

CHAPTER XXVII

SWART PIET SETS A SNARE

It was a strange life that Suzanne led among the Umpondwana during the two years or more that, together with Sihamba, she ruled over them as chieftainess. Upon the top of the mountain was a space of grass land measuring about five hundred morgen, or a thousand acres in extent, where were placed the chief's huts and those of the head men and soldiers, surrounding a large cattle kraal, which, however, was only used in times of danger. The rest of the people dwelt upon the slopes of the mountain, and even on the rich plains at the foot of it, but if need were they could all retreat to the tableland upon its crest. Here they might have defied attack for ever, for beneath the cattle kraal grain was stored in pits, only there was but one spring, which in dry seasons was apt to fail. Therefore it was that the Umpondwana had built stone schanzes or fortifications about the mouth of the river which gushed from the mountain between the thumb and finger like ridges on the eastern slope, although it lay below their impregnable walls of rock, seeing that to this river they must look for their main supply of water.

The table-top of the hill, which could only be approached by one path that wound upwards through a ravine cut by water, being swept by every wind of heaven, and so high in the air, was very cold and naked. Indeed, in the winter season, rain fell there twice or thrice a week, and there were many days when it was wrapt in a dense white mist. Still, during the two years and more that she dwelt with the Umpondwana, Suzanne

scarcely left this plain, not because she did not desire to do so, but because she did not dare, for word was brought that the foot, and even the slopes, of the mountain were patrolled by men in the employ of Swart Piet. Moreover, soon it became clear that he had knowledge of all her movements, doubtless from spies in his pay who dwelt among the Umpondwana themselves. During the first few months of her sojourn on the mountain, it is true that now and again Suzanne rode out on the veldt mounted on the schimmel, but this pastime she was forced to abandon because one day Swart Piet and his men saw her and gave chase, so that she was only saved from him by the fleetness of the great horse.

After this, both she and the schimmel stayed upon the tableland, where daily they took exercise together, galloping round a prepared path which was laid about the fence of the cattle kraal, and thus kept themselves in good health.

Swart Piet had Kaffir blood in his veins, as I have said, and from boyhood it had been his custom to live two lives, one as a white man with white men, and one as a Kaffir with Kaffirs. About three miles distant from the Umpondwana Mountain was a strong koppie with fertile valleys to the back of it, and here, being rich and having a great name as a white man, he found it no trouble to establish himself as a native chief, for refugees of all sorts gathered themselves about him, so that within a year he ruled over a little tribe of about a hundred men together with women.

With these men Van Vooren began to harass the Umpondwana, cutting off

their cattle if they strayed, and from time to time killing or enslaving small parties of them whom he caught wandering on the plains out of reach of help from the mountain. Whenever he captured such a party he would spare one of them, sending him back with a message to the Umpondwana. They were all to one effect, namely, that if the tribe would deliver over to him the lady Swallow who dwelt among them he would cease from troubling it, but if this were not done, then he would wage war on it day and night until in this way or in that he compassed its destruction.

To these messages Sihamba would reply as occasion offered, that if he wanted anything from the Umpondwana he had better come and take it.

So things went on for a long while. Swart Piet's men did them no great harm indeed, but they harassed them continually, until the people of the Umpondwana began to murmur, for they could scarcely stir beyond the slopes of the mountain without being set upon. Happily for them these slopes were wide, for otherwise they could not have found pasturage for their cattle or land upon which to grow their corn. So close a watch was kept upon them, indeed, that they could neither travel to visit other tribes, nor could these come to them, and thus it came about that Suzanne was as utterly cut off from the rest of the world as though she had been dead. She had but one hope to keep her heart alive, and it was that Ralph and Jan would learn of her fate through native rumours and be able to find her out. Still, as she knew that this could not be counted on, she tried to let us have tidings of her, for when she had been only a week on the mountain Umpondwana she despatched Zinti and two men to

bear him company, with orders to travel back over all the hundreds of miles of veldt to the far-off stead in the Transkei.

As she had neither pen nor ink, nor anything with which she could write, Suzanne was obliged to trust a long message to Zinti's memory, making him repeat it to her until she was sure that he had it by heart. In this message she told all that had befallen her, and prayed us to take Zinti for a guide and to come to her rescue, since she did not dare to set foot outside the walls of rock, for fear that she should be captured by Van Vooren, who watched for her continually.

Zinti, being brave and faithful, started upon his errand, though it was one from which many would have shrunk. But as ill-luck would have it, one night when they were camped near the kraal of a small Basuto tribe, his companions becoming hungry, stole a goat and killed it. Zinti ate of the goat, for they told him that they had bought it for some beads, and while they were still eating the Basutos came upon them and caught them red-handed. Next day they were tried by the councillors of the tribe and condemned to die as thieves, but the chief, who wanted servants, spared their lives and set them to labour in his gardens, where they were watched day and night.

Zinti was a prisoner among these Basutos for nearly a year, but at length he made his escape, leaving his two companions behind, for they were afraid lest if they ran away with him they should be recaptured and killed. As soon as he was free Zinti continued his journey, for he was a man not easily turned from his purpose, nor because it was now over a

year old did he cease from his attempt to deliver the message that had been set in his mouth.

Well, after many dangers, footsore and worn-out with travelling, at length he reached the stead, to find that we had all gone, none knew whither, and that the long-nosed cheat to whom we had sold the farm ruled in our place. Zinti sought out some Kaffirs who lived upon the land, and abode with them awhile till he was rested and strong again. Then once more he turned his face northward towards the mountain Umpondwana, for though he greatly feared the journey, he knew that the heart of Suzanne would be sick for news. War raged in the country that he must pass, and food was scarce; still at length he won through, although at the last he was nearly captured by Black Piet's thieves, and one year and nine months after he had left it, a worn and weary figure, he limped up the red rock path of Umpondwana.

Suzanne had been watching for him. It seems strange to say it, but after six months had gone by, which time at the best must be given to his journey, she watched for him every day. On the top of the highest and most precipitous cliff of the mountain fortress of Umpondwana was a little knoll of rock curiously hollowed out to the shape of a chair, difficult to gain and dizzy to sit in, for beneath it was a sheer fall of five hundred feet, which chair-rock commanded the plain southward, and the pass where Van Vooren had spoken to Suzanne from his hiding-place among the stones. By this pass and across this plain help must reach her if it came at all, or so she thought; therefore in that eagle's eyrie of a seat Suzanne sat day by day watching ever for those

who did not come. A strange sight she must have been, for now long ago such garments as she had were worn to rags, so that she was forced to clothe herself in beautiful skins fashioned to her fancy, and to go sandal-footed, her lovely rippling hair hanging about her.

At length one day from her lonely point of outlook she saw a solitary man limping across the plain, a mere black speck dragging itself forward like a wounded fly upon a wall. Descending from her seat she sought out Sihamba.

"Swallow," said the little woman, "there is tidings in your eyes. What is it?"

"Zinti returns," she answered, "I have seen him from far away."

Now Sihamba smiled, for she thought Zinti lost; also she did not believe it possible that Sihamba could have recognized him from such a distance. Still before two hours were over Zinti came, gaunt and footsore, but healthy and unharmed, and sitting down before Suzanne in her private enclosure, began at the very beginning of his long story, after the native fashion, telling of those things which had befallen him upon the day when he left the mountain nearly two years before.

"Your news? Your news?" said Suzanne.

"Lady, I am telling it," he answered.

"Fool!" exclaimed Sihamba. "Say now, did you find the Baas Kenzie and the Baas Botmar?"

"No, indeed," he replied, "for they were gone."

"Gone where? Were they alive and well?"

"Yes, yes, they were alive and well, but all the Boers in those parts have trekked, and they trekked also, believing the lady Swallow to be dead."

"This is a bitter cup to drink," murmured Suzanne, "yet there is some sweetness in it, for at least my husband lives."

Then Zinti set out all his story, and Suzanne listened to it in silence, praising him much and thanking him when he had done. But after that day her heart failed her, and she seemed to give up hope. Ralph had vanished, and we, her parents, had vanished, and she was left alone a prisoner among a little Kaffir tribe, at the foot of whose stronghold her bitter enemy waited to destroy her. Never was white woman in a more dreadful or more solitary state, and had it not been for Sihamba's tender friendship she felt that she must have died.

Now also Swart Piet grew bolder, appearing even on the slopes of the mountain where his men harried and stole. He did more than this even, for one morning just before dawn he attacked the pass leading to the stronghold so secretly and with such skill that his force was halfway

up it before the sentries discovered them. Then they were seen, and the war-horns blew, and there followed a great fight. Indeed, had it not been for a lucky chance, it is doubtful how that fight would have ended, for his onslaught was fierce, and the Umpondwana, who at the best were not the bravest of warriors, were taken by surprise.

It will be remembered that Zinti had brought Ralph's gun with him when first they fled north, and this gun he still had, together with a little powder and ball, for, fearing lest it should be stolen from him, he had not taken it on his great journey to the Transkei and back. Now, hearing the tumult, he ran out with it, and fired point blank at the stormers, who were pushing their way up the narrow path, driving the Umpondwana before them. The roar was loaded with slugs, which, scattering, killed three men; moreover, by good fortune, one of the slugs struck Van Vooren himself through the fleshy part of the thigh, causing him to fall, whereon, thinking him mortally wounded, in spite of his curses and commands, his followers lost heart and fled, bearing him with them. Sihamba called upon her people to follow, but they would not, for they feared to meet Swart Piet in the open.

In truth they began to weary of this constant war, which was brought upon them through no fault or quarrel of their own, and to ask where was that good luck which the White Swallow had promised them. Had it not been that they loved Suzanne for her beauty and her gentle ways, and that Sihamba, by her cleverness and good rule, had mastered their minds, there is little doubt indeed but that they would have asked Suzanne to depart from among them.

On the day following the attack Sihamba learned that Swart Piet lay very sick, having lost much blood, and sought to persuade her people to attack him in turn, and make an end of him and his robbers. But they would not, and so the council broke up, but not before Sihamba had spoken bitter words, telling them that they were cowards, and would meet the end of cowards, whereat they went away sullenly. Afterwards they learned through their spies that Van Vooren had gone to Zululand to visit the King Dingaan, which Sihamba thought evil tidings, for she scented fresh danger in this journey, and not without reason. But to Suzanne she said nothing.

Two more months went by peacefully, when one morning a herd who was tending the cattle that belonged to Suzanne and Sihamba, sought audience of the chieftainess.

"What is it?" asked Sihamba, for she saw by the man's face that something strange had happened.

"This, lady," he answered. "When I went down to the kloof at dawn, where your cattle and those of the Lady Swallow are kraaled, I found among them strange oxen to the number of more than a hundred. They are beautiful oxen, such as I have never seen, for every one of them is pure white--white from the muzzle to the tail, and I cannot understand how they came among your cattle, for the mouth of the kraal was closed as usual last night; moreover, I found it closed this morning."

When Sihamba heard this she turned cold to the heart, for she knew well that these spotless white cattle must come from the royal herd of Dingaan, king of the Zulus, since none other were known like them in all the land. Also she was sure that Swart Piet had stolen them and placed them among her cattle so as to bring down upon her and her tribe the terrible wrath of Dingaan, for she remembered that this mingling of cattle was a trick which he had played before. But to the herd she said only that doubtless they were cattle which had strayed, and that she would make enquiry as to their owner. Then she dismissed him, bidding him to keep a better watch in future.

Scarcely had he gone when another man appeared saying that he had met a Kaffir from beyond the mountains, who told him that a party of white men with women and children had crossed the Quathlamba range by what is now known as Bezuidenhout's Pass, and were camped near the Tugela River. This was strange news to Sihamba, who had heard nothing of the whereabouts of the Trek Boers, so strange that she would not speak of it to Suzanne, fearing lest it should fill her with false hopes. But she sent for Zinti, and bade him cross the Quathlamba by a little-used pass that was known to her near the place where the Tugela takes its rise, and which to-day is called Mont aux Sources, and following the river down, to find out whether or no it was true that white men were encamped upon its banks. When he had done this he was to return as swiftly as possible with whatever information he could gather.

This task Zinti undertook gladly, for he loved following a spoor, which was a gift that Nature had given him; also he was weary of being cooped

up like a fattening fowl upon the mountain Umpondwana.

When Zinti had gone Sihamba summoned other messengers, and commanded them to travel swiftly to the kraal Umgungundlhovo, bearing her homage to Dingaan, king of the Amazulus, and asking whether he had lost any of the cattle from his royal herds, since certain white oxen had been found among her beasts, though how they came there she could not tell. These men went also, though in fear and trembling, since in those days none loved to approach the Lion of the Zulu with tales of cattle of his that had strayed among their herd. Still they went, and with doubt in her heart Sihamba sat awaiting their return.