

CHAPTER XXXI

SIHAMBAS FAREWELL

Then they began the work, for much must be done before the daylight came. First Sihamba took a sharp knife, and with it cut off Suzanne's beautiful hair close to the head, over which what was left of it curled naturally. To disguise it further, for though it was dark it was too fine for the hair of a native, she put grease upon it and powdered it with the blue dust that Kaffir women use. This done, the poor girl stripped herself, and with the help of Sihamba smeared all her body, every inch of it down to the soles of her feet, with the ink-like juice mixed with the black earth and grease, which when it was dry made her the colour of a Kaffir. Next Sihamba dressed her in a native woman's moocha made of skin and beads, and gave her an old skin blanket to wear upon her shoulders and hide sandals for her feet, together with anklets of beads and copper wire. Then having examined her all over to see that no sign of her white skin could be seen through the pigments, and burned the long tresses of her hair, Sihamba went to the door of the hut.

"Where are you going?" asked Suzanne.

"To find Zinti," she answered, "for now we must have his help."

"No, no," cried Suzanne, "I am ashamed to be seen thus by any man."

"Wherefore, Swallow, seeing that for some days you are but a Kaffir

woman, and this is their dress, of which none think harm? Nay, you must, for remember that if you show doubt or shame, you will betray yourself."

Then with a groan Suzanne yielded, and crouching upon the floor like a native, awaited the return of Sihamba. Presently she came, followed by Zinti, who was in good case, though somewhat thin, for Zinti was clever and provident, and, foreseeing what would come, he had hidden water for himself among the rocks.

"Zinti," said Sihamba, "I would speak with you of secret matters."

"Speak on, lady," he answered--here his eyes fell upon Suzanne crouched on the ground in the full light of the lamp--"but there is a stranger present."

"This is no stranger, Zinti," said Sihamba, "but one whom you know well."

"Indeed, lady, I know her not. Should I forget one so beautiful? And yet--and yet--" and he rubbed his eyes and stared, gasping, "it cannot be."

"Yes, it is, Zinti. There sits the lady Swallow and none other."

Now although there was little mirth left in him, Zinti burst out laughing till the tears ran from his eyes, and Sihamba struck him with her hands, calling him "Fool," and commanding him to be silent.

"Wow!" he said, "this is wonderful. This is magic indeed. She who was white as snow has become black as coal, and yes, she looks best black. Oh! this is magic indeed."

At his words Suzanne sprang up looking as though she were about to weep, and Sihamba stopped his lips with fierce words and blows, though he took small heed of either, but stood staring.

"Zinti," Sihamba said, "you have done me many services, but to-day you must do me the greatest of all. This morning at the daylight the lady Swallow will pass with the multitude down the cleft yonder and none will know her in that disguise. You must go with her, but not too near her, and cross the plain, meeting her by the saw-edged rock which stands yonder at the mouth of the gorge in the Quathlamba mountains. Then you must lead her as fast as you can travel to that camp of the Boers which is near the Tugela River, where she will be safe. Do you understand?"

"I understand, lady. But what of yourself?"

"It is my plan to hide on the mountain," Sihamba answered quickly, "in a secret place I know of, seeing that it is impossible that I should escape because my stature would betray me. I will join you at the Boer camp later; or, failing that, you can return in a while--say on the first night of the new moon--to search for me. But talk no more, for we have still much to do. Yes, we who have made a white woman black, must make a black woman white. Follow me, both of you," and giving Zinti a

jar of pigment and the long goat-skin cloak, which Suzanne wore for an outer garment, she left the hut, carrying in her hand strips of ox-hide tanned white.

Avoiding the groups of thirst-tormented people who sat or wandered about in the coolness of the night, they passed through the gates of the kraal unheeded, and walking quickly across the wide stretch of tableland reached the eastern edge of the cliff. Now upon the very verge of this cliff rose a sharp pinnacle of rock fifty feet or more into the air, and upon the top of this pinnacle was that stone shaped like a great chair, in which Suzanne sat day by day, poised like an eagle over the dizzy gulf of space, for the slopes of the mountain swelled five hundred feet beneath, watching for the help that never came. Not far from the base of this point Sihamba began to search in the starlight till she found what she wanted, the body of a young woman who had crept here to die of thirst, and whose death and the place of it had been reported to her.

Now she took the jar of white clay, and, aided by Zinti, set about her ghastly task, daubing the stuff thickly upon the cold features and the neck and arms and feet. Soon it was done, for such work needed little care, but then began their true toil since the corpse must be carried up the sharp point of rock, and that by no easy path. Had not Zinti been so strong it could never have been done; still, with the aid of Suzanne and Sihamba herself, at last it was finished.

Up that steep place they toiled, the three of them, dragging the dead body from knob to knob of rock, well knowing that one false step in the

gloom would send them to be broken to pieces hundreds of feet beneath. At length they reached the little platform where there was scarcely room for all of them to stand with their burden, and climbing on to the stone which was called the Chair, Zinti drew the dead woman into the seat of it.

Then as Sihamba bade him he wrapped her in Suzanne's long white cape of goat-skin, putting the hood of it upon her head, after which he made the corpse fast in a sitting posture, lashing it round the neck and middle to the back of the stone with the white tanned rimpis in such fashion that it could not fall or even slip.

"So," said Sihamba grimly, "there sits the bridge upon whom Swart Piet can feast his eyes while you seek safety across the mountains. Now back to the town, for from this height I can already see light glimmering in the east."

Accordingly they returned to the hut and entered it, leaving Zinti without, none noting them since by now the multitudes were thronging the narrow way. Here Sihamba lit the lamp, and by its light once more examined Suzanne carefully, retouching the dye in this place and in that, till she was sure that no gleam of white showed through it.

"It is good," she said at length; "unless you betray yourself, your skin will not betray you. And now, lady Swallow, the hour has come for us to part, and I rejoice to think that some of the debt I owe you I have repaid. Long ago I told you that very far away I should live to save you

as you saved me, and I am sure that I have saved you; there is no doubt of it in my heart. Yes, yes, Swallow, I see you most happy in the love of husband and of children, thinking of all these things as a far-off evil dream, as of a dream that never will return. What more do I desire? What more have I to ask?

"I say that I have repaid to you part of the debt I owe, but all of it I can never repay, for, Swallow, you have given me love which elsewhere has been denied to me. Others have parents and brothers and sisters and husbands to love them; I have none of these. I have only you who are to me father and mother and sister and lover.

"How then can I repay you who have taught this cold heart of mine to love, and have deigned to love me in return? Oh! and the love will not die; no, no, it will live on when all else is dead, for although I am but a Kaffir doctress, at times light shines upon my heart, and in that light I see many new things. Yes, yes, I see that this life of ours is but a road, a weary road across the winter veldt, and this death but the black gate of a garden of flowers----"

"Oh! why do you speak thus?" broke in Suzanne. "Is this then our last farewell, and does your wisdom tell you that we part to meet no more?"

"I know not, Swallow," answered Sihamba hastily, "but if it should be so I care nothing, for I am sure that through all your days you will not forget me, and that when your days are done I shall meet you at the foot of the death-bed. Nay, you must not weep. Now go swiftly, for it is

time, and even in your husband's love be mindful always that a woman can love also; yes, though she be but a dwarfed Kaffir doctress.

Swallow--Sister Swallow, fare you well," and, throwing herself upon her breast, Sihamba kissed her again and again. Then, with a strange strength, she thrust her from the hut, calling to Zinti to take charge of her and do as she had bidden him, adding that if he failed in this task she would blast his body and haunt his spirit.

Thus parted Sihamba, the Kaffir witch-doctress, and my daughter Suzanne, whom she kept safe for nearly three years, and saved at last at the cost of her own life. Yes, thus they parted, and for always in the flesh, since it was not fated that they should meet again in this world, and whether it has been permitted to Sihamba--being a Kaffir, and no Christian--to enter a better one is more than I can say. In her case, however, I hope that she has found some hole to creep through, for although she was a black witch-doctress, according to her knowledge she was a good woman and a brave one, as the reader will say also before he comes to the end of this story.

Outside the hut Zinti took Suzanne by the arm and led her through the mazes of the town to the open ground that lay between it and the mouth of the steep cleft which ran down to the slopes of the mountain.

All this space was crowded with people, for as yet they could not enter the cleft, which nowhere was more than ten feet wide, because it was filled with cattle, some alive and some dead, that, drawn by the smell of water beneath, had gathered as near to it as the stone walls which blocked the pass would allow.

Suzanne and Zinti mingled with this crowd of fugitives, taking a position almost in the midst of it, for they did not wish to pass out either among the first or the last. There they waited a while, none noting them, for in their great agony of thirst all thought of themselves and not of their neighbours. Indeed, husbands deserted their sick wives and mothers their children, which were too heavy to carry; yes, they deserted them to be trampled by the feet of men and the hoofs of cattle.

Now, the eastern sky grew grey, and though the sun had not yet risen the light was such that a man could see the veins upon the back of his hand and the white moons on his finger-nails. Presently, as though moved by one impulse, thousands of voices uttered a hoarse cry of "It is dawn! Open, open!"

But it would seem that the wall still stood, for the cattle remained packed in so dense a mass that a man could have walked upon their backs, as, indeed, some tried to do.

At last the sun rose, or rather its rays shot upwards across the eastern skies like a fan of fire. Suzanne turned her head and watched till

presently the arrows of light struck upon the tall chair rock which was the highest point of all the mountain. Yes, there in the chair sat the white figure and by its side stood what seemed to be a black child. It was Sihamba. Far below other eyes were watching also, the eyes of Swart Piet, for he would not let the people go until he knew that Suzanne and Sihamba stayed behind. But now he saw them, Suzanne in her accustomed place, and at her side Sihamba.

"Pull down the walls," he shouted to his men, for he was eager to clear the pass of cattle and Kaffirs that he might go up it, and they obeyed him. Before they were more than half down the oxen, pushing and leaping forward madly, cleared what was left of them and, open-mouthed, their lolling tongues hanging from their dry jaws, rushed downward to the water, goring or trampling to death some of those who worked at the wall.

"The schanzes are down," screamed the people, seeing the long line of cattle move, and immediately they began to press forward also.

At Suzanne's side was a young woman so weak with thirst that she could scarcely walk, and on her back a year-old boy, insensible but living, for a red froth bubbled from his lips. A man thrust this woman to one side and she fell; it was that aged councillor who on the yesterday had brought news of the surrender to Sihamba. She tried to struggle to her feet but others trampled upon her.

"Sister, sister!" she cried, catching Suzanne by the hide blanket which

she wore, "I am dead, but oh! save my child."

"Let it be," whispered Zinti, but Suzanne could not deny those piteous eyes, and as she passed she snatched up the boy and the sling in which he was carried by the dying woman, setting the band of it beneath her own breast. So she went forward, bearing him upon her hip, nor did that act of mercy lack its reward, for as shall be seen it was her salvation. Also the child lived, and to this day is a faithful servant in our house, though now his beard is white.

Down the narrow way surged the crowd, scrambling over rocks and dead cattle and crushed women and children, till at the last Suzanne drew near its opening, where stood Swart Piet and some twenty of his followers, watching the multitude pass out.

"Lady," whispered Zinti into her ear, "now I fall behind, for Bull-Head may know me. If I win through I will rejoin you on the plain, or by the saw-edged rock; if I do not, throw away that child, and follow the road of which I have told you, you can scarcely mistake it. Go on, showing no fear, and--stay, let that blanket hang open in front, it is not the custom of these women to wear their garments wrapped so closely."

Suzanne groaned, but she obeyed.