddenly the door opened, and who should appear at it but Frank Muller himself! Mistake was impossible; there he stood, stroking his long golden beard, as big, as handsome, and, to Jess's mind, as evil-looking as ever. The cold eyes fell upon John with a glance of recognition, and something like a smile began to play around the corners of the finely cut cruel mouth. Suddenly, however, his gaze lit upon the two Boers, one of whom was picking his teeth with a steel fork and the other lighting his pipe within a few inches of Jess's head, and instantly his face grew stern and angry.

"Did I not tell you two men," he said, "that you were not to eat with the prisoners?"--this word struck awkwardly on Jess's ear. "I told you that they were to be treated with all respect, and here I find you sprawling over the table and smoking in their faces. Be off with you!"

The smooth-faced man with the tusk rose at once with a sigh, put down the steel fork with which he had been operating, and departed, recognising that Meinheer Muller was not a commanding officer to be trifled with, but his companion, the Vilderbeeste, demurred. "What," he said, tossing his head so as to throw the long black hair out of his eyes, "am I not fit to sit at meat with a couple of accursed English--a

rooibaatje and a woman? If I had my way he should clean my boots and she should cut up my tobacco;" and he grinned at the notion till eyebrows, whiskers, and moustache nearly met round his nose, causing him to look for all the world like a hairy-faced baboon.

Frank Muller made no answer in words. He simply took one step forward, pounced upon his insubordinate follower, and with a single swing of his athletic frame sent him flying headlong through the door, so that this free and independent burgher lit upon his head in the passage, smashing his pipe and considerably damaging his best feature--his nose. "There," said Muller, shutting the door after him, "that is the only way to deal with such a fellow. And now let me bid you good-day, Miss Jess," and he extended his hand, which Jess took, rather coldly it must be owned.

"It has given me great pleasure to be able to do you this little service," he added politely. "I had considerable difficulty in obtaining the pass from the General--indeed I was obliged to urge my personal services before he would give it to me. But never mind that, I got it, as you know, and it will be my care to escort you safely to Mooifontein."

Jess bowed, and Muller turned to John, who had risen from his chair and was standing some two paces away, and addressed him. "Captain Niel," he said, "you and I have had some differences in the past. I hope that the service I am doing you will prove that I, for one, bear no malice. I will go farther. As I told you before, I was to blame in that affair in

the inn-yard at Wakkerstroom. Let us shake hands and end what we cannot mend," and he stepped forward and extended his hand.

Jess turned to see what would happen. She knew the whole story, and hoped he would take the man's hand; next, remembering their position, she hoped that he would.

John turned colour a little, then he drew himself up deliberately and put his hand behind his back.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Muller," he said, "but even in our present position I cannot shake hands with you; you will know why."

Jess saw a flush, bred of the furious passion which was his weak point, spread itself over the Boer's face.

"I do not know, Captain Niel. Be so good as to explain."

"Very well, I will," said John calmly. "You tried to assassinate me."

"What do you mean?" thundered Muller.

"What I say. You shot at me twice under pretence of firing at a buck. Look here!"--and he took up his soft black hat, which he still wore--"here is the mark of one of your bullets! I did not know about it then; I do now, and I decline to shake hands with you."

By this time Muller's fury had got the better of him. "You shall answer for that, you English liar!" he said, at the same time clapping his hand to his belt, in which his hunting-knife was placed. Thus for a few seconds they stood face to face. John never flinched or moved. There he stood, quiet and strong as some old stubby tree, his plain honest face and watchful eye affording a strange contrast to the beautiful but demoniacal countenance of the great Dutchman. Presently he spoke in measured tones.

"I have proved myself a better man than yourself once, Frank Muller, and if necessary I will again, notwithstanding that knife of yours. But, in the meantime, I wish to remind you that I have a pass signed by your own General guaranteeing our safety. And now, Mr. Muller," with a flash of the blue eyes, "I am ready." The Dutchman drew the knife, but replaced it in its sheath. For a moment he was minded to end the matter then and there, but suddenly, even in his rage, he remembered that there was a witness.

"A pass from the General!" he said, forgetting his caution in his fury. "Much good a pass from the General is likely to be to you. You are in my power, man! If I choose to close my hand I can crush you. But there--there," he added, checking himself, "perhaps I ought to make allowances. You are one of a defeated people, and no doubt are sore, and say what you do not mean. Anyhow, there is an end of it, especially in the presence of a lady. Some day we may be able to settle our trouble

like men, Captain Niel; till then, with your permission, we will let it drop."

"Quite so, Mr. Muller," said John, "only you must not ask me to shake hands with you."

"Very good, Captain Niel; and now, if you will allow me, I will tell the boy to get your horses in; we must be getting on if we are to reach Heidelberg to-night." And he bowed himself out, feeling that once more his temper had endangered the success of his plans. "Curse the fellow!" he said to himself: "he is what those English call a gentleman. It was brave of him to refuse to take my hand when he is in my power."

"John," said Jess, as soon as the door had closed, "I am afraid of that man. If I had understood that he had anything to do with the pass I would not have taken it. I thought that the writing was familiar to me. Oh dear! I wish we had stopped at Pretoria."

"What can't be cured must be endured," said John again. "The only thing to do is to make the best of it, and get on as we can. You will be all right anyhow, but he hates me like poison. I suppose that it is on account of Bessie."

"Yes, that's it," said Jess: "he is, or was, madly in love with Bessie."

"It is curious to think that a man like that can be in love," remarked

John as he lit his pipe, "but it only shows what queer mixtures people are. I say, Jess, if this fellow hates me so much, what made him give me the pass, eh? What's his game?"

Jess shook her head as she answered, "I don't know, John; I don't like it."

"I suppose he can't mean to murder me; he did try it on once, you know."

"Oh no, John," she answered with a sort of cry, "not that."

"Well, I don't know that it would matter much," he said, with an approach to cheerfulness which was rather a failure. "It would save one a deal of worry, and only anticipate things a bit. But there, I frightened you, and I dare say that, for the present at any rate, he is an honest man, and has no intentions on my person. Look! there is Mouti calling us. I wonder if those brutes have given him anything to eat! We'll secure the rest of this leg of mutton on chance. At any rate, Mr. Frank Muller sha'n't starve me to death," and with a cheerful laugh he left the room.

In a few minutes they were on their road again. As they started Frank Muller came up, took off his hat, and informed them that probably he would join them on the morrow below Heidelberg, in which town they would find every preparation to enable them to spend the night comfortably. If he did not join them it would be because he was detained on duty.

In that case the two men had his orders to escort them safely to Mooifontein, and, he added significantly, "I do not think that you will be troubled with any further impoliteness."

In another moment he had galloped off on his great black horse, leaving the pair considerably mystified and not a little relieved.

"Well," said John, "at any rate that does not look like foul play, unless, indeed, he has gone on to prepare a warm reception for us."

Jess shrugged her shoulders, she could not understand it; and then they settled themselves down to their long lonely drive. They had forty odd miles to cover, but the guides, or rather the guard, would only consent to their outspanning once, which they did on the open veldt a little before sunset. At sundown they inspanned again, and started across the darkening veldt. The road was in a shocking state, and until the moon rose, which it did about nine o'clock, the journey was both difficult and dangerous. After that things were a little better; and at last, about eleven o'clock, they reached Heidelberg. The town seemed almost deserted. Evidently the great body of the Boers were at the front, and had only left a guard at their seat of government.

"Where are we to outspan?" asked John of the Unicorn, who was jogging on alongside, apparently half asleep.

"At the hotel," was the short reply, and thither they went. Thankful

enough they were to reach it, and to find, from the lights in the windows, that people were still about.

Notwithstanding the awful jolting of the cart, Jess had been asleep for the last two hours. Her arm was hooked round the back of the seat, and her head rested against John's great-coat, which he had fixed up in such a way as to make a pillow. "Where are we?" she asked, waking up with a start as the cart stopped. "I have had such a bad dream! I dreamt that I was travelling through life, and that suddenly everything stopped, and I was dead."

"I don't wonder at it," laughed John; "the road for the last ten miles has been as rough as anybody's life. We are at the hotel. Here are the boys to take the horses," and he clambered stiffly out of the cart and helped or rather lifted her down, for she was almost too cramped to move.

Standing at the inn-door, holding a light above her head, they found a pleasant-looking Englishwoman, who welcomed them heartily.

"Frank Muller was here three hours ago, and told me to expect you," she said; "and very glad I am to see an English face again, I can tell you. My name is Gooch. Tell me, is my husband all right in Pretoria? He went up there with his waggon just before the siege began, and I have not heard a word from him since."

"Yes," said John, "he is all right. He was slightly wounded in the shoulder a month ago, but he has quite recovered."

"Oh, thank God!" said the poor woman, beginning to cry; "those devils told me that he was dead--to torment me, I suppose. Come in, miss: there is some hot supper ready when you have washed your hands. The boys will see to the horses."

Accordingly they entered, and were made as happy as a good supper, a hearty welcome, and comfortable beds could make people in their condition.

In the early morning one of their estimable escort sent in a message to say that they were not to start before half-past ten, as the horses required more rest, so they enjoyed some hours longer in bed than they had expected, and anybody who has ever made a journey in a post-cart in South Africa can understand the blessing thereof. At nine they breakfasted, and as the clock struck half-past ten Mouti brought the cart round, and with it came the two Boers.

"Well, Mrs. Gooch," said John, "what do we owe you?"

"Nothing, Captain Niel, nothing. If you only knew what a weight you have taken off my mind! Besides, we are quite ruined; the Boers have looted all my husband's cattle and horses, and until last week six of them were quartered on me without paying a farthing, so it makes no odds to me."

"Never mind, Mrs. Gooch," said John cheerfully, "the Government will compensate you when this business is over, no doubt."

Mrs. Gooch shook her head prophetically. "Never a halfpenny do I expect to see," she said. "If only I can get my husband back, and we can escape out of this wicked place with our lives, I shall be thankful. And look here, Captain Niel, I have put up a basketful of food--bread, meat, and hard-boiled eggs, with a bottle of three-star brandy. It may be useful to you and the young lady before you reach home. I don't know where you will sleep to-night, for the English are still holding Standerton, so you won't be able to stop there, and you can't drive right through. No, don't thank me, I could not do less. Good-bye--good-bye, miss; I hope you will get through all right. You had better look out, though. Those two men you have with you are very bad lots. I heard say, rightly or wrongly, that that fat-faced man with the tooth shot two wounded soldiers through the head after the fight at Bronker's Spruit, and I know no good of the other. They were laughing and talking together about you in the kitchen this morning; one of my boys overheard them, and the Boer with the long hair said that, at any rate, they would not be troubled with you after to-night. I don't know what he meant; perhaps they are going to change the escort; but I thought that I had better tell you."

John looked grave, and his suspicions re-rose, but at that moment one of the men in question rode up and told him that he must start at once,

and so off they went.

This second day's journey was in many respects a counterpart of the first. The road was utterly deserted, and they saw neither Boer, Englishman, nor Kafir upon it; nothing, indeed, except a few herds of game grazing on the ridges. About two o'clock, however, just as they had started after a short outspan, a little incident occurred. Suddenly the Vilderbeeste's horse put his foot into an ant-bear hole and fell heavily, throwing his rider on to his head. He was up in a minute, but his forehead had struck against the jawbone of a dead buck, and the blood was pouring from it down his hairy face. His companion laughed brutally at the accident, for there are some natures in the world to which the sight of pain is irresistibly comical, but the injured man cursed aloud, trying to staunch the flow with the lappet of his coat.

"Waacht een beeche," said Jess, "there is some water in that pool," and telling John to pull up she sprang from the trap and led the man, who was half-blinded with blood, to the spring. Here she made him kneel down and bathed the wound, which was not a very deep one, till it stopped bleeding, and then, having first placed a pad of cotton-wool, some of which she happened to have in the cart, upon it, she bound her handkerchief tightly round his head. The man, brute as he was, appeared to be much touched at her kindness.

"Almighty," he said, "but you have a kind heart and soft fingers; my own wife could not have done it better; it is a pity that you are a damned

Englishwoman."

Jess climbed back into the cart, making no reply, and they started on, the Vilderbeeste looking more savage and unhuman than ever with the discoloured handkerchief round his head, and his dense black beard and hair matted with gore which he would not take the trouble to wash out of them.

After this nothing further occurred till, by the orders of their escort, they outspanned, an hour or so before sunset, at a spot in the veldt where a faint track forked from the Standerton road.