COLLECTION

OF

BRITISH AUTHORS

TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 2452.

JESS BY H. RIDER HAGGARD.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

JESS

BY

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ETC. ETC.

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1887.

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OF VOLUME II.

JESS.

CHAPTER I.

HANS COETZEE COMES TO PRETORIA.

ONCE he had taken the turn, John's recovery was rapid. Naturally of a vigorous constitution, when the artery had fairly united, he soon made up for the great loss of blood which he had undergone, and in a little more than a month from the date of his wound was, physically, almost as good a man as ever.

One morning—it was the 20th of March—Jess and he were sitting in "The Palatial" garden. John was lying in a long cane deck chair that Jess had borrowed or stolen out of one of the deserted houses, and smoking a pipe. By his side, in a hole in the flat arm of the chair, made originally to receive a soda-water tumbler, was a great bunch of purple grapes which she had

gathered for him; and on his knees was a copy of that journalistic curiosity, the "News of the Camp," which was chiefly remarkable for its utter dearth of news. It is not easy to keep a newspaper going in a beleaguered town.

They sat in silence: John puffing away at his pipe, and Jess, her work—one of his socks—lying idly upon her knees, with her hands clasped over it, and her eyes fixed upon the lights and shadows that played with broad fingers upon the wooded slopes beyond.

So silently did they sit that a great green lizard came and basked himself in the sun within a yard of them, and a beautiful striped butterfly perched deliberately upon the purple grapes! It was a delightful day and a delightful spot. They were too far from the camp to be disturbed by its rude noise, and the only sound that reached their ears was the rippling of running water and the whispers of the wind, odorous with the breath of mimosa blooms, as it stirred the stiff grey leaves on the blue gums.

They were sitting in the shade of the little house that Jess had learned to love as she had never loved a spot before, but around them lay the flood of sunshine shimmering like golden

water; and beyond the red line of the fence at the end of the garden, where the rich pomegranate bloom tried to blush the roses down, the hot air danced merrily above the rough stone wall like a million microscopic elves at play. Peace! everywhere was peace! and in it the full heart of Nature beat out in radiant life. Peace in the voice of the turtle-doves among the willows! peace in the play of the sunshine and the murmur of the wind! peace in the growing flowers and hovering butterfly! Jess looked out at the wealth and glory that was spread about her, and thought that it was like heaven; and then, giving way to that queer melancholy strain in her nature, began to wonder idly how many human beings had sat and thought the same things, and had been gathered up into the azure of the past and forgotten; and how many would sit and think there when she in her turn had been utterly swept away into that gulf from whence no echo ever comes! But what did it matter? The sunshine would still flood the earth with gold, the water would ripple, and the butterflies hover: and there would be other women to sit and fold their hands and look at it all, and think the same identical thoughts, beyond which the human intelligence

cannot travel. And so on for thousands upon thousands of centuries, till at last the old world reaches its journey's appointed end, and, passing from the starry spaces, is swallowed up with those it bore.

And she—where would she be? Would she still live on, and love and suffer on elsewhere, or was it all a cruel myth? Was she merely a creature bred of the teeming earth, or had she an individuality beyond the earth? What awaited her after sunset?—Sleep. She had often hoped that it was sleep, and nothing but sleep. But now she did not hope that. Her life had centred itself round a new interest, and one that she felt could never die while the life lasted. She hoped for a future now; for if there was a future for her, there would be one for *him*, and then her day would come, and where he was there she would be also. Oh, sweet mockery, old and unsubstantial thought, bright dream set halowise about the dull head of life! Who has not dreamt it and yet who can believe in it? And yet, who shall say that it may not be true? Though philosophers and scientists smile and point in derision to the gross facts and freaks that mark our passions, is it not still possible that there may be

a place where the love shall live when the lust has died; and where Jess will find that she has not sat in vain in the sunshine, throwing out her pure heart towards the light of a happiness and a visioned glory of which, for some few minutes, the shadow seemed to lay within her?

John had finished his pipe, and, although she did not know it, was watching her face, which, now that she was off her guard, was no longer impassive, but seemed to mirror the tender and glorious hope that was floating through her mind. Her lips were slightly parted, and her wide eyes were full of a soft strange light, while on the whole countenance was stamped a look of eager thought and spiritualised desire such as he had known portrayed in ancient masterpieces upon the face of the Virgin Mother. Jess was not, except as regards her eyes and hair, even a good-looking person. But, at that moment, John thought that her face was touched with a diviner beauty than he had yet seen on the face of woman. It thrilled him and appealed to him, not as Bessie's beauty had appealed, but to that other side of his nature, of which Jess alone could turn the key. Her face was more like the face of a

spirit than of a human being, and it almost frightened him to see it.

"Jess," he said at last, "what are you thinking of?"

She started, and her face resumed its normal air. It was as though a mask had been suddenly set upon it.

"Why do you ask?" she said.

"Because I want to know. I never saw you look like that before."

She laughed a little.

"You would think me foolish if I told you what I was thinking about. Never mind, it has gone wherever thoughts go. I will tell you what I am thinking about now, which is—that it is about time we got out of this place. My uncle and Bessie will be half distracted."

"We've had more than two months of it now. The relieving column can't be far off," suggested John; for these foolish people in Pretoria laboured under a firm belief that one fine morning they would be gratified with the sight of the light dancing down a long line of British bayonets, and of Boers evaporating in every direction like storm clouds before the sun.

Jess shook her head. She was beginning to lose faith in relieving columns that never came.

"If we don't help ourselves, my opinion is that we may stop here till we are starved out, which we pretty well are. However, it's no use talking about it, so I'm off to get our rations. Let's see, have you got everything you want?"

"Everything, thanks."

"Well, then, mind you stop quiet till I come back."

"Why," laughed John, "I am as strong as a horse."

"Possibly; but that is what the doctor said, you know. Good-bye!" And Jess took her big basket and started on what John used to feebly call her "rational undertaking."

She had not got fifty paces from the door before she suddenly caught sight of a familiar form seated on a familiar pony. The form was fat and jovial-looking, and the pony was small but also fat. It was Hans Coetzee—none other!

Jess could hardly believe her eyes. Old Hans in Pretoria! What could it mean?

"Om Coetzee! Om Coetzee!" she called, as he came ambling past her, evidently making for the Heidelberg road.

The old Boer pulled up his pony, and gazed around him in a mystified way.

"Here, Om Coetzee! Here!"

"Allemachter!" he said, jerking his pony round. "It's you, Missie Jess, is it? Now who would have thought of seeing you here?"

"Who would have thought of seeing *you* here?" she answered.

"Yes, yes; it seems strange; I dare say that it seems strange. But I am a messenger of peace, like Uncle Noah's dove in the ark, you know. The fact is," and he glanced round to see if anybody was listening, "I have been sent by the Government to arrange about an exchange of prisoners."

"The Government! What Government?"

"What Government? Why, the Triumvirate, of course—whom may the Lord bless and prosper as He did Jonah when he walked on the wall of the city."

"Joshua, when he walked round the wall of the city," suggested Jess. "Jonah walked down the whale's throat."

"Ah! to be sure, so he did, and blew a trumpet inside. I remember now; though I am sure I don't know how he did it. The fact is

that our glorious victories have quite confused me. Ah! what a thing it is to be a patriot! The dear Lord makes strong the arm of the patriot, and takes care that he hits his man well in the middle."

"You have turned wonderfully patriotic all of a sudden, Om Coetzee," said Jess tartly.

"Yes, missie, yes; I am a patriot to the bone of my back. I hate the English Government; damn the English Government! Let us have our land back and our Volksraad. Almighty! I saw who was in the right at Laing's Nek there. Ah, these poor rooibaatjes! I shot four of them myself; two as they came up, and two as they ran away, and the last one went head-over-heels like a buck. Poor man! I cried for him afterwards. I did not like going to fight at all, but Frank Muller sent to me and said that if I did not go he would have me shot. Ah, he is a devil of a man, that Frank Muller! So I went, and when I saw how the dear Lord had put it into the heart of the English general to be a bigger fool even that day than he is every day, and to try and drive us out of Laing's Nek with a thousand of his poor rooibaatjes, then, I tell you, I saw where the right lay, and I said, 'Damn the Eng-

lish Government! What is the English Government doing here?' and after Ingogo I said it again."

"Never mind all that, Om Coetzee," broke in Jess. "I have heard you tell a different tale before, and perhaps you will again. Tell me, how are my uncle and my sister? Are they at the farm?"

"Almighty! you don't suppose that I have been there to see, do you? But, yes, I have heard they are there. It is a nice place, that Mooifontein, and I think that I shall buy it when we have turned all you English people out of the land. Frank Muller told me that they were there. And now I must be getting on, or that devil of a man, Frank Muller, will want to know what I have been about."

"Om Coetzee," said Jess, "will you do something for me? We are old friends, you know, and I once persuaded my uncle to lend you five hundred pounds when all your oxen died of the lungsick."

"Yes, yes, it shall be paid back one day—when we have got the damned Englishmen out of the country." And he began to gather up his reins preparatory to riding off.

"Will you do me a favour?" said Jess, catching the pony by the bridle.

"What is it? What is it, missie? I must be getting on. That devil of a man, Frank Muller, is waiting for me with the prisoners at the Rooihuis Kraal."

"I want a pass for myself and Captain Niel, and an escort. We want to get down home."

The old Boer held up his fat hands in amazement.

"Almighty!" he said, "it is impossible. A pass!—who ever heard of such a thing? Come, I must be going."

"It is not impossible, Uncle Coetzee, as you know," said Jess. "Listen! If I get that pass I will speak to my uncle about the five hundred pounds. Perhaps he would not want it all back again."

"Ah!" said the Boer. "Well, we are old friends, missie, and 'never desert a friend,' that is my saying, Almighty! I will ride a hundred miles—I will swim through blood for a friend. Well, well, I will see. It will depend upon that devil of a man, Frank Muller. Where are you to be found—in the white house yonder? Good. To-morrow the escort will come in with the

prisoners, and if I can get it they will bring the pass. But, missie, remember the five hundred pounds. If you do not speak to your uncle about that I shall be even with him. Almighty! what a thing it is to have a good heart, and to love to help your friends! Well, good-day, good-day," and off he cantered on his fat pony, his broad face shining with a look of unutterable benevolence.

Jess cast a look of contempt after him, and then went on towards the camp to fetch the rations.

When she got back to "The Palatial" she told John what had taken place, and suggested that it would be as well, in case there should be a favourable reply to her request, to have everything prepared for a start; and, accordingly, the cart was brought down and stood outside "The Palatial," and John unscrewed the patent caps and filled them with castor-oil, and ordered Mouti to keep the horses, which were all in health, though "poor" from want of proper food, well within hail.

Meanwhile, old Hans pursued the jerky tenor of his way for an hour or so, till he came in sight of a small red house.

Presently, from the shadow in front of the red house emerged a horseman, mounted on a powerful black horse. The horseman—a stern, handsome, bearded man—put his hand above his eyes to shade them from the sun, and gazed up the road. Then he seemed to suddenly strike his spurs into the horse, for the animal gave a sudden bound forward, and came sweeping towards Hans at a hand gallop.

"Ah! it is that devil of a man, Frank Muller!" ejaculated Hans. "Now I wonder what he wants? I always feel cold down the back when he comes near me."

By this time the plunging black horse was being reined up alongside of his pony so sharply that it reared till its great hoofs were pawing the air within a few inches of Hans's head.

"Almighty!" said the old man, tugging his pony round. "Be careful, nephew, be careful! I do not wish to be crushed like a beetle."

Frank Muller—for it was he—smiled. He had made his horse rear purposely, in order to frighten the old man, whom he knew to be an arrant coward.

"Why have you been so long? and what have

you done with the Englishmen? You should have been back half an hour ago."

"And so I should, nephew, and so I should, if I had not been detained. Surely you do not suppose that I would linger in the accursed place? Bah!" and he spat upon the ground, "it stinks of Englishmen. I cannot get the taste of them out of my mouth."

"You are a liar, Uncle Coetzee," was the cool answer. "English with the English, Boer with the Boer. You blow neither hot nor cold. Be careful lest I show you up. I know you and your talk. Do you remember what you were saying to the Englishman Niel in the inn-yard at Wakkerstroom when you turned and saw me? I heard, and I do not forget. You know what happens to a 'land betrayer'?"

Hans's teeth positively chattered, and his florid face blanched with fear.

"What do you mean, nephew?" he asked.

"I—ah!—I mean nothing. I was only speaking a word of warning to you as a friend. I have heard things said about you by——" and he dropped his voice and whispered a name, at the sound of which poor Hans turned whiter than ever.

"Well," went on his tormentor, when he had sufficiently enjoyed his terror, "what sort of terms did you make in Pretoria?"

"Oh, good, nephew, good," he gabbled, delighted to get on to a fresh subject. "I found the Englishmen supple as a tanned skin. They will give up their twelve prisoners for our four. The men are to be in by ten to-morrow. I told their commandant about Laing's Nek and Ingogo, and he would not believe me. He thought I lied like himself. They are getting hungry there now. I saw a Hottentot I knew there, and he told me that their bones were beginning to show."

"They will be through the skin before long," muttered Frank. "Well, here we are at the house. The General is there. He has just come up from Heidelberg, and you can make your report to him. Did you find out about the Englishman—Captain Niel? Is it true that he is dead?"

"No, he is not dead. By the way, I met Om Croft's niece—the dark one. She is shut up there with the Captain, and she begged me to try and get them a pass to go home. Of course I told her that it was nonsense, and that they must stop and starve with the others."

Muller, who had been listening to this last

piece of information with intense interest, suddenly checked his horse and answered:

"Did you? Then you are a bigger fool than I thought you. Who gave you authority to decide whether they should have a pass or not?"

CHAPTER II.

THE GREAT MAN.

COMPLETELY overcome by this last remark, Hans collapsed like a jellyfish out of water, and reflected in his worthless old heart that Frank Muller was indeed "a devil of a man." By this time they had reached the door of the little house, and were dismounting, and in another minute Hans found himself in the presence of one of the leaders of the rebellion.

He was a short, ugly man of about fifty-five, with a big nose, small eyes, straight hair, and a stoop. The forehead, however, was good, and the whole face betrayed a keenness and ability far beyond the average. The great man was seated at a plain deal table, writing something with evident difficulty upon a dirty sheet of paper, and smoking a very large pipe.

"Sit, Heeren, sit," he said when they entered, waving the stem of his pipe towards a deal bench. Accordingly they sat down without even removing

their hats, and pulling out their pipes, proceeded to light them.

"How, in the name of God, do you spell 'Excellency'?" asked the General presently. "I have spelt it in four different ways, and each one looks worse than the last."

Frank Muller gave the required information. Hans in his heart thought he spelt it wrong, but he did not dare to say so. Then came another pause, only interrupted by the slow scratching of a quill across the dirty paper, during which Hans nearly went to sleep; for the weather was very hot, and he was tired with his ride.

"There!" said the writer presently, gazing at his handwriting with an almost childish air of satisfaction, "that is done. A curse on the man who invented writing! Our fathers did very well without it; why should not we? Though, to be sure, it is useful for treaties with the Kafirs. I don't believe you have told me right now about that 'Excellency,' nephew. Well, it will have to serve. When a man writes such a letter as that to the representative of the English Queen he needn't mind his spelling; it will be swallowed with the rest," and he leaned back in his chair and laughed softly.

"Well, Meinheer Coetzee, what is it? Ah, I know; the prisoners. Well, what did you do?"

Hans told his story, and was rambling on when the General cut him short.

"So, cousin, so! You talk like an ox-waggon —rumble and creak and jolt, a devil of a noise and turning of wheels, but very little progress. They will give up the twelve men for our four, will they? Well, that is about a fair proportion. No, it is not, though: four Boers are better than twelve Englishmen any day—ay, better than forty!" and he laughed again. "Well, the men shall be sent in as you arranged; they will help to eat up their last biscuits. Good-day, cousin. Stop, though; one word before you go. I have heard about you at times, cousin. I have heard it said that you cannot be trusted. Now, I don't know if that is so. I don't believe it myself. Only, listen: if it should be so, and I should find you out, by God! I will have you cut into rimpis with afterox sjambocks, and then shoot you and send in your carcase as a present to the English," and as he said it he leaned forward, brought down his fist upon the deal table with a bang that produced a most unpleasant effect upon poor Hans's nerves, and a cold gleam of sudden fero-

city flickered in the small eyes, very discomforting for a timid man to behold, however innocent he knew himself to be.

"I swear——" he began to babble.

"Swear not at all, cousin; you are an elder of the church. There is no need to, besides. I told you I did not believe it of you; only I have had one or two cases of this sort of thing lately. No, never mind who they were. You will not meet them about again. Good-day, cousin, good-day. Forget not to thank the Almighty God for our glorious victories. He will expect it from an elder of the church."

Poor Hans departed crestfallen, feeling that the days of him who tries, however skilfully and impartially, to sit upon two stools at once are not happy days, and sometimes threaten to be short ones. And supposing that the Englishmen should win after all—as in his heart he hoped they might—how should he then prove that he had hoped it? The General watched him waddle through the door from under his pent brows, a half-humorous, half-menacing expression on his face.

"A windbag: a coward; a man without a heart for good or for evil. Bah! nephew, that is Hans

Coetzee. I have known him for years. Well, let him go. He would sell us if he could, but I have frightened him now, and, what is more, if I see reason, he shall find I never bark unless I mean to bite. Well, enough of him. Let me see, have I thanked you yet for your share in Majuba? Ah! that was a glorious victory! How many were there of you when you started up the mountain?"

"Eighty men."

"And how many at the end?"

"One hundred and seventy—perhaps a few more."

"And how many of you were hit?"

"Three—one killed, two wounded, and a few scratches."

"Wonderful, wonderful! It was a brave deed, and because it was so brave it was successful. He must have been mad, that English general. Who shot him?"

"Breytenbach. Colley held up a white handkerchief in his hand, and Breytenbach fired, and down went the general all of a heap, and then they all ran helter-skelter down the hill. Yes, it was a wonderful thing! They could have beat us

back with their left hand. That is what comes of having a righteous cause, uncle."

The General smiled grimly. "That is what comes of having men who can shoot, and who understand the country, and are not afraid. Well, it is done, and well done. The stars in their courses have fought for us, Frank Muller, and so far we have conquered. But how is it to end? You are no fool; tell me, how will it end?"

Frank Muller rose and walked twice up and down the room before he answered. "Shall I tell you?" he asked, and then, without waiting for an answer, went on: "It will end in our getting the country back. That is what this armistice means. There are thousands of rooibaatjes there at the Nek; they cannot therefore be waiting for soldiers. They are waiting for an opportunity to yield, uncle. We shall get the country back, and you will be President of the Republic."

The old man took a pull at his pipe. "You have a long head, Frank, and it has not run away with you. The English Government is going to give in. The stars in their courses continue to fight for us. The English Government is as mad as its officers. They will give in. But it means more than that, Frank; I will tell you

what it means. It means"—and again he let his heavy hand fall upon the deal table—"the triumph of the Boer throughout South Africa. Bah! Burgers was not such a fool after all when he talked of his great Dutch Republic. I have been twice to England now, and I know the Englishman. I could measure him for his veldtschoens [shoes]. He knows nothing — nothing. He understands his shop; he is buried in his shop, and can think of nothing else. Sometimes he goes away and starts his shop in other places, and buries himself in it, and makes it a big shop, because he understands shops. But it is all a question of shops, and if the shops abroad interfere with the shops at home, or if it is thought that they do, which comes to the same thing, then the shops at home put an end to the shops abroad. Bah! they talk a great deal there in England, but, at the bottom of it, it is shop, shop, shop. They talk of honour, and patriotism too, but they both give way to the shop. And I tell you this, Frank Muller: it is the shop that has made the English, and it is the shop that will destroy them. Well, so be it. We shall have our slice: Africa for the Africanders. The Transvaal for the Transvaalers first, then the rest. Shepstone was a clever man; he would have

made it all into an English shop, with the black men for shop-boys. We have changed all that, but we ought to be grateful to Shepstone. The English have paid our debts, they have eaten up the Zulus, who would otherwise have destroyed us, and they have let us beat them, and now we are going to have our turn again, and, as you say, I shall be the first President."

"Yes, uncle," replied the younger man calmly, "and I shall be the second."

The great man looked at him. "You are a bold man," he said; "but boldness makes the man and the country. I dare say you will. You have the head; and one clear head can turn many fools, as the rudder does the ship, and guide them when they are turned. I dare say that you will be President one day."

"Yes, I shall be President, and when I am I will drive the Englishmen out of South Africa. This I will do with the help of the Natal Zulus. Then I will destroy the natives, as T'Chaka destroyed, keeping only enough for slaves. That is my plan, uncle; it is a good one."

"It is a big one; I am not certain that it is a good one. But good or bad, who shall say? You may carry it out, nephew, if you live. A man

with brains and wealth may carry out anything if he lives. But there is a God. I believe, Frank Muller, that there is a God, and I believe that God sets a limit to a man's doings. If he is going too far, God kills him. *If you live*, Frank Muller, you will do these things, but perhaps God will kill you. Who can say? You will do what God wills, not what you will."

The elder man was speaking seriously now. Muller felt that this was none of the whining cant people in authority among the Boers find it desirable to adopt. It was what he thought, and it chilled Muller in spite of his pretended scepticism, as the sincere belief of an intellectual man, however opposite to our own, is apt to chill us into doubt of ourselves and our opinions. For a moment his slumbering superstition awoke, and he felt half afraid. Between him and that bright future of blood and power lay a chill gulf. Suppose that gulf should be death, and the future nothing but a dream—or worse! His face fell as the idea occurred to him, and the General noticed it.

"Well," he went on, "he who lives will see. Meanwhile you have done good service to the State, and you shall have your reward, cousin. If

I am President"—he laid emphasis on this, the meaning of which his listener did not miss—"if by the support of my followers I become President, I will not forget you. And now I must upsaddle and get back. I want to be at Laing's Nek in sixty hours, to wait for General Wood's answer. You will see about the sending in of those prisoners;" and he knocked out his pipe and rose.

"By the way, Meinheer," said Muller, suddenly adopting a tone of respect, "I have a favour to ask."

"What is it, nephew?"

"I want a pass for two friends of mine—English people—in Pretoria to go down to their relations in Wakkerstroom district. They sent a message to me by Hans Coetzee."

"I don't like giving passes," answered the General with some irritation. "You know what it means, letting out messengers. I wonder you ask me."

"It is a small favour, Meinheer, and I do not think that it will matter. Pretoria will not be besieged much longer. I am under an obligation to the people."

"Well, well, as you like; but, if any harm

comes of it, you will be held responsible. Write the pass; I will sign it."

Frank Muller sat down and wrote and dated the paper. Its contents were simple: "Pass the bearers unharmed."

"That is big enough to drive a waggon along," said the General, when it was handed to him to sign. "It might mean all Pretoria."

"I am not certain if there are two or three of them," answered Muller carelessly.

"Well, well, you are responsible. Give me the pen;" and he scrawled his big coarse signature at the foot.

"I propose, with your permission, to escort the cart down with two other men. As you are aware, I go down to take over the command of the Wakkerstroom district to-morrow."

"Very good. It is your affair; you are responsible. I shall ask no questions, provided your friends do no hurt to the cause;" and he left the room without another word.

When the great man had gone, Frank Muller sat down again on the bench and looked at the pass, and communed with himself, for he was far too wise a man to commune with anybody else. "The Lord hath delivered mine enemy into mine

hand," he said with a smile, and stroked his golden beard. "Well, well, I will not waste His merciful opportunities as I did that day out buck-shooting. And then for Bessie. I suppose I shall have to kill the old man too. I am sorry for that, but it can't be helped; besides, if anything should happen to Jess, Bessie will take Mooifontein, and that is worth having. Not that I want more land; I have enough. Yes, I will marry her. It would serve her right if I didn't; but, after all, marriage is more respectable, and also one has more hold of a wife. Nobody will interfere for her. Then, she will be of use to me by-and-by, for a beautiful woman is a power even among these fellow-countrymen of mine, if only a man knows how to bait his lines with her. Yes, I shall marry her. Bah! that is the way to win a woman—by capture; and, what is more, they like it. It makes her worth winning too. It will be a courtship of blood. Well, the kisses will be the sweeter, and in the end she will love me the more for what I have dared for her. So, Frank Muller, so! Ten years ago you said to yourself: 'There are three things worth having in the world—first, wealth; secondly, women, if they take your fancy, or, better still, one woman, if

you desire her above all others; thirdly, power.' Now, you have got the wealth, for one way and another you are the richest man in the Transvaal. In a week's time you will have the woman you love, and who is sweeter to you than all the world besides. In five years' time you will have the power—absolute power. That old man is clever; he will be President. But I am cleverer. I shall soon take his seat, thus"—and he rose and seated himself in the General's chair—"and he will go down a step and take mine. Ay, and then I will reign. My tongue shall be honey and my hand iron. I will pass over the land like a storm. I will drive the English out with the help of the Kafirs, and then I will kill the Kafirs and take their land. Ah!"—and his eyes flashed and his nostrils dilated as he said it to himself—"then life will be worth living! What a thing is power! What a thing it is to be able to destroy! Take that Englishman, my rival: to-day he is well and strong; in three days he will be gone utterly, and I—I shall have sent him away. That is power. But when the time comes that I have only to stretch out my hand to send thousands after him!—that will be absolute power; and then with Bessie I shall be happy."

And so he dreamed on for an hour or more, till at last the fumes of his untutored imagination actually drowned his reason in spiritual intoxication. Picture after picture rose and unrolled itself before his mind's eye. He saw himself as President addressing the Volksraad, and compelling it to his will. He saw himself, the supreme general of a great host, defeating the forces of England with awful carnage, and driving them before him; ay, he even selected the battle-ground on the slopes of the Biggarsberg in Natal. Then he saw himself again, sweeping the natives out of South Africa with the unrelenting besom of his might, and ruling unquestioned over a submissive people. And, last of all, he saw something glittering at his feet—it was a crown!

This was the climax of his intoxication. Then there came an anticlimax. The rich imagination which had been leading him on as a gaudy butterfly does a child, suddenly changed colour and dropped to earth; and then rose up in his mind the memory of the General's words: "God sets a limit to a man's doings. If he is going too far, *God kills him.*"

The butterfly had settled on a coffin!

CHAPTER III.

JESS GETS A PASS.

About half-past ten on the morning following her interview with Hans Coetzee, Jess was at "The Palatial" as usual, and John was just finishing packing the cart with such few goods as they possessed. There was not much chance of its being of any material use, for he did not in the slightest degree expect that they would get the pass; but, as he cheerfully said, it was as good an amusement as any other.

"I say, Jess," he sang out presently, "come here."

"What for?" answered Jess, who was seated on the doorstep mending something, and looking at her favourite view.

"Because I want to speak to you."

She got up and went, feeling rather angry with herself for going.

"Well," she said tartly, "here I am. What is it?"

"I have finished packing the cart, that's all."

"And you mean to tell me that you have brought me round here to say that?"

"Yes, of course I have; exercise is good for the young." And then he laughed, and she laughed too.

It was all nothing—nothing at all—but somehow it was very delightful. Certainly mutual affection, even when unexpressed, has a way of making things go happily, and can find something to laugh at anywhere.

Just then, who should come up but Mrs. Neville, in a great state of excitement, and, as usual, fanning herself with her hat.

"What do you think, Captain Niel? the prisoners have come in, and I heard one of the Boers in charge say that he had a pass signed by the Boer general for some English people, and that he was coming over to see about them presently. Who can it be?"

"It is for us," said Jess quickly. "We are going home. I saw Hans Coetzee yesterday, and begged him to try and get us a pass, and I suppose he has."

"My word! going to get out: well, you are lucky! Let me sit down and write a letter to my

great-uncle at the Cape. You must post it when you can. He is ninety-four, and rather soft, but I dare say he will like to hear from me," and she bundled off into the house to give her aged relative (who, by the way, laboured under the impression that she was still a little girl of four years of age) as minute an account of the siege of Pretoria as time would allow.

"Well, John, you had better tell Mouti to put the horses in. We shall have to start presently," said Jess.

"Ay," he said, pulling his beard thoughtfully, "I suppose that we shall;" adding, by way of an afterthought, "Are you glad to go?"

"No," she said, with a sudden flash of passion and a stamp of the foot, and then turned and entered the house again.

"Mouti," said John to the Zulu, who was lounging around in a way characteristic of that intelligent but unindustrious race, "inspan the horses. We are going back to Mooifontein."

"Koos!" [chief], said the Zulu unconcernedly, and started on the errand as though it were the most everyday occurrence to drive off home out of a closely beleaguered town. That is another beauty of the Zulu race: you cannot astonish

them. They, no doubt, consider that that, to them, extraordinary mixture of wisdom and insanity, the white man, is, as the agnostic French critic said in despair of the prophet Zerubbabel, "*capable de tout.*"

John stood and absently watched the inspanning. The fact was that he, too, was conscious of a sensation of regret. He felt ashamed of himself for it, but there it was; he was sorry to leave the place. For the last week or so he had been living in a dream, and everything outside that dream was blurred and indistinct as a landscape in a fog. He knew the things were there, but he did not quite appreciate their relative size and position. The only real thing was his dream; all else was as vague as those far-off people and events that we lose in infancy and find again in old age.

And now there would be an end of dreaming; the fog would lift, and he must face the facts. Jess, with whom he had dreamed, would go away to Europe and he would marry Bessie, and all this Pretoria business would glide away into the past like a watch in the night. Well, it must be so; it was right and proper that it should be so, and he for one was not going to flinch from his

duty; but he would have been more than human had he not felt the pang of awakening. It was all so very unfortunate.

By this time Mouti had got the horses up, and asked if he was to inspan.

"No; wait a bit," said John. "Very likely it is all rot," he added to himself.

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth when he caught sight of two armed Boers of a peculiarly unpleasant type and rough appearance, riding across the veldt towards "The Palatial" gate. With them was an escort of four carbineers. At the gate they all stopped, and one of the Boers dismounted and came up to where John was standing by the stable-door.

"Captain Niel?" he said interrogatively, in English.

"That is my name."

"Then here is a letter for you;" and he handed him a folded paper.

John opened it—it had no envelope—and read as follows:

"Sir,—the bearer of this has with him a pass which it is understood that you desire, giving you and Miss Jess Croft a safe conduct to Mooifontein, in the Wakkerstrom district of the Re-

public. The only condition attached to the pass, which is signed by one of the honourable Triumvirate, is that you must carry no despatches out of Pretoria. Upon your giving your word of honour to the bearer that you will not do this he will hand you the pass."

This letter, which was fairly written and in good English, had no signature.

"Who wrote this?" asked John of the Boer.

"That is no affair of yours," was the curt reply. "Will you pass your word about the despatches?"

"Yes."

"Good. Here is the pass;" and he handed over that document to John. It was in the same handwriting as the letter, but signed by the Boer general.

John examined it, and then called to Jess to come and translate it. She was on her way round the corner of the house as he did so, having heard the voice of the Boer.

"It means, 'Pass the bearers unharmed,'" she said, "and the signature is correct. I have seen the General's signature before."

"When must we start?" asked John.

"At once, or not at all."

"I must drive round by the headquarter camp to explain about my going. They will think that I have run away."

To this the Boer demurred, but finally, after going to the gate to consult his companion, consented, and the two rode back to the headquarter camp, saying that they would wait for the cart there, whereupon the horses were inspanned.

In five minutes everything was ready, and the cart was standing in the roadway in front of the little gate. After he had looked to all the straps and buckles, and seen that everything was properly packed, John went to call Jess. He found her standing by the doorsteps, looking out at her favourite view. Her hand was placed sideways against her forehead, as though to shade her eyes from the sun. But where she was standing there was no sun, and John could not help guessing why she was shading her eyes. She was crying at leaving the place in that quiet, harrowing sort of way that some women indulge in; that is to say, a few big tears were rolling down her face. John felt a lump rise in his own throat at the sight, and very naturally relieved his feelings in rough language.

"What the deuce are you after?" he asked.

"Are you going to keep the horses standing all day?"

Jess did not resent this. The probability is that she guessed its reason. And besides, it is a melancholy fact that women rather like being sworn at than otherwise, provided that the swearer is the man whom they are attached to. But he must only swear on state occasions. At this moment, too, Mrs. Neville came plunging out of the house, licking an envelope as she ran.

"There," she said, "I hope I haven't kept you waiting. I haven't told the old gentleman half the news; in fact, I've only taken him down to the time when the communications were cut, and I dare say he has seen all that in the papers. But he won't understand anything about it, and if he does he will guess the rest; besides, for all I know, he may be dead and buried by now. I shall have to owe you for the stamp. I think it's threepence. I'll pay you when we meet again—that is, if we ever do meet again. I'm beginning to think that this siege will go on for all eternity. There, good-bye, my dear! God bless you! When you get out of it, mind you write to the 'Times,' in London, you know. There, don't cry. I am sure I should not cry if I were going to get out

of this place;" for at this point Jess took the opportunity of Mrs. Neville's fervent embrace to burst out into a sob or two.

In another minute they were in the cart, and Mouti was scrambling up behind.

"Don't cry, old girl," said John, laying his hand upon her shoulder. "What can't be cured must be endured."

"Yes, John," she answered, and dried her tears.

At the headquarter camp John went in and explained the circumstances of his departure. At first the officer who was temporarily in command —the Commandant having been wounded at the same time that John was—rather demurred to his going, especially when he learnt that he had passed his word not to carry despatches. Presently, however, he thought better of it, and said he supposed that it was all right, as he could not see that their going could do the garrison any harm: "rather the reverse, in fact, because you can tell the people how we are getting on in this God-forsaken hole. I only wish that somebody would give me a pass, that's all;" whereupon John shooks hands with him and left, to find an eager crowd gathered outside.

The news of their going had got abroad, and everybody was running down to hear the truth of it. Such an event as a departure out of Pretoria had not happened for a couple of months and more, and the excitement was proportionate to its novelty.

"I say, Niel, is it true you are going?" halloed out a burly farmer.

"How the deuce did you get a pass?" put in another man with a face like a weasel. He was what is known as a "Boer vernuker" (literally, a "Boer cheater"), that is, a travelling trader whose business it is to beguile the simple-minded Dutchman by selling him worthless goods at five times their value. "I have loads of friends among the Boers. There is hardly a Boer in the Transvaal who does not know me"—("To his cost," put in a bystander with a grunt)—"and yet I have tried all I know"—("And you know a good deal," said the same rude man)—"and *I* can't get a pass."

"You don't suppose those Boers are going to let you out when once they have got you in?" went on the tormentor. "Why, man, it's against human nature. You've got all their wool: now do you think they want you to have their skin too?"

Whereupon the weasel-faced individual gave a howl of wrath, and pretended to make a rush at the author of these random gibes, waiting half-way for somebody to stop him and prevent a breach of the peace.

"Oh, Miss Croft!" cried out a woman in the crowd, who, like Jess, had been trapped in Pretoria while on a flying visit, "if you can get a line down to my husband at Maritzburg, to tell him that I am well, except for the rheumatism, from sleeping on the wet ground; and tell him to kiss the twins for me."

"I say, Niel, tell those Boers that we will give them a d—d good hiding yet, when Colley relieves us," sang out a jolly young Englishman in the uniform of the Pretoria Carbineers. He little knew that poor Colley—kind-hearted English gentleman that he was—was sleeping peacefully under six feet of ground with a Boer bullet through his brain.

"Now, Captain Niel, if you are ready, we must trek," said one of the Boers in Dutch, suiting the action to the word by catching the near wheeler a sharp cut with his riding sjambock that made him jump nearly out of the traces.

Away started the horses with a plunge, scattering the crowd to the right and left, and, amid a volley of farewells, they were off upon their homeward journey.

For more than an hour nothing particular happened. John drove at a fair pace, and the two Boers cantered along behind. At the end of this time, however, just as they were approaching the Red House, where Frank Muller had obtained the pass from the General on the previous day, one of the Boers rode up and told them, roughly enough, that they were to outspan at the house, where they would get some food. As it was past one o'clock, they were by no means sorry to hear this, and accordingly John drew up the cart about fifty yards from the place, where they outspanned the horses, and, having watched them roll and drink, went up to the house.

The two Boers, who had also off-saddled, were already sitting on the verandah, and when Jess looked inquiringly towards them one of them pointed with his pipe towards the little room. Taking the hint, they entered, and found a Hottentot woman just setting some food upon the table.

"Here is dinner: let us eat it," said John;

"goodness knows when we shall get any more!" and accordingly he sat down.

As he did so the two Boers came in, and one of them made some sneering remark that caused the other to look at them and laugh insultingly.

John flushed up, but took no notice. Indeed, he thought it safest not, for, to tell the truth, he did not much like the appearance of these two worthies. One of them was a big, smooth, pasty-faced man, with a peculiarly villanous expression of countenance and a prominent tooth that projected in ghastly isolation over his lower lip. The other was a small man, with a sardonic smile and a profusion of black beard and whiskers on his face, and long hair hanging on to his shoulders. Indeed, when he smiled more vigorously than usual, his eyebrows came down and his whiskers advanced, and his moustache went up till there was scarcely any face left, and he looked more like a great bearded monkey than a human being. This man was a Boer of the wildest type from the far borders of Zoutpansberg, and did not understand a word of English. Jess nicknamed him the Vilderbeeste, from his likeness to that ferocious-looking and hairy animal. The other man, on the contrary, understood English

perfectly, for he had passed many years of his life in Natal, having left that colony on account of some little indiscretion about thrashing Kafirs which had brought him into collision with the penal laws. Jess named him the Unicorn, on account of his one gleaming tusk.

The Unicorn was an unusually pious man, and on arriving at the table, to John's astonishment, he gently but firmly grasped the knife with which he was about to cut the meat.

"What's the matter?" said John.

The Boer shook his head sadly. "No wonder you English are an accursed race, and have been given over into our hands as the great king Agag was given into the hands of the Israelites, so that we have hewed you to pieces. You sit down to meat and give no thanks to the dear Lord," and he threw back his head and sang out a portentously long Dutch grace through his nose. Not content with that, he set to work to translate it into English, which took a good time; nor was the rendering a very finished one in the result.

The Vilderbeeste grinned sardonically and put in a pious "Amen," and then at last they were allowed to proceed with their dinner, which, on

the whole, was not a pleasant one. But then they could not expect much pleasure under the circumstances, so they ate their food and made the best of a bad job. After all, it might have been worse: they might have had no dinner to eat.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE ROAD.

JOHN and Jess had finished their meal, and were about to leave the table, when suddenly the door opened, and who should appear at it but Frank Muller himself! There was no mistake about him; there he stood, stroking his long golden beard, as big, as handsome, and, to Jess's mind, as evil-looking as ever. The cold eyes fell upon John with a glance of recognition, and then something like a smile began to play round the corners of the fine-cut, cruel mouth. Suddenly, however, his gaze lit upon the two Boers, one of whom was picking his teeth with a steel fork and the other lighting his pipe within a few inches of Jess's head, and instantly his face grew stern and angry.

"Did I not tell you two men," he said, "that you were not to eat with the prisoners?" (this word struck awkwardly on Jess's ear). "I told you that they were to be treated with all respect,

and here I find you sprawling over the table and smoking in their faces. Be off with you!"

The smooth-faced man with the tusk rose at once with a sigh, put down the steel fork with which he had been operating, and departed, recognising that Meinheer Muller was not a commanding officer to be trifled with, but his companion, the Vilderbeeste, demurred. "What," he said, tossing his head so as to throw the long black hair out of his eyes, "am I not fit to sit at meat with a couple of accursed English—a rooibaatje and a woman? If I had my way he should clean my boots and she should cut up my tobacco;" and he grinned at the notion till eyebrows, whiskers, and moustache nearly met round his nose, making him look for all the world like a hairy-faced baboon.

Frank Muller made no answer in words. He simply took one step forward, pounced upon his insubordinate follower, and with a single swing of his athletic frame sent him flying headlong through the door, so that the free and independent burgher lit upon his head in the passage, smashing his pipe and considerably damaging his best feature —his nose. "There," said Muller, shutting the door after him, "that is the only way to deal with

a fellow like that. And now let me bid you good-day, Miss Jess," and he extended his hand, which Jess took, rather coldly it must be owned.

"It has given me great pleasure to be able to do you this little service," he added politely. "I had considerable difficulty in getting the pass from the General—indeed I was obliged to urge my personal services before he would give it to me. But, never mind that, I did get it, as you know, and it will be my care to escort you safely to Mooifontein."

Jess bowed, and Muller turned to John, who had risen from his chair and was standing some two paces from him, and addressed him. "Captain Niel," he said, "you and I have had some differences in the past. I hope that the service I am doing you will prove that I, for one, bear no malice. I will go farther. As I told you before, I was to blame in that affair in the inn-yard at Wakkerstroom. Let us shake hands and end what we cannot mend," and he stepped forward and extended his hand.

Jess turned to see what would happen. She knew the whole story, and hoped he would not take the man's hand; next, remembering their position, she hoped he would.

John turned colour a little, and then deliberately drew himself up and put his hand behind his back.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Muller," he said, "but even in our present position I cannot shake hands with you; you will know why."

Jess saw a flush of the furious passion which was his weak point spread itself over the Boer's face.

"I do *not* know, Captain Niel. Be so good as to explain."

"Very well, I will," said John calmly. "You tried to assassinate me."

"What do you mean?" thundered Muller.

"What I say. You shot at me twice under pretence of firing at a buck. Look here!"—and he took up his soft black hat, which he still had—"here is the mark of one of your bullets! I did not know about it then; I do now, and I decline to shake hands with you."

By this time Muller's fury had got the better of him. "You shall answer for that, you English liar!" he said, at the same time clapping his hand to his belt, in which his hunting-knife was placed. Thus for a few seconds they stood face to face. John never flinched or moved. There

he stood, quiet and strong as some old stubby tree, his plain honest face and watchful eye affording a strange contrast to the beautiful but demoniacal countenance of the great Dutchman. Presently he spoke in measured tones.

"I have proved myself a better man than yourself once, Frank Muller, and if necessary I will again, notwithstanding that knife of yours. But, in the meantime, I wish to remind you that I have a pass signed by your own General guaranteeing our safety. And now, Mr. Muller," with a flash of the blue eyes, "I am ready." The Dutchman drew the knife and then replaced it in its sheath. For a moment he was minded to end the matter then and there, but suddenly remembered, even in his rage, that there was a witness.

"A pass from the General!" he said, forgetting his caution in his fury. "Much good a pass from the General is likely to be to you. You are in my power, man! If I choose to close my hand I can crush you. But there—there," he added, checking himself, "perhaps I ought to make allowances. You are one of a defeated people, and no doubt are sore, and say what you do not mean. Anyhow, there is an end of it, especially in the presence of a lady. Some day we may be

able to settle our trouble like men, Captain Niel; till then, with your permission, we will let it drop."

"Quite so, Mr. Muller," said John, "only you must not ask me to shake hands with you."

"Very good, Captain Niel; and now, if you will allow me, I will tell the boy to get your horses in; we must be getting on if we are to reach Heidelberg to-night." And he bowed himself out, feeling that his temper had once more endangered the success of his plans. "Curse the man!" he said to himself: "he is what those English call a gentleman. It was brave of him to refuse to take my hand when he is in my power."

"John," said Jess, as soon as the door had closed, "I am afraid of that man. If I had understood that he had anything to do with the pass I would not have taken it. I thought that the writing was familiar to me. Oh dear! I wish we had stopped at Pretoria."

"What can't be cured must be endured," said John again. "The only thing to do is to make the best of it, and get on as we can. You will be all right anyhow, but he hates me like poison. I suppose that it is on account of Bessie."

"Yes, that's it," said Jess: "he is madly in love with Bessie, or was."

"It is curious to think that a man like that can be in love," remarked John as he lit his pipe, "but it only shows what queer mixtures people are. I say, Jess, if this fellow hates me so, what made him give me the pass, eh? What's his game?"

Jess shook her head as she answered, "I don't know, John; I don't like it."

"I suppose he can't mean to murder me; he did try it on once, you know."

"Oh no, John," she answered with a sort of cry, "not that."

"Well, I don't know that it would matter much," he said, with an approach to cheerfulness which was rather a failure. "It would save one a deal of worry, and only anticipate things a bit. But there, I frightened you, and I dare say that he is, for the present at any rate, an honest man, and has no intentions on my person. Look! there is Mouti calling us. I wonder if those brutes have given him anything to eat! We'll collar the rest of this leg of mutton on chance. At any rate, Mr. Frank Muller shan't starve me to death," and with a cheerful laugh he left the room.

In a few minutes they were on their road again. As they started Frank Muller came up, took off his hat, and informed them that he would

probably join them on the morrow below Heidelberg, in which town they would find every preparation to enable them to spend the night comfortably. If he did not join them it would be because he was detained on duty. In that case the two men had his orders to escort them safely to Mooifontein, and, he added significantly, "I do not think that you will be troubled with any further impoliteness."

In another moment he had galloped off on his great black horse, leaving the pair considerably mystified and not a little relieved.

"Well," said John, "at any rate that does not look like foul play, unless, indeed, he has gone on to prepare a warm reception for us."

Jess shrugged her shoulders, she could not make it out; and then they settled themselves down to their long lonely drive. They had forty odd miles to cover, but the guides, or rather the guard, would only consent to their outspanning once, which they did on the open veldt a little before sunset. At sundown they inspanned again, and started across the darkening veldt. The road was in a shocking state, and until the moon got up, which it did about nine o'clock, the journey was both difficult and dangerous. After that

things were a little better; and at last, about eleven o'clock, they reached Heidelberg. The town seemed almost deserted. Evidently the great body of the Boers were at the front, and had only left a guard at their seat of government.

"Where are we to outspan?" asked John of the Unicorn, who was jogging on alongside, apparently half asleep.

"At the hotel," was the short reply, and thither they went; and thankful enough they were to get there, and to find, from the lights in the windows, that the people were still up.

Jess had been asleep for the last couple of hours, notwithstanding the awful jolting of the cart. Her arm was hooked round the back of the seat, and her head rested against John's greatcoat, which he had fixed up in such a way as to make a pillow. "Where are we?" she asked, waking up with a start as the cart stopped. "I have had such a bad dream! I dreamt that I was travelling through life, and that suddenly everything stopped, and I was dead."

"I don't wonder at it," laughed John; "the road for the last ten miles has been as rough as anybody's life. We are at the hotel. Here come

the boys to take the horses," and he clambered stiffly out of the cart and helped or rather lifted her down, for she was almost too cramped to move.

Standing at the inn-door, holding a light above her head, they found a pleasant-looking Englishwoman, who welcomed them heartily.

"Frank Muller was here three hours ago, and told me to expect you," she said; "and very glad I am to see an English face again, I can tell you. My name is Gooch. Tell me, is my husband all right in Pretoria? He went up there with his waggon just before the siege began, and I have not heard a word from him since."

"Yes," said John, "he is all right. He was slightly wounded in the shoulder a month ago, but he has quite recovered."

"Oh, thank God!" said the poor woman, beginning to cry; "those devils told me that he was dead—to torment me, I suppose. Come in, miss: there is some hot supper ready when you have washed your hands. The boys will see to the horses."

Accordingly they entered, and were made as happy as a good supper, a hearty welcome, and

comfortable beds could make people in their condition.

In the early morning one of their estimable escort sent in a message to say that they were not to start before half-past ten, as their horses required more rest, so they got several hours more in bed than they had expected, and anybody who has ever made a journey in a post-cart in South Africa can understand what a blessing that was. At nine they had breakfast, and as the clock struck half-past ten Mouti brought the cart round, and with it came the two Boers.

"Well, Mrs. Gooch," said John, "what do we owe you?"

"Nothing, Captain Niel, nothing. If you only knew what a weight you have taken off my mind! Besides, we are quite ruined; the Boers have taken all my husband's cattle and horses, and until last week six of them were quartered on me without paying a farthing, so it makes no odds to me."

"Never mind, Mrs. Gooch," said John cheerfully, "the Government will compensate you when this business is over, no doubt."

Mrs. Gooch shook her head prophetically. "Never a farthing do I expect to see," she said.

"If only I can get my husband back, and we can escape out of this wicked place with our lives, I shall be thankful. And look here, Captain Niel, I have put up a basket full of food—bread, meat, and hard-boiled eggs, and a bottle of three-star brandy. It may be useful to you and the young lady before you get home. I don't know where you will sleep to-night, for the English are still holding Standerton, so you won't be able to stop there, and you can't get right through. No, don't thank me, I could not do less. Good-bye—good-bye, miss; I hope you will get through all right. You had better look out, though. Those two men you have got with you are a very bad lot. I heard say, rightly or wrongly, that that fat-faced man with the tooth shot two wounded men through the head after the fight at Bronker's Spruit, and I know no good of the other. They were laughing and talking together about you in the kitchen this morning; one of my boys overheard them, and the man with the long hair said that, at any rate, they would not be troubled with you after to-night. I don't know what he meant; perhaps they are going to change the escort; but I thought that I had better tell you."

John looked grave, and his suspicions rearose,

but at that moment one of the men in question rode up and told him that he must start at once, and so off they went.

This second day's journey was in many respects a counterpart of the first. The road was utterly deserted, and they saw neither Boer, Englishman, nor Kafir upon it; nothing, indeed, except a few herds of game grazing on the ridges. About two o'clock, however, just as they had started on after a short outspan, a little incident occurred. Suddenly the Vilderbeeste's horse put his foot into an antbear hole and fell heavily, throwing his rider on to his head. He was up in a minute, but his forehead had struck against the jawbone of a dead buck, and the blood was pouring from it all down his hairy face. His companion laughed brutally at the sight, for there are some natures in the world to which the sight of pain is irresistibly comical, but the injured man cursed aloud, trying to stanch the flow with the lappet of his coat.

"Waacht een beeche" [Wait a bit], said Jess, "there is some water in that pool," and without further to do she got out of the trap and led the man, who was half-blinded with blood, to the spring. Here she made him kneel down and

bathed the wound, which was not a very deep one, till it stopped bleeding, and then, having first placed a pad of cotton-wool, some of which she happened to have in the cart, upon it, bound her handkerchief tightly round his head. The man, brute as he was, appeared to be much touched at her kindness.

"Almighty," he said, "but you have a kind heart and soft fingers; my own wife could not have done it better; it is a pity that you are a damned Englishwoman."

Jess climbed back into the cart, making no reply, and they started on, the Vilderbeeste looking more savage and unhuman than ever with the discoloured handkerchief round his head, and his dense beard and hair matted with the blood he would not take the trouble to wash out of them.

After this nothing further occurred till, by the orders of their escort, they outspanned, an hour or so before sunset, at a spot in the veldt where a faint track forked out of the Standerton road.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE DRIFT OF THE VAAL.

THE day had been intensely and overpoweringly hot, and our travellers sat in the shade of the cart positively gasping. During the afternoon there had been a little breeze, but this had now died away, and the stifling air felt as thick as though they were breathing cream. Even the two Boers seemed to feel the heat, for they were both outstretched on the grass a few paces to the left, to all appearance fast asleep. As for the horses, they were thoroughly done up—too much so to eat—and hobbled along as well as their knee-halters would allow, daintily picking a mouthful here and a mouthful there. The only person who did not seem to mind was the Zulu Mouti, who sat on an antheap near the horses, in full glare of the setting sun, and comfortably droned out a little song of his own invention, for Zulus are as good at improvising as the Italians.

"Have another egg, Jess?" said John. "It will do you good."

"No, thank you; the last one stuck in my throat. It is impossible to eat in this heat."

"You had better. Goodness knows when and where we shall stop again. I can get nothing out of our delightful escort; either they don't know or they won't say."

"I can't, John. There is a thunderstorm coming up, I can feel it in my head, and I can never eat before a thunderstorm—and when I am tired," she added by an after-thought.

After that the conversation flagged for a while.

"John," said Jess at last, "where do you suppose we are going to camp to-night? If we follow the main road we shall reach Standerton in an hour."

"I don't think that they will go near to Standerton," he said. "I suppose that we shall cross the Vaal by another drift and have to 'veldt' it."

Just then the two Boers woke up and began to talk earnestly together, as though they were debating something hotly.

Slowly the huge red ball of the sun sank towards the horizon, steeping the earth and sky in blood. About a hundred yards from where they sat the little bridle-path that branched from the

main road crossed the crest of one of the great land-waves which rolled away in every direction towards the far horizon. John watched the sun sinking behind it till something called off his attention for a minute. When he looked up again there was a figure on horseback, standing quite still upon the crest of the ridge, and in the full glow of the now disappearing sun. It was Frank Muller. John recognised him in a moment. His horse was standing sideways, so that even at that distance every line of his features, and even the trigger-guard of the rifle which rested on his knee, showed distinctly against the background of smoky red. Nor was that all. Both he and his horse had the appearance of being absolutely on fire. The effect produced was so weird and extraordinary that John called his companion's attention to it. She looked, and shuddered involuntarily.

"He looks like a devil in hell," she said; "the fire seems to be running all up and down him."

"Well," said John, "he certainly is a devil, but I am sorry to say that he has not yet reached his destination. Here he comes, like a whirlwind."

In another twenty seconds Muller had reined

the great black horse on to his haunches alongside of them, and was smiling sweetly and taking off his hat.

"You see I have managed to keep my word," he said. "I can tell you that I had great difficulty in doing so; indeed I was nearly obliged to give the thing up at the last moment. However, here I am."

"Where are we to outspan to-night?" asked Jess. "At Standerton?"

"No," he said; "I am afraid that that is more than I can manage for you, unless you can persuade the English officer there to surrender. What I have arranged is, that we should cross the Vaal at a drift I know about two hours (twelve miles) from here, and outspan at a farm on the other side. Do not trouble, I assure you you shall both sleep well to-night," and he smiled a somewhat terrifying smile, as Jess thought.

"But how about this drift, Mr. Muller?" said John. "Is it safe? I should have thought that the Vaal would have been in flood after all the rain that we have had."

"The drift is perfectly safe, Captain Niel. I crossed it myself about two hours ago. I know you have a bad opinion of me, but I suppose you

do not think that I should guide you to an unsafe drift?" and with another bow he rode on to speak to the two Boers, saying, as he went, "Will you tell the Kafir to put the horses in?"

With a shrug of the shoulders John rose and went off towards Mouti, to help him to drive up the four greys, which were now standing limply together, biting at the flies, that, before a storm, sting more sharply than at any other time. The two horses belonging to the escort were some fifty paces to the left. It was as though they appreciated the position of affairs, and declined to mix with the animals of the discredited Englishman.

The two Boers rose as Muller came and walked off towards their horses, Muller slowly following them. As they came the horses hobbled away another thirty yards or so, and then lifted up their heads, and, as a consequence, their forelegs, to which the heads were tied, and stood looking defiantly at their captors, for all the world as though they were trying to make up their minds whether or no to shake hands with them.

Frank Muller was alongside the two men now, and they were alongside the horses.

"Listen!" he said sternly.

The men looked up.

"Go on loosening the reims, and listen."

They obeyed, and began to slowly fumble at the knee-halters.

"You understand what our orders are. Repeat them—you!"

The man with the tooth, who was addressed, still handling the reim, began as follows: "To take the two prisoners to the Vaal, to force them into the water where there is no drift, at night, so that they drown: if they do not drown, to shoot them."

"Those are the orders," said the Vilderbeeste, grinning.

"You understand them?"

"We understand, Meinheer; but, forgive us, the matter is a big one. You gave the orders—we wish to see the authority."

"Yah, yah," said the other, "show us the authority. These are two harmless people enough. Show us the authority for killing them. People must not be killed so, even if they are English folk, without proper authority, especially when one is a pretty girl who would do for a man's wife."

Frank Muller set his teeth. "Nice fellows you

are to have under one!" he said. "I am your officer; what other authority do you want? But I thought of this. See here!" and he drew a paper from his pocket. "Here, you—read it! Careful now—do not let them see from the waggon."

The big flabby-faced man took the paper and, still bending down over the horse's knee, read aloud:

"The two prisoners and their servant (an Englishman, an English girl, and a Zulu Kafir) to be executed in pursuance of our decree, as your commanding officer shall order, as enemies to the Republic. For so doing this shall be your warrant."

"You see the signature," said Muller, "and you do not dispute it?"

"Yah, we see it, and we do not dispute it."

"Good. Give me back the warrant."

The man with the tooth was about to do so when his companion interposed.

"No," he said, "the warrant must remain with us. I do not like the job. If it were only the man and the Kafir now—but the girl, the girl! If we give you back the warrant, what shall we have to show for the deed of blood? The warrant must remain with us."

"Yah, yah, he is right," said the Unicorn; "the warrant must remain with us. Put it in your pocket, Jan."

"Curse you, give it me!" said Muller between his teeth.

"No, Frank Muller, no!" answered the Vilderbeeste, patting his pocket, while the two or three square inches of skin round his nose wrinkled up in a hairy grin that, owing to the cut on his head, was even more curious than usual; "if you wish to have the warrant you shall have it, but then we shall up-saddle and go, and you can do your murdering yourself. There, there! take your choice; we shall be glad enough to get home, for we do not like the job. If I go out shooting I like to shoot buck or Kafirs, not white people."

Frank Muller reflected a moment, and then he laughed a little.

"You are funny people, you home-bred Boers," he said; "but perhaps you are right. After all, what does it matter who has the warrant, provided the thing is well done? Mind that there is no bungling, that is all."

"Yah, yah," said the fat-faced man, "you can trust us for that. It won't be the first that we have toppled over. If I have my warrant I ask

nothing better than to go on shooting Englishmen all night, one down, the other come on. I know no prettier sight than an Englishman toppling over."

"Stop that talk and saddle up, the cart is waiting. You fools can never understand the difference between killing when it is necessary to kill and killing for killing's sake. These people must die because they have betrayed the land."

"Yah, yah," said the Vilderbeeste, "betrayed the land; we have heard that before. Those who betray the land must manure it; that is a good rule;" and he laughed and passed on.

Frank Muller watched his retreating form with a smile of peculiar malignity on his handsome face. "Ah, my friend," he said to himself in Dutch, "you and that warrant will part company before you are many hours older. Why, it would be enough to hang me, even in this happy land of patriots. Old——would not forgive even me for taking that little liberty with his name. Dear me, what a lot of trouble one has to take to be rid of a single enemy! Well, it must be done, and Bessie is well worth it; but if it had not been for this war I could never have managed it. Ah! I did well to give my voice for war. I am

sorry for the girl Jess, but it must be; there must be no living witness left. Ah! we are going to have a storm. So much the better. Such deeds are best done in a storm."

Muller was right; the storm was coming up fast, throwing a veil of inky cloud across the star-spangled sky. In South Africa there is but little twilight, and the darkness follows hard upon the heels of the day. No sooner had the great angry ball of the sun finally disappeared than the night swept with all her stars across the sky. And now after her came the great storm, covering up her beauty with his blackness. The air was stiflingly hot. Above was a starry space, to the east the angry bosom of the storm, in which the lightnings were already playing with an incessant flickering movement, and to the west a deep red glow, reflected from the sunken sun, yet lingered on the horizon.

On toiled the horses through the gathering gloom. Fortunately, the road was fairly level and free from mud-holes, and Frank Muller rode just ahead to show the way, his strong manly form standing out clear against the departing western glow. Silent was the earth, silent as death. No bird or beast, no blade of grass or breath of air

stirred upon its surface. The only sign of life was the continual flickering of those awful tongues of light as they licked the lips of the storm. On for mile after mile, on through the desolation! They could not be far from the river now, and could catch the distant growling of the thunder, echoing solemnly down it.

It was an awful night. Great pillars of mud-coloured cloud came creeping across the surface of the veldt towards them, seemingly blown along without a wind. And now, too, a ghastly looking ringed moon arose and threw an unholy, distorted light upon the blackness that seemed to shudder in her rays as though with a prescience of the advancing terror. On crept the mud-coloured columns, and on above them, and resting on them, came the muttering storm. The cart was quite close to the river now, and they could plainly hear its murmur. To their left was a koppie, covered with white, slab-like stones, on which the sickly moonbeams danced.

"Look, John, look!" cried Jess with an hysterical laugh; "it is like a huge graveyard, and the dark shadows between are the ghosts of the buried."

"Nonsense," said John sternly; "what do you mean by talking such rubbish?"

He felt that she was a little off her balance, and, what is more, he was getting rather off his own, and therefore was naturally the angrier with her, and the more determined to be perfectly matter-of-fact.

Jess made no answer, but she was frightened, she could not tell why. The whole thing resembled some awful dream, or one of Doré's pictures come to life. No doubt, also, the near presence of the storm exercised an effect upon her nerves. Even the wearied horses snorted and shook themselves uneasily.

They crept over the ridge of a wave of land, and the wheels rolled softly on the grass.

"Why, we are off the road!" shouted John to Muller, who was still guiding them, fifteen or twenty paces ahead.

"All right! all right! it is a short cut to the ford!" he called in answer, and his voice rang strange and hollow through the great depths of the silence.

Below them, a hundred yards away, the light, such as it was, gleamed faintly upon the wide surface of the river. Another five minutes and they were on the bank, but in the gathering gloom they could not make out the opposite shore.

"Turn to the left!" shouted Muller; "the ford is a few yards up. It is too deep here for the horses."

John turned accordingly, and followed Muller's horse some three hundred yards up the bank till they came to a spot where the water ran with an angry music, and there was a great swirl of eddies.

"Here is the place," said Muller; "you must make haste through. The house is just the other side, and it will be better to get there before the tempest breaks."

"It's all very well," said John, "but I can't see an inch before me; I don't know where to drive."

"Drive straight ahead; the water is not more than three feet deep, and there are no rocks."

"I am not going, and that is all about it."

"You must go, Captain Niel. You cannot stop here, and if you can we cannot. Look there, man!" and he pointed to the east, which now presented a truly awful and magnificent sight.

Down, right on to them, its centre bowed out like the belly of a sail by the weight of the wind behind, swept the great storm-cloud, while over all its surface the lightning played unceasingly, appearing and disappearing in needles of fire,

and twisting and writhing serpentwise round and about its outer edges. So brilliant was the intermittent light that it appeared to fire the revolving pillars of mud-coloured cloud beneath, and gave ghastly peeps of river and bank and plain, miles upon miles away. But perhaps the most awful thing of all was the preternatural silence. The distant muttering of thunder that they had heard had died away, and now the great storm swept on in silent majesty, like the passage of a ghostly host, from which there arose no sound of feet or of rolling wheels. Only before it sped the swift angels of the wind, and behind it swung the curtain of the rain.

Even as Muller spoke a gust of icy air caught the cart and tilted it, and the lightning needles began to ply more dreadfully than ever. The storm was breaking upon them.

"Come, get on, get on!" he shouted, "you will be killed here; the lightning always strikes along the water;" and as he said it he struck one of the wheelers sharply with his whip.

"Climb over the back of the seat, Mouti, and stand by to help me with the reins!" sang out John to the Zulu, who obeyed, getting between him and Jess.

"Now, Jess, hang on and say your prayers, for it strikes me we shall have need of them. So, horses, so!"

The horses backed and plunged, but Muller on the one side and the smooth-faced Boer on the other lashed them without mercy, and at last in they went into the river with a rush. The gust had passed now, and for a moment or two there was renewed silence, except for the whirl of the water and the snake-like hiss of the coming rain.

For a few yards, ten or fifteen perhaps, all went well, and then John suddenly discovered that they were getting into deep water; the two leaders were evidently almost off their legs, and could scarcely stand against the current of the flooded river.

"Damn you!" he shouted back, "there is no drift here."

"Go on, go on, it is all right!" came Muller's voice in answer.

John said no more, but, putting out all his strength, tried to get the horses round. Jess turned herself on the seat to look, and just then came a blaze of lightning which revealed Muller and his two companions standing dismounted on

the bank, the muzzles of their rifles pointing straight at the cart.

"Oh God!" she screamed, "they are going to shoot us."

Even as the words passed her lips three tongues of flame flared out from the rifles' mouths, and the Zulu Mouti, sitting by her side, pitched heavily forward on to his head into the bottom of the cart, while one of the wheelers reared straight up into the air with a shriek of agony, and came down with a splash into the river.

And then followed a scene the horror of which baffles my poor pen. Overhead the storm burst in fury, and flash after flash of fork, or rather chain lightning, fell into the river. The thunder, too, began to crack like the trump of doom; the wind rushed down, tearing the surface of the water into foam, and, catching under the tent of the cart, lifted it right off the wheels, so that it began to float. Then the two leaders, made mad with fear by the fury of the storm and the dying struggles of the off-wheeler, plunged and tore at the traces till they actually rent themselves loose and vanished between the darkness overhead and the boiling water beneath. Away floated the cart, now touching the bottom and now riding on

the water like a boat, oscillating this way and that, and slowly turning round and round. With it floated the dead horse, dragging down the other wheeler beneath the water. It was awful to see his struggles in the glare of the lightning, but at last he sank and choked.

And meanwhile, sounding sharp and clear across the din and hubbub of the storm, came the cracking of the three rifles whenever the flashes showed the whereabouts of the cart to the murderers on the bank. Mouti was lying still in the bottom on the bed-plank of the cart, a bullet between his broad shoulders and another in his skull; but John felt that his life was yet whole in him, though something had hissed past his face and stung it. Instinctively he reached across the cart and drew Jess on to his knee, and cowered over her, thinking dimly that perhaps his body would protect her from the bullets.

Rip! rip! through the wood and canvas; *phut! phut!* through the air: but some merciful power protected them, and though one cut John's coat and two passed through the skirt of Jess's dress, not a bullet struck them. And very soon the shooting began to grow wild, and then that dense veil of rain came down and wrapped them

so close that even the lightning could not show their whereabouts to the assassins on the bank.

"Stop shooting," said Frank Muller; "the cart has sunk, and there is an end of them. No human being can have lived through that fire and the Vaal in flood."

The two Boers ceased firing, and the Unicorn shook his head softly and remarked to his companion that the damned English people in the water could not be much wetter than they were on the bank. It was a curious thing to say at such a moment, but probably the spirit that animated the remark was not so much callousness as that which animated Cromwell, who flipped the ink in his neighbour's face when he signed the death-warrant of his king.

The Vilderbeeste made no reply. His conscience was oppressed; he had a touch of imagination. He thought of the soft fingers that had bound up his head that morning; the handkerchief—her handkerchief!—was still around it. Now those fingers would be gripping at the slippery stones of the Vaal in their death-struggle, or probably they were already limp in death, with little bits of gravel sticking beneath the

nails. It was a painful thought, but he consoled himself by thinking of the warrant, and also by the reflection that whoever had shot the people he had not, for he had been careful to fire wide of the cart every time.

Muller was also thinking of the warrant which he had forged. He must get it back somehow, even if——

"Let us take shelter under the bank there. There is a flat place, about fifty yards up, where the bank lies over. This rain is drowning us. We can't up-saddle till it clears. I must have a nip of brandy too. Almighty! I can see that girl's face now! the lightning shone on it just as I shot. Well, she will be in heaven now, poor thing, if English people ever go to heaven."

It was the Unicorn who spoke, and the Vilderbeeste made no reply, but advanced with him to where the horses stood. They took the patient brutes that were waiting for their masters, their heads well down and the water streaming from them, and led them along with them. Frank Muller stood by his own horse thinking, and watched them vanish into the gloom. How was he to get that warrant back without dyeing his hands even redder than they were?

As he thought an answer came. For at that moment, accompanied by a fearful thunderclap, there shot from the storm overhead, which had now nearly passed away, one of those awful flashes that sometimes end an African tempest. It lit up the whole scene round as light as day, and right in the white heart of it Muller saw his two companions in crime and their horses as the great king saw the men in the furnace. They were about forty paces from him on the crest of the bank. He saw them, one moment erect; the next—men and horses falling this way and that prone to the earth. And then it was all dark again. He staggered with the shock, and when it had passed rushed to the spot, calling the men by name; but no answer came except the echo of his voice. He was there now, and the moonlight began to struggle faintly through the rain. Its pale beams lit upon two outstretched forms—one lying on its back, its distorted features gazing up to heaven, the other on its face. By them, the legs of the nearest sticking straight into the air, lay the two horses. They had all gone to their account. The lightning had killed them, as it kills many a man in Africa.

Frank Muller looked; and then, forgetting

about the warrant and everything else in the horror of what he took to be a visible judgment, rushed to his horse and galloped wildly away, pursued by all the terrors of hell.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

THE firing from the bank had ceased, and John, who still kept his head (being a rather phlegmatic specimen of the Anglo-Saxon race), realised that, for the moment at any rate, all danger from that source was ended. Jess lay perfectly still in his arms, her head upon his breast; and a horrible idea struck him that she might be shot, perhaps already dead!

"Jess, Jess," he shouted, through the turmoil of the storm, "are you all right?"

She lifted her head an inch or two—"I think so," she said. "What is going on?"

"God only knows, I don't. Sit still, it will be all square."

But in his heart he knew that it was not "all square," and that they were in imminent danger of death from drowning. They were whirling down a raging river in a cart. In a few moments it was probable that the cart would upset, and then—

Presently the wheel bumped against something, and the cart gave a great lurch and then scraped along a little.

"Now for it," thought John, for the water was pouring over the flooring. Then came a check, and the cart leant still farther to one side.

Crack! The pole had gone, and the cart swung round bows, or rather box, on to the stream. What had happened was this: they had struck across a rock that projected up from the bed of the river, the force of the current having washed the dead horses to the one side and the cart to the other. Consequently they were anchored to the rock, as it were, the anchor being the dead horses, and the cable the stout traces of untanned leather. So long as these traces and the rest of the harness held they were, comparatively speaking, safe; but of course they did not know this. Indeed, they knew nothing. Above them rolled the storm, and round them the waters seethed, and the rain hissed. They knew nothing except that they were helpless living atoms tossing between the wild waters and the wilder night with imminent death staring them in the face, around, above, and below. To and fro they swung, locked fast in each other's

arms, and as they did so came that awful flash that, though they knew it not, sent two of the murderers to their account, and for an instant, even through the sheet of rain, illumined the space of boiling water and the long lines of the banks on either side. It showed the point of rock to which they were fixed, it glared upon the head of one of the poor horses tossed up by the driving current as though it were trying to rise from its watery death, and revealed the form of the dead Zulu, Mouti, lying on his face, one arm hanging over the edge of the cart and dabbling in the water that ran level with it, in ghastly similarity to some idle passenger in a pleasure boat, who lets his fingers slip softly through the stream.

In a second it was gone, and they were once more in darkness. But then by degrees the storm passed off and the moon began to shine, feebly indeed, for the sky was not clear washed of clouds, which still trailed along in the tracks of the tempest, sucked after it by its mighty draught. Still it was lighter, and the rain gradually thinned till at last it stopped. The storm had passed in majesty down the ways of the night, and there was no sound round them but the sound of rushing water.

"John," said Jess presently, "can we do anything?"

"Nothing, dear."

"Shall we escape, John?"

He hesitated. "It is in God's hands, dear. We are in great danger. If the cart upsets we shall be drowned. Can you swim?"

"No, John."

"If we can hang on here till daylight we may get ashore, if those devils are not there to shoot us. I do not think that our chance is a good one."

"John, are you afraid to die?"

He hesitated. "I don't know, dear. I hope to meet it like a man."

"Tell me what you truly think. Is there any hope for us at all?"

Once more he paused, reflecting whether or no he should speak the truth. Finally he decided to do so.

"I can see none, Jess. If we are not drowned we are sure to be shot. They will wait about the bank till morning, and for their own sakes they will not dare to let us live."

He did not know that all that was left of two of them would indeed wait for many a long year, and that the third had fled aghast.

"Jess, dear," he went on, "it is no good to tell lies. Our lives may end any minute. Humanly speaking, they must end before the sun is up."

The words were awful enough—if the reader can by an effort of the imagination throw himself for a moment into the position of these two, he will perhaps understand how awful. It is a dreadful thing, when in the full flow of health and youth, to be suddenly placed face to face with the certainty of violent death, and to know that in a few more minutes your course will have been run, and that you will have commenced to explore the future, which may prove to be even worse, because more enduring, than the life you are now quitting in agony. It is a dreadful thing, as any who have ever stood in such a peril can testify, and John felt his heart sink within him at the thought—for death is very strong. But there is one thing stronger, a woman's perfect love. Against this Death himself cannot prevail. And so it came to pass that now as He fixed his cold gaze upon Jess's eyes they answered him with a strange unearthly light. She feared not Death, so that she might meet him with her beloved. Death was her hope and opportunity. Here she had none; there she might have all—

or sleep. The fetters had fallen from her, struck off by an overmastering hand. Her duty was satisfied, her trust fulfilled, and she was free—free to die with her beloved. Ay! her love was indeed a love deeper than the grave; and now it rose in all its strength, standing tiptoe upon the earth, ready, when dissolution had lent it wings, to soar to love's own star.

"You are sure, John?" she asked again.

"Yes, dear, yes. Why do you force me to repeat it? I can see no hope."

Her arms were round his neck, her soft curls rested on his cheek and the breath from her lips played upon his face. Indeed it was only by speaking into each other's ears that conversation was feasible, owing to the rushing sound of the waters.

"Because I have something to tell you which I cannot tell unless we are going to die. You know it, but I want to say it with my own lips before I die. I love you, John, *I love you, I love you*; and I am glad to die because I can die with you and go away with you."

He heard, and such was the power of her love, that his, which had been put out of mind in the terror of that hour, reawoke and took the

colour of her own. He too forgot the imminence of death in the warm presence of his down-trodden passion. She was in his arms as he had taken her during the firing, and he bent his head to look at her. The moonlight played upon her pallid, quivering face, and showed that in her eyes from which no man could look upon and turn away. Once more—yes, even then—there came over him that feeling of utter surrender to the sweet mastery of her will which had possessed him in the sitting-room of "The Palatial." But now, all earthly considerations having faded away, he no longer hesitated, but pressed his lips against hers and kissed her again and again. It was perhaps as wild and pathetic a love-scene as ever the old moon above has looked upon. There they were, those two, experiencing the fullest and acutest joy that life has to offer in the actual shadow of death. Nay, death was present with them, for there, beneath their feet, half-hidden by the water, was the stiffening corpse of the Zulu.

To and fro swung the cart in the rush of the swollen river, up and down beside them the carcases of the horses rose and fell with the swell of the water, on whose surface the broken moon-

beams played and quivered. Overhead was the blue, star-sown depth through which they were waiting presently to pass, and to the right and left the long broken outlines of the banks stretched away till at last they appeared to grow together in the gloom.

But they heeded none of these things; they remembered nothing except that they had found each other's hearts, and were happy with a wild joy it is not often given to us to feel. The past was forgotten, the future was at hand, and between the one and the other was spanned a bridge of passion made perfect and sanctified by the approaching end. Bessie was forgotten, all things were forgotten, for they were alone with Love and Death.

Let those who would blame them pause awhile. Why not? They had kept the faith. They had denied themselves and run straightly down the path of duty. But the compacts of life end with life. No man may bargain for the beyond. Even the marriage service shrinks from it. And now that hope had gone and life was at its extremest ebb, why should they not take their happiness before they passed to the land where, perchance, all things will be forgotten? So it seemed to

them; if indeed they were any longer capable of reason.

He looked into her eyes and she laid her head upon his heart in that mute abandonment of worship which is sometimes to be met with in the world, and is redeemed from vulgar passion by an indefinable quality of its own. He looked into her eyes and was glad to have lived, ay, even to have reached this hour of death. And she, lost in the depths of her own nature, sobbed out her passion-laden heart upon his breast, and called him her own, her own, her very own!

And so the long hours passed unheeded, till at last a new-born freshness in the air told them that they were not far from dawn. The death they were waiting for had not yet come. It must now be very near at hand.

"John," she whispered in his ear, "do you think that they will shoot us?"

"Yes," he said hoarsely; "they must for their own safety."

"I wish it were over," she said.

Suddenly she started back from his arms with a little cry, causing the cart to rock violently.

"I forgot," she said; "you can swim, though I cannot. Why cannot you swim to the bank and get off under cover of the darkness? It is not more than fifty yards, and the current is not so very swift."

The idea of escaping without Jess had never occurred to him, and now that she suggested it, it struck him as so absurd that he actually broke into a ghost of a laugh.

"Don't talk nonsense, Jess," he said.

"Yes, yes, I will. Go! You *must* go! It does not matter about me now. I know you love me, and I can die happy. I will wait for you. Oh, John! wherever I am, if I have any life and any remembrance I will wait for you. Never forget that all your life. However far I may seem away, if I live at all, I shall be waiting for you. And now go; you *shall* go, I say! No, I will not be disobeyed. If you will not go I will throw myself into the water. Oh, the cart is turning over!"

"Hold on, for God's sake!" shouted John. "The traces have broken."

He was right; the tough leather was at length worn through by the constant rubbing against the rock, and the strain and swaying of the cart on

the one side, and of the dead horses on the other. Round it spun, broadside on to the current, and immediately began to heave over, till at last the angle was so sharp that the dead body of poor Mouti slid out with a splash and vanished into the darkness. This relieved the cart, and it righted for a moment, but being now no longer held up by the bodies of the horses or by the sustaining power of the wind it began to fill and sink, and at the same time to revolve round and round. John realised that it was all up, and that to stop in the cart would only mean certain death, because they would be held under water by the canvas tent. So with a devout aspiration for assistance he seized Jess round the waist with one arm and sprang off into the water. As he did so the cart filled and sank.

"Lie still, for Heaven's sake!" he shouted, as they rose to the surface.

In the dim light of the dawn which was now creeping over the earth he could make out the line of the left bank of the Vaal, the same from which they had started into the river on the previous night. It appeared to be about forty yards away, but the current was running quite six knots, and he realised that, burdened as he was, it

would be quite impracticable for him to try and reach it. The only thing to do was to keep afloat. Luckily the water was warm and he was a strong swimmer. In a minute or so he made out that about fifty paces ahead some rocks jutted out twenty yards into the bed of the stream. Then catching Jess by the hair with his left hand he made his effort, and a desperate one it was. The broken water boiled furiously round the rocks. Presently he was in it, and, better still, his feet touched the ground. Next second he was swept off them and rolled over and over at the bottom of the river, getting sadly knocked about against the boulders. Somehow he struggled to his legs, still retaining his hold of Jess. Twice he fell, and twice he struggled up again. One more effort—so. The water was only up to his thighs now, and he was obliged to half carry his companion.

As he lifted her he felt a deadly sickness come over him, but still he struggled on like a man, till at last they both fell of a heap upon a big flat rock, and for a while he remembered no more.

When he came to himself again it was to find Jess, who had recovered sooner than he had,

standing over him and chafing his hands. Indeed, as the sun was up he guessed that he must have lost his senses for some time. He rose with some difficulty and shook himself. Except for some bruises he was sound enough.

"Are you hurt?" he asked of Jess, who, pale and faint and bruised, her hat gone, her dress torn by bullets and the rocks, and dripping water at every step, looked an exceedingly forlorn object.

"No," she said feebly, "not very much."

He sat down on the rock in the sun, for they were both shivering with cold. "What is to be done?" he asked.

"Die," she said fiercely; "I meant to die—why did you not let me die? Ours is a position that only death can set straight."

"Don't be alarmed," he said, "your desire will soon be gratified: those murdering villains will hunt us up presently."

The bed and banks of the river were clothed with thin layers of mist, but as the sun gathered power these lifted. The spot where they had got ashore was about three hundred yards below that where the two Boers and their horses had been destroyed by the lightning on the previous night.

Seeing the mist lift, John insisted upon Jess crouching with him behind a rock so that they could look up and down the river without being seen themselves. Presently he made out the forms of two horses grazing about two hundred yards away.

"Ah," he said, "I thought so; the devils have offsaddled there. Thank Heaven I have still got my revolver, and the cartridges are watertight. I mean to sell our lives as dearly as I can."

"Why, John," cried Jess, following the line of his outstretched hand, "those are not the Boers' horses, they are our two leaders that broke loose in the water. Look, their collars are still on."

"By Jove! so they are. Now if only we can catch them without being caught ourselves we have a chance of getting out of this."

"Well, there is no cover about, and I can't see any signs of Boers. They must have been sure of having killed us, and gone away."

John looked round, and for the first time a sense of hope began to creep into his heart. Perhaps they would survive after all.

"Let's go up and see. It's no good stopping here; we must get some food somewhere. I feel as weak as a cat."

She rose without a word, and taking his hand they advanced together along the bank. They had not gone twenty yards before John gave an exclamation of joy, and rushed at something white that had stuck in some reeds. It was the basket of food which had been given to them by the innkeeper's wife at Heidelberg. It had been washed out of the cart, and as the lid was fastened nothing had been lost out of it. He undid it. There was the bottle of three star brandy untouched, also most of the eggs, meat, and bread, which last was, of course, sodden and worthless. It did not take long to get the cork out, and then John filled a broken wine-glass there was in the basket half-full of water and half of brandy, and made Jess drink it, with the result that she began to look a little less like a corpse. Next, he repeated the process twice on his own account, and instantly felt as though new life was flowing into him. Then they went cautiously on.

The horses allowed them to catch them without trouble, and did not appear to be any the worse for their adventure, though the flank of one was grazed by a bullet.

"There is a tree down there where the bank shelves over; we had better tie the horses up,

dress, and get some breakfast," said John, almost cheerfully; and accordingly they proceeded thither. Suddenly John, who was ahead, started back with an exclamation of fear, and the horses began to snort, for there, stark and stiff in death, and already swollen and discoloured by decomposition —as is sometimes the case with people killed by lightning—the rifles in their hands twisted and fused, their clothes cut and blown from the bodies by the explosion of the cartridges in their bandoliers—lay the two Boers themselves. It was a terrifying sight, and, taken in conjunction with their own remarkable escape, one to make the most careless and sceptical reflect.

"And yet there are people who say that there is no such thing as a God, and no punishment for wickedness," said John aloud.

CHAPTER VII.

MEANWHILE.

JOHN, it will be remembered, left Mooifontein for Pretoria towards the end of December, and with him went all the life and light of the place.

"Dear me, Bessie," said old Silas Croft on the evening after he had started, "the place seems very dull without John,"—a remark in which Bessie, who was secretly weeping in the corner, heartily concurred.

Then, a few days afterwards, came the news of the investment of Pretoria, but no news of John. They ascertained that he had passed Standerton in safety, but beyond that nothing could be heard of him. Day after day passed, but no news, and at last, one evening, Bessie broke out in a passion of hysterical tears.

"What did you send him for?" she asked of her uncle. "It was ridiculous—I knew that it was ridiculous. He could not help Jess or get her back; the most that could happen was that they both would be

shut up together. And now he is dead—I know that those Boers have shot him—and it is all your fault! And if he is dead I will never speak to you again."

The old man retreated, somewhat dismayed at this outburst, which was not at all in Bessie's style.

"Ah, well," he said to himself, "that is the way of women; they turn into tigers about a man!"

There may have been truth in this reflection, but a tiger is not a pleasant domestic pet, as poor old Silas found out during the next two months. The more Bessie thought about the matter the more incensed she grew at his having sent her lover away. Indeed, in a little while she quite forgot that she had herself acquiesced in his going. In short, her temper completely gave way under the strain, so that at last her uncle scarcely dared to mention John's name.

Meanwhile, things had been going as ill without as within. First of all—that was the day after John's departure—two or three loyal Boers and an English storekeeper from Lake Chrissie, in New Scotland, outspanned on the place and

came and implored Silas Croft to fly for his life into Natal while there was yet time. They said that the Boers would certainly shoot any Englishmen who might be sufficiently defenceless. But the old man would not listen.

"I am an Englishman—*civis Romanus sum*," he said in his sturdy fashion, "and I do not believe that they will touch me, who have lived among them for twenty years. At any rate, I am not going to run away and leave my place at the mercy of a pack of thieves. If they shoot me they will have to reckon with England for the deed, so I expect that they will leave me alone. Bessie can go if she likes, but I shall stop here and see the row through, and there's an end of it."

Whereon, Bessie having flatly declined to budge an inch, the loyalists departed in a hurry, metaphorically wringing their hands at such an exhibition of ill-placed confidence and insular pride. This little scene occurred at dinner-time, and after dinner old Silas proceeded to hurl defiance at his foes in another fashion. Going to a cupboard in his bedroom, he extracted an exceedingly large Union Jack, and promptly advanced with it to an open spot between two of

the orange-trees in front of the house, where a flag-staff was planted, formed of a very tall young blue gum, in such a position that it could be seen for miles around. On this flag-staff it was old Silas's habit to hoist the large Union Jack on the Queen's birthday, Christmas-day, and other state occasions.

"Now, Jantjé," he said, when he had bent on the flag, "run her up, and I'll cheer!" and accordingly, as the broad flag floated out on the breeze, he took off his hat and waved it, and gave such a "hip, hip, hoorah!" in his stentorian tones that Bessie came running down from the house to see what was the matter. Nor was he satisfied with this, but, having obtained a ladder, he placed it against the post and sent Jantjé up it, instructing him to fasten the rope on which the flag was bent about fifteen feet from the ground, so that nobody should get at it to haul it down.

"There," he said, "I've nailed my colours to the mast. That will show these gentry that an Englishman lives here.

> Confound their politics,
> Frustrate their knavish tricks,
> God save the Queen."

"Amen," said Bessie, but she had her doubts about the wisdom of that Union Jack, which, whenever the wind blew, streamed out, a visible defiance not calculated to soothe the breasts of excited patriots.

Indeed, two days after that, a patrol of three Boers, spying the ensign whilst yet a long way off, came galloping up in hot haste to see what it meant. Silas saw them coming, and, taking his rifle in his hand, went and stood beneath the flag, for which he had an almost superstitious veneration, feeling sure that they would not dare to meddle either with him or it.

"What is the meaning of this, Om Silas?" asked the leader of the three men, with all of whom he was perfectly acquainted.

"It means that an Englishman lives here, Jan," was the answer.

"Haul the dirty rag down!" said the man.

"I will see you damned first!" replied old Silas.

Thereon the Boer dismounted and made for the flag-staff, only to find "Uncle Croft's" rifle in a direct line with his chest.

"You will have to shoot me first, Jan," he

said, and thereon, after some consultation, they left him and went away.

The fact was that, notwithstanding that he was an Englishman, Silas Croft was very popular with the Boers, most of whom had known him since they were children, and a member of whose Volksraad he had twice been. It was to this personal popularity that he owed the fact that he was not turned out of his house, and forced to choose between serving against his countrymen or being imprisoned and otherwise maltreated at the very commencement of the rebellion.

For a fortnight or more after this flag episode nothing of any importance happened, and then came the news of the crushing defeat at Laing's Nek. At first, Silas Croft would not believe the news. "No general could have been so mad," he said; but soon the report was amply confirmed from native sources.

Another week passed, and with it came the news of the British defeat at Ingogo. The first they heard of it was on the morning of February 8, when Jantjé brought a Kafir up to the verandah at breakfast-time. This Kafir said that he had been watching the fight from a mountain; that the English were completely hemmed in and

fighting well, but that "their arms were tired," and they would all be killed at night-time. The Boers, he said, were not suffering at all—the English could not "shoot straight." After hearing this they passed a sufficiently miserable day and evening. About twelve o'clock that night, however, a native spy Mr. Croft had despatched came back with the report that the English general had got safely back to camp, having suffered heavily and abandoned his wounded, many of whom had died in the rain, for the night after the battle was wet.

Then came another long pause, during which no reliable news reached them, though the air was thick with rumours, and old Silas was made happy by hearing that large reinforcements were on their way from England.

"Ah, Bessie, my dear, they will soon sing another tune now," he said in great glee; "and what's more, it's about time they did. I can't understand what the soldiers have been about—I can't indeed."

And so the time wore heavily along till at last there came a dreadful day, which Bessie will never forget as long as she lives. It was the 20th of February—just a week before the final

disaster at Majuba Hill. Bessie was standing idly on the verandah, looking down the long avenue of blue gums, where the shadows formed a dark network to catch the wandering rays of light. The place looked very peaceful, and certainly no one could have known from its appearance that a bloody war was being waged within a few miles. The Kafirs came and went about their work as usual, or made pretence to; but now and then a close observer might see them stop and look towards the Drakensberg, and then say a few words to their neighbour about the wonderful thing that had come to pass, that the Boers were beating the great white people, who came out of the sea and shook the earth with their tread. Whereon the neighbour would take the opportunity to relax from toil and squat down, and have a pinch of snuff, and relate in what particular collection of rocks on the hillside he and his wives slept the last night—for when the Boers are out on commando the Kafirs will not sleep in their huts for fear of being surprised and shot down. Then the pair would spend half an hour or so in speculating on what would be their fate when the Boer had eaten up the Englishman and taken back the country, and finally

come to the conclusion that they had better emigrate to Natal.

Bessie, on the verandah, noted all this going on, every now and again catching snatches of the lazy rascals' talk, which chimed in but too sadly with her own thoughts. Turning from it impatiently, she began to watch the hens marching solemnly about the drive, followed by their broods. This picture, too, had a sanguinary background, for under an orange-tree two rival cocks were fighting furiously. They always did this about once a week, nor did they cease from troubling till each retired, temporarily blinded, to the shade of a separate orange-tree, where they spent the rest of the week in recovering, only to emerge when the cure was effected and fight their battles over again. Meanwhile, a third cock, young in years but old in wisdom, who steadily refused to fight when attacked, looked after the hens in dispute. To-day the fight was particularly ferocious, and, fearing that the combatants would have no eyes left at all if she did not interfere, Bessie called to the old Boer hound who was lying in the sun on the verandah.

"Hi, Stomp, Stomp—hunt them, Stomp!"

Up jumped Stomp and made a prodigious

show of furiously attacking the embattled cocks; it was an operation to which he was used, and which afforded him constant amusement. Suddenly, however, as he dashed towards the trees, he stopped midway, his simulated wrath ceased, and instead of it, an expression of real disgust came upon his honest face. Then the hair along his backbone stood up like the quills upon the fretful porcupine, and he growled.

"A strange Kafir, I expect," said Bessie to herself.

Stomp hated strange Kafirs. She had scarcely got the words out before they were justified by the appearance of a native. He was a villanous-looking fellow, with one eye, and nothing on but a ragged pair of trousers fastened round the waist with a greasy leather strap. In his wool, however, were stuck several small distended bladders such as are generally worn by medicine-men and witch-doctors. In his left hand he held a long stick, cleft at one end. In the cleft was a letter.

"Come here, Stomp," said Bessie, and as she did so a wild hope shot across her heart like a meteor across the night: perhaps the letter was from John.

The dog obeyed her unwillingly enough, for

he evidently did not like that Kafir; and when he saw that Stomp was well out of the way the Kafir himself followed. He was an insolent fellow, and took no notice of Bessie beyond squatting himself down upon the drive in front of her.

"What is it?" said Bessie in Dutch, her lips trembling as she spoke.

"A letter," answered the man.

"Give it to me."

"No, missie, not till I have looked at you to see if it is right. Light yellow hair that curls—*one*," checking it on his fingers, "yes, that is right; large blue eyes—*two*, that is right; big and tall, and fair as a star—yes, the letter is for you, take it," and he poked the long stick up almost into her face.

"Where is it from?" asked Bessie, with sudden suspicion, recoiling a step.

"Wakkerstroom last."

"Who is it from?"

"Read it, and you will see."

Bessie took the letter, which was wrapped up in a piece of old newspaper, from the cleft of the stick and turned it over and over doubtfully. Most of us have a mistrust of strange-looking letters, and this letter was unusually strange. To

begin with, it had no address whatever on the dirty envelope, which was curious. In the second place, the envelope was sealed apparently with a threepenny bit.

"Are you sure it is for me?" asked Bessie.

"Yah, yah—sure, sure," answered the native, with a rude laugh. "There are not many such white girls in the Transvaal. I have made no mistake. I have 'smelt you out.'" And he began to go through his catalogue—"Yellow hair that curls", &c.—again.

Then Bessie opened the letter. Inside was an ordinary sheet of paper written over in a bold, firm, yet slightly unpractised writing that Bessie knew well enough, and the sight of which filled her with a presentiment of evil. It was Frank Muller's.

She turned sick and cold, but could not choose but read as follows:

"Camp, near Pretoria. 15 February.

"Dear Miss Bessie,—I am sorry to have to write to you, but though we have quarrelled lately, and also your good father, I think it my duty to do so, and send this to your hand by special runner. Yesterday was a sortie made by the poor

folk in Pretoria, who are now as thin with hunger as the high veldt oxen just before spring. Our arms were again victorious; the redcoats ran away and left their ambulance in our hands, carrying with them many dead and wounded. Among the dead was the Captain Niel——"

Here Bessie gave a sort of choked cry, and let the letter fall over the verandah, to one of the posts of which she clung with both her hands.

The ill-favoured native below grinned, and, picking the paper up, handed it to her.

She took it, feeling that she must know all, and read on like one reads in some ghastly dream:

"who has been staying on your uncle's farm. I did not see him killed myself, but Jan Vanzyl shot him, and Roi Dirk Oosthuizen, and Carolus, a Hottentot, saw them pick him up and carry him away. They say that he was quite dead. For this I fear you will be sorry, as I am, but it is the chance of war, and he died fighting bravely. Make my obedient compliments to your uncle. We parted in anger, but I hope in the new circumstances that have arisen in the land to

show him that I, for one, bear no anger.—Believe me, dear Miss Bessie, your humble and devoted servant,

"FRANK MULLER."

Bessie thrust the letter into the pocket of her dress, and then again caught hold of the verandah post, and supported herself by it, while the light of the sun seemed to visibly fade out of the day before her eyes and replace itself by a cold blackness in which there was no break. He was dead!—her lover was dead! The glow had gone from her life as it seemed to be going from the day, and she was left desolate. She had no knowledge of how long she stood thus, staring with wide eyes at the sunshine she could not see. She had lost her count of time; all things were phantasmagorical and unreal; all that she could realise was this one overpowering, crushing fact—John was dead!

"Missie," said the ill-favoured messenger below, fixing his one eye upon her poor sorrow-stricken face, and yawning.

There was no answer.

"Missie," he said again, "is there any answer?

I must be going. I want to get back in time to see the Boers take Pretoria."

Bessie looked at him vaguely. "Yours is a message that needs no answer," she said. "What is, is."

The brute laughed. "No, I can't take a letter to the Captain," he said; "I saw Jan Vanzyl shoot him. He fell *so*," and he suddenly collapsed all in a heap on the path, in imitation of a man struck dead by a bullet. "I can't take *him* a message, missie," he went on, rising, "but one day you will be able to go and look for him yourself. I did not mean that; what I meant was that I could take a letter to Frank Muller. A live Boer is better than a dead Englishman; and Frank Muller will make a fine husband for any girl. If you shut your eyes you won't know the difference."

"Go!" said Bessie, in a choked voice, and pointing her hand towards the avenue.

Such was the suppressed energy in her tone that the man sprang to his feet, and as he did so, interpreting her gesture as an encouragement to action, the old dog, Stomp, who had been watching him all the time, and occasionally giving utterance to a low growl of animosity, flew straight

at his throat from the verandah. The dog, which was a heavy one, struck the man full in the chest and knocked him backwards. Down came dog and man on the drive together, and then ensued a terrible scene, the man cursing and shrieking and striking out at the dog, and the dog worrying the man in a fashion that he was not likely to forget for the remainder of his life.

Bessie, whose energy seemed again to be exhausted, took absolutely no notice of the fray, and it was at this juncture that her old uncle arrived upon the scene, together with two Kafirs — the same whom Bessie had been watching idling.

"Hullo! hullo!" he halloed out in his stentorian tones, "what is all this about? Get off, you brute!" and what between his voice and the blows of the Kafirs the dog was persuaded to let go his hold of the man, who staggered to his feet, severely mauled, and bleeding from half a dozen bites.

For a moment he did not say anything, but picked up his sticks. Then, however, having first seen that the dog was being held by the Kafirs, he turned, his face streaming with blood, his one eye blazing with fury, and, shaking both his

clenched fists at poor Bessie, broke into a scream of cursing.

"You shall pay for this—Frank Muller shall make you pay for it. I am his servant. I——"

"Get out of this, whoever you are," thundered old Silas, "or by Heaven I will let the dog on you again!" and he pointed to Stomp, who was struggling wildly with the two Kafirs.

The man paused and looked at the dog, and then, with a final shake of the fist, departed at a run down the avenue, turning once only to look if the dog was coming.

Bessie vacantly watched him go, taking no more notice of it than she had of the noise of the fighting. Then, as though struck by a thought, she turned and went into the sitting-room.

"What is all this about, Bessie?" said her uncle, following her. "What does the man mean about Frank Muller?"

"It means, uncle dear," she said at last, in a voice that was something between a sob and a laugh, "that I am a widow before I am married. John is dead!"

"Dead! dead!" said the old man, putting his

hand to his forehead and turning round in a dazed sort of fashion, "John dead!"

"Read the letter," said Bessie, handing him Frank Muller's missive.

The old man took it and read it. His hand shook so much that it took him a long while to come to the end of it.

"Good God!" he said at last, "what a blow! My poor Bessie," and he took her into his arms and kissed her. Suddenly a thought struck him. "Perhaps it is all one of Frank Muller's lies," he said, "or perhaps he made a mistake."

But Bessie made no answer. For the time, at any rate, hope had left her.

CHAPTER VIII.

FRANK MULLER'S FAMILIAR.

THE study of the conflicting elements that go to make up a character like Frank Muller's, however fascinating it might prove, is not one that can be attempted in detail here. Such a character in its developed form is fortunately practically impossible in a highly civilised country. The dead weight of the law would crush it back to the level of the human mass around it. But those who have lived in the wild places of the earth will be acquainted with its prototypes, more especially in those places where a handful of a superior race rule over the dense thousands of an inferior. Solitudes are favourable to the production of strongly marked individualities. The companionship of highly developed men, on the contrary, whittles individualities away; the difference between their growth being the difference between the growth of a tree on a plain and a tree in the forest. On the plain the tree takes

the innate bent of its nature. It springs in majesty towards the skies; it spreads itself around, or it slants along the earth, just as Nature intended that it should, and in accordance with the power of the providential breath that bends it. In the forest it is different. There the tree grows towards the light wherever the light may be. Forced to modify its natural habit in obedience to the pressure of circumstances over which it has no control, it takes such form and height as its neighbours will allow to it, all its energies being directed to the preservation of life in any shape and at any sacrifice. Thus is it with us all. Left to ourselves, or surrounded only by the scrub of humanity, we become outwardly that which the spirit within would fashion us to, but, placed among our fellows, shackled by custom, restrained by law, pruned and bent by the force of public opinion, we grow as like one to another as the fruit bushes on a garden wall. The sharp angles of our characters are fretted away by the friction of the crowd, and we become round, and polished, and superficially, at any rate, identical. We no longer resemble a solitary boulder on a plain, but are as a stone built into the great edifice of civilised society.

The place of a man like Frank Muller is at the junction of the waters of civilisation and barbarism. Too civilised to possess those savage virtues which, such as they are, represent the quantum of innate good Nature has thought fit to allow in the mixture, Man; and too barbarous to be subject to the tenderer restraints of cultivated society, he is at once strong in the strength of both and weak in their weaknesses. Animated by the spirit of barbarism, Superstition; and almost entirely destitute of the spirit of civilisation, Mercy, he stands on the edge of both and an affront to both, as terrific a moral spectacle as the world can afford.

Had he been a little more civilised, with his power of evil trained by education and cynical reflection to defy the attacks of those spasms of unreasoning spiritual terror and unrestrainable passion that have their natural dwelling-place in the raw strong mind of uncultivated man, Frank Muller might have broken upon the world as a Napoleon. Had he been a little more savage, a little further removed from the unconscious but present influence of a progressive race, he might have ground his fellows down and ruthlessly destroyed them in the madness of his rage and lust,

like an Attila or a T'Chaka. As it was he was buffeted between two forces he did not realise, even when they swayed him, and thus at every step in his path towards a supremacy of evil an unseen power made stumbling-blocks of weaknesses which, if that path had been laid along a little higher or a little lower level in the scale of circumstance, would themselves have been deadly weapons of overmastering force.

See him, as with his dark heart filled up with fears, he thunders along from the scene of midnight death and murder his brain had not feared to plan and his hand to execute. Onward his black horse strides, companioned by the storm, like a dark thought travelling on the wings of Night. He does not believe in any God, and yet the terrible fears that spring up in his soul, born fungus-like from a dew of blood, take shape and form, and seem to cry aloud, "*We are the messengers of the avenging God.*" He glances up. High on the black bosom of the storm the finger of the lightning is writing that awful name, and again and again the voice of the thunder reads it out aloud in spirit-shaking accents. He shuts his dazed eyes, and even the falling rhythm of his horse's hoofs beats out, "*There is a God! there*

is a God!" from the silent earth on which they strike.

And so, on through the tempest and the night, flying from that which no man can leave behind.

It was near midnight when Frank Muller drew rein at a wretched mud hut perched by itself on the banks of the Vaal, and flanked on its rear by an equally miserable shed. The place was silent as the grave; not even a dog barked.

"If that beast of a Kafir is not here," he said aloud, "I will have him flogged to death. Hendrik, Hendrik!"

As he called, a form rose up at his very feet, causing the weary horse to start back so violently that he almost threw his rider to the ground.

"What in the name of the devil are you?" almost shrieked Frank Muller, whose nerves, indeed, were in no condition to stand fresh shocks.

"It is me, Baas," said the form, at the same time throwing off a grey blanket in which it was enveloped, and revealing the villanous countenance of the one-eyed witch-doctor, who had taken the letter to Bessie, and who had for years been Muller's body-servant, and followed him about like a shadow.

"Curse you, you dog! What do you mean by hiding up like that? It is one of your infernal tricks; be careful"—tapping his pistol case—"or I shall one day put an end to you and your witchcraft together."

"I am very sorry, Baas," said the man in a whine, "but half an hour ago I heard you coming. I don't know what is the matter with the air to-night, but it sounded as though twenty people were galloping after you. I could hear them all quite clear; first the big black horse, and then all those who came after, just as though they were hunting you; and so I came out and lay down to listen, and it was not till you were quite close that one by one the others stopped. Perhaps it was the devils who galloped."

"Curse you, stop that wizard's talk," said Muller, his teeth chattering with fear and agitation. "Take the horse and clean and feed him well; he has galloped far, and we start at dawn. Stop, tell me, where are the lights and the brandy? If you have drunk the brandy I will flog you."

"They are on the shelf on the left as you go in, Baas, and there is flesh there too, and bread."

Muller swung himself from the saddle and entered the hut, pushing open the cranky, broken-hinged door with a kick. He found the box of Tandstickör matches and, after one or two false shots—due chiefly to his shaking hand—succeeded in getting fire and lighting a coarse dip such as the Boers make out of mutton fat. Near the candle was a bottle of peach brandy two thirds full, and a tin pannikin and a jug of river water. Seizing the pannikin, he filled it half full of spirit, added a little water, and drank the mixture off. Then he took down the meat and bread from the same shelf, and, cutting some of each off with his clasp-knife, tried to eat. But he could not eat much, and soon gave the attempt up, consoling himself instead with the brandy.

"Bah!" he said, "the stuff tastes like hell fire;" and he filled his pipe and sat smoking.

Presently Hendrik came in to say that the horse was eating well, and was about to go out again, when his master beckoned him to stop. The man was surprised, for Muller was not generally fond of his society, except when he wanted to consult him or get him to exercise his pretended art of divination; but the fact was that at that moment Frank Muller would have been

glad to consort with a dog. The events of the night had brought this terrible man, steeped in iniquity from his youth up, down to the level of a child frightened at the dark. For a while he sat in a silence, the Kafir squatting on the ground at his feet. Presently, however, the doses of powerful spirit took effect on him, and he began to talk more unguardedly than was his custom, even with his black "familiar" Hendrik.

"How long have you been here?" he asked of his retainer.

"About four days, Baas."

"Did you take my letter to Om Croft's?"

"Yah, Baas. I gave it to the Missie."

"What did she do?"

"She read it, and then stood like this, holding on to the verandah pole;" and he opened his mouth and one eye, and twisted up his hideous countenance into a ghastly imitation of Bessie's sorrow-stricken face, catching hold of one of the posts that supported the hut to assist in the performance.

"So she believed it?"

"Surely."

"What did she do, then?"

"She set the dog on me. Look here! and

here! and here!" and he pointed to the half-healed scars left by Stomp's sharp fangs.

Muller laughed a little. "I should have liked to have seen him worry you, you black cheat; it shows her spirit too. I suppose you are angry, and want to have a revenge?"

"Surely."

"Well, who knows? Perhaps you shall; we are going there to-morrow."

"So, Baas! I knew that before you told me."

"We are going there, and we are going to take the place; and we are going to try Uncle Silas by court-martial for flying an English flag, and if he is found guilty we are going to shoot him, Hendrik."

"So, Baas," said the Kafir, rubbing his hands in glee, "but will he be found guilty?"

"I don't know," murmured the white man, stroking his golden beard; "that will depend upon what Missie has to say; and upon the verdict of the court," he added, by way of an afterthought.

"On the verdict of the court, ha! ha!" chuckled his wicked satellite. "On the verdict of the court, yes! yes! and the Baas will be president, ha! ha!

One needs no witchcraft to guess the verdict. And if the court finds Uncle Silas guilty, who will do the shooting, Baas?"

"I have not thought of that; the time has not come to think of it. It does not matter; anybody can carry out the sentence of the law."

"Baas," said the Kafir, "I have done much for you and had little pay. I have done ugly things. I have read omens and made medicines, and 'smelt out' your enemies. Will you grant me a favour? Will you let me shoot Om Croft if the court finds him guilty? It is not much to ask, Baas. I am a clever wizard, and deserve my pay."

"Why do you want to shoot him?"

"Because he flogged me once, years ago, for being a witch-doctor, and the other day he hunted me off the place. Beside, it is nice to shoot a white man. I should like it better," he went on, with a smack of the lips, "if it were Missie, who set the dog on me. I would——"

In a moment Frank Muller had the astonished ruffian by the throat, and was kicking and shaking him as though he were a toy. His brutal talk of Bessie had appealed to such manliness as he had in him, and, whatever his own wicked-

ness may have been, he was too madly in love with the woman to let her name be taken in vain by a man whom, though he held his "magic" in superstitious reverence, he yet ranked lower than a dog. With his nerves strung to the highest possible state of tension, and half drunk as he was, Frank Muller was no more a person to be played with or irritated than a mad bull.

"You black beast!" he yelled, "if ever you dare to mention her name again like that I will kill you, for all your witchcraft;" and he hurled him with such force up against the wall of the hut that the whole place shook. The man fell, lay for a moment groaning, and then crept from the hut on his hands and knees.

Muller sat scowling from under his bent brows and watched him go. When he was gone he rose and fastened the door behind him, and then suddenly burst into tears, the result, no doubt, of the mingled effects of the drink, mental and physical exhaustion, and the never-resting passion (one can scarcely call it love) that ate away at his heart, like the worm that dieth not.

"Oh, Bessie, Bessie!" he groaned, "I have done it all for you. Surely you cannot be angry when I have killed them all for you? Oh, my

darling, my darling! If you only knew how I love you! Oh, my darling, my darling!" and in an agony of passion he flung himself down on the rough pallet in the corner of the hut and sobbed himself to sleep.

Somehow Frank Muller's evil-doing did not make him any the happier, the fact of the matter being that to enjoy wickedness a man must be not only without conscience but also without passion. Now Frank Muller was tormented with a very effective substitute for the first, superstition, and his life was literally overshadowed by the last, for the beauty of a girl possessed the power to dominate his wildest moods and inflict upon him torments that she herself was incapable of even imagining.

At the first light of dawn Hendrik crept humbly into the hut and woke his master, and within half an hour they were across the Vaal and on the road to Wakkerstroom.

As the light increased so did Muller's spirits rise, till at last, when the red sun came up in glory and swept away the shadows, he felt as though all the load of guilt and fear that lay at his heart had departed with them. He could see now that the two Boers being killed by the flash of lightning was a

mere accident—a happy accident indeed; for, had it not been for that, he himself would have had to kill them, if he could not by any other means have got the warrant from them. As it was he had forgotten the warrant; but it did not matter much, he reflected. Nobody would be likely to find the bodies of the two men and horses under the lonely bank there. Certainly they would not be found till the aasvögels had picked them clean. They would be at work upon them by now. And if they were found it was probable that the paper would have rotted or blown away, or, at the worst, be so discoloured as to be unreadable. For the rest, there was nothing to connect him with the murder, now that the accessories were dead. Hendrik would prove an alibi for him. He was a useful man, Hendrik. Besides, who would believe that it was a murder? Two men were escorting an Englishman to the river; somehow they became involved in a quarrel; the Englishman shot them, and they shot the Englishman and his companion. Then the horses plunged into the Vaal and upset the cart, and there was an end of it. He could see now how well things had gone for him. He was practically placed beyond suspicion.

And then he fell to thinking of the fruits of his honest labours, and his cheek grew suddenly warm with the mounting blood, and his eyes flashed with the fire of youth. In two days—forty-eight hours—at the outside, Bessie would be in his arms. He could not miscarry now; he was in absolute command there. Besides, Hendrik had read it in his omens long ago.* Mooifontein should be stormed on the morrow if that were necessary, and Om Silas Croft and Bessie should be taken prisoners; and then he knew how to put on the screw. That talk about shooting on the previous night had been no idle threat. She should yield herself to him or the old man should die, and then he would take her. There could be no legal consequences from that now that the British Government was surrendering. It would be a meritorious act to shoot a rebel Englishman.

Yes, it was all plain sailing now. How long had it taken him to win her—three years? He had loved her for three years. Well, he would

* It is not a very rare thing to meet white men in South Africa who believe more or less in the efficacy of native witchcraft, and who, although such a proceeding is forbidden by law, will at a pinch not hesitate to consult the witch-doctors themselves, especially when they are desirous of discovering some lost article.

have his reward; and then, his mind at rest about his passion, he would turn it to those far-reaching, ambitious schemes, of which the end was something like a throne.

CHAPTER IX.

SILAS IS CONVINCED.

At first Bessie was utterly prostrated by the blow that had fallen on her, but as time went on she revived a little, for hers was a sanguine nature with a great deal of elasticity about it. Troubles sink into the souls of some like water into a sponge, and weigh them down almost to the grave. From others they run off as the water would if poured upon marble, merely wetting the surface. Bessie was neither of the one nor the other of these classes, but rather of a substance between the two—a healthy, happy-hearted woman, full of beauty and vigour, made to bloom in the sunshine, not to languish in the shadow of some old grief. Women of her stamp do not die of broken hearts or condemn themselves to life-long celibacy as a sacrifice to the shade of the de-

parted. If No. 1 is unfortunately removed they, as a general rule, shed many a tear and suffer many a pang, and after a decent interval very sensibly turn their attention to No. 2.

Still it was a very pale-faced, quiet Bessie who went to and fro about the place after the visit of the one-eyed Kafir. All her irritability had left her now; she no longer jumped down her uncle's throat about his having despatched John to Pretoria. Indeed, on that very evening after the evil tidings came, he began to reproach himself bitterly in her presence for having sent her lover away, when she stopped him.

"It is God's will, uncle," she said quietly. "You only did what it was ordained that you should do." And then she came and laid her sunny head upon the old man's shoulder and cried a little, and said that they two were all alone in the world now; and he comforted her in the best fashion that he could. It was a curious thing that they neither of them thought much of Jess when they talked thus about being alone. Jess was an enigma, a thing apart even from them. When she was there she was loved and allowed to go her own way, when she was not there she seemed to fade into outer darkness. A

wall came down between her and her belongings. Of course they were both very fond of her, but simple-natured people are apt to shrink involuntarily from what they cannot understand, and these two were no exception. For instance, Bessie's affection for her sister was a poor thing compared to the deep and self-sacrificing, though often secret love that her sister showered upon her. She loved her old uncle far more dearly than she did Jess, and it must be owned that he returned the compliment with interest, and in those days of heavy trouble they drew nearer to each other even than before.

But as time went on they both began to hope again. No further news of John's death reached them. Was it not possible, after all, that the whole story was an invention? They knew that Frank Muller was not a man to hesitate at a lie if he had a purpose to gain, and they could guess in this case what the purpose was. His furious passion for Bessie was no secret from either of them, and it struck them as at least possible that the tale of John's death might have been invented to forward it. It was not probable, more especially as he was not present to urge his suit, but it was possible, and however cruel suspense

may be, it is at least less absolutely crushing than the dead weight of certainty.

One Sunday—it was just a week after the letter came—Bessie was sitting after dinner on the verandah, when her quick ears caught what she took to be the booming of heavy guns far away on the Drakensberg. She rose, and leaving the house, climbed the hill behind it. On reaching the top she stood and looked at the great solemn stretch of mountains. Away, a little to her right, was a square precipitous peak called Majuba, which was generally clothed in clouds. To-day, however, there was no mist, and it seemed to her that it was from the direction of this peak that the faint rolling sounds came floating on the breeze. But she could see nothing; the mountain seemed as tenantless and devoid of life as on the day when it first towered up upon the face of things created. Presently the sound died away, and she returned, thinking that she must have been deceived by the echoes of some distant thunderstorm.

Next day they learnt from the natives that what she had heard was the sound of the big guns covering the flight of the British troops down the precipitous sides of Majuba Mountain.

After this old Silas Croft began to lose heart a little. The run of disaster was so unrelieved that even his robust faith in the invincibility of the English arms was shaken.

"It is very strange, Bessie," he said, "very strange; but, never mind, it is bound to come right at last. Our Government is not going to knock under because it has suffered a few reverses."

Then came a long four weeks of uncertainty. The air was thick with rumours, most of them brought by natives, and one or two by passing Boers, to which last Silas Croft declined to pay any attention. Soon, however, it became abundantly clear that an armistice was concluded between the English and the Boers, but what were its terms or its object they were quite unable to decide. Silas Croft thought that the Boers, overawed by the advance of an overwhelming force, meant to give in without further fighting; but Bessie shook her head.

One day—it was the same on which John and Jess had left Pretoria—a Kafir brought the news that the armistice was at an end, that the English were advancing up to the Nek in thousands, and were going to force it on the morrow and relieve

the garrisons—a piece of intelligence that brought some of the old light back to Bessie's eyes. As for her uncle, he was jubilant.

"The tide is going to turn at last, my love," he said, "and we shall have our innings. Well, it is time we should, after all the shame and loss and agony of mind we have gone through. Upon my word, for the last two months I have been ashamed to call myself an Englishman. However, there is an end of it now. I knew that they would never give in and desert us," and the old man straightened his crooked back and slapped his chest, and looked as proud and gallant as though he were five-and-twenty instead of seventy.

The rest of that day passed without any further news, and so did the following two, but on the next, which was March 23, the storm broke.

About eleven o'clock in the forenoon Bessie was employed upon her household duties as usual, or rather she had just finished them. Her uncle had returned from making his after-breakfast round upon the farm and was standing in the sitting-room, his broad felt hat in one hand and a red pocket-handkerchief in the other, with which he was polishing his bald head, while he chatted to Bessie through the open door.

"No news of the advance, Bessie dear?"

"No, uncle," she replied with a sigh, and her blue eyes filling with tears, for she was thinking of one of whom there was also no news.

"Well, never mind. These things take a little time, especially with our soldiers, who move so slowly. I dare say that there was some delay waiting for guns or ammunition or something. I expect that we shall hear something by to-night——"

He had got as far as this, when suddenly the figure of Jantjé appeared, flying up the passage in the extremity of terror and haste.

"De Booren, Baas, de Booren!" [The Boers, master, the Boers] he shouted. "The Boers are coming with a waggon, twenty of them or more, with Frank Muller at their head on his black horse, and Hans Coetzee, and the wizard with one eye with him. I was hiding behind a tree at the end of the avenue, and I saw them coming over the rise. They are going to take the place;" and, without waiting to give any further explanations, he slipped through the house and hid himself up somewhere out of the way at the back, for Jantjé, like most Hottentots, was a sad coward.

The old man stopped rubbing his head and

stared at Bessie who was standing pale and trembling in the doorway. Just then he heard the patter of running feet on the drive outside, and looked out of the window. It was caused by the passing of some half-dozen Kafirs who were working on the place, and who, on catching sight of the Boers, had promptly thrown down their tools and were flying to the hills. Even as they passed a shot was fired somewhere from the direction of the avenue, and the last of the Kafirs, a lad of about twelve, suddenly threw up his hands and pitched forward on to his face, with a bullet between his shoulder-blades.

Bessie heard the shout of "Good shot, good shot!" and the brutal laughter that greeted his fall, and the tramping of the horses as they came up the drive.

"Oh, uncle!" she said, "what shall we do?"

The old man made no answer at the moment, but going to a rack upon the wall, reached down a Westley-Richards falling-block rifle that hung there. Then he sat down in a wooden armchair that faced the French window opening on to the verandah, and beckoned to her to come to him.

"We will meet them so," he said. "They shall see that we are not afraid of them. Don't be

frightened, dear, they will not dare to harm us; they will be afraid of the consequences of harming English people."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the cavalcade began to appear in front of the window, led, as Jantjé had said, by Frank Muller on his black horse, accompanied by Hans Coetzee on the fat pony and the villanous-looking Hendrik, mounted on a nondescript sort of animal, and carrying a gun and an assegai in his hand. Behind these were a body of about fifteen or sixteen armed men, among whom Silas Croft recognised most of his neighbours, by whose side he had lived for years in peace and amity.

Opposite the house they stopped and began looking about. They could not see into the room at once, on account of the bright light outside and the shadow within.

"I fancy you will find the birds flown, nephew," said the fat voice of Hans Coetzee. "They have got warning of your little visit."

"They cannot be far," answered Muller. "I have had them watched, and know that they have not left the place. Get down, uncle, and look in the house, and you too, Hendrik."

The Kafir obeyed with alacrity, tumbling out

of his saddle with all the grace of a sack of coals, but the Boer hesitated.

"Uncle Silas is an angry man," he ventured; "he might shoot if he found me poking about his house."

"Don't answer me!" thundered Muller; "get down and do as I bid you!"

"Ah, what a devil of a man!" murmured the unfortunate Hans as he hurried to obey.

Meanwhile, Hendrik the one-eyed had jumped upon the verandah and was peering through the windows.

"Here they are, Baas; here they are!" he sung out; "the old cock and the pullet, too!" and he gave a kick to the window, which, being unlatched, swung wide open, revealing the old man sitting there in his wooden armchair with Bessie standing at his side, his rifle on his knees, and holding his fair-haired niece by the hand. Frank Muller dismounted and came on to the verandah, and behind him crowded up a dozen or more of his followers.

"What is it that you want, Frank Muller, that you come to my house with all these armed men?" asked Silas Croft from his chair.

"I call upon you, Silas Croft, to surrender to

take your trial as a land betrayer and a rebel against the Republic," was the answer. "I am sorry," he added, with a bow towards Bessie, on whom his eyes had been fixed all the time, "to be obliged to take you prisoner in the presence of a lady, but my duty gives me no choice."

"I do not know what you mean," said the old man. "I am a subject of Queen Victoria and an Englishman. How, then, can I be a rebel against any republic? I am an Englishman, I say," he went on with rising anger, speaking so high that his powerful voice rang till every Boer there could hear it, "and I acknowledge the authority of no republics. This is my house, and I order you to leave it. I claim my rights as an Englishman——"

"Here," interrupted Muller coldly, "Englishmen have no rights, except such as we choose to allow to them."

"Shoot him!" cried a voice.

"Treat him as Buskes treated Van der Linden at Potchefstroom!" cried another.

"Yes, make him swallow the same pill that we gave to Dr. Barber," put in a third.

"Silas Croft, are you going to surrender?" asked Muller in the same cold voice.

"*No!*" thundered the old man in his English pride. "I surrender to no rebels in arms against the Queen. I will shoot the first man who tries to lay a finger on me!" and he rose to his feet and lifted his rifle.

"Shall I shoot him, Baas?—shall I shoot him?" asked the one-eyed Hendrik, smacking his lips at the thought, and fiddling with the rusty lock of the old fowling-piece he carried.

Muller, by way of answer, struck him across the face with the back of his hand. "Hans Coetzee," he said, "go and arrest that man."

Poor Hans hesitated, as well he might. Nature had not endowed him with any great amount of natural courage, and the sight of his old neighbour's rifle-barrel made him feel positively sick. He hesitated and began to stammer excuses.

"Are you going, uncle, or must I denounce you to the General as a sympathiser with Englishmen?" asked Muller in malice, for he knew the old fellow's weaknesses and cowardice, and was playing on them.

"I am going. Of course I am going, nephew. Excuse me, a little faintness took me—the heat of the sun," he babbled. "Oh, yes, I am going to seize the rebel. Perhaps one of those young

men would not mind engaging his attention on the other side. He is an angry man—I know him of old—and an angry man with a gun, you know, dear cousin——"

"Are you going?" said his terrible master once more.

"Oh, yes! yes, certainly yes. Dear Uncle Silas, pray put down that gun, it is so dangerous. Don't stand there looking like a wild ox, but come up to the yoke. You are old, Uncle Silas, and I don't want to have to hurt you. Come now, come, come," and he held out his hand towards him as though he were a shy horse that he was endeavouring to beguile.

"Hans Coetzee, traitor and liar that you are," said the old man, "if you come a single step nearer, by God! I will put a bullet through you!"

"Go on, Hans; chuck a rim over his head; get him by the tail; knock him down with a yokeskei; turn the old bull on his back!" shouted the crowd of scoffers from the window, taking very good care, however, to clear off to the right and left in order to leave room for the expected bullet.

Hans positively burst into tears, and Muller,

who was the only one who held his ground, caught him by the arm, and putting out all his strength, swung him towards Silas Croft.

For reasons of his own, he was anxious that the latter should shoot one of them, and he chose Hans Coetzee, whom he disliked and despised, for the sacrifice.

Up went the rifle, and at that moment Bessie, who had been standing bewildered, made a dash at it, knowing that bloodshed could only make matters worse. As she did so it exploded, but not before she had shaken her uncle's arm, for, instead of killing Hans, as it undoubtedly would otherwise have done, the bullet only cut his ear and then passed out through the open window-place. In an instant the room was filled with smoke. Hans Coetzee clapped his hand to his head, and commenced to yell with pain and terror, and in the confusion that ensued three or four men, headed by the Kafir Hendrik, rushed into the room and sprang upon Silas Croft, who had retreated to the wall and was standing with his back against it, his rifle, which he had clubbed in both his hands, raised above his head.

When his assailants got close to him they

hesitated, for, aged and bent as he was, the old man looked like mischief. He stood there like a wounded lion, and swung the rifle-stock about. Presently one of the men struck at him and missed him, but before he could retreat Silas brought down the stock of the rifle on his head, and down he went like an ox beneath a poleaxe. Then they closed on him, but for a while he kept them off, knocking down another man in his efforts. As he did so, the witch-doctor Hendrik, who had been watching for his opportunity, brought down the barrel of his old fowling-piece upon Silas's bald head and felled him. Fortunately the blow was not a very heavy one, or it would have broken his skull in. As it was, it only cut his head open and knocked him down. Thereon the whole mass of Boers, with the exception of Muller, who was standing watching, seeing that he was now defenceless, fell upon him, and would have kicked him to death had not Bessie precipitated herself upon him with a cry, and thrown her arms about him to protect him.

Then Frank Muller interfered, fearing lest she should be hurt. Plunging into the fray with a curse, he exercised his great strength, throwing

the men this way and that like ninepins, and finally dragging Silas to his feet again.

"Come!" he shouted, "take him out of this;" and accordingly, with taunts and curses and obloquy, the poor old man, whose fringe of white locks was red with blood, was kicked and dragged and pushed on to the verandah, then off it on to the drive, where he fell over the body of the murdered Kafir boy, and finally hauled up to the open space by the flagstaff, on which the Union Jack, that he had planted there some two months before, still waved bravely in the breeze. Here he sunk down upon the grass, his back against the flagstaff, and asked faintly for some water. Bessie, who was weeping bitterly, and whose heart felt as though it were bursting with anguish and indignation, pushed her way through the men, and, running to the house, got some in a glass and brought it to him. One of the brutes tried to knock it out of her hand, but she avoided him and gave it to her uncle, who drank it greedily.

"Thank you, love, thank you," he said; "don't be frightened, I ain't much hurt. Ah! if only John had been here, and we had had an hour's notice, we would have held the place against them all."

Meanwhile one of the Boers, getting on to the shoulders of another, had succeeded in untying the cord on which the Union Jack was bent and hauling it down. Then they reversed it and hoisted it half-mast high, and began to cheer for the Republic.

"Perhaps Uncle Silas does not know that we are a Republic again now," said one of the men, a near neighbour of his own, in mockery.

"What do you mean by a Republic?" asked the old man. "The Transvaal is a British colony."

There was a hoot of derision at this. "The English Government has surrendered," said the same man. "The country is given up, and the British are to evacuate it in six months."

"It is a lie!" said Silas, springing to his feet, "a cowardly lie! Whoever says that the English have given up the country to a few thousand blackguards like you, and deserted its subjects and the loyals and the natives, is a liar—a liar from hell!"

There was another howl of mockery at this outburst, and when it had subsided Frank Muller stepped forward.

"It is no lie, Silas Croft," he said, "and the

cowards are not we Boers, who have beaten you again and again, but your soldiers, who have done nothing but run away, and your Government, that follows the example of your soldiers. Look here"—and he took a paper out of his pocket—"you know that signature, I suppose: it is that of one of the Triumvirate. Listen to what he says," and he read aloud:—

"'WELL-BELOVED HEER MULLER,—This is to inform you that, by the strength of our arms fighting for the right and freedom, and also by the cowardice of the British Government, generals, and soldiers, we have by the will of the Almighty concluded this day a glorious peace with the enemy. The British Government surrenders nearly everything except in the name. The Republic is to be re-established, and the soldiers who are left will leave the land within six months. Make this known to everyone, and forget not to thank God for our glorious victories.'"

The Boers shouted aloud, as well they might, and Bessie wrung her hands. As for the old man, he leant against the flagstaff, and his gory head sunk upon his breast as though he were

about to faint. Then suddenly he lifted it, and with clenched and quivering fists held high in the air, he broke out into such a torrent of blasphemy and cursing that even the Boers fell back for a moment, dismayed into silence by the force of the fury wrung from his utter humiliation.

It was an appalling sight to see this good and godfearing old man, his face bruised, his grey hairs dabbled with blood, and his clothes nearly rent from his body, stamp and reel to and fro, blaspheming his Maker, and the day that he was born; hurling execrations at his beloved country and the name of Englishman, and the Government that had deserted him, till at last nature gave out, and he fell in a fit, there, in the very shadow of his dishonoured flag.

CHAPTER X.

BESSIE IS PUT TO THE QUESTION.

MEANWHILE another little tragedy was being enacted at the back of the house. After the one-eyed witch-doctor Hendrik had knocked Silas Croft down and assisted in the pleasing operation of dragging him to the flagstaff, it had occurred to his villanous heart that the present would be a good opportunity to profit personally by the confusion, and possibly to add to the Englishman's misfortunes by doing him some injury on his own account. Accordingly, just before Frank Muller began to read the despatch announcing the English surrender, he slipped away into the house, which was now totally deserted, to see what he could steal. Passing into the sitting-room, he annexed Bessie's gold watch and chain, which was lying on the mantelpiece, a present that her uncle had made her on the Christmas Day before the last. Having pocketed this he proceeded to the kitchen, where, lying on the

dresser ready to be put away, there was a goodly store of silver forks and spoons which Bessie had been busily engaged in cleaning that morning. These he also transferred, to the extent of several dozens, to the capacious pockets of the tattered military great-coat that he wore. Whilst doing so he was much disturbed by the barking of the dog Stomp, the same animal that had mauled him so severely a few weeks before, and was now, as it happened, tied up to his kennel—an old wine-barrel—just outside the kitchen door. Hendrik peeped out of the window, and having ascertained that the dog was secured, proceeded, with a diabolical chuckle, to settle his account with the poor animal. He had left his gun behind on the grass, but he still held his assegai in his hand, and going out of the kitchen door with it, he showed himself within a few feet of the kennel. The dog recognised him instantly, and went nearly mad with fury, making the most desperate efforts to break its chain and get at him. For some moments he stood exciting the animal by derisive gestures and pelting it with stones, till at last, fearing that the clamour would attract attention, he suddenly transfixed it with his spear, and then, thinking he was quite unobserved, sat down

and snuffed and enjoyed the luxury of watching the poor beast's last agonies.

But, as it happened, he was not quite alone, for, creeping along in the grass and rubbish that grew on the further side of the wall, his brown body squeezed tightly against the brown stones —so tightly that an unpractised eye would certainly have failed to observe it at a distance of a dozen paces—was the Hottentot Jantjé. Occasionally, too, he would lift his head above the level of the wall and observe the proceedings of the one-eyed man. Apparently he was undecided what to do, for he hesitated a little, and whilst he did so Hendrik killed the dog.

Now Jantjé had all a Hottentot's natural love for animals, which is, generally speaking, as marked as is the Kafir's callousness towards them, and he was particularly fond of the dog Stomp, which always went out walking with him on those rare occasions when he thought it safe or desirable to walk like an ordinary man instead of creeping from bush to bush like a panther, or wriggling through the grass like a snake. The sight of the animal's death, therefore, raised in his black breast a very keen desire for vengeance on the murderer, if vengeance could be safely accomplished; and

he paused to reflect how this could be done. As he did so Hendrik got up, gave the dead dog a kick, withdrew his assegai from the carcass, and then, as though struck by a sudden desire to conceal the murder, undid the collar and, lifting the dog in his arms, carried him with difficulty into the house and laid him under the kitchen-table. This done, he came out again to the wall, which was built of loose unmortared stones, pulled one out without trouble, deposited the watch and the silver he had stolen in the cavity and replaced the stone. Next, before Jantjé could guess what he meant to do, he proceeded to make it practically impossible for his robbery to be discovered, or at any rate very improbable, by lighting a match, and, having first glanced round to see that nobody was looking, reaching up and applying it to the thick thatch with which the house itself was roofed, and of which the fringe just at this spot was not more than nine feet from the ground. No rain had fallen at Mooifontein for several days, and there had been a hot sun and dry wind. As a result the thatch was as dry as tinder. The light caught in a second, and in two more a thin line of fire was running up the roof.

Hendrik paused, stepped a few paces back, resting his shoulders against the wall, immediately the other side of which was Jantjé, and proceeded to chuckle aloud and rub his hands as he admired the results of his handiwork. This was too much for the Hottentot on the further side. The provocation was too great, and so was the opportunity. In Jantjé's hand was the thick stick on which he was so fond of cutting notches. Raising it in both hands he brought the heavy knob down with all his strength upon the one-eyed villain's unprotected skull. It was a thick skull, but the knob prevailed against it and fractured it, and down went the estimable witch-doctor as though he were dead.

Next, taking a leaf out of his fallen enemy's book, Jantjé slipped over the wall, and, seizing the senseless man, dragged him by one arm into the kitchen and rolled him under the table to keep company with the dead dog. Then, filled with a fearful joy, he slipped out, shutting and locking the door behind him, and crept round to a point of vantage in a little plantation seventy or eighty yards to the right of the house, whence he could watch the conflagration that he knew must ensue, for the fire had taken instant and

irremediable hold, and also see what the Boers were doing.

Ten minutes or so afterwards that amiable character Hendrik partially regained his senses, to find himself surrounded by a sea of fire, in which he perished miserably, not having power to move, and his feeble cries being totally swallowed up and lost in the fierce roaring of the flames. And that was the very appropriate end of Hendrik and the magic of Hendrik.

Down by the flagstaff the old man lay in his fit, with Bessie tending him and a posse of Boers standing round, smoking and laughing or lounging about with an air of lordly superiority, well worthy of victors in possession.

"Will none of you help me to take him to the house?" she cried. "Surely you have ill-treated an old man enough."

Nobody stirred, not even Frank Muller, who was gazing at her tear-stained face with a fierce smile playing round the corners of his clean-cut mouth, which his beard was trimmed to show.

"It will pass, Miss Bessie," he said; "it will pass. I have often seen such fits. They come from too much excitement, or too much drink——"

Suddenly he broke off with an exclamation,

and pointed to the house, from the roof of which pale curls of blue smoke were rising.

"Who has fired the house?" he shouted. "By Heaven! I will shoot the man."

The Boers started round and stared in astonishment, and as they did so the tinderlike roof burst into a broad sheet of flame that grew and gathered breadth and height with an almost marvellous rapidity. Just then, too, a light breeze sprang up from over the hill at the rear of the house, as it sometimes did at this time of the day, and bent the flames over towards them in an immense arch of fire, so that the fumes and heat and smoke began to beat upon their faces.

"Oh, the house is burning down!" cried Bessie, utterly bewildered by this new misfortune.

"Here, you!" shouted Muller to the gaping Boers, "go and see if anything can be saved. Phew! we must get out of this," and stooping down, he picked up Silas Croft in his arms and walked off with him, followed by Bessie, towards the plantation on their left, which was the same where Jantjé had taken refuge. In the centre of this plantation was a little glade surrounded by young orange and blue-gum trees. Here he put the old man down upon a bed of dead leaves

and soft springing grass, and then hurried away without a word to the fire, only to find that the house was already utterly unapproachable. In fifteen minutes, such was the rapidity with which the flames did their work upon the mass of dry straw and the wooden roof and floorings beneath, the whole of the interior of the house was a glowing incandescent pile, and in half an hour it was completely gutted, nothing being left standing but the massive outer walls of stone, over which a dense column of smoke hung like a pall. Mooifontein was a blackened ruin; only the stables and outhouses, which were roofed with galvanised iron, being left uninjured.

Frank Muller had not been gone five minutes when, to Bessie's joy, her uncle opened his eyes and sat up.

"What is it? what is it?" he said. "Ah! I recollect. What is all this smell of fire? Surely they have not burnt the place?"

"Yes, uncle," sobbed Bessie, "they have."

The old man groaned. "It took me ten years to build, bit by bit, almost stone by stone, and now they have destroyed it. Well, why not? God's will be done! Give me your arm, love, I want to get to the water. I feel faint and sick."

She did as he bade her, sobbing bitterly. Within fifteen yards on the edge of the plantation, was a little spruit or runnel of water, and of this he drank copiously, and then bathed his wounded head and face.

"There, love," he said, "don't fret, I feel quite myself again. I fear I made a fool of myself. I haven't learnt to bear misfortune and dishonour as I should yet, and, like Job, I felt as though God had forsaken us. But, as I said, His will be done. What is the next move, I wonder? Ah! we shall soon know, for here comes our friend Frank Muller."

"I am glad to see that you have recovered, uncle," said Muller politely, "and I am sorry to have to tell you that the house is beyond help. Believe me, if I knew who fired it I would shoot him. It was not my wish or intention that the property should be destroyed."

The old man merely bowed his head and made no answer. His fiery spirit seemed to be crushed out of him.

"What is it your pleasure that we should do, sir?" said Bessie at last. "Perhaps, now that we are ruined, you will allow us to go to Natal, which, I suppose, is still an English country?"

"Yes, Miss Bessie, Natal is still English—for the present; soon it will be Dutch; but I am sorry that I cannot let you go there now. My orders are to keep you both prisoners and to try your uncle by court-martial. The waggon-house," he went on quickly, "with the two little rooms on each side of it, has not been touched by the fire. I will have them made ready for you, and as soon as the heat is less you can go there;" and turning to the men who had followed him he gave some rapid orders, which two of them departed to carry out.

Still the old man made no comment, he did not even seem indignant or surprised, but poor Bessie was utterly prostrated and stood helpless, not knowing what to say to this terrible, remorseless man, who stood so calm and unmoved before them.

Frank Muller paused awhile to think, stroking his beard as he did so, then turned again and addressed the two remaining men behind him.

"You will keep guard over the prisoner," indicating Silas Croft, "and suffer none to communicate with him by word or sign. As soon as it is ready you will place him in the little room to the left of the waggon-house; and see that he is

supplied with all he wants. If he escapes or converses, or is illtreated, I will hold you responsible. Do you understand?"

"Yah, Meinheer," was the answer.

"Very good; be careful you do not forget. And now, Miss Bessie, I shall be glad if you can give me a word alone——"

"No," said Bessie; "no, I will not leave my uncle."

"I fear you will have to do that," he said, with his cold smile. "I beg you to think again. It will be very much to your advantage to speak to me, and to your uncle's advantage also. I should advise you to come."

Bessie hesitated. She hated and mistrusted the man, as she had good reason to do, and feared to trust herself alone with him.

While she still hesitated, the two Boers, under whose watch and ward Muller had placed her uncle, came and stood between him and her, cutting her off from him. Muller turned and walked a few paces—ten or so—to the right, and in desperation she followed him. He halted behind a bushy orange-tree of some eight years' growth. Overtaking him, she stood silent, waiting for him to begin. They were quite close to the others,

but the roaring of the flames of the burning house was still sufficiently loud to have drowned a much more audible conversation than theirs.

"What is it you have to say to me?" she said at length, pressing her hand against her heart to still its beating. Her woman's instinct told her what was coming, and she was trying to nerve herself to meet it.

"Miss Bessie," he said slowly, "it is this. For years I have loved you and wanted to marry you. I again ask you to be my wife."

"Mr. Frank Muller," she answered, her spirit rising to the occasion, "I thank you for your offer, and the only answer that I can give you is that I once and for all decline it."

"Think," he said; "I love you as women are not often loved. You are always in my mind, by day and by night too. Everything I do, every step I go up the ladder, I have said and say to myself, 'I am doing it for Bessie Croft, whom I mean to marry.' Things have changed in this country. The rebellion has been successful. It was I who gave the casting vote for it that I might win you. I am now a great man, and shall one day be a greater. You will be great with me. Think what you say."

"I have thought, and I will not marry you. You dare to come and ask me to marry you over the ashes of my home, out of which you have dragged me and my poor old uncle! I hate you, I tell you, and I will not marry you! I had rather marry a Kafir than marry you, Frank Muller, however great you may be."

He smiled. "Is it because of the Englishman Niel that you will not marry me? He is dead. It is useless to cling to a dead man."

"Dead or alive, I love him with all my heart, and if he is dead it is at the hands of your people, and his blood rises up between us."

"His blood has sunk down into the sand. He is dead, and I am glad that he is dead. Once more, is that your last word?"

"It is."

"Very good. Then I tell you that you shall marry me or——"

"Or what?"

"Or your uncle, the old man you love so much, shall *die!*"

"What do you mean?" she said in a choked voice.

"What I say; no more and no less. Do you think that I will let one old man's life stand

between me and my desire? Never. If you will not marry me, Silas Croft shall be put upon his trial for attempted murder and for treason within an hour from this. Within an hour and a half he shall be condemned to die, and to-morrow at dawn he shall die, by warrant under my hand. I am commandant here, with power of life and death, and I tell you that he shall certainly die —and his blood will be on your head."

Bessie grasped at the tree for support. "You dare not," she said; "you dare not murder an innocent old man."

"Dare not!" he answered; "you must understand me very ill, Bessie Croft, when you talk of what I dare not do for you. There is nothing," he added, with a thrill of his rich voice, "that I dare not do to gain you. Listen: promise to marry me to-morrow morning. I will get a clergyman here from Wakkerstroom, and your uncle shall go free as air, though he is a traitor to the land, and though he has tried to shoot a burgher after the declaration of peace. Refuse, and he dies. Choose now."

"I have chosen," she answered with passion. "Frank Muller, perjured traitor—yes, murderer that you are, I will *not* marry you!"

"Very good, very good, Bessie; as you will. But now one more thing. You shall not say that I have not warned you. If you persist in this your uncle shall die, but you shall not escape me. You will not marry me? Well, even in this country, where I can do most things, I cannot force you to do that. But I can force you to be my wife in all but the name, without marriage; and this, when your uncle is stiff in his bloody grave, I will do. You shall have one more chance after the trial, and one only. If you refuse he shall die, and then, after his death, I shall take you away by force, and in a week's time you will be glad enough to marry me to cover up your shame, my pretty!"

"You are a devil, Frank Muller, a wicked devil, but I will not be frightened into dishonour by you. I had rather kill myself. I trust to God to help me. I will have nothing to do with you;" and she put her hands before her face and burst into tears.

"You look lovely when you weep," he said with a laugh; "to-morrow I shall be able to kiss away your tears. As you will. Here, you!" he shouted to some men, who could be seen watching the progress of the dying fire, "come here."

Some of the men obeyed, and he proceeded to give instructions in the same terms that he had given to the other two men who were watching old Silas, ordering Bessie to be instantly incarcerated in the corresponding little room on the other side of the waggon-house, and kept strictly from all communication with the outside world, adding, however, these words:

"Bid the burghers assemble in the waggon-house for the trial of the Englisman, Silas Croft, for treason against the State, and attempted murder of one of the burghers of the State in the execution of the commands of the Triumvirate."

The two men advanced and seized Bessie by both arms. Then, faint and overpowered, she was led through the little plantation, over a gap in the garden wall, down past the scorched syringa-trees which lined the roadway that ran along the hillside at the back of the still burning house, till they reached the waggon-house with the two little rooms which served respectively as a store and harness room. She was then thrust into the store-room, which was half full of loose potatoes and mealies in sacks, and the door locked upon her.

There was no window to this room, and the

only light in it was such as found its way through the chinks of the door and an air-hole in the masonry of the back wall. She sank on a half-emptied sack of mealies and tried to reflect. Her first idea was of escape, but she soon realised that this was a practical impossibility. The stout yellow wood door was locked upon her, and a sentry stood before it. She rose and looked through the air-hole in the rear wall, but there another sentry was posted. Then she turned her attention to the side wall that divided the room from the waggon-house. It was built of fourteen-inch green brickwork, and had cracked from the shrinkage of the bricks, so that she could hear anything that went on in the waggon-house, and even see anybody who might be moving about in it. But it was far too strong for her to hope to be able to break through, and even if she did, it would be useless, for there were armed men there also. Besides, how could she run away and leave her old uncle to his fate?

CHAPTER XI.

CONDEMNED TO DEATH.

HALF an hour passed in silence, which was only broken by the footsteps of the sentries as they tramped, or rather loitered, up and down, or by the occasional fall of some calcined masonry from the walls of the burnt-out house. What between the smell of smoke and dust, the heat of the sun on the tin roof above, and of the red-hot embers of the house in front, the little room where Bessie was shut up was almost unbearable, and she felt as though she should faint upon the sacks. Through one of the cracks in the waggon-house wall there blew a little draught, and by this crack Bessie placed herself, leaning her head against the wall so as to get the full benefit of the air and command a view of the place. Presently several of the Boers came into the waggon-house and pulled some of the carts and timber out of it, leaving one buck-waggon, however, placed along the wall on the side op-

posite to the crack through which Bessie was looking. Then they pulled the Scotch cart over to her side, laughing about something among themselves as they did so, and arranged it with its back turned towards the waggon, supporting the shafts upon a waggon-jack. Next, out of the further corner of the place, they extracted an old saw-bench and set it at the top of the open space. Then Bessie understood what they were doing: they were arranging a court, and the saw-bench was the judge's chair. So Frank Muller meant to carry out his threat!

Shortly after this all the Boers, except those who were keeping guard, filed into the place and began to clamber on to the buck-waggon, seating themselves with much rough joking in a double row upon the broad side rails. Next appeared Hans Coetzee, his head bound up in a bloody handkerchief. He was pale and shaky, but Bessie could see that he was but little the worse for his wound. Then came Frank Muller himself, looking white and very terrible, and as he came the men stopped their joking and talking. Indeed it was curious to observe how strong was his ascendency over them. As a rule, the weak part of Boer organisation is that it is practically impos-

sible to get one Boer to pay deference to or obey another; but this was certainly not the case where Frank Muller was concerned.

Muller advanced without hesitation to the saw-bench at the top of the open space, and sat down on it, placing his rifle between his knees. After this there was a pause, and next minute Bessie saw her old uncle conducted in by two armed Boers, who halted in the middle of the space, about three paces from the saw-bench, and stood one on either side of their prisoner. At the same time Hans Coetzee climbed up into the Scotch cart, and Muller drew a note-book and a pencil from his pocket.

"Silence!" he said. "We are assembled here to try the Englishman, Silas Croft, by court-martial. The charges against him are that by word and deed, notably by continuing to fly the English flag after the country had been surrendered to the Republic, he has traitorously rebelled against the Government of the country. Further, that he has attempted to murder a burgher of the Republic by shooting at him with a loaded rifle. If these charges are proved against him he will be liable to death, by martial law. Prisoner Croft, what do you answer to the charges against you?"

The old man, who seemed very quiet and composed, looked up at his judge and then replied:

"I am an English subject. I only defended my house after you had murdered one of my servants. I deny your jurisdiction over me, and I refuse to plead."

Frank Muller made some notes in his pocket-book, and then said, "I overrule the prisoner's objection as to the jurisdiction of the court. As to the charges, we will now take evidence. Of the first charge no evidence is needed, for we all saw the flag flying. As to the second, Hans Coetzee, the assaulted burgher, will now give evidence. Hans Coetzee, do you swear in the name of God and the Republic to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"

"Almighty, yes," answered Hans from the cart on which he had enthroned himself, "so help me the dear Lord."

"Proceed then."

"I was entering the house of the prisoner to arrest him, in obedience to your worshipful commands, when the prisoner lifted a gun and fired at me. The bullet from the gun struck me upon

the ear, cutting it and putting me to much pain and loss of blood. That is the evidence I have to give."

"That's right; that is not a lie," said some of the men on the waggon.

"Prisoner, have you any question to ask the witness?" said Muller.

"I have no question to ask; I deny your jurisdiction," said the old man with spirit.

"The prisoner declines to question the witness, and again pleads to the jurisdiction, a plea which I have overruled. Gentlemen, do you desire to hear any further evidence?"

"No, no."

"Do you then find the prisoner guilty of the charges laid against him?"

"Yes, yes," from the waggon.

Muller made a further note in his book and then went on:

"Then the prisoner, having been found guilty of high treason and attempted murder, the only matter that remains is the question of the punishment required to be meted out by the law to such wicked and horrible offences. Every man will give his verdict, having duly considered if there is any way by which, in accordance with

the holy dictates of his conscience, and with the natural promptings to pity in his heart, he can extend mercy to the prisoner. As commandant and president of the court, the first vote lies with me; and I must tell you, gentlemen, that I feel the responsibility a very heavy one in the sight of God and my country: and I must also warn you not to be influenced or overruled by my decision, who am, like you, only a man, liable to err and be led away."

"Hear, hear," said the voices on the waggon, as he paused to note the effect of his address.

"Gentlemen and burghers of the State, my natural promptings in this case are towards pity. The prisoner is an old man, who has lived many years amongst us like a brother. Indeed he is a 'voortrekker,' and, though an Englishman, one of the fathers of the land. Can we condemn such a one to a bloody grave, more especially as he has a niece dependent upon him?"

"No, no!" they cried, in answer to this skilful touch upon the better strings in their nature.

"Gentlemen, those sentiments do you honour. My own heart cried but now, 'No, no. Whatever his sins have been, let the old man go free.' But then came reflection. True, the prisoner is old;

but should not age have taught him wisdom? Is that which is not to be forgiven to youth to be forgiven to the ripe experience of many years? May a man murder and be a traitor because he is old?"

"No, certainly not!" cried the chorus on the waggon.

"Then there is the second point. He was a 'voortrekker' and a father of the land. Should he not therefore have known better than to betray it into the hands of the cruel, godless English? For, gentlemen, though that charge is not laid against him, we must remember, as throwing light upon his general character, that the prisoner was one of those vile men who betrayed the land to Shepstone. Is it not a most cruel and unnatural thing that a father should sell his own child into slavery?—that a father of the land should barter away its freedom? Therefore on this point, too, does justice temper mercy."

"That is so," said the chorus with particular enthusiasm, most of them having themselves been instrumental in bringing the annexation about.

"Then one more thing: this man has a niece, and it is the care of all good men to see that the young should not be left destitute and friend-

less, lest they should grow up bad and become enemies to the wellbeing of the State. But in this case that will not be so, for the farm will go to the girl by law; and, indeed, she will be well rid of so desperate and godless an old man.

"And now, having set my reasons towards one side and the other before you, and having warned you fully to act each man according to his conscience, I give my vote. It is"—and in the midst of the most intense silence he paused and looked at old Silas, who never even quailed —"it is *death.*"

There was a little hum of conversation, and poor Bessie, surveying the scene through the crack in the store-room wall, groaned in bitterness and despair of heart.

Then Hans Coetzee spoke. "It cut his bosom in two," he said, "to have to say a word against one to whom he had for many years been as a brother. But, then, what was he to do? The man had plotted evil against their land, the dear land that the dear Lord had given them, and which they and their fathers had on various occasions watered, and were still continuing to water, with their blood. What could be a fitting punishment for so black-hearted a traitor, and

how would it be possible to insure the better behaviour of other damned Englishmen, unless they inflicted that punishment? There could, alas! be but one answer—though, personally speaking, he uttered it with many tears—and that answer was *death.*"

After this there were no more speeches, but each man voted according to his age, upon his name being called by the president. At first there was a little hesitation, for some among them were fond of old Silas, and loath to destroy him. But Frank Muller had played his game very well, and, notwithstanding his appeals to their independence of judgment, they knew full surely what would happen to him who gave his vote against the president. So they swallowed their better feelings with all the ease for which such swallowing is noted, and one by one uttered the fatal word.

When they had all done Frank Muller addressed Silas:

"Prisoner, you have heard the judgment against you. I need not now recapitulate your crimes. You have had a fair and open trial by court-martial, such as our law directs. Have you anything to say why sentence of death should

not be passed upon you in accordance with the judgment?"

Old Silas looked up with flashing eyes, and shook back his fringe of white hair like a lion at bay.

"I have nothing to say. If you will do murder, do it, black-hearted villain that you are! I might point to my grey hairs, to my murdered servant, to my home that took me ten years to build, destroyed by you! I might tell you how I have been a good citizen and lived peaceably and neighbourly in the land for more than twenty years—aye, and done kindness after kindness to many of you who are going to murder me in cold blood! But I will not. Shoot me if you will, and may my death lie heavy on your heads. This morning I would have said that my country would avenge me; I cannot say that now, for England has deserted us and I have no country. Therefore I leave the vengeance in the hands of God, who never fails to avenge, though sometimes He waits for long to do it. I am not afraid of you. Shoot me now if you like. I have lost my honour, my home, and my country; why should I not lose my life also?"

Frank Muller fixed his cold eyes upon the

old man's quivering face and smiled a dreadful smile of triumph.

"Prisoner, it is now my duty, in the name of God and the Republic, to sentence you to be shot to-morrow at dawn, and may the Almighty forgive you your wickedness and have mercy upon your soul.

"Let the prisoner be removed, and let a man ride full speed to the empty house on the hill-side, where the Englishman with the red beard used to live, one hour this side of Wakkerstroom, and bring back with him the clergyman he will find waiting there, that the prisoner may be offered his ministrations. Also let two men be set to dig the prisoner's grave in the burial-place at the back of the house."

The guards laid their hands upon the old man's shoulders, and he turned and went with them without a word. Bessie watched him go through her crack in the wall, till the dear old head with its fringe of white hairs and the bent frame were no more visible, and then at last, her faculties benumbed and exhausted by the horrors she was passing through, gave out, and she fell forward in a faint there upon the sacks.

Meanwhile Muller was writing the death-

warrant on a sheet of his pocket-book. At the foot he left a space for his own signature, but he did not sign it, for reasons of his own. What he did do was to pass it round to be countersigned by all who had formed the court in this mock trial, his object being to implicate every one there present in the judicial murder by the direct and incontrovertible evidence of his sign-manual. Now, Boers are simple pastoral folk, but they are not quite so simple as not to see through a move like this, and thereon followed a very instructive little scene. They had, to a man, been willing enough to give their verdict for the old man's execution, but they were by no means ready to record it in black and white. As soon as ever they understood the object of their feared and respected commandant, a general desire manifested itself to make themselves respectively and collectively scarce. Suddenly they found that they had business outside, and something like a general attempt at a bolt ensued. Several of them had already tumbled off their extemporised jury-box, and, headed by the redoubtable Hans, were approaching the entrance to the waggon-house, when Frank Muller perceived their design, and roared out in a voice of thunder:

"Stop! Not a man leaves this place till the warrant is signed."

Instantly the men halted, and began to look innocent and converse.

"Hans Coetzee, come here and sign," said Muller again, whereon that unfortunate advanced with as good a grace as he could muster, murmuring to himself curses, not loud but deep, upon the head of "that devil of a man, Frank Muller."

However, there was no help for it, so, with a sickly smile, he put his name to the fatal document in big shaky letters. Then Muller called another man, who instantly tried to get out of it on the ground that his education had been neglected and that he could not write, an excuse that availed him little, for Frank Muller quietly wrote his name for him, leaving a space for his mark. After that there was no more trouble, and in five minutes the entire back of the warrant was covered with the scrawling signatures of the various members of the court.

One by one the men went, till at last Muller was left alone, seated on the saw-bench, his head sunk upon his breast, and holding the warrant in one hand, while with the other he stroked his

golden beard. Presently he stopped stroking his beard and sat for some minutes perfectly still, so still he might have been carved in stone. By this time the afternoon sun had got behind the hill and the deep waggon-house was full of shadow that seemed to gather round him and invest him with a sombre, mysterious grandeur. He looked like a King of Evil, for Evil has her princes as well as Good, and stamps them with her imperial seal of power and crowns them with a diadem of her own, and among these Frank Muller was surely great. A little smile of triumph played upon his beautiful cruel face, a little light danced within his cold eyes and ran down the yellow beard. At that moment he might have sat for a portrait of his master, the devil.

Presently he awoke from his reverie. "I have her!" he said to himself; "I have her in a vice! She cannot escape me; she cannot let the old man die! Those curs have served my purpose well; they are as easy to play on as a fiddle, and I am a good player. Yes, and now we are getting to the end of the tune."

CHAPTER XII.

"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 went by them to the tree which grew some ten paces or more on the other side of the place of destruction. There was some little difficulty in getting the horses past the corpses, 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 was going to take her clothes off and dry them in the sun while she ate her breakfast, and that she advised him to do the same. Accordingly, as soon as she was well out of sight behind the shelter of the rocks, she set to work to get out of her sodden garments, in itself 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 went down a few paces to a pool under the shadow of the bank, in the rock-bed of the river, and bathed her bruises and washed the sand and mud from her hair and feet. After this she came 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. For her heart was very sore and heavy, and she could find it in her to wish that she was lying somewhere beneath those rushing waters. She had calculated on death and now she was not dead, and she and her shame and her trouble might yet live for many a year. She was like one who in her sleep had seemed to soar on angel's wings out 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 had sprung into being beneath the shadow of the approaching end, had come down to the common level of an undesirable attachment, along which she must now drag her weary feet for many a year. Nor was that all. She had been false to Bessie, and 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; she would never have done it had she thought that she was going to live; but now death had cheated her, as he has a way of doing with people to whom his presence is more or less desirable, and left her to cope with the spirit she had invoked when his sword was quivering over her.

What would be the end of it, supposing that they escaped? What could be the end except misery? It should go no further, 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 wonderful hours when they two swung upon the raging river and exchanged their undying troth with the grave for their altar, must be a memory and nothing more. It had risen on 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, right 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 all 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 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 that Jess had the sense to realise; so she presently wiped her eyes with her hair, having nothing else handy to wipe them with, and set to work to get 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 nearly wild, so much so that had she been a man she would probably have sworn—a consolation that her sex denied her. Fortunately she had 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 to fasten it up with.

Then, after a last and frightful struggle with her sodden boots, that seemed to take almost as much out of her as her roll at the bottom of the Vaal, she rose and walked back to the spot where she had left John an hour before. He was employed when she reached him in saddling up the two greys, with the saddles and bridles that he

had removed from the carcases of the horses which the lightning had destroyed.

"Hulloa, Jess, you look quite smart. Have you dried your clothes?" he said. "I have after a fashion."

"Yes," she answered.

He looked at her. "Why, dearest, you have been crying. Come, things are black enough, but it is no use crying. At any rate, we have got off 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 got to the end of our misfortunes."

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

"My dearest Jess," he said, "what is to be done?"

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, 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? what *shall* I do?"

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 blackguard 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 have you do 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 all 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 way 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 of it, whatever his passion might prompt to the contrary. As he turned wearily to finish saddling the horses he almost regretted with Jess that they had not both been drowned and got it over.

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, Jess could, from constant practice, 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 way. 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 little laugh, putting the horse into a canter as she spoke. John followed her on the other horse, and noted 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 got well on to the plain they halted to consider their route, and as they did so 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 get 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 they were not unnaturally somewhat sceptical about the value of a pass, and certainly 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 fair 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 pretty correct course across the veldt—a fact that would render them independent of the roads. On the roads they would run a momentary risk, if not a certainty, of detection. But on the wide veldt the chances were they would meet no living creature except the wild game. Should they come across houses they would be able to avoid

them, and their male inhabitants would probably 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, when 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 at no distant date, perhaps a week before.

"That is good enough," said John; "we will try it." And without further ado they plunged in.

In the centre of the stream the water was strong and deep, and for a few yards took the horses off their legs, but they struck out boldly till they got their footing again; and after that there was no more trouble. On the further side of the river John took counsel with his compass, and they steered a course straight for Mooifontein. At midday they offsaddled the horses for an hour by some water, and ate a small portion of their remaining food. Then they upsaddled and went on across the lonely, desolate veldt. No human being did they see all that long day. The wide country was only tenanted by great herds of game that came thundering past like squadrons

of cavalry, or here and there by coteries 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, making the green grass ripple like the sea. There was absolutely no shelter to be had, nor anything to break the monotony, unless it was a couple of ant-heaps 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 poor Jess's teeth were already chattering with cold. Soon, indeed, they found that the only way to keep their blood moving was, weary as they were, to continually tramp up and down. After an hour and a half of this or so, the breeze dropped and the temperature got 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 could stand, and she at last 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 would have fared even worse than they did; for,

though the days were hot, the nights were now beginning to get 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 by 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 and 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 had 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 halted 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 swampy 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.

CHAPTER XIII.

JESS FINDS A FRIEND.

THE Boers swooped down on them with a shout, like a hawk 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;" when, 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, Om Crofts!" said the Boer as he took the pass, "you are likely to meet a burying party there," and 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 in for it again," she said to John; "and there is nothing for it but to go."

"I shan't mind so much if only they will give us some grub," said 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 an 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 was, as may well be imagined, 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 curious 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 very little of what they were saying. Presently, however, the young Boer made another attempt, putting out his hand to give her a sly push, and as it happened John saw it, and the sight of the indignity made the blood 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. The man 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 that 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 had taken the pass interposed; the fact being that he had witnessed the proceedings which led to his follower's discomfiture, and, being a decent man at bottom, had 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 *was* exceedingly sick and trembled in every limb—was with difficulty hoisted on to his horse, and continued 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 on 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 they suddenly on passing over a crest saw Hans Coetzee's homestead lying down by the water in the hollow. So that was where they were being taken to.

Within a hundred yards of the house the Boers halted and consulted, except Jacobus, who went on, still looking very green. Finally the older 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 at 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 turned 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, which was enhanced in her case by want of food and trouble of mind. But she was a strong woman and had a will like iron, and she held on when most women would have died. Jess meant to get to Mooifontein somehow, and she knew that she would get there. If she could only reach the place and get some help sent to her lover, she did not greatly care what happened to her afterwards. The pace of the horse she was riding got slower and slower. From the ambling canter into which at first she managed to occasionally force it, and which is the best pace to travel at in South Africa, it continually collapsed 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 to 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 not a yard of go 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. Then she set to work to walk over the hill. The poor horse watched her go with melancholy eyes, knowing that it was being deserted. First it neighed, then with a desperate effort struggled to its feet and ran after her 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 Jess at length reached the top of the hill and looked down. She knew the spot well, and from it she could always see the light from 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 halfway down a shower of sparks suddenly shot up 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 suddenly laid upon her arm. She turned quickly, too paralysed with fear to cry out, and as she did so a voice that was familiar to her whispered, "Missie Jess, Missie Jess, is it you?" into her ear. "I am Jantjé."

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, Jantjé crept through and Jess followed him. She found herself in a small apartment, about six-feet square by eight high, principally formed by the accidental falling together of several

big boulders, and roofed in by one great natural slab. The place, which was lighted by an end of candle stuck upon the floor, was very dirty, as was to 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 Jantjé offered her, Jess sunk down upon 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 Jantjé had "lifted" 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 here. Altogether it was a strange place; and it vaguely 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, shs would have seen 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."

Jantjé grinned knowingly, and, grubbing in a heap of rubbish in the corner, drew out a gourd with a piece of flat sheet-iron, which had once formed the back plate of a stove, placed on the top of it. It contained "maas," or curdled butter milk, which a woman had brought him down that very morning from a neighbouring kraal, and was destined for Jantjé's own supper. Hungry as he was himself, for he had had 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 Jantjé 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 Jantjé 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 was. 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 way to

action. She thought first of all of going down boldly and facing Muller, and denouncing 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 going on. She might as well be a hundred miles away as a hundred yards.

"Jantjé," 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."

"Jantjé, 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.

CHAPTER XIV.

HE SHALL DIE.

THE night was still and very dark. A soft cold rain, such as one often gets in the Wakkerstroom and New Scotland districts of the Transvaal, and which more resembles a true north country mist than anything else, was falling 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 Jantjé, 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 Jantjé 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 Jantjé; "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 had a cape of dark cloth thrown over his shoulders, which seemed to add to his great breadth, and the thought flashed through the mind of Jess as she looked at him through the hole, and the light struck upon his face and form, and glinted down his golden beard, that he was the most magnificent specimen of humanity she had ever seen. In another instant he had turned the lantern round and revealed her dear sister Bessie to her gaze. Bessie was seated 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 said, 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 marrying 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 place 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 it in such fashion that the light from it 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, and then held her breath and remained as still as the dead. In another second he 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, 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 the 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 loved 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 a 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 my 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 simply 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, and next moment Jess heard the footsteps of the returning sentry, and saw him leave go of her. Jantjé, too, caught her by the hand and dragged her away from the wall, and in ten seconds more she was once more ascending the hill-side towards the Hottentot's

kennel. She had gone to find out how matters were, and she had indeed found out. To attempt to portray the fury, the indignation, and the thirst to be avenged upon the fiend who had attempted to murder her and her lover, and had bought her dear sister's honour at the price of her innocent old uncle's life, would be impossible. All her weariness was forgotten; she was mad with what she had seen and heard, with the knowledge of what had been done and 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 she might have herein seen an opportunity, for Bessie once married to Muller, John would be free to marry her, but the 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 take such an advantage. Presently they reached the shelter again and crept in.

"Light a candle," said Jess.

Jantjé fumbled about and finally struck a match. The bit 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. Jess, in that queer sort of way in which trifles do strike us when the mind is undergoing a severe strain, instantly remembered that for years she had been unable to discover what became of the odd pieces of the candles used in the house. Now the mystery was explained.

"Now go outside and leave me. I want to think."

The Hottentot obeyed, and seated upon the heap of skins, her forehead resting on her hand and her fingers run through her silky hair, now wet with the rain, she 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 it for a moment. If Bessie did not marry him he would murder the old man, as he had tried to murder her and John, only this time judicially, and then abduct her afterwards. Bessie 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 going down and 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 without further ado. 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 was back. Besides, what object could be served? The knowledge that John was alive might, it is true, nerve up Bessie to resist Muller, but then the sole result would be that the old man would be shot. Dismissing this from her mind she began to consider whether they could obtain assistance. Alas! it was impossible. The only people from whom she could hope for help 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 Jantjé), it was very doubtful if the Kafirs would dare to help her. Besides, at the best it would take twenty-four hours to collect a force, and that would be too late. The thing was hopeless. Nowhere could she see a ray of light.

"What," she said aloud to herself—"what is

there in the world that will stop a man like Frank Muller?"

And then all of an instant the answer rose up in her brain as though through an inspiration—

"*Death!*"

Death, and death alone, would stop him. For a minute she kept the idea in her mind till she was familiarised with it, and then it was driven out by another 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 saved. If he was dead he could not marry Bessie, and if he died with the warrant unsigned their uncle could not be executed. That was the answer to the riddle, and a terrible one it was.

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

And so this apparently helpless girl, crouched 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. She had not come to that yet. Her eyes wandered round the kennel and lit upon Jantjé's assegais and sticks in the corner, and then she got another inspiration. Jantjé should do the deed. John had told her one day—told her, when they were sitting together in the "Palatial" at Pretoria—the whole of Jantjé'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 off the face of the earth by the survivor of those unfortunates. There would be a little poetic justice about that, and it 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.

"Jantjé," she whispered, putting her head towards the beehole.

"Yah, Missie," answered a hoarse voice out-

side, and next second his monkey-like face came creeping into the ring of light, followed by his even more monkey-like form.

"Sit down there, Jantjé. 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 used to speak like I used to do years and years ago?"

"No, Jantjé. Tell me about that stick—that long stick with a knob on 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, that big notch, that is my father, Baas Frank shot him; and that next notch, that is my mother, Baas Frank shot her; and the next one, that is my uncle, an old, old man, Baas Frank shot him too. 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 without further ado he 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 Jantjé's peculiar treasure, the chief joy of his narrow little heart. He had bought it from a Zulu for a heifer which her uncle had given him in lieu of half a year's wage. The Zulu had got it from a man who came down from beyond Delagoa Bay. As a matter of fact it was a Somali knife, manufactured from soft native steel (which takes an edge like a razor), and with a handle cut from 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, Jantjé, and let me look at that knife."

He obeyed, and put it into her hand.

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

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

"It would kill Frank Muller, now, would it not?" she said, 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, with a fierce sound, half sniggle, half laugh.

"He killed your father, Jantjé."

"Yah, yah, he killed my father," said Jantjé, 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 voice rose to a sort of 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 toe; 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 way, now there is no stone: look, *the ends meet!* He will die in blood; he will die *soon*. I know how to read the circle;" and he gnashed his teeth and sawed the air with his clenched fists.

"Yes, you are right, Jantjé," 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, Jantjé."

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

"How?" he said; "how?"

"Bend forward, Jantjé, and I will tell you how;" and she 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."

CHAPTER XV.

VENGEANCE.

For three or four minutes more they whispered together, after which the Hottentot rose to go and find out how things were among the Boers below, and see when Frank Muller retired to his tent. As soon as he had marked him down he was to come back and report to Jess, and then the final steps were to be decided on.

When he was gone Jess gave a sigh of relief. This stirring up of Jantjé 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 the deed settled upon. But what the end of it would be none could say. She would practically be a murderess, and she felt that sooner or later her guilt would find her out, and then she would have little mercy to hope for. Still she had no scruples, for after all Frank Muller's would be a well-merited doom. 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 slain Bessie would marry John, provided John escaped from the Boers, and be happy, but what would become of her? 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. And then she 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 was to go away. Well, it was the only thing to do. She would see this deed done, and set her sister free, and then if she happened to escape she would go—go right away where she would never be heard of again. Then 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 vividness, standing out alone against a black background of nothingness, not softened and shaded down 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 and 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 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 drew it out 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. Whether there is another I do not know. 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 world 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 off her knee, and then put it back again and began to scribble in verse, quickly and almost without correction. It was a habit of hers, though she never showed what she wrote, and now it asserted itself irresistibly and half unconsciously:—

When hands that clasp thine own in seeming truth,
Or linger in caress upon thy head,
Have rudely broke the idols of thy youth,
And cast them down amid thy treasured dead,
Remember me——

When she had got thus far she stopped, dissatisfied, and running her pencil through the lines began afresh:—

If I should die to-night,
Then wouldst thou look upon my quiet face,
Before they laid me in my resting-place,
And deem that death had made it almost fair;
And laying snow-white flowers against my hair,
Wouldst on my cold cheek tender kisses press,
And fold my hands with lingering caress—
Poor hands, so empty and so cold to-night!

If I should die to-night,
Then wouldst thou call to mind with loving thought
Some kindly deed the icy hands had wrought,

Some tender words the frozen lips had said,
Errands on which the willing feet had sped:
The memory of my passion and my pride,
And every fault would sure be set aside.
So should I be forgiven of all to-night!

. . . . . .

Death waits on me to-night
E'en now my summons echoes from afar,
And grave mists gather fast about my star.
Think gently of me; I am travel-worn,
My faltering feet are pierced with many a thorn,
This cruel world has made my faint heart bleed.
When dreamless rest is mine I shall not need
The tenderness for which I long to-night!

She stopped, apparently more because she had got to the end of the paper than for any other reason, and without even re-reading what she had written pushed the pass back into her bosom and was soon lost in thought.

Ten minutes later Jantjé came creeping in to where she sat like a great snake in human form, 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."

"Have the Boers all gone to sleep?"

"All, Missie, except the sentries."

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

"No, Missie, there is nobody near."

"What is the time, Jantjé?"

"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 Jantjé 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."

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

"Now, Jantjé," she said at length, 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 with a start, "why?"

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

"You fool!" said Jess angrily; and then recollecting herself, added, "Come, be a man, Jantjé: 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 he meant what he said. He was getting 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 was really almost callous about being detected, so 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, Jantjé."

"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 they once more crept down the hill. This time there was no light to be seen in the direction of the waggon-house, and no sound to be heard except the regular tramp of the sentries. But their business did not lie in the direction of the waggon-house; they left that on their right, and curved round towards the blue gum avenue. When they got nearly opposite to the first tree they halted in a patch of stones, and Jantjé went 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. It had 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 light cast a magnified reflection of his every feature and even of his expression upon the screen before them. The attitude in which he was seated 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 was in his own hand. He had triumphed, and yet over him hung the shadow of that curse that 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 in his mind 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 up and down.

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

Then 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, had been obliged to crouch upon the open 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 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 cut out upon the darkness through the opening of the tent broaden a little, and by that 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—she felt somebody touch her on the arm. It was Jantjé.

"*Is it done?*" she whispered again.

He shook his head and drew her away from the tent. In going her foot caught in one of the guide-ropes and shook 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 could get 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

Jantjé would assuredly have been blasted then. The man's cowardice made her mad, 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 sprung with a crash almost from their feet, passing away like a grey gleam into the utter darkness.

Jess started and then recovered herself, guessing what it was, but the miserable Hottentot was overcome with terror, and 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, picked it up, and hissed into his ear that if he was 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. Jantjé 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 was yet 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 down from his throat and massive chest, which were quite bare.

Jess stood and gazed. "For Bessie's sake, for Bessie's sake!" she murmured, and 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 the man 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 murdered, 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——

She 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 Jantjé 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 Jantjé. 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 night!

CHAPTER XVI.

TANTA COETZEE TO THE RESCUE.

After Jess had been set free by the Boers outside Hans Coetzee's place, John was sharply ordered to dismount and offsaddle his horse. This he did with the best grace that he could

muster, and the horse was knee-haltered and let loose to feed. It was then indicated to him that he was to enter the house, and this he also did, closely attended by two of the Boers. The room into which he was conducted was the same that he had first become acquainted with, on the occasion of the buck hunt that had so nearly ended in his extinction. There was the Buckenhout table, and there were the chairs and couches made of stinkwood. Also, in the biggest chair at the other end of the room, a moderate-sized slop-basin full of coffee by her side, sat Tanta Coetzee, still actively employed in doing absolutely nothing. There, too, were the showily-dressed young women, there was the sardonic lover of one of them, and all the posse of young men with rifles. The whole place and its characteristics were quite unchanged, and on entering it John felt inclined to rub his eyes and wonder whether the events of the last few months had been nothing but a dream. The only thing that was different was the welcome that he received. Evidently he was not expected to shake hands all round on the present occasion. Fallen indeed would the Boer have been considered who, within a few days of Majuba, offered to shake

hands with a wretched English Rooibatje, picked up like a lame buck on the veldt. At the least he would have kept the ceremony for private celebration, if only out of respect to the feelings of others. On this occasion John's entry was received in icy silence. The old woman did not deign to look up, the young ones shrugged their shoulders and turned their backs, as though they had suddenly seen something that was not nice. Only the countenance of the sardonic lover softened to a grin.

John walked to the end of the room where there was a vacant chair and stood by it.

"Have I your permission so sit down, ma'am?" he said at last in a loud tone, addressing the old lady.

"Dear Lord;" said the old lady to the man next to her, "what a voice the poor creature has! it is like a bull's. What does he say?"

The man explained.

"The floor is the right place for Englishmen and Kafirs," said the old lady, "but after all he is a man, and perhaps sore with riding. Englishmen always get sore when they try to ride;" and then with startling energy she shouted out,—

"*Sit!*

"I will show the Rooibaatje he is not the only one with a voice," she added by way of explanation.

A subdued sniggle followed this sally of wit, during which John took his seat with all the native grace that he could command, which at the moment was not much.

"Dear me!" she went on presently, for she was a bit of a humorist, "he looks very dirty and pale, doesn't he? I suppose the poor thing has been hiding in the ant-bear holes with nothing to eat. I am told that up in the Drakensberg yonder the ant-bear holes are full of Englishmen. They had rather starve in them than come out, for fear lest they should meet a Boer."

This provoked another sniggle, and then the young ladies took up the ball.

"Are you hungry, Rooibaatje?" asked one in English.

John was boiling with fury, but he was also starving, so he answered that he was.

"Tie his hands behind him, and let us see if he can catch in his mouth, like a dog," suggested one of the gentle youths.

"No, no; make him eat pap with a wooden spoon, like a Kafir," said another. "I will feed him—if you have a very long spoon."

Here again was legitimate cause for merriment, but in the end matters were compromised by a lump of biltong and a piece of bread being thrown to him from the other end of the room. He caught them and proceeded to eat, trying to conceal his ravenous hunger as much as possible from the circle of onlookers who clustered round to watch the operation.

"Carolus," said the old lady to the sardonic affianced of her daughter, "there are three thousand men in the British army."

"Yes, my aunt."

"There are three thousand men in the British army," she repeated, looking round angrily as though somebody had questioned the truth of her statement. "I tell you that my grandfather's brother was at Cape Town in the time of Governor Smith, and he counted the whole British army, and there were three thousand of them."

"That is so, my aunt," answered Carolus.

"Then why did you contradict me, Carolus?"

"I did not intend to, my aunt."

"I should hope not, Carolus; it would vex the dear Lord to see a boy with a squint" (Carolus was slightly afflicted in this way) "contradict his

future mother-in-law. Tell me how many Englishmen were killed at Laing's Nek?"

"Nine hundred," replied Carolus promptly.

"And at Ingogo?"

"Six hundred and twenty."

"And at Majuba?"

"One thousand."

"Then that makes two thousand five hundred men; yes, and the rest were finished at Bronker's Spruit. Nephews, that Rooibaatje there," pointing to John, "is one of the last men left in the British army."

Most of her audience appeared to accept this argument as conclusive, but some mischievous spirit put it into the breast of the saturnine Carolus to contradict her, notwithstanding the lesson he had just had.

"That is not so, my aunt; there are many damned Englishmen still sneaking about the Nek and also at Pretoria and Wakkerstroom."

"I tell you it is a lie," said the old lady, raising her voice, "they are only Kafirs and camp followers. There were three thousand men in the British army, and now they are all killed except that Rooibaatje. How dare you contradict your future mother-in-law, you dirty squint-eyed, yellow-

faced monkey! There, take that!" and before the unfortunate Carolus knew where he was, he received the slop-basin with its contents full in the face. The bowl broke upon the bridge of his nose, and the coffee flew all over him, into his eyes and hair, down his throat and over his body, making such a spectacle of him as must have been seen to be appreciated.

"Ah!" went on the old lady, much soothed and gratified by the eminent and startling success of her shot, "never you tell me again I don't know how to throw a basin of coffee. I haven't practised at my man Hans for thirty years for nothing, I can tell you. Now you, Carolus, I have taught you not to contradict; go and wash your face and we will have supper."

Carolus ventured no reply, and was led away by his betrothed half blinded and utterly subdued, while her sister set the table for the evening meal. When it was ready the men sat down to meat and the women waited on them. John was not asked to sit down, but one of the girls threw him a boiled mealiecob, for which, being still very hungry, he was duly grateful, and afterwards he managed to get a mutton bone and another bit of bread.

When supper was over, some bottles of peach brandy were produced, and the men began to drink freely, and then it was that matters commenced to get dangerous for John. Suddenly one of the men remembered about the young fellow whom he had thrown backwards off the horse, and who was lying very sick in the next room, and suggested that measures of retaliation should be taken, which would undoubtedly have been done had not the elderly Boer who had commanded the party interposed. This man was getting drunk like the others, but fortunately for John he got amiably drunk.

"Let him alone," he said, "let him alone. We will send him to the commandant to-morrow. Frank Muller will know how to deal with him."

John thought to himself that he certainly would.

"Now, for myself," the man went on with a hiccough, "I bear no malice. We have thrashed the British and they have given up the country, so let bygones be bygones, I say. Almighty, yes! I am not proud, not I. If an Englishman takes off his hat to me I shall acknowledge it."

This staved the fellows off for a while, but presently John's protector went away, and then the others began to get playful. They got their

rifles and amused themselves with levelling them at him, and making sham bets as to where they would hit him. John, seeing the emergency, backed his chair well into the corner of the wall and drew his revolver, which fortunately for himself he still had.

"If any man interferes with me, by God, I'll shoot him!" he said in good English, which they did not fail to understand. Undoubtedly as the evening went on it was only the possession of this revolver and his evident determination to use it that saved his life.

At last things got very bad indeed, so bad that he found it absolutely necessary to keep his eyes continually fixed, now on one and now on another, to prevent their putting a bullet through him unawares. He had twice appealed to the old woman, but she sat in her big chair with a sweet smile upon her fat face and refused to interfere. It is not every day that one gets the chance of seeing a real live English Rooibaatje baited like an ant-bear on the flat.

Presently, just as John in desperation was making up his mind to begin shooting right and left, and take his chance of cutting his way out, the saturnine Carolus, whose temper had never

recovered the bowl of coffee, and who was besides very drunk, rushed forward with an oath and dealt a tremendous blow at him with the butt-end of his rifle. John dodged the blow, which fell upon the back of the chair and smashed it to bits, and in another second Carolus's gentle soul would have departed to a better sphere, had not the old woman, seeing that matters were getting beyond a joke, come waddling down the room with marvellous activity and thrown herself between them.

"There, there," she said, cuffing right and left with her fat fists, "be off with you, every one. I can't have this noise going on here. Come, off you all go, and get the horses into the stable; they will be right away by morning if you trust them to the Kafirs."

Carolus collapsed, and the other men too hesitated and drew back, whereupon, following up her advantage, the old woman, to John's astonishment and relief, literally bundled the whole tribe of them out of the front door.

"Now then, Rooibaatje," said the old lady briskly when they had gone, "I like you because you are a brave man, and were not afraid when they mobbed you. Also, I don't want to have a

had he not chanced in the mist and darkness to turn into the mouth of the great gorge known as Leuw Kloof, where he had once, months before, had an interesting talk with Jess just before she went to Pretoria. It was whilst he was blundering and stumbling up this gorge that at length the rain ceased and the moon got out, it being then nearly midnight. Its very first rays lit upon one of the extraordinary pillars of balanced boulders, and by it he recognised the locality. As may be imagined, strong man that he was, John was by this time quite exhausted. For nearly a week he had been travelling incessantly, and for the last two nights he had not only not slept, but had endured a great deal of peril and mental excitement. Had it not been for the brandy Tanta Coetzee had given him he could not have got over the fifteen miles or so of ground he had covered; and now he was quite broken down, and felt that the only thing that he could do, wet through as he was, would be to lie down somewhere, and sleep or die as the case might be. Then it was that the little cave near the top of the Kloof, the same from which Jess had watched the thunderstorm, came into his recollection. He had been there once with Bessie after their

engagement, and she had told him that it was one of Jess's favourite spots.

If he could once reach the cave he would at any rate get shelter and a dry place to lie on. It could not be more than three hundred yards away. So he struggled on bravely through the wet grass and over the scattered boulders, till at last he came to the base of the huge column that had been shattered by the lightning before Jess's eyes.

Thirty paces more and he was in the cave.

With a sigh of utter exhaustion he flung himself down upon the rocky floor, and was almost instantly buried in a profound sleep.

CHAPTER XVII.

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 came to the top of Leuw Kloof, and in a bewildered way recognised the spot and commenced 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 was the mouth of her 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 saw 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 drew out the pass on the back of which she had written to him, and 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.

Then at last the end came. There was a great flashing of light before her eyes, and the roaring as of a thousand seas within her ears, and her head sank gently on her lover's breast as on a pillow; and there she died and passed upward towards the wider life and larger liberty, or, as some would have us believe, downward into the depths of an eternal sleep.

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 sung their requiem over her. Here she first had learnt her love, and here she closed its book on earth.

She might have been a great and a good wo-

man. She might even have been a happy woman. But fate had ordained it otherwise. Women such as she 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 morning, 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, and one which sometimes finds a counterpart in our waking life, but still the man slept, and the dead woman lay till the night turned into the morning and the world woke up as usual. The sunbeams slid into the cave, and played indifferentlerently 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 recked not and troubled not because Jess was dead.

It is so accustomed to such sights.

And at last John woke up too. He stretched his arms and yawned, and then 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 him that his brain did not give way in that first 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 came stumbling 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 see who it was and what he carried. But when they knew, they fell back awed and without a word, and he too passed through them without a word. For a moment he hesitated, realising that the house was burnt down, and then turned into the waggon-shed, and laid his burden down upon the saw-

bench where Frank Muller had sat as judge upon the previous day.

Then 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 they again 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 the Boers all went and left them alone. Now that Frank Muller was 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 had died leaving it unsigned. So they held a sort of informal inquest upon their leader's body, and then buried him in the little graveyard that was

planted with the four red gums, one at each corner, and walled in on the hill-side at the back of where the house had stood. Rather than be at the pains of hollowing out another, they buried him in the very grave 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 Jantjé, and a Hottentot was seen running from the place of the deed and hunted for some way, but could not be caught or heard of again. Therefore many of them are of opinion that he is the guilty man. Others, again, believe that the crime rests upon the shoulders of the villanous one-eyed Kafir, Hendrik, Muller's own servant, who had also mysteriously vanished. But as they have never found either of them, and are not likely to, 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 lies Jess, some ten feet of earth only between her and the man on whom she was the instrument of vengeance. But they never knew that, or even guessed it. They never even knew that she had been near Mooifontein on that awful night. Nobody knew it except Jantjé; and Jantjé, 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 they were both practically ruined. The thousand pounds that John had paid to Silas for 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.

And 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.

. . . . .

So but one word more.

After some difficulty, John Niel, within three months of his arrival in England, got 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 nowadays. Also, he in due course became the beloved husband of sweet Bessie Croft, and on the whole may be considered a happy man. At times, however, a sorrow of which his wife knows nothing gets the better of him, and for a while he is not himself.

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

come when he will once more 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 did when she was yet alive; and from time to time he seems to clearly know that if, as we may surely hope, and as he for one believes, there prove to be an individual future for us struggling mortals, he will certainly find Jess waiting to greet him at its gates.

THE END.

PRINTING OFFICE OF THE PUBLISHER.