

CHAPTER XIX

HOW THE SCHIMMEL CROSSED THE RED WATER

When they turned their horses' heads, Swart Piet and his men were not much more than a hundred paces from them, but in the wood they gained much ground, for he did not think that they would dare to leave it, and hunted for them there while they were racing over the open plain more than a mile away. At last he caught sight of them crossing a distant ridge, and the long chase began. For hour after hour they galloped on through the moonlight across the wide and rolling veldt until the moon sank, and they must pick their way as best they could in the darkness. Then came the dawn, and still they rode forward, though now the horses were beginning to grow weary, except the schimmel, who pulled upon his bit as though he were fresh from the stable. In front of them, some twenty miles away, rose the lofty peak for which they were heading, and behind lay the great expanse of plain which they had passed. Suzanne looked back over her shoulder, but there was no one in sight.

"Let us halt," she said, "and rest ourselves and the horses." So they pulled up by a stream and suffered the beasts to drink some water, though not much, while they themselves devoured biltong, of which they had a little in the saddle-bags.

"Why do we ride for the peak?" asked Suzanne.

"Because there are places where we may lie hid," Sihamba answered, "and

thence we can make our way down to the seashore and so back homewards, whereas here upon the plain we can be seen from miles away."

"Do any people live on the peak?"

"Yes, Swallow; it is the home of the great chief Sigwe, the chief-paramount of the Red Kaffirs, who counts his spears by thousands, but I have heard that he is away to the north upon a war which he makes against some of the Swazi tribes with whom he has a quarrel."

"Will the people of Sigwe protect us, Sihamba?"

"Perhaps. We shall see. At least, you are safer with them than in the hands of Swart Piet."

At this moment, Zinti, who was watching the plain over which they had travelled, uttered a cry of warning. Looking back, they saw the reason of it, for there, crossing the crest of a wave of ground, not more than a mile away, were five horsemen riding hard upon their spoor.

"Swart Piet and four of his men," said Sihamba, "and by my Spirit, they have fresh horses; they must have taken them from the kraal of the half-breed which we passed at daybreak, and that is why we lost sight of them for a while."

Now even as Zinti helped her to mount the schimmel Suzanne turned so faint with terror that she almost fell to the ground again.

"Have no fear, Swallow," said Sihamba, "he has not caught us yet, and a voice in me says that we shall escape him."

But though she spoke thus bravely, in her heart Sihamba was much afraid, for except the schimmel their horses were almost spent, whereas Van Vooren was fresh mounted, and not a mile behind. Still they galloped forward till they reached a more broken stretch of veldt, where trees grew singly, and here and there were kloofs with bush in them.

"Mistress," cried Zinti, "my horse can go no more, and Bull-Head is hard upon us. Of your wisdom tell me what I should do or presently I must be killed."

"Ride into that kloof and hide yourself," answered Sihamba, "for Bull-Head will never seek you there; he hunts the white Swallow, not the black finch. Afterwards you can follow on our spoor, and if you cannot find us, make your way back to the Baas Botmar and tell him all you know. Quick, into the kloof, for here they cannot see you."

"I hear you, lady," said Zinti, and the next minute they saw him leading his weary horse into the shelter of the thick bush, for the poor beast could carry him no more.

For the next three miles the ground trended downwards to the banks of a great river, beyond which were the gentle rising slopes that surrounded the foot of the high peak. On they galloped, the schimmel never

faltering in his swinging stride, although his flanks grew thin and his eyes large. But with the grey mare it was otherwise, for though she was a gallant nag her strength was gone. Indeed, with any heavier rider upon her back, ere this she would have fallen. But still she answered to Sihamba's voice and plunged on, rolling and stumbling in her gait.

"She will last till the river," she said, seeing Suzanne look at the mare.

"And then----?" gasped Suzanne, glancing behind her to where, not five hundred yards away, Swart Piet and his Kaffirs hunted them sullenly and in silence, as strong dogs hunt down a wounded buck.

"And then--who knows?" answered Sihamba, and they went on without more words, for they had no breath to spare.

Now, not half a mile away, they came in sight of the river, which had been hidden from them before by the lie of the ground, and a groan of despair broke from their lips, for it was in flood. Yes, the storms in the mountains had swollen it, and it rolled towards the sea a red flood of foam-flecked water, well-nigh two hundred yards from bank to bank. Still they rode on, for they dared not stop, and presently behind them they heard a shout of triumph, and knew that their pursuers had also seen the Red Water, and rejoiced because now they had them in a trap.

Within ten yards of the lip of the river, the grey mare stopped suddenly, shivered like a leaf in the wind and sank to the ground.

"Now, Swallow," said Sihamba as she slipped from the saddle, "you must choose between that raging torrent and Swart Piet. If you choose the torrent the great horse is still strong and he may swim through; I can say no more."

"And you?" asked Suzanne.

"I? I bide here, and oh! I would that Zinti had left the gun with me."

"Never," cried Suzanne. "Together we will live or die. Mount, I say--mount. Nay, if you refuse I will throw myself into the water before your eyes."

Then seeing that she would indeed do no less, Sihamba took her outstretched hand, and placing her foot upon the foot of Suzanne, scrambled up upon the pad in front of her, whereat the pursuers, who now were little over two hundred yards away, laughed out loud, and Swart Piet shouted to Suzanne to yield. But they did not laugh long, for Sihamba, having first bent her head and kissed Suzanne on the hand, leaned forward and began to stroke the schimmel's neck and to whisper into his ear, till indeed it seemed as though the great brute that loved her understood. At the least he pricked his ears and tossed his head, then looked, first round at the horses that drew near, and next at the foaming flood in front.

"Sit fast, Swallow," said Sihamba, and then she cried a word aloud to

the horse, and struck it lightly with her hand. At the sound of that word the stallion drew himself together, sprang forward with two bounds over the ten paces of level bank and leapt far out into the flood that foamed beneath. Down sank the horse and his riders till the Red Water closed over their heads, then they rose again and heard the shout of wonder of their enemies, who by now had almost reached the bank. With a yell of rage Black Piet rode his horse at the river, for to do him justice he was a brave man, but do what he might it would not face it, so with the others he sat still and watched.

Now the schimmel struck out bravely, heading for the other bank, but in the fierce current it was not possible that any horse should reach it swimming in a straight line, for the weight of the stream was too great. Sihamba had noted, however, that from the further shore, but two or three hundred paces lower down the river, a little point of land projected into it, and this the horse had seen also, or perhaps she told him of it, at least for that point he swam steadily. In five minutes they were in the centre of the torrent, and here it ran with a roar and mighty force so that its waves began to break over the schimmel's head, and they feared that he would drown. So much did Sihamba fear it, indeed, that she slipped from his back, and leaving Suzanne to cling to the saddle, caught hold of his mane, floating alongside of him and protected by his neck from the whirl of the water. Lying thus she continued to call to the horse and to urge him forward, and ever he answered to her words, so that although twice he nearly sank, in the end he set his feet upon a sandbank and, having rested there a while, plunged forward, half wading and half swimming, to the projecting point

of land, up which he scrambled, still carrying Suzanne and dragging Sihamba with him, until once more they found themselves safe upon the solid earth, where he stood shaking himself and snorting.

Suzanne slipped from the saddle and lay flat upon the ground, looking at the awful water they had passed, and by her lay Sihamba. Presently the little doctress spoke.

"It is well to have lived," she said, "if only to have dared that deed, for no others have ever made the passage across the Red Water in flood, two of them on one tired horse," and she caught in her arms the muzzle of the schimmel that hung above her, pressing it to her breast as though it had been a child, whereon the brute whinnied faintly, knowing well that she was thanking him for his toil and courage.

"I pray God that I may never be called upon to make it again," answered Suzanne, staggering to her feet, the water running from her dripping dress as she turned to look across the river.

Now, when Van Vooren's horse refused to face the stream, he had ridden up and down shouting like a madman; once even he lifted his gun and pointed it, then let it fall again, remembering that he could not make sure of hitting the horse, and that if he did so Suzanne must certainly be drowned. When they were quite beyond his reach in the middle of the stream, he stood still and watched until he saw them come to the further shore in safety. Then he called his men about him and consulted with them, and the end of it was that they rode off in a body up the bank of

the river.

"They go to seek a ford," said Suzanne.

"Yes, Swallow, but now we shall have the start of them. Come, let us mount."

So they climbed upon the back of the schimmel, and once more he went on with them, not fast, for now he could not even canter, but ambling or walking, according to the nature of the ground, at a rate perhaps of seven miles the hour. Soon they had left the river and were toiling up the slopes of the peak, until presently they struck a well-worn footpath.

"I think that this must lead to the town of Sigwe," said Sihamba.

"I pray that it does," answered Suzanne, "and that it is not far, for I feel as though Death were near to me."

"Keep a great heart," said Sihamba, "for we have met Death face to face and conquered him."

So still they toiled on till at length the path took a turn, and there, in a fold of the hill, they beheld the great kraal of Sigwe, a very large Kaffir town. Before the kraal was a wide open space, and on that space armed men were assembled, several full regiments of them. In front of this impi was gathered a company of chiefs.

"Now we have no choice," said Sihamba, and turned the schimmel towards them, while all that army stared at this strange sight of two women, one tall and fair, one black and little, riding towards them mounted together upon a great blood horse which was so weary that he could scarcely set one foot before the other.

When they reached the captains Sihamba slipped to the ground, but Suzanne remained seated upon the schimmel.

"Who are you?" asked a broad man in a leopard-skin cloak, of Sihamba; but although she was small and dishevelled, her hair and garments being wet with water, he did not laugh at her, for he saw that this stranger had the air of one who is of the blood of chiefs.

"I am Sihamba Ngenyanga, the doctress, of whom you may have heard," she answered; and some of the people said, "We have heard of her; she is a great doctress."

"To what people do you belong, Sihamba?" asked the captain again.

"I belong to the people of Zwide, whom Chaka drove from Zululand, and by birth I am a chieftainess of the Umpondwana, who live in the mountain Umpondwana, and who were the Children of Zwide, but are now the Children of Chaka."

"Why then do you wander so far from home, Sihamba?"

"For this reason. When Zwide and his people, the Endwandwe, were driven back, my people, the Umpondwana, who were subject to Zwide, made peace with Chaka against my will. Therefore, because I would not live as a Zulu dog, I left them."

"Although your body is small you have a large heart," said the captain, and one of his people cried out: "The story of Sihamba is true, for when you sent me as messenger to the Endwandwe, I heard it--it is a tale there."

Then the captain asked, "And who is the beautiful white woman who sits upon the great horse?"

"She is my mother and my sister and my mistress, whom I serve till death, for she saved me from death, and her name is Swallow."

Now at this word Swallow, most of those present started, and some uttered exclamations of wonder, especially a little band of people, men and women, who stood to the left, and who from their dress and other tokens it was easy to see were witch-doctors and diviners. Sihamba noted the movements and words of wonder, but pretending to see nothing she went on:

"The lady Swallow and I have fled hither from far, hoping to find the chief Sigwe, for we need his counsel and protection, but he is away, making war to the north, is it not so?"

"Nay," answered the captain. "I am the chief Sigwe, and I have not yet begun my war."

"I am glad," said Sihamba. "Chief, listen to my tale and suffer us to creep into the shadow of your strength----" and in a few words she told them the story of the capture of Suzanne by Swart Piet and of their flight from him. Now when she spoke of Van Vooren, or of Bull-Head rather, for she called him by his native name, she saw that Sigwe and the captains looked at each other, and when she told how they had swum the Red Water in flood, the two of them upon one horse, she was sure that they did not believe her, for such a deed they thought to be impossible. But still Sihamba went on and ended--"Chief, we seek this from you; protection from Bull-Head, who doubtless will be here ere long, and an escort of spears to lead us down the coast to the home of the Swallow, a hundred miles away, where they and you will be well rewarded for the service. Answer us quick, chief, I pray you, for our need is great and we are weary."