

CHAPTER VIII

THE WISDOM OF SUZANNE

Now, although Suzanne heard not a word of our talk, still she grasped its purport well enough, for she knew that I proposed to throw dust into the eyes of the Englishmen. This troubled her conscience sorely, for the more she thought of it the more did it seem to her to be wicked that just because we loved him and did not wish to part with him, Ralph should be cheated of his birthright. All night long she lay awake brooding, and before ever the dawn broke she had settled in her mind that she herself would speak to the Englishmen, telling them the truth, come what might of her words, for Suzanne, my daughter, was a determined girl with an upright heart. Now feeling happier because of her decision, at length she fell asleep and slept late, and as it happened this accident of fate was the cause of the miscarriage of her scheme.

It came about in this way. Quite early in the morning--at sun-up, indeed--the Englishmen rose, and coming out of the little guest-chamber, drank the coffee that I had made ready for them, and talked together for a while. Then the young lord--Ralph's cousin--said that as they journeyed yesterday at a distance of about an hour on horseback from the farm he had noticed a large vlei, or pan, where were many ducks and also some antelope. To this vlei he proposed to ride forward with one servant only, and to stay there till the others overtook him, shooting the wild things which lived in the place, for to be happy these Englishmen must always be killing something. So he bade me farewell,

making me a present of the gold chain which he took off his watch, which chain I still have. Then he rode away, smiling after his fashion; and as I watched him go I was glad to think that he was no knave but only an easy tool in the hands of others. We never met again, but I believe that death finished his story many years ago; indeed, all those of whom I tell are dead; only Jan and I survive, and our course is well-nigh run.

When Suzanne awoke at length, having heard from a Kaffir girl that the strangers had ordered their horses, but not that the young lord had ridden forward, she slipped from the house silently, fearing lest I should stay her, and hid herself in a little patch of bush at the corner of the big mealie field by which she knew the Englishmen must pass on their return journey. Presently she heard them coming, and when she saw that the young lord was not with them, she went to the lawyer, who pulled up his horse and waited for her, the rest of the party riding on, and asked where his master was, saying that she wished to talk with him. And here I must say, if I have not said it before, that Suzanne could speak English, though not well. The Hollander tutor had instructed her in that tongue, in which Ralph also would converse with her at times when he did not wish others to understand what they were saying, for he never forgot his mother language, though he mixed many Dutch words with it.

"He has ridden forward an hour or more ago. Can I take any message to him for you?" said the lawyer. "Or if you wish to talk of business, to speak to me is to speak to him."

"That may be so," answered Suzanne, "still I like to draw my water at the fountain itself. Yet, as he has gone, I beg you to listen to me, for when you have heard what I have to say I think that you will bring him back. You came here about Ralph Kenzie, did you not, and my mother told you that he is not the man whom you seek, did she not?"

The lawyer nodded.

"Well, I tell you that all this tale is false, for he is the very man," and she poured out the true story of Ralph and of the plot that had been made to deceive them about him.

Now, as I have said, Suzanne's English was none of the best and it is possible that the lawyer did not understand. For my part, however, I think that he understood well enough, for she told me afterwards that his face grew grey and anxious as he listened, and that at length he said:

"All this you tell me is very strange and weighty, so much so that I must bring my friend back to look more closely into the matter. Return now to the farm and say nothing of having met me, for by this evening, or to-morrow at the latest, we will come there again and sift out the truth of this question."

To this she agreed, being guileless, and the lawyer rode away after the other. All that day and all the next Suzanne scarcely spoke to me, but I saw that she was expecting something to happen, and that she glanced continually towards the path by which the Englishmen had journeyed,

thinking to see them riding back to the farm. But they rode back no more, and I am sure that the cunning lawyer never breathed one word of his meeting with Suzanne and of what took place at it to the young lord. That book was shut and it did not please him to reopen it, since to do so might have cost him ten thousand pounds. On the third morning I found Suzanne still looking down the path, and my patience being exhausted by her silence, I spoke to her sharply.

"What are you doing, girl?" I asked. "Have we not had enough visitors of late that you must stand here all day awaiting more?"

"I seek no new visitors," Suzanne said, "but those who have been here only, and I see now that I seek in vain."

"What do you mean, Suzanne?"

Now of a sudden she seemed to make up her mind to speak, for she turned and faced me boldly, saying:

"I mean, mother, that I told the Englishman with the red hair, the agent, that all the fine tale you spun to him about Ralph was false, and that he was the man they came to find."

"You dared to do that, girl?" I said, then checked myself and added,

"Well, what did the man say?"

"He said that he would ride on and bring the young lord back that I might talk with him, but they have not come."

"No, nor will they, Suzanne, for if they sought they did not wish to find, or at least the lawyer did not wish it, for he had too much at stake. Well, things have gone finely with you, seeing that your hands are clean from sin, and that Ralph still stays at your side."

"The sin of the parents is the sin of the child," she answered, and then of a sudden she took fire as it were, and fell upon me and beat me with her tongue; nor could I hold my own before this girl of eighteen, the truth being that she had right on her side, and I knew it. She told me that we were wicked plotters who, to pleasure ourselves, had stolen from Ralph everything except his life; and many other such hard sayings she threw at me till at last I could bear it no more, but gave her back word for word. Indeed, it would be difficult to say which had the best of that quarrel, for if Suzanne's tongue was the nimbler and her words were winged with truth, I had the weight of experience on my side and the custom of authority. At last, as she paused breathless, I cried out:

"And for whose sake was all this done, you ungrateful chit, if it was not for your own?"

"If that was so, which is not altogether true," she answered, "it would have pleased me better, if, rather than make me a partner in this crime, and set me as bait to snare Ralph, you had left me to look after my own welfare."

"What!" I exclaimed, "are you then so shallow hearted that you were ready to bid farewell to him who for many years has been as your brother, and is now your affianced husband? You know well whatever he might promise now, that if once he had gone across the sea to England, you would have seen him no more."

"No," she answered, growing calm of a sudden, "I was not so prepared, for sooner would I die than lose Ralph."

"How, then, do you square this with all your fine talk?" I asked, thinking that at length I had trapped her. "If he had gone you must have lost him."

"Not so," she answered, innocently, "for I should have married him before he went, and then I could have been certain that he would return here whenever I wished it."

Now when I heard this I gasped, partly because the girl's cleverness took the breath from me, and partly with mortification that I should have lived to learn wisdom from the mouth of a babe and a suckling. For there was no doubt of it, this plan, of which I had not even thought, was the answer to the riddle, since by means of it Ralph might have kept his own, and we, I doubt not, should have kept Ralph. Once married to Suzanne he would have returned to her, or if she had gone with him for a little while, which might have been better, she would certainly have brought him back, seeing that she loved us and her home too well to

forsake them.

Yes, I gasped, and the only answer that I could make when I reflected how little need there had been for the sin which we had sinned, was to burst into weeping, whereon Suzanne ran to me and kissed me and we made friends again. But all the same, I do not think that she ever thought quite so well of me afterwards, and if I thought the more of her, still I made up my mind that the sooner she was married and had a husband of her own to preach to, the better it would be for all of us.

Thus ended the story of the coming of the Englishmen, and of how Ralph lost his wealth and rank. We never heard or saw more of them, seeing that in those days before the great Trek we did not write letters, and if we had we should not have known where to send them, nor did the post-cart pass the door twice a week as it does in this overcrowded land of Natal.

Now I must go on to tell of the doings of that devil upon earth, Swart Piet, and of how the little Kaffir witch-doctress, Sihamba Ngenyanga, which means She-who-walks-by-the-moonlight, became the slave and saviour of Suzanne.

At this time the Heer van Vooren, Swart Piet's father, had been dead for two years, and there were strange stories as to the manner of his death which I do not think it necessary to set out here. Whether or no Swart

Piet did or did not murder his father I cannot say, nor does it matter, for at the least he worked other crimes as bad. After the death of the Heer van Vooren, however he may have chanced to die, this is certain, that Swart Piet inherited great riches as we used to reckon riches in those days; that is, he had vast herds of cattle and goats and sheep, some of which were kept for him by native chiefs far away, as much land as he wanted, and, it was said, a good sum in English gold. But he was a strange man, not like to other men, for he married no wife and courted no misses, that is until he took to courting Suzanne, and his only pleasure was to keep the company of Kaffir chiefs and women and to mix himself up with the devilments of the witch-doctors. Still, as every man has his fate, at last he fell in love with Suzanne, and in love with her he remained during all his wicked life, if that can be love which seeks to persecute and bring misery upon its object. It was just before the coming of the Englishmen that this passion of his manifested itself, for whenever he met the girl--outside the house for the most part, since Jan did not like to have him in it--he made sweet speeches and passed foolish pleasantries which, to be just, I am sure Suzanne never encouraged, since all her heart was elsewhere.

Now Swart Piet had information of everything, for his Kaffir spies brought it to him; therefore he very soon learned that Jan and Ralph had gone away with the cattle to the warm veldt, and that we two women were alone in the house. This was his opportunity, and one of which he availed himself, for now two or three times a week he would ride over from his place, take supper and ask leave to sleep, which it was difficult to refuse, all this time wearying the poor girl with his

attentions. At last I spoke my mind to him about it, though not without hesitation, for to tell truth Swart Piet was one of the few men of whom I have ever been afraid. He listened to me politely and answered:

"All this is very true, Aunt, but if you desire a fruit and it will not fall, then you must shake the tree."

"What if it sticks to the bough?" I asked.

"Then, Aunt, you must climb the tree and pluck it."

"And what if by that time it is in another man's pouch?"

"Then, Aunt," he answered with one of those dark smiles that turned my blood cold, "then, Aunt, the best thing which you can do is to kill the other man and take it out, for after that the fruit will taste all the sweeter."

"Get you gone, Swart Piet," I said in anger, "for no man who talks thus shall stay in my house, and it is very well for you that neither my husband nor Ralph Kenzie are here to put you out of it."

"Well," he answered, "they are not here, are they? And as for your house, it is a pretty place, but I only seek one thing in it, and that is not built into the walls. I thank you for your hospitality, Aunt, and now, good-day to you."

"Suzanne!" I called, "Suzanne!" for I thought that she was in her chamber; but the girl, knowing that Piet van Vooren was here, had slipped out, and of this he was aware. He knew, moreover, where she had gone, for I think that one of his Kaffir servants was watching outside and told him, and thither he followed her and made love to her.

In the end--for he would not be put off--he asked her for a kiss, whereat she grew angry. Then, for he was no shy wooer, he tried to take it by force; but she was strong and active and slipped from him. Instead of being ashamed, he only laughed after his uncanny fashion, and said:

"Well, missy, you have the best of me now, but I shall win that kiss yet. Oh! I know all about it; you love the English castaway, don't you? But there, a woman can love many men in her life, and when one is dead another will serve her turn."

"What do you mean, myn Heer van Vooren?" asked Suzanne, afraid.

"Mean? Nothing, but I shall win that kiss yet, yes, and before very long."