

CHAPTER III

THE STORY OF THE SHIPWRECK

"What shall we do with this boy whom Suzanne has brought to us, wife?" asked Jan of me that day while both the children lay asleep.

"Do with him, husband!" I answered; "we shall keep him; he is the Lord's gift."

"He is English, and I hate the English," said Jan, looking down.

"English or Dutch, husband, he is of noble blood, and the Lord's gift, and to turn him away would be to turn away our luck."

"But how if his people come to seek him?"

"When they come we will talk of it, but I do not think that they will come; I think that the sea has swallowed them all."

After that Jan said no more of this matter for many years; indeed I believe that from the first he desired to keep the child, he who was sonless.

Now while the boy lay asleep Jan mounted his horse and rode for two hours to the stead of our neighbour, the Heer van Vooren. This Van Vooren was a very rich man, by far the richest of us outlying Boers, and

he had come to live in these wilds because of some bad act that he had done; I think that it was the shooting of a coloured person when he was angry. He was a strange man and much feared, sullen in countenance, and silent by nature. It was said that his grandmother was a chieftainess among the red Kaffirs, but if so, the blood showed more in his son and only child than in himself. Of this son, who in after years was named Swart Piet, and his evil doings I shall have to tell later in my story, but even then his dark face and savage temper had earned for him the name of "the little Kaffir."

Now the wife of the Heer van Vooren was dead, and he had a tutor for his boy Piet, a poor Hollander body who could speak English. That man knew figures also, for once when, thinking that I should be too clever for him, I asked him how often the wheel of our big waggon would turn round travelling between our farm and Capetown Castle, he took a rule and measured the wheel, then having set down some figures on a bit of paper, and worked at them for a while, he told me the answer. Whether it was right or wrong I did not know, and said so, whereon the poor creature grew angry, and lied in his anger, for he swore that he could tell how often the wheel would turn in travelling from the earth to the sun or moon, and also how far we were from those great lamps, a thing that is known to God only, Who made them for our comfort. It is little wonder, therefore, that with such unholy teaching Swart Piet grew up so bad.

Well, Jan went to beg the loan of this tutor, thinking that he would be able to understand what the English boy said, and in due course the creature came in a pair of blue spectacles and riding on a mule, for he

dared not trust himself to a horse. Afterwards, when the child woke up from his long sleep, and had been fed and dressed, the tutor spoke with him in that ugly English tongue of which I could never even bear the sound, and this was the story that he drew from him.

It seems that the boy, who gave his name as Ralph Kenzie, though I believe that really it was Ralph Mackenzie, was travelling with his father and mother and many others from a country called India, which is one of those places that the English have stolen in different parts of the world, as they stole the Cape and Natal and all the rest. They travelled for a long while in a big ship, for India is a long way off, till, when they were near this coast, a storm sprang up, and after the wind had blown for two days they were driven on rocks a hundred miles or more away from our stead. So fierce was the sea and so quickly did the ship break to pieces that only one boat was got out, which, except for a crew of six men, was filled with women and children. In this boat the boy Ralph and his mother were given a place, but his father did not come, although the captain begged him, for he was a man of some importance, whose life was of more value than those of common people. But he refused, for he said that he would stop and share the fate of the other men, which shows that this English lord, for I think he was a lord, had a high spirit. So he kissed his wife and child and blessed them, and the boat was lowered to the sea, but before another could be got ready the great ship slipped back from the rock upon which she hung and sank (for this we heard afterwards from some Kaffirs who saw it), and all aboard of her were drowned. May God have mercy upon them!

When it was near to the shore the boat was overturned, and some of those in it were drowned, but Ralph and his mother were cast safely on the beach, and with them others. Then one of the men looked at a compass and they began to walk southwards, hoping doubtless to reach country where white people lived. All that befell afterwards I cannot tell, for the poor child was too frightened and bewildered to remember, but it seems that the men were killed in a fight with natives, who, however, did not touch the women and children. After that the women and the little ones died one by one of hunger and weariness, or were taken by wild beasts, till at last none were left save Ralph and his mother. When they were alone they met a Kaffir woman, who gave them as much food as they could carry, and by the help of this food they struggled on southward for another five or six days, till at length one morning, after their food was gone, Ralph woke to find his mother cold and dead beside him.

When he was sure that she was dead he was much frightened, and ran away as fast as he could. All that day he staggered forward, till in the evening he came to the kloof, and being quite exhausted, knelt upon the flat stone to pray, as he had been taught to do, and there Suzanne found him. Such was the story, and so piteous it seemed to us that we wept as we listened, yes, even Jan wept, and the tutor snivelled and wiped his weak eyes.

That it was true in the main we learned afterwards from the Kaffirs, a bit here and a bit there. Indeed, one of our own people, while searching for Suzanne, found the body of Ralph's mother and buried it. He said that she was a tall and noble-looking lady, not much more than thirty

years of age. We did not dig her up again to look at her, as perhaps we should have done, for the Kaffir declared that she had nothing on her except some rags and two rings, a plain gold one and another of emeralds, with a device carved upon it, and in the pocket of her gown a little book bound in red, that proved to be a Testament, on the fly leaf of which was written in English, "Flora Gordon, the gift of her mother, Agnes Janey Gordon, on her confirmation," and with it a date.

All these things the Kaffir brought home faithfully, also a lock of the lady's fair hair, which he had cut off with his assegai. That lock of hair labelled in writing--remember it, Suzanne, when I am gone--is in the waggon box which stands beneath my bed. The other articles Suzanne here has, as is her right, for her grandfather settled them on her by will, and with them one thing which I forgot to mention. When we undressed the boy Ralph, we found hanging by a gold chain to his neck, where he said his mother placed it the night before she died, a large locket, also of gold. This locket contained three little pictures painted on ivory, one in each half of it and one with the plain gold back on a hinge between them. That to the right was of a handsome man in uniform, who, Ralph told me, was his father (and indeed he left all this in writing, together with his will); that to the left, of a lovely lady in a low dress, who, he said, was his mother; that in the middle a portrait of the boy himself, as anyone could see, which must have been painted not more than a year before we found him. This locket and the pictures my great-granddaughter Suzanne has also.

Now, as I have said, we let that unhappy lady lie in her rude grave

yonder by the sea, but my husband took men and built a cairn of stones over it and a strong wall about it, and there it stands to this day, for not long ago I met one of the folk from the Old Colony who had seen it, and who told me that the people that live in those parts now reverence the spot, knowing its story. Also, when some months afterwards a minister came to visit us, we led him to the place and he read the Burial Service over the lady's bones, so that she did not lack for Christian Burial.

Well, this wreck made a great stir, for many were drowned in it, and the English Government sent a ship of war to visit the place where it happened, but none came to ask us what we knew of the matter; indeed, we never learned that the frigate had been till she was gone again. So it came about that the story died away, as such stories do in this sad world, and for many years we heard no more of it.

For a while the boy Ralph was like a haunted child. At night, and now and again even in the daytime, he would be seized with terror, and sob and cry in a way that was piteous to behold, though not to be wondered at by any who knew his history. When these fits took him, strange as it may seem, there was but one who could calm his heart, and that one Suzanne. I can see them now as I have seen them thrice that I remember, the boy sitting up in his bed, a stare of agony in his eyes, and the sweat running down his face, damping his yellow hair, and talking rapidly, half in English, half in Dutch, with a voice that at times would rise to a scream, and at times would sink to a whisper, of the shipwreck, of his lost parents, of the black Indian woman who nursed

him, of the wilderness, the tigers, and the Kaffirs who fell on them, and many other things. By him sits Suzanne, a soft kaross of jackal skins wrapped over her nightgown, the dew of sleep still showing upon her childish face and in her large dark eyes. By him she sits, talking in some words which for us have little meaning, and in a voice now shrill, and now sinking to a croon, while with one hand she clasps his wrist, and with the other strokes his brow, till the shadow passes from his soul and, clinging close to her, he sinks back to sleep.

But as the years went by these fits grew rarer till at last they ceased altogether, since, thanks be to God, childhood can forget its grief.

What did not cease, however, was the lad's love for Suzanne, or her love

for him, which, if possible, was yet deeper. Brother may love sister, but that affection, however true, yet lacks something, since nature teaches that it can never be complete. But from the beginning--yes, even while they were children--these twain were brother and sister, friend and friend, lover and lover; and so they remained till life left them, and so they will remain for aye in whatever life they live. Their thought was one thought, their heart was one heart; in them was neither variableness nor shadow of turning; they were each of each, to each and for each, as one soul in their separate spirits, as one flesh in their separate bodies. I who write this am a very old woman, and though in many things I am most ignorant, I have seen much of the world and of the men who live in it, yet I say that never have I known any marvel to compare with the marvel and the beauty of the love between Ralph Kenzie, the castaway, and my sweet daughter, Suzanne. It was of heaven, not of

earth; or, rather, like everything that is perfect, it partook both of earth and heaven. Yes, yes, it wandered up the mountain paths of earth to the pure heights of heaven, where now it dwells for ever.

The boy Ralph grew up fair and brave and strong, with keen grey eyes and a steady mouth, nor did I know any lad of his years who could equal him in strength and swiftness of foot; for, though in youth he was not over tall, he was broad in the breast and had muscles that never seemed to tire. Now, we Boers think little of book learning, holding, as we do, that if a man can read the Holy Word it is enough. Still Jan and I thought as Ralph was not of our blood, though otherwise in all ways a son to us, that it was our duty to educate him as much in the fashion of his own people as our circumstances would allow. Therefore, after he had been with us some two years, when one day the Hollander tutor man, with the blue spectacles, of whom I have spoken, rode up to our house upon his mule, telling us that he had fled from the Van Voorens because he could no longer bear witness to the things that were practised at their stead, we engaged him to teach Ralph and Suzanne. He remained with us six years, by which time both the children had got much learning from him; though how much it is not for me, who have none, to judge. They learnt history and reading and writing, and something of the English tongue, but I need scarcely say that I would not suffer him to teach them to pry into the mystery of God's stars, as he wished to do, for I hold that such lore is impious and akin to witchcraft of which I have seen enough from Sihamba and others.

I asked this Hollander more particularly why he had fled from the Van

Voorens, but he would tell me little more than that it was because of the wizardries practised there. If I might believe him, the Heer Van Vooren made a custom of entertaining Kaffir witch doctors and doctresses at his house, and of celebrating with them secret and devilish rites, to which his son, Swart Piet, was initiated in his presence. That this last story was true I have no doubt indeed, seeing that the events of after years prove it to have been so.

Well, at last the Hollander left us to marry a rich old vrouw twenty years his senior, and that is all I have to say about him, except that if possible I disliked him more when he walked out of the house than when he walked in; though why I should have done so I do not know, for he was a harmless body. Perhaps it was because he played the flute, which I have always thought contemptible in a man.