

CHAPTER XX

THE OMEN OF THE WHITE SWALLOW

Now Sigwe and two of his captains walked to where the diviners stood and took counsel with them, speaking low and earnestly. Then he returned and said:

"Sihamba, Walker-by-Moonlight, and you, Lady Swallow, listen to me. A wonderful thing has come to pass in the kraal of Sigwe this day, such a thing as our fathers have not known. You see that my host is gathered yonder: well, to-morrow they start to make war upon these very Endwandwe of whom you have spoken because of a deadly insult which they have put upon me and my house. Therefore, according to custom, this morning the soldiers were assembled at dawn to be doctored and that the diviners might search out the omens of the war. So the diviners searched, and she who was chosen among them ate the medicine and sank into the witch sleep here before us all. Yes, this one," and he pointed to a tall woman with dreamy eyes who was bedizened with bones and snakeskins.

"Now in her sleep she spoke, and we hung upon her words, for we knew that they would be the words of omen. Sihamba, these were the words, as all can testify:

"Thus say the spirits of your fathers, and thus speaks the Snake of your tribe. Unless a White Swallow guide your footsteps in the war with the Men of the Mountains you shall perish and your impis shall be

scattered, but if a White Swallow flies before your spears than but little of your blood shall be shed, and you shall return with honour and with one whom you seek. Only the Swallow shall not return with you, for if she set her face southward, then, Sigwe, woe to you and your armies.'

"Sihamba, these were the words of the dreamer. Scarcely was she awake again, while we wondered at their strangeness, and asked her questions of their meaning, which she could not answer, for here the wisdom of the wisest was at fault, lo! you rode over the hill, and with you a beautiful white woman whose name you say is Swallow. Yes, this is the White Swallow who shall fly in front of my regiments, bringing me honour and good fortune in the war, and therefore, Sihamba, your prayer is granted, though not all of it, for you shall go northward and not southward, and among your own people I will leave you and the Swallow with you, and for her sake I will spare your people, the people of Umpondwana, although they are subject to my foe, the Endwandwe, and of the same blood. Moreover, while you are among us all honour shall be done to you and the Swallow, and of the cattle we capture a tenth part shall be the Swallow's. Still, I tell you this, that had it not been for the omen of the diviner I would have refused your prayer and delivered you and the Swallow over to Bull-Head, for with him I have sworn friendship long ago. But now the face of things is changed, and should he come with a hundred men armed with guns yet I will protect you from him, and the Swallow also; yes, though oaths must be broken to do it."

When they heard this saying, Suzanne and Sihamba looked at each other in dismay.

"Alas!" said Suzanne, "it seems that we do but change one prison for another, for now we must be borne away to the far north to do battle with this Kaffir chief, and there be left among your people, so that none will know what has become of us, and the heart of Ralph will break with doubt and sorrow; yes, and those of my parents also."

"It is bad," answered Sihamba, "but had not yonder diviner dreamed that dream of a swallow, it would have been worse. Better is it to travel in all honour with the impis of Sigwe than to be dragged back by Bull-Head to his secret kraal--I to be done to death there and you to the choice of which you know. For the rest we must take our chance and escape when the time comes, and meanwhile we will send a message to the stead."

Now Suzanne heard her, and sat upon the horse thinking, for her trouble was sore; still, she could see no way out of the net which had meshed her. As she thought, a man who was herding cattle on the mountains ran up to the chief and saluted him, saying that five men, one of them white, rode towards his kraal. When Suzanne heard this she hesitated no more, but cried out to the chief Sigwe, speaking in the Kaffir tongue, which she knew well:

"Chief Sigwe, swear to me that you will not suffer Bull-Head so much as to touch me or my sister Sihamba, and that while we dwell with you you will treat us with all honour, and I, who am named Swallow, yes, I, the White Swallow of the diviner's dream, will lead your armies to the northern land, bringing you the good fortune which is mine to give to

others, though myself I know it not."

"I swear by the spirits of my fathers, lady," answered Sigwe, "and these my counsellors and headmen swear it also."

"Yes," echoed the counsellors, "we swear it, all of it, and while one of us is left alive the oath shall be fulfilled, O White Bird of good omen."

Then Sigwe gave an order, and at his bidding five hundred soldiers, the half of a regiment, ran up and formed a circle about Sihamba and Suzanne, who still sat upon the schimmel, white faced and wearied, her hair hanging down her back. Scarcely was the circle made when from round the shoulder of the hill appeared Swart Piet and with him his four after-riders.

Seeing all the great array, he halted for a moment astonished, then catching sight of Suzanne set up above the heads of the ring of soldiers, he rode straight to Sigwe, who, with his counsellors and guards, was standing outside the circle.

"Chief Sigwe," he said, "a wife of mine with her servant has escaped from me, and as I suspected taken refuge in your kraal, for I see her sitting yonder surrounded by your soldiers. Now, in the name of our friendship, I pray you hand them over to me that I may lead them back to their duty."

"I give you greeting, Bull-Head," answered Sigwe courteously, "and I thank you for your visit to my town; presently an ox shall be sent for you to eat. As for this matter of the white lady and her companion it is one that we can inquire into at leisure. I hear that she is the daughter of the big Boer whom the natives of the coast name Thick-Arm; also that you murdered the lady's husband and carried her off by force to be your wife instead of his. Now here, as you know, I am chief paramount, for having of our blood in your veins, you understand our customs, and, therefore, I must see justice done, especially as I do not wish to bring a quarrel with the white people upon our heads. So off-saddle a while, and to-morrow before I start upon a certain journey, I will summon my counsellors and we will try the case."

Now by this time Swart Piet, who, as Sigwe had said, understood the customs of the Kaffirs, knew very well that the chief was making excuses, and would not surrender Suzanne to him. For a while he kept himself calm, but when this knowledge came home to his mind his reason left him, and he grew more than commonly mad with rage and disappointment, for after all his crimes and toil Suzanne was now as far from him as ever. Springing from his horse, but still keeping the gun in his hand, he ran up to the triple ring of soldiers, pausing only at the hedge of assegais which shone about it.

"Open," he said, "open, you red dogs!" but not a spear moved. Twice he ran round the circle, then he stopped and cried, "Sihamba. Is Sihamba here?"

"Surely, Bull-Head," answered the little woman, walking forward from where she stood behind the schimmel. "Where else should I be? I pray you, soldiers, draw a little way but not far apart, that yonder half-breed may satisfy his eyes with the sight of me. So, a little way, but not far, for I who know him like him best at a distance. Now, Bull-Head," she went on, "what is it that you wish to talk about--the Englishman, Ralph Kenzie, the husband of Swallow yonder? You thought you killed him. Well, it was not so; I lifted him living from the water, and I, who am a doctress, tell you that his wound is of no account, and that soon he will be strong again and seeking a word with you, Half-breed. No, not of him? Then perhaps it is of your hidden krantz and the new hut you built in it. Bah! I knew its secret long ago and--that hut has too wide a smoke-hole. Go back and ask him who guarded it if this is not true. What! Not of that either? Then would you speak of the ride which we have taken? Ah! man, I thought at least that you were no coward, and yet even when you had us in your hand, you did not dare to face the Red Water which two women swam on one tired horse. Look at him, soldiers, look at the brave cross-bred chief who dared not swim his horse across one little stream."

Now while the soldiers laughed Swart Piet stamped upon the ground, foaming with rage, for Sihamba's bitter words stuck in him like barbed assegais.

"Snake's wife, witch!" he screamed, "I will catch you yet, and then you shall learn how slowly a woman may die, yes, and her also, and she shall learn other things, for if that husband of hers is not dead I will

kill him before her eyes. I tell you I will follow you both through all Africa and across the sea if needful; yes, whenever you lie down to sleep, you may be sure that Piet van Vooren is not far from you."

"Do you say so?" mocked Sihamba. "Well, now I think of it you have no luck face to face with me, Half-breed, and were I you, I should look the other way when you saw me coming, for I who have the Sight tell you that when you behold the Walker-by-Moonlight for the last time, you will very soon become a walker in the darkness for ever. Bah!" she went on, her clear voice rising to a cry. "Bastard, dog, thief, murderer that you are! I, Sihamba, who have met and beaten you in every pool of the stream, will beat you for the last time where the stream falls into the sea. Be not deceived, yonder Swallow never shall be yours; for many and many a year after you are dead, your rival shall fold her close, and when men name your name they shall spit upon the ground. Nothing, nothing shall be yours, but shame and empty longing and black death, and after it the woe of the wicked. Get you back to your secret krantz and your Kaffir wives, Half-breed, and tell them the tale of your ride, and of how you did not dare to face the foam of the Red Water."

Now Van Vooren went mad indeed; so mad that, forgetting he was not on the lonely veldt, he lifted his gun and fired straight at Sihamba. But her eye was quick, and seeing the muzzle rise, she threw herself upon the ground, so that the ball passed over her.

"Why, Half-breed, have you even forgotten how to shoot?" she called, springing to her feet again and mocking him. Then the voice of Sigwe

broke in, for his anger was deep.

"One thing you have certainly forgotten, Bull-Head," he said, "that these two are my guests and wrapped in my kaross, and therefore from this hour we are enemies. Ho! men," he cried to his guard, "I spare Bull-Head's life because once we were friends, therefore do not take his life, but beat him and those with him out of my town with the shafts of your assegais, and if ever he sets foot within it again then use their blades upon him."

At their chief's bidding the soldiers of the guard sprang forward, and, falling upon Van Vooren and those with him, they flogged them with sticks and the shafts of their spears until from head to foot they were nothing but blood and bruises, and thus they drove them out of the town of Sigwe back to the ford of the Red River.

When they were gone, Suzanne, who through it all had sat upon the horse watching in silence, now urged him forward to where Sigwe stood, and said:

"Chief, I thank you for that deed, and now, I pray you, give us food and a hut to rest in, for we are wet and hungry and worn out with long travel."

So the guest masters led them into the fence of the town and gave them the guest hut, the largest in the kraal, and the best food that they had--milk and meal and beef and eggs, as much as they would of it. The

schimmel also was fastened to a post in the little courtyard of the hut, and a Kaffir who once had served as groom to a white man, washed him all over with warm water. Afterwards he was given a mash of meal to eat, and, later, when he was a little rested, his fill of good forage, which he ate gladly, for, though he was very tired and his legs were somewhat swollen, otherwise he was none the worse for that great ride.

In the shelter of the hut Suzanne took off her clothes, remembering with a sort of wonder how she had put them on on the morning of her marriage, which now seemed years ago, and bathed herself with water. Then Sihamba having given the garments to a waiting woman to wash, wrapped her in a soft kaross of fur, and after drinking some milk and eating a little, Suzanne laid herself down upon a mattress made of the husks of mealie cobs, and even as she thanked God Who had brought her safely through so many dangers past, and prayed Him to protect her in those that were to come, and to comfort the heart of her husband in his sickness and affliction, she fell asleep. When she saw her sleeping, but not before, Sihamba crept to her feet, for now that all was over she could scarcely walk, and laying herself down there slept also.

All the rest of the day they slept, and all the night that followed, nor did they wake till sunrise of the next morning, when women of the household of the chief knocked upon the door-board to ask if they needed aught. Then they rose feeling well and strong again except for the stiffness of their limbs, and Suzanne clothed herself in the garments that the woman had washed, combing her dark hair with a Kaffir comb. Afterwards they ate heartily of the good food that was brought to

them, and left the hut to visit the schimmel, that they found almost recovered and devouring Kaffir sugar-cane, though like themselves he was somewhat stiff.

Presently, while they stroked and fondled him, a messenger came, saying that if it pleased the lady Swallow, the chief Sigwe would take counsel with her in the place of audience. So after a little while they went, and as they passed out of the kraal fence, Suzanne was received with a chief's salute by the escort that was waiting for her. Then surrounding her and Sihamba, they led them to the place of audience, a circle of ground enclosed by a high double fence, and as Suzanne entered it once more all present there, including Sigwe himself, gave her the salute of chiefs.

But though it was strange enough that such a thing should happen to a white woman, at the time Suzanne took little notice of the salute or aught else, for there standing before her, looking much bewildered and very weary, was none other than Zinti and with him Sihamba's horse, and also that mule laden with goods, which they had abandoned in the wood nearly a hundred miles away, when they came face to face with Van Vooren and his riders and turned to begin their long flight for life and liberty.