

CHAPTER IX

HOW SUZANNE SAVED SIHAMBAMBA

Now in a valley of the hills, something over an hour's ride from the farm, and not far from the road that ran to Swart Piet's place, lived the little Kaffir witch-doctress, Sihamba Ngenyanga. This woman did not belong to any of the Transkei or neighbouring tribes, but had drifted down from the North; indeed, she was of Swazi or some such blood, though why she left her own people we did not know at that time. In appearance Sihamba was very strange, for, although healthy, perfectly shaped and copper-coloured rather than black, she was no taller than a child of twelve years old--a thing that made many people believe that she was a bush woman, which she most certainly was not. For a Kaffir also she was pretty, having fine small features, beautiful white teeth, and a fringe of wavy black hair that stood out stiffly round her head something after the fashion of the gold plates which the saints wear in the pictures in our old Bible.

This woman Sihamba, who might have been a little over thirty years of age, had been living in our neighbourhood for some three or four years and practising as a doctress. Not that she was a "black" doctress, for she never took part in the "smelling-out" of human beings for witchcraft or in the more evil sort of rites. Her trade was to sell charms and medicines to the sick, also to cure animals of their ailments, at which, indeed, she was very clever, though there was some who said that when she chose she could "throw the bones" and tell the future better than

most, and this without dressing herself up in bladders and snake skins, or falling into fits, or trances, and such mummary. Lastly, amongst the natives about, and some of the Boers too, I am sorry to say, she had the reputation of being the best of rainmakers, and many were the head of cattle that she earned by prophesying the break-up of a drought, or the end of continual rains. Indeed, it is certain that no one whom I ever knew had so great a gift of insight into the omens of the weather at all seasons of the year, as this strange Sihamba Ngenyanga, a name that she got, by the way, because of her habit of wandering about in the moonlight to gather the herbs and the medicine roots which she used in her trade.

On several occasions Jan had sent animals to be doctored by this Sihamba, for she would not come out to attend to them whatever fee was offered to her. At first I did not approve of it, but as she always cured the animals, whatever their ailments might be, I gave in on the matter.

Now it happened that a few months before some travellers who had guested at our house gave Suzanne a little rough-haired dog bred of parents which had been brought from England. Of this dog Suzanne grew very fond, and when it fell sick of the distemper she was in much distress. So it came about that one afternoon Suzanne put the dog in a basket, and taking with her an old Hottentot to carry it, set out upon her grey mare for the valley where Sihamba lived. Now Sihamba had her hut and the huts of the few people in her service in a recess at the end of the valley, so placed that until you were quite on to them you would never have

guessed that they were there. Down this valley Suzanne rode, the Hottentot with the basket on his head trotting by her side, till turning the corner she came upon a scene which she had very little expected. In one part of the open space beyond her, herded by some Kaffirs, were a number of cattle, sheep and goats. Opposite to them in the shadow under the hillside stood the huts of Sihamba, and in front of these grew a large tree. Beneath this tree was Sihamba herself with scarcely any clothing on her, for she had been stripped, her tiny wrists bound together behind her back and a rope about her neck, of which one end was thrown over a bough of the tree. In front of her, laughing brutally, stood none other than Swart Piet and with him a small crowd of men, mostly half-breed wanderers of the sort that trek from place to place claiming hospitality on the grounds of cousinship or poverty, until they are turned off as a nuisance. Also there were present a few Kaffirs, either headmen in Swart Piet's pay or some of his dark associates in witchcraft.

At first Suzanne was inclined to turn her horse and fly, but she was a brave girl, and the perilous state of the little doctress moved her to pity, for where Swart Piet was there she suspected cruelty and wicked motive. So she rode on, yes, straight up to Swart Piet himself.

"In the name of Heaven what passes here, myn Heer?" she asked.

"Ah! Miss Suzanne, is it you?" he answered. "Well, you have not chosen a nice time for your visit, for we are about to--hang--this thief and witch, who has been duly convicted after a fair trial."

"A fair trial," said Suzanne, glancing scornfully at the rabble about her, "and were these friends of yours the jury? What is her offence?"

"Her offence is that she who lives here on my land has stolen my cattle and hid them away in a secret kloof. It has been proved against her by ample evidence. There are the cattle yonder mixed up with her own. I, as Veld-Cornet of the district, have tried the case according to law, and the woman having been found guilty must die according to law."

"Indeed, myn Heer," said Suzanne, "then if I understand you right, you are both accuser and judge, and the law which permits this is one that I never heard of. Oh!" she went on angrily, "no wonder that the English sing a loud song about us Boers and our cruelty to the natives when such a thing as this can happen. It is not justice, myn Heer; it is a crime for which, if you escape the hand of man, God will bring you to account."

Then for the first time Sihamba spoke in a very quiet voice, which showed no sign of fear.

"You are right, lady," she said; "it is not justice, it is a crime born of revenge, and my life must pay forfeit for his wickedness. I am a free woman, and I have harmed none and have bewitched none. I have cured sick people and sick creatures, that is all. The Heer says that I live upon his land, but I am not his slave; I pay him rent to live here. I never stole his cattle; they were mixed up with mine by his servants in a

far-off kloof in order to trump up a charge against me, and he knows it, for he gave orders that the thing should be done, so that afterwards he might have the joy of hanging me to this tree, because he wishes to be avenged upon me for other matters, private matters between me and him. But, lady, do not trouble yourself about the fate of such a poor black creature as I am. Go away and tell the story if you will, but go quickly, for these sights of death are not fit for young eyes like yours to see."

"I will not go," exclaimed Suzanne, "or if I go, it shall be to bring down upon you, Swart Piet, the weight of the law which you have broken. Ah! would that my father were at home; he does not love Kaffirs but he does love justice."

Now when they heard Suzanne speaking such bold words and saw the fire in her eyes, Swart Piet and those with him began to grow afraid. The hanging of a witch-doctress after a formal trial upon the charge of theft of cattle was no great matter in those days, for such thefts were common and a cause of much trouble to out-lying farmers, nor would anyone in these half-settled regions be likely to look too closely into the rights and wrongs of an execution on account of them. But if a white person who was present went away to proclaim to the authorities, perhaps even to the Governor of the Cape, whose ear could always be won through the missionaries of the London Society, that this pretended execution was nothing but a murder, then the thing became serious. From the moment that Suzanne began to speak on behalf of Sihamba, Swart Piet had seen that it would be impossible to hang her unless he wished to risk his

own neck. But he guessed also that the girl could not know this, and therefore he determined to make terms by working on her pity, such terms as should put her to shame before all those gathered there; yes, and leave something of a stain upon her heart for so long as she should live.

"I do not argue law with young ladies," he said, with a little laugh, "but I am always ready to oblige young ladies, especially this young lady. Now, yonder witch and cattle-thief has richly earned her doom, yet, because you ask it, Suzanne Botmar, I am ready to withdraw the prosecution against her, and to destroy the written record of it in my hand, on two conditions, of which the first is that she pays over to me by way of compensation for what she has stolen, all her cattle and other belongings. Do you consent to that, witch?"

"How can I refuse?" said Sihamba, with a bitter laugh, "seeing that if I do you will take both life and goods. But what is the second condition?"

"I am coming to that, witch, but it has nothing to do with you. Suzanne, it is this: that here, before all these people, as the price of this thief's life, you give me the kiss which you refused to me the other day."

Now, before Suzanne could answer, Sihamba broke in eagerly, "Nay, lady, let not your lips be stained and your heart be shamed for the sake of such as I. Better that I should die than that you should suffer defilement at the hands of Swart Piet, who, born of white blood and

black, is false to both and a disgrace to both."

"I cannot do it," gasped Suzanne, turning pale and not heeding her outburst, "and, Heer van Vooren, you are a coward to ask it of me."

"Can't you?" he sneered. "Well, you need not, unless you please, and it is true that young women like best to be kissed alone. Here, you Kaffirs, pull that little devil up; slowly now, that she may learn what a tight string feels like about her throat before it chokes her."

In obedience to his command three of the evil fellows with him caught hold of the end of the rope which hung over the bough, and began to pull, dragging the light form of Sihamba upwards till only the tips of her big toes touched the ground.

"Doesn't she dance prettily?" said Swart Piet with a brutal laugh, at the same time motioning to the men to keep her thus a while.

Now Suzanne looked at the blackening lips and the little form convulsed in its death struggle, and could bear the sight no more.

"Let her down!" she cried, and, springing from the saddle, for all this while she had been seated upon her horse, she walked up to Piet, saying, "Take what you seek, but oh! for your sake I wish to God that my lips were poison."

"No, no," gasped Sihamba, who now was lying half choked upon the ground.

"That is not our bargain, dear," said Piet; "it is that you should kiss me, not I you."

Again Suzanne shrank back, and again at his signal the men began to pull upon the rope. Then seeing it, with her face as pale as death, she leaned forward and touched his lips with hers, whereon he seized her round the middle, and, drawing her to him, covered her with kisses till even the brutes with him called to him not to push his jest too far and to let the girl go. This he did, uttering words which I will not repeat, and so weak was Suzanne with shame that when his arms were taken from her she fell to the ground, and lay there till the old Hottentot, her servant, ran to her, cursing and weeping with rage, and helped her to her feet. For a while she stood saying nothing, only wiping her face, as though filth had bespattered it, with the sun kapje which had fallen from her head, and her face was whiter than the white cap. At last she spoke in a hoarse voice:

"Loose that woman," she said, "who has cost me my honour."

They obeyed her, and snatching up her skin rug Sihamba turned and fled swiftly down the valley. Then Suzanne went to her horse, but before she mounted it she looked Swart Piet straight in the eyes. At the time he was following her, begging her not to be angry at a joke, for his madness was satisfied for a while and had left him. But she only looked in answer, and there was something so terrible to him in the dark eyes of this young unfriended girl that he shrank back, seeing in them,

perhaps, the shadow of fate to come. Then Suzanne rode away, and Swart Piet, having commanded his ruffians to fire the huts of Sihamba, and to collect her people, goods, and cattle, went away also.

Just at the mouth of the valley something stirred in a bush, causing the horse to start, so that Suzanne, who was thinking of other things, slipped from it to the ground. Next moment she saw that it was Sihamba, who knelt before her, kissing her feet and the hem of her robe.

"Rise," she said kindly; "what has been cannot be helped, and at least it was no fault of yours."

"Nay, Swallow," said Sihamba, for I think I have said that was the name which the natives had given to Suzanne from childhood, I believe, because of the grace of her movements and her habit of running swiftly hither and thither--"Nay, Swallow, in a way it was my fault."

"What do you mean, Sihamba?"

"I mean, Swallow, that although I am so small some have thought me pretty, and the real reason of Black Piet's hate for me is--but why should I defile your ears with the tale?"

"They would only match my face if you did," answered Suzanne grimly, "but there is no need; I can guess well enough."

"You can guess, Swallow; then you will see why it was my fault. Yes,

yes, you will see that what I, a black woman, who am less than dirt in the eyes of your people, would not do to save my own life; you, a white chieftainess, and the fairest whom we know, have done of your own will to keep it in me."

"If the act was good," answered Suzanne, "may it go to my credit in the Book of the Great One who made us."

"It will go to your credit, Swallow," answered Sihamba with passion, "both in that Book and in the hearts of all who hear this story, but most of all in this heart of mine. Oh! listen, lady; sometimes a cloud comes over me, and in that cloud I who was born a doctress see visions of things that are to happen, true visions. Among them I see this: that many moons hence and far away I shall live to save you as you have saved me, but between that day and this the cloud of the future is black to my eyes, black but living."

"It may be so," answered Suzanne, "for I have heard that you have the Sight. And now, farewell; you had best seek out some friends among your people and hide yourself."

"My people," said Sihamba; "then I must seek long, for they are very, very far away, nor do they desire to see me."

"Why not?"

"Because as it chances I am by blood their ruler, for I am the only

child of my father's head-wife. But they would not have me set over them as chieftainess unless I married a man, and towards marriage I have no wish, for I am different from other women, both in body and heart. So having quarrelled with them on this and another matter of policy I set out to seek my fortune and left them to theirs."

"Your fortune was not a good one, Sihamba, for it led you to Swart Piet and the rope."

"Nay, lady, it led me to the Swallow and freedom; no, not to freedom but to slavery, for I am your slave, whose life you have bought at a great price. Now I have nothing left in the world; Swart Piet has taken my cattle which I earned cow by cow and bred up heifer by heifer, and save for the wit within my brain and this kaross upon my shoulders, I have nothing."

"What, then, will you do, Sihamba?"

"What you do, Swallow, that I shall do, for am I not your slave bought at a great price? I will go home with you and serve you, yes, to my life's end."

"That would please me well enough, Sihamba, but I do not know how it would please my father."

"What pleases you pleases him, Swallow; moreover, I can save my food twice over by curing his cattle and horses in sickness, for in such

needs I have skill."

"Well," she said, "come, and when my father returns we will settle how it shall be."