

## CHAPTER XXVII

### SILAS IS CONVINCED

At first Bessie was utterly prostrated by the blow that had fallen on her, but as time went on she revived a little, for hers was an elastic and a sanguine nature. Troubles sink into the souls of some like water into a sponge, and weight them down almost to the grave. From others they run off as the water does if poured upon marble, merely wetting the surface.

Bessie belonged to neither of these classes, but was of a substance between the two--a healthy, happy-hearted woman, full of beauty and vigour, made to bloom in the sunshine, not to languish in the shadow of some old grief. Women of her stamp do not die of broken hearts or condemn themselves to life-long celibacy as a sacrifice to the shade of the departed. If unfortunately No. 1 is removed, as a general rule they shed many a tear and suffer many a pang, and after a decent interval very sensibly turn their attention to No. 2.

Still it was but a pale-faced, quiet Bessie who went to and fro about the place after the visit of the one-eyed Kafir. All her irritability had left her now; she no longer reproached her uncle because he had despatched John to Pretoria. Indeed, on that very evening after the evil tidings came, he began to blame himself bitterly in her presence for having sent her lover away, when she stopped him.

"It is God's will, uncle," she said quietly. "You only did what it was ordained that you should do." Then she came and laid her sunny head upon the old man's shoulder and cried a little, and said that they two were all alone in the world now; and he comforted her in the best fashion that he could. It was a curious thing that they neither of them thought much of Jess when they talked thus of being alone. Jess was an enigma, a thing apart even from them. When she was there she was loved and allowed to go her own way, when she was not there she seemed to fade into outer darkness. A veil came down between her and her belongings. Of course they were both very fond of her, but simple-natured people are apt to shrink from what they cannot understand, and these two were no exception to the rule. For instance, Bessie's affection for her sister was a poor thing compared to the deep and self-sacrificing, though often secret love that her sister showered upon her. She loved her old uncle far more dearly than she loved Jess, and it must be owned that he returned her attachment with interest, and in those days of heavy trouble they drew nearer to each other than ever they were before.

But as time went on they began to hope again. No confirmation of John's death reached them. Was it not possible then, after all, that the story was an invention? They knew that Frank Muller was not a man to hesitate at a lie if he had a purpose to gain, and they could guess in this case what that purpose was. His furious passion for Bessie was no secret from either of them, and it occurred to them as possible that the tale of John's death might have been invented to forward it. This was scarcely

probable, it is true, but it might be so, and however cruel suspense may be, it is at least less absolutely crushing than the dead weight of certainty.

One Sunday--it was just a week since the letter came--Bessie was sitting after dinner on the verandah, when her quick ears caught what she took to be the booming of heavy guns far away on the Drakensberg. She rose, and leaving the house, climbed the hill behind it. On reaching its top she stood and looked at the great solemn stretch of mountains. Away, a little to her right, was a square precipitous peak called Majuba, which was generally clothed in clouds. To-day, however, there was no mist, and it seemed to her that it was from the direction of this peak that the faint rolling sounds came floating on the breeze. But she could see nothing; the mountain seemed as tenantless and devoid of life as on the day when it first towered up upon the face of things created. Presently the sounds died away, and she returned, thinking that she must have been deceived by the echoes of some distant thunderstorm.

Next day they learnt from the natives that what she had heard was the roar of the big guns covering the flight of the British troops down the precipitous sides of Majuba Mountain. After these tidings old Silas Croft began to lose heart a little. The run of disaster was so unrelieved that even his robust faith in the invincibility of the English arms was shaken.

"It is very strange, Bessie," he said, "very strange; but, never mind,

it is bound to come right at last. Our Government is not going to knock under because it has suffered a few reverses."

Then followed a long four weeks of uncertainty. The air was thick with rumours, most of them brought by natives, and one or two by passing Boers, to which Silas Croft declined to pay any attention. Soon, however, it became abundantly clear that an armistice was concluded between the English and the Boers, but what were its terms or its object they were quite unable to decide. Silas Croft thought that the Boers, overawed by the advance of an overwhelming force, meant to give in without further fighting;[\*] but Bessie shook her head.

[\*] This is said on good authority to have been their intention had not Mr. Gladstone surprised them by his sudden surrender.--Author.

One day--it was the same on which John and Jess left Pretoria--a Kafir brought the news that the armistice was at an end, that the English were advancing up to the Nek in thousands, and were going to force it on the morrow and relieve the garrisons--a piece of intelligence that brought some of the old light back to Bessie's eyes. As for her uncle, he was jubilant.

"The tide is going to turn, at last, my love," he said, "and we shall have our innings. Well, it is time we should, after all the disgrace, loss and agony of mind we have gone through. Upon my word, for the last

two months I have been ashamed to call myself an Englishman. However, there is an end of it now. I knew that they would never give in and desert us," and the old man straightened his crooked back and slapped his chest, looking as proud and gallant as though he were five-and-twenty instead of seventy years of age.

The rest of that day passed without any further news, and so did the following two days, but on the third, which was March 23, the storm broke.

About eleven o'clock in the forenoon Bessie was employed upon her household duties as usual, or rather she had just finished them. Her uncle had returned from his usual after-breakfast round upon the farm, and was standing in the sitting-room, his broad felt hat in one hand and a red pocket-handkerchief in the other, with which he was polishing his bald head, while he chattered to Bessie through the open door.

"No news of the advance, Bessie dear?"

"No, uncle," she replied with a sigh, her blue eyes filling with tears, for she was thinking of one of whom there was also no news.

"Well, never mind. These things take a little time, especially with our soldiers, who move so slowly. I dare say that there was some delay waiting for guns or ammunition or something. I expect that we shall hear by to-night----"

"De Booren, Baas, de Booren!" (the Boers, master, the Boers) he shouted. "The Boers are coming with a waggon, twenty of them or more, with Frank Muller at their head on his black horse, and Hans Coetzee, and the one-eyed Basutu wizard with him. I was hiding behind a tree at the end of the avenue, and I saw them riding over the rise. They are going to take the place;" and, without waiting to give any further explanations, he slipped through the house and hid himself up somewhere out of the way at the back, for Jantje, like most Hottentots, was a sad coward.

The old man stopped rubbing his head and stared at Bessie, who stood pale and trembling in the doorway. Just then he heard the patter of running feet on the drive outside, and looked out of the window. It was caused by the passing of some half-dozen Kafirs who were working on the place, and who, on catching sight of the Boers, had promptly thrown down their tools and were flying to the hills. Even as they passed a shot was fired somewhere from the direction of the avenue, and the last of the Kafirs, a lad of about twelve, suddenly threw up his hands and pitched forward on to his face, with a bullet between his shoulder-blades.

Bessie heard the shout of "Good shot, good shot!" the brutal laughter that greeted his fall, and the tramping of the horses as they came up the drive.

"Oh, uncle!" she said, "what shall we do?"

The old man made no answer at the moment, but going to a rack upon the wall, he reached down a Wesley-Richards falling-block rifle that hung there. Then he sat down in a wooden armchair that faced the French window opening on to the verandah, and beckoned to her to come to him.

"We will meet them so," he said. "They shall see that we are not afraid of them. Don't be frightened, dear, they will not dare to harm us; they will be afraid of the consequences of harming English people."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the cavalcade began to appear in front of the window, led, as Jantje had said, by Frank Muller on his black horse, accompanied by Hans Coetzee on the fat pony, and the villainous-looking Hendrik, mounted on a nondescript sort of animal, and carrying a gun and an assegai in his hand. Behind these were a body of about fifteen or sixteen armed men, among whom Silas Croft recognised most of his neighbours, by whose side he had lived for years in peace and amity.

Opposite the house they stopped and began looking about. They could not see into the room at once, on account of the bright light outside and the shadow within.

"I fancy you will find the birds flown, nephew," said the fat voice of Hans Coetzee. "They have got warning of your little visit."

"They cannot be far off," answered Muller. "I have had them watched, and

know that they have not left the place. Get down, uncle, and look in the house, and you too, Hendrik."

The Kafir obeyed with alacrity, tumbling out of his saddle with all the grace of a sack of coals, but the Boer hesitated.

"Uncle Silas is an angry man," he ventured; "he might shoot if he found me poking about his house."

"Don't answer me!" thundered Muller; "get down and do as I bid you!"

"Ah, what a devil of a man!" murmured the unfortunate Hans as he hurried to obey.

Meanwhile, Hendrik the one-eyed had jumped upon the verandah and was peering through the windows.

"Here they are, Baas; here they are!" he sung out; "the old cock and the pullet too!" and he gave a kick to the window, which, being unlatched, swung wide, revealing the old man sitting in his wooden armchair, his rifle on his knees, and holding by the hand his fair-haired niece, who was standing at his side. Frank Muller dismounted and came on to the verandah, and behind him crowded a dozen or more of his followers.

"What is it that you want, Frank Muller, that you come to my house with all these armed men?" asked Silas Croft from his chair.



"I call upon you, Silas Croft, to surrender to take your trial as a land betrayer and a rebel against the Republic," was the answer. "I am sorry," he added, with a bow towards Bessie, on whom his eyes had been fixed all the time, "to be obliged to take you prisoner in the presence of a lady, but my duty gives me no choice."

"I do not know what you mean," said the old man. "I am a subject of Queen Victoria and an Englishman. How, then, can I be a rebel against any republic? I am an Englishman, I say," he went on with rising anger, speaking so high that his powerful voice rang till every Boer there could hear it, "and I acknowledge the authority of no republics. This is my house, and I order you to leave it. I claim my rights as an Englishman----"

"Here," interrupted Muller coldly, "Englishmen have no rights, except such as we choose to allow to them."

"Shoot him!" cried a voice.

"Treat him as Buskes treated Van der Linden at Potchefstroom!" cried another.

"Yes, make him swallow the same pill that we gave to Dr. Barber," put in a third.

"Silas Croft, are you going to surrender?" asked Muller in the same cold voice.

"No!" thundered the old man in his English pride. "I surrender to no rebels in arms against the Queen. I will shoot the first man who tries to lay a finger on me!" and he rose to his feet and lifted his rifle.

"Shall I shoot him, Baas?--shall I shoot him?" asked the one-eyed Hendrik, smacking his lips at the thought, and fiddling with the rusty lock of the old fowling-piece he carried.

Muller, by way of answer, struck him across the face with the back of his hand. "Hans Coetzee," he said, "go and arrest that man."

Poor Hans hesitated, as well he might. Nature had not endowed him with any great amount of natural courage, and the sight of his old neighbour's rifle-barrel made him feel positively sick. He hesitated and began to stammer excuses.

"Are you going, uncle, or must I denounce you to the General as a sympathiser with Englishmen?" asked Muller in malice, for he knew the old fellow's weakness and cowardice, and was playing on them.

"I am going. Of course I am going, nephew. Excuse me, a little faintness took me--the heat of the sun," he babbled. "Oh, yes, I am going to seize the rebel. Perhaps one of these young men would not mind engaging his

attention on the other side. He is an angry man--I know him of old--and an angry man with a gun, you know, dear cousin----"

"Are you going?" said his terrible master once more.

"Oh, yes! yes, certainly, yes. Dear Uncle Silas, pray put down that gun, it is so dangerous. Don't stand there looking like a wild ox, but come up to the yoke. You are old, Uncle Silas, and I don't want to have to hurt you. Come now, come, come," and he held out his hand towards him as though he were a shy horse that he was endeavouring to beguile.

"Hans Coetzee, traitor and liar that you are," said the old man, "if you draw a single step nearer, by God! I will put a bullet through you."

"Go on, Hans, chuck a reim over his head; get him by the tail; knock him down with a yokeskei; turn the old bull on his back!" shouted the crowd of scoffers from the window, taking very good care, however, to clear off to the right and left in order to leave room for the expected bullet.

Hans positively burst into tears, and Muller, who was the only one who held his ground, caught him by the arm, and putting out all his strength, swung him towards Silas Croft.

For reasons of his own, he was anxious that the latter should shoot one of them, and he chose Hans Coetzee, whom he disliked and despised, for

the sacrifice.

Up went the rifle, and at that moment Bessie, who had been standing bewildered, made a dash at it, knowing that bloodshed could only make matters worse. As she did so it exploded, but not before she had shaken her uncle's arm, for, instead of killing Hans, as it undoubtedly would have done, the bullet only cut his ear and then passed out through the open window-place. In an instant the room was filled with smoke. Hans Coetzee clapped his hand to his head, uttering yells of pain and terror, and in the confusion that ensued three or four men, headed by the Kafir Hendrik, rushed into the room and sprang upon Silas Croft, who had retreated to the wall and was standing with his back against it, his rifle, which he had clubbed in both his hands, raised above his head.

When his assailants were close to him they hesitated, for, aged and bent as he was, the old man looked dangerous. He stood there like a wounded lion, and swung the rifle-stock about. Presently one of the men struck at him and missed him, but before he could retreat Silas brought down the stock of the rifle on his head, and down he went like an ox beneath a poleaxe. Then they closed on him, but for a while he kept them off, knocking down another man in his efforts. At that moment the witch-doctor Hendrik, who had been watching his opportunity, brought down the barrel of his old fowling-piece upon Silas's bald head and felled him. Fortunately the blow was not a very heavy one, or it would have broken his skull. As it was, it only cut his scalp open and knocked him down. Thereon, the whole mass of Boers, with the exception of

Muller, who stood watching, seeing that he was now defenceless, fell upon Silas, and would have kicked him to death had not Bessie precipitated herself upon him with a cry, and thrown her arms about his body to protect him.

Then Frank Muller interfered, fearing lest she should be hurt. Plunging into the fray with a curse, he exercised his great strength, throwing the men this way and that like ninepins, and finally dragging Silas to his feet again.

"Come!" he shouted, "take him out of this;" and accordingly, with taunts, curses and obloquy, the poor old man, whose fringe of white locks was red with blood, was kicked and pushed on to the verandah, then off it on to the drive. Here he fell over the body of the murdered Kafir boy, but finally he was dragged to the open space by the flagstaff, on which the Union Jack that he had hoisted there some two months before still waved bravely in the breeze. There he sank down upon the grass, his back against the flagstaff, and asked faintly for some water.

Bessie, who was weeping bitterly, and whose heart felt as though it were bursting with anguish and indignation, pushed her way through the men, and, running to the house, filled a glass and brought it to him. One of the brutes tried to knock it out of her hand, but she avoided him and gave it to her uncle, who drank it greedily.

"Thank you, love, thank you," he said; "don't be frightened, I ain't much hurt. Ah! if only John had been here, and we had had an hour's

notice, we would have held the place against them all."

Meanwhile one of the Boers, climbing on to the shoulders of another, had succeeded in untying the cord on which the Union Jack was bent, and hauled it down. Then they reversed it and hoisted it half-mast high, and began to cheer for the Republic.

"Perhaps Uncle Silas does not know that we are a Republic again now," said one of the men, a near neighbour of his own, in mockery.

"What do you mean by a Republic?" asked the old man. "The Transvaal is a British colony."

There was a hoot of derision at this. "The English Government has surrendered," said the same man. "The country is given up, and the British are to evacuate it in six months."

"It is a lie!" said Silas, springing to his feet, "a cowardly lie! Whoever says that the English have given up the country to a few thousand blackguards like you, and deserted its subjects and the loyalists and the natives, is a liar--a liar from hell!"

There was another howl of mockery at this outburst, and when it had subsided Frank Muller stepped forward.

"It is no lie, Silas Croft," he said, "and the cowards are not we Boers,

who have beaten you again and again, but your soldiers, who have done nothing but run away, and your Mr. Gladstone, who follows the example of your soldiers. Look here"--and he took a paper out of his pocket--"you know that signature, I suppose? It is that of one of the Triumvirate. Listen to what he says," and he read aloud:--

"Well-beloved Heer Muller,--this is to inform you that, by the strength of our arms fighting for the right and freedom, and also by the cowardice of the British Government, generals, and soldiers, we have by the will of the Almighty concluded this day a glorious peace with the enemy. The Heer Gladstone surrenders nearly everything except in the name. The Republic is to be re-established, and the soldiers who are left will leave the land within six months. Make this known to everyone, and forget not to thank God for our glorious victories."

The Boers shouted aloud, as well they might, and Bessie wrung her hands. As for the old man, he leant against the flagstaff, and his gory head sank back upon his breast as though he were about to faint. Then suddenly he lifted it, and with clenched and quivering fists, held high in the air, he broke out into such a torrent of blasphemy and cursing that even the Boers fell back for a moment, dismayed into silence by the force of the fury wrung from his utter humiliation.

It was an appalling sight to see this good and God-fearing old man, his face bruised, his grey hairs dabbled with blood, and his clothes nearly rent from his body, stamp and reel to and fro, blaspheming his Maker and

the day that he was born; hurling execrations at his beloved country and the name of Englishman, and the Government of Britain that had deserted him, till at last nature gave out, and he fell in a fit, there, in the very shadow of his dishonoured flag.