

Swallow

By

H. Rider Haggard

Ditchingham, 20th May, 1898.

My dear Clarke,

Over twenty years have passed since we found some unique opportunities of observing Boer and Kaffir character in company; therefore it is not perhaps out of place that I should ask you to allow me to put your name upon a book which deals more or less with the peculiarities of those races--a tale of the great Trek of 1836.

You, as I know, entertain both for Dutchman and Bantu that regard tempered by a sense of respectful superiority which we are apt to feel for those who on sundry occasions have but just failed in bringing our earthly career to an end. The latter of these admirations I share to the full; and in the case of the first of them, as I hope that the dour but not unkindly character of Vrouw Botmar will prove to you, time softens a man's judgment. Nor have I ever questioned, as the worthy Vrouw tells us, that in the beginning of the trouble the Boers met with much of which to complain at the hands of English Governments. Their maltreatment was not intentional indeed, but rather a result of systematic neglect--to use a mild word--of colonies and their inhabitants, which has culminated within our own experience, only, thanks to a merciful change in public opinion, to pass away for ever. Sympathy with the Voortrekkers of 1836 is easy; whether it remains so in

the case of their descendants, the present masters of the Transvaal, is a matter that admits of many opinions. At the least, allowance should always be made for the susceptibilities of a race that finds its individuality and national life sinking slowly, but without hope of resurrection, beneath an invading flood of Anglo-Saxons.

But these are issues of to-day with which this story has little to do.

Without further explanation, then, I hope that you will accept these pages in memory of past time and friendship, and more especially of the providential events connected with a night-long ride which once we took on duty together among the "schanzes" and across the moon-lit paths of Secocoeni's mountain.

Believe me, my dear Clarke, Your sincere friend, H. Rider Haggard.

To Lieut.-Colonel Sir Marshal Clarke, R.A., K.C.M.G.

SWALLOW

CHAPTER I

WHY VROUW BOTMAR TELLS HER TALE

It is a strange thing that I, an old Boer vrouw, should even think of beginning to write a book when there are such numbers already in the world, most of them worthless, and many of the rest a scandal and offence in the face of the Lord. Notably is this so in the case of those called novels, which are stiff as mealie-pap with lies that fill the heads of silly girls with vain imaginings, causing them to neglect their household duties and to look out of the corners of their eyes at young men of whom their elders do not approve. In truth, my mother and those whom I knew in my youth, fifty years ago, when women were good and worthy and never had a thought beyond their husbands and their children, would laugh aloud could any whisper in their dead ears that Suzanne Naudé was about to write a book. Well might they laugh indeed, seeing that to this hour the most that I can do with men and ink is to sign my own name very large; in this matter alone, not being the equal of my husband Jan, who, before he became paralysed, had so much learning that he could read aloud from the Bible, leaving out the names and long words.

No, no, I am not going to write; it is my great-granddaughter, who is

named Suzanne after me, who writes. And who that had not seen her at the work could even guess how she does it? I tell you that she has brought up from Durban a machine about the size of a pumpkin which goes tap-tap--like a woodpecker, and prints as it taps. Now, my husband Jan was always very fond of music in his youth, and when first the girl began to tap upon this strange instrument, he, being almost blind and not able to see it, thought that she was playing on a spinet such as stood in my grandfather's house away in the Old Colony. The noise pleases him and sends him to sleep, reminding him of the days when he courted me and I used to strum upon that spinet with one finger. Therefore I am dictating this history that he may have plenty of it, and that Suzanne may be kept out of mischief.

There, that is my joke. Still there is truth in it, for Jan Botmar, my husband, he who was the strongest man among the fathers of the great trek of 1836, when, like the Israelites of old, we escaped from the English, our masters, into the wilderness, crouches in the corner yonder a crippled giant with but one sense left to him, his hearing, and a little power of wandering speech. It is strange to look at him, his white hair hanging upon his shoulders, his eyes glazed, his chin sunk upon his breast, his great hands knotted and helpless, and to remember that at the battle of Vechtkop, when Moselikatse sent his regiments to crush us, I saw those same hands of his seize the only two Zulus who broke a way into our laager and shake and dash them together till they were dead.

Well, well, who am I that I should talk? For has not the dropsy got hold

of my legs, and did not that doctor, who, though an Englishman, is no fool, tell me but yesterday that it was creeping up towards my heart? We are old and soon must die, for such is the will of God. Let us then thank God that it is our lot to pass thus easily and in age, and not to have perished in our youth, as did so many of our companions, the Voortrekkers, they and their children together, by the spear of the savage, or by starvation and fever and wild beasts in the wilderness. Ah! I think of them often, and in my sleep, which has grown light of late, I see them often, and hear those voices that none but I would know to-day. I think of them and I see them, and since Suzanne has the skill to set down my words, a desire comes upon me to tell of them and their deeds before God takes me by the hand and I am borne through the darkness by the wings of God.

Also there is another reason. The girl, Suzanne Kenzie, my great-granddaughter, who writes this, alone is left of my blood, since her father and grandfather, who was our adopted son, and the husband of our only child, fell in the Zulu war fighting with the English against Cetuywayo. Now many have heard the strange story of Ralph Kenzie, the English castaway, and of how he was found by our daughter Suzanne. Many have heard also the still stranger story of how this child of ours, Suzanne, in her need, was sheltered by savages, and for more than two years lived with Sihamba, the little witch doctress and ruler of the Tribe of the Mountains, till Ralph, her husband, who loved her, sought her out and rescued her, that by the mercy of the Lord during all this time had suffered neither harm nor violence. Yes, many have heard of these things, for in bygone years there was much talk of them as of

events out of nature and marvellous, but few have heard them right. Therefore before I go, I, who remember and know them all, would set them down that they may be a record for ever among my descendants and the descendants of Ralph Kenzie, my foster-son, who, having been brought up amongst us Boers, was the best and bravest Englishman that ever lived in Africa.

And now I will tell of the finding of Ralph Kenzie many years ago.

To begin at the beginning, my husband, Jan Botmar, is one of the well-known Boer family of that name, the most of whom lived in the Graafrinet district in the Old Colony till some of them trekked into the Transkei, when I was still a young girl, to be as far as they could from the heart of the British power. Nor did they trek for a little reason. Listen and judge.

One of the Bezuidenhouts, Frederick, was accused of treating some black slave of his cruelly, and a body of the accursed Pandours, the Hottentots whom the English had made into a regiment, were sent to arrest him. He would not suffer that these black creatures should lay hands upon a Boer, so he fled to a cave and fought there till he was shot dead. Over his open grave his brethren and friends swore to take vengeance for his murder, and fifty of them raised an insurrection. They were pursued by the Pandours and by burghers more law abiding or more

cautious, till Jan Bezuidenhout, the brother of Frederick, was shot also, fighting to the last while his wife and little son loaded the rifles. Then the rest were captured and put upon their trial, and to the rage and horror of all their countrymen the brutal British governor of that day, who was named Somerset, ordered five of them to be hanged, among them my husband's father and uncle. Petitions for mercy availed nothing, and these five were tied to a beam like Kaffir dogs yonder at Slagter's Nek, they who had shed the blood of no man. Yes, yes, it is true, for Jan, my man, saw it; he saw his father and his uncle hanged like dogs. When they pushed them from the beam four of the ropes broke--perhaps they had been tampered with, I know not--but still the devils who murdered them would show no mercy. Jan ran to his father and cast his arms about him, but they tore him away.

"Do not forget, my son," he gasped as he lay there on the ground with the broken rope about his neck, nor did Jan ever forget.

It was after this that the Botmars trekked into the Transkei, and with them some other families, amongst whom were the Naudes, my parents. Here in the Transkei the widow Botmar and my father were near neighbours, their steads being at a distance from each other of about three hours upon horseback, or something over twenty miles. In those days, I may say it without shame now, I was the prettiest girl in the Transkei, a great deal prettier than my granddaughter Suzanne there, although some think well of her looks, but not so well as she thinks of them herself, for that would be impossible. I have been told that I have noble French blood in my veins, though I care little for this, being quite content to

be one of the Boers, who are all of noble blood. At least I believe that my great-grandfather was a French Huguenot Count who fled from his country to escape massacre because of his religion. From him and his wife Suzanne, so it is said, we women of the Naudes get our beauty, for we have always been beautiful; but the loveliest of the race by far was my daughter Suzanne who married the Englishman, Ralph Kenzie, from which time our good looks have begun to fall off, though it is true that he was no ill-favoured man.

Whatever the cause, in my youth, I was not like the other Boer girls, who for the most part are stout, heavy, and slow of speech, even before they are married, nor did I need to wear a kapje to keep a pink and white face from burning in the sun. I was not tall, but my figure was rounded and my movements were as quick as my tongue. Also I had brown hair that curled and brown eyes beneath it, and full red lips, which all the young men of that district--and there were six of them who can be counted--would have given their best horse to kiss, with the saddle and bridle thrown in. But remember this, Suzanne, I never suffered them to do so, for in my time girls knew better what was right.

Well, among all these suitors I favoured Jan Botmar, the old cripple who sits yonder, though in those days he was no cripple but the properest man a girl could wish to see. My father was against such a match, for he had the old French pride of race in him, and thought little of the Botmar family, as though we were not all the children of one God--except the black Kaffirs, who are the children of the devil. But in the end he gave way, for Jan was well-to-do; so after we had "opsitted" together

several times according to our customs, and burnt many very long candles,[*] we were married and went to live on a farm of our own at a distance. For my part I have never regretted it, although doubtless I might have done much better for myself; and if Jan did, he has been wise enough not to say so to me. In this country most of us women must choose a man to look after--it is a burden that Heaven lays upon us--so one may as well choose him one fancies, and Jan was my fancy, though why he should have been I am sure I do not know. Well, if he had any wits left he would speak up and tell what a blessing I have been to him, and how often my good sense has supplied the lack of his, and how I forgave him, yes, and helped him out of the scrape when he made a fool of himself with--but I will not write of that, for it makes me angry, and as likely as not I should throw something at him before I had finished, which he would not understand.

[*] It is customary among the Boers for the suitor to sit up alone at night with the object of his choice. Should the lady favour him, she lights long candles, but if he does not please her she produces "ends," signifying thereby that she prefers his room to his company.--Author.

No, no; I do not regret it, and, what is more, when my man dies I shall not be long behind him. Ah! they may talk, all these wise young people; but, after all, what is there better for a woman than to love some man, the good and the bad of him together, to bear his children and to share his sorrows, and to try to make him a little better and a little less selfish and unfortunate than he would have been alone? Poor men! Without

us women their lot would be hard indeed, and how they will get on in heaven, where they are not allowed to marry, is more than I can guess.

So we married, and within a year our daughter was born and christened by the family name of Suzanne after me, though almost from her cradle the Kaffirs called her "Swallow," I am not sure why. She was a very beautiful child from the first, and she was the only one, for I was ill at her birth and never had any more children. The other women with their coveys of eight and ten and twelve used to condole with me about this, and get a sharp answer for their pains. I had one which always shut their mouths, but I won't ask the girl here to set it down. An only daughter was enough for me, I said, and if it wasn't I shouldn't have told them so, for the truth is that it is best to take these things as we find them, and whether it be one or ten, to declare that that is just as we would wish it. I know that when we were on the great trek and I saw the kinderchies of others dying of starvation, or massacred in dozens by the Kaffir devils, ah! then I was glad that we had no more children. Heartaches enough my ewe lamb Suzanne gave me during those bitter years when she was lost. And when she died, having lived out her life just before her husband, Ralph Kenzie, went on commando with his son to the Zulu war, whither her death drove him, ah! then it ached for the last time. When next my heart aches it shall be with joy to find them both in Heaven.