

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

The firing from the bank had ceased, and John, who still kept his head, being a rather phlegmatic specimen of the Anglo-Saxon race, knew that, for the moment at any rate, all danger from this source was ended. Jess lay perfectly still in his arms, her head upon his breast. A horrible idea struck him that she might be shot, perhaps already dead!

"Jess, Jess," he shouted, through the turmoil of the storm, "are you hit?"

She lifted her head an inch or two--"I think not," she said. "What is going on?"

"God only knows, I don't. Sit still, it will be all right."

But in his heart he knew it was not "all right," and that they stood in imminent danger of death by drowning. They were whirling down a raging river in a cart. In a few moments it was probable that the cart would upset, and then----

Presently the wheel bumped against something, the cart gave a great lurch, and scraped along a little.

"Now for it," thought John, for the water was pouring over the flooring. Then came a check, and the cart leant still farther to one side.

Crack! The pole had gone, and the cart swung round bows, or rather box, on to the stream. What had happened was this: they had drifted across a rock that projected from the bed of the river, the force of the current having washed the dead horses to the one side of it and the cart to the other. Consequently they were anchored to the rock, as it were, the anchor being the dead horses, and the cable the stout traces of untanned leather. So long as these traces and the rest of the harness held, they were safe from drowning; but of course they did not know this.

Indeed, they knew nothing. Above them rolled the storm; about them the river seethed and the rain hissed. They knew nothing except that they were helpless living atoms tossing between the wild waters and the wilder night, with imminent death staring them in the face, around, above, and below. To and fro they rocked, locked fast in each other's arms, and as they swung came that awful flash that, though they guessed it not, sent two of the murderers to their account, and for an instant, even through the sheet of rain, illumined the space of boiling water and the long lines of the banks on either side. It showed the point of rock to which they were fixed, it glared upon the head of one of the poor horses tossed up by the driving current as though it were still trying to escape its watery doom, and revealed the form of the dead Zulu, Mouti, lying on his face, one arm hanging over the edge of the cart and

dabbling in the water that ran level with it, in ghastly similarity to some idle passenger in a pleasure boat, who lets his fingers slip softly through the stream.

In a second it was gone, and once more they were in darkness. Then by degrees the storm passed off and the moon began to shine, feebly indeed, for the sky was not clear washed of clouds, which still trailed along in the tracks of the tempest, sucked after it by its mighty draught. Still it was lighter and the rain thinned gradually till at last it stopped. The storm had rolled in majesty down the ways of night, and there was no sound round them save the sound of rushing water.

"John," said Jess presently, "can we do anything?"

"Nothing, dear."

"Shall we escape, John?"

He hesitated. "It is in God's hands, dear. We are in great danger. If the cart upsets we shall be drowned. Can you swim?"

"No, John."

"If we can hang on here till daylight we may get ashore, if those devils are not there to shoot us. I do not think that our chance is a good one."

"John, are you afraid to die?"

He hesitated. "I don't know, dear. I hope to meet it like a man."

"Tell me what you truly think. Is there any hope for us at all?"

Once more he paused, reflecting whether or no he should speak the truth. Finally he decided to do so.

"I can see none, Jess. If we are not drowned we are sure to be shot. They will wait about the bank till morning, and for their own sakes they will not dare to let us live."

He did not know that all which was left of two of them would indeed wait for many a long year, while the third had fled aghast.

"Jess, dear," he went on, "it is of no good to tell lies. Our lives may end any minute. Humanly speaking, they must end before the sun is up."

The words were awful enough--if the reader can by an effort of imagination throw himself for a moment into the position of these two, he will understand how awful.

It is a dreadful thing, when in the flow of health and youth, suddenly to be placed face to face with the certainty of violent death, and to

know that in a few more minutes your course will have been run, and that you will have commenced to explore a future, which may prove to be even worse, because more enduring, than the life you are now quitting in agony. It is a dreadful thing, as any who have ever stood in such a peril can testify, and John felt his heart sink within him at the thought of it--for Death is very strong. But there is one thing stronger, a woman's perfect love, against which Death himself cannot prevail. And so it came to pass that now as he fixed his cold gaze upon Jess's eyes they answered him with a strange unearthly light. She feared not Death, so that she might meet him with her beloved. Death was her hope and opportunity. Here she had nothing; there she might have all. The fetters had fallen from her, struck off by an overmastering hand. Her duty was satisfied, her trust fulfilled, and she was free--free to die with her beloved. Ay! her love was indeed a love deeper than the grave; and now it rose in eager strength, standing expectant upon the earth, ready, when dissolution had lent it wings, to soar to its own predestined star.

"You are sure, John?" she asked again.

"Yes, dear, yes. Why do you force me to repeat it? I can see no hope."

Her arms were round his neck, her soft curls rested on his cheek, and the breath from her lips played upon his brow. Indeed it was only by speaking into each other's ears that conversation was possible, owing to the rushing sound of the waters.

"Because I have something to tell you which I cannot tell unless we are going to die. You know it, but I want to say it with my own lips before I die. I love you, John, I love you, I love you; and I am glad to die because I can die with you, and go away with you."

He heard, and such was the power of her love, that his, which had been put out of mind in the terror of that hour, reawoke and took the colour of her own. He too forgot the imminence of death in the warm presence of his down-trodden passion. She was in his arms as he had taken her during the firing, and he bent his head to look at her. The moonlight played upon her pallid, quivering face, and showed that in her eyes which no man could look upon and turn away. Once more--yes, even then--there came over him that feeling of utter surrender to the sweet mastery of her will which had possessed him in the sitting-room of "The Palatial."

Only all earthly considerations having faded into nothingness now, he no longer hesitated, but pressed his lips to hers and kissed her again and yet again. It was perhaps as wild and pathetic a love scene as ever the old moon above has witnessed. There they clung, those two, in the actual shadow of death experiencing the fullest and acutest joy that our life has to offer. Nay, death was present with them, for, beneath their very feet, half-hidden by the water, lay the stiffening corpse of the Zulu.

To and fro swung the cart in the rush of the swollen river, up and down beside them the carcasses of the horses rose and fell with the surge of the water, on whose surface the broken moonbeams played and quivered.

Overhead was the blue star-sown depth through which they were waiting presently to pass, and to the right and left the long broken outlines of the banks stretched away till at last they appeared to grow together in the gloom.

But they heeded none of these things; they remembered nothing except that they had found each other's hearts, and were happy with a wild joy it is not often given to us to feel. The past was forgotten, the future loomed at hand, and between the one and the other was spanned a bridge of passion made perfect and sanctified by its approaching earthly end. Bessie was forgotten, all things were forgotten, for they were alone with Love and Death.

Let those who would blame them pause awhile. Why not? They had kept the faith. They had denied themselves and run straightly down the path of duty. But the compacts of life end with life. No man may bargain for the beyond; even the marriage service shrinks from it. And now that hope had gone and life was at its extremest ebb, why should they not take their joy before they passed to the land where, perchance, such things will be forgotten? So it seemed to them; if indeed they were any longer capable of reason.

He looked into her eyes and she laid her head upon his heart in that mute abandonment of worship which is sometimes to be met with in the world, and is redeemed from vulgar passion by an indefinable quality of its own. He looked into her eyes and was glad to have lived, ay, even to

have reached this hour of death. And she, lost in the abyss of her deep nature, sobbed out her love-laden heart upon his breast, and called him her own, her own, her very own!

Thus the long hours passed unheeded, till at last a new-born freshness in the air told them that they were not far from dawn. The death they were awaiting had not found them. It must now be very near at hand.

"John," she whispered in his ear, "do you think that they will shoot us?"

"Yes," he answered hoarsely; "they must for their own sakes."

"I wish it were over," she said.

Suddenly she started back from his arms with a little cry, causing the cart to rock violently.

"I forgot," she said; "you can swim, though I cannot. Why should you not swim to the bank, and escape under cover of the darkness? It is only fifty yards, and the current is not so very swift."

The idea of flight without Jess had never occurred to John, and now that she suggested it, it struck him as so absurd that he broke into the

ghost of a laugh.

"Don't be foolish, Jess," he said.

"Yes, yes, I will. Go! You must go! It does not matter about me now. I know that you love me, and I can die happy. I will wait for you. Oh, John! wherever I am, if I have any individual life and any remembrance I will wait for you. Never forget that all your days. However far I may seem away, if I live at all, I shall be waiting for you. And now go; you shall go, I say. No, I will not be disobeyed. If you will not go I will throw myself into the water. Oh, the cart is turning over!"

"Hold on, for God's sake!" shouted John. "The traces have broken."

He was right; the tough leather was at length worn through by constant rubbing against the rock, and the strain and sway of the dead horses on the one side, and of the cart upon the other. Round it spun, broadside on to the current, and immediately began to heave over, till at last the angle was so sharp that the dead body of poor Mouti slid out with a splash and vanished into the darkness. This relieved the cart, and it righted for a moment, but now being no longer held up by the bodies of the horses or by the sustaining power of the wind it began to fill and sink, and at the same time to revolve swiftly. John understood that all was finished, and that to stop in the cart would only mean certain death, because they would be held under water by the canvas tent. So with a devout aspiration for assistance he seized Jess round the waist

with one arm and sprang off into the river. As he leapt the cart filled and sank.

"Lie still, for Heaven's sake!" he shouted, when they rose to the surface.

In the dim light of the dawn which was now creeping over the earth he could discover the line of the left bank of the Vaal, the same from which they had been driven into the river on the previous night. It appeared to be about forty yards away, but the current was running quite six knots, and he saw that, burdened as he was, it would be quite impracticable for him to reach it. The only thing to do was to keep afloat. Luckily the water was warm and he was a strong swimmer. In a minute or so he saw that about fifty paces ahead some rocks jutted out twenty yards into the bed of the stream. Then catching Jess by the hair with his left hand he made his effort, and a desperate one it was. The broken water boiled furiously round the rocks. Presently he was in it, and, better still, his feet touched the ground. Next second he was swept off them and rolled over and over at the bottom of the river, to be sadly knocked about against the boulders. Somehow he struggled to his legs, still retaining his hold of Jess. Twice he fell, and twice he struggled up again. One more effort--so. The water was only up to his thighs now, and he was obliged to half carry his companion.

As he lifted her he felt a deadly sickness come over him, but still he staggered on, till at last they both fell of a heap upon a big flat

rock, and for a while he remembered no more.

When he came to himself again it was to see Jess, who had recovered sooner than he had, standing over him and chafing his hands. Indeed, as the sun was up he guessed that he must have lost his senses for some time. He rose with difficulty and shook himself. Except for some bruises he was sound enough.

"Are you hurt?" he asked of Jess, who, pale, faint and bruised, her hat gone, her dress torn by bullets and the rocks, and dripping water at every step, looked an exceedingly forlorn object.

"No," she said feebly, "not very much."

He sat down on the rock in the sun, for they were both shivering with cold. "What is to be done?" he asked.

"Die," she said fiercely; "I meant to die--why did you not let me die? Ours is a position that only death can set straight."

"Don't be alarmed," he said, "your desire will soon be gratified: those murderous villains will hunt us up presently."

The bed and banks of the river were clothed with thin layers of mist, but as the sun gathered power these lifted. The spot at which they had climbed ashore was about three hundred yards below that where the

two Boers and their horses had been destroyed by the lightning on the previous night. Seeing the mist thin, John insisted upon Jess crouching with him behind a rock so that they could look up and down the river without being seen themselves. Presently he made out the forms of two horses grazing about a hundred yards away.

"Ah," he said, "I thought so; the devils have off-saddled there. Thank Heaven I have still got my revolver, and the cartridges are watertight. I mean to sell our lives as dearly as I can."

"Why, John," cried Jess, following the line of his out-stretched hand, "those are not the Boers' horses, they are our two leaders that broke loose in the water. Look, their collars are still on."

"By Jove! so they are. Now if only we can catch them without being caught ourselves we have a chance of getting out of this."

"Well, there is no cover about, and I can't see any signs of Boers. They must have been sure of having killed us, and gone away," Jess answered.

John looked round, and for the first time a sense of hope began to creep into his heart. Perhaps they would survive after all.

"Let's go up and look. It is no good stopping here; we must get food somewhere, or we shall faint."

She rose without a word, and taking his hand they advanced together along the bank. They had not gone twenty yards before John uttered an exclamation of joy and rushed at something white that had lodged in the reeds. It was the basket of food which was given to them by the innkeeper's wife at Heidelberg that had been washed out of the cart, and as the lid was fastened nothing was lost out of it. He undid it. There was the bottle of three-star brandy untouched, also most of the eggs, meat, and bread, the last, of course, sodden and worthless. It did not take long to draw the cork, and then John filled a broken wineglass there was in the basket half full of water and half of brandy, and made Jess drink it, with the result that she began to look a little less like a corpse. Next, he repeated the process twice on his own account, and instantly felt as though new life were flowing into him. Then they went on cautiously.

The horses allowed themselves to be caught without trouble, and did not appear to be any the worse for the adventure, although the flank of one was grazed by a bullet.

"There is a tree yonder where the bank shelves over; we had better tie the horses up, dress, and eat some breakfast," said John, almost cheerfully; and accordingly they proceeded towards it. Suddenly John, who was ahead, started back with an exclamation of fear, and the horses began to snort, for there, stark and stiff in death, already swollen and discoloured by decomposition--as is sometimes the case with people killed by lightning--the rifles in their hands twisted and fused, their

clothes cut and blown from their bandoliers--lay the two Boer murderers. It was a terrifying sight, and, taken in conjunction with their own remarkable escape, one to make the most careless and sceptical reflect.

"And yet there are people who say that there is no God, and no punishment for wickedness," said John aloud.