

CHAPTER XIII

THE SCHIMMEL'S FIRST RACE

So hard did Sihamba ride, and so swift and untiring proved the horse, to whose strength her light weight was as nothing, that, the veldt over which they travelled being flat and free from stones or holes, she reached the mouth of Tiger's Nek, twenty miles away, in very few minutes over the hour of time. But the Nek itself was a mile or more in length, and for aught she knew we might already be taken in Black Piet's trap, and she but riding to share our fate. Still she did not stay, but though it panted like a blacksmith's bellows, and its feet stumbled with weariness among the stones of the Nek, she urged on the schimmel at a gallop. Now she turned the corner, and the off-saddling place was before her. Swiftly and fearfully Sihamba glanced around, but seeing no signs of us, she uttered a cry of joy and shook the reins, for she knew that she had not ridden in vain. Then a voice from the rocks called out:

"It is the witch-doctress, Sihamba, who rides to warn them. Kill her swiftly." With the voice came a sound of guns and of bullets screaming past her, one of which shattered the wand she carried in her hand, numbing her arm. Nor was that all, for men sprang up across the further end of the off-saddling place, where the path was narrow, to bar her way, and they held spears in their hands. But Sihamba never heeded the men or the spears, for she rode straight at them and through them, and so soon was she gone that, although six or seven assegais were hurled at her, only one of them struck the horse, wounding it slightly in the

shoulder.

A few minutes later, three perhaps, or five, just as the four of us with our Kaffir servants were riding quietly up to the mouth of the Nek, we saw a great horse thundering towards us, black with sweat and flecked with foam, its shoulder bloody, its eyes staring, its red nostrils agape, and perched upon its bare back a little woman who swayed from side to side as though with weariness, holding in her hand a shattered wand.

"Allemachter!" cried Jan. "It is Sihamba, and the witch rides my roan schimmel!"

By this time Sihamba herself was upon us. "Back," she screamed as she came, "death waits you in the pass;" whereon, compelled to it as it were by the weight of the words and the face of she who spoke them, we turned our horses' heads and galloped after the schimmel for the half of a mile or more till we were safe in the open veldt.

Then of a sudden the horse stopped, whether of its own accord or because its rider pulled upon the reins I know not. At the least it stood there trembling like a reed and Sihamba lay upon its back clinging to the mane, and as she lay I saw blood running down her legs, for her skin was chafed to the flesh beneath. Ralph sprang to her and lifted her to the ground and Suzanne made her take a draught of peach brandy from Jan's flask, which brought the life to her face again.

"Now," she said, "if you have it to spare, give the schimmel yonder a drink of that stuff, for he has saved all your lives and I think he needs it."

"That is a wise word," said Jan, and he bade Ralph and the Kaffirs pour the rest of the spirit down the horse's throat, which they did, thereby, as I believe, saving its life, for until it had swallowed it the beast looked as though its heart were about to burst.

"Now," said Jan, "why do you ride my best horse to death in this fashion?"

"Have I not told you, father of Swallow," she answered, "that it was to save you from death? But a few minutes over an hour ago, fifteen perhaps, a word was spoken to me at your stead yonder and now I am here, seven leagues away, having ridden faster than I wish to ride again, or than any other horse in this country can travel with a man upon its back."

"To save us from death! What death?" asked Jan astounded.

"Death at the hands of Swart Piet and his Kaffir tribesmen for the three of you and the two slaves, and for the fourth, the lady Swallow there, a love which she does not seek, the love of the murderer of her father, her mother, and her chosen."

Now we stared at each other; only Suzanne ran to Sihamba, and putting

her arms about her, she kissed her.

"Nay," said the little woman smiling, "nay, Swallow, I do but repay to you one-hundredth part of my debt, and all the rest is owing still."

Then she told her story in few words, and when it was done, having first looked to see that Swart Piet and his men were not coming, at the bidding of Jan we all knelt down upon the veldt and thanked the Almighty for our deliverance. Only Sihamba did not kneel, for she was a heathen, and worshipped no one unless it were Suzanne.

"You should pray to the horse, too," she said, "for had it not been for his legs, I could never have reached you in time."

"Peace, Sihamba," I answered, "it is God who made the horse's legs, as God put it into your mind to use them;" but I said no more, though at any other time I should have rated her well for her heathen folly.

Then we consulted together as to what was to be done and decided to make our way to the house by a longer path which ran through the open veldt, since we were sure that there, where is no cover, Swart Piet would not attack us. Ralph, it is true, was for going into the Nek and attacking him, but, as Jan showed him, such an act would be madness, for they were many, and we were few; moreover, they could have picked us off from behind the shelter of the rocks. So we settled to leave him alone, and that night came home safely, though not without trouble, for we carried Sihamba the most of the way, and after he grew stiff the schimmel

could only travel at a walking pace. Very soon that horse recovered, however, for he was a good feeder, and lived to do still greater service, although for a while his legs were somewhat puffed and had to be poulticed with cabbage leaves.

Now Jan and Ralph were mad against Swart Piet, and would have brought him to justice. But this road of justice was full of stones and mud-holes, since the nearest land-drost, as we call a magistrate, lived a hundred miles off, and it would not have been easy to persuade Piet to appear and argue the case before him. Moreover, here again we had no evidence against the man except that of a simple black fellow, who would never have been believed, for, in fact, no attack was made upon us, while that upon Sihamba might very well have been the work of some of the low Kaffirs that haunt the kloofs, runaway slaves, and other rascals who desired to steal the fine horse upon which she rode. Also we learned that our enemy, acting through some agent, had sold his farm to a stranger for a small sum of money, giving it out that he had no need of the land, as he was leaving this part of the country.

But if we saw Piet's face no more, we could still feel the weight of his hand, since from that time forward we began to suffer from thefts of cattle and other troubles with the natives, which--so Sihamba learned in her underground fashion--were instigated by him, working through his savage tools, while he himself lay hidden far away and in safety. Also he did us another ill turn--for it was proved that his money was at the bottom of it--by causing Ralph to be commandeered to serve on some distant Kaffir expedition, out of which trouble we were obliged to buy

him, and at no small cost.

All these matters weighed upon us much, so much, indeed, that I wished Jan to trek from the Transkei and found a new home; but he would not, for he loved the place which he had built up brick by brick, and planted tree by tree; nor would he consent to be driven out of it through fear of the wicked practices of Swart Piet. To one thing he did consent, however, and it was that Ralph and Suzanne should be married as soon as possible, for he saw that until they were man and wife there would be little peace for any of us. When they were spoken to on the matter, neither of them had anything to say against this plan; indeed, I believe that in their hearts, for the first and last time in their lives, they blessed the name of Black Piet, whose evil-doing, as they thought, was hurrying on their happiness.

Now it was settled that the matter of this marriage should be kept secret for fear it should come to the ears of Van Vooren through his spies, and stir him up to make a last attempt to steal away Suzanne. And, indeed, it did come to his ears, though how to this hour I do not know, unless, in spite of our warning, the predicant who was to perform the ceremony, a good and easy man but one who loved gossip, blabbed of it on his journey to the farm, for he had a two days' ride to reach it.

It was the wish of all of us that we should continue to live together after the marriage of Ralph and Suzanne, though not beneath the same roof. Indeed, there would have been no room for another married pair in

that house, especially if children came to them, nor did I wish to share the rule of a dwelling with my own daughter after she had taken a husband, for such arrangements often end in bitterness and quarrels. Therefore Jan determined to build them a new house in a convenient spot not far away, and it was agreed that during the two or three months while this house was building Ralph and his wife should pay a visit to a cousin of mine, who owned a very fine farm on the outskirts of the dorp which we used to visit from time to time to partake of Nachtmahl[*]. This seemed wise to us for several reasons beyond that of the building of the new house. It is always best that young people should begin their married life alone, as by nature they wish to do, and not under the eyes of those who have bred and nurtured them, for thus face to face, with none to turn to, they grow more quickly accustomed to each other's faults and weaknesses, which, perhaps, they have not learned or taken count of before.

[*] That is, Holy Communion.

Moreover, in the case of Ralph and Suzanne we thought it safer that they should be absent for a while from their own district and the neighbourhood of Swart Piet, living in a peopled place where they could not be molested, although, not knowing the wickedness of his heart, we did not believe it possible that he would molest them when once they were married. Indeed, there was some talk of their going to the dorp for the wedding, and I wish that they had done so, for then much trouble might have been spared to us. But their minds were set against this plan, for they desired to be married where they had met and lived so

long, so we did not gainsay them.

At length came the eve of the wedding day and with it the predicant, who arrived hungry and thirsty but running over with smiles and blessings. That night we all supped together and were full of joy, nor were Ralph and Suzanne the least joyous of us, though they said little, but sat gazing at each other across the table as though the moon had struck them.

Before I went to bed I had occasion to go out of the house for I remembered that some linen which Suzanne was to take with her had been left drying upon bushes after the wash, and I feared that if it remained there the Kaffir women might steal it. This linen was spread at a little distance from the house, near the huts where Sihamba lived, but I took no lantern with me, for the moon was bright.

As I drew near the spot I thought that I heard a sound of chanting which seemed to come from a little circle of mimosa trees that grew a spear's throw to my left, of chanting very low and sweet. Wondering who it was that sung thus, and why she sang--for the voice was that of a woman--I crept to the nearest of the trees, keeping in its shadow, and peeped through the branches into the grassy space beyond, to perceive Sihamba crouched in the centre of the circle. She was seated upon a low stone in such fashion that her head and face shone strangely in the moonlight, while her body was hidden in the shadow. Before her, placed upon another stone, stood a large wooden bowl, such as the Kaffirs cut out of the

trunk of a tree, spending a month of labour, or more, upon the task, and into this bowl, which I could see was filled with water, for it reflected the moonrays, she was gazing earnestly, and, as she gazed, chanting that low, melancholy song whereof I could not understand the meaning.

Presently Sihamba ceased her singing, and turning from the bowl as though she had seen in it something that frightened her, she covered her eyes with her hands and groaned aloud, muttering words in which the name of Suzanne was mixed up, or of Swallow, as she called her. Now I guessed that Sihamba was practising that magic of which she was said to be so great a mistress, although she denied always that she knew anything of the art. At first I made up my mind to call to her to cease from such wickedness, which, as the Holy Book tells us, is a sin in the eyes of the Lord, and a cause of damnation to those who practise it. But I was curious and longed greatly in my heart to know what it was that Sihamba saw in the bowl, and what it had to do with my daughter Suzanne. So I changed my mind, thereby making myself a partaker of the sin, and coming forward said instead:

"What is it that you do here by night, in this solitary place, Sihamba?"

Now although, as I suppose, she had neither seen nor heard me, for I came up from behind her, Sihamba did not start or cry out as any other woman would have done; she did not even turn to look at me as she answered in a clear and steady voice:

"Now while she is still a girl I read the fate of Swallow and of those who love her according to my lore, O mother of Swallow. Look, I read it there."

I looked and saw that the large bowl was filled to the brim with pure water. At the bottom of it lay some white sand, and on the sand were placed five pieces of broken looking-glass, all of which had been filed carefully to a round shape. The largest of these pieces was of the size of a crown of English money. This lay in the exact centre of the bowl. Above it and almost touching its edge, was another piece the size of a half-crown, then to the right and left at a little distance, two more pieces of the size of a shilling, and below, but some way off, where the bowl began to curve, a very small piece not larger than a six-penny bit.

"Swallow," said Sihamba, pointing to the two largest of the fragments, "and husband of Swallow. There to the right and left father and mother of Swallow, and here at her feet, a long way off and very small, Sihamba, servant of Swallow, made all of them from the broken glass that shows back the face, which she gave me, and set, as they must be set, like the stars in the Cross of the Skies."

Now I shivered a little, for in myself I was afraid of this woman's magic, but to her I laughed and said roughly:

"What fool's plaything made of bits of broken glass is this that you have here, Sihamba?"

"It is a plaything that will tell a story to those who can read it," she answered without anger, but like one who knows she speaks the truth.

"Make it tell its story to me, and I will believe you," I said laughing again.

She shook her head and answered, "Lady, I cannot, for you have not the Sight; but bring your husband here, and perhaps he will be able to read the story, or some of it."

Now at this I grew angry, for it is not pleasant to a woman to hear that a man whom all know to be but a child compared to her can see things in water which she is not able to see, even though the things are born only of the false magic of a witch-doctress. Still, as at that moment I chanced to hear Jan seeking me, for he wondered where I had gone, I called to him and set out the matter, expecting that he would be very angry and dismiss Sihamba, breaking up her magic bowl. But all the while that I talked to him the little woman sat, her chin resting upon her hand, looking into his face, and I think that she had some power over him. At the least, he was not at all angry, although he said that I must not mention the business to the predicant, who was well known to be a prejudiced man. Then he asked Sihamba to show him the wonders of the bowl. Replying that she would if she might, and always keeping her eyes fixed upon his face, she bade him kneel down and look into the water in such fashion that he did not shut the moonlight off from it, and to tell us what he saw.

So he knelt and looked, whispering presently that on the midmost piece of glass there appeared the image of Suzanne, and on the others respectively those of Ralph, Jan himself, me his wife, and Sihamba. I asked him what they were doing, but he could give me no clear answer, so I suppose that they were printed there like the heads on postage stamps, if indeed they existed anywhere except in Jan's brain, into which Sihamba had conjured them.

"What do you see more?" asked Sihamba.

"I see a shadow in the water," he answered, "a dark shadow, and--it is like the head of Swart Piet cut out of black paper--it spreads till it almost hides all the faces on the bits of glass. Almost, I say, but not quite, for things are passing beneath the shadow which I cannot distinguish. Now it shrinks quite small, and lies only over your likeness, Sihamba, which shows through it red--yes, and all the water round it is red, and now there is nothing left;" and Jan rose pale with fright, and wiped his brow with a coloured pocket-handkerchief, muttering "Allemachter! this is magic indeed."

"Let me look," I said, and I looked for a long while and saw nothing except the five bits of glass. So I told Jan outright that he was a fool whom any conjurer could play with, but he waited until I had done and then asked Sihamba what the vision meant.

"Father of Swallow," she answered, "what I saw in the water mirror you have seen, only I saw more than you did because my sight is keener. You

ask me what it means, but I cannot tell you altogether, for such visions are uncertain; they sum up the future but they do not show it all. This, however, is sure, that trouble waits us every one because of Swart Piet, for his shadow lay thick upon the image of each of us; only note this, that while it cleared away from the rest, it remained upon mine, staining it blood-red, which means that while in the end you will escape him, I shall die at his hands, or through him. Well, so be it, but meanwhile this is my counsel--because of other things that I saw in the water which I cannot describe, for in truth I know not rightly what they were--that the marriage of the Swallow and her husband should be put off, and that when they are married it should be at the dorp yonder, not here."

Now when I heard this my anger overflowed like water in a boiling pot. "What!" I cried, "when all is settled and the predicant has ridden for two days to do the thing, is the marriage to be put off because forsooth this little black idiot declares that she sees things on bits of glass in a bowl, and because you, Jan, who ought to know better, take the lie from her lips and make it your own? I say that I am mistress here and that I will not allow it. If we are to be made fools of in this fashion by the peepings and mutterings of Kaffir witch-doctors we had better give up and die at once to go and live among the dead, whose business it is to peep and mutter. Our business is to dwell in the world and to face its troubles and dangers until such time as it pleases God to call us out of the world, paying no heed to omens and magic and such like sin and folly. Let that come which will come, and let us meet it like men and women, giving glory to the Almighty for the ill as well as for the

good, since both ill and good come from His hands and are part of His plan. For my part I trust to Him who made us and who watches us, and I fear not Swart Piet, and therefore chance what may the marriage shall go on."

"Good words," said Jan, "such as my heart approves of;" but he still mopped his head with the coloured pocket-handkerchief and looked troubled as he added, "I pray you, wife, say nothing of this to anybody, and above all to the predicant, or he will put me out of the church as a wizard."

"Yes, yes," said Sihamba, "good words, but the Sight is still the Sight for those who have the power to see. Not that I wished you to see, indeed I did not wish it, nor did I think that you would be turned from your purpose by that which you have seen. Father and mother of Swallow, you are right, and now I will tell you the truth. What you beheld in the water was nothing but a trick, a clever trick of the little doctress, Sihamba, by the help of which and others like it, she earns her living, and imposes on the foolish, though she cannot impose upon you, who are wise, and have the Lord of the skies for a friend. So think no more of it, and do not be angry with the little black monkey whose nature it is to play tricks;" and with a motion of her foot she upset the bowl of water, and collecting the pieces of mirror hid them away in her skin pouch.

Then we went, but as I passed through the thorn trees I turned and looked at Sihamba, and lo! she was standing in the moonlight, her face

lifted towards the sky, weeping softly and wringing her hands. Then for the first time I felt a little afraid.