

CHAPTER II

HOW SUZANNE FOUND RALPH KENZIE

Our farm where we lived in the Transkei was not very far from the ocean; indeed, any one seated in the kopje or little hill at the back of the house, from the very top of which bubbles a spring of fresh water, can see the great rollers striking the straight cliffs of the shore and spouting into the air in clouds of white foam. Even in warm weather they spout thus, but when the south-easterly gales blow then the sight and the sound of them are terrible as they rush in from the black water one after another for days and nights together. Then the cliffs shiver beneath their blows, and the spray flies up as though it were driven from the nostrils of a thousand whales, and is swept inland in clouds, turning the grass and the leaves of the trees black in its breath. Woe to the ship that is caught in those breakers and ground against those rocks, for soon nothing is left of it save scattered timbers shivered as though by lightning.

One winter--it was when Suzanne was seven years old--such a south-east gale as this blew for four days, and on a certain evening after the wind had fallen, having finished my household work, I went to the top of the kopje to rest and look at the sea, which was still raging terrible, taking with me Suzanne. I had been sitting there ten minutes or more when Jan, my husband, joined me, and I wondered why he had come, for he, as brave a man as ever lived in all other things, was greatly afraid of the sea, and, indeed, of any water. So afraid was he that he did not

like the sight of it in its anger, and would wake at nights at the sound of a storm--yes, he whom I have seen sleep through the trumpeting of frightened elephants and the shouting of a Zulu impi.

"You think that sight fine, wife," he said, pointing to the spouting foam; "but I call it the ugliest in the world. Almighty! it turns my blood cold to look at it and to think that Christian men, ay, and women and children too, may be pounding to pulp in those breakers."

"Without doubt the death is as good as another," I answered; "not that I would choose it, for I wish to die in my bed with the predicant saying prayers over me, and my husband weeping--or pretending to--at the foot of it."

"Choose it!" he said. "I had sooner be speared by savages or hanged by the English Government as my father was."

"What makes you think of death in the sea, Jan?" I asked.

"Nothing, wife, nothing; but there is that fool of a Pondo witch-doctress down by the cattle kraal, and I heard her telling a story as I went by to look at the ox that the snake bit yesterday."

"What was the story?"

"Oh! a short one; she said she had it from the coast Kaffirs--that far away, up towards the mouth of the Umzimbubu, when the moon was young,

great guns had been heard fired one after the other, minute by minute, and that then a ship was seen, a tall ship with three masts and many 'eyes' in it--I suppose she meant portholes with the light shining through them--drifting on to the coast before the wind, for a storm was raging, while streaks of fire like red and blue lightnings rushed up from her decks."

"Well, and then?"

"And then, nothing. Almighty! that is all the tale. Those waves which you love to watch can tell the rest."

"Most like it is some Kaffir lie, husband."

"May be, but amongst these people news travels faster than a good horse, and before now there have been wrecks upon this coast. Child, put down that gun. Do you want to shoot your mother? Have I not told you that you must never touch a gun?" and he pointed to Suzanne, who had picked up her father's roer--for in those days, when we lived among so many Kaffirs, every man went armed--and was playing at soldiers with it.

"I was shooting buck and Kaffirs, papa," she said, obeying him with a pout.

"Shooting Kaffirs, were you? Well, there will be a good deal of that to do before all is finished in this land, little one. But it is not work for girls; you should have been a boy, Suzanne."

"I can't; I am a girl," she answered; "and I haven't any brothers like other girls. Why haven't I any brothers?"

Jan shrugged his shoulders, and looked at me.

"Won't the sea bring me a brother?" went on the child, for she had been told that little children came out of the sea.

"Perhaps, if you look for one very hard," I answered with a sigh, little knowing what fruit would spring from this seed of a child's talk.

On the morrow there was a great to do about the place, for the black girl whose business it was to look after Suzanne came in at breakfast time and said that she had lost the child. It seemed that they had gone down to the shore in the early morning to gather big shells such as are washed up there after a heavy storm, and that Suzanne had taken with her a bag made of spring-buck hide in which to carry them. Well, the black girl sat down under the shadow of a rock, leaving Suzanne to wander to and fro looking for the shells, and not for an hour or more did she get up to find her. Then she searched in vain, for the spoor of the child's feet led from the sand between the rocks to the pebbly shore above, which was covered with tough sea grasses, and there was lost. Now at the girl's story I was frightened, and Jan was both frightened and so angry that he would have tied her up and flogged her if he had found time. But of this there was none to lose, so taking with him such Kaffirs as he could find he set off for the seashore to hunt for Suzanne. It was near

sunset when he returned, and I, who was watching from the stoep, saw with a shiver of fear that he was alone.

"Wife," he said in a hollow voice, "the child is lost. We have searched far and wide and can find no trace of her. Make food ready to put in my saddle-bags, for should we discover her to-night or to-morrow, she will be starving."

"Be comforted," I said, "at least she will not starve, for the cook girl tells me that before Suzanne set out this morning she begged of her a bottle of milk and with it some biltong and meal cakes and put them in her bag."

"It is strange," he answered. "What could the little maid want with these unless she was minded to make a journey?"

"At times it comes into the thoughts of children to play truant, husband."

"Yes, yes, that is so, but pray God that we may find her before the moon sets."

Then while I filled the saddle-bags Jan swallowed some meat, and a fresh horse having been brought he kissed me and rode away in the twilight.

Oh! what hours were those that followed! All night long I sat there on the stoep, though the wind chilled me and the dew wet my clothes,

watching and praying as, I think, I never prayed before. This I knew well--that our Suzanne, our only child, the light and joy of our home, was in danger so great that the Lord alone could save her. The country where we lived was lonely, savages still roamed about it who hated the white man, and might steal or kill her; also it was full of leopards, hyenas, and other beasts of prey which would devour her. Worst of all, the tides on the coast were swift and treacherous, and it well might happen that if she was wandering among the great rocks the sea would come in and drown her. Indeed, again and again it seemed to me that I could hear her death-cry in the sob of the wind.

At length the dawn broke, and with it came Jan. One glance at his face was enough for me. "She is not dead?" I gasped.

"I know not," he answered, "we have found nothing of her. Give me brandy and another horse, for the sun rises, and I return to the search. The tide is down, perhaps we shall discover her among the rocks," and he groaned and entered the house with me.

"Kneel down and let us pray, husband," I said, and we knelt down weeping and praying aloud to our God who, seated in the Heavens, yet sees and knows the needs and griefs of His servants upon the earth; prayed that He would pity our agony and give us back our only child. Nor, blessed be his name, did we pray vainly, for presently, while we still knelt, we heard the voice of that girl who had lost Suzanne, and who all night long had lain sobbing in the garden grounds, calling to us in wild accents to come forth and see. Then we rushed out, hope burning up

suddenly in our hearts like a fire in dry grass.

In front of the house and not more than thirty paces from it, was the crest of a little wave of land upon which at this moment the rays of the rising sun struck brightly. There, yes, there, full in the glow of them, stood the child Suzanne, wet, disarrayed, her hair hanging about her face, but unharmed and smiling, and leaning on her shoulder another child, a white boy, somewhat taller and older than herself. With a cry of joy we rushed towards her, and reaching her the first, for my feet were the swiftest, I snatched her to my breast and kissed her, whereon the boy fell down, for it seemed that his foot was hurt and he could not stand alone.

"In the name of Heaven, what is the meaning of this?" gasped Jan.

"What should it mean," answered the little maid proudly, "save that I went to look for the brother whom you said I might find by the sea if I searched hard enough, and I found him, though I do not understand his words or he mine. Come, brother, let me help you up, for this is our home, and here are our father and mother."

Then, filled with wonder, we carried the children into the house, and took their wet clothes off them. It was I who undressed the boy, and noted that though his garments were in rags and foul, yet they were of a finer stuff than any that I had seen, and that his linen, which was soft as silk, was marked with the letters R. M. Also I noted other things: namely, that so swollen were his little feet that the boots must be cut

off them, and that he was well-nigh dead of starvation, for his bones almost pierced his milk-white skin.

Well, we cleaned him, and having wrapped him in blankets and soft-tanned hides, I fed him with broth a spoonful at a time, for had I let him eat all he would, he was so famished that I feared lest he should kill himself. After he was somewhat satisfied, sad memories seemed to come back to him, for he cried and spoke in English, repeating the word "Mother," which I knew, again and again, till presently he dropped off to sleep, and for many hours slept without waking. Then, little by little, I drew all the tale from Suzanne.

It would seem that the child, who was very venturesome and full of imaginings, had dreamed a dream in her bed on the night of the day when she played with the gun and Jan and I had spoken together of the sea. She dreamed that in a certain kloof, an hour's ride and more away from the stead, she heard the voice of a child praying, and that although he prayed in a tongue unknown to her, she understood the words, which were: "O Father, my mother is dead, send some one to help me, for I am starving." Moreover, looking round her in her dream, though she could not see the child from whom the voice came, yet she knew the kloof, for as it chanced she had been there twice, once with me to gather white lilies for the burial of a neighbour who had died, and once with her father, who was searching for a lost ox. Now Suzanne, having lived so much with her elders, was very quick, and she was sure when she woke in the morning that if she said anything about her dream we should laugh at her and should not allow her to go to the place of which she had dreamt.

Therefore it was that she made the plan of seeking for the shells upon the seashore, and of slipping away from the woman who was with her, and therefore also she begged the milk and the biltong.

Now before I go further I would ask, What was this dream of Suzanne's? Did she invent it after the things to which it pointed had come to pass, or was it verily a vision sent by God to the pure heart of a little child, as aforetime He sent a vision to the heart of the infant Samuel? Let each solve the riddle as he will, only, if it were nothing but an imagination, why did she take the milk and food? Because we had been talking on that evening of her finding a brother by the sea, you may answer. Well, perhaps so; let each solve the riddle as he will.

When Suzanne escaped from her nurse she struck inland, and thus it happened that her feet left no spoor upon the hard, dry veldt. Soon she found that the kloof she sought was further off than she thought for, or, perhaps, she lost her way to it, for the hillsides are scarred with such kloofs, and it might well chance that a child would mistake one for the other. Still she went on, though she grew frightened in the lonely wilderness, where great bucks sprang up at her feet and baboons barked at her as they clambered from rock to rock. On she went, stopping only once or twice to drink a little of the milk and eat some food, till, towards sunset, she found the kloof of which she had dreamed. For a while she wandered about in it, following the banks of a stream, till at length, as she passed a dense clump of mimosa bushes, she heard the faint sound of a child's voice--the very voice of her dream. Now she stopped, and turning to the right, pushed her way through the mimosas,

and there beyond them was a dell, and in the centre of the dell a large flat rock, and on the rock a boy praying, the rays of the setting sun shining in his golden, tangled hair. She went to the child and spoke to him, but he could not understand our tongue, nor could she understand his. Then she drew out what was left of the bottle of milk and some meal cakes and gave them to him, and he ate and drank greedily.

By this time the sun was down, and as they did not dare to move in the dark, the children sat together on the rock, clasped in each other's arms for warmth, and as they sat they saw yellow eyes staring at them through the gloom, and heard strange snoring sounds, and were afraid. At length the moon rose, and in its first rays they perceived standing and walking within a few paces of them three tigers, as we call leopards, two of them big and one half-grown. But the tigers did them no harm, for God forbade them; they only looked at them a little and then slipped away, purring as they went.

Now Suzanne rose, and taking the boy by the hand she began to lead him homeward, very slowly, since he was footsore and exhausted, and for the last half of the way could only walk resting upon her shoulder. Still through the long night they crawled forward, for the kopje at the back of our stead was a guide to Suzanne, stopping from time to time to rest a while, till at the breaking of the dawn with their last strength they came to the house, as has been told.

Well it was that they did so, for it seems that the searchers had already sought them in the very kloof where they were hidden, without

seeing anything of them behind the thick screen of the mimosas, and having once sought doubtless they would have returned there no more, for the hills are wide and the kloofs in them many.