

CHAPTER XXI

THE VISION OF RALPH AND SUZANNE

"Sihamba," said the chief Sigwe, "this man who was found wandering upon the outskirts of the town, declares that he is your servant, and that he comes to seek you. Is it so?"

"It is so, indeed, chief," she answered, "though I scarcely expected to see him again," and she told how they two and Zinti had parted.

Then Zinti was commanded to tell his tale, and from it it seemed that after he had rested some hours in the kloof he crept to the mouth of it, and, hidden behind a stone, saw Swart Piet and his servants pass quite close to him on their homeward way. A sorry sight they were, for three of their horses were lame, so that the riders were obliged to walk and lead them, and the men themselves had been so bruised with the spear-shafts that they seemed more dead than alive. Swart Piet rode last of all, and just then he turned, and looking towards the peak shook his fist as though threatening it, and cursed aloud in Dutch and Kaffir. Indeed, Zinti said that his head and face were so swollen with blows that had it not been for his large round eyes he could not have known him, and Sihamba thought that very good tidings.

Well, when they had gone Zinti took heart, for it was plain that they had been roughly handled, and had failed to catch his mistress or the Swallow. So he went back to where he had left his horse eating a little

grass, and since it was too weak to carry him he led it, following Van Vooren's spoor backwards till in the evening he came to the ford of the Red River. Here he halted for the night, knee-haltering the horse, and leaving it loose to graze, though he himself had nothing to eat. At the first grey of dawn he awoke, and was astonished to see a second animal feeding with the horse, which proved to be none other than the mule that, as these creatures sometimes will, had followed the spoor of his companion, Sihamba's horse, till it found it again. After this he crossed the drift, riding slowly and leading the mule, till shortly after sunrise he came to the outskirts of the town, where Sigwe's watchmen found him and brought him to the chief.

"This man is a servant worth having," said Sigwe when he had heard the story. "Let food be given to him and to the beasts."

When Zinti had gone Sigwe spoke to Suzanne.

"Lady Swallow," he said, "as you have heard, by the command of the spirits of my ancestors speaking through the mouth of the diviner, while you are with us, you and not I are the captain of my army, and must lead it in this great war which I make against the Endwandwe. Now the regiments are ready to march, and I ask if it be your pleasure that we should set out to-morrow at the dawn, for time presses, and the Endwandwe live very far away?"

"Your will is my will, chief," she answered, for she could see no way of escape from this strange journey, "but I desire to learn the cause

of this war which I must lead by the decree of the spirits of your ancestors."

Now Sigwe gave an order to some attendants waiting upon him, who went away to return presently leading with them a woman. This woman was about fifty years of age, very fat in person, sour-faced, yellow-toothed, and with one eye only.

"There is the cause," exclaimed the chief, at the same time turning his back upon the woman and spitting upon the ground as though in disgust.

"I do not understand," said Suzanne.

"Then listen, Lady Swallow. Sikonyana, the chief of the Endwandwe, has a sister named Batwa, whose beauty is famous throughout all the world, and for her by my envoys I made an offer of marriage, intending that she should be my head wife, for I desired to be the husband of the most beautiful woman in the world."

"I saw Batwa when she was still a child," broke in Sihamba; "indeed, she is my cousin, and it is true that she is most beautiful."

"The chief Sikonyana," went on Sigwe, "answered me that he was much honoured by my offer since he knew me to be the greatest man of all this country, but that at the same time his sister was not to be won with a small price; yet if I would send a thousand head of cattle, half of them black and half white, she should be mine. Then with much pain

I collected these cattle, two years did it take me to gather them together, for here oxen and cows pure white and pure black are not common, and I sent them with an impi to guard them, for nothing less would suffice, to the kraal of the chief of the Endwandwe.

"Four moons was that impi gone, while I awaited its return, eating out my heart with impatience. At length it did return, bringing with it my bride. At nightfall it marched into the town hungry and tired, for it had suffered much upon the journey, and twice had been forced to give battle to the armies of other chiefs, but although I was eager to see her I did not look upon my new wife that night. No, I sent out messengers and gathered together all my army and all the people young and old, yonder in the plain of assembly. Then when they were mustered from far and near, I commanded that Batwa, the sister of Sikonyana, should be produced in the face of the people that her loveliness might shine upon me and upon them as the sun shines equally upon us all.

"Lady Swallow, the moment came, and this old woman was brought out; yes, she strutted before us proudly, this one-eyed hag, this cat of the mountains. For her I had sent an impi, for her I had paid a thousand head of cattle, half of them pure black and half pure white----" and Sigwe ceased, gasping with rage.

Now at this story Suzanne, who had not smiled for days, laughed aloud, while even Sihamba the wise looked down studying the earth. But there was one who did not laugh, and it was the one-eyed woman. No, she sprang up and screamed aloud:

"Dog of a red Kaffir, who are you that dare to talk thus of a princess of the blood of the Endwandwe, a princess whom Chaka, the great king, wished to take to wife? You asked for Batwa in marriage, Batwa, the sister to Sikonyana, and I am Batwa the sister of Sikonyana."

"Then, hag, there must be two Batwas," shouted Sigwe in answer.

"Two Batwas!" she screamed. "Fool and beast, there are four! In our race all the women of the royal blood are named Batwa, and I am the eldest and the wisest and the best of them, for I am older than my brother Sikonyana by twenty years, I, who have had three husbands and outlived them all; whereas the chit of whom you talk, a thing with a waist like a reed and an eye like a sick buck, is his junior by ten years, being a child of our father's last wife."

"It may be so," answered Sigwe, "for aught I know, every woman of your accursed tribe is named Batwa, but this I say, that every soon there will be few Batwas left to look upon the sun, for to-morrow I march against them and I will stamp the house of Batwa flat, and you I will hang to the roof-tree of the hut of the chief your brother; yes, I keep you alive that I may hang you there, so until then you have nothing to fear from me."

"Is it is, is it so, indeed?" shrieked the virago; "then I am safe, for, little red Kaffir, I shall live to see you and your cowards beaten out of the country of the Endwandwe with whips of hide."

"Take her away," groaned Sigwe, "before I break my word and hang her at once, which I do not wish to do," and Batwa the eldest was led off still screaming curses.

When she had gone, after consulting apart for a while with Sihamba, Suzanne spoke.

"Now, chief," she said, "I understand the cause of this war and in truth it is a strange one. Still, as I must lead your armies, and as I do not love to see men killed for such a quarrel, here and before we start I will lay down the terms of peace if it should please Sikonyana and the people of the Endwandwe to accept them. Subject to your wisdom they shall be these: If Sikonyana will give to you that Batwa whom you desire in the place of the Batwa whom you do not desire, paying back to you the thousand head of cattle, and by way of fine for his deceit, if indeed he meant to deceive you, for you do not seem to have told him which of the many Batwas you sought, two thousand other head of cattle, then no blood shall be shed and you and your impi shall return in peace and honour. If he will not do this, then the war must go as it is fated. Say, do you consent as I counsel you to do? for otherwise, although I go with you my goodwill will not go, since I am the Swallow of peace and not the Hawk of war."

Now there followed a great indaba or debate between Sigwe and his

counsellors and captains, some of them taking one view of the matter, and some of them the other, but the end of it was that the party of peace prevailed, it being agreed between them that if the Endwandwe would grant these terms and in addition an ox for every man who might die or be killed upon the journey, the impi should return without putting the matter to the chance of war, and this the chief and his counsellors swore solemnly to Suzanne. Indeed Sigwe was glad to swear it, for he sought that Batwa for whom he longed rather than the dangers of battle and the risk of defeat in a far land, while those who were for fighting at all costs thought that the oath meant little, since they did not believe that the great Sikonyana would make peace upon such terms.

When this matter was settled Suzanne prayed the chief that he would allow her to send Zinti as a messenger to her husband and father to tell them that she lived and was well. But on this matter, and this only, Sigwe would not listen to her, and though he gave many reasons for his refusal, the true one was that he feared lest the white men, on learning her whereabouts, should gather a commando and send it to take her from him, as doubtless we should have done had it been in any way possible.

Indeed, the foolish dream of the diviner as to the leading of his army by a white swallow, followed as it chanced to be by the arrival at his town of a woman who was named Swallow, had taken such a hold of Sigwe--who, like all savages, was very superstitious--that for nothing which could have been offered to him would he have consented to let Suzanne go until the war with the Endwandwe was finished. Rather than do so he would have fought till the last, and he issued an order that

if any man, woman, or child spoke of Suzanne's presence in his town to strangers they should be put to death without mercy. Moreover, in his terror lest she should escape, he set a guard over her and Sihamba day and night and other guards over the horses and the lad Zinti, so that they soon learned that all hopes of flight must be abandoned and that it was not possible even to send a messenger or a letter.

As may be guessed this was a sore grief to Suzanne, so great a grief that when they were back in the guest-hut she wept long and bitterly, for her heart ached with her own sorrow, and she knew well how deep would be the torment of mind of Ralph if he still lived, and of us, her father and mother, when we learned that she had vanished quite away, and that none could tell what her fate had been. At first she thought of bidding Zinti slip away under cover of the night, but Sihamba showed her that even if he could do so, which was not likely, the end of it must be that he would be followed and put to death, and that then his blood would be upon their hands and no good done. Afterwards she tried to bribe and to command several men of her guard to take the message, but in this matter alone the people of Sigwe would not obey her, for they knew the doom which awaited them if they listened to her pleading. So, when she spoke, they looked into the air over her head, and did not seem to hear, although afterwards they reported her words to Sigwe, whereupon that chief doubled the guard, setting a second to watch the first.

And now I have to tell you one of the strangest things in the strange story of the love of Ralph Kenzie and my daughter Suzanne. It will be remembered that it was by means of a dream--or so the child

declared--that Suzanne was led to where the boy Ralph lay alone and starving in the kloof. So now in this second great crisis of their lives, it was by means of a dream that comfort was brought to the hearts of both of them, enabling them, as I believe, to bear the terrors of those long years of tidingless terror and separation, that otherwise would have broken down their minds and perhaps have killed them.

It seems, as Suzanne told me in after days, that before she slept that night, there in the guest-hut of Sigwe, she prayed long and earnestly as those who have faith do pray when they lie under the shadow of an overwhelming grief. She prayed that God would bring about what she was unable to bring about, namely, that her husband should learn that she was unharmed and well, and that she might learn how it went with him, seeing that for aught she knew, by now he might be dead of his wounds. Well, that prayer was heard, for I myself can testify to it, as the prayer of faith is so often heard; yes, that which seemed to be impossible was done, for in the watches of the night these two who lay a hundred miles apart, one of them a prisoner in the town of a savage, and the other helpless upon a bed of pain, had sight and speech of each other.

Still praying, Suzanne fell asleep. Then of a sudden it seemed as though space had no bars for her, for she awoke, or thought that she awoke, in the guest-hut of Sigwe, since she could hear the breathing of Sihamba at her side, and stretching out her hand she touched her face. But in the twinkling of an eye there came a change, for, still wide awake, now she was standing in the stead at home just within the door of her

own sleeping-room. There upon the bed lay her husband, fevered and unconscious, but muttering to himself, while bending over him were I, her mother, and a strange man whom she did not know, but who, as she guessed, must have been roused from his sleep, for his hair was dishevelled and he was half-clothed.

To this man she heard me--her mother--talking. "The fever runs so high, doctor," I said, "that I made bold to wake you from your rest, for I fear lest it should burn his life away." Thereupon she saw the man look at Ralph, feeling his pulse, and heard him answer as he examined the bandages of the wound, "His hurt does well, and I do not think that the fever comes from it. It comes from his mind, and it is there that the danger lies, for who can doctor a broken heart?"

"Heaven only," I replied.

"Yes," he said. "Heaven only. And now, Vrouw Botmar, go and rest awhile, hoping for the best, for you will hear him if he wakes up, but he will not wake, since the sleep-draught that I gave him holds him fast."

Then she saw us both go--the doctor back to his bed and me to a settle with mattress on it, which was placed just outside his door.

Here I would stop my tale to say that this thing happened, and that those words which Suzanne heard while her body lay in Sigwe's guest-hut, passed between the doctor, who was sleeping at the stead, and myself at one o'clock of the morning on the third night after the night of

the taking of Suzanne, and moreover, that I never spoke of them to any living creature until Suzanne repeated them to me in later years. Nor could the doctor have told them to her, for he went away to the province of Graff Reinet, where shortly afterwards he was killed by a fall from his horse.

Then it seemed to Suzanne that she moved to the bedside of her husband, and bending down, kissed him upon the forehead, which was hot to her lips, saying, "Awake, dear love." Instantly, in her vision, he awoke with a cry of joy, and said, "Suzanne, how came you here?" to which she answered, "I am not here. I have escaped unharmed from Swart Piet, but I am a prisoner in the hands of red Kaffirs, and to-morrow I lead their army to the north. Yet it has been permitted me to visit you, husband, and to tell you to be of good comfort and to fear no evil tidings, for you will recover and we shall meet again, unharmed in any way, though not till many days are passed."

"Where shall we meet?" he asked. "I do not know," she answered. "Yes, I see now. Look before you."

Then they looked, both of them, and there painted in the air they saw the picture of a great mountain, standing by itself upon a plain, but with other mountains visible to the north and south of it. This mountain was flat-topped, with precipices of red rock, and down its eastern slope ran five ridges shaped like the thumb and fingers of a mighty hand, while between the thumb and the first finger, as it were, a stream gushed out, upon the banks of which grew flat-topped trees with thick

green leaves and white bloom.

"You have seen and you will remember, fearing nothing," she said in her vision.

"I have seen and I shall remember, fearing nothing," Ralph answered, and with the sound of his voice still echoing in her ears, Suzanne awoke in the guest-hut of Sigwe, and once more heard Sihamba breathing at her side, and felt the hand which she had outstretched to find her, pressed against her cheek. But now there was a new sense of comfort in her heart, for she believed that without any doubt she had seen her husband, and that although they were separated, still the day would come when they should meet again, not in the spirit but in the flesh.

Now I, Suzanne Botmar, who tell this tale, had scarcely left Ralph's room upon that very night and laid myself down upon the settle when he called to me. I ran back to the bed to find him sitting up in it wide awake and calm-eyed.

"Mother," he said, for so he still named me, "did you see Suzanne?"

"Hush, Ralph," I answered, "you are talking foolishly; wherever Suzanne may be, alas! she is not here."

"She was here just now," he said, smiling, "for we have been talking

together. She has escaped from Swart Piet and is unharmed, but a prisoner among the Kaffirs. And, mother, she and I will meet again upon a great mountain like a fortress, which has ridges on its eastern side resembling the thumb and fingers of a man, and a stream of water gushing out between the thumb and first finger."

"Doubtless, doubtless," I said, for I saw that he was wandering in his mind.

"Ah!" Ralph answered, "you do not believe me, but it is true. I tell you that I saw Suzanne just now wearing a fine kaross of tiger skins upon her shoulders, and that she kissed me on the forehead," and even as he spoke he sank into a deep and quiet sleep, and when he awoke in the morning we found that the fever had left him and that he was out of danger of his life.