

CHAPTER XV

RALPH RETURNS INTO THE SEA

Ralph and Suzanne reached their outspan place in safety a little before sunset. I used to know the spot well; it is where one of the numerous wooden kloofs that scar the mountain slopes ends on a grassy plain of turf, short but very sweet. This plain is not much more than five hundred paces wide, for it is bordered by the cliff, that just here is not very high, against which the sea beats at full tide.

When the oxen had been turned loose to graze, and the voorlooper set to watch them, the driver of the waggon undid the cooking vessels and built a fire with dry wood collected from the kloof. Then Suzanne cooked their simple evening meal, of which they partook thankfully. After it was done the pair left the waggon and followed the banks of the little kloof stream, which wandered across the plain till it reached the cliff, whence it fell in a trickling waterfall into the sea. Here they sat down upon the edge of the cliff, and locked in each other's arms, watched the moon rise over the silver ocean, their young hearts filled with a joy that cannot be told.

"The sea is beautiful, is it not, husband?" whispered Suzanne into his ear.

"To-night it is beautiful," he answered, "as our lives seem to be; yet I have seen it otherwise," and he shuddered a little.

She nodded, for she knew of what he was thinking, and did not wish to speak of it. "Neither life nor ocean can be always calm," she said, "but oh! I love that great water, for it brought you to me."

"I pray that it may never separate us," answered Ralph.

"Why do you say that, husband?" she asked. "Nothing can separate us now, for even if you journey far away to seek your own people, as sometimes I think you should, I shall accompany you. Nothing can separate us except death, and death shall bind us more closely each to each for ever and for ever."

"I do not know why I said it, Sweet," he answered uneasily, and just then a little cloud floated over the face of the moon, darkening the world, and a cold wind blew down the kloof, causing its trees to rustle and chilling the pair, so that they clung closer to each other for comfort.

The cloud and the wind passed away, leaving the night as beautiful as before, and they sat on for a while to watch it, listening to the music of the waterfall that splashed into the deep sea pool below, and to the soft surge of the waves as they lapped gently against the narrow beach.

At length Ralph spoke in a low voice. "Sweet, it is time to sleep," he said, and kissed her.

"It is time," she whispered back, "but, husband, first let us kneel together here and pray to the Almighty to bless our married life and make us happy."

"That is a good thought," he answered, for in those days young men who had been brought up as Christians were not ashamed to say their prayers even in the presence of others.

So they knelt down side by side upon the edge of the cliff, with their faces set towards the open sea.

"Pray for us both aloud, Ralph," said Suzanne, "for though my heart is full enough I have no words."

So Ralph prayed very simply, saying: "Oh, God, Who madest us, hear us, Thy son and daughter, and bless us. This night our married life begins; be Thou with us ever in it, and if it should please Thee that we should have children, let Thy blessing go with them all their days. Oh! God, I thank Thee that Thou didst save me alive from the sea and lead the feet of the child who is now my wife to the place where I was starving, and Suzanne thanks Thee that through the whisperings of a dream her feet were led thus. Oh! God, as I believe that Thou didst hear my prayer when as a lost child I knelt dying on the rock, so I believe that Thou dost hear this the first prayer of our wedded life. We know that all life is not made up of such joy as Thou hast given us this day, but that it has many dangers and troubles and losses, therefore we pray Thee to comfort us in the troubles, to protect us in the dangers, and to give us

consolation in the losses; and most of all we pray Thee that we who love each other, and whom Thou hast joined together, may be allowed to live out our lives together, fearing nothing, however great our peril, since day and night we walk in the shadow of Thy strength, until we pass into its presence."

This was Ralph's prayer, for he told it to me word by word afterwards when he lay sick. At the time the answer to it seemed to be a strange one, an answer to shake the faith out of a man's heart, and yet it was not lost or mocked at, for the true response came in its season. Nay, it came week by week and hour by hour, seeing that every day through those awful years the sword of the Strength they had implored protected those who prayed, holding them harmless in many a desperate peril to reunite them at the last. The devil is very strong in this world of ours, or so it seems to me, who have known much of his ways, so strong that perhaps God must give place to him at times, for if He rules in heaven, I think that Satan shares His rule on earth. But in the end it is God who wins, and never, never, need they fear who acknowledge Him and put their faith in Him, trying the while to live uprightly and conquer the evil of their hearts. Well, this is only an old woman's wisdom, though it should not be laughed at, since it has been taught to her by the experience of a long and eventful life. Such as it is I hope that it may be of service to those who trust in themselves and not in their Maker.

As the last words of his prayer left Ralph's lips he heard a man laugh

behind him. The two of them sprang to their feet at the sound, and faced about to see Swart Piet standing within five paces of them, and with him eight or ten of his black ruffians, who looked upon him as their chief, and did his needs without question, however wicked they might be.

Now Suzanne uttered a low cry of fear and the blood froze about Ralph's heart, for he was unarmed and their case was hopeless. Black Piet saw their fear and laughed again, since like a cat that has caught a mouse for which it has watched long, he could not resist the joy of torture before he dealt the death blow.

"This is very lucky," he said, "and I am glad that I have to do with such pious people, since it enabled us to creep on you unawares; also I much prefer to have found you engaged in prayer, friend Englishman, rather than in taking the bloom off my peach with kisses, as I feared might be the case. That was a pretty prayer, too; I almost felt as though I were in church while I stood listening to it. How did it end? You prayed that you might be allowed to live together, fearing nothing, however great your peril, since you walked always in the shadow of God's strength. Well, I have come to answer your petition, and to tell you that your life together is ended before it is begun. For the rest, your peril is certainly great, and now let God's strength help you if it can. Come, God, show Your strength. He does not answer, you see, or perhaps He knows that Swart Piet is god here and is afraid."

"Cease your blasphemy," said Ralph in a hoarse voice, "and tell me what you want with us."

"What do I want? I want her whose scorn and beauty have driven me mad, her for whom I have been seeking this long time--Suzanne Botmar."

"She is my wife," said Ralph; "would you steal away my wife?"

"No, friend, for that would not be lawful. I will not take your wife, but I shall take your widow, as will be easy, seeing that you are armed with God's strength only."

Now understanding all this man's devilish purpose, Suzanne fell upon her knees before him, imploring him with many piteous words. But knowing that death was at hand Ralph's heart rose to it, as that of a high-couraged man will do, and he bade her to cease her supplications and rise. Then in a loud, clear voice he spoke in the Kaffir tongue, so that those who were with Piet Van Vooren should understand him.

"It seems, Piet Van Vooren," he said, "that you have stolen upon us here to carry off my wife by violence after you have murdered me. These crimes you may do, though I know well that if you do them they will be revenged upon you amply, and upon you men also who take part in them. And now I will not plead to you for mercy, but I ask one thing which you cannot refuse, because those with you, Kaffirs though they be, will not suffer it--five short minutes of time in which to bid farewell to my new-wed wife."

"Not an instant," said Swart Piet, but at the words the black men who

were with him, and whose wicked hearts were touched with pity, began to murmur so loudly, that he hesitated.

"At your bidding, Bull-Head," said one of them, "we have come to kill this man and to carry away the white woman, and we will do it, for you are our chief and we must obey you. But, if you will not give him the little space for which he asks, wherein to bid farewell to his wife before she becomes your wife, then we will have nothing more to do with the matter. I say that our hearts are sick at it already, and, Bull-Head, you kill a man, not a dog, and that by murder, not in fair fight."

"As you will, fool," said Swart Piet. "Englishman, I give you five minutes," and he drew a large silver watch from his pocket and held it in his hand.

"Get out of hearing then, murderer," said Ralph, "for I have no breath left to waste on you," and Piet obeying him, fell back a little and stood gnawing his nails and staring at the pair.

"Suzanne, wife Suzanne," whispered Ralph, "we are about to part, since, as you see, I must die, and your fate lies in the Hand of God. Yes, you are made a widow before you are a wife; and, Suzanne, ah! that is the worst of it, another takes you, even my murderer."

Now Suzanne, who till this moment had been as one stupefied, seemed to gather up her strength and answered him calmly, saying:

"Truly, husband, things appear to be as you say, though what we have done that they should be so, I cannot tell. Still comfort yourself, for death comes to all of us soon or late, and whether it comes soon or late makes little difference in the end, seeing that come it must."

"No, not death, it is your fate that makes the difference. How can I bear to die and leave you the prey of that devil? Oh my God! my God! how can I bear to die!"

"Have no fear, husband," went on Suzanne in the same clear, indifferent voice, "for you do not leave me to be his prey. Say, now; if we walk backwards swiftly before they could catch us we might fall together into the pit of the sea beneath."

"Nay, wife, let our deaths lie upon their heads and not upon ours, for self-murder is a crime."

"As you will, Ralph; but I tell you, and through you I tell Him who made me, that it is a crime which I shall dare if need be. Have no fear, Ralph, as I leave your arms, so shall I return to them, whether it be in Heaven or upon earth. That man thinks he has power over me, but I say that he has none, seeing that at the last God will protect me with His hand, or with my own."

"I cannot blame you, Suzanne, for there are some things which are not to be borne. Do therefore as your conscience teaches you, if you have the

means."

"I have the means, Ralph. Hidden about me is a little knife which I have carried since I was a child; and if that fails me there are other ways."

"Time is done," said Swart Piet, replacing the watch in his pocket.

"Farewell, sweet," whispered Ralph.

"Farewell, husband," she answered bravely, "until we meet again, whether it be here on earth or above in Heaven; farewell until we meet again," and she flung her arms about his neck and kissed him.

For a moment Ralph clung to her muttering some blessing above her bowed head; then he unloosed her clasping arms, letting her fall gently upon the ground and saying: "Lie thus, shutting your ears and hiding your eyes till all is done. Afterwards you must act as seems best to you. Escape to your father if you can, if not--tell me, do you understand?"

"I understand," she murmured, and hid her face in a tuft of thick grass, placing her hands upon her ears.

Ralph bowed his head for an instant in prayer. Then he lifted it and there was no fear upon his face.

"Come on, murderer," he said, addressing Swart Piet, "and do your butcher's work. Why do you delay? You cannot often find the joy of

slaughtering a defenceless man in the presence of his new-made wife.
Come on then and win the everlasting curse of God."

Now Swart Piet glanced at him out of the corners of his round eyes; then he ordered one of the Kaffirs to go up to him and shoot him.

The man went up and lifted his gun, but presently he put it down again and walked away, saying that he could not do this deed. Thrice did Van Vooren issue his command, and to three separate men, the vilest of his flock, but with each of them it was the same; they came up lifting their guns, looked into Ralph's grey eyes and slunk away muttering. Then, cursing and swearing in his mad fury, Swart Piet drew the pistol from his belt and rushing towards Ralph fired it into him so that he fell. He stood over him and looked at him, the smoking pistol in his hand, but the wide grey eyes remained open and the strong mouth still smiled.

"The dog lives yet," raved Swart Piet; "cast him into the sea, and let the sea finish him."

But no man stirred; all stood silent as though they had been cut in stone, and there, a little nearer the cliff edge, lay the silent form of Suzanne.

Then Van Vooren seized Ralph and dragged him by the shoulders to the brink of the precipice. His hair brushed the hair of Suzanne as his body was trailed along the ground, and as he passed he whispered one word, "Remember," into her ear, and she raised her head to look at him and

answered, "Now, and always." Then she let her head fall again.

Stooping down, Swart Piet lifted Ralph in his great arms, and crying aloud: "Return into the sea out of which you came," he hurled him over the edge of the cliff. Two seconds later the sound of a heavy splash echoed up its sides; then, save for the murmur of the waterfall and the surge of the surf upon the beach, all was still again.