

## CHAPTER XVI

### HOW RALPH CAME BACK TO THE STEAD

For a few moments Swart Piet and his black ruffians stood staring now at each other and now over the edge of the cliff into the deep sea-hole. There, however, they could see nothing, for the moonbeams did not reach its surface, and the only sound they heard was that of the dripping of the little waterfall, which came to their ears like the tinkle of distant sheep-bells. Then Swart Piet shivered and laughed aloud, a laugh that had more of fear than of merriment in it.

"The Englishman called down the everlasting curse of God on me," he cried. "Well, I have waited for it, and it does not come, so now for man's reward," and going to where Suzanne lay, he set his arms beneath her and turned her over upon her back. "She has swooned," he said; "perhaps it is as well," and he stood looking at her, for thus in her faint she seemed wonderfully fair with the moonbeams playing upon her deathlike face.

"He had good taste, that Englishman," went on Swart Piet. "Well, now our account is squared; he has sown and I shall harvest. Follow me, you black fellows, for we had best be off," and, stooping down he lifted Suzanne in his arms and walked away with her as though she were a child. For a while they followed the windings of the stream, keeping under cover of the reeds and bushes that grew upon its banks. Then they struck out to the right, taking advantage of a cloud which dimmed the face of

the moon for a time, for they wished to reach the kloof without being seen from the waggon. Nor, indeed, were they seen, for the driver and voorlooper were seated by the cooking-fire on its further side, smoking, and dozing as they smoked. Only the great thoroughbred horse winded them and snorted, pulling at the riem with which he was tied to the hind wheel of the waggon.

"Something has frightened the schimmel," said the driver waking up.

"It is nothing," answered the other boy drowsily; "he is not used to the veldt, he who always sleeps in a house like a man; or, perhaps, he smells a hyena in the kloof."

"I thought I heard a sound like that of a gun a while ago down yonder by the sea," said the driver again. "Say, brother, shall we go and find out what made it?"

"By no means," answered the voorlooper, who did not like walking about at night, fearing lest he should meet spooks. "I have been wide awake and listening all this time, and I heard no gun; nor, indeed, do people go out shooting at night. Also it is our business to watch here by the waggon till our master and mistress return."

"Where can they have gone?" said the driver, who felt frightened, he knew not why. "It is strange that they should be so long away when it is time for them to sleep."

"Who can account for the ways of white people?" answered the other, shrugging his shoulders. "Very often they sit up all night. Doubtless these two will return when they are tired, or perhaps they desire to sleep in the veldt. At any rate it is not our duty to interfere with them, seeing that they can come to no harm here where there are neither men nor tigers."

"So be it," said the driver, and they both dozed off again till the messenger of ill came to rouse them.

Now Black Piet and his men crept up the kloof carrying Suzanne with them, till they came to a little patch of rocky ground at the head of it where they had left their horses.

"That was very well managed," said Piet as they loosed them and tightened their girths, "and none can ever know that we have made this journey. To-morrow the bride and bridegroom will be missed, but the sea has one and I have the other, and hunt as they may they will never find her, nor guess where she has gone. No, it will be remembered that they walked down to the sea, and folk will think that by chance they fell from the cliff into the deep water and vanished there. Yes, it was well managed and none can guess the truth."

Now the man to whom he spoke, that same man with whom the boy Zinti had heard him plot our murder in the Tiger Kloof, shrugged his shoulders and

answered:

"I think there is one who will guess."

"Who is that, fool?"

"She about whose neck I once set a rope at your bidding, Bull-Head, and whose life was bought by those lips," and he pointed to Suzanne, "Sihamba Ngenyanga."

"Why should she guess?" asked Piet angrily.

"Has she not done so before? Think of the great schimmel and its rider in Tiger Kloof. Moreover, what does her name mean? Does it not mean 'Wanderer-by-moonlight,' and was not this great deed of yours a deed at the telling of which all who hear of it shall grow sick and silent, done in the moonlight, Bull-Head?"

Now as we learned afterwards from a man whom Jan took prisoner, and who told us everything which passed that night, hoping to buy his life, Piet made no answer to this saying, but turned to busy himself with his saddle, for, after his ill dealings with her, he was always afraid of Sihamba, and would never mention her name unless he was obliged. Soon the horses, most of which were small and of the Basuto breed, were ready to start. On one of the best of them there was a soft pad of sheepskins, such as girls used to ride on when I was young, before we knew anything about these new-fangled English saddles with leather hooks to hold the

rider in her place. On this pad, which had been prepared for her, they set Suzanne, having first tied her feet together loosely with a riem so that she might not slip to the ground and attempt to escape by running. Moreover, as she was still in a swoon, they supported her, Black Piet walking upon one side and a Kaffir upon the other. In this fashion they travelled for the half of an hour or more, until they were deep in among the mountains, indeed, when suddenly with a little sigh Suzanne awoke, and glanced about her with wide, frightened eyes. Then memory came back to her, and she understood, and, opening her lips, she uttered one shriek so piercing and dreadful that the rocks of the hills multiplied and echoed it, and the blood went cold even in the hearts of those savage men.

"Suzanne," said Swart Piet in a low, hoarse voice, "I have dared much to win you, and I wish to treat you kindly, but if you cry out again, for my own safety's sake and that of those with me, we must gag you."

She made no answer to him, nor did she speak at all except one word, and that word "Murderer." Then she closed her eyes as though to shut out the sight of his face, and sat silent, saying nothing and doing nothing, even when Piet and the other man who supported her had mounted and pushed their horses to a gallop, leading that on which she rode by a riem.

It might be thought after receiving a pistol bullet fired into him at a

distance of four paces, and being cast down through fifty feet of space into a pool of the sea, that there was an end of Ralph Kenzie for ever on this earth. But thanks to the mercy of God this was not so, for the ball had but shattered his left shoulder, touching no vital part, and the water into which he fell was deep, so that, striking against no rock, he rose presently to the surface, and the pool being but narrow, was able to swim to one side of it where the beach shelved. Up that beach Ralph could not climb, however, for he was faint with loss of blood and shock. Indeed, his senses left him while he was in the water, but it chanced that he fell forward and not backward, so that his head rested upon the shelving edge of the pool, all the rest of his body being beneath its surface. Lying thus, had the tide been rising, he would speedily have drowned, but it had turned, and so, the water being warm, he took no further harm.

Now Sihamba did not leave the stead till some hours after Ralph and his bride had trekked away. She knew where they would outspan, and as she did not wish that they should see her yet, or until they were too far upon their journey to send her back, it was her plan to reach the spot, or rather a hiding-place in the kloof within a stone's throw of it, after they had gone to rest. So it came about that at the time when Ralph and Suzanne were surprised by Swart Piet, Sihamba was riding along quietly upon the horse which Jan had given her, accompanied by the lad Zinti, perched on the strong brown mule in the midst of cooking pots, bags of meal, biltong, and rolls of blankets. Already, half a mile off or more, she could see the cap of the waggon gleaming white in the moonlight, when suddenly away to the left they heard the sound of a

pistol shot.

"Now who shoots in this lonely place at night?" said Sihamba to Zinti.

"Had the sound come from the waggon yonder I should think that someone had fired to scare a hungry jackal, but all is quiet at the waggon, and the servants of Swallow are there, for, look, the fire burns."

"I know not, lady," answered Zinti, for Sihamba was given the title of Chieftainess among the natives who knew something of her birth, "but I am sure that the sound was made by powder."

"Let us go and see," said Sihamba turning her horse.

For a while they rode on towards the place whence they had heard the shot, till, suddenly, when they were near the cliff and in a little fold of ground beyond the ridge of which ran the stream, Sihamba stopped and whispered, "Be silent, I hear voices." Then she slipped from her horse and crept like a snake up the slope of the rise until she reached its crest, where at this spot stood two tufts of last season's grass, for no fires had swept the veldt. From between these tufts, so well hidden herself that unless they had stepped upon her body, none could have discovered her, she saw a strange sight.

There beneath her, within a few paces indeed, for the ground sloped steeply to the stream, men were passing. The first of these was white, and he carried a white woman in his arms; the rest were Kaffirs, some of whom wore karosses or cotton blankets, and some tattered soldiers' coats

and trousers, while all were well armed with "roers" or other guns, and had powder flasks hung about their necks. Sihamba knew at once that the white man was Swart Piet, and the woman in his arms her mistress, Suzanne. She could have told it from her shape alone, but as it happened, her head hung down, and the moonlight shone upon her face so brightly that she could see its every feature. Her blood boiled in her as she looked, for now she understood that her fears were just, and that the Swallow whom she loved above everything in the world, had fallen into the power of the man she hated. At first she was minded to follow, and if might be, to rescue her. Then she remembered the pistol-shot, and remembered also that this new-made wife would have been with her husband and no other. Where, then, was he now? Without doubt, murdered by Bull-Head. If so, it was little use to look for him, and yet something in her heart told her to look.

At that moment she might not help Suzanne, for what could one woman and a Kaffir youth do against so many men? Moreover, she knew whither Van Vooren would take her, and could follow there, but first she must learn for certain what had been the fate of the Baas Ralph her husband. So Sihamba lay still beneath the two tufts of grass until the last of the men had passed in silence, glancing about them sullenly as though they feared vengeance for a crime. Then, having noted that they were heading for the kloof, she went back to where Zinti stood in the hollow holding the horse with one hand and the mule with the other, and beckoned him to follow her.

Very soon, tracing the spoor backwards, they reached the edge of the



cliff just where the waterfall fell over it into the sea pool. Here she searched about, noting this thing and that, till at last all grew clear to her. Yonder Suzanne had lain, for the impress of her shape could still be seen upon the grass. And there a man had been stretched out, for his blood stained the ground. More, he had been dragged to the edge of the cliff, for this was the track of his body and the spoor of his murderer's feet. Look how his heels had sunk into the turf as he took the weight of the corpse in his arms to hurl it over the edge.

"Tie the horse and the mule together, Zinti," she said, "and let us find a path down this precipice."

The lad obeyed, wondering, though he too guessed much of what had happened, and after a little search they found a place by which they could descend. Now Sihamba ran to the pool and stood upon its brink scanning the surface with her eyes, till at length she glanced downwards, and there, almost at her feet, three parts of his body yet hidden in the water, lay the man she sought.

Swiftly she sprang to him, and, aided by Zinti, dragged him to dry ground.

"Alas! lady," moaned the Kaffir, "it is of no use, the Baas is dead. Look, he has been shot."

Taking no heed of the words, Sihamba opened Ralph's garments, placing first her hand, then her ear, upon his heart. Presently she lifted her

head, a light of hope shining in her eyes, and said:

"Nay, he lives, and we have found him in time. Moreover, his wound is not to death. Now help me, for between us we must bear him up the cliff."

So Zinti took him on his back as a man takes a sack of flour, while Sihamba supported his legs, and thus between them, with great toil, for the way was very steep, they carried him by a sloping buck's path to the top of the precipice, and laid him upon the mule.

"Which way now?" gasped Zinti, for being strong he had borne the weight.

"To the waggon if they have not yet stolen it," said Sihamba, and thither they went.

When they were near she crept forward, searching for Swart Piet and his gang, but there were no signs of them, only she saw the driver and his companion nodding by the fire. She walked up to them.

"Do you then sleep, servants of Kenzie," she said, "while the Swallow is borne away to the Hawk's Nest and the husband of Swallow, your master, is cast by Bull-Head back into the sea whence he came?"

Now the men woke up and knew her. "Look, it is Sihamba," stammered one of them to the other, for he was frightened. "What evil thing has happened, Lady Sihamba?"

"I have told you, but your ears are shut. Come then and see with your eyes," and she led them to where Ralph lay in his blood, the water yet dripping from his hair and clothes.

"Alas! he is dead," they groaned and wrung their hands.

"He is not dead, he will live; for while you slept I found him," she answered. "Swift now, bring me the waggon box that is full of clothes, and the blankets off the cartel."

They obeyed her, and very quickly and gently--for of all doctors Sihamba was the best--with their help she drew off his wet garments, and, having dried him and dressed his wounds with strips of linen, she put a flannel shirt upon him and wrapped him in blankets. Then she poured brandy into his mouth, but, although the spirit brought a little colour into his pale face, it did not awaken him, for his swoon was deep.

"Lay him on the cartel in the waggon," she said, and, lifting him, they placed him upon the rimpi bed. Then she ordered them to inspan the waggon, and this was done quickly, for the oxen lay tied to the trek-tow. When all was ready she spoke to the two men, telling them what had happened so far as she knew it, and adding these words:

"Trek back to the stead as swiftly as you may, one of you sitting in the waggon to watch the Baas Kenzie and to comfort him should he wake out of his swoon. Say to the father and mother of Swallow that I have taken the

horses to follow Swart Piet and to rescue her by cunning if so I can, for as will be plain to them, this is a business that must not wait; also that I have taken with me Zinti, since he alone knows the path to Bull-Head's secret hiding-place in the mountains. Of that road Zinti will tell you all he can and you will tell it to the Baas Botmar, who must gather together such men as he is able, and start to-morrow to follow it and rescue us, remembering what sort of peril it is in which his daughter stands. If by any means I can free the Swallow, we will come to meet him; if not, who knows? Then he must act according to his judgment and to what he learns. But let him be sure of this, and let her husband be sure also, that while I have life in me I will not cease from my efforts to save her, and that if she dies--for I know her spirit and no worse harm than death will overtake her--then if may be, I will die with her or to avenge her, and I have many ways of vengeance. Lastly, let them not believe that we are dead until they have certain knowledge of it, for it may chance that we cannot return to the stead, but must lie hid in the mountains or among the Kaffirs. Now hear what Zinti has to say as to the path of Bull-Head's den and begone, forgetting no one of my words, for if you linger or forget, when I come again I, Sihamba, will blind your eyes and shrivel your livers with a spell."

"We hear you," they answered, "and remember every word of your message. In three hours the Baas shall know it."

Five minutes later they trekked away and so swiftly did they drive and so good were the oxen, that in less than the three hours we were awakened by the barking of the dogs and one knocking on our door, and

ran out to learn all the dreadful tidings and to find Ralph bleeding and still senseless, stretched upon that cartel where we thought him sleeping happily with his bride.

Oh! the terror and the agony of that hour, never may I forget them! Never may I forget the look that sprang into Ralph's eyes when at last he awoke and, turning them to seek Suzanne, remembered all.

"Why am I here and not dead?" he asked hoarsely.

"Sihamba saved you and you have been brought back in the waggon," I answered.

"Where then is Suzanne?" he asked again.

"Sihamba has ridden to save her also, and Jan starts presently to follow her, and with him others."

"Sihamba!" he groaned. "What can one woman do against Piet Van Vooren and his murderers, and for the rest they will be too late. Oh! my God, my God, what have we done that such a thing should fall upon us? Think of it, think of her in the hands of Piet Van Vooren. Oh! my God, my God, I shall go mad!"

Indeed I, who watched him, believe that this would have been so, or else his brain must have burst beneath its shock of sorrow, had not nature been kind to him and plunged him back into stupor. In this he lay long,

until well on into the morrow indeed, or rather the day, for by now it was three o'clock, when the doctor came to take out the pistol ball and set his shattered bone. For, as it chanced, a doctor, and a clever one, had been sent for from the dorp to visit the wife of a neighbour who lay sick not more than twenty miles away, and we were able to summon him. Indeed but for this man's skill, the sleeping medicines he gave him to quiet his mind, and, above all, a certain special mercy which shall be told of in its place, I think that Ralph would have died. As it was, seven long weeks went by before he could sit upon a horse.