

## CHAPTER XXIII

### HOW SUZANNE BECAME A CHIEFTAINESS

So the cattle were handed over, and the girl Batwa was given to Sigwe, whom by the way she made unhappy for the rest of his days. Indeed, she brought about his ruin, for being ambitious she persuaded him to make war upon the white people in the Transkei, of which the end was that from a great chief he became a very small one. When all was accomplished Sigwe waited upon Suzanne.

"Lady Swallow," he said, "in three days I begin my homeward march, and now I have come to ask whither you wish to go, since you cannot stop here in the veldt alone."

"I would return with you to the Transkei," she answered, "and seek out my own home."

"Lady," he said shamefacedly, "alas! that may not be. You remember the dream of the diviner, and you know how that all which she foretold, and more, has come to pass, for you, the White Swallow, appeared and flew in front of my impi, and from that hour we have had the best of luck. By your wisdom we outwitted the Pondos and seized their cattle; by your wisdom we have conquered the Endwandwe without lifting a single spear, and that Batwa, whom I desired, is mine; while of the great force which came out with me to war but twenty-one are dead, twelve by drowning, eight by sickness, and one by snakebite. All things have gone well,

and she who dreamed the dream of the White Swallow is the greatest of diviners.

"But, lady, this was not all the dream, for it said that if you, the Swallow, should set your face southward with us then the best of luck would turn to the worst, for then utter misfortune should overwhelm me and my regiments. Now, lady, I cannot doubt that as the first part of the prophecy has come true, so the last part would come true also did I tempt the spirits of my ancestors by disregarding it, and, therefore, White Swallow, though all I have is yours, yet you cannot fly home with us."

Now Suzanne pleaded with him long and earnestly, as did Sihamba, but without avail, for he could not be moved. Indeed, had he consented the captains and the army would have disobeyed his order in this matter, for they believed, every man of them, that to take the Swallow with them homewards would be to run to their own deaths. Nor was it safe that she should attempt to follow in the path of the impi, since then in their superstitious fear they might send back and kill her to avert the evil fate.

"Now, Swallow," said Sihamba, "there is but one thing for us to do, and it is to seek refuge among my people, the Umpondwana, whose mountain stronghold lies at a distance of four days' journey from this place. But to speak truth, I am not sure how they will receive me, seeing that I parted from them in anger twelve years ago, having quarrelled with them, first about a matter of policy, and secondly about a matter of marriage,

and that my half-brother, the son of my father by a slave, was promoted to rule in my place. Still to them we must go, and with them we must stay, if they will suffer it, until we find an opportunity of travelling south in safety."

"If it must be so," answered Suzanne, sighing, "perhaps Sigwe will escort us to the house of the Umpondwana before he turns homewards, for they will think the more of us if they see us at the head of a great army."

To this plan Sigwe and his captains assented with gladness, for they loved and honoured the Swallow, and were sore at heart because their fears forced them to leave her alone in the wilderness. But first they made sure that the mountain Umpondwana lay to the west, and not to the south, for not one step to the southward would they allow Suzanne to travel with them.

On the morrow, then, they marched, and the evening of the third day they set their camp in a mountain pass which led to a wide plain. Before sunrise next morning Sihamba woke Suzanne.

"Dress yourself, Swallow," she said, "and come to see the light break on the house of my people."

So they went out in the grey dawn, and climbing a koppie in the mouth of the pass, looked before them. At first they could distinguish nothing, for all the plain beneath was a sea of mist through which in the

distance loomed something like a mountain, till presently the rays of the rising sun struck upon it and the veils of vapour parted like curtains that are drawn back, and there before them was the mountain-fortress of Umpondwana separated from the pass by a great space of mist-clad plain. Suzanne looked and knew it.

"Sihamba," she said, "it is the place of my vision and none other. See, the straight sides of red rock, the five ridges upon the eastern slope fashioned like the thumb and fingers of the hand of a man. Yes, and there between the thumb and first finger a river runs."

"I told you that it was so from the beginning, Swallow, for in all the country there is no other such hill as this, and because of the aspect of those ridges when seen from a distance it is named the Mountain of the Great Hand."

Before the words had left her lips another voice spoke, at the sound of which Suzanne nearly fell to the earth.

"Good day to you, Suzanne," it said in Dutch and was silent.

"Sihamba, did you hear, Sihamba?" she gasped. "Do I dream, or did Piet Van Vooren speak to me?"

"You did not dream," answered Sihamba, "for that voice was the voice of Swart Piet and no other, and he is hidden somewhere among the rocks of yonder cliff wall. Quick, Swallow, kneel behind this stone lest he

should shoot."

She obeyed, and at that moment the voice spoke again out of the shadows of the cliff that bordered the pass twenty or thirty paces from them.

"What, Suzanne," it said, "is that little witch-doctress telling you that I shall fire on you? Had I wished I could have shot you three times over while you were standing upon that rock. But why should I desire to kill one who will be my lover? Sihamba I wished to shoot indeed, but her familiar set her so that the bullet must pass through you to reach her heart. Suzanne, you are going to hide yourself among the people of the Umpondwana. Oh! yes, I know your plan. Well, when once you are behind the walls of that mountain it may be difficult to speak to you for a while, so listen to me. You thought that you had left me far away, did you not? but I have followed you step by step and twice I have been very near to you, although I could never find a chance to carry you off safely. Well, I wish to tell you that sooner or later I shall find that chance; sooner or later you will come out of the mountain or I shall get into it, and then it will be my turn; so, love, till that hour fare you well. Stay, I forgot, I have news for you; your husband, the English castaway, is dead."

At this tidings a low moan of pain broke from Suzanne's lips.

"Be silent and take no heed," whispered Sihamba, who was kneeling at her side behind the shelter of the stone, "he does but lie to torment you."

"The bullet and the water together were too much for him," went on Swart Piet, "and he died on the second night after he reached the stead. Your father came to seek me in the place you know, and was carried home badly wounded for his pains, but whether he lived or died I cannot tell you, but I heard that your mother, the good Vrouw Botmar, is very sick, for things have so fallen out lately that her mind is troubled, and she flies to drink to comfort it."

Now when she heard this, Sihamba could keep silence no longer, but cried in a mocking voice:

"Get you gone, Bull-Head, and take lessons in lying from your friends of my trade, the Kaffir witch-doctors, for never before did I hear a man bear false witness so clumsily. On the third night of his illness the husband of Swallow was alive and doing well; the Heer Jan Botmar was not wounded at all, and as for the Vrouw Botmar, never in her life did she drink anything stronger than coffee, for the white man's firewater is poison to her. Get you gone, you silly half-breed, who seek to deceive the ears of Sihamba, and I counsel you, hold fast to your business of theft and murder and give up that of lying, in which you will never succeed. Now be off, you stink-cat of the rocks, lest I send some to hunt you from your hole who this time will use the points and not the shafts of their assegais. Come, Swallow, let us be going."

So they went, keeping under cover all the way to the camp, which, indeed, was quite close to them, and if Swart Piet made any answer they did not hear it. So soon as they reached it Sihamba told Sigwe what had

passed and he sent men to scour the cliff and the bush behind it, but of Van Vooren they could find no trace, no, not even the spot where he had been hidden, so that Sigwe came to believe that they had been fooled by echoes and had never heard him at all.

But both Suzanne and Sihamba knew that this was not so; indeed, this hearing of the voice of Swart Piet filled Suzanne with fear, since where the voice was, there was the man, her hateful enemy, who had given his life to her ruin and to that of those she loved. Whatever lies he might have spoken--and her heart told her that all his ill tidings were but a cruel falsehood--this at least was true, that he had dogged her step by step through the vast wilderness, and so craftily that none guessed his presence. What might not be feared from such a foe as this, half mad and all wicked, armed with terrible cunning and untiring patience? If the Umpondwana would not receive her she must fall into his hands at once, and if they did receive her she would never dare to leave their kraal, for always, always he would be watching and waiting for her. Little wonder then that she felt afraid, though, just as the sun shines ever behind the blackest cloud, still in her heart shone the sure comfort of her hope, and more than hope that in the end God would give her back her husband and her to him unharmed. Yet, which ever way she looked the cloud was very black, and through it she could see no ray of light.

When the mists had vanished and the air was warm with the sun, the army of Sigwe marched from the pass heading for the great mountain. As they

drew near they saw that the Umpondwana were much terrified at the sight of them, for from all the kraals, of which there were many on the slopes of the mountain, they ran hither and thither like ants about a broken nest, carrying their goods and children upon their shoulders, and driving herds of cattle in towards the central stronghold. Noting this, Sigwe halted and sent heralds forward to say that he came in peace and not in war, and he desired to speak with their chief. In less than two hours the heralds returned, bringing with them some of the headmen of the Umpondwana, who stared round with frightened eyes, for they did not believe that any general would come upon a message of peace with so many regiments. When the indaba was set Sigwe told them his name and tribe, of both of which they had heard, and then, before speaking of his business, asked which of them was the chief of the Umpondwana.

"Alas!" answered an old man, "we are in sore trouble here, and wander in the darkness, for our chief, who was named Koraanu, died two days ago of the small-pox which has raged among us for many months, leaving no children behind him, for the sickness killed them also. Moreover, we are suffering from a great drought, for as you may see, the veldt is still brown, and there is no green upon the cornfields, and if rain does not fall soon famine will follow the sickness, and then it will only need that the Zulus should follow the famine to make an end of us once and for all."

"It seems that your tribe must have sinned deeply and brought down upon itself the curse of the spirits of its ancestors," said Sigwe, when they had done their melancholy tale, "that so many misfortunes should

overtake you. Tell me now, who by right is ruler of the Umpondwana?"

"We do not know, chief," they answered, "or rather, we cannot tell if our ruler is alive or dead, and if she is dead then none are left of the true blood. She was a small woman, but very pretty and full of wisdom as a mealie-cob with grains of corn, for in all this country there was no doctress or diviner like to her. Her name was Sihamba Ngenyanga, the Wanderer-by-Moonlight, which name was given her when she was little, because of her habit of walking in the dark alone, and she was the only child of our late chief's inkosikaas, a princess of the Swazis, the father of that lord, Koraanu, who lies dead of the small-pox. But when this chief died and Sihamba was called upon to rule our tribe, quarrels arose between her and the indunas of the tribe, for she was a very headstrong woman.

"We, the indunas, wished her to marry, but for her own reasons she would not marry; also we wished to swear allegiance to Chaka, but she was against it, saying that as well might a lamb swear allegiance to a wolf as the Umpondwana to the Zulus. The end of it was that in a temper she took a bowl of water, and before us all washed her hands of us, and that same night she vanished away we know not where, though rumours have reached us that she went south. From the day of her departure, however, things have gone ill with us; the Zulus with whom we made peace threaten us continually; her half-brother, Koraanu, the slave-born, was not a good chief, and now he is dead of the sickness. So our heart is heavy and our head is in the dust, and when we saw your impi we thought that Dingaan, who now rules over the Zulus, had sent it to eat us up and to

take the cattle that still remain to us.

"But you say that you come in peace, so tell us, chief, what it is you desire, and I trust that it may be little, for here we have nothing to give, unless," he added with meaning, "it be the small-pox, although we are ready to fight to the death for what is left to us, our liberty and our cattle; and, chief, even a larger army than yours might fail to take that stronghold which has but one gate."

When the councillor had finished speaking, Sigwe called aloud:

"Lady Sihamba, I pray you come hither, and with you the lady Swallow, your companion."

Then Sihamba, who was prepared for this event, for her hair was freshly dressed and powdered with blue mica, wearing her little cape of fur and the necklace of large blue beads, stepped from the screen of bush behind which she had hidden. With her, and holding her hand, came Suzanne, who covered the raggedness of her clothes beneath a splendid kaross of leopards' skins that Sigwe had given her, down which her dark hair flowed almost to her knee. A strange pair they made, the tall Suzanne in the first bloom of her white beauty which had suffered nothing in their journeying, and the small, quick-eyed, delicate-featured Kaffir woman.

"Who are these?" asked Sigwe of the council.

The old man looked at them and answered:

"Of the white lady we can say nothing except that she is very beautiful; but, unless our eyes deceive us, she whom she holds by the hand is Sihamba Ngenyanga, who was our chieftainess, and who left us because she was angry."

"She is Sihamba and no one else," said Sigwe. "Sihamba come back to rule you in the hour of need, and with her own tongue she shall tell you her story and the story of the White Swallow who holds her by the hand."

So Sihamba began, and for an hour or more she spoke to them, for when she chose this little woman had the gift of words, telling them all about herself, and telling them also the story of the Swallow, and of how she had brought good luck to the army of Sigwe, and how she was destined to bring good luck wherever she made her home. At the end of her speech she said:

"Now, my people, although I have wandered from you, yet my eyes, which are far-seeing, have not been blind to your griefs, and in the hour of your need I return to you, bringing with me the White Swallow to sojourn among you for a while. Receive us if you will and be prosperous, or reject us and be destroyed; to us it matters nothing, it is for you to choose. But if we come, we come not as servants but as princes whose word cannot be questioned, and should you accept us and deal ill with us in any way, then your fate is sure. Ask the chief Sigwe here whether or no the flight of the Swallow is fortunate, and whether or no there is

wisdom in the mouth of Sihamba, who is not ashamed to serve her."

Then Sigwe told them of all the good fortune that had come to him through Suzanne, and of how wise had been the words of Sihamba, and told them, moreover, that if they dealt ill by either of them he would return from his own country and stamp them flat.

Thus it came about that the indunas of the Umpondwana took back Sihamba to be their chieftainess with all powers, and with her Suzanne as her equal in rule, and this their act was confirmed that same day by a great council of the tribe. So that evening Suzanne, mounted on the schimmel, rode down the ranks of the Red Kaffirs, while they shouted their farewells to her. Then having parted with Sigwe, who almost wept at her going, she passed with Sihamba, the lad Zinti, and a great herd of cattle--her tithe of the spoil--to the mountain Umpondwana, where all the tribe were waiting to receive them. They rode up to the flanks of the mountain, and through the narrow pass and the red wall of rock to the tableland upon its top, where stood the chief's huts and the cattle-kraal, and here they found the people gathered.

"Give us a blessing," these cried. "Grant to us that rain may fall."

Sihamba spoke with Suzanne and answered:

"My people, I have entreated of the White Swallow, and for your sake she

will pray that rain may fall ere long."

Now Sihamba knew the signs of the water, and as it happened rain began to fall that night in torrents, and fell for three days almost without ceasing, washing the sickness away with it. So the Umpondwana blessed the name of Sihamba and the White Swallow, and these two ruled over them without question, life and death hanging upon their words.

And there, a chieftainess among savages, Suzanne was fated to dwell for more than two long years.