

CHAPTER XXXI

JESS FINDS A FRIEND

The Boers swooped down on them with a shout, like hawks on a sparrow. John pulled up his horse and drew his revolver.

"Don't, don't!" cried Jess; "our only chance is to be civil;" whereon, thinking better of the matter, he replaced it, and wished the leading Boer good-day.

"What are you doing here?" asked the Dutchman; whereon Jess explained that they had a pass--which John promptly produced--and were proceeding to Mooifontein.

"Ah, Oom Croft's!" said the Boer as he took the pass, "you are likely to meet a burying party there," but at the time Jess did not understand what he meant. He eyed the pass suspiciously all over, and then asked how it came to be stained with water.

Jess, not daring to tell the truth, said that it had been dropped into a puddle. The Boer was about to return it when suddenly his eye fell upon Jess's saddle.

"How is it that the girl is riding on a man's saddle?" he asked. "Why, I know that saddle; let me look at the other side. Yes, there is a

bullet-hole through the flap. That is Swart Dirk's saddle. How did you get it?"

"I bought it from him," answered Jess without a moment's hesitation. "I could get nothing to ride on."

The Boer shook his head. "There are plenty of saddles in Pretoria," he said, "and these are not the days when a man sells his saddle to an English girl. Ah! and that other is a Boer saddle too. No Englishman has a saddle-cloth like that. This pass is not sufficient," he went on in a cold tone; "it should have been countersigned by the local commandant. I must arrest you."

Jess began to make further excuses, but he merely repeated, "I must arrest you," and gave some orders to the men with him.

"We are caught again," she said to John; "and there is nothing for it but to go."

"I sha'n't mind so much if only they will give us some food," replied John philosophically. "I am half starved."

"And I am half dead," said Jess with a little laugh. "I wish they would shoot us and have done with it."

"Come, cheer up, Jess," he answered; "perhaps the luck is going to

change."

She shook her head with the air of one who expects the worst, and then some gay young spirits among the Boers came up and made things pleasant by an exhibition of their polished wit, which they chiefly exercised at the expense of poor Jess, whose appearance, as may well be imagined, was exceedingly wretched and forlorn; so much so that it would have moved the pity of most people. But these specimens of the golden youth of a simple pastoral folk found in it a rich mine of opportunities. They asked her if she would not like to ride straddle-legged, and if she had bought her dress from an old Hottentot who had done with it, and if she had been rolling about tipsy in the veldt to get all the mud on it; and generally availed themselves of this unparalleled occasion to be witty at the expense of an English lady in sore distress. Indeed, one gay young dog called Jacobus was proceeding from jokes linguistic to jokes practical. Perceiving that Jess only kept her seat on the man's saddle by the exercise of a faculty of balance, it occurred to him that it would be a fine thing to upset it and make her fall upon her face. Accordingly, with a sudden twist of the rein he brought his horse sharply against her wearied animal, nearly throwing it down; but she was too quick for him, and saved herself by catching at the mane. Jess said nothing; indeed, she made no answer to her tormentors, and fortunately John understood little of what they were saying. Presently, however, the young Boer made another attempt, putting out his hand to give her a slight push. As it happened John saw this, and the sight of the indignity caused the blood to boil in his veins. Before he could reflect

on what he was doing he was alongside of the man, and, catching him by the throat, had hurled him backwards over his crupper with all the force he could command. Jacobus fell heavily upon his shoulders, and instantly there was a great hubbub. John drew his revolver, and the other Boers raised their rifles, so that Jess thought there was an end of it, and put her hand before her face, having first thanked John for avenging the insult with a swift flash of her beautiful eyes. And indeed in another second it would have been all over had not the elder man who inspected the pass interposed. In fact he had witnessed the proceedings which led to his follower's discomfiture, and, being a decent person at bottom, strongly disapproved of them.

"Leave them alone and put down those guns," he shouted. "It served Jacobus right; he was trying to push the girl from her horse! Almighty! it is not wonderful those English call us brute beasts when you boys do such things. Put down your guns, I say, and one of you help Jacobus up. He looks as sick as a buck with a bullet through it."

Accordingly the row passed over, and the playful Jacobus--whom Jess noted with satisfaction seemed exceedingly ill and trembled in every limb--was with difficulty hoisted on to his horse, to continue his journey with not a single bit of fun left in him.

A little while after this Jess pointed out a long low hill that lay upon the flat veldt, a dozen miles or so away, like a stone upon a stretch of sand.

"Look," she said, "there is Mooifontein at last!"

"We are not there yet," remarked John sadly.

Another weary half-hour passed, and then on passing over a crest suddenly they saw Hans Coetzee's homestead lying down by the water in the hollow. So that was whither they were being taken.

Within a hundred yards of the house the Boers halted and consulted, except Jacobus, who went on, still looking very green. Finally the elder man came to them and addressed Jess, at the same time handing her back the pass.

"You can go on home," he said. "The Englishman must stay with us till we find out more about him."

"He says that I can go. What shall I do?" asked Jess. "I don't like leaving you with these men."

"Do? why, go, of course. I can look after myself; and if I can't, certainly you won't be able to help me. Perhaps you will be able to get some help from the farm. At any rate, you must go."

"Now, Englishman," said the Boer.

"Good-bye, Jess," said John. "God bless you."

"Good-bye, John," she answered, looking him steadily in the eyes for a moment, and then turning away to hide the tears which would gather in her own.

And thus they parted.

She knew her way now even across the open veldt, for she dared not go by the road. There was, however, a bridle path that ran over the hill at the back of Mooifontein, and for this she shaped her course. It was five o'clock by now, and both she and her horse were in a condition of great exhaustion, enhanced in her own case by want of food and trouble of mind. But she was a strong woman, with a will like iron, and she held on when most girls would have died. Jess meant to get to Mooifontein somehow, and she knew that she would get there. If only she could reach the place and find help to send to her lover, she did not greatly care what happened to her afterwards. The pace of the horse she was riding grew slower and slower. From the ambling canter into which at first she managed occasionally to force it, and which is the best pace to travel at in South Africa, it relapsed continually into a rough short trot, which was agony to her, riding as she was, and from the trot into a walk. Indeed, just before sunset, or a little after six o'clock, the walk became final. At last they reached the rising ground that stretched up the slope of the Mooifontein hill, and here the poor beast fell down utterly worn out. Jess slipped off and tried to drag it up, but failed.

It had no strength left in it. So she did what she could, pulling off the bridle and undoing the girth, so that the saddle would fall off if the horse ever managed to rise. The animal watched her go with melancholy eyes, knowing that it was being deserted. First it neighed, then with a desperate effort it struggled to its feet and trotted after her for a hundred yards or so, only to fall down again at last. Jess turned and saw it, and, exhausted as she was, she positively ran to get away from the look in those big eyes. That night there was a cold rain, in which the horse perished, as "poor" horses are apt to do.

It was nearly dark when at length Jess reached the top of the hill and looked down. She knew the spot well, and from it she could always see the light in the kitchen window of the house. To-night there was no light. Wondering what it could mean, and feeling a fresh chill of doubt creep round her heart, she scrambled on down the hill. When she was about half-way a shower of sparks suddenly shot into the air from the spot where the house should be, caused by the fall of a piece of wall into the smouldering embers beneath. Again Jess paused, wondering and aghast. What could have happened? Determined at all hazards to discover, she crept on very cautiously. Before she had gone another twenty yards, however, a hand was laid suddenly upon her arm. She turned quickly, too paralysed with fear to cry out, and a voice that was familiar to her whispered into her ear, "Missie Jess, Missie Jess, is it you? I am Jantje."

She gave a sigh of relief, and her heart, which had stood still, began

to move again. Here was a friend at last.

"I heard you coming down the hill, though you came so softly," he said; "but I could not tell who it was, because you jumped from rock to rock and did not walk as usual. But I thought it was a woman with boots; I could not see, because the light all falls dead against the hill, and the stars are not up. So I got to the left of your path--for the wind is blowing from the right--and waited till you had passed and winded you. Then I knew who you were for certain--either you or Missie Bessie; but Missie Bessie is shut up, so it could not be her."

"Bessie shut up!" ejaculated Jess, not even pausing to marvel at the dog-like instinct that had enabled the Hottentot to identify her. "What do you mean?"

"This way, missie, come this way, and I will tell you;" and he led her to a fantastic pile of rocks in which it was his wild habit to sleep. Jess knew the place well, and had often peeped into, but never entered, the Hottentot's kennel.

"Stop a bit, missie. I will go and light a candle; I have some in there, and they can't see the light from outside;" and accordingly he vanished. In a few seconds he returned, and, taking her by the sleeve, led her along a winding passage between great boulders till they came to a beehole in the rocks, through which she could see the light shining. Going down on his hands and knees, Jantje crept through, and Jess

followed him. She found herself in a small apartment, about six feet square by eight high, formed for the most part by the accidental falling together of big boulders, and roofed in with one great natural slab. The place, which was lighted by an end of candle stuck upon the floor, was very dirty, as might be expected of a Hottentot's den, and in it were collected an enormous variety of odds and ends. As, discarding a three-legged stool that Jantje offered her, Jess sank down on a pile of skins in the corner, her eye fell upon a collection worthy of an old rag and bone shop. The sides of the chamber were festooned with every imaginable garment, from the white full-dress coat of an Austrian officer down to a shocking pair of corduroys "lifted" by Jantje from the body of a bushman, which he had discovered in his rambles. All these clothes were in various stages of decay, and obviously the result of years of patient collecting. In the corners again were sticks, kerries, and two assegais, a number of queer-shaped stones and bones, handles of broken table-knives, bits of the locks of guns, portions of an American clock, and various other articles which this human jackdaw had picked up and hidden away. Altogether it was a strange place: and vaguely it occurred to Jess, as she sank back upon the dirty skins, that, had it not been for the old clothes and the wreck of the American clock, she would have made acquaintance with a very fair example of the dwellings of primeval man.

"Stop before you begin," she said. "Have you anything to eat here? I am nearly starving."

Jantje grinned knowingly, and, grubbing in a heap of rubbish in the corner, drew out a gourd with a piece of flat sheet iron, which once had formed the back plate of a stove, placed on the top of it. It contained "maas," or curdled buttermilk, which a woman had brought him that very morning from a neighbouring kraal, and it was destined for Jantje's own supper. Hungry as he was himself, for he had tasted no food all day, he gave it to Jess without a moment's hesitation, together with a wooden spoon, and, squatting on the rock before her, watched her eat it with guttural exclamations of satisfaction. Not knowing that she was robbing a hungry man, Jess ate the maas to the last spoonful, and was grateful to feel the sensation of gnawing sickness leave her.

"Now," she said, "tell me what you mean."

Thereon Jantje began at the beginning and related the events of the day so far as he was acquainted with them. When he came to where the old man was dragged, with kicks and blows and ignominy, from his own house, Jess's eyes flashed, and she positively ground her teeth with indignation; and as for her feelings when she learnt that he was condemned to death and to be shot at dawn on the morrow, they are simply indescribable. Of the Bessie complication Jantje was quite ignorant, and could only tell her that Frank Muller had an interview with her sister in the little plantation, after which she was shut up in the store-room, where she still remained. But this was quite enough for Jess, who knew Muller's character better, perhaps, than anybody else, and was not by any means ignorant of his designs upon Bessie. A few moments' thought

put the key of the matter into her hand. She saw now what was the reason of the granting of the pass, and of the determined and partially successful attempt at wholesale murder of which they had been the victims. She saw, too, why her old uncle had been condemned to death--it was to be used as a lever with Bessie; the man was capable even of that.

Yes, she saw it all as clear as daylight; and in her heart she swore, helpless as she seemed to be, that she would find a way to prevent it. But what way? what way? Ah, if only John were here! but he was not, so she must act without him if only she could see the road to action. She thought first of all of going down boldly to face Muller and denounce him as a murderer before his men; but a moment's reflection showed that this was impracticable. For his own safety he would be obliged to stop her mouth somehow, and the best she could expect would be to be incarcerated and rendered quite powerless. If only she could manage to communicate with Bessie! At any rate it was absolutely necessary that she should know what was happening. She might as well be a hundred miles away as a hundred yards.

"Jantje," she said, "tell me where the Boers are."

"Some are in the waggon-house, missie, some are on sentry, and the rest are down by the waggon they brought with them and outspanned behind the gums there. The cart is there, too, that came just before you did, with the clergyman in it."

"And where is Frank Muller?"

"I don't know, missie; but he brought a round tent with him in the waggon, and it is pitched between the two big gums."

"Jantje, I must go down there and find out what is going on, and you must come with me."

"You will be caught, missie. There is a sentry at the back of the waggon-house, and two in front. But," he added, "perhaps we might get near. I will go out and look at the night."

Presently he returned and said that a "small rain" had come on, and the clouds covered up the stars so that it was very dark.

"Well, let us go at once," said Jess.

"Missie, you had better not go," answered the Hottentot. "You will get wet, and the Boers will catch you. Better let me go. I can creep about like a snake, and if the Boers catch me it won't matter."

"You must come too, but I am going. I must find out."

Then the Hottentot shrugged his shoulders and yielded, and, having extinguished the candle, silently as ghosts they crept out into the night.