

CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT PASSED IN THE HUT

Going on to her hands and knees Sihamba crawled towards the hut. Now she was within ten paces of it and could see that a man stood on guard at its doorway. "I must creep round to the back," she thought, and began to do so, heading for some shrubs which grew to the right. Already she had almost reached them, when of a sudden, and for an instant only, the moon shone out between two thick clouds, revealing her, though indistinctly, to the eyes of the guard. Now Sihamba was wearing a fur cape made of wild dog's hide, and, crouched as she was upon her hands and knees, half-hidden, moreover, by a tuft of dry grass, the man took her to be a wild dog or a jackal, and the hair which stood out round her head for the ruff upon the animal's neck.

"Take that, you four-legged night thief," he said aloud, and hurled the assegai in his hand straight at her. The aim was good; indeed, had she been a dog it would have transfixed her. As it was, the spear passed just beneath her body, pinning the hanging edges of the cape and remaining fixed in the tough leather. Now if Sihamba's wit had left her, as would have happened with most, she was lost, but not for nothing had she been a witch-doctress from her childhood, skilled in every artifice and accustomed to face death. From his words she guessed that the sentry had mistaken her for a wild beast, so instead of springing to her feet she played the part of one, and uttering a howl of pain scrambled away among the bushes. She heard the man start to follow her, then the

moonlight went out and he returned to his post grumbling over his lost assegai and saying that he would find it in the jackal's body on the morrow. Sihamba, listening not far away, knew his voice; it was that of the fellow who had set the noose about her neck at Swart Piet's bidding and who was to have done the murder in the pass.

"Now, friend, you are unarmed," she thought to herself, "for you have no gun with you, and perhaps we shall settle our accounts before you go to seek that dead jackal by to-morrow's light." Then drawing the assegai from the cloak and keeping it in her hand, she crept on till she came to the back of the hut in safety. Still she was not much nearer to her end, for the hut was new and very well built, and she could find no crack to look through, though when she placed her ear against its side she thought that she could hear the sound of a man's voice. In her perplexity Sihamba cast her eyes upwards and saw that a fine line of light shone from the smoke-hole at the very top of the hut, which was hive-shaped, and a thought came into her head.

"If I climb up there," she said to herself, "I can look down through the smoke-hole and see and hear what passes in the hut. Only then if the moon comes out again I may be seen lying on the thatch; well, that I must chance with the rest."

So very slowly and silently, by the help of the rimpis which bound the straw, she climbed the dome of the hut, laughing to herself to think that this was the worst of omens for its owner, till at length she reached the smoke-hole at the top and looked down.

This was what she saw: Half seated, half lying upon a rough bedstead spread with blankets, was Suzanne. Her hair had come undone and hung about her, her feet were still loosely bound together, and as the Kaffir, Asika, had said, her face was like that of a dead woman, and her eyes were set in a fixed unnatural stare. Before her was a table cut by natives out of a single block of wood, on which were two candles of sheep's fat set in bottles, and beyond the table stood Swart Piet, who was addressing her.

"Suzanne," he said, "listen to me. I have always loved you, Suzanne, yes, from the time when I was but a boy: we used to meet now and again, you know, when you were out riding with the Englishman who is dead"--here Suzanne's face changed, then resumed its deathlike mask--"and always I worshipped you, and always I hated the Englishman whom you favoured. Well, as you grew older you began to understand and dislike me, and Kenzie began to understand and insult me, and from that seed of slight and insult grew most that is bad in me. Yes, Suzanne, you will say that I am wicked; and I am wicked. I have done things of which I should not like to tell you. I have done such things as you saw last night; I have mixed myself up with Kaffir wizardries and cruelties; I have forgotten God and taken another master, and so far from honouring my own father, why, I struck him down when he was drunk and dared me to do it, and of that blow they say he died. Well, I owed him nothing less for begetting me into such a world as this, and teaching me how to find the devil before my time.

"And now," he went on after a pause, for Suzanne answered nothing, "standing before you as I do here with your husband's blood upon my hands, and seeking your love over his grave, you will look at me and say--'This man is a monster, a madman, one who should be cast from the earth and stamped deep, deep into hell!' Yes, all these things I am, and let the weight of them rest upon your head, for you made me them, Suzanne. I am mad, I know that I am mad, as my father and grandfather were before me, but my madness is mixed with knowledge, for in me runs the blood of the old Pondo witch-doctress, my grandmother, she who knew many things that are not given to white men. When I saw you and loved you I became half mad--before that I was sane--and when the Englishman, Kenzie, struck me with the whip after our fight at the sheep-kraal, ah! then I went wholly mad, and see how wisely, for you are the first-fruits of my madness, you and the body that to-night rolls to and fro in the ocean.

"You do not answer: Well, look you, Suzanne, I have won you by craft and blood, and by craft and blood I will keep you. Here you are in my power, here Heaven itself could not save you from me, in Bull-Head's secret krantz which none knew of but some few natives. Choose, therefore; forget the sins that I have committed to win you and become my wife willingly, and no woman shall ever find a better husband, for then the fire and the tempest will leave my brain and it will grow calm as it was before I saw you.

"Have you still no answer? Well, I will not hurry you. See, I must go--do you know what for? To set scouts lest by any chance your father

or other fools should have found my hiding-place, though I think that they can never find it except it be through the wisdom of Sihamba, which they will not seek. Still I go, and in an hour I will return for your answer, which you must make then, Suzanne, since whether you desire it, or desire it not, fortune has given you to me. Have you no word for me before I go?"

Now during all this long, half-insane harangue, Suzanne had sat quite silent, making no reply at all, not even seeming to hear the demon, for such he was, whose wicked talk defiled her ears. But when he asked her whether she had nothing to say to him before he went, still looking not at him, but beyond him, she gave him his answer in one word, the same that she had used when she awoke from her swoon:

"Murderer."

Something in the tone in which she spoke, or perhaps in the substance of that short speech, seemed to cow him; at the least he turned and left the hut, and presently Sihamba heard him talking to the sentry without, bidding him to keep close watch till he came back within an hour.

When Piet went out he left the door-board of the hut open, so that Sihamba dared neither act nor speak, fearing lest the guard should hear or see her through it. Therefore she still lay upon the top of the hut, and watched through the smoke-hole. For a while Suzanne sat quiet upon the bed, then of a sudden she rose from it, and shuffling across the hut as well as her bound feet would allow her, she closed the opening with

the door-board, and secured it by its wooden bar. Next she returned to the bed and, seating upon it, clasped her hands and began to pray, muttering aloud and mixing with her prayer the name of her husband Ralph. Ceasing presently, she thrust her hand into her bosom and drew from it a knife, not large, but strong and very sharp. Opening this knife she cut the thong that bound her ankles, and made it into a noose. Then she looked earnestly first at the noose, next at the knife, and thirdly at the candles, and Sihamba understood that she meant to do herself to death, and was choosing between steel and rope and fire.

Now all this while, although she dared not so much as whisper, Sihamba had not been idle, for with the blade of the assegai she was working gently at the thatch of the smoke-hole, and cutting the rimpis that bound it, till at last, and not too soon, she thought that it was wide enough to allow of the passage of her small body. Then watching until the guard leaned against the hut, so that the bulge of it would cut her off from his sight, during the instant that her figure was outlined against the sky, she stood up, and thrusting her feet through the hole, forced her body to follow them, and then dropped lightly as a cat to the floor beneath. But now there was another danger to be faced, and a great one, namely, that Suzanne might cry out in fear, which doubtless she would have done, had not the sudden sight of some living creature in the hut where she thought herself alone, so startled her that for a moment she lost her breath. Before she could find it again Sihamba was whispering in her ear, saying:

"Keep silence for your life's sake, Swallow. It is I, Sihamba, who am

come to save you."

Suzanne stared at her, and light came back into the empty eyes, then they grew dark again, as she answered below her breath:

"Of what use is my life? Ralph is dead, and I was about to take it that I may save myself from shame and go to seek him, for surely God will forgive the sin."

Sihamba looked at her and said:

"Swallow, prepare yourself for great joy, and, above all, do not cry out. Your husband is not dead, he was but wounded, and I drew him living from the sea. He lies safe at the stead in your mother's care."

Suzanne heard her, and, notwithstanding the caution, still she would have cried aloud in the madness of her joy, had not Sihamba, seeing her lips opened, thrust her hands upon her mouth and held them there till the danger was past.

"You do not lie to me?" she gasped at length.

"Nay, I speak truth, I swear it. But this is no time to talk. Yonder stand food and milk; eat while I think."

As Sihamba guessed, nothing but a little water had passed Suzanne's lips since that meal which she and her husband took together beside the

waggon, nor one minute before she could have swallowed anything had her life been the price of it. But now it was different, for despair had left her, and hope shone in her heart again, and behold! of a sudden she was hungry, and ate and drank with gladness, while Sihamba thought.

Presently the little woman looked up and whispered:

"A plan comes into my head; it is a strange one, but I can find no other, and it may serve our turn, for I think that good luck goes with us. Swallow, give me the noose of hide which you made from the riem that bound your feet."

Suzanne obeyed her wondering, whereon Sihamba placed the noose about her own neck, then bade Suzanne stand upon the bed and thrust the end of the riem loosely into the thatch of the hut as high up as she could reach, so that it looked as though it were made fast there. Next, Sihamba slipped off her fur cloak, leaving herself naked except for the moocha round her middle, and, clasping her hands behind her back with the assegai between them, she drew the riem taut, and leaned against the wall of the hut after the fashion of one who is about to be pulled from the ground and strangled.

"Now, mistress, listen to me," she said earnestly. "You have seen me like this before, have you not, when I was about to be hanged, and you bought my life at a price? Well, as it chances, that man who guards the hut is he who took me at Bull-Head's bidding and set the rope round my neck, whereon I said some words to him which made him afraid. Now if

he sees me again thus in a hut where he knows you to be alone, he will think that I am a ghost and his heart will turn to ice and the strength of his hands to water, and then before he can find his strength again I shall make an end of him with the spear, as I know well how to do although I am so small, and we will fly."

"Is there no other way?" murmured Suzanne aghast.

"None, Swallow. For you the choice lies between witnessing this deed and--Swart Piet or--Death. Nay, you need not witness it even, if you will do as I tell you. Presently, when I give the word, loosen the bar of the door-board, then crouch by the hole and utter a low cry of fear, calling to the man on guard for help. He will enter and see me, whereon you can creep through the door-hole and wait without, leaving me to deal with him. If I succeed I will be with you at once; if I fail, run to the stream and hoot like an owl, when Zinti, who is hidden there, will join you. Then you must get out of the krantz as best you can. Only one man watches the entrance, and if needful Zinti can shoot him. The schimmel and other horses are hidden in the wood, and he will lead you to them. Mount and ride for home, or anywhere away from this accursed place, and at times when you talk of the matter of your escape with your husband, think kindly of Sihamba Ngenyanga. Nay, do not answer, for there is little time to lose. Quick, now, to the door-hole, and do as I bade you."

So, like one in a dream, Suzanne loosened the bar, and, crouching by the entrance to the hut, uttered a low wail of terror, saying, "Help me,

soldier, help me swiftly," in the Kaffir tongue. The man without heard, and, pushing down the board, crept in at once, saying, "Who harms you, lady?" as he rose to his feet. Then suddenly, in this hut, where there was but one woman, a white woman, whom he himself had carried into it, he beheld another woman--Sihamba; and his hair stood up upon his head and his eyes grew round with terror. Yes, it was Sihamba herself, for the light of the candles shone full upon her, or, rather, her ghost, and she was hanging to the roof, the tips of her toes just touching the ground, as once he had seen her hang before.

For some seconds the man stared in his terror, and while he stared Suzanne slipped from the hut. Then muttering, "It is the spirit of the witch, Sihamba, who prophesied my death--her spirit that haunts me," he dropped to his knees, and, trembling like a leaf, turned to creep from the hut. Next second he was dead, dead without a sound, for Sihamba was a doctress, and knew well where to thrust with the spear.

Of all this Suzanne heard nothing and saw nothing, till presently Sihamba stood by her side holding the skin cape in one hand and the spear in the other.

"Now one danger is done with," she said quietly, as she put on the cape, "but many still remain. Follow me, Swallow," and, going to the edge of the stream, she hooted like an owl, whereupon Zinti came out of the reeds, looking very cold and frightened.

"Be swift," whispered Sihamba, and they started along the krantz at a

run. Before they were half way across it, the storm-clouds, which had been thinning gradually, broke up altogether, and the moon shone out with a bright light, showing them as plainly as though it were day; but as it chanced they met nobody and were seen of none.

At length they reached the cleft in the rock that led to the plain below. "Stay here," said Sihamba, "while I look," and she crept to the entrance. Presently she returned and said:

"A man watches there, and it is not possible to slip past him because of the moonlight. Now, I know of only one thing that we can do; and you, Zinti, must do it. Slip down the rock and cover the man with your gun, saying to him that if he stirs a hand or speaks a word you will shoot him dead. Hold him thus till we are past you on our way to the wood, then follow us as best you can, but do not fire except to save your life or ours."

Now the gifts of Zinti lay rather in tracking and remembering paths and directions than in fighting men, so that when he heard this order he was afraid and hesitated. But when she saw it, Sihamba turned upon him so fiercely that he feared her more than the watchman, and went at once, so that this man who was half asleep suddenly saw the muzzle of a roer within three paces of his head and heard a voice command him to stand still and silent or die. Thus he stood indeed until he perceived that the new wife of his chief was escaping. Then remembering what would be his fate at the hands of Bull-Head he determined to take his chance of being shot, and, turning suddenly, sped towards the kraal shouting as he

ran, whereon Zinti fired at him, but the ball went wide. A cannon could scarcely have made more noise than did the great roer in the silence of the night as the report of it echoed to and fro among the hills.

"Oh! fool to fire, and yet greater fool to miss," said Sihamba. "To the horses! Swift! swift!"

They ran as the wind runs, and now they were in the wood, and now they had found the beasts.

"Praise to the Snake of my house!" said Sihamba, "they are safe, all four of them," and very quickly they untied the riems by which they had fastened the horses to the trees.

"Mount, Swallow," said Sihamba, seizing the head of the great schimmel.

Suzanne set her foot upon the shoulder of Zinti, who knelt to receive it, and sprang into the saddle. Then having lifted Sihamba on the grey mare Zinti mounted the other horse himself, holding the mule by a leading riem.

"Which way, mistress?" he asked.

"Homewards," she answered, and they cantered forward through the wood.

On the further side of this wood was a little sloping plain not more

than three hundred paces wide, and beyond it lay the seaward Nek through which they must pass on their journey to the stead. Already they were out of the wood and upon the plain, when from their right a body of horsemen swooped towards them, seven in all, of whom one, the leader, was Swart Piet himself, cutting them off from the Nek. They halted their horses as though to a word of command, and speaking rapidly, Sihamba asked of Zinti: "Is there any other pass through yonder range, for this one is barred to us?"

"None that I know of," he answered; "but I have seen that the ground behind us is flat and open as far as the great peak which you saw rising on the plain away beyond the sky-line."

"Good," said Sihamba. "Let us head for the peak, since we have nowhere else to go, and if we are separated, let us agree to meet upon its southern slope. Now, Zinti, loose the mule, for we have our lives to save, and ride on, remembering that Death is behind you."