

## CHAPTER XII

### WHAT THE COW SHOWED ZINTI

Twelve days passed, and one morning when I went out to feed the chickens, I saw the red Kaffir with the scar on his face seated beyond the stoep taking snuff.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A letter," he answered, giving me a paper.

I took it into the house, where the others were gathered for breakfast, and as before Ralph read it. It was to this effect:

"Well-beloved Heer Botmar,--I have received your honoured letter, and I think that the unchristian spirit which it shows cannot be pleasing to our Lord. Still, as I seek peace and not war, I take no offence, nor shall I come near your place to provoke the shedding of the blood of men. I love your daughter, but if she rejects me for another, I have nothing more to say, except that I hope she may be happy in the life she has chosen. For me, I am leaving this part of the country, and if you, Heer Botmar, like to buy my farm, I shall be happy to sell it to you at a fair price; or perhaps the Heer Kenzie will buy it to live on after he is married; if so, he can write to me by this messenger. Farewell."

Now, when they heard this letter, the others looked more happy; but for my part I shook my head, seeing guile in it, since the tone of it was too humble for Swart Piet. There was no answer to it, and the messenger went away, but not, as I learned, before he had seen Sihamba. It seems that the medicine which she gave him had cured his child, for which he was so grateful that he drove her down a cow in payment, a fine beast, but very wild, for handling was strange to it; moreover, it had been but just separated from its calf. Still, although she questioned him closely, the man would tell Sihamba but little of the place where he lived, and nothing of the road to it.

Here I will stop to show how great was the cunning of this woman, and yet how simple the means whereby she obtained the most of her knowledge. She desired to learn about this hiding-place, since she was sure that it was one of the secret haunts of Swart-Piet, but when she asked him the messenger grew deaf and blind, and she could find no one else who knew anything of the matter. Still she was certain that the cow which had been brought to her would show the way to its home, if there were anybody to follow it thither and make report of the path.

Now when Sihamba had been robbed and sentenced to death by Swart Piet, the most of her servants and people who lived with her had been taken by him as slaves. Still two or three had escaped, either then or afterwards, and settled about in the neighbourhood of the farm where they knew that their mistress dwelt. From among these people, who still did her service, she chose a young man named Zinti, who, although he

was supposed to be stupid, was still very clever about many things, especially the remembering of any path that he had once trodden, and of every kopje, stream, or pan by which it could be traced. This youth she bade to herd the cow which had been given her, telling him to follow it whithersoever it should wander, even if it led him a ten days' journey, and when he saw that it had reached home, to return himself without being seen, and to give to her an exact report of the road which it had travelled.

Now all happened as Sihamba expected, for on the first day that the cow was turned out, watched by the lad, who was provided with food and a blanket, so soon as it had filled itself it started straight over the hills, running at times, and at times stopping to graze, till night came on. Then it lay down for a while and its herd beside it, for he had tied his wrist to its tail with a rimpi lest it should escape in the darkness.

At the first breaking of the light the cow rose, filled itself with grass and started forward on its homeward path, followed by Zinti. For three days they travelled thus, the herd milking the cow from time to time when its udder was full. On the evening of the third day, however, the beast would not lie down, but walked forward all night, lowing now and again, by which Zinti, who found it difficult to keep it in sight because of the darkness, guessed that it must be near its home. So it proved indeed, for when the sun rose Zinti saw a kraal before him hidden away in a secret valley of the mountains over which they had been travelling. Still following the cow, though at a distance, he moved

down towards the kraal and hid himself in a patch of bush. Presently the cattle were let out to graze, and the cow rushed to them lowing loudly, till a certain calf came to it, which it made much of and suckled, for it was its own calf.

Now Zinti's errand was done, but still he lay hid in the bush a while, thinking that he might learn some more, and lying thus he fell asleep, for he was weary with travel. When he woke the sun was high, and he heard women talking to each other close by him, as they laboured at their task of cutting wands, such as are used for the making of huts. He rose to run away, then thought better of it and sat down again, remembering that should he be found, it would be easy to tell them that he was a wanderer who had lost his path. Presently one of the women asked:

"For whom does Bull-Head build this fine new hut in the secret krantz yonder?"

Now Zinti opened his ears wide, for he knew that this was the name which the natives had given to Swart Piet, taking it from his round head and fierce eye, according to their custom when they note any peculiarity in a man.

"I do not know," answered a second woman, who was young and very pretty, "unless he means to bring another wife here; if so, she must be a chief's daughter, since men do not build such huts for girls of common blood."

"Perhaps," said the other; "but then I think that he has stolen her from her father without payment; else he would not wish to hide her away in the secret krantz. Well, let her come, for we women must work hard here where there are so few men, and many hoes clean a field quickly."

"For my part I think there are enough of us already," said the young girl, looking troubled, for she was Swart Piet's last Kaffir wife, and did not desire to be supplanted by a new favourite. "But be silent, I hear Bull-Head coming on his horse," and she began to work very hard at cutting the wands.

A few minutes later Zinti saw Swart Piet himself ride up to the women, who saluted him, calling him "Chief" and "Husband."

"You are idle," he said, eyeing them angrily.

"These wands are tough to cut, husband," murmured the young woman in excuse.

"Still you must cut them quicker, girl," he answered, "if you would not learn how one of them feels upon your back. It will go hard with all of you if the big hut is not finished in seven days from now."

"We will do our best," said the girl, "but who is to dwell in the hut when it is done?"

"Not you, be sure of that," he answered, roughly, "nor any black woman, for I am weary of you, one and all. Listen: I go to-morrow with my servants to fetch a chieftainess, a white lady, to rule over you, but if any of you speak a word of her presence here you will pay for it, for I shall turn you away to starve. Do you understand?"

"We hear you, husband," they replied, somewhat sullenly, for now they understood that this new wife would be a mistress, and not a sister to them.

"Then be careful that you do not forget my words, and--hearken--so soon as you have cut a full load of hut-poles, let two of you carry them up to the krantz yonder, where they are wanted, but be careful that no one sees you going in or coming out."

"We hear you, husband," they said again, whereon Swart Piet turned and rode away.

Now, although Zinti was said to be foolish, chiefly, as I think, because he could not, or would not, work, yet in many ways he was cleverer than most Kaffirs, and especially always did he desire to see new places, the more so if they chanced to be secret places. Therefore, when he heard Swart Piet command the women to carry the rods for the hidden krantz, he determined that he would follow them, and this he did so skilfully that they neither heard nor saw him. At first he wondered whither they could be going, for they walked straight to the foot of what seemed to be an unclimbable wall of rock more than a hundred feet high. On the face of

this rock, however, shrubs grew here and there like the bristles on the back of a hog, and having first glanced round to see that no one was watching them, the women climbed to one of these shrubs, which was rooted in the cliff about the height of a man above the level of the

ground, and vanished so quickly that Zinti, who was watching, rubbed his eyes in wonder. After waiting a while, however, he followed in their steps to find that behind the shrub was a narrow cleft or crack such as are often to be seen in cliffs, and that down this cleft ran a pathway which twisted and turned in the rock, growing broader as it went, till at last it ended in the hidden krantz. This krantz was a very beautiful spot about three morgen, or six English acres, in extent, and walled all round with impassable cliffs. Down the face of one of these cliffs fell a waterfall forming a deep pool, out of which a stream ran, and on the banks of this stream the new hut was being built in such a position that the heat of the sun could strike it but little.

While he was taking note of these and other things Zinti saw some of those who were working at the hut leave it and start to walk towards the cleft. So having learnt everything that he could he thought it was time to go, and slipped away back to the bush, and thence homewards by the road which the cow had shown him.

Now, it chanced that as he went Zinti pierced his foot with a large thorn so that he was only able to travel slowly. On the fifth night of his journey he limped into a wood to sleep, which wood grew not much more than two hours on horseback from our farm. When he had been asleep

for some hours he woke up, for all his food was done, and he could not rest well because of his hunger, and was astonished to see the light of a fire among the trees at some distance from him. Towards this fire he crept, thinking that there were herds or travellers who would give him food, but when he came to it he did not ask for any, since the first thing he saw was Swart Piet himself walking up and down in front of the fire, while at some distance from it lay a number of his men asleep in their karosses. Presently another man appeared slipping through the tree trunks, and coming to Swart Piet saluted him.

"Tell me what you have found out," he said.

"This, Baas," answered the man; "I went down to Heer Botmar's place and begged a bowlful of meal there, pretending that I was a stranger on a journey to court a girl at a distant kraal. The slaves gave me meal and some flesh with it, and I learned in talk with them that the Heer Botmar, his vrouw, his daughter Suzanne and the young Englishman, Heer Kenzie, all rode away yesterday to the christening party of the first-born of the Heer Roozen, who lives about five hours on horseback to the north yonder. I learned also that it is arranged for them to leave the Heer Roozen to-morrow at dawn, and to travel homewards by the Tiger's Nek, in which they will off-saddle about two hours before mid-day, for I forgot to say that they have two servants with them to see to their horses."

"That makes six in all," said Swart Piet, "of whom two are women, whereas we are twenty. Yes, it is very good, nothing could be better,



for I know the off-saddling place by the stream in Tiger's Nek, and it is a nice place for men to hide behind the rocks and trees. Listen now for the plan, and be sure you understand it. When these people are off-saddled and eating their food, you Kaffirs will fall on them--with the spear and the kerry alone, mind--and they will come to their end."

"Does the master mean that we are to kill them?" asked the man doubtfully.

"Yes," answered Swart Piet, with some hesitation. "I do not want to kill them indeed, but I see no other way, except as regards the girl, of course, who must be saved. These people are to be attacked and robbed by Kaffirs, for it must never be known that I had a hand in it, and you brutes of Kaffirs always kill. Therefore, they must die, alas! especially the Englishman, though so far as I am concerned I should be glad to spare the others if I could, but it cannot be done without throwing suspicion upon me. As for the girl, if she is harmed the lives of all of you pay for it. You will throw a kaross over her head, and bring her to the place which I will tell you of to-morrow, where I shall come upon you with some men and seem to rescue her. Do you understand, and do you think the plan good?"

"I understand, and I think the plan good--for you--and yet, Baas, there is one thing that I have not told you which may mar it."

"What is it?"

"This: When I was down there at the Heer Botmar's place, I saw the witch-doctress Sihamba, who has a hut upon the farm. I was some way off, but I think that she recognised me, as she might well do seeing that it was I who set the rope about her neck when you wished to hang her. Now if she did know me all your plans may be in vain, for that woman has the Sight and she will guess them. Even when the cord was round her she laughed at me and told me that I should die soon, but that she would live for years, and therefore I fear her more than anyone living."

"She laughed at you, did she?" said Swart Piet; "well, I laugh at her, for neither she nor anyone who breathes shall stand between me and this girl, who has preferred the suit of another man to mine."

"Ah, master!" said the Kaffir, with admiration, "you are a great one, for when a fruit pleases you, you do not wait for it to drop into your lap, you pluck it."

"Yes," said Swart Piet, striking his breast with pride, "if I desire a fruit I pluck it as my father did before me. But now go you and sleep, for to-morrow you will need all your wit and strength."

When the herd Zinti had heard this talk he crept away, heading straight for the farm, but his foot was so bad, and he was so weak from want of food, that he could only travel at the pace of a lame ox, now hopping

upon one leg and now crawling upon his knees. In this fashion it was that at length, about half-past eight in the morning, he reached the house, or rather the hut of Sihamba, for she had sent him out, and therefore to her, after the Kaffir fashion, he went to make report. Now, when he came to Sihamba, he greeted her and asked for a little food, which she gave him. Then he began to tell his story, beginning as natives do at the first of it, which in his case were all the wanderings of the cow which he had followed, so that although she hurried him much, many minutes went by before he came to that part of the tale which told of what he had heard in the wood some eight hours before.

So soon as he began to speak of this, Sihamba stopped him, and calling to a man who lingered near, she bade him bring to her Jan's famous young horse, the roan schimmel, bridled but not saddled. Now this horse was the finest in the whole district, for his sire was the famous stallion which the Government imported from England, where it won all the races, and his dam the swiftest and most enduring mare in the breeding herds at the Paarl. What Jan gave for him as a yearling I never learned, because he was afraid to tell me; but I know that we were short of money for two years after he bought him. Yet in the end that schimmel proved the cheapest thing for which ever a man paid gold.

Well, the Kaffir hesitated, for, as might be guessed, Jan was very proud of this horse, and none rode it save himself, but Sihamba sprang up and spoke to him so fiercely that at last he obeyed her, since, although she was small in stature, all feared the magic of Sihamba, and would do her bidding. Nor had he far to go, for the schimmel did not run wild upon

the veldt, but was fed and kept in a stable, where a slave groomed him every morning. Thus it came about that before Zinti had finished his tale, the horse was standing before Sihamba bridled but not saddled, arching his neck and striking the ground with his hoof, for he was proud and full of corn and eager to be away.

"Oh! fool," said Sihamba to Zinti, "why did not you begin with this part of your story? Now, to save five from death and one from dishonour, there is but a short hour left and twenty long miles to cover in it. Ho! man, help me to mount this horse."

The slave put down his hand, and setting her foot in it, the little woman sprang on to the back of the great stallion, which knew and loved her as a dog might do, for she had tended it day and night when it was ill from the sickness we call "thick head," and without doubt had saved its life by her skill. Then, gripping its shoulders with her knees, Sihamba shook the reins and called aloud to the schimmel, waving the black rod she always carried in her hand, so that the fiery beast, having plunged once, leapt away like an antelope, and in another minute was nothing but a speck racing towards the mountains.