

## CHAPTER XXXII

### THE PASS OF THE QUATHLAMBA

Like wild beasts escaping from a pen, that red-eyed, gasping mob rushed and staggered to the edge of the water, and, plunging their heads into it with hoarse grunts and cries, drank and drank and drank. Indeed, several lost their lives there, for some filled themselves so full that their vitals were ruptured, and some were thrust into the river by the cattle or those pressing behind them, to be carried away by the swift stream.

Just at the mouth of the pass Suzanne, laden with the child, was pushed down by those who followed, and doubtless would have been trampled to death, had not one of Swart Piet's men, desiring to clear the way, or, perhaps, moved to pity at her plight, dragged her to her feet again. But when he had done this he did not let her go, but held her, staring at her beauty with greedy eyes.

"Here is a rock-rabbit whom I shall keep for a wife," he cried. "I would rather take her than twenty fat oxen."

Now Suzanne's heart nearly stood still with terror.

"Water, water," she moaned; "let me drink, I pray you."

"Do not fear, I will take you to drink, my pretty," went on the man,

still staring at her.

Then, losing command of herself, Suzanne screamed and struggled, and the sound of her cries reached the ears of Swart Piet, who was standing close at hand.

"What is this?" he asked of the man.

"Nothing, Bull-Head, except that I have taken a woman whom I wish for a wife because she is so fair."

Van Vooren let his eyes rest upon her, but dreamily, for all his thoughts were given to her who sat aloft five hundred feet above his head, and, feeling their glance, Suzanne's blood froze in her veins.

"Yes, she is fair," he answered, "but she is a married woman, and I will have no Umpondwana brats among my people. Let her go, and take a girl if you will." For Van Vooren did not wish that the few men who remained with him should cumber themselves just then with women and children, since they were needed to look after the cattle.

"Maid or wife, I choose this one and no other," said the man sulkily.

Then Black Piet, whose sullen temper could not brook to be crossed, broke into a blaze of rage.

"Do you dare to disobey me?" he shouted with an awful Kaffir oath. "Let

her go, dog, or I will kill you."

At this the man, who knew his master, loosed hold of Suzanne, who ran away, though it was not until she reached the water that she noticed a white ring round her arm, where his grip had rubbed the paint off the skin beneath. Strangely enough Van Vooren saw the ring, and at that distance mistook it for an ivory ornament such as Kaffir women often wear above the elbow. Still more strangely its white colour made him think again of the white woman who sat aloft yonder, and he turned his face upwards, forgetting all about the black girl with the child.

Thrusting herself through the crowd, Suzanne ran on for a while till she was clear of the worst of it, then terrified though she was, she could resist the temptation of the water no longer, for her mouth and throat felt dry and rough. Climbing down to the edge of the river she drank greedily under the shelter of a rock, and when she had satisfied some of her thirst, she poured water into the mouth of the child, dipping its shrunken little body into the stream, whereon it seemed to increase before her eyes like a dry sponge that is left out in the rain.

While she tended the child thus, and just as it began to find its senses and to wail feebly, she chanced to look up, and to her terror saw that man from whom she had escaped walking along the bank looking for her. Happy was it for Suzanne that the rock under which she was crouched hid her, for the man stood for thirty seconds or more within two paces, so that she was obliged to plunge the body of the boy under water to stifle its crying.

Then, as it happened, the Kaffir caught sight of another woman and infant, more than a hundred yards away, and ran off towards them. Thereon Suzanne, replacing the half-choked child upon her back, climbed the bank, hiding the white mark upon her arm beneath the blanket, and taking such shelter as she could behind stones or cattle, or knots of people who, their thirst appeased, were hastening to escape, she slipped across the shoulder of the slope.

Now she was out of sight of Swart Piet and his men, and for the first time for many a day began to breathe freely. For a while she crept on round the flank of the mountain, then at the best of her speed she struck across the plain straight for the saw-edged rock ten miles away, which marked the entrance to the pass over the Quathlamba range.

From time to time Suzanne looked behind her, but none followed her, nor, search as she would, could she discover any trace of Zinti, who, she began to fear, must have come to some harm. One thing she could see, however--the whitened corpse set on high in the chair of rock, and by the side of it a black dot that she knew to be Sihamba. Twice she turned round and gazed at it, but the second time the dot had become almost imperceptible, although it still was there. Long and earnestly she looked, sending her farewell through space to that true friend and deliverer whose eyes, as she knew well, watched her flight and whose heart went with her.

Then she travelled on sadly, wondering what was that plan of escape of

which Sihamba had spoken, and why it was that she stood there by the corpse and did not put it into practice, wondering also when they should meet again and where. A third time she turned, and now the dead woman on the rock was but as a tiny point of white, and now it had altogether vanished away.

After this Suzanne halted no more, but pressed on steadily towards the saw-edged spur, which she reached about twelve o'clock, for the grass was so tall, the untrodden veldt so rough, and the sun so hot that, weak as she felt with grief and the effects of thirst, and laden with a heavy child, her progress was very slow. At length, however, she stood gasping in its shadow, gazing dismayed at the huge range of mountains before her and the steep rough cliffs up which she must climb.

"Never shall I cross them without foot and weighted with this child, so the end of it will be that I must die after all," thought Suzanne as she sank down by the banks of a little rivulet, resting her swollen feet in its cool stream, for then, and indeed for weeks after, it seemed to her that she could never have enough of the taste and smell and feel of water.

As she sat thus, striving to still the wailing of the hungry boy, suddenly the shadow of a man fell upon her. With a cry she sprang to her feet to find herself face to face with Zinti.

"Oh! I thought that they had taken you," she exclaimed.

"No, lady, I escaped, but I crossed the plain far to your left, for it seemed better that we should not be seen travelling together from the mountain. Now let us eat who have eaten little for so many days, lacking water to wash down the food," and from the large skin wallet which he bore Zinti drew out dried flesh and roasted corn.

Suzanne looked at the food with longing, but before she touched any she took some corn, and having pounded it into a pulp with a stone, she mixed it with water and fed the child, who devoured the stuff greedily and presently fell asleep. Then they ate as much as they wanted, since Zinti carried enough for three such meals, and never did Suzanne take meat with a greater relish. Afterwards, though she yearned to sleep, they pressed on again, for Zinti said it was not safe to stay, since long before this Van Vooren would be seeking her far and wide, and if he chanced to discover the secret of her flight he would travel further in one hour on horseback than they could in four on foot. So they went forward up the pass much refreshed, Zinti carrying the child.

All day long they walked thus, resting at intervals, till by sunset they reached the crest of the pass, and saw the wide plains of Natal stretched out like a map beneath them, and on them, not so very far away and near to the banks of the river that wound at their feet, a white-topped koppie, beneath which, said Zinti, was the Boer camp.

Suzanne sat down and looked, and there, yes, there the caps of the waggons gleamed in the fading light; and oh! her heart leapt at the sight of them, for in those waggons were white men and women such as she

had not seen for years, and with whom at length she would be safe. But even as her breast heaved at the thought of it, an icy, unnatural wind seemed to stir her hair, and of a sudden she felt, or seemed to feel, the presence of Sihamba. For a moment, and one only, it was with her, then it was gone, nor during all her life did it ever come back again.

"Oh! Sihamba is dead!" she cried.

Zinti looked at her in question.

"It may well be so," he said sadly, "but I pray that it is not so, for she is the best of chieftainesses. At least we have our own lives to save, so let us go on," and again they pressed forward through the gathering gloom.

Soon it grew dark, and had her guide been any other man than Zinti Suzanne must have stopped where she was till the moon rose at midnight. But Zinti could find any path that his feet had trod even in the dark; yes, although it ran through piled-up rocks on the mountain side, and was cut with the course of streams which must be forded.

In wading through one of these rivulets, Suzanne struck her bare ankle against a stone and lamed herself, so that from this time forward, shivering and wet with water, for her hurt was so sharp and sudden that she had fallen in the stream, she was forced to walk leaning on Zinti's shoulder, and indeed over some rough places he was obliged to carry her. Now again Zinti wished to abandon that heavy child, for strong though he

was the weight of the two of them proved almost more than he could bear, but Suzanne would not listen to him.

"Nay," she said, "this child that was sent to me by Heaven has saved me from shame and death, and shame and death be my portion if I will leave it while I live. Go on alone if you will, Zinti, and I will stay here with the child."

"Truly white people are strange," answered Zinti, "that they should wish to burden themselves with the child of another when their own lives are at stake, but be it as you will, lady," and he struggled forward as best he could, carrying the one and supporting the other.

Thus for hour after hour, slowly they crept onward with only the stars to light and guide them, till at length about midnight the moon rose and they saw that they were near the foot of the mountain. Now they rested awhile, but not long enough to grow stiff, then hastening down the slope they reached the plain, and headed for the white-topped koppie which shone in the moonlight some six miles away. On they crept, Suzanne now limping painfully, for her ankle had begun to swell, and now crawling upon her hands and knees, for Zinti had no longer the strength to carry her and the child. Thus they covered three miles in perhaps as many hours. At last, with something like a sob, Suzanne sank to the earth.

"Zinti, I can walk no more," she said. "Either I must rest or die."

He looked at her and saw that she spoke truth, for she was quite

outworn.

"Is it so?" he said, "then we must stay here till the morning, nor do I think that you will take hurt, for Bull-Head will scarcely care to cross that pass by night."

Suzanne shook her head and answered:

"He will have begun to climb it at the rising of the moon. Hear me, Zinti. The Boer camp is close and you still have some strength left; take the child and go to it, and having gained an entrance in this way or in that tell them my plight and they will ride out and save me."

"That is a good thought," he said; "but, lady, I do not like to leave you alone, since here there is no place for you to hide."

"You could not help me if you stayed, Zinti, therefore go, for the sooner you are gone, the sooner I shall be rescued."

"I hear your command, lady," he answered, and having given her most of the food that was left, he fastened the sleeping child upon his shoulder and walked forward up the rise.

In something less than an hour Zinti came to the camp, which was formed of unlaagered waggons and tents pitched at the foot of a koppie, along one base of which ran the river. About fifty yards in front of the camp stood a single buck-waggon, and near to it still glowed the embers of a

cooking-fire.

"Now if I try to pass that waggon those who watch by it will shoot at me," thought Zinti, though, indeed, he need have had no fear, for they were but camp-Kaffirs who slept soundly.

Not knowing this, however, he stood at a distance and called aloud, till at last a Hottentot crept out with a gun, and, throwing back the blanket from his head, asked who he was and what he wanted.

"I want to see the Baas of the camp," he answered, "for my mistress, a white woman, lies exhausted upon the veldt not far away and seeks his help."

"If you want to see the Baas," yawned the man, "you must wait till daylight when he wakes up."

"I cannot wait," answered Zinti, and he made as though to pass towards the camp, whereupon the man raised his gun and covered him, saying:

"If you go on I will shoot you, for stray Kaffir dogs are not allowed to prowl about the camp at night."

"What then must I do?" asked Zinti.

"You can go away, or if you will you may sit by the waggon here till it is light, and then when the Boers, my masters, wake up you can tell your

story, of which I believe nothing."

So, having no choice, Zinti sat down by the waggon and waited, while the man with the gun watched him, pretending to be asleep all the while.

Now Suzanne was left alone upon the great veldt, and fear took hold of her, for she was broken in body and mind, and the place was very desolate; also she dreaded lest lions should take her, for she could hear them roaring in the distance, or Swart Piet, who was worse than any lion. Still she was so weary that after washing her face and hands in a spring close by, presently she fell asleep. When she awoke the east was tinged with the first grey light of the coming dawn, and it seemed to her as though some cold hand of fear had gripped her heart of a sudden and aroused her from heavy sleep. A sound caused her to look up, and there on the crest of the rise before her, some three hundred yards away, she saw dark forms moving, and caught sight of spears that glimmered in the moonlight.

"Now there is an end," thought Suzanne to herself, "for without doubt yonder stands a Zulu impi; the same that attacked the Umpondwana, for I can see the crane's feathers in their head-dresses," and she crouched upon the ground in an extremity of dread.