

## CHAPTER XXXV

### THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER

When the rain ceased and the moon began to shine, Jess was still fleeing like a wild thing across the plain on the top of the mountain. She felt no sense of exhaustion now or even of weariness; her only idea was to get away, right away somewhere, where she could lose herself and nobody would ever see her again. Presently she reached to top of Leeuwen Kloof, and recognising the spot in a bewildered way she began to descend it. Here was a place where she might lie till she died, for no one ever came there, except now and again some wandering Kafir herd. On she sprang, from rock to rock, a wild and eerie figure, well in keeping with the solemn and titanic sadness of the place.

Twice she fell, once right into the stream, but she took no heed, she did not even seem to feel it. At last she was at the bottom, now creeping like a black dot across the wide spaces of moonlight, and now swallowed up in the shadow. There before her gaped the mouth of the little cave; her strength was leaving her at last, and she was fain to crawl into it, broken-hearted, crazed, and--dying.

"Oh, God forgive me! God forgive me!" she moaned as she sank upon the rocky floor. "Bessie, I sinned against you, but I have washed away my sin. I did it for you, Bessie love, not for myself. I had rather have died than kill him for myself. You will marry John now, and you will

never, never know what I did for you. I am going to die. I know that. I am dying. Oh, if only I could see his face once more before I die--before I die!"

Slowly the westering moonlight crept down the blackness of the rock. Now at last it peeped into the little cave and played upon John's sleeping face lying within six feet of her. Her prayer had been granted; there was her lover by her side.

With a start and a great sigh of doubt she recognised him. Was it a vision? Was he dead? She dragged herself to him upon her hands and knees and listened for his breathing, if perchance he still breathed and was not a wraith. Then it came, strong and slow, the breath of a man in deep sleep.

So he lived. Should she try to wake him? What for? To tell him she was a murderess and then to let him see her die? For instinct told her that nature was exhausted; and she knew that she was certainly going--going fast. No, a hundred times no!

Only she put her hand into her breast, and drawing out the pass on the back of which she had written her last message to him, she thrust it between his listless fingers. It should speak for her. Then she leant over him, and watched his sleeping face, a very incarnation of infinite, despairing tenderness, and love that is deeper than the grave. And as she watched, gradually her feet and legs grew cold and numb, till at

length she could feel nothing below her bosom. She was dead nearly to the heart. Well, it was better so!

The rays of the moon faded slowly from the level of the little cave, and John's face grew dark to her darkening sight. She bent down and kissed him once--twice--thrice.

At last the end came. There was a great flashing of light before her eyes, and within her ears the roaring as of a thousand seas, and her head sank gently on her lover's breast as on a pillow; and there Jess died and passed upward towards the wider life and larger liberty, or, at the least, downward into the depths of rest.

Poor dark-eyed, deep-hearted Jess! This was the fruition of her love, and this her bridal bed.

It was done. She had gone, taking with her the secret of her self-sacrifice and crime, and the night-winds moaning amidst the rocks sang their requiem over her. Here she first had learned her love, and here she closed its book on earth.

She might have been a great and a good woman. She might even have been a happy woman. But fate had ordained it otherwise. Women such as Jess are rarely happy in the world. It is not worldly wise to stake all one's fortune on a throw, and lack the craft to load the dice. Well, her troubles are done with. Think gently of her and let her pass in peace!

The hours grew on towards the evening, but John, the dead face of the woman he had loved still pillowed on his breast, neither dreamed nor woke. There was a strange and dreadful irony in the situation, an irony which sometimes finds its counterpart in our waking life, but still the man slept, and the dead girl lay till the night turned into the morning and the earth woke up as usual. The sunbeams slid into the cave, and played indifferently upon the ashen face and tangled curls, and on the broad chest of the living man whereon they rested. An old baboon peeped round the rocky edge and manifested no surprise, only indignation, at the intrusion of humanity, dead or alive, into his dominions. Yes, the world woke up as usual, and reeked not and troubled not because Jess was dead.

It is so accustomed to such sights.

At last John woke up also. He stretched his arms yawning, and for the first time became aware of the weight upon his breast. He glanced down and saw dimly at first--then more clearly.

There are some things into which it is wisest not to pry, and one of them is the first agony of a strong man's grief.

Happy was it for John that his brain did not give way in that lonely hour of bottomless despair. But he lived through it, as we do live through such things, and was sane and sound after it, though it left its mark upon his life.

Two hours later a gaunt, haggard figure stumbled down the hill-side towards the site of Mooifontein, bearing something in his arms. The whole place was in commotion. Here and there were knots of Boers talking excitedly, who, when they saw the man coming, hurried up to learn who it was and what he carried. But when they knew, they fell back awed and without a word, and John too passed through them without a word. For a moment he hesitated, seeing that the house was burnt down. Then he turned into the waggon-shed, and laid his burden down on the saw-bench where Frank Muller had sat as judge upon the previous day.

Now at last John spoke in a hoarse voice: "Where is the old man?"

One of them pointed to the door of the little room.

"Open it!" he said, so fiercely that again they fell back and obeyed him without a word.

"John! John!" cried Silas Croft, rising amazed from his seat upon a

sack. "Thank God--you have come back to us from the dead!" and trembling with joy and surprise he would have fallen on his neck.

"Hush!" he answered; "I have brought the dead with me."

And he led him to where Jess lay.

During the day all the Boers went away and left them alone. Now that Frank Muller lay dead there was no thought among them of carrying out the sentence upon their old neighbour. Besides, there was no warrant for the execution, even had they desired so to do, for their commandant died leaving it unsigned. So they held an informal inquest upon their leader's body, and buried him in the little graveyard that was walled in on the hill-side at the back of where the house had stood, and planted with the four red gums, one at each corner. Rather than be at the pains of hollowing another grave, they buried him in the very place that he had caused to be dug to receive the body of Silas Croft.

Who had murdered Frank Muller was and remains a mystery among them to this day. The knife was identified by natives about the farm as belonging to the Hottentot Jantje, and a Hottentot had been seen running away from the place of the deed and hunted for some way, but he could not be caught or heard of again. Therefore many of them are of the opinion that he is the guilty man. Others, again, believe that the crime

rests upon the shoulders of the villainous one-eyed Kafir, Hendrik, Muller's own servant, who had also vanished. But as they have never found either of them, and are not likely to do so, the point remains a moot one. Nor, indeed, did they take any great pains to hunt for them. Frank Muller was not a popular character, and the fact of a man coming to a mysterious end does not produce any great sensation among a rough people and in rough times.

On the following day, old Silas Croft, Bessie, and John Niel also buried their dead in the little graveyard on the hill-side, and there Jess lies, with some ten feet of earth only between her and the man upon whom she was the instrument of vengeance. But they never knew this, or even guessed it. They never knew indeed that she had been near Mooifontein on that awful night. Nobody knew it except Jantje; and Jantje, haunted by the footfall of the pursuing Boers, was gone from the ken of the white man far into the heart of Central Africa.

"John," said the old man when they had filled in the grave, "this is no country for Englishmen. Let us go home to England." John bowed his head in assent, for he could not speak. Fortunately means were not wanting, although practically they were both ruined. The thousand pounds that John had paid to Silas as the price of a third interest in the farm still lay to the credit of the latter in the Standard Bank at Newcastle, in Natal, together with another two hundred and fifty pounds in cash.

And so in due course they went.

Now what more is there to tell? Jess, to those who read what has been written as it is meant to be read, was the soul of it all, and Jess--is dead. It is useless to set a lifeless thing upon its feet, rather let us strive to follow the soarings of the spirit. Jess is dead and her story at an end.

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So but one word more.

After some difficulty, John Niel, within three months of his arrival in England, obtained employment as a land agent to a large estate in Rutlandshire, which position he fills to this day, with credit to himself and such advantage to the property as can be expected in these times. Also, in due course he became the beloved husband of sweet Bessie Croft, and on the whole he may be considered a happy man. At times, however, a sorrow overcomes him of which his wife knows nothing, and for a while he is not himself.

He is not a man much addicted to sentiment or speculation, but sometimes when his day's work is done, and he strays to his garden gate and looks out at the dim and peaceful English landscape beyond, and thence to the wide star-strewn heavens above, he wonders if the hour will ever come



when once more he will see those dark and passionate eyes, and hear that sweet remembered voice.

For John feels as near to his lost love now that she is dead as he felt while she was yet alive. From time to time indeed he seems to know without possibility of doubt that if, when death is done with, there should prove to be an individual future for us suffering mortals, as he for one believes, certainly he will find Jess waiting to greet him at its gates.