

CHAPTER XXVIII

BESSIE IS PUT TO THE QUESTION

Meanwhile another little tragedy was being enacted at the back of the house. After the one-eyed witch-doctor Hendrik had knocked Silas Croft down and assisted in the pleasing operation of dragging him to the flagstaff, it occurred to his villainous heart that the present would be a good opportunity to profit personally by the confusion, and possibly add to the Englishman's misfortunes by doing him some injury on his own account. Accordingly, just before Frank Muller began to read the despatch announcing the British surrender, he slipped away into the house, which was now totally deserted, to see what he could steal. Passing into the sitting-room, he annexed Bessie's gold watch and chain, which was lying on the mantelpiece, a present that her uncle had made her on the Christmas Day before the last. Having pocketed this he proceeded to the kitchen, where, lying on the dresser ready to put away, there was a goodly store of silver forks and spoons which Bessie had been busily engaged in cleaning that morning. These he also transferred, to the extent of several dozens, to the capacious pockets of the tattered military great-coat that he wore. Whilst thus employed he was much disturbed by the barking of the dog Stomp, the same animal that had mauled him so severely a few weeks before, and was now, as it happened, tied up in his kennel--an old wine barrel--just outside the kitchen door. Hendrik peeped out of the window, and having ascertained that the dog was secured, he proceeded, with a diabolical chuckle, to settle his

account with the poor animal. He had left his gun behind on the grass, but he still held his assegai in his hand, and going out of the kitchen door with it, he showed himself within a few feet of the kennel. The dog recognised him instantly, and went nearly mad with fury, making the most desperate efforts to break its chain and get at him. For some moments he stood exciting the animal by derisive gestures and pelting it with stones, till at last, fearing that the clamour would attract attention, he suddenly transfixed it with his spear, and then, thinking he was quite unobserved, sat down, snuffed and enjoyed the luxury of watching the poor beast's last agonies.

But, as it happened, he was not quite alone, for, creeping along in the grass and rubbish that grew on the farther side of the wall, his brown body squeezed tightly against the brown stones--so tightly that an unpractised eye would certainly have failed to notice it at a distance of a dozen paces--was the Hottentot Jantje. Occasionally, too, he would lift his head above the level of the wall and observe the proceedings of the one-eyed man. Apparently he was undecided what to do, for he hesitated a little, and whilst he did so Hendrik killed the dog.

Now Jantje had all a Hottentot's natural love for animals, which is, generally speaking, as marked as is the Kafir's callousness towards them, and he was particularly fond of the dog Stomp, which always went out with him those rare occasions when he thought it safe or desirable to walk like an ordinary man instead of wriggling from bush to bush like a panther, or wriggling through the grass like a snake. The sight of

the animal's death, therefore, raised in his yellow breast a very keen desire for vengeance on the murderer, if vengeance could be safely accomplished; and he paused to reflect how this might be done. As he thought Hendrik rose, gave the dead dog a kick, withdrew his assegai from the carcase, and then, as though struck by a sudden desire to conceal the murder, he undid the collar and, lifting the dog in his arms, carried him with difficulty into the house and laid him under the kitchen-table. This done, he came out again to the wall, which was built of unmortared stones, pulled one out without trouble, deposited the watch and the silver he had stolen in the cavity, and replaced the stone. Next, before Jantje could guess what he meant to do, he proceeded to make it practically impossible for his robbery to be discovered, or at any rate very improbable, by lighting a match, and, having first glanced round to see that nobody was looking, reaching up and applying it to the thick thatch wherewith the house itself was roofed, the fringe of which just at this spot was not more than nine feet from the ground. No rain had fallen at Mooifontein for several days, and there had been a hot sun with wind. As a result the thatch was dry as tinder. The light caught in a second, and in two more a thin line of fire was running up the roof.

Hendrik paused, stepped a few paces back, resting his shoulders against the wall, immediately the other side of which was Jantje, and began to chuckle aloud and rub his hands as he admired the results of his labours. This proved too much for the Hottentot behind him. The provocation was overmastering, and so was the opportunity. Jantje

carried with him the thick stick on which he was so fond of cutting notches. Raising it in both hands he brought the heavy knob down with all his strength upon the one-eyed villain's unprotected skull. It was a thick skull, but the knob prevailed against it, and fractured it, and down went the estimable witch-doctor as though he were dead.

Next, taking a leaf out of his fallen enemy's book, Jantje slipped over the wall, and, seizing the senseless man, he dragged him by one arm into the kitchen and rolled him under the table to keep company with the dead dog. Then, filled with a fearful joy, he crawled out, to a point of vantage in a little plantation seventy or eighty yards to the right of the house, whence he could see what the Boers were doing and watch the conflagration that he knew must ensue, for the fire had taken instant and irremediable hold.

Ten minutes or so afterwards that amiable character Hendrik partially regained his senses, to find himself surrounded by a sea of fire, in which he perished miserably, not having power to move, and his feeble cries being totally swallowed up and lost in the fierce roaring of the flames. Such was the very appropriate end of Hendrik and of the magic of Hendrik.

Down by the flagstaff the old man lay in his fit, while Bessie tended him and a posse of Boers stood round, smoking and laughing or lounging about with an air of lordly superiority, well worthy of victors in possession.

"Will none of you help me to take him to the house?" she cried. "Surely you have ill treated an old man enough."

Nobody stirred, not even Frank Muller, who was gazing at her tear-stained face with a fierce smile playing round the corners of his clean-cut mouth, which his beard was trimmed to show.

"It will pass, Miss Bessie," he said; "it will pass. I have often seen such fits. They come from too much excitement, or too much drink----"

Suddenly he broke off with an exclamation, and pointed to the house, from the roof of which pale curls of blue smoke were rising.

"Who has fired the house?" he shouted. "By Heaven! I will shoot the man."

The Boers wheeled round staring in astonishment, and as they gazed the tinderlike roof burst into a red sheet of flame that grew and gathered breadth and height with an almost marvellous rapidity. Just then, too, a light breeze sprang up from over the hill at the rear of the house, as it sometimes did at this time of the day, and bent the flames over towards them in an immense arch of fire, so that the fumes and heat and smoke began to beat upon their faces.

"Oh, the house is burning down!" cried Bessie, utterly bewildered by

this new misfortune.

"Here, you!" shouted Muller to the gaping Boers, "go and see if anything can be saved. Phew! we must get out of this," and, stooping down, he lifted Silas Croft in his arms and walked away with him, followed by Bessie, towards the plantation on their left, the same spot where Jantje had taken refuge. In the centre of this plantation was a little glade surrounded by young orange and blue-gum trees. Here he laid the old man down upon a bed of dead leaves and soft springing grass, and then hurried away without a word to the fire, only to find that the house was already utterly unapproachable. Such was the rapidity with which the flames did their work upon the mass of dry straw and the wooden roof and floorings beneath, that in fifteen minutes the whole of the interior of the house was a glowing incandescent pile, and in half an hour it was completely gutted, nothing being left standing but the massive outer walls of stone, over which a dense column of smoke hung like a pall. Mooifontein was a blackened ruin; only the stables and outhouses, which were roofed with galvanised iron, remained uninjured.

Frank Muller had not been gone five minutes when, to Bessie's joy, her uncle opened his eyes and sat up.

"What is it? what is it?" he said. "Ah! I recollect. What is all this smell of fire? Surely they have not burnt the place?"

"Yes, uncle," sobbed Bessie, "they have."

Silas groaned aloud. "It took me ten years to build, bit by bit, almost stone by stone, and now they have destroyed it. Well, why not? God's will be done. Give me your arm, love; I want to get to the water. I feel faint and sick."

She did as he bade her, sobbing bitterly. Within fifteen yards, on the edge of the plantation, was a little spruit or runnel of water, and of this he drank copiously, and bathed his wounded head and face.

"There, love," he said, "don't fret; I feel quite myself again. I fear I made a fool of myself. I haven't learnt to bear misfortune and dishonour as I should yet, and, like Job, I felt as though God had forsaken us. But, as I said, His will be done. What is the next move, I wonder? Ah! we shall soon know, for here comes our friend Frank Muller."

"I am glad to see that you have recovered, uncle," said Muller politely, "and I am sorry to have to tell you that the house is beyond help. Believe me, if I knew who fired it I would shoot him. It was not my wish or intention that the property should be destroyed."

The old man merely bowed his head and made no answer. His fiery spirit seemed to be crushed out of him.

"What is it your pleasure that we should do, sir?" said Bessie at last.

"Perhaps, now that we are ruined, you will allow us to go to Natal,

which, I suppose, is still an English country?"

"Yes, Miss Bessie, Natal is still English--for the present; soon it will be Dutch; but I am sorry that I cannot let you go there now. My orders are to keep you both prisoners and to try your uncle by court-martial. The waggon-house," he went on quickly, "with the two little rooms on each side of it, have not been touched by the fire. They shall be made ready for you, and as soon as the heat is less you can go there;" and, turning to his men who had followed him, he gave some rapid orders, which two of them departed to carry out.

Still the old man made no comment; he did not even seem indignant or surprised; but poor Bessie was utterly prostrated, and stood helpless, not knowing what to say to this terrible, remorseless man, who stood so calm and unmoved before them.

Frank Muller paused awhile to think, stroking his golden beard, then he turned again and addressed the two other men who stood behind him.

"You will keep guard over the prisoner," indicating Silas Croft, "and suffer none to communicate with him by word or sign. As soon as it is ready you will place him in the little room to the left of the waggon-house, and see that he is supplied with all he wants. If he escapes or converses, or is ill treated, I will hold you responsible. Do you understand?"

"Yah, Meinheer," was the answer.

"Very good; be careful you do not forget. And now, Miss Bessie, I shall be glad if you can give me a word alone----"

"No," said Bessie; "no, I will not leave my uncle."

"I fear you will have to do that," he said, with his cold smile. "I beg you to think again. It will be very much to your advantage to speak to me, and to your uncle's advantage also. I should advise you to come."

Bessie hesitated. She hated and mistrusted the man, as she had good reason to do, and feared to trust herself alone with him.

While she still hesitated, the two Boers, under whose watch and ward Muller had placed her uncle, advanced and stood between him and her, cutting her off from him. Muller turned and walked a few paces--ten or so--to the right, and in desperation she followed him. He halted behind a bushy orange-tree of some eight years' growth. Overtaking him, she stood silent, waiting for him to begin. They were quite close to the others, but the roaring of the flames of the burning house was still sufficiently loud to have drowned a much more audible conversation.

"What is it you have to say to me?" she said at length, pressing her hand against her heart to still its beating. Her woman's instinct told her what was coming, and she was trying to nerve herself to meet it.

"Miss Bessie," he said slowly, "it is this. For years I have loved you and wanted to marry you. I again ask you to be my wife."

"Mr. Frank Muller," she answered, her spirit rising to the occasion, "I thank you for your offer, and the only answer that I can give you is that I once and for all decline it."

"Think," he said; "I love you as women are not often loved. You are always in my mind, by day and by night too. Everything I do, every step I go up the ladder, I have said and say to myself, 'I am doing it for Bessie Croft, whom I mean to marry.' Things have changed in this country. The rebellion has been successful. It was I who gave the casting vote for it that I might win you. I am now a great man, and shall one day be a greater. You will be great with me. Think what you say."

"I have thought, and I will not marry you. You dare to come and ask me to marry you over the ashes of my home, out of which you have dragged me and my poor old uncle. I hate you, I tell you, and I will not marry you! I had rather marry a Kafir than marry you, Frank Muller, however great you may be."

He smiled. "Is it because of the Englishman Niel that you will not marry me? He is dead. It is useless to cling to a dead man."

"Dead or alive, I love him with all my heart, and if he is dead it is at the hands of your people, and his blood rises up between us."

"His blood has sunk down into the sand. He is dead, and I am glad that he is dead. Once more, is that your last word?"

"It is."

"Very good. Then I tell you that you shall marry me or----"

"Or what?"

"Or your uncle, the old man you love so much, shall die!"

"What do you mean?" she said in a choked voice.

"What I say; no more and no less. Do you think that I will let one old man's life stand between me and my desire? Never. If you will not marry me, Silas Croft shall be put upon his trial for attempted murder and for treason within an hour from this. Within an hour and a half he shall be condemned to die, and to-morrow at dawn he shall be shot, by warrant under my hand. I am commandant here, with power of life and death, and I tell you that he shall certainly die--and his blood will be on your head."

Bessie grasped at the tree for support. "You dare not," she said; "you

dare not murder an innocent old man."

"Dare not!" he answered; "you must understand me very ill, Bessie Croft, when you talk of what I dare not do for you. There is nothing," he added, with a thrill of his rich voice, "that I dare not do to gain you. Listen: promise to marry me to-morrow morning. I will bring a clergyman here from Wakkerstroom, and your uncle shall go free as air, though he is a traitor to the land, and though he has tried to shoot a burgher after the declaration of peace. Refuse, and he dies. Choose now."

"I have chosen," she answered with passion. "Frank Muller, perjured traitor--yes, murderer that you are, I will not marry you."

"Very good, very good, Bessie; as you will. But now one more thing. You shall not say that I have not warned you. If you persist in this your uncle shall die, but you shall not escape me. You will not marry me? Well, even in this country, where I can do most things, I cannot force you to do that. But I can force you to be my wife in all but the name, without marriage; and this, when your uncle is stiff in his bloody grave, I will do. You shall have one more chance after the trial, and one only. If you refuse he shall die, and then, after his death, I shall take you away by force, and in a week's time you will be glad enough to marry me to cover up your shame, my pretty!"

"You are a devil, Frank Muller, a wicked devil, but I will not be frightened into dishonour by you. I had rather kill myself. I trust to

God to help me. I will have nothing to do with you;" and she put her hands before her face and burst into tears.

"You look lovely when you weep," he said with a laugh; "to-morrow I shall be able to kiss away your tears. As you will. Here, you!" he shouted to some men, who could be seen watching the progress of the dying fire, "come here."

Some of the men obeyed, and to them he gave instructions in the same terms that he had given to the other two men who were watching old Silas, ordering Bessie to be instantly incarcerated in the corresponding little room on the other side of the waggon-house, and kept strictly from all communication with the outside world, adding, however, these words:

"Bid the burghers assemble in the waggon-house for the trial of the Englishman, Silas Croft, for treason against the State, and attempted murder of one of the burghers of the State in the execution of the commands of the Triumvirate."

The two men advanced and seized Bessie by both arms. Then, faint and overpowered, she was led through the little plantation, over a gap in the garden wall, down past the scorched syringa-trees which lined the roadway that ran along the hillside at the back of the still burning house, till they reached the waggon-house with the two little rooms which served respectively as a store and a harness room. There she was

thrust into the store-room, which was half full of loose potatoes and mealies in sacks, and the door locked upon her.

There was no window to this room, and the only light in it was such as found its way through the chinks of the door and an air-hole in the masonry of the back wall. Bessie sank on a half-emptied sack of mealies and tried to reflect. Her first thought was of escape, but soon she came to the conclusion that this was a practical impossibility. The stout yellow wood door was locked upon her, and a sentry stood before it. She rose and looked through the air-hole in the rear wall, but there another sentry was posted. Then she turned her attention to the side wall that divided the room from the waggon-house. It was built of fourteen-inch green brickwork, and had cracked from the shrinkage of the bricks, so that she could hear everything that went on in the waggon-house, and even see anybody who might be moving about in it. But it was far too strong for her to hope to be able to break through, and even if she did, it would be useless, for armed men were there also. Besides, how could she run away and leave her old uncle to his fate?