

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MADNESS OF RALPH KENZIE

Now my story goes back to that night at the stead when I, Suzanne Botmar and my husband, Jan Botmar, were awakened from our sleep to learn that our daughter had been carried off by that mad villain, Piet Van Vooren, and that her husband Ralph lay senseless and wounded in the waggon at the door. We carried him in, groaning in our bitter grief, and despatched messengers to arouse all the Kaffirs on and about the place whom we could trust and to a party of Boers, six men in all, who chanced to have outspanned that night upon the borders of our farm to shoot vildebeest and blesbok. Also we sent another messenger mounted on a good horse to the house of that neighbour who was being attended by the doctor from the dorp, praying that he would come with all speed to visit Ralph, which indeed he did, for he was with us by half-past eight in the morning.

Within an hour of the despatch of the messengers the Boers rode up from their waggons, and to them, as well as to ourselves and to the Kaffirs who had gathered, the driver and voorlooper told all they knew of the terrible crime that had been done upon the persons of Ralph Kenzie and his wife by Piet Van Vooren and his band. Also they repeated all that Zinti had taught them of the road to the secret krantz whither it was believed that he had carried off Suzanne. Then Jan asked those present if they would help him in this trouble, and being true men, one and all, they answered yes, so by seven in the morning the little commando,

numbering twenty-one guns--eight white men and thirteen Kaffirs--started to seek for Swart Piet's hiding-place, and to rescue Suzanne if they might.

"Alas!" I said to Jan as he bade me farewell, "at the best I fear that you will be too late."

"We must trust in God," he answered heavily.

"Never had we more need of trust, husband, but I think that God turns His face from us because of the lies we told to the Englishmen, for now the punishment which you foresaw has fallen."

"Then, wife, it were more just that it should have fallen on us who were guilty, and not on those two who are innocent. But still I say I trust in God--and in Sihamba"--he added by an afterthought, "for she is brave and clever, and can run upon a path which others cannot even see."

Then they went, and were away five days, or it may have been six. They started early on Tuesday, and upon the Thursday morning, after much trouble, by the help of a native whom they captured, they found Swart Piet's kraal, but of Swart Piet or Suzanne or the hidden krantz they could see nothing. Indeed, it was not until they had gathered together every man they could find in the kraal and tied them to trees, saying that they would shoot them, that a woman, the wife of one of the men, led them to a rock wall and showed the secret of the kloof. They entered and found the big hut with the body of the man whom Sihamba had killed

still lying in it, and also the knife with which Suzanne had intended to destroy herself, and which her father knew again.

Then by degrees they discovered the whole story, for the woman pointed out to them the man who had guarded the entrance to the kloof, at whom Zinti had fired, and under fear of death this man confessed all he knew, which was that Suzanne, Sihamba and Zinti had escaped northward upon their horses, followed by Swart Piet and his band.

Accordingly northwards they rode, but they never found any traces of them, for rain had fallen, washing out their spoor, and as might be expected in that vast veldt they headed in the wrong direction. So at last worn out, they returned to the stead, hoping that Suzanne and Sihamba would have found their way back there, but hoping in vain.

After that for days and weeks they searched and hunted, but quite without result, for as it chanced the Kaffirs who lived between the territory of Sigwe and the stead rose in arms just then, and began to raid the Boer farms, stealing the cattle, including some of our own, so that it was impossible to travel in their country, and therefore nobody ever reached the town of Sigwe to make inquiries there.

The end of it was that, exhausted by search and sorrow, Jan sat down at home and abandoned hope; nor could the prayers and urgings of Ralph, who all this while was unable even to mount a horse, persuade him to go out again upon so fruitless an errand.

"No, son," he answered, "long before this the girl is either dead or she is safe far away, and in either event it is useless to look for her about here, since Van Vooren's kraal is watched, and we know that she is not in it." To which Ralph would answer:

"She is not dead, I know that she is not dead," and we understood that he spoke of the vision which had come to him, for I had told the tale of it to Jan. But in his heart Jan put no faith in the vision, and believed that Suzanne, our beloved child, had been dead for many days, for he was certain that she would die rather than fall again into the hands of Van Vooren, as I was also, and indeed of this we were glad to be sure.

To Ralph, however, that we might comfort him in his sorrow, which was even more terrible than our own, we made pretence that we believed Suzanne to be hiding far away, but unable to communicate with us, as in fact she was.

Oh! our lives were sad during those bitter months. Yes, the light had gone out of our lives, and often we wished, the three of us, that already we were resting in the grave. As he recovered from his wounds and the strength of his body came back to him, a kind of gentle madness took hold of Ralph which it wrung our hearts to see. For hours, sometimes for days indeed, he would sit about the place brooding and saying no word. At other times he would mount his horse and ride away none knew whither, perhaps not to return that night or the next, or the next, till we were terrified by the thought that he too might never come back again. It was useless to be angry with him, for he would only

answer with a little smile:

"You forget; I must be seeking my wife, who is waiting for me upon the Mountain of the Hand," and then we learned that he had ridden to a far off hill to examine it, or to see some travellers or natives and ask of them if they knew or had heard of such a mountain, with ridges upon its eastern slopes fashioned like the thumb and fingers of a man's hand. Indeed, in all that countryside, among both Boers and natives, Ralph won the by-name of the "Man of the Mountain" because he rarely spoke of aught else. But still folk, black and white, knew the reason of his madness and bore with him, pitying his grief.

It was, I remember, in the season after Suzanne had vanished that the Kaffirs became so angry and dangerous. For my part I believe that those in our neighbourhood were stirred up by the emissaries of Swart Piet, for though he had gone none knew where, his tools and agents remained behind him. However this may have been, all over the country the black men began to raid the stock, and in our case they ended by attacking the stead also, a great number of them armed with guns. Fortunately we had a little warning, and they were very sad Kaffirs that went away next day; moreover, forty of them never went away at all. Just at dawn, when they had been besieging the house for some hours, shouting, banging off their guns, and trying to fire the roof by means of assegais with tufts of blazing grass tied on to them, Jan, Ralph, and about twenty of our people crept down under cover of the orchard wall and sallied out upon them.

Almighty! how those men fought, especially Jan and Ralph. It was a pleasure to see them, for I watched the whole thing from the stoep, though I admit that I was anxious, since it was evident that neither of them seemed to care whether he lived or died. However, as it turned out, it was not they who died, but the Kaffirs, who went off with some few cattle and afterwards left us in peace.

And now comes the strange part of the affair, though I scarcely like to tell it, lest after all these years it should not be believed. Someone connected with the London Missionary Society reported us to the Government at the Cape for shooting poor, innocent black men, and it was threatened that Jan and Ralph would be put upon their trial for murder by the British Government. Indeed, I believe that this would have been done had not we and others of our neighbourhood let it be clearly known that before they were dragged to the common gaol there would be killing not only of black but of white men.

Our case was only one of many, since in those times there was no security for us Boers--we were robbed, we were slandered, we were deserted. Our goods were taken and we were not compensated; the Kaffirs stole our herds, and if we resisted them we were tried as murderers; our slaves were freed, and we were cheated of their value, and the word of a black man was accepted before our solemn oath upon the Bible.

No wonder that we grew tired of it and trekked, seeking to shake the dust of British rule from off our feet, and to find a new home for ourselves out of the reach of the hand of the accursed British

Government. Oh! I know that there are two sides to the story, and I daresay that the British Government meant well, but at the least it was a fool, and it always will be a fool with its Secretaries of State, who know nothing sitting far away there in London, and its Governors, whose only business is to please the Secretaries of State, that when the country they are sent to rule grows sick of them, they may win another post with larger pay.

Well, this tale is of people and not of politics, so I will say no more of the causes that brought about the great trek of the Boers from the old Colony and sent them forth into the wilderness, there to make war with the savage man and found new countries for themselves. I know those causes, for Jan and Ralph and I were of the number of the voortrekkers; still, had it not been for the loss of Suzanne, I do not think that we should have trekked, for we loved the home we had made upon the face of the wild veldt.

But now that she was gone it was no home for us; every room of the house, every tree in the garden, every ox and horse and sheep reminded us of her. Yes, even the distant roar of the ocean and the sighing of the winds among the grasses seemed to speak of her. These were the flowers she loved, that was the stone she sat on, yonder was the path which day by day she trod. The very air was thick with memories of her, and the tones of her lost voice seemed to linger in the echoes of the hills at night.

It was upon the anniversary of the marriage of Ralph and Suzanne, yes,

on the very day year of her taking by Piet Van Vooren, that we made up our minds to go. We had dined and Ralph sat quite silent, his head bowed a little upon his breast, as was his custom, while Jan spoke loudly of the wrongs of the Boers at the hand of the British Government. I do not think that he was much troubled with those wrongs just then, but he talked because he wished to interest Ralph and turn his mind from sad thoughts.

"What think you of it, son?" said Jan at length, for it is hard work talking all by oneself, even when one has the British Government to abuse, which was the only subject that made Jan a wordy man.

"I, father?" answered Ralph with a start, which showed me that his mind was far away. "I do not quite know what I think. I should like to hear what the English Government say about the matter, for I think that they mean to be fair, only they do not understand the wants and troubles of us Boers who live so far away. Also, without doubt the missionaries mean well, but they believe that a black man has a bigger soul than a white man, whereas we who know the black man see that there is a difference."

"Allemachter, son," said Jan, looking at him out of the corner of his eye, "cannot you show some spirit? I hoped that being an Englishman you would have stood up for your own people, and then we might have quarrelled about it, which would have done us both good, but you only sit and talk like a magistrate in his chair, looking at both sides of the case at once, which is an evil habit for men who have to make their way in the world. Well, I tell you that if you had seen the cursed

British Government hang your father and uncle at Slagter's Nek, and not satisfied with that, hang them a second time, when the ropes broke, just because they tried to shoot a few Hottentot policemen, you would not think much of its fairness. And as for the missionaries of the London Society, well, I should like to hang them, as would be right and proper, seeing that they blacken the names of honest Boers."

Ralph only smiled at this onslaught, for he was not to be stirred from his lethargy by talk about Slagter's Nek and the missionaries. For a while there was silence, which presently was broken by Jan roaring at me in a loud voice as though I were deaf.

"Vrouw, let ons trek," and, to give weight to his words, he brought his great fist down with a bang upon the table, knocking off a plate and breaking it.

I stooped to pick up the pieces, rating him for his carelessness as I gathered them, for I wished to have time to think, although for a long while I had expected this. When I had found them all I placed them upon the table, saying:

"They cannot be mended, and--hearts or plates--what cannot be mended had best be hidden away. Hearts and plates are brittle things, but the last can be bought in iron, as I wish the first could be also. Yes, husband, we will trek if you desire it."

"What say you, son?" asked Jan.

Ralph answered his question by another. "In which direction will the emigrants trek?"

"North, I believe, to the Vaal River."

"Then, father, I say let us go," he replied with more spirit than he had shown for a long while, "for I have searched and inquired to the south and the east and the west, and in them I can hear of no mountain that has ridges upon its eastern slopes shaped like the thumb and fingers of a man's hand with a stream of water issuing from between the thumb and first finger."

Now once more we were silent, for we saw that his madness had again taken hold of Ralph's mind, and that was a sad silence.