

CHAPTER XI

A FIGHT AND A SHOT

Early the next morning I sought for Ralph to speak to him on the matter of his marriage, which, to tell truth, I longed to see safely accomplished. But I could not find him anywhere, or learn where he had gone, though one of the slaves told me that they had seen him mount his horse at the stable.

I went down to the cattle kraal to look if he were there, and as I returned, I saw Sihamba seated by the door of her hut engaged in combing her hair and powdering it with the shining blue dust.

"Greeting, Mother of Swallow," she said. "Whom do you seek?"

"You know well," I answered.

"Yes, I know well. At the break of dawn he rode over yonder rise."

"Why?" I asked.

"How can I tell why? But Swart Piet lives out yonder."

"Had he his gun with him?" I asked again and anxiously.

"No, there was nothing but a sjambock, a very thick sjambock, in his

hand."

Then I went back to the house with a heavy heart, for I was sure that Ralph had gone to seek Piet van Vooren, though I said nothing of it to the others. So it proved indeed. Ralph had sworn to Suzanne that he would not try to kill Piet, but here his oath ended, and therefore he felt himself free to beat him if he could find him, for he was altogether mad with hate of the man. Now he knew that when he was at home it was Swart Piet's habit to ride of a morning, accompanied by one Kaffir only, to visit a certain valley where he kept a large number of sheep. Thither Ralph made his way, and when he reached the place he saw that, although it was time for them to be feeding, the sheep were still in their kraal, baa-ing, stamping, and trying to climb the gate, for they were hungry to get at the green grass.

"So," thought Ralph, "Swart Piet means to count the flock out himself this morning. He will be here presently."

Half an hour afterwards he came sure enough, and with him the one Kaffir as was usual. Then the bars of the gate were let down, and the sheep suffered to escape through them, Swart Piet standing upon one side and the Kaffir upon the other, to take tale of their number. When all the sheep were out, and one of the herds had been brought before him and beaten by the Kaffir, because some lambs were missing, Swart Piet turned to ride homewards, and in a little gorge near by came face to face with Ralph, who was waiting for him. Now he started and looked to see if he could escape, but there was no way of doing it without shame, so he rode

forward and bid Ralph good-day boldly, asking him if he had ever seen a finer flock of sheep.

"I did not come here to talk of sheep," answered Ralph, eyeing him.

"Is it of a lamb, then, that you come to talk, Heer Kenzie, a ewe lamb, the only one of your flock?" sneered Piet, for he had a gun in his hand and he saw that Ralph had none.

"Aye," said Ralph, "it is of a white ewe lamb whose fleece has been soiled by a bastard thief who would have stolen her," and he looked at him.

"I understand," said Piet coldly, for he was a bold man; "and now, Heer Kenzie, you had best let me ride by."

"Why should I let you ride by when I have come out to seek you?"

"For a very good reason, Heer Kenzie; because I have a gun in my hand and you have none, and if you do not clear the road presently it may go off."

"A good reason, indeed," said Ralph, "and one of which I admit the weight," and he drew to one side of the path as though to let Piet pass, which he began to do holding the muzzle of the gun in a line with the other's head. Ralph sat upon his horse staring moodily at the ground, as though he was trying to make up his mind to say something or other, but

all the time he was watching out of the corner of his quick eye. Just as Swart Piet drew past him, and was shaking the reins to put his horse to a canter, Ralph slid from the saddle, and springing upon him like light, he slipped his strong arm round him and dragged him backwards to the ground over the crupper of the horse. As Piet fell he stretched out his hands to grip the saddle and save himself, so that the gun which he carried resting on his knees dropped upon the grass. Ralph seized it and fired it into the air; then he turned to face his enemy, who by this time had found his feet.

"Now we are more equally matched, myn Heer van Vooren," he said, "and can talk further about that ewe lamb, the only one of the flock. Nay, you need not look for the Kaffir to help you, for he has run after your horse, and at the best he will hardly dare to thrust himself between two angry white men. Come, let us talk, myn Heer."

Black Piet made no answer, so for a while the two stood facing each other, and they were a strange pair, as different as the light from the darkness. Ralph fair-haired, grey-eyed, stern-faced, with thin nostrils, that quivered like those of a well-bred horse, narrow-flanked, broad-chested, though somewhat slight of limb and body, for he was but young, and had scarcely come to a man's weight, but lithe and wiry as a tiger. Piet taller and more massive, for he had the age of him by five years, with round Kaffir eyes, black and cruel, coarse black hair that grew low upon his brow, full red lips, the lower drooping so that the large white teeth and a line of gums could be seen within. Great-limbed he was also, firm-footed and bull-strengthened, showing his face the

cruelty and the cunning of a black race, mingled with the mind and mastery of the white; an evil and a terrible man, knowing no lord save his own passions, and no religion but black witchcraft and vile superstition; a foe to be feared indeed, but one who loved better to stab in the dark than to strike in the open day.

"Well, myn Heer van Vooren," mocked Ralph, "you could fling your arms about a helpless girl and put her to shame before the eyes of men, now do the same by me if you can," and he took one step towards him.

"What is this monkey's chatter?" asked Piet, in his slow voice. "Is it because I gave the girl a kiss that you would fix a quarrel upon me? Have you not done as much yourself many times, and for a less stake than the life of one who has been doomed to die?"

"If I have kissed her," answered Ralph, "it is with her consent, and because she will be my wife; but you worked upon her pity to put her to shame and now you shall pay the price of it. Do you see that whip?" and he nodded toward the sjambock that was lying on the grass. "Let him who proves the best man use it upon the other."

"Will be your wife----" sneered Piet, "the wife of the English castaway! She might have been, but now she never shall, unless she cares to wed a carcass cut into rimpis. You want a flogging, and you shall have it, yes, to the death, but Suzanne shall be--not your wife but----"

He got no further, for at that moment Ralph sprang at him like a wild

cat, stopping his foul mouth with a fearful blow upon the lips. Then there followed a dreadful struggle between these two. Black Piet rushed again and again, striving to clasp his antagonist in his great arms and crush him, whereas Ralph, who, like all Englishmen, loved to use his fists, and knew that he was no match for Piet in strength, sought to avoid him and plant blow after blow upon his face and body. This, indeed, he did with such success that soon the Boer was covered with blood and bruises. Again and again he charged at him, roaring with pain and rage, and again and again Ralph first struck and then slipped to one side.

At length Piet's turn came, for Ralph in leaping back caught his foot against a stone and stumbled, and before he could recover himself the iron arms were round his middle, and they were wrestling for the mastery.

Still, at the first it was Ralph who had the best of it, for he was skilful at the game, and before Swart Piet could put out his full strength he tripped him so that he fell heavily upon his back, Ralph still locked in his arms. But he could not keep him there, for the Boer was the stronger; moreover, as they fought they had worked their way up the steep side of the kloof so that the ground was against him. Thus it came about that soon they began to roll down hill fixed to each other as though by ropes, and gathering speed at every turn. Doubtless, the end of this would have been Ralph's defeat, and perhaps his death, for I think that, furious as he was, Black Piet would certainly have killed him had he found himself the master. But it chanced that his hand was

stayed, and thus. Near the bottom of the slope lay a sharp stone, and as they rolled in their fierce struggle, Piet's head struck against this stone so that for a few moments he was rendered helpless. Feeling the grip of his arms loosen, Ralph freed himself, and running to the sjambock snatched it from the ground. Now Piet sat up and stared at him stupidly, but he made no effort to renew the fight, whereon Ralph gasped:

"I promised you a flogging, but since it is chance that has conquered you more than I, I will take no advantage of it, save this----" and he struck him once or twice across the face with the whip, but not so as to draw blood, and added, "Now, at least, I am free from a certain promise that I made--that I would not kill you--and should you attempt further harm or insult towards Suzanne Botmar, kill you I will, Piet van Vooren."

At first Swart Piet did not seem to feel the blows, but presently he awoke, as it were, and touched his cheeks where the sjambock had struck him as though to assure himself that he was not dreaming some evil dream. Then he spoke in a hollow, unnatural voice. "You have won for this time, Ralph Kenzie," he said, "or, rather, Fate fighting for you has won. But it would have been better for you and your dear also, if you had never struck those blows, for I tell you, Ralph Kenzie, that as your whip touched me something broke in my brain, and now I think that I am mad."

"Mad or bad, it is all one to me," replied Ralph. "You have had your

warning, and you had best keep sane enough to remember it." Then turning he went to his horse, which was standing close by, mounted and rode away, the other answering him nothing.

Still Ralph did not get home without another adventure, for when he had gone a little way he came to a stream that ran from a hillside which was thick with trees, and here he stopped to doctor his hurts and bruises, since he did not wish to appear at the house covered with blood. Now this was a foolish enough thing to do, seeing the sort of man with whom he had to deal, and that there was bush where anyone could hide to within a hundred and twenty yards of his washing place. So it proved indeed, for just as Ralph had mounted his horse and was about to ride on, he felt a sharp stinging pain across his shoulders, as though someone had hit him on the back with a stick, and heard the sound of a gunshot fired from the cover of the bush, for there above the green leaves hung a cloud of smoke.

"That is Swart Piet who has crept round to cut me off," Ralph thought to himself, and for a moment was minded to ride to the smoke to seek him. Then he remembered that he had no gun, and that that of his enemy might be loaded again before he found him, and judged it wisest to canter into the open plain and so homewards. Of the hurt which he had taken from the bullet he thought little, yet when he reached the house it was seen that his escape had been narrow indeed, for the great ball had cut through his clothes beneath his shoulders, so that they hung down leaving his back naked. Also it had furrowed the skin, causing the blood to flow copiously, and making so horrible a sight of him that Suzanne nearly

fainted when she saw it. For my part I made certain that the lad was shot through the body, although, as it turned out, in a week, except for some soreness he was as well as ever.

Now this matter caused no little stir among us, and Jan was so angry that, without saying a word to anyone, he mounted his horse and, taking some armed servants with him, set out to seek Black Piet, but not to find him, for the man had gone, nobody knew whither. Indeed this was as well, or so we thought at the time, for though Jan is slow to move, when once he is moved he is a very angry man, and I am sure that if he had met Piet van Vooren that day the grasses would have been richer by the blood of one or both of them. But he did not meet him and so the thing passed over, for afterwards we remembered that Ralph had been the aggressor, since no one would take count of this story of the kissing of a girl, and also that there was no proof at all that it was Piet who had attempted his life, as that shot might have been fired by anyone.

Now from this day forward Suzanne went in terror of Swart Piet, and whenever Ralph rode, he rode armed, for though it was said that he had gone on one of his long journeys trading among the Kaffirs, both of them guessed that they had not seen the last of Van Vooren. Jan and I were afraid also, for we knew the terrible nature of the man and of his father before him, and that they came of a family which never forgot a quarrel or left a desire ungratified.

About fourteen days after Ralph had been shot at and wounded, a Kaffir brought a letter for Jan, which, on being opened, proved to have been

written by Swart Piet, or on his behalf, since his name was set at the bottom of it. It read thus:--

"To the Heer Jan Botmar,

"Well-beloved Heer, this is to tell you that your daughter, Suzanne, holds my heart, and that I desire to make her my wife. As it is not convenient for me to come to see you at present, I write to ask you that you will consent to our betrothal. I will make a rich woman of her as I can easily satisfy you, and you will find it better to have me as a dear son-in-law and friend than as a stranger and an enemy, for I am a good friend and a bad enemy. I know there has been some talk of love between Suzanne and the English foundling at your place; but I can overlook that, although you may tell the lad that if he is impertinent to me again as he was the other day, he will not for the second time get off with a whipping only. Be so good as to give your answer to the bearer, who will pass it on to those that can find me, for I am travelling about on business, and do not know where I shall be from day to day. Give also my love to Suzanne, your daughter, and tell her that I think often of the time when she shall be my wife.

"I am, well-beloved Heer, your friend,

"Piet van Vooren."

Now, when Ralph had finished reading this letter aloud, for it had been given to him as the best scholar among us, you might have thought there were four crazy people in the room, so great was our rage. Jan and Ralph said little indeed, although they looked white and strange with anger, and Suzanne not over much, for it was I who talked for all of them.

"What is your answer, girl?" asked her father presently with an angry laugh.

"Tell the Heer Piet van Vooren," she replied, smiling faintly, "that if ever his lips should touch my face again it will be only when that face is cold in death. Oh! Ralph," she cried, turning to him suddenly and laying her hand upon his breast, "it may be that this man will bring trouble and separation on us; indeed, my heart warns me of it, but, whatever chances, remember my words, dead I may be, but faithful I shall be--yes, to death and through death."

"Son, take pen and write," said Jan before Ralph could answer. So Ralph wrote down these words as Jan told them to him:

"Piet van Vooren,

"Sooner would I lay my only child out for burial in the grave than lead her to the house of a coloured man, a consorter with witch-doctors and black women and a would-be murderer. That is my answer, and I add this to it. Set no foot within a mile of my house, for here we shoot

straighter than you do, and if we find you on this place, by the help of God we will put a bullet through your carcass."

At the foot of this writing, which he would not suffer to be altered, Jan printed his name in big letters; then he went out to seek the messenger, whom he found talking to Sihamba, and having given him the paper bade him begone swiftly to wherever it was he came from. The man, who was a strong red-coloured savage, marked with a white scar across the left cheek, and naked except for his moocha and the kaross rolled up upon his shoulders, took the letter, hid it in his bundle, and went.

Jan also turned to go, but I who had followed him and was watching him, although he did not know it, saw him hesitate and stop.

"Sihamba," he said, "why were you talking to that man?"

"Because it is my business to know of things, Father of Swallow, and I wished to learn whence he came."

"Did you tell you then?"

"Not altogether, for someone whom he fears has laid a weight upon his tongue, but I learned that he lives at a kraal far away in the mountains, and that this kraal is owned by a white man who keeps wives and cattle at it, although he is not there himself just now. The rest I hope to hear when Swart Piet sends him back again, for I have given the

man a medicine to cure his child, who is sick, and he will be grateful to me."

"How do you know that Swart Piet sent the man?" asked Jan.

She laughed and said: "Surely that was easy to guess; it is my business to twine little threads into a rope."

Again he turned to go and again came back to speak to her.

"Sihamba," he said, "I have seen you talking to that man before. I remember the scar upon his face."

"The scar upon his face you may remember," she answered, "but you have not seen us talking together, for until this hour we never met."

"I can swear it," he said angrily. "I remember the straw hat, the shape of the man's bundle, the line where the shadow fell upon his foot, and the tic-bird that came and sat near you. I remember it all."

"Surely, Father of Swallow," Sihamba replied, eyeing him oddly, "you talk of what you have just seen."

"No, no," he said, "I saw it years ago."

"Where?" she asked, staring at him.

He started and uttered some quick words. "I know now," he said. "I saw it in your eyes the other day."

"Yes," she answered quietly, "I think that, if anywhere, you saw it in my eyes, since the coming of this messenger is the first of all the great things that are to happen to the Swallow and to those who live in her nest. I do not know the things; still, it may happen that another who has Vision may see them in the glass of my eyes."