

CHAPTER XVII

THE HIDDEN KRANTZ

Before the waggon left her, Sihamba took from it Ralph's gun, a very good roer, together with powder and bullets. Also she took tinder, a bottle of peach-brandy, a blanket, mealies in a small bag, wherewith to bait the horses in case of need, and some other things which she thought might be necessary. These she laded among her own goods upon the mule that with her horse had been fetched by Zinti and hastily fed with corn. Now, at her bidding, Zinti set Suzanne's saddle upon the back of the schimmel, and Ralph's on that of Suzanne's grey mare, which he mounted that the mule might travel lighter. Then Sihamba got upon her own horse, a good and quiet beast which she rode with a sheepskin for a saddle, and they started, Sihamba leading the schimmel and Zinti the mule that, as it chanced, although bad tempered, would follow well on a riem.

Riding up the kloof they soon reached the spot where Van Vooren's band had tethered their horses and tracked the spoor of them with ease for so long as the ground was soft. Afterwards when they reached the open country, where the grass had been burnt off and had only just begun to spring again, this became more difficult, and at length, in that light, impossible. Here they wasted a long time, searching for the hoof-marks by the rays of the waning moon, only to lose them again so soon as they were found.

"At this pace we shall take as long to reach Bull-Head's kraal as did

the cow you followed," said Sihamba presently. "Say, now, can you find the way to it?"

"Without a doubt, lady; Zinti never forgets a road or a landmark."

"Then lead me there as fast as may be."

"Yes, lady, but Bull-Head may have taken the Swallow somewhere else, and if we do not follow his spoor how shall we know where he has hidden her?"

"Fool, I have thought of that," she answered angrily, "else should I have spent all this time looking for hoof-marks in the dark? We must risk it, I say. To his house he has not taken her, for other white folk are living in it, and it is not likely he would have a second, or a better hiding-place than that you saw. I say that we must be bold and risk it since we have no time to lose."

"As you will, mistress," answered Zinti. "Who am I that I should question your wisdom?" and, turning his horse's head, he rode forward across the gloomy veldt as certainly as a homing rock-dove wings its flight.

So they travelled till the sun rose behind a range of distant hills.

Then Zinti halted and pointed to them.

"Look, lady," he said. "Do you see that peak among the mountains which

has a point like a spear, the one that seems as though it were on fire?
Well, behind it lies Bull-Head's kraal."

"It is far, Zinti, but we must be there by night."

"That may be done, lady, but if so we must spare our horses."

"Good," she answered. "Here is a spring; let us off-saddle a while."

So they off-saddled and ate of the food which they had brought, while the horses filled themselves with the sweet green grass, the schimmel being tied to the grey mare, for he would not bear a knee-halter.

All that day they rode, not so very fast but steadily, till towards sunset they off-saddled again beneath the shadow of the spear-pointed peak. There was no water at this spot, but seeing a green place upon the slope of a hill close by, Zinti walked to it, leading the thirsty beasts. Presently he threw up his hand and whistled, whereon Sihamba set out to join him, knowing that he had found a spring. So it proved to be, and now they learned that Sihamba had been wise in heading straight for Swart Piet's hiding-place, since round about this spring was the spoor of many horses and of men. Among these was the print of a foot that she knew well, the little foot of Suzanne.

"How long is it since they left here?" asked Sihamba, not as one who does not know, but rather as though she desired to be certified in her judgment.

"When the sun stood there," answered Zinti, pointing to a certain height in the heavens.

"Yes," she answered, "three hours. Bull-Head has travelled quicker than I thought."

"No," said Zinti, "but I think that he knew a path through the big vlei, whereas we rode round it, two hours' ride, fearing lest we should be bogged. Here by this spring they stayed till sunset, for it was needful that the horses should feed and rest, since they would save their strength in them.

"Lady," went on Zinti presently, "beyond the neck of the hill yonder lies the secret kraal of Bull-Head. Say, now, what is your plan when you reach it?"

"I do not know," she answered, "but tell me again of the hidden krantz where the women built the new hut, and of the way to it."

He told her and she listened, saying nothing.

"Good," she said, when he had done. "Now lead me to this place, and then perhaps I will tell my plan if I have one."

So they started on again, but just as they reached the crest of the Nek a heavy thunderstorm came up, together with clouds and rain, hiding

everything from them.

"Now I suppose that we must stay here till the light comes," said Sihamba.

"Not so, lady," answered Zinti, "I have been the path once and I can go it again in storm or shine," and he pressed forward, with the lightning flashes for a candle.

Well was that storm for them indeed, since otherwise they would have been seen, for already Swart Piet had set his scouts about the kraal.

At length Sihamba felt that they were riding among trees, for water dripped from them upon her and their branches brushed her face.

"Here is the wood where the women cut poles for the new hut," whispered Zinti in her ear.

"Then let us halt," she answered, and dismounting they tied the three horses and the mule to as many small trees close together, but not near enough for them to kick each other.

Now Sihamba took a piece of biltong from a saddle-bag and began to eat it, for she knew that she would need all her cleverness and strength.

"Take the bag of mealies," she said, "and divide it among the horses and the mule, giving a double share to the schimmel."

Zinti obeyed her, and presently all four of the beasts were eating well, for though they had travelled far their loads were light, nor had the pace been pressed.

Sihamba turned, and, holding out her hands towards the horses, muttered something rapidly.

"What are you doing, mistress?" asked Zinti.

"Perhaps I am throwing a charm upon these animals, that they may neither neigh nor whinny till we come again, for if they do so we are lost.

Now let us go, and--stay, bring the gun with you, for you know how to shoot."

So they started, slipping through the wet wood like shadows. For ten minutes or more they crept on thus towards the dark line of cliff, Zinti going first and feeling the way with his fingers, till presently he halted.

"Hist!" he whispered. "I smell people."

As he spoke, they heard a sound like to that of someone sliding down rocks. Then a man challenged, saying, "Who passes from the krantz?" and a woman's voice answered, "It is I, Asika, the wife of Bull-Head." "I hear you," answered the man. "Now tell me, Asika, what happens yonder."

"What happens? How do I know what happens?" she answered crossly. "About

sunset Bull-Head brought home his new wife, a white chieftainess, for whom we built the hut yonder; but the fashions of marriage among these white people must be strange indeed, for this one came to her husband, her feet bound, and with a face like to the face of a dead woman, the eyes set wide, and the lips parted. Yes, and they blindfolded her in the wood there and carried her through this hole in the rock down to the hut where she is shut in."

"I know something of this matter," answered the man; "the white lady is no willing wife to Bull-Head, for he killed her husband and took her by force. Yes, yes, I know, for my uncle was one of those with him when the deed was done, and he told me something of it just now."

"An evil deed," said Asika, "and one that will bring bad luck upon all of us; but then, Bull-Head, our chief, is an evil man. Oh! I know it who am of the number of his Kaffir wives. Say, friend," she went on, "will you walk a little way with me, as far as the first huts of the kraal, for there are ghosts in the wood, and I fear to pass it alone at night."

"I dare not, Asika," he answered, "for I am set here on guard."

"Have no fear, friend, the chief is within, seeing to the comfort of his new wife."

"Well, I will come with you a little way if you wish it, but I must be back immediately," he said, and the listeners heard them walk off together.

"Now, Zinti," whispered Sihamba, "lead me through the hole in the rock."

So he took her by the hand and felt along the face of the cliff till he found the bush which covered the entrance. To this he climbed, dragging her after him, and presently they were in the secret krantz.

"We have found our way into the spider's nest," muttered Zinti, who grew afraid; "but say, lady, how shall we find our way out of it?"

"Lead on and leave that to me," she answered. "Where I, a woman, can go, surely you who are a man can go also."

"I trust to your magic to protect us--therefore I come," said Zinti, "though if we are seen our death is sure."

On they crept across the glen, till presently they heard the sound of the small waterfall and saw it glimmering faintly through the gloom and drizzling rain. To their left ran the stream, and on the banks of it stood something large and round.

"There stands the new hut where Swallow is," whispered Zinti.

Now Sihamba thought for a moment and said:

"Zinti, I must find out what passes in that hut. Listen: do you lie hid among the rocks under the bank of the stream, and if you hear me hoot

like an owl, then come to me, but not before."

"I obey," answered Zinti, and crept down among the reeds, where he crouched for a long time up to his knees in water, shivering with cold and fear.