

## CHAPTER XXXII

### HE SHALL DIE

The night was still and very dark. A soft cold rain, such as often falls in the Wakkerstroom and New Scotland districts of the Transvaal, and which more resembles a true north country mist than anything else, was drizzling gently but persistently. This condition of affairs was as favourable as possible to their enterprise, and under cover of it the Hottentot and the white girl crept far down the hill to within twelve or fourteen paces of the back of the waggon-house. Then Jantje, who was leading, suddenly put back his hand and checked her, and at that moment Jess caught the sound of a sentry's footsteps as he tramped leisurely up and down. For a couple of minutes or so they stopped thus, not knowing what to do, when suddenly a man came round the corner of the building holding a lantern in his hand. On seeing the lantern Jess's first impulse was to fly, but Jantje by a motion made her understand that she was to stop still. The man with the lantern advanced towards the other man, holding the light above his head, and looking dim and gigantic in the mist and rain. Presently he turned his face, and Jess saw that it was Frank Muller himself. He stood thus for a moment waiting till the sentry was near to him.

"You can go to your supper," he said. "Come back in half an hour. I will be responsible for the prisoners till then."

The man growled out an answer something about the rain, and then departed round the end of the building, followed by Muller.

"Now then, come on," whispered Jantje; "there is a hole in the store-room wall, and you may be able to speak to Missie Bessie."

Jess did not require a second invitation, but slipped up to the wall in five seconds. Passing her hand over the stone-work she found the air-hole, which she remembered well, for they used to play bo-peep there as children, and was about to whisper through it, when suddenly the door at the other end opened, and Frank Muller entered, bearing the lantern in his hand. For a moment he stood on the threshold, opening the slide of the lantern in order to increase the light. His hat was off, and he wore a cape of dark cloth thrown over his shoulders, which seemed to add to his great breadth. Indeed the thought flashed through the mind of Jess as she looked at him through the hole, and saw the light strike upon his face and form, glinting down his golden beard, that he was the most magnificent specimen of humanity whom she had ever seen. In another instant he had turned the lantern round and revealed her dear sister Bessie to her gaze. Bessie lay upon one of the half-empty sacks of mealies, apparently half asleep, for she opened her wide blue eyes and looked round apprehensively like one suddenly awakened. Her golden curls were in disorder and falling over her fair forehead, and her face was very pale and troubled, and marked beneath the eyes with deep blue lines. Catching sight of her visitor she rose hurriedly and retreated as far from him as the pile of sacks and potatoes would allow.

"What is it?" she asked in a low voice. "I gave you my answer. Why do you come to torment me again?"

He placed the lantern upon an upright sack of mealies, and carefully balanced it before he answered. Jess could see that he was taking time to consider.

"Let us recapitulate," he said at length, in his full rich voice. "The position is this. I gave you this morning the choice between consenting to marry me to-morrow and seeing your old uncle and benefactor shot. Further, I assured you that if you would not consent to marry me your uncle should be shot, and that I would then make you mine, dispensing with the ceremony of marriage. Is that not so?"

Bessie made no answer, and he continued, his eyes fixed upon her face, and thoughtfully stroking his beard.

"Silence gives consent. I will go on. Before a man can be shot according to law he must be tried and condemned according to law. Your uncle has been tried and has been condemned."

"I heard it all, cruel murderer that you are," said Bessie, lifting her head for the first time.

"So! I thought you would, through the crack. That is why I had you put

into this place; it would not have looked well to bring you before the court;" and he took the light and examined the crevice. "This wall is badly built," he went on in a careless tone; "look, there is another space there at the back;" and he actually came up to it and held the lantern close to the airhole in such fashion that its light shone through into Jess's eyes and nearly blinded her. She shut them quickly so that the gleam reflected from them should not betray her, then held her breath and remained still as the dead. In another second Muller took away the light and replaced it on the mealie bag.

"So you say you saw it all. Well, it must have shown you that I was in earnest. The old man took it well, did he not? He is a brave man, and I respect him. I fancy that he will not move a muscle at the last. That comes of English blood, you see. It is the best in the world, and I am proud to have it in my veins."

"Cannot you stop torturing me, and say what you have to say?" asked Bessie.

"I had no wish to torture you, but if you like I will come to the point. It is this. Will you now consent to marry me to-morrow morning at sun-up, or am I to be forced to carry the sentence on your old uncle into effect?"

"I will not. I will not. I hate you and defy you."

Muller looked at her coldly, and then drew his pocket-book from his pocket and extracted from it the death-warrant and a pencil.

"Look, Bessie," he said. "This is your uncle's death-warrant. At present it is valueless and informal, for I have not yet signed, though, as you will see, I have been careful that everybody else should. If once I place my signature there it cannot be revoked, and the sentence must be carried into effect. If you persist in your refusal I will sign it before your eyes;" and he placed the paper on the book and took the pencil in his right hand.

"Oh, you cannot, you cannot be such a fiend," wailed the wretched woman, wringing her hands.

"I assure you that you are mistaken. I both can and will. I have gone too far to turn back for the sake of one old Englishman. Listen, Bessie. Your lover Niel is dead--that you know."

Here Jess behind the wall felt inclined to cry out, "it is a lie!" but, remembering the absolute necessity of silence, she checked herself.

"And what is more," went on Muller, "your sister Jess is dead too! she died two days ago."

"Jess dead! Jess dead! It is not true. How do you know that she is dead?"

"Never mind; I will tell you when we are married. She is dead, and, except for your uncle, you are alone in the world. If you persist in this he will soon be dead too, and his blood will be upon your head, for you will have murdered him."

"And if I were to say yes, how would that help him?" she cried wildly.

"He is condemned by your court-martial--you would only deceive me and murder him after all."

"On my honour, no. Before the marriage I will give this warrant to the pastor, and he shall burn it as soon as the service is said. But, Bessie, don't you see that these fools who tried your uncle are only like clay in my hands? I can bend them this way and that, and whatever song I sing they will echo it. They do not wish to shoot your uncle, and will be glad indeed to get out of it. Your uncle shall go in safety to Natal, or stay here if he wills. His property shall be secured to him, and compensation paid for the burning of his house. I swear it before God."

She looked up at him, and he could see that she was inclined to believe him.

"It is true, Bessie, it is true--I will rebuild the place myself, and if I can find the man who fired it he shall be shot. Come, listen to me, and be reasonable. The man you love is dead, and no amount of sighing

can bring him to your arms. I alone am left--I who love you better than life, better than man ever loved woman before. Look at me: am I not a proper man for any maid to wed, though I be half a Boer? And I have the brains, too, Bessie, the brains that shall make us both great. We were made for each other--I have known it for years, and slowly, slowly, I have worked my way to you till at last you are in my reach;" and he stretched out both his arms towards her.

"My darling," he went on, in a soft, half-dreamy voice, "my love and desire, yield, now--yield! Do not force this new crime upon me. I want to grow good for your sake, and have done with bloodshed. When you are my wife I believe that the evil will go out of me, and I shall grow good. Yield, and never shall woman have had such a husband as I will be to you. I will make your life soft and beautiful to you as women love life to be. You shall have everything that money can buy and power bring. Yield for your uncle's sake, and for the sake of the great love I bear you."

As he spoke he was slowly drawing nearer Bessie, whose face wore a half-fascinated expression. As he came the wretched woman gathered herself together and put out her hand to repulse him. "No, no," she cried, "I hate you--I cannot be false to him, living or dead. I shall kill myself--I know I shall."

He made no answer, but only came always nearer, till at last his strong arms closed round her shrinking form and drew her to him as easily as

though she were a babe. And then all at once she seemed to yield. That embrace was the outward sign of his cruel mastery, and she struggled no more, mentally or physically.

"Will you marry me, darling--will you marry me?" he whispered, with his lips so close to the golden curls that Jess, straining her ears outside, could only just catch the words--

"Oh, I suppose so; but I shall die--it will kill me."

He strained her to his heart and kissed her beautiful face again and again, until Jess heard the heavy footsteps of the returning sentry, and saw Muller leave her. Then Jantje caught Jess by the hand, dragging her away from the wall, and presently she was once more ascending the hill-side towards the Hottentot's kennel. She had desired to find out how matters stood, and she had found out indeed. To attempt to portray the fury, the indignation, and the thirst to be avenged upon this fiend who had attempted to murder her and her lover, and had bought her dear sister's honour at the price of their innocent old uncle's life, would be impossible. Her weariness had left her; she was mad with all she had seen and heard, with the knowledge of what had been done and of what was about to be done. She even forgot her passion in it, and swore that Muller should never marry Bessie while she lived to prevent it. Had she been a bad woman herein she might have seen an opportunity, for Bessie once tied to Muller, John would be free to marry her, but this idea never even entered her mind. Whatever Jess's errors may have



been she was a self-sacrificing, honourable woman, and one who would have died rather than profit thus by circumstance. At length they reached the shelter again and crept into it.

"Light a candle," said Jess.

Jantje hunted for and struck a match. The piece of candle they had been using, however, was nearly burnt out, so from the rubbish in the corner he produced a box full of "ends," some of them three or four inches long. In the queer sort of way that trifles do strike us when the mind is undergoing a severe strain, Jess remembered instantly that for years she had been unable to discover what became of the odd bits of the candles used in the house. Now the mystery was explained.

"Go outside and leave me. I want to think," she said.

The Hottentot obeyed, and seated upon the heap of skins, her forehead resting on her hand and her fingers buried in her silky rain-soaked hair, Jess began to review the position. It was evident to her that Frank Muller would be as good as his word. She knew him too well to doubt this for a moment. If Bessie did not marry him he would murder the old man, as he had tried to murder herself and John, only this time judicially, and then abduct her sister afterwards. She was the only price that he was prepared to take in exchange for her uncle's life. But it was impossible to allow Bessie to be so sacrificed; the thought was horrible to her.

How, then, was it to be prevented?

She thought again of confronting Frank Muller and openly accusing him of her attempted murder, only, however, to dismiss the idea. Who would believe her? And if they did believe what good would it do? She would only be imprisoned and kept out of harm's way, or possibly murdered out of hand. Then she thought of attempting to communicate with her uncle and Bessie, to tell them that John was, so far as she knew, alive, only to recognise the impossibility of doing so now that the sentry had returned. Besides, what object could be served? The knowledge that John was alive might, it is true, encourage Bessie to resist Muller, but then the death of the old man must certainly ensue. Dismissing this project from her mind Jess began to consider whether they could obtain assistance. Alas! it was impossible. The only people from whom she could hope for aid would be the natives, and now that the Boers had triumphed over the English--for this much she had gathered from her captors and from Jantje--it was very doubtful if the Kafirs would dare to assist her. Besides, at the best it would take twenty-four hours to collect a force, and by then help would come too late. The situation was hopeless. Nowhere could she see a ray of light.

"What," Jess said aloud to herself--"what is there in the world that will stop a man like Frank Muller?"

And then of an instant the answer rose up in her brain as though by

inspiration--

"Death!"

Death, and death alone, would stay him. For a minute she held the idea in her mind till she grew familiar with it, then it was driven out by another thought that followed swiftly on its track. Frank Muller must die, and die before the morning light. By no other possible means could the Gordian knot be cut, and both Bessie and her old uncle be saved. If he were dead he could not marry Bessie, and if he died with the warrant unsigned their uncle could not be executed. That was the terrible answer to her riddle.

Yet it was most just that he should die, for had he not murdered and attempted murder? Surely if ever a man deserved a swift and awful doom that man was Frank Muller.

And so this forsaken, helpless girl, crouching upon the ground a torn and bespattered fugitive in the miserable hiding-hole of a Hottentot, arraigned the powerful leader of men before the tribunal of her conscience, and without pity, if without wrath, passed upon him a sentence of extinction.

But who was to be the executioner? A dreadful thought flashed into her mind and made her heart stand still, but she dismissed it. No, she had not come to that! Her eyes wandering round the kennel lit upon

Jantje's assegais and sticks in the corner, and these gave her another inspiration. Jantje should do the deed.

John had told her one day when they were sitting together in "The Palatial" at Pretoria the whole of Jantje's awful story about the massacre of his relatives by Frank Muller twenty years before, of which, indeed, she already knew something. It would be most fitting that this fiend should be removed from the face of the earth by the survivor of those unfortunates. That would be poetic justice, and justice is so rare in the world. But the question was, would he do it? The little man was a wonderful coward, that she knew, and had a great terror of Boers, and especially of Frank Muller.

"Jantje," she whispered, stooping towards the bee-hole.

"Yah, missie," answered a hoarse voice outside, and next second the Hottentot's monkey-like face came creeping into the ring of light, followed by his even more monkey-like form.

"Sit down there, Jantje. I am lonely here and want to talk."

He obeyed her, with a grin. "What shall we talk about, missie? Shall I tell you a story of the time when the beasts could speak, as I used to do years and years ago?"

"No, Jantje. Tell me about that stick--that long stick with a knob at

the top, and the nicks cut on it. Has it not something to do with Frank Muller?"

The Hottentot's face instantly grew evil. "Yah, yah, missie!" he said, reaching out a skinny claw and seizing the stick. "Look, this big notch, that is my father, Baas Frank shot him; and this next notch, that is my mother, Baas Frank shot her; and this next notch, that is my uncle, an old, old man, Baas Frank shot him also. And these small notches, they are when he has beaten me--yes, and other things too. And now I will make more notches, one for the house that is burnt, and one for the old Baas Croft, my own Baas, whom he is going to shoot, and one for Missie Bessie." And Jantje drew from his side his large white-handled hunting-knife and began to cut them then and there upon the hard wood of the stick.

Jess knew this knife of old. It was Jantje's peculiar treasure, the chief joy of his narrow little heart. He had brought it from a Zulu for a heifer which her uncle had given him in lieu of half a year's wage. The Zulu had it from a half-caste whose kraal was beyond Delagoa Bay. As a matter of fact it was a Somali knife, manufactured from the soft native steel which takes an edge like a razor, and with a handle cut out of the tusk of a hippopotamus. For the rest, it was about a foot long, with three grooves running the length of the blade, and very heavy.

"Stop cutting notches, Jantje, and let me look at that knife."

He obeyed, and put it into her hand.

"That knife would kill a man, Jantje," she said.

"Yes, yes," he answered: "no doubt it has killed many men."

"It would kill Frank Muller, now, would it not?" she went on, suddenly bending forward and fixing her dark eyes upon the little man's jaundiced orbs.

"Yah, yah," he said starting back, "it would kill him dead. Ah! what a thing it would be to kill him!" he added, making a fierce sound, half grunt, half laugh.

"He killed your father, Jantje."

"Yah, yah, he killed my father," said Jantje, his eyes beginning to roll with rage.

"He killed your mother."

"Yah, he killed my mother," he repeated after her with eager ferocity.

"And your uncle. He killed your uncle."

"And my uncle too," he went on, shaking his fist and twitching his long

toes as his hoarse voice rose to a subdued scream. "But he will die in blood--the old Englishwoman, his mother, said it when the devil was in her, and the devils never lie. Look! I draw Baas Frank's circle in the dust with my foot; and listen, I say the words--I say the words," and he muttered something rapidly; "an old, old witch-doctor taught me how to do it, and what to say. Once before I did it, and there was a stone in the circle, now there is no stone: look, the ends meet. He will die in blood; he will die soon. I know how to read the omen;" and he gnashed his teeth and sawed the air with his clenched fists.

"Yes, you are right, Jantje," she said, still holding him with her dark eyes. "He will die in blood, and he will die to-night, and you will kill him, Jantje."

The Hottentot started, and turned pale under his yellow skin.

"How?" he said; "how?"

"Bend forward, Jantje, and I will tell you how;" and Jess whispered for some minutes into his ear.

"Yes! yes! yes!" he said when she had done. "Oh, what a fine thing it is to be clever like the white people! I will kill him to-night, and then I can cut out the notches, and the spooks of my father and my mother and my uncle will stop howling round me in the dark as they do now, when I am asleep."