

CHAPTER XXX

SIHAMBBA PREVAILS

Now a fire of hope shot up in Sihamba's eyes, but soon it died out again.

"It is a trick, it must be a trick," she said, "for who ever heard of a Zulu loosing the prey that was in his hand? Never dare he do it save by the command of the king," and she left the hut to be met by others running with the same tidings. Of these she sent some down the gorge to bring her report of what had happened, and with them Zinti, for she could not altogether trust the word of her own people.

Within an hour the messengers returned, and on their faces was a strange look which, clever as she was, Sihamba did not understand.

"Is the path clear?" she asked.

"No, chieftainess," they replied, "it is still blocked, for though the Zulus have gone we know not where by order received from Dingaan, Bull-Head holds it with such of his own men as are left alive."

"Had you speech with the white man?" she asked.

"Yes, lady."

"Say on."

Now they looked about them like people who are ashamed, but at last the oldest of them spoke.

"Chieftainess," he said, "Bull-Head made us this offer and in these words: 'You people of the Umpondwana, you are dying of thirst and I know it; yes, though the Zulus have gone and but few of us are left here, yet you cannot force the narrow way against us, so that I have only to sit here for a few days longer and you will be dead of thirst, everyone of you, you and your cattle together. But I do not wish that you should die, for with you I have no quarrel; also if you die one will perish among you whom I desire to keep alive. Therefore I make you this offer. Hand over to me your ruler, Sihamba Ngenyanga, and with her the white woman named Swallow, and you yourselves shall go free, everyone of you; more, although I will take this stronghold of yours to live in myself, I will give back to you the half of the cattle. Now, answer.'

"Lady, when he had finished speaking we consulted together and answered Bull-Head thus: 'We cannot give over to you our chieftainess and her white sister, for it is better to die than that such dishonour should lie upon our names. But if you will let us go, you can take them from among our number as we pass before you, for that will be no fault of ours, or if they do not choose to accompany us, after we have gone by you can ascend the mountain and take them.'

"To this Bull-Head assented, saying, 'Set the Lady Swallow in her chair

upon the cliff edge and Sihamba at her side so that my eyes seeing them may know that they are safe, and you shall go.' So it was agreed between us that to-morrow at the dawn he will open the wall and let us down to the river to drink, after which we may pass whither we will."

Now when Sihamba heard these shameful words her rage was so great that for a while she could not even speak. At length she found her tongue and gasped out:

"Oh! father of cowards, do you dare to sing such a song in my ears? Why do not you, who are many, storm the pass and take the water?"

"Lady," answered the old man coldly, "we dare because we must, for honour cannot live before the assegai of thirst. You talk to us of storming the pass; we cannot storm it, for ten men can hold that place against a hundred; also our arms are weak and we are weary of war. Listen; on the one hand are the lives of thousands, with them your own and that of the White Swallow, and on the other this dishonour. We choose the dishonour, since if you and the Swallow do not desire to fall into the hands of Bull-Head, you can still do what you must have done had we chosen honour. Lady, you can die, knowing that by your death you have saved the lives of the multitude over whom you rule.

"Listen again, lady, we did not seek you, it was you who came back to us after the death of the chief, your brother. We accepted you and you have ruled us justly for these two years, but you wish to make of us a fighting people who are and who desire to remain a people of peace.

Moreover, you promised that the white chieftainess, your companion, would bring us prosperity and good, whereas to us she has been a bird of ill-omen, for since she came here on her account there has been war and nothing but war. Yes, because of her we have been cooped up on this mountain and killed whenever we ventured on to the plains beyond; therefore we will have no more of her, she must find her own fortune, for we have our lives and those of our wives and children to save.

"Further, I say this: the news of the offer of Bull-Head has gone abroad among the people, and had we refused they would have torn us limb from limb, yes, and you and the White Swallow also. Our hearts are sad, but lady, who can fight against fate?"

"I can," answered Sihamba, "but have no fear; to-morrow at the dawn you shall see us sit out upon the cliff point; and now, father of cowards, begone, and let me see your face no more. Betray us if you will, you who were not men enough to hold the water, you who are not men enough to cut a path to it as you might, and therefore must complete your cowardice with treachery. Betray us if you will, but I tell you that you shall not go free from this disgrace. The curse of Chaka shall fall upon you and the blade of the spear shall be the inheritance of you who are afraid to grasp its shaft. Begone!" and withered by her words and the fire of her eyes, the spokesmen of the Umpondwana crept like beaten hounds from the presence of their deserted chieftainess.

Here I will stop the tale to say that this prophecy of Sihamba's came true, as did all the prophecies of that strange woman, who, with other gifts, without doubt had that of foresight. A few years later, when Panda was king, and their wars with us Boers were ended, the Zulus, who never forgot a quarrel, swooped down upon the Umpondwana unawares, and storming the mountain by night, put all the men on it to the spear, and carried away the women and children to Zululand, so that of this tribe there remains nothing but some crumbling walls and a name of shame.

Now the sun had set upon that home of thirst, and all was silent in it save for the sound of the hoofs of the galloping cattle as they rushed hither and thither, and the groaning of the women and children, who wandered about seeking grass to chew, for the sake of the night damps that gathered on it. Sihamba went into the great hut where she always slept with Suzanne, whom she found seated upon a stool, wan-faced, and her eyes set wide with misery of mind and body.

"What passes now?" asked Suzanne.

The little woman came to her, and throwing her arms about her neck she kissed her, answering:

"Alas! sister, all things pass, and with them our lives," and she told her of the surrender of the Umpondwana and its terms.

Suzanne listened in silence, for grief and despair had done their worst with her, and her heart could hold no more pain.

"So it is finished at last," she said, when Sihamba had spoken, "and this is the end of all our toil and strivings and of our long fight against fate. Yes, this is the end: that we must die, or at the least I must die, for I will choose death rather than that Van Vooren should lay a finger upon me. Well, I should care little were it not that now I believe my husband to be still alive, and it is hard to go before him into yonder darkness, though I believe also that the darkness which we fear will prove such a happy light as does not shine upon this earth," and she laid her head upon Sihamba's breast and they wept together.

Presently Sihamba said, "My mind, that was wont to be so clear, is darkened. Pray to your God, you who are of His people that He may send light upon it, so that I can think once more while there is yet time. Now we wander in the forest of despair, but never yet was there a forest so thick that it cannot be passed. Pray then that I may be given light, for your life hangs upon it."

So Suzanne prayed, and presently, as she prayed, her weariness overcame her and she slept, and Sihamba slept also. When Sihamba awoke it was within an hour of midnight. A little lamp of oil burnt in the hut, and by the light of it she could see the white face of Suzanne lying at her side, and groaned in her bitterness to think that before the sun set again that face must be whiter still, for she knew that the Swallow was not of the mind of the Umpondwana, who preferred dishonour to death.

"Oh! that my wisdom might come back to me," she murmured. "Oh! Great-Great, God of my sister, give me back my wisdom and I will pay my life for it. Oh! Lighter of the stars, for myself I ask nothing, who am not of Thy children. Let eternal death be my portion, but give me back my wisdom that I may save my sister who serves Thee."

Thus prayed Sihamba out of the depth of her untutored heart, not for herself but for another, and it would seem that her prayer was heard; though many among our people think that God does not listen to the black creatures. At the least, as her eyes wandered around the hut, they fell upon certain jars of earthenware. Now during the years that she dwelt among the Umpondwana Suzanne had but two pastimes. One of them was to carve wood with a knife, and the other to paint pictures upon jars, for which art she always had a taste, these jars being afterwards burnt in the fire. For pigments she used certain clays or ochres, red and black and white and yellow, which were found in abundance on the slopes of the mountain, and also a kind of ink that she made by boiling down the kernels of the fruit of the green-leaved tree which grew by the banks of the river.

Now it was as she gazed at these jars of pigments and the brushes of goat's hair that the wisdom which she sought came to Sihamba; yes, in a moment it came to her, in a moment her plan was made, and she knew that it would not fail. To-morrow at the dawn the Umpondwana, to the number of several thousands, would pour through the pass on to the plain beyond. Well, Suzanne should go with them, she should go as a black woman! Already her hair and eyes were dark, and with those pigments her

snow-white flesh could be darkened also, and then in the crowd who would know her from a Kaffir girl, she who could talk the language as though she had been born a Kaffir. Stay! Bull-Head was artful and clever, and perhaps he might be ready for such a trick. How could she deceive him?

Again she looked at the jars, and again wisdom came to her. It was the habit of Suzanne to sit in her dizzy chair of rock and watch the sunrise, hoping ever that in the light of it she might see white men riding to rescue her, and this Van Vooren knew, for she could be seen from the mouth of the pass below, where from hour to hour he would stand gazing at her five hundred feet above his head.

Well, to-morrow at the dawn another white woman should be seated yonder to satisfy his eyes, or at least a woman who seemed to be white. On the cliff edge, not far from this very rock lay the body of a poor girl who that day had died of thirst. If its face and arms and feet were painted white, and Suzanne's cloak of white goat's hair were set upon its shoulders, and the corpse itself placed upright in the chair, who, looking at it from hundreds of feet beneath, could guess that it was not Suzanne, and who, seeing it set aloft, would seek for Suzanne among the crowd of escaping Kaffirs? The plan was good; it could scarcely fail, only time pressed.

"Sister, awake," whispered Sihamba. Suzanne sat up at once, for the sleep of the doomed is light. "Listen, sister," went on Sihamba, "that wisdom for which you prayed has come to me," and she told her all the plan.

"It is very clever, and it may serve," answered Suzanne, "for I understand these paints and can stain myself so that if my hair is cut none would know me from a Kaffir. But, Sihamba, there is one thing which I do not understand. What will you do? For if you attempt to escape your stature will betray you."

"I?" hesitated the little woman, "nay, I do not know, I have never thought of it. Doubtless I shall win through in this way or in that."

"You are deceiving me, Sihamba. Well, there is an end, I will not go without you."

"Can you think of death and say that you will not go without me?"

"I can Sihamba."

"Can you think of your father and your mother and say that you will not go without me?"

"I can, Sihamba."

"Can you think of your husband and say that you will not go without me?"

"I can," faltered Suzanne.

"Truly you are brave," laughed the little woman. "There is more courage

in that white heart of yours than in those of all the Umpondwana. Well, sister, I also am brave, or at the least for these many moons I have set myself a task, nor will I shrink from it at the end, and that is to save you from Piet Van Vooren as once at a dearer price you saved me. Now, hearken, for myself I have no fear; as I have said, doubtless in this way or in that I shall win through, but it cannot be at your side. I must rejoin you afterwards. What, you refuse to go? Then, Lady Swallow, you send me down to death and your hands are red with my blood. I am weary, I will not live to see more trouble; life is hard and death is easy. Finish your own battle, Swallow, and fly out your flight alone," and drawing a knife from her girdle Sihamba laid it upon her knee.

"Do you mean that you will kill yourself if I refuse your prayer?"

"Nothing less, sister, and at once, for I thirst, and would seek some land where there is water, or where we need none. It comes to this, then: if you consent I may live, if you refuse I must die."

"I cannot do it," moaned Suzanne. "Let us die together."

Now Sihamba crept to her and whispered in her ear:

"Think of Ralph Kenzie and of what his life must be if you should die. Think of those children who will come, and of that first kiss of love found again which you must miss in death, whatever else it may have to give. Think of the knife's point that you would change for it, or the last sick rush down a mountain height of space. Think of your husband.

Hark! I hear him calling you."

Then Suzanne yielded.

"O woman with a noble heart," she murmured, "I listen to your tempting; may God forgive me and God reward you, O woman with the noble heart."