

CHAPTER X

THE OATH OF SIHAMBBA

Suzanne came home and told me her story, and when I heard it I was like a mad woman; indeed, it would have gone ill with Swart Piet's eyes and hair if I could have fallen in with him that night.

"Wait till your father returns, girl," I said.

"Yes, mother," she answered, "I wait for him--and Ralph."

"What is to be done with the little doctress, Sihamba?" I asked, adding, "I do not like such people about the place."

"Let her bide also till the men come back, mother," she answered, "and then they will see to it. Meanwhile there is an empty hut down by the cattle kraal where she can live."

So Sihamba stopped on and became a body servant to Suzanne, the best I ever saw, though she would do no other work save that of attending to sick animals.

Ten days afterwards Jan and Ralph returned safe and sound, leaving some Kaffirs in charge of the cattle in the bush-veldt. Very glad we were to see them, since, putting everything else aside, it was lonely work for two women upon the place with no neighbour at hand, and in those days to

be lonely meant to be in danger.

When we were together Jan's first question to me was:

"Have those Englishmen been here?"

"They have been here," I answered, "and they have gone away."

Jan asked me nothing more of the matter, for he did not wish to know what had passed between us. Only he looked at me queerly, and, as I think, thought the worse of me afterwards, for he found out that Suzanne and I had quarrelled about the song I sang in the ears of the Englishmen, and what that song was he could guess very well. Yes, yes, although he had been a party to the fraud, in his heart Jan put all the blame of it upon me, for that is the way of men who are mean, and always love to say "The woman tempted me," a vile habit which has come down to them with their blood.

Meanwhile another talk was passing between Ralph and Suzanne. They had rushed to meet each other like two separated colts bred in the same meadow, but when they came together it was different. Ralph put out his arms to embrace her, but she pushed him back and said, "No, not until we have spoken together."

"This is a cold greeting," said Ralph, amazed and trembling, for he feared lest Suzanne should have changed her mind as to their marriage.

"What is it that you have to tell me? Speak on, quickly."

"Two things, Ralph," she answered, and taking the least of them first, she plunged straightway into a full account of the coming of the Englishmen, of all that had passed then, and of her quarrel with me upon the matter.

"And now, Ralph," she ended, "you will understand that you have been cheated of your birthright, and this I think it just that you should know, so that, if you will, you may change your mind about staying here, for there is yet time, and follow these Englishmen to wherever it is they have gone, to claim from them your heritage."

Ralph laughed and answered, "Why, Sweet, I thought that we had settled all this long ago. That your mother did not tell the men quite the truth is possible, but if she played with it, it was for the sake of all of us and with my leave. Let them go and the fortune with them, for even if I could come to England and find it there, I should be but as a wild buck in a sheep kraal, out of place and unhappy. Moreover, we should be separated, dear, for even if you would all consent, I could never take you from your own people and the land where you were born. So now that there is an end to this, once and for ever, let me kiss you in greeting, Suzanne."

But she shook her head and denied him, saying, "No, for I have another tale to tell you, and an uglier--so ugly indeed that after the hearing of it I doubt much whether you will wish to kiss me any more."

"Be swift with it then," he answered, "for you torment me," and she began her story.

She told how that, after he had gone away, Swart Piet began to persecute her; how he had wished to kiss her and she had refused them, so that he left her with threats. Then she paused suddenly and said:

"And now, before I finish the story, you shall swear an oath to me. You shall swear that you will not attempt to kill Swart Piet because of it."

At first he would swear nothing, for already he was wild with anger against the man, whereupon she answered that she would tell him nothing.

At last, when they had wrangled for a while, he asked her in a hoarse voice, "Say now, Suzanne, have you come to any harm at the hands of this fellow?"

"No," she answered, turning her head away. "God be thanked! I have come to no harm of my body, but of my mind I have come to great harm."

Now he breathed more freely and said:

"Very well, then, on with your story, for I swear to you that I will not try to kill Swart Piet because of this offence, whatever it may be."

So she went on, setting out everything exactly as it had happened, and before she had finished Ralph was as one who is brain sick, for he

ground his teeth and stamped upon the earth like an angry bull. At last, when Suzanne had told him all, she said:

"Now, Ralph, you will understand why I would not let you kiss me before you had heard my story. It was because I feared that after hearing it you would not wish to kiss me any more."

"You talk like a foolish girl," he answered, taking her into his arms and embracing her, "and though the insult can only be paid back in blood, I think no more of it than if some beast had splashed mud into your face, which you had washed away at the next stream."

"Ah!" she cried, "you swore that you would not try to kill him for this offence."

"Yes, Sweet, I swore, and I will keep my oath. This time I will not try to kill Swart Piet."

Then they went into the house, and Ralph spoke to Jan about this matter, of which indeed I had already told him something. Jan also was very angry, and said that if he could meet Piet van Vooren it would go hard with him. Afterwards he added, however, that this Piet was a very dangerous man, and one whom it might be well to leave alone, especially as Suzanne had taken no real hurt from him.

Nowadays, and here in Natal, such a villain could be made to answer to the law, either for attempting the life of the Kaffir, or for the

assault upon the girl, or for both, but in those times it was different. Then the Transkei had but few white people in it, living far apart, nor was there any law to speak of; indeed each man did what was right in his own eyes, according to the good or evil that was in his heart. Therefore, as Jan said, it was not well to make a deadly enemy of one who was restrained by the fear of neither God nor man, and who had great wealth and power, since it might come about that he would work murder in revenge or raise the Kaffirs on us, as he who had authority among them could do very easily. Indeed as will be seen he did both these things, or tried to do them.

When his anger had cooled a little Jan spoke to us in this sense and we women agreed with him; but Ralph, who was young, fearless, and full of rage, set his mouth and said nothing.

As for Sihamba Jan wished to send her away, but Suzanne, who had grown fond of her, begged him that he would not do so, at least until he had spoken with her. So he ordered one of the slaves to fetch her, and presently the little woman came, and having saluted him, sat herself down on the floor of the sitting room after the Kaffir fashion. She was a strange little creature to see in her fur kaross and bead broidered girdle, but for a native she was very clean and pretty, with her wise woman's face set upon a body that had it been less rounded might almost have been that of a child. Also she had adorned herself with great care, not in the cast-off clothes of white people but after her own manner, for her wavy hair which stood out from her head was powdered over with that sparkling blue dust which the Kaffir women use, and round her neck

she wore a single string of large blue beads.

At first Jan spoke to her crossly, saying:

"You have brought trouble and disgrace upon my house, Sihamba, and I wish you to begone from it."

"It is true," she answered, "but not of my own will did I bring the trouble, O Father of Swallow," for so she always called Jan. Indeed, for Sihamba, Suzanne was the centre of all things, and thus in her mouth the three of us has no other names than "Father" or "Mother" or "Lover" of Swallow.

"That may be so," answered Jan, "but, doubtless, Black Piet, who hates you, will follow you here, and then we shall be called upon to defend you, and there will be more trouble."

"It is not I whom Black Piet will follow," she replied, "for he has stolen all I have, and as my life is safe there is nothing more to get from me," and she looked at Suzanne.

"What do you mean, Sihamba? Speak plain words," said Jan.

"I mean," she answered, "that it is not I who am now in danger, but my mistress, the Swallow, for he who has kissed her once will wish to kiss her again."

Now at this Ralph cursed the name of Swart Piet aloud, and Jan answered,

"It is a bullet from my roer that he shall kiss if he tries it, that I swear."

"I hope it may be so," said Sihamba; "yet, Father of Swallow, I pray you send me not away from her who bought me at a great price, and to whom my life belongs. Look; I cost you but little to keep, and that little I can earn by doctoring your horses and cattle, in which art I have some skill, as you know well. Moreover I have many eyes and ears that can see and hear things to which yours are deaf and blind, and I tell you that I think a time will come when I shall be able to do service to all of you who are of the nest of the Swallow. Now, if she bids me to go I will go--for am I not her servant to obey?--yet I beseech you do not so command her."

Sihamba had risen as she spoke, and now she stood before Jan, her head thrown back, looking up into his eyes with such strange power that, though he was great and strong and had no will to it, yet he found himself forced to look down into hers. More, as he told me afterwards, he saw many things in the eyes of Sihamba, or it may be that he thought that he saw them, for Jan was always somewhat superstitious. At least this is true that more than once during the terrible after years, when some great event had happened to us he would cry out, "I have seen this place, or thing, before, I know not where." Then if I bade him think he would answer, "Now I remember; it was in the eyes of Sihamba that I saw it, yonder in the Transkei before Ralph and Suzanne were married."

Presently she freed his eyes and turned her head, whereon Jan grew pale and swayed as though he were about to fall. Recovering himself, however, he said shortly,

"Stay if you will, Sihamba; you are welcome for so long as it shall please you."

She lifted her little hand and saluted him, and I noticed that it was after another fashion to that of the Kaffirs who lived thereabouts, after the Zulu fashion indeed.

"I hear your words, chief," she said, "and I stay. Though I be but a lizard in the thatch, yet the nest of the Swallow shall be my nest, and in the fangs of the lizard, Sihamba, there is poison and woe to the hawk of the air or the snake of the grass that would rob this nest wherein you dwell. Listen now to my oath--you whom she loves. Cold shall this heart be and stiff this hand, empty shall this head be of thoughts and these eyes of sight, before shame or death shall touch the swift wings of yonder Swallow who stained her breast for me. Remember this always, you whom she loves, that while I live, I, Sihamba Ngenyanga, Sihamba the walker by moonlight, she shall live, and if she dies I will die also."

Then once more she saluted and went, leaving us wondering, for we saw that this woman was not altogether as other Kaffirs are, and it came into our minds that in the time of need she would be as is a sharp spear in the hand of one who is beset with foes.

That night as we lay abed I talked with Jan, saying:

"Husband, I think there are clouds upon our sky, which for many years has been so blue. Trouble gathers round us because of the beauty of Suzanne, and I fear Swart Piet, for he is not a man to be stopped by a trifle. Now, Ralph loves Suzanne and Suzanne loves Ralph, and, though they are young, they are man and woman full grown, able to keep a house and bear its burdens. Why then should they not marry with as little delay as may be, for when once they are wed Van Vooren will cease from troubling them, knowing his suit to be hopeless?"

"As you will, wife, as you will," Jan answered, somewhat sharply, "but I doubt if we shall get rid of our danger thus, for with you I think that the tide of our lives has turned, and that it sets towards sorrow. Ay," he went on, sitting up in the bed, "and I will tell you when it turned; it turned upon the day that you lied to the Englishmen."