

CHAPTER XXXIII

RALPH FINDS THE DREAM MOUNTAIN

Now I must go back to that evening when we learned the great tidings from the lips of the lad Gaasha, whose life Ralph had saved after the attack by the Kaffirs upon the laager. There sat Gaasha on the ground staring, and there, not far away, Ralph was lying in his swoon, while Jan and I looked at each other like people who have suddenly beheld a sign from heaven.

"What evil magic is there in my words," said Gaasha presently, "that they should strike the Baas yonder dead like a spear?"

"He is not dead," I answered, "but for long he has sought that mountain Umpondwana of which you speak. Tell us now, did you hear of any white woman dwelling with the chieftainess Sihamba?"

"No, lady, I heard of none."

This answer of Gaasha's saddened me, for I made sure that if so strange a thing had happened as that a white woman had come to live among his tribe, the man who told him of the return of Sihamba would have told him of this also. Therefore, so I argued, either Suzanne was dead or she was in the power of Piet Van Vooren, or Sihamba had deserted her, though this last I did not believe. As it turned out afterwards, had not Gaasha been the stupidest of Kaffirs, we should have been saved those long

days of doubt and trouble, for though he had not heard that Sihamba was accompanied by a white woman, he had heard that she brought with her a white bird to the mountain Umpondwana. Of course if he had told us this we should have guessed that the white bird could be none other than Suzanne, whose native name was Swallow.

Well, we set about reviving Ralph, which was done by throwing water on to his face. When he had found his senses again I prayed him not to suffer himself to be carried away with hope, since although Gaasha had heard of Sihamba, he had heard nothing of Suzanne.

To this he answered that now when God had pointed out to him the mountain of his vision and in so strange a manner, he had no fear but that he would find his wife upon it, since God was merciful and did not desire to mock or torment His servants.

I replied that I trusted it might be so, but the ways of the Almighty were beyond our understanding, nor did it become us to pass judgment upon them. Ralph scarcely heeded my words, but, springing to his feet, said:

"Come, let us be going to the mountain Umpondwana."

"First we must consult with the commandant and get aid from him," said Jan, "for it would not be safe that we should wander into these wild places alone, where there are many Kaffirs who doubtless would murder us."

In his eagerness Ralph would not listen to this, for he desired to start at once. But I pointed out to him that we had no horses, all ours being dead of the sickness; moreover, that the night was dark, and we could not trek till the moon rose, so at length he consented. Then we went into the laager, and Jan called the older men together in a quiet place.

"What is it, Heer Botmar?" asked the commandant when they were assembled.

"It is this, cousin," said Jan. "I desire to ask you to go a three days' trek out of your march to a mountain called Umpondwana, whither this servant of mine, Gaasha, can guide you."

"For what reason?" asked the commandant astonished.

"Friend," said Jan, "you have all of you heard the story of how that outcast devil Piet Van Vooren, stole away my only child, Suzanne, the wife of Ralph Kenzie the Englishman here."

"That is an old tale," said the commandant, "and, doubtless, the poor girl is dead long ago; why then do you speak of it now, and what has it to do with your request that we should trek to the mountain Umpondwana?"

"Only this, cousin; we think that my daughter Suzanne is living there among the Kaffirs, and we seek to rescue her. At least this is certain, for only now we have learnt it from the lips of Gaasha that Sihamba, her

friend and servant whom we believe was with her, rules over this tribe as chieftainess."

"That may be so," said the commandant, "but did Gaasha tell you that your daughter was there also?"

"No," answered Jan.

"Then how do you know it?"

Now Jan hesitated and turned red as he replied:

"We know it because Ralph Kenzie here saw this very mountain in a vision more than two years ago, and in that vision was told that there he would find the wife who was taken from him on his marriage day."

Now, on hearing this most of the Boers broke out laughing, for, though very religious, we are not a people who place faith in visions. Thereupon I grew angry, and spoke to them more strongly, perhaps, than I should have done, reducing them to silence, for they were all of them a little afraid of my tongue. Also I told them the story of that dream of Ralph's and of what had just passed with Gaasha, showing them that there was more in it than they imagined. After I had done Ralph spoke also, saying:

"Friends, doubtless this tale sounds foolish in your ears; but I ask what has been my nickname among you? Has it not been 'Man of the

Mountain,' because I have always spoken and inquired for a certain mountain which had ridges on it shaped like the fingers of a man's hand, and have you not thought me mad for this reason? Now I have heard of such a mountain and I have heard also that Sihamba, who was with my wife, rules there as chieftainess. Is it strange, therefore, that I, believing now as ever in that vision, should wish to visit this mountain where, as I am sure, I shall find the wife that is lost to me?"

After this the Boers laughed no more but consulted apart till at last the elder, Heer Celliers, spoke.

"Heeren Botmar and Kenzie," he said, "of all this story of a vision we can say little. For aught we know it may be true, but if true then it is the work of magic and we will have nothing to do with it. Should you wish to go to seek this mountain Umpondwana you must go alone, for we cannot alter our plans to trek there with you. But we counsel you not to go, since no good can come of visions and magic."

When I heard this I answered him back, but Jan and Ralph went away, and presently I found them talking together outside the laager.

"Let me go alone," Ralph was saying.

"Nay," Jan answered, "I will accompany you, for two are better than one; also I shall not sleep till I find out the truth and know whether Suzanne lives or is dead."

"Indeed! and what is to become of me?" I asked.

"You, vrouw, can stop with the neighbours here, and we will join you in Natal."

"You will do no such thing, Jan Botmar," I answered, "for where you two go there I can go. What! Am I not sick also with love for my daughter and anxious to learn her fate?"

"As you will, wife," answered Jan; "perhaps it is well that we three should not separate who have been together always," and he went to see about the waggon.

As soon as the moon rose, which was about eleven o'clock, the oxen were inspanned. Before we started, however, several of our friends came praying us not to venture on so perilous a journey; indeed, they threatened even to use force to prevent us, and I think would have done so had not Jan told them outright that we were our own masters and free to go where we wished. So they departed, grieving over our obstinacy, and little guessing that their danger was far greater than our own, since as it chanced just as they had trekked through the Van Reenen's Pass a few days later a Zulu impi, returning from the Weenen massacres, fell upon them unawares and killed more than half their number before they were beaten off.

So we trekked with the moon, Gaasha guiding us, and did not outspan till dawn. As I have said, we had no horses, but never until I made that

journey did it come home to me how slow are oxen, for never before then was I in a hurry, nor, indeed, have I been since that time. It is the Englishmen who are always in a hurry, and that is one of the reasons why we Boers are so superior to them, and when we choose can master them in everything, except shopkeeping, and especially in fighting. Well, at the best the cattle could not drag the waggon over the roadless veldt at a greater rate than two miles an hour, or cover more than twenty miles a day in all. It was pitiful to see Ralph's impatience; again and again he walked on and returned; indeed, had we allowed it, I think that he would have pressed forward on foot, leaving us to follow in the waggon.

At daylight on the third day we inspanned as usual, and trekked through the morning mists until the sun sucked them up. Then Gaasha, who was sitting on the waggon-box beside Ralph, touched his shoulder, and pointed before him. Ralph looked, and far away upon the plain saw what seemed to be a white cloud, above which towered the flat cliffs of a mountain of red rock.

"See, Baas," he said, "yonder is Umpondwana, my home, and now by nightfall I shall know whether my parents are still alive, or, if they are dead, whether they have left any cattle that I can claim by law," and he began to whistle cheerfully.

"And I," said Ralph aloud, "shall know whether my life is to be a heaven or a hell," and all day long, neither eating nor drinking, he sat upon the waggon-box and stared at the mountain, not lifting his eyes from it.

It was about one o'clock in the afternoon when we seemed to be quite close to the green flanks of Umpondwana, that of a sudden we cut a wide spoor trampled by thousands of naked feet. Jan and Gaasha got off the waggon to examine it, but Ralph did not move.

"An impi has passed here," said Jan presently.

"Yes, and a Zulu impi as I think, Baas, but more than one whole day ago," and Gaasha began to hunt about amongst some low bushes which grew near the trail. Presently he held up his hand and shouted, and Jan ran to him.

"Look, Baas," he said, pointing to a bush.

Jan looked, and there beneath the bush lay a man, a Zulu soldier, for his tall grey plume was still fixed upon his head, and near him was his broad assegai. At that moment the man, who was still alive, although he was very near his death from dysentery, seemed to hear, for he sat up and opened his eyes, saying, "Manzie, umlungo, manzie." (Water, white man, water.)

"Bring a pannikin of water, here lies a sick Kaffir," shouted Jan to Ralph, who was still seated on the waggon-box staring at the mountain.

Ralph brought the water, and the soldier drank it greedily.

"Who are you, and how come you here?" asked Jan.

"I am a soldier of Dingaan," answered the man, "but when we were attacking the little people on that mountain I fell sick. Still I came away with the impi, but here my strength failed me, and here I have lain for a round of the sun and a round of the moon. I begged them to kill me, but my brothers would not, for they said that I might recover and join them."

"Where have they gone?" asked Jan.

"They have gone to eat up the Boers in Natal," the Zulu answered in a hollow voice, his empty eyes wandering towards the mountains of the Quathlamba range. "Yes, they have gone to do the King's bidding on the white men, for his word came to us while we besieged yonder stronghold. To-morrow at the dawn they attack the little laager beneath the white koppie by the banks of the Tugela, and I must reach them by then--yes, yes, now I am strong again, and I shall attack with them to-morrow at the dawn. Farewell, white men, I will not kill you because you gave me the water which has made me strong again," and, rising from the ground, he grasped his spear and started forward at a run.

"Stay," cried Ralph. "I would question you as to what has happened on that mountain;" but the man did not seem to hear him. For thirty paces or so he ran on, then suddenly he halted and saluted with his spear, crying in a loud voice:

"Chief, I report myself, I am present."

Next he stretched his arms wide and fell forward upon his face. When they reached him he was quite dead.

"This is a strange story that we have heard about the Zulus and the folk in Natal," said Jan, rubbing his forehead.

"I think that the man was wandering in his mind," answered Ralph, "still there may be truth in it; but, father," he added, with a gasp of fear, and, catching Jan by the arm, "what has happened on the mountain Umpondwana? The Zulus have been there, and--what has happened on the mountain?"

Jan shook his head, but did not answer, for he knew too well what happens where the Zulu impis pass.

Notwithstanding that Ralph was mad with impatience we halted the waggon for a few minutes to take counsel, and in the end decided to send the voorlooper back to the camp which we had left to warn our friends of what we had learned as to the onslaught on our brethren in Natal, though we had small faith in the story. But either the lad ran away, or some accident befell him, or he failed to find the Boers who had already trekked, at the least our message never reached them, nor did we see him again. Then we went on, Gaasha leading the oxen as quickly as they could walk. All that afternoon we travelled almost in silence, following the

spoor of the impi backwards, for our hearts were full of fear. We met no man, but once or twice we saw groups of cattle wandering unherded, and this astonished us, giving us hope, for it was not the custom of a victorious impi to leave the cattle of its enemy behind it, though if the people of the Umpondwana had conquered, it was strange that we should see no herds with the beasts.

At length, within two hours of sunset, we passed round the shoulder of the mountain and beheld its eastern slope.

"It is the very place of my vision," cried Ralph, and certainly there before us were the stone ridges shaped like the thumb and fingers of a man, while between the thumb and first finger gushed the river, upon the banks of which grew flat-topped green-leaved trees.

"Onward, onward!" he cried again, and, taking the long waggon whip, he thrashed the oxen till they bellowed in the yokes. But I, who was seated beneath the tent of the waggon, turned to look behind me, and in the far distance saw that men were driving herds of cattle towards the mountains.

"We are too late," I thought in my heart, "for, without doubt, whether it be the Zulus or others, the place has been taken, since yonder go the victors with the cattle. Now they will fall upon us and kill us. Well, should God will it, so let it be, for if Suzanne is dead indeed I care little if we die also; and to Ralph at least death will be welcome, for I think that then death alone can save him from madness."

Now we had reached the banks of the river, and were trekking up them towards the spot where it issued from the side of the mountain. Everywhere was spoor, but we saw no people, although here and there the vultures were hissing and quarrelling over the bones of a man or a beast.

"There has been war in this place," whispered Jan, "and now the peace of death has fallen upon it," but Ralph only flogged the weary oxen, saying nothing.

At length they could drag the waggon no further, for the path grew too steep for them, whereupon Ralph, seizing the first weapon that came to hand, which, as it chanced, was the broad assegai that Gaasha had taken that day from the side of the dead Zulu, ran forward up the trail followed by Jan and myself. Another two hundred yards and the path took a turn which led to the entrance of the first scherm, the same that the Zulus had captured by forcing the passage of the river. The gateway was open now, and Ralph entered.

At first he could see no one, but presently he heard a voice saying:

"Will you not tell, for death is very near you? Drink, witch, tell and drink."

"Fool," answered another voice, a grating, broken voice, "I say that death is near to both of us, and since she is saved I die gladly, taking

my secret with me."

"Then witch, I will try steel," said the first voice.

Now Ralph looked over the rock from behind which the sound of voices came and saw the body of a little woman tied to a stone by the edge of the water, while over her leant a man, a white man, holding a knife in one hand and in the other a gourd of water, which he now placed close to her lips, and now withdrew from them. He knew that woman, it was Sihamba. Just at this moment the man looked up and their eyes met, and Ralph knew him also.

It was Piet Van Vooren.