

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### VENGEANCE

For three or four minutes more Jess and Jantje whispered together, after which the Hottentot rose and crept away to find out what was passing among the Boers below, and watch when Frank Muller retired to his tent. So soon as he had marked him down it was agreed that he was to come back and report to Jess.

When he was gone Jess gave a sigh of relief. This stirring up of Jantje to the boiling-point of vengeance had been a dreadful thing to nerve herself to do, but now at any rate it was done, and Muller's doom was sealed. But what the end of it would be none could say. Practically she would be a murderess, and she felt that sooner or later her guilt must find her out, and then she could hope for little mercy. Still she had no scruples, for after all Frank Muller's would be a well-merited fate. But when all was said and done, it was a dreadful thing to be forced to steep her hands in blood, even for Bessie's sake. If Muller were removed Bessie would marry John, provided that John escaped the Boers, and be happy, but what would become of herself? Robbed of her love and with this crime upon her mind, what could she do even if she escaped--except die? It would be better to die and never see him again, for her sorrow and her shame were more than she could bear. Then Jess began to think of John till all her poor bruised heart seemed to go out towards him. Bessie could never love him as she did, she felt sure of that, and yet

Bessie was to have him by her all her life, and she--she must go away. Well, it was the only thing to do. She would see this deed done, and set her sister free, then if she happened to escape she would go at once--go quite away where she would never be heard of again. Thus at any rate she would have behaved like an honourable woman. She sat up and put her hands to her face. It was burning hot though she was wet through, and chilled to the bone with the raw damp of the night. A fierce fever of mind and body had taken hold of her, worn out as she was with emotion, hunger, and protracted exposure. But her brain was clear enough; she never remembered its being so clear before. Every thought that came into her mind seemed to present itself with startling strength, standing out alone against a black background of nothingness, not softened down and shaded one into another as thoughts generally are. She seemed to see herself wandering away--alone, utterly alone, alone for ever!--while in the far distance John stood holding Bessie by the hand, gazing after her regretfully. Well, she would write to him, since it must be so, and bid him one word of farewell. She could not go without that, though how her letter was to reach John she knew not, unless indeed Jantje could find him and deliver it. She had a pencil, and in the breast of her dress was the Boer pass, the back of which, stained as it was with water, would serve the purpose of paper. She found it, and, bending forward towards the light, placed it on her knees.

"Good-bye," she wrote, "good-bye! We can never meet again, and it is better that we never should in this world. I believe that there is another. If there is I shall wait for you there if I have to wait ten

thousand years. If not, then good-bye for ever. Think of me sometimes, for I have loved you very dearly, and as nobody will ever love you again; and while I live in this or any other existence and am myself, I shall always love you and you only. Don't forget me. I never shall be really dead to you until I am forgotten.--J."

She lifted the paper from her knee, and without even re-reading what she had written thrust the pass back into her bosom and was soon lost in thought.

Ten minutes later Jantje, like a great snake in human form, came creeping in to where she sat, his yellow face shining with the raindrops.

"Well," whispered Jess, looking up with a start, "have you done it?"

"No, missie, no. Baas Frank has but now gone to his tent. He has been talking to the clergyman, something about Missie Bessie, I don't know what. I was near, but he talked low, and I could only hear the name."

"Are all the Boers asleep?"

"All, missie, except the sentries."

"Is there a sentry before Baas Frank's tent?"

"No, missie, there is nobody near."

"What is the time, Jantje?"

"About three hours and a half after sundown" (half-past ten).

"Let us wait half an hour, and then you must go."

Accordingly they sat in silence. In silence they sat facing each other and their own thoughts. Presently Jantje broke it by drawing the big white-handled knife and commencing to sharpen it on a piece of leather.

The sight made Jess feel sick. "Put the knife up," she said quickly, "it is sharp enough."

Jantje obeyed with a feeble grin, and the minutes passed on heavily.

"Now, Jantje," she said at last, speaking huskily in her struggle to overcome the spasmodic contractions of her throat, "it is time for you to go."

The Hottentot fidgeted about, and at last spoke.

"Missie must come with me!"

"Come with you!" answered Jess starting, "why?"

"Because the ghost of the old Englishwoman will be after me if I go alone."

"You fool!" said Jess angrily; then recollecting herself she added, "Come, be a man, Jantje; think of your father and mother, and be a man."

"I am a man," he answered sulkily, "and I will kill him like a man, but what good is a man against the ghost of a dead Englishwoman? If I put the knife into her she would only make faces, and fire would come out of the hole. I will not go without you, missie."

"You must go," she said fiercely; "you shall go!"

"No, missie, I will not go alone," he answered.

Jess looked at him and saw that Jantje meant what he said. He was growing sulky, and the worst dispositioned donkey in the world is far, far easier to deal with than a sulky Hottentot. She must either give up the project or go with the man. Well, she was equally guilty one way or the other, and being almost callous about detection, she might as well go. She had no power left to make fresh plans. Her mind seemed to be exhausted. Only she must keep out of the way at the last. She could not bear to be near then.

"Well," she said, "I will go with you, Jantje."

"Good, missie, that is all right now. You can keep off the ghost of the dead Englishwoman while I kill Baas Frank. But first he must be fast asleep. Fast, fast asleep."

Then slowly and with the uttermost caution once more they crept down the hill. This time there was no sound to be heard except the regular tramp of the sentries. But their present business did not take them to the waggon-house; they left that on their right, and went on towards the blue-gum avenue. When they were nearly opposite to the first tree they halted in a patch of stones, and Jantje slipped forward to reconnoitre. Presently he returned with the intelligence that all the Boers who were with the waggon had gone to sleep, but that Muller was still sitting in his tent thinking. Then they crept on, perfectly sure that if they were not heard they would not be seen, curtained as they were by the dense mist and darkness.

At length they reached the bole of the first big gum tree. Five paces from this tree Frank Muller's tent was pitched. There was a light in it which caused the wet tent to glow in the mist, as though it had been rubbed with phosphorus, and on this lurid canvas the shadow of Frank Muller was gigantically limned. He was so placed that the lamp cast a magnified reflection of his every feature and even of his expression upon the screen before them. The attitude in which he sat was his favourite one when he was plunged in thought, his hands resting on his knees and his gaze fixed on vacancy. He was thinking of his triumph,

and of all that he had gone through to win it, and of all that it would bring him. He held the trump cards now, and the game lay in his own hand. He had triumphed, and yet over him hung the shadow of that curse which dogs the presence of our accomplished desires. Too often, even with the innocent, does the seed of our destruction lurk in the rich blossom of our hopes, and much more is this so with the guilty. Somehow this thought was present with him to-night, and in a rough half-educated way he grasped its truth. Once more the saying of the old Boer general rose in his mind: "I believe that there is a God--I believe that God sets a limit to a man's doings. If he is going too far, God kills him."

What a dreadful thing it would be if the old fool were right after all! Supposing that there were a God, and God were to kill him to-night, and hurry off his soul, if he had one, to some dim place of unending fear! All his superstitions awoke at the thought, and he shivered so violently that the shadow of the shiver caused the outlines of the gigantic form upon the canvas to tremble visibly.

Then rising with an angry curse, Muller hastily threw off his outer clothing, and having turned down but not extinguished the rough paraffine lamp, he flung himself down upon the little camp bedstead, which creaked and groaned beneath his weight like a thing in pain.

Now came silence, only broken by the drip, drip of the rain from the gum leaves overhead, and the rattling of the boughs whenever a breath of air

stirred them. It was an eerie and depressing night, a night that might well have tried the nerves of any strong man who, wet through and worn out, was obliged to crouch upon the open veldt and endure it. How much more awful was it then to the unfortunate woman who, half broken-hearted, fever-stricken, and well-nigh crazed with the suffering of mind and body, waited in it to see murder done! Slowly the minutes passed, and at every raindrop or rustle of a bough her guilty conscience summoned up a host of fears. But by the mere power of her will she kept them down. She would go through with it. Yes, she would go through with it. Surely he must be asleep by now!

They crept up to the tent and placed their ears within two inches of his head. Yes, he was asleep; the sound of his breathing rose and fell with the regularity of an infant's.

Jess turned round and touched her companion upon the shoulder. He did not move, but she felt that his arm was shaking.

"Now," she whispered.

Still he hung back. It was evident to her that the long waiting had taken the courage out of him.

"Be a man," she whispered again, so low that the sound scarcely reached his ears although her lips were almost touching them, "go, and mind you strike home!"



Then at last she heard him softly draw the great knife from the sheath, and in another second he had glided from her side. Presently she saw the line of light that streamed upon the darkness through the opening of the tent broaden a little, and by this she knew that he was creeping in upon his dreadful errand. Then she turned her head and put her fingers in her ears. But even so she could see a long line of shadow travelling across the skirt of the tent. So she shut her eyes also, and waited sick at heart, for she did not dare to move.

Presently--it might have been five minutes or only half a minute afterwards, for she had lost count of time--Jess felt somebody touch her on the arm. It was Jantje.

"Is it done?" she whispered again.

He shook his head and drew her away from the tent. In going her foot caught one of the guy-ropes and stirred it slightly.

"I could not do it, missie," he said. "He is asleep and looks just like a child. When I lifted the knife he smiled in his sleep and all the strength went out of my arm, so that I could not strike. And then before I grew strong again the spook of the old Englishwoman came and hit me in the back, and I ran away."

If a look could have blasted a human being Jantje would assuredly have

been blasted then. The man's cowardice maddened Jess, but whilst she still choked with wrath a duiker buck, which had come down from its stony home to feed upon the rose-bushes, suddenly sprang with a crash almost from their feet, passing away like a grey gleam into the utter darkness.

Jess started, then recovered herself, guessing what it was, but the miserable Hottentot, overcome with terror, fell upon the ground groaning out that it was the spook of the old Englishwoman. He had dropped the knife as he fell, and Jess, seeing the imminent peril in which they were placed, knelt down, found it, and hissed into his ear that if he were not quiet she would kill him.

This pacified him a little, but no earthly power could persuade him to enter the tent again.

What was to be done? What could she do? For two minutes or more she buried her face in her wet hands and thought wildly and despairingly.

Then a dark and dreadful determination entered her mind. The man Muller should not escape. Bessie should not be sacrificed to him. Rather than that, she would do the deed herself.

Without a word she rose, animated by the tragic agony of her purpose and the force of her despair, and glided towards the tent, the great knife in her hand. Now, ah! all too soon, she was inside of it, and stood for

a second to allow her eyes to grow accustomed to the light. Presently she began to see, first the outline of the bed, then the outline of the manly form stretched upon it, then both bed and man distinctly. Jantje had said that he was sleeping like a child. He might have been; now he was not. On the contrary, his face was convulsed like the face of one in an extremity of fear, and great beads of sweat stood upon his brow. It was as though he knew his danger, and yet was utterly powerless to avoid it. He lay upon his back. One heavy arm, his left, hung over the side of the bed, the knuckles of the hand resting on the ground; the other was thrown back, and his head was pillowed upon it. The clothing had slipped away from his throat and massive chest, which were quite bare.

Jess stood and gazed. "For Bessie's sake, for Bessie's sake!" she murmured; then impelled by a force that seemed to move of itself she crept slowly, slowly, to the right-hand side of the bed.

At this moment Muller woke, and his opening eyes fell full upon her face. Whatever his dream had been, what he now saw was far more terrible, for bending over him was the ghost of the woman he had murdered in the Vaal! There she was, risen from her river grave, torn, dishevelled, water yet dripping from her hands and hair. Those sunk and marble cheeks, those dreadful flaming eyes could belong to no human being, but only to a spirit. It was the spirit of Jess Croft, of the woman whom he had slain, come back to tell him that there was a living vengeance and a hell!

Their eyes met, and no creature will ever know the agony of terror that he tasted of before the end came. She saw his face sink in and turn ashen grey while the cold sweat ran from every pore. He was awake, but fear paralysed him, he could not speak or move.

He was awake, and she could hesitate no more. . . .

He must have seen the flash of the falling steel, and----

Jess was outside the tent again, the red knife in her hand. She flung the accursed thing from her. That shriek must have awakened every soul within a mile. Already she could faintly hear the stir of men down by the waggon, and the patter of the feet of Jantje running for his life.

Then she too turned, and fled straight up the hill. She knew not whither, she cared not where! None saw her or followed her, the hunt had broken away to the left after Jantje. Her heart was lead and her brain a rocking sea of fire, whilst before her, around her, and behind her yelled all the conscience-created furies that run Murder to his lair.

On she flew, one sight only before her eyes, one sound only in her ears.

On over the hill, far into the rain and the night!