

## CHAPTER VII

### THE SIN OF VROUW BOTMAR

When the meat was cleared away I bade Suzanne go to bed, which she did most unwillingly, for knowing the errand of these men she wished to hear our talk. As soon as she was gone I took a seat so that the light of the candles left my face in shadow and fell full on those of the three men--a wise thing to do if one is wicked enough to intend to tell lies about any matter--and said:

"Now, here I am at your service; be pleased to set out the business that you have in hand."

Then they began, the lawyer, speaking through the interpreter, asking, "Are you the Vrouw Botmar?"

"That is my name."

"Where is your husband, Jan Botmar?"

"Somewhere on the veldt; I do not know where."

"Will he be back to-morrow?"

"No."

"When will he be back?"

"Perhaps in two months, perhaps in three, I cannot tell."

At this they consulted together, and then went on:

"Have you living with you a young Englishman named Ralph Mackenzie?"

"One named Ralph Kenzie lives with us."

"Where is he?"

"With my husband on the veldt. I do not know where."

"Can you find him?"

"No, the veldt is very wide. If you wish to see him you must wait till he comes back."

"When will that be?"

"I am not his nurse and cannot tell; perhaps in three months, perhaps six."

Now again they consulted, and once more went on:

"Was the boy, Ralph Mackenzie, or Kenzie, shipwrecked in the India in

the year 1824?"

"Dear Lord!" I cried, affecting to lose my patience, "am I an old Kaffir wife up before the Landdrost for stealing hens that I should be cross-questioned in this fashion? Set out all your tale at once, man, and I will answer it."

Thereon, shrugging his shoulders, the lawyer produced a paper which the interpreter translated to me. In it were written down the names of the passengers who were upon the vessel India when she sailed from a place called Bombay, and among the names those of Lord and Lady Glenthirsk and of their son, the Honourable Ralph Mackenzie, aged nine. Then followed the evidence of one or two survivors of the shipwreck, which stated that Lady Glenthirsk and her son were seen to reach the shore in safety in the boat that was launched from the sinking ship. After this came a paragraph from an English newspaper published in Capetown, dated not two years before, and headed "Strange Tale of the Sea," which paragraph, with some few errors, told the story of the finding of Ralph--though how the writing man knew it I know not, unless it was through the tutor with the blue spectacles of whom I have spoken--and said that he was still living on the farm of Jan Botmar in the Transkei. This was all that was in the paper. I asked to look at it and kept it, saying in the morning that the Kaffir girl seeing it lying about the kitchen had used it to light the fire; but to this day it is with the other things in the waggon chest under my bed.

When the paper was done with, the lawyer took up the tale and told me

that it was believed in England that Lord Glenthirsk had been drowned in the sea, as indeed he was, and that Lady Glenthirsk and her son perished on the shore with the other women and children, for so those sent by the English Government to search out the facts had reported. Thus it came about that after a while Lord Glenthirsk's younger brother was admitted by law to his title and estates, which he enjoyed for some eight years, that is, until his death. About a year before he died, however, someone sent him the paragraph headed "Strange Tale of the Sea," and he was much disturbed by it, though to himself he argued that it was nothing but an idle story, such as it seems are often put into newspapers. The end of the matter was that he took no steps to discover whether the tale were true or false, and none knew of it save himself, and he was not minded to go fishing in that ugly water. So it came about that he kept silent as the grave, till at length, when the grave yawned at his feet, and when the rank and the lands and the wealth were of no more use to him, he opened his mouth to his son and to his lawyer, the two men who sat before me, and to them only, bidding them seek out the beginning of the tale, and if it were true, to make restitution to his nephew.

Now--for all this, listening with my ears wide open, and sometimes filling in what was not told me in words, I gathered from the men before they left the house--as it chanced the dying lord could not have chosen two worse people for such an errand, seeing that although the son was honest, both of them were interested in proving the tale to be false. Since that time, however, often I have thought that he knew this himself, and trusted by the choice both to cheat his own conscience and to preserve the wealth and dignity for his son. God, to whom he has

gone, alone knows the truth of it, but with such a man it may very well have been as I think. I say that both were interested, for it seems, as he told me afterwards, that the lawyer was to receive a great sum--ten thousand pounds--under the will of the dead lord for whom he had done much during his lifetime. But if Ralph were proved to be the heir this sum would have been his and not the lawyer's, for the money was part of his father's inheritance; therefore it was worth just ten thousand pounds to that lawyer to convince himself and the false lord that Ralph was not the man, and therefore it was that I found him so easy to deal with.

Now after his father was dead the lawyer tried to persuade the son to take no notice of his dying words, and to let the matter rest where it was, seeing that he had nothing to gain and much to lose. But this he would not consent to, for, as I have said, he was honest, declaring that he could not be easy in his mind till he knew the truth, and that if he did not go to find it out himself he would send others to do so for him. As the lawyer desired this least of anything, he gave way, and they set out upon their journey--which in those days was a very great journey indeed--arriving at last in safety at our stead in the Transkei; for, whether he liked it or not, his companion--who now was called Lord Glenthirsk--would not be turned aside from the search or suffer him to prosecute it alone.

At length, when all the tale was told, the lawyer looked at me with his sharp eyes and said, through the interpreter:

"Vrouw Botmar, you have heard the story, tell us what you know. Is the young man who lives with you he whom we seek?"

Now I thought for a second, though that second seemed like a year. All doubt had left me, there was no room for it. Ralph and no other was the man, and on my answer might hang his future. But I had argued the thing out before and made up my mind to lie, though, so far as I know, it is the only lie I ever told, and I am not a woman who often changes her mind. Therefore I lied.

"It is not he," I said, "though for his sake I might wish that it were, and this I can prove to you."

Now, when I had told this great falsehood, prompted to it by my love for the lad and my love for Suzanne, his affianced wife, my mind grew as it were empty for a moment, and I remember that in the emptiness I seemed to hear a sound of laughter echoing in the air somewhere above the roof of the house. Very swiftly I recovered myself, and looking at the men I saw that my words rejoiced them, except the interpreter indeed, who being a paid servant coming from far away, from the neighbourhood of Capetown I believe, had no interest in the matter one way or the other beyond that of earning his money with as little trouble as possible. Yes, they smiled at each other, looking as though a great weight had been lifted off their minds, till presently the lawyer checked himself and said:

"Be so good as to set out the proofs of which you speak, Vrouw Botmar."

"I will," I answered, "but tell me first, the ship India was wrecked in the year 1824, was she not?"

"Undoubtedly," answered the lawyer.

"Well, have you heard that another ship called the Flora, travelling from the Cape I know not whither, was lost on this coast in the same month of the following year, and that a few of her passengers escaped?"

"I have heard of it," he said.

"Good. Now look here," and going to a chest that stood beneath the window, I lifted from it the old Bible that belonged to my grandfather and father, on the white pages at the beginning of which are written the record of many births, marriages, deaths and other notable events that had happened in the family. Opening it I searched and pointed to a certain entry inscribed in the big writing of my husband Jan, and in ink which was somewhat faint, for the ink that the traders sold us in those days had little virtue in it. Beneath this entry were others made by Jan in later years, telling of things that had happened to us, such as the death of his great-aunt who left him money, the outbreak of small-pox on the farm, and the number of people who died from it, the attack of a band of the red Kaffirs upon our house, when by the mercy of God we beat them off, leaving twelve of their dead behind them, but taking as many of our best oxen, and so forth.

"Read," I said, and the interpreter read as follows:

"On the twelfth day of September in the year 1825 (the date being written in letters) our little daughter Suzanne found a starving English boy in a kloof, who had been shipwrecked on the coast. We have taken him in as a gift of the Lord. He says that his name is Rolf Kenzie."

"You see the date," I said.

"Yes," answered the lawyer, "and it has not been altered!"

"No," I added, "it has not been altered;" but I did not tell them that Jan had not written it down till afterwards, and then by mistake had recorded the year in which he wrote, refusing to change it, although I pointed out the error, because, he said, there was no room, and that it would make a mess in the book.

"There is one more thing," I went on; "you say the mother of him you seek was a great lady. Well, I saw the body of the mother of the boy who was found, and it was that of a common person very roughly clad with coarse underclothes and hands hard with labour, on which there was but one ring, and that of silver. Here it is," and going to a drawer I took from it a common silver ring which I once bought from a pedlar because he worried me into it. "Lastly, gentlemen, the father of our lad was no lord, unless in your country it is the custom of lords to herd sheep,



for the boy told me that in his own land his father was a shepherd, and that he was travelling to some distant English colony to follow his trade. That is all I have to say about it, though I am sorry that the lad is not here to tell it you himself."

When he had heard this statement of mine, which I made in a cold and indifferent voice, the young lord, Ralph's cousin, rose and stretched himself, smiling happily.

"Well," he said, "there is the end of a very bad nightmare, and I am glad enough that we came here and found out the truth, for had we not done so I should never have been happy in my mind."

"Yes," answered the lawyer, the interpreter rendering their words all the while, "the Vrouw Botmar's evidence is conclusive, though I shall put her statement in writing and ask her to sign it. There is only one thing, and that is the strange resemblance of the names," and he glanced at him with his quick eyes.

"There are many Mackenzies in Scotland," answered Lord Glenthirsk, "and I have no doubt that this poor fellow was a shepherd emigrating with his wife and child to Australia or somewhere." Then he yawned and added, "I am going outside to get some air before I sleep. Perhaps you will draw up the paper for the good lady to sign."

"Certainly, my lord," answered the lawyer, and the young man went away quite convinced.

After he had gone the lawyer produced pen and ink and wrote out the statement, putting in it all the lies that I had told, and copying the extract from the fly-leaf of the Bible. When he had done the interpreter translated it to me, and then it was that the lawyer told me about the last wishes of the dying lord, and how it would have cost him ten thousand pounds and much business also had the tale proved true. Now at last he gave me the paper to sign. Besides the candles on the table, which being of mutton fat had burnt out, there was a lamp fed with whale's oil, but this also was dying, the oil being exhausted, so that its flame, which had sunk low, jumped from time to time with a little noise, giving out a blue light. In that unholy blue light, which turned our faces ghastly pale, the lawyer and I looked at each other as I sat before him, the pen in my hand, and in his eyes I read that he was certain that I was about to sign to a wicked lie, and in mine he read that I knew it to be a lie.

For a while we stared at each other thus, discovering each other's souls. "Sign," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "the light dies."

Then I signed, and as I wrote the lamp went out, leaving us in darkness, and through the darkness once more I heard that sound of laughter echoing in the air above the house.