

CHAPTER XXX

"WE MUST PART, JOHN"

Jess and her companion stood in awed silence and gazed at the blackening and distorted corpses of the thunder-blasted Boers. Then they passed by them to the tree which grew some ten paces or more on the other side of the place of death. There was some difficulty in leading the horses by the bodies, but at last they came with a wheel and a snort of suspicion, and were tied up to the tree by John. Meanwhile Jess took some of the hard-boiled eggs out of the basket and vanished, remarking that she should take her clothes off and dry them in the sun while she at her breakfast, and that she advised him to do likewise. Accordingly, so soon as she was well out of sight behind the shelter of the rocks she set to work to free herself from her sodden garments, a task of no little difficulty. Then she wrung them out and spread them one by one on the flat water-washed stones around, which were by now thoroughly warmed with the sun. Next she climbed to a pool under the shadow of the steep bank, in the rock-bed of the river, where she bathed her bruises and washed the sand and mud from her hair and feet. Her bath finished, she returned and sat herself on a slab of flat stone out of the glare of the sun, and ate her breakfast of hard-boiled eggs, reflecting meanwhile on the position in which she found herself. Her heart was very sore and heavy, and almost could she wish that she were lying deep beneath those rushing waters. She had counted upon death, and now she was not dead; indeed, she with her shame and trouble might yet live for many a year.

She was as one who in her sleep had seemed to soar on angels' wings far into the airy depths, and then awakened with a start to find that she had tumbled from her bed. All the heroic scale, all the more than earthly depth of passion, all the spiritualised desires that sprang into being beneath the shadow of the approaching end, had come down to the common level of an undesirable attachment, along which she must drag her weary feet for many a year. Nor was this all. She had been false to Bessie; more, she had broken Bessie's lover's troth. She had tempted him and he had fallen, and now he was as bad as she. Death would have justified all this; never would she have done it had she thought that she was doomed to live; but now Death had cheated her, as is his fashion with people to whom his presence is more or less desirable, leaving her to cope with the spirit she had invoked when his sword was quivering over her.

What would be the end of it in the event of their escape? What could be the end except misery? It should go no farther, far as it had gone--that she swore; no, not if it broke her heart and his too. The conditions were altered again, and the memory of those dreadful and wondrous hours when they two swung upon the raging river and exchanged their undying troth, with the grave for an altar, must remain a memory and nothing more. It had risen in their lives like some beautiful yet terrible dream-image of celestial joy, and now like a dream it must vanish. And yet it was no dream, except in so far as all her life was a dream and a vision, a riddle of which glimpses of the answer came as rarely as gleams of sunshine on a rainy day. Alas! it was no dream; it was a

portion of the living, breathing past, that, having once been, is immortal in its every part and moment, incarnating as it does the very spirit of immortality, an utter incapacity to change. As the act was, as the word had been spoken, so would act and word be for ever and for ever. And now this undying thing must be caged and cast about with the semblance of death and clouded over with the shadow of an unreal forgetfulness. Oh, it was bitter, very bitter! What would it be now to go away, quite away from him, and know him married to her own sister, the other woman with a prior right? What would it be to think of Bessie's sweetness slowly creeping into her empty place and filling it, of Bessie's gentle constant love covering up the recollection of their wilder passion; pervading it and covering it up as the twilight slowly pervades and covers up the day, till at last perhaps it was blotted out and forgotten in the night of forgetfulness?

And yet it must be so: she was determined that it should be so. Ah, that she had died then with his kiss upon her lips! Why had he not let her die? And grieving thus the poor girl shook her damp hair over her face and sobbed in the bitterness of her heart, as Eve might have sobbed when Adam reproached her.

But, naked or dressed, sobbing will not mend matters in this sad world of ours, a fact which Jess had the sense to recognise; so presently she wiped her eyes with her hair, having nothing else at hand to wipe them with, and set to work to struggle into her partially dried garments again, a process calculated to irritate the most fortunate and

happy-minded woman in the whole wide world. Certainly in her present frame of mind those damp, bullet-torn clothes drove Jess frantic, so much so that had she been a man she would probably have sworn--a consolation that her sex denied her. Fortunately she carried a travelling comb in her pocket, with which she made shift to do her curling hair, if hair can be said to be done when one has not a hairpin or even a bit of string wherewith to fasten it.

Then, after a last and frightful encounter with her sodden boots, that seemed to take almost as much out of her as her roll at the bottom of the Vaal, Jess rose and walked back to the spot where she had left John an hour before. When she reached him he was employed in saddling up the two greys with the saddles and bridles that he had removed from the carcasses of the horses which the lightning had destroyed.

"Why, Jess, you look quite smart. Have you dried your clothes?" he said.

"I have after a fashion."

"Yes," she answered.

He looked at her. "Dearest, you have been crying. Come, things are black enough, but it is useless to cry. At any rate, we have escaped with our lives so far."

"John," said Jess sharply, "there must be no more of that. Things have changed. We were dead last night. Now we have come to life again."

Besides," she added, with a ghost of a laugh, "perhaps you will see Bessie to-morrow. I should think that we ought to have come to the end of our misfortunes."

John's face fell as a sense of the impossible and most tragic position in which they were placed, physically and morally, swept into his mind.

"Jess, my own Jess," he said, "what can we do?"

She stamped her foot in the bitter anguish of her heart. "I told you," she said, "that there must be no more of that. What are you thinking about? From to-day we are dead to each other. I have done with you and you with me. It is your own fault; you should have let me die. Oh, John," she wailed out, "why did you not let me die? Why did we not both die? We should have been happy now, or--asleep. We must part, John, we must part; and what shall I do without you, how shall I live without you?"

Her distress was very poignant, and it affected him so much that for a moment he could not trust himself to answer her.

"Would it not be best to make a clean breast of it to Bessie?" he said at last. "I should feel a villain for the rest of my life, but upon my word I have a mind to do it."

"No, no," she cried passionately, "I will not allow it! You shall swear

to me that you will never breathe a word to Bessie. I will not have her happiness destroyed. We have sinned, we must suffer; not Bessie, who is innocent, and only takes her right. I promised my dear mother to look after Bessie and protect her, and I will not be the one to betray her--never, never! You must marry her and I must go away. There is no other way out of it."

John looked at her, not knowing what to say or do. A sharp pang of despair went through him as he watched the passionate pale face and the great eyes dim with tears. How was he to part from her? He put out his arms to take her in them, but she pushed him away almost fiercely.

"Have you no honour?" she cried. "Is it not all hard enough to bear without your tempting me? I tell you it is done with. Finish saddling that horse and let us start. The sooner we get off the sooner it will be over, unless the Boers catch us again and shoot us, which for my own part I devoutly hope they may. You must make up your mind to remember that I am nothing but your sister-in-law. If you will not remember it, then I shall ride away and leave you to go your road and I will go mine."

John said no more. Her determination was as crushing as the cruel necessity that dictated it. What was more, his own reason and sense of honour approved it, whatever his passion might prompt to the contrary. As he turned wearily to finish saddling the horses, with Jess he almost regretted that they had not both been drowned.

Of course the only saddles that they had were those belonging to the dead Boers, which was very awkward for a lady. Luckily for herself, however, from constant practice, Jess could ride almost as well as though she had been trained to the ring, and was even capable of balancing herself without a pommel on a man's saddle, having often and often ridden round the farm in that fashion. So soon as the horses were ready she astonished John by clambering into the saddle of the older and steadier animal, placing her foot in the stirrup-strap and announcing that she was ready to start.

"You had better ride some other way," said John. "It isn't usual, I know, but you will tumble off so."

"You shall see," she said with a cold little laugh, putting the horse into a canter as she spoke. John followed her on the other horse, and noticed with amazement that she sat as straight and steady on her slippery seat as though she were on a hunting saddle, keeping herself from falling by an instinctive balancing of the body which was very curious to notice. When they were well on to the plain they halted to consider their route, and, turning, Jess pointed to the long lines of vultures descending to feast on their would-be murderers. If they went down the river it would lead them to Standerton, and there they would be safe if they could slip into the town, which was garrisoned by English. But then, as they had gathered from the conversation of their escort, Standerton was closely invested by the Boers, and to try and pass

through their lines was more than they dared to do. It was true that they still had the pass signed by the Boer general, but after what had occurred not unnaturally they were somewhat sceptical about the value of a pass, and certainly most unwilling to put its efficacy to the proof. So after due consideration they determined to avoid Standerton and ride in the opposite direction till they found a practicable ford of the Vaal. Fortunately, they both of them had a very good idea of the lay of the land; and, in addition to this, John possessed a small compass, fastened to his watch-chain, which would enable him to steer a fairly correct course across a veldt--a fact that rendered them independent of the waggon tracks. On the roads they were exposed to the risk, if not the certainty, of detection. But on the wide veldt the chances were they would meet no living creature except the wild game. Should they see houses they could avoid them, and probably their male inhabitants would be far away from home on business connected with the war.

Accordingly they rode ten miles or more along the bank without seeing a soul, till they reached a space of bubbling, shallow water that looked fordable. Indeed, an investigation of the banks revealed the fact that a loaded waggon had passed the river here and at no distant date, perhaps a week before.

"This is good enough," said John; "we will try it." And without further ado they plunged into the rapid.

In the centre of the stream the water was strong and deep, and for a few

yards swept the horses off their legs, but they struck out boldly till they found their footing again; and after that there was no more trouble. On the farther side of the river John took counsel with his compass, and they steered a course straight for Mooifontein. At midday they off-saddled the horses for an hour by some water, and ate a small portion of their remaining food. Then they up-saddled and went on across the lonely, desolate veldt. No human being did they see all that long day. The wide country was tenanted only by great herds of game that went thundering past like squadrons of cavalry, or here and there by coterie of vultures, hissing and fighting furiously over some dead buck. And so at last the twilight gathered and found them alone in the wilderness.

"Well, what is to be done now?" said John, pulling up his tired horse.

"It will be dark in half an hour."

Jess slid from her saddle as she answered, "Get off and go to sleep, I suppose."

She was quite right; there was absolutely nothing else that they could do; so John set to work and hobbled the horses, tying them together for further security, for it would be a dreadful thing if they were to stray. By the time that this was done the twilight was deepening into night, and the two sat down to contemplate their surroundings with feelings akin to despair. So far as the eye could reach there was nothing to be seen but a vast stretch of lonely plain, across which the night wind blew in dreary gusts, causing the green grass to ripple like

the sea. There was absolutely no shelter to be had, nor any object to break the monotony of the veldt, except two ant-heaps set about five paces apart. John sat down on one of the ant-heaps, and Jess took up her position on the other, and there they remained, like pelicans in the wilderness, watching the daylight fade out of the day.

"Don't you think that we had better sit together?" suggested John feebly. "It would be warmer, you see."

"No, I don't," answered Jess snappishly. "I am very comfortable as I am."

Unfortunately, however, this was not the exact truth, for already poor Jess's teeth were chattering with cold. Soon, indeed, weary as they were, they found that the only way to keep their blood moving was to tramp continually up and down. After an hour and a half of this exercise, the breeze dropped and the temperature became more suitable to their lightly clad, half-starved, and almost exhausted bodies. Then the moon came up, and the hyenas, or wolves, or some such animals, came up also and howled round them--though they could not see them. These hyenas proved more than Jess's nerves would bear, and at last she condescended to ask John to share her ant-heap: where they sat, shivering in each other's arms, throughout the livelong night. Indeed, had it not been for the warmth they gathered from each other, it is probable that they might have fared even worse than they did; for, though the days were hot, the nights were now beginning to be cold on the high veldt, especially when,

as at present, the air had recently been chilled by the passage of a heavy tempest. Another drawback to their romantic situation was that they were positively soaked with the falling dew. There they sat, or rather cowered, for hour after hour without sleeping, for sleep was impossible, and almost without speaking; and yet, notwithstanding the wretchedness of their circumstances, not altogether unhappy, since they were united in their misery. At last the eastern sky began to turn grey, and John rose, shook the dew from his hat and clothes, and limped off as well as his half-frozen limbs would allow to catch the horses, which were standing together some yards away, looking huge and ghost-like in the mist. By sunrise he had managed to saddle them up, and they started once more. This time, however, he was obliged to lift Jess on to the saddle.

About eight o'clock they halted and ate their little remaining food, and then went on, slowly enough, for the horses were almost as tired as they were, and it was necessary to husband them if they were to reach Mooifontein by dark. At midday they rested for an hour and a half, and then, feeling almost worn out, continued their journey, reckoning that they could not be more than sixteen or seventeen miles from Mooifontein. It was about two hours after this that the catastrophe happened. The course they were following ran down the side of one land wave, then across a little swampy sluit, and up the opposite slope. They crossed the marshy ground, walked their horses up to the crest of the opposite rise, and found themselves face to face with a party of armed and mounted Boers.