

CHAPTER XIV

THE WEDDING

The marriage morning of Ralph and Suzanne broke brightly; never have I seen a fairer. It was spring time, and the veldt was clothed with the fresh green grass and starred everywhere with the lily blooms that sprang among it. The wind blew softly, shaking down the dewdrops from the growing corn, while from every bush and tree came the cooing of unnumbered doves. Beneath the eave of the stoep the pair of red-breasted swallows which had built there for so many years were finishing their nest, and I watched them idly, for to me they were old friends, and would wheel about my head, touching my cheek with their wings. Just then they paused from their task, or perhaps it was at length completed, and flying to a bough of the peach tree a few yards away, perched there together amidst the bright bloom, and nestling against each other, twittered forth their song of joy and love.

It was at this moment that Sihamba walked up to the stoep as though to speak to me.

"The Swallow and the Swallow's mate," she said, following my eyes to where the little creatures swung together on the beautiful bough.

"Yes," I answered, for her fancy seemed to me of good omen, "they have built their nest, and now they are thanking God before they begin to live together and rear their young in love."

As the words left my lips a quick shadow swept across the path of sunlit ground before the house, two strong wings beat, and a brown hawk, small but very fierce, being of a sort that preys upon small birds, swooped downwards upon the swallows. One of them saw it, and slid from the bough, but the other the hawk caught in its talons, and mounted with it high into the air. In vain did its mate circle round it swiftly, uttering shrill notes of distress; up it went steadily as pitiless as death.

"Oh! my swallow," I cried aloud in grief, "the accursed hawk has carried away my swallow."

"Nay, look," said Sihamba, pointing upwards.

I looked, and behold! a black crow that appeared from behind the house, was wheeling about the hawk, striking at it with its beak until, that it might have its talons free to defend itself, it let go the swallow, which, followed by its mate, came fluttering to the earth, while the crow and the falcon passed away fighting, till they were lost in the blue depths of air.

Springing from the stoep I ran to where the swallow lay, but Sihamba was there before me and had it in her hands.

"The hawk's beak has wounded it," she said pointing to a blood stain among the red feathers of the breast, "but none of its bones are broken,

and I think that it will live. Let us put it in the nest and leave it to its mate and nature."

This we did, and there in the nest it stayed for some days, its mate feeding it with flies as though it were still unfledged. After that they vanished, both of them together, seeking some new home, nor did they ever build again beneath our eaves.

"Would you speak with me, Sihamba?" I asked when this matter of the swallows was done with.

"I would speak with the Baas, or with you, it is the same thing," she answered, "and for this reason. I go upon a journey; for myself I have the good black horse which the Baas gave me after I had ridden to warn you in Tiger Kloof yonder, the one that I cured of sickness. But I need another beast to carry pots and food and my servant Zinti, who accompanies me. There is the brown mule which you use little because he is vicious, but he is very strong and Zinti does not fear him. Will you sell him to me for the two cows I earned from the Kaffir whose wife I saved when the snake bit her? He is worth three, but I have no more to offer."

"Whither do you wish to journey, Sihamba?" I asked.

"I follow my mistress to the dorp," she answered.

"Did she bid you follow her, Sihamba?"

"No! is it likely that she would think of me at such a time, or care whether I come or go? Fear not, I shall not trouble her, or put her to cost; I shall follow, but I shall not be seen until I am wanted."

Now I had made up my mind to gainsay Sihamba, not that I could find any fault with her plan, but because if such arrangements are to be made, I like to make them myself, as is the business of the head of the house. I think Sihamba guessed this; at any rate she answered me before I spoke, and that in an odd way, namely, by looking first at the swallow's nest, then at the blooming bough of the peach tree, and lastly into the far distances of air.

"It was the black crow that drove the hawk away," she said, reflectively, as though she were thinking of something else, "though I think, for my eyes are better than yours, that the hawk killed the crow, or perhaps they killed each other; at the least I saw them falling to the earth beyond the crest of the mountain."

At this I was about to break in angrily, for if there was one thing in the world I hated it was Sihamba's nonsense about birds and omens and such things, whereof, indeed, I had had enough on the previous night, when she made that lump Jan believe that he saw visions in a bowl of water. And yet I did not--for the black crow's sake. The cruel hawk had seized the swallow which I loved, and borne it away to devour it in its eyrie, and it was the crow that saved it. Well, the things that happened among birds might happen among men, who also prey upon each other,

and--but I could not bear the thought.

"Take the mule, Sihamba," I said; "I will answer for it to the Baas. As for the two cows, they can run with the other cattle till your return."

"I thank you, Mother of Swallow," she answered, and turned to go, when I stopped her and asked:

"Have you heard anything that makes you afraid, Sihamba?"

"I have heard nothing," she replied, "still I am afraid."

"Then you are a fool for your pains, to be afraid of nothing," I answered roughly; "but watch well, Sihamba."

"Fear not, I will watch till my knees are loosened and my eyes grow hollow." Then she went away, and that was the last I saw of her for many a weary month. Ah! Suzanne, child, had it not been for the watching of little Sihamba, the walker-by-moonlight, you had not been sitting there to-day, looking much as she used to look, the Suzanne of fifty years ago.

The marriage was to take place at noon, and though I had much to see to, never have I known a longer morning. Why it was I cannot say, but it seemed to me as though twelve o'clock would never come. Then, wherever

I went there was Ralph in my way, wandering about in a senseless fashion with his best clothes on, while after him wandered Jan holding his new hat in his hand.

"In the name of Heaven," I cried at length as I blundered into both of them in the kitchen, "be off out of this. Why are you here?"

"Allemachter!" said Jan, "because we have nowhere else to go. They are making the sitting-room ready for the service and the dinner after it; the predicant is in Ralph's room writing; Suzanne is in yours trying on her clothes, and the stoep and even the stables are full of Kaffirs. Where, then, shall we go?"

"Cannot you see to the waggon?" I asked.

"We have seen to it, mother," said Ralph; "it is packed, and the oxen are already tied to the yokes for fear lest they should stray."

"Then be off and sit in it and smoke till I come to call you," I replied, and away they walked shamefacedly enough, Ralph first, and Jan following him.

At twelve o'clock I went for them, and found them both seated on the waggon-chest smoking like chimneys, and saying nothing.

"Come, Ralph," I said, "it is quite time for you to be married," and he came, looking very pale, and walking unsteadily as though he had been

drinking, while after him, as usual, marched Jan, still pulling at the pipe which he had forgotten to take out of his mouth.

Somehow I do not recollect much of the details of that wedding; they seem to have slipped my mind, or perhaps they are buried beneath the memories of all that followed hard upon it. I remember Suzanne standing before the little table, behind which was the predicant with his book. She wore a white dress that fitted her very well, but had no veil upon her head after the English fashion, which even Boer girls follow nowadays, only in her hand she carried a bunch of rare white flowers that Sihamba had gathered for her in a hidden kloof where they grew. Her face was somewhat pale, or looked so in the dim room, but her lips showed red like coral, and her dark eyes glowed and shone as she turned them upon the lover at her side, the fair-haired, grey-eyed, handsome English lad, whose noble blood told its tale in every feature and movement, yes, and even in his voice, the man whom she had saved from death to be her life-mate.

A few whispered words, the changing of a ring, and one long kiss, and these two, Ralph Kenzie and Suzanne Botmar, were husband and wife in the eyes of God and man. Ah! me, I am glad to think of it, for in the end, of all the many marriages that I have known, this proved the very best and happiest.

Now I thought that it was done with, for they had knelt down and the predicant had blessed them; but not so, for the good man must have his word, and a long word it was. On and on he preached about the duties of

husbands and wives, and many other matters, till at last, as I expected, he came to the children. Now I could bear it no longer.

"That is enough, reverend Sir," I said, "for surely it is scarcely needful to talk of children to people who have not been married five minutes."

That pricked the bladder of his discourse, which soon came to an end, whereon I called to the Kaffirs to bring in dinner.

The food was good and plentiful, and so was the Hollands, or Squareface as they call it now, to say nothing of the Constantia and peach-brandy which had been sent to me many years before by a cousin who lived at Stellenbosch; and yet that meal was not as cheerful as it might have been. To begin with, the predicant was sulky because I had cut him short in his address, and a holy man in the sulks is a bad kind of animal to deal with. Then Jan tried to propose the health of the new married pair and could not do it. The words seemed to stick in his throat, for at the best Jan was never a speaker. In short, he made a fool of himself as usual, and I had to fill up the gaps in his head.

Well, I talked nicely enough till in an evil moment I overdid it a little by speaking of Ralph as one whom Heaven had sent to us, and of whose birth and parents we knew nothing. Then Jan found his tongue and said: "Wife, that's a lie, and you know it," for, doubtless, the Hollands and the peach-brandy had got the better of his reason and his manners. I did not answer him at the time, for I hate wrangling in

public, but afterwards I spoke to him on the subject once and for all. Luckily, the predicant took no notice of this incident, for he was thinking about himself as he was too prone to do.

Then, to make matters worse, Suzanne must needs throw her arms round her father's neck and begin to cry--thanks be to my bringing up of her, she knew better than to throw them round mine. "Good Lord!" I said, losing my temper, "what is the girl at now? She has got the husband for whom she has been craving, and the first thing she does is to snivel. Well, if I had done that to my husband I should have expected him to box my ears, though Heaven knows that I should have had excuse for it."

Here the predicant woke up, seeing his chance.

"Vrouw Botmar," he said, blinking at me like an owl, "it is my duty to reprove your irreverent language even at this festive board, for a word must be spoken both in and out of season, and without respect of persons. Vrouw Botmar, I fear that you do not remember the Third Commandment, therefore I will repeat it to you," and he did so, speaking very slowly.

What I answered I cannot recollect, but even now I seem to see that predicant flying out of the door of the room holding his hands above his head. Well, for once he met his match, and I know that afterwards he always spoke of me with great respect.

After this again I remember little more till the pair started upon their

journey. Suzanne asked for Sihamba to say good-bye to her, and when she was told that she was not to be found she seemed vexed, which shows that the little doctress did her injustice in supposing that just because she was married she thought no more of her. Then she kissed us all in farewell--ah! we little knew for how long that farewell was to be--and went down to the waggon to which the sixteen black oxen, a beautiful team, were inspanned, and standing there ready to start. But Ralph and Suzanne were not going to ride in the waggon, for they had horses to carry them. At the last moment, indeed, Jan, whose head was still buzzing with the peach-brandy, insisted upon giving Ralph the great schimmel, that same stallion which Sihamba had ridden when she warned us of the ambush in the pass, galloping twenty miles in the hour. This shows me that Providence can turn even a man's vices to account, for afterwards the schimmel was very useful.

So there was much kissing and many good-byes; Ralph and Suzanne saying that they would soon be back, which indeed was the case with one of them, till at last they were off, Jan riding with them a little way towards their first outspan by the sea, fourteen miles distant, where they were to sleep that night.

When they had gone I went into my bedroom, and sitting down, I cried, for I was sorry to lose Suzanne, even for a little and for her own good, and my heart was heavy. Also my quarrel with the predicant had put me out of temper. When I had got over this fit I set to work to tidy Suzanne's little sleeping place, and that I found a sad task. Then Jan returned from the waggon, having bid farewell to the young couple, an

hour's trek away, and his head being clear by now, we talked over the plans of the new house which was to be built for them to live in, and, going down to the site of it, set it out with sticks and a rule, which gave us occupation till towards sunset, when it was time for him to go to see to the cattle.

That night we went to bed early, for we were tired, and slept a heavy sleep, till at length, about one in the morning, we were awakened by the shoutings of the messengers who came bearing the terrible news.