

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE DRIFT OF THE VAAL

The day had been intensely hot, and our travellers sat in the shade of the cart overpowered and gasping. During the afternoon a faint breeze blew, but this had now died away, and the stifling air felt as thick as though they were breathing cream. Even the two Boers seemed to feel the heat, for they lay outstretched on the grass a few paces to the left, to all appearance fast asleep. As for the horses, they were thoroughly done up--too much so to eat--and hobbled along as well as their knee-halters would allow, daintily picking a mouthful here and a mouthful there. The only person who did not seem to mind was the Zulu Mouti, who sat on an ant-heap near the horses, in full glare of the setting sun, and comfortably droned out a little song of his own invention, for Zulus seem as clever at improvising as are the Italians.

"Have another egg, Jess?" said John. "It will do you good."

"No, thank you; the last one stuck in my throat. It is impossible to eat in this heat."

"You had better. Goodness knows when and where we shall stop again. I can get nothing out of our delightful escort; either they don't know or they won't say."

"I can't, John. There is a thunderstorm coming up. I feel it in my head, and I can never eat before a thunderstorm--and when I am tired," she added by an afterthought.

After that the conversation flagged for a while.

"John," said Jess at last, "where do you suppose we are going to camp to-night? If we follow the main road we shall reach Standerton in an hour."

"I don't think that they will go near Standerton," he answered, "I suppose that we shall cross the Vaal by another drift and have to 'veldt' it."

Just then the two Boers woke up and began to talk earnestly together, as though they were debating something hotly.

Slowly the huge red ball of the sun sank towards the horizon, steeping the earth and sky in blood. About a hundred yards from where they sat the little bridle path that branched from the main road crossed the crest of one of the great landwaves which rolled away in every direction towards the far horizon. John watched the sun sinking behind it till something called off his attention for a minute. When he looked up again there was a figure on horseback, standing quite still upon the crest of the ridge, and in full glow of the now disappearing sun. It was Frank Muller. John recognised him in a moment. His horse was halted sideways,

so that even at that distance every line of his features, and even the trigger-guard of the rifle which rested on his knee, showed distinctly against the background of smoky red. Nor was that all. Both he and his horse had the appearance of being absolutely on fire. The effect produced was so wild and extraordinary that John called his companion's attention to it. Jess looked and shuddered involuntarily.

"He looks like a devil in hell," she said; "the fire seems to be running all up and down him."

"Well," said John, "he is certainly a devil, but I am sorry to say that he has not yet reached his destination. Here he comes, like a whirlwind."

In another twenty seconds Muller had reined the great black horse on to his haunches alongside of them, and was smiling sweetly and taking off his hat.

"You see I have managed to keep my word," he said. "I can tell you that I had great difficulty in doing so; indeed I was nearly obliged to give the thing up at the last moment. However, here I am."

"Where are we to outspan to-night?" asked Jess. "At Standerton?"

"No," he said; "I am afraid that is more than I could manage for you, unless you can persuade the English officers there to surrender. What

I have arranged is, that we should cross the Vaal at a drift I know of about two hours (twelve miles) from here, and outspan at a farm on the other side. Do not trouble, I assure you you shall both sleep well to-night," and he smiled, a somewhat terrifying smile, as Jess thought.

"But how about this drift, Mr. Muller?" said John. "Is it safe? I should have thought the Vaal would have been in flood after all the rain that we have had."

"The drift is perfectly safe, Captain Niel. I crossed it myself about two hours ago. I know you have a bad opinion of me, but I suppose you do not think that I would guide you to an unsafe drift?" Then with another bow he rode on to speak to the two Boers, saying, as he went, "Will you tell the Kafir to put the horses in?"

With a shrug of the shoulders John rose and went to Mouti, to help him to drive up the four greys, which were now standing limply together, biting at the flies, that, before a storm, sting more sharply than at any other time. The two horses belonging to the escort were some fifty paces to the left. It was as though they appreciated the position of affairs, and declined to mix with the animals of the discredited Englishman.

The Boers rose as Muller came and walked towards their horses, Muller slowly following them. As they drew near, the horses hobbled away for twenty or thirty yards. Then they lifted up their heads, and, as a

consequence, their forelegs, to which the heads were tied, and stood looking defiantly at their captors, just as though they were trying to make up their minds whether or not to shake hands with them.

Frank Muller was alongside the two men now, and they were alongside the horses.

"Listen!" he said sternly.

The men looked up.

"Go on loosening the reims, and listen."

They obeyed, and slowly began to fumble at the knee-halters.

"You understand what our orders are. Repeat them--you!"

The man with the tooth, who was addressed, still handling the reim, began as follows: "To take the two prisoners to the Vaal, to force them into the water where there is no drift, at night, so that they drown: if they do not drown, to shoot them."

"Those are the orders," said the Vilderbeeste, grinning.

"You understand them?"

"We understand, Meinheer; but, forgive us, the matter is a big one. You have the orders--we wish to see the authority."

"Yah, yah," said the other, "show us the authority. These are two harmless people enough. Show us the authority for killing them. People must not be killed so, even if they are English folk, without proper authority, especially when one is a pretty girl who would do for a man's wife."

Frank Muller set his teeth. "Nice fellows you are to have under one!" he said. "I am your officer; what other authority do you want? But I thought of this. See here!" and he drew a paper from his pocket. "Here, you--read it! Careful now--do not let them see from the waggon."

The big flabby-faced man took the paper and, still bending down over the horse's knee, read aloud:

"The two prisoners and their servant (an Englishman, an English girl, and a Zulu Kafir) to be executed in pursuance of our decree, as your commanding officer shall order, as enemies to the Republic. For so doing this shall be your warrant."

"You see the signature," said Muller, "and you do not dispute it?"

"Yah, we see it, and we do not dispute it."

"Good. Give me back the warrant."

The man with the tooth was about to obey when his companion interposed.

"No," he said, "the warrant must remain with us. I do not like the job. If it were only the man and the Kafir now--but the girl, the girl! If we give you back the warrant, what shall we have to show for the deed of blood? The warrant must remain with us."

"Yah, yah, he is right," said the Unicorn; "the warrant must remain with us. Put it in your pocket, Jan."

"Curse you, give it me!" said Muller between his teeth.

"No, Frank Muller, no!" answered the Vilderbeeste, patting his pocket, while the two or three square inches of skin round his nose wrinkled up in a hairy grin that, owing to the cut on his head, was even more curious than usual. "If you wish to have the warrant you shall have it, but then we shall up-saddle and go, and you can do your murdering yourself. There, there! take your choice; we shall be glad enough to get home, for we do not care for the job. If I go out shooting I like to shoot buck or Kafirs, not white people."

Frank Muller reflected a moment, then he laughed a little.

"You are funny folk, you home-bred Boers," he said; "but perhaps you are

right. After all, what does it matter who keeps the warrant, provided that the thing is well done? Mind that there is no bungling, that is all."

"Yah, yah," said the fat-faced man, "you can trust us for that. It won't be the first that we have toppled over. If I have my warrant I ask nothing better than to go on shooting Englishmen all night, one down the other come on. I know no prettier sight than an Englishman toppling over."

"Stop that talk and saddle up, the cart is waiting. You fools can never understand the difference between killing when it is necessary to kill and killing for killing's sake. These people must die because they have betrayed the land."

"Yah, yah," said the Vilderbeeste, "betrayed the land; we have heard that before. Those who betray the land must manure it; that is a good rule!" and he laughed and passed on.

Frank Muller watched his retreating form with a smile of peculiar malignity on his handsome face. "Ah, my friend," he said to himself in Dutch, "you and that warrant will part company before you are many hours older. Why, it would be enough to hang me, even in this happy land of patriots. Old ---- would never forgive even me for taking that little liberty with his name. Dear me, what a lot of trouble it is to be rid of a single enemy! Well, it must be done, and Bessie is well worth the

pains; but if it had not been for this war I could never have managed it. Yes! I did well to give my voice for war. I am sorry for the girl Jess, but it is necessary; there must be no living witnesses left. Ah! we are going to have a storm. So much the better. Such deeds are best done in a storm."

Muller was right; the storm was coming up fast, throwing a veil of inky cloud across the star-spangled sky. In South Africa there is but little twilight, and the darkness follows hard upon the heels of the day. No sooner had the angry ball of the setting sun disappeared than the night swept with all her stars across the sky. And now after her came the great storm, covering up her beauty with his blackness. The air was stiflingly hot. Above was a starry space, to the east the black bosom of the storm, in which the lightnings were already playing with an incessant flickering movement, and to the west a deep red glow, reflected from the sunken sun, yet lingered on the horizon.

On toiled the horses through the gathering gloom. Fortunately, the road was almost level and free from mud-holes, and Frank Muller rode just ahead to show the way, his strong athletic form standing out clearly against the departing western glow. Silent was the earth, silent as death. No bird or beast, no blade of grass or breath of air stirred upon its surface. The only sign of life was the continual flickering of those awful tongues of light as they licked the lips of the storm. On for mile after mile, on through the desolation! They were not far from the river now, and could hear the distant growling of the thunder, echoing down it

solemnly.

It was an awful night. Great pillars of mud-coloured cloud came creeping across the surface of the veldt towards them, seemingly blown along without a wind. Now, too, a ghastly-looking ringed moon arose throwing an unholy and distorted light upon the blackness that seemed to shudder in her rays as though with a prescience of the advancing terror. On crept the mud-coloured columns, and on above them, and resting on them, came the muttering storm. The cart was quite close to the river now, and they could distinguish the murmur of its waters. To their left stood a koppie, covered with white, slab-like stones, on which the sickly moonbeams danced.

"Look, John, look!" cried Jess with an hysterical laugh; "it is like a huge graveyard, and the dark shadows between are the ghosts of the buried."

"Nonsense," said John sternly; "why do you talk such rubbish?"

He felt that her mind had lost its balance, and, what is more, his own nerves were shaken. Therefore he was naturally the angrier with her, and the more determined to be perfectly matter-of-fact.

Jess made no answer, but she was frightened, she could not tell why. The scene resembled that of some awful dream, or of one of Dore's pictures come to life. No doubt, also, the near presence of the tempest exercised

a physical effect upon her. Even the wearied horses snorted and shook themselves uneasily.

They crept over the ridge of a wave of land, and the wheels rolled softly on the grass.

"Why, we are off the road!" shouted John to Muller, who was still guiding them, fifteen or twenty paces ahead.

"All right! all right! it is a short cut to the ford!" he called in answer, and his voice rang strange and hollow through the great depths of the silence.

Below them, a hundred yards away, the light, such as it was, gleamed faintly upon the wide surface of the river. Another five minutes and they were on the bank, but in the gathering doom they could not see the opposite shore.

"Turn to the left!" shouted Muller; "the ford is a few yards up. It is too deep here for the horses."

John turned accordingly, and followed Muller's horse some three hundred yards up the bank till they came to a spot where the water ran with an angry music, and there was a great swirl of eddies.

"Here is the place," said Muller; "you must make haste through. The

house is just the other side, and it will be better to get there before the tempest breaks."

"It is all very well," said John, "but I cannot see an inch before me; I don't know where to drive."

"Drive straight ahead; the water is not more than three feet deep, and there are no rocks."

"I am not going, and that is all about it."

"You must go, Captain Niel. You cannot stop here, and if you can we will not. Look there, man!" and he pointed to the east, which now presented a truly awful and magnificent sight.

Down, right on to them, its centre bowed out like the belly of a sail by the weight of the wind behind, swept the great storm-cloud, while over all its surface the lightning played unceasingly, appearing and disappearing in needles of fire, and twisting and writhing serpentwise round and about its outer edges. So brilliant was the intermittent light that it appeared to fire the revolving pillars of mud-coloured cloud beneath, and gave ghastly peeps of river and bank and plain, miles upon miles away. But perhaps its most awful circumstance was the preternatural silence. The distant boom and muttering of thunder had died away, and now the great storm swept on in voiceless majesty, like the passage of a ghostly host, from which there arose no sound of feet

or of rolling wheels. Only before it sped the swift angels of the wind, and behind it swung the curtain of the rain.

Even as Muller spoke a gust of icy air caught the cart and tilted it, and the lightning needles began to ply more dreadfully than ever. The tempest was breaking upon them.

"Come, drive on, drive on!" he shouted, "you will be killed here; the lightning always strikes along the water;" and as he said it he struck one of the wheelers sharply with his whip.

"Climb over the back of the seat, Mouti, and stand by to help me with the reins!" called out John to the Zulu, who obeyed, scrambling between him and Jess.

"Now, Jess, hold on and say your prayers, for it strikes me that we shall have need of them. So, horses, so!"

The horses backed and plunged, but Muller on the one side and the smooth-faced Boer on the other lashed them without mercy, and at last they went into the river with a rush. The gust had passed now, and for a few moments the heavy quiet was renewed, except for the whirl of the water and the snake-like hiss of the coming rain.

For some yards, ten or fifteen perhaps, all went well, and then John discovered suddenly that they were driving into deep water; the two

leaders were evidently almost off their legs, and could scarcely stand against the current of the flooded river.

"Damn you!" he shouted back, "there is no drift here."

"Go on, go on, it is quite safe!" came Muller's voice in answer.

John said no more, but, putting out all his strength, he tried to drag the horses round. Jess turned herself on the seat to look, and just then a blaze of lightning flamed which revealed Muller and his two companions standing dismounted on the bank, the muzzles of their rifles pointing straight at the cart.

"O God!" she screamed, "they are going to shoot us."

Even as the words passed her lips three tongues of fire flared from the rifles' mouths, and the Zulu Mouti, sitting by her side, pitched heavily forward on to his head into the bottom of the cart, while one of the wheelers reared straight up into the air with a shriek of agony, and fell with a splash into the river.

Then followed a scene of horror indescribable. Overhead the storm burst in fury, and flash after flash of fork, or rather chain lightning, leapt into the river. The thunder, too, began to crack like the tramp of doom; the wind rushed down, tearing the surface of the water into foam, and, catching under the tent of the cart, lifted it quite off the wheels, so

that it began to float. Then the two leaders, made mad with fear by the fury of the storm and the dying struggles of the off-wheeler, plunged and tore at the traces till at last they rent themselves loose and vanished between the darkness overhead and the boiling water beneath. Away floated the cart, now touching the bottom and now riding on the river like a boat, oscillating this way and that, and slowly turning round and round. With it floated the dead horse, dragging down the other wheeler beneath the water. It was awful to see his struggles in the glare of the lightning, but at last he sank and choked.

Meanwhile, sounding sharply and clearly through the din and hubbub of the storm, came the cracking of the three rifles whenever the flashes showed the position of the cart to the murderers on the bank. Mouti was lying still in the bottom of it on the bed-plank, a bullet between his broad shoulders and another in his skull: but John felt that his life was yet whole in him, though something had hissed past his face and stung it. Instinctively he reached across the cart and drew Jess on to his knee, and cowered over her, thinking dimly that perhaps his body would protect her from the bullets.

Rip! rip! through the wood and canvas; phut! phut! through the air; but some merciful power protected them, and though one cut John's coat and two passed through the skirt of Jess's dress, not a bullet struck them. Very soon the shooting began to grow wild, then that dense veil of rain came down and wrapped them so closely that even the lightning could not reveal their whereabouts to the assassins on the bank.

"Stop shooting," said Frank Muller; "the cart has sunk, and there is an end of them. No human being can have lived through that fire and the Vaal in flood."

The two Boers ceased firing, and the Unicorn shook his head softly and remarked to his companion that the damned English people in the water could not be much wetter than they were on the bank. It was a curious thing to say at such a moment, but probably the spirit which caused the remark was not so much callousness as that which animated Cromwell, who flipped the ink in his neighbour's face when he signed the death-warrant of his king.

The Vilderbeeste made no reply. His conscience was oppressed; he had a touch of imagination. He thought of the soft fingers which had bound up his head that morning: the handkerchief--her handkerchief!--was still around it. Now those fingers would be gripping at the slippery stones of the Vaal in a struggle for life, or more probably they were already limp in death, with little grains of gravel sticking beneath the nails.

It was a painful thought, but he consoled himself by remembering the warrant, also by the reflection that whoever had shot the people he had not, for he had been careful to fire wide of the cart every time.

Muller was also thinking of the warrant which he had forged. He must get it back somehow, even if---

"Let us take shelter under the shore. There is a flat place, about fifty yards up, where the bank hangs down. This rain is drowning us. We can't up-saddle till it clears. I must have a nip of brandy, too. Almighty! I can see that girl's face still! the lightning shone on it just as I shot. Well, she will be in heaven now, poor thing, if English people ever go to heaven."

It was the Unicorn who spoke, and the Vilderbeeste made no reply, but advanced with him to where the horses stood. They caught the patient brutes that were waiting for their masters, their heads well down and the water streaming from their flanks, and led them along with them. Frank Muller stood by his own horse still thinking, and watched them vanish into the gloom. How was he to win that warrant back without dying his hands even redder than they were?

As he thought an answer came. For at that moment, accompanied by a fearful thunderclap, there shot from the storm overhead, which had now nearly passed away, one of those awful flashes that sometimes end an African tempest. It lit up the scene with a light vivid as that of day, and in the white heart of it Muller saw his two companions in crime and their horses as the great king saw the men in the furnace. They were about forty paces from him on the crest of the bank. He saw them, one moment erect; the next--men and horses falling this way and that prone to the earth. Then it was dark again.

Muller staggered with the shock, and when it had passed he rushed to the

spot, calling the men by name; but no answer came except the echo of his voice. He was there alone now, and the moonlight began to struggle faintly through the rain. Its pale beams lit upon two outstretched forms--one lying on its back, its distorted features gazing up to heaven, the other on its face. By them, the legs of the nearer sticking straight into the air, lay the horses. They had all gone to their account. The lightning had killed them, as it kills many a man in Africa.

Frank Muller looked; then, forgetting about the warrant and everything else in the horror of what he took to be a visible judgment, he rushed to his horse and galloped wildly away, pursued by all the terrors of hell.