

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### THE AVENGER OF BLOOD

For a moment the two men stood looking at each other, yes, the shedder of blood and the avenger of blood stood quite still and silent, and looked each other in the eyes, as though a spell had fallen upon them striking them into stone. It was the voice of Sihamba that broke the spell, and it issued from her parched throat with a sound like the sound of a death-rattle.

"Ah! devil and torturer," it said, "did I not tell you that doom was at hand? Welcome, Ralph Kenzie, husband of Swallow."

Then with a roar like that of a wounded beast, Ralph sprang forward, in his hand the uplifted spear. For one instant Swart Piet hesitated, but at the words of Sihamba a sudden terror had taken hold of him and he dared not wait. Like a startled buck he turned and fled up the mountain, but as he passed her he struck downwards with the knife he held, stabbing Sihamba in the body.

Once also he looked round for help, but there was none, for during the long torment of Sihamba all the black villains who served him had slipped away, fearing lest others should secure their share of the stolen cattle. Then he sped on up the pass and never did a man run more swiftly. But after him came one who was swifter than he, the light-footed, long-limbed Englishman with rage in his heart, and an

awful fire of vengeance blazing in his eyes.

Up the pass they ran, leaping over stones and dead cattle till at length they reached the tableland at the top. Here once again Van Vooren paused for an instant, for he bethought him that, perhaps, he might hold the mouth of the cleft against his pursuer. But his wicked heart was too full of fear to let him stay, so at full speed he set forward across the plain, heading for that chair rock where still sat the whitened corpse, for there he thought he could defend himself. Ralph followed him somewhat more slowly, for of a sudden he had grown cold and cunning, and, knowing that his foe could not escape him, he desired to save his breath for the last struggle.

For six hundred yards or more they ran thus, and when Van Vooren began to climb the pedestal of rock Ralph was fifty paces behind him. Presently he also reached the pedestal and paused to look. Already Swart Piet was standing by the stone chair, but it was not at him that he looked, but rather at the figure which was tied in the chair that he now saw for the first time. That figure no longer sat upright, draped in its white fur cloak, for it had been disturbed, as I shall tell presently, and the cloak was half torn from it. Now it hung over the arm of the chair, the ghastly white face looking down towards Ralph and beneath it the bare black breast.

Ralph stared, wondering what this might mean. Then the answer to the riddle flashed into his mind, and he laughed aloud, for here he saw the handiwork of Sihamba. Yes, that grisly shape told him that his love

still lived and that it was to win the secret of her whereabouts that the devil above him had practised torment upon the little doctress.

Ralph laughed aloud and began to climb the pinnacle. He might have waited till Jan, who was struggling up the pass after them, arrived with his gun, but he would not wait. He had no fear of the man above and he was certain of the issue of the fray, for he knew that God is just. As for that man above, he grinned and gibbered in his disappointed rage and the agony of his dread; yes, he stood there by the painted corpse and gibbered like an ape.

"Your evil doing has not prospered over much, Piet Van Vooren," called Ralph, "and presently when you are dead you will taste the fruits of it. Suzanne shall be mine till the end as she was mine from the beginning, but look upon the Death-wife that your wickedness has won," and he pointed at the body with his spear.

Black Piet made no answer, nor did Ralph speak any more, for he must set himself to finish his task. The Boer took a heavy stone and threw it at him, but it missed him and he could find no more. Then gripping the wrist of the corpse in his left hand to steady himself upon that giddy place, he leant forward and prepared to stab Ralph with the knife as he set foot upon the platform. Ralph saw his plan, and stopping in his climb, he took off his coat and wound it round his left arm as a shield. Then he came on slowly, holding the broad spear in front of him. At the last he made a rush and reached the flat space of rock. Piet stabbed at him, but the strength of the thrust lost itself in the folds of the

coat.

Now who can say what happened. Round and round the rock chair they swung, Van Vooren still holding fast to the arm of the dead woman who was lashed in it. Yes, even from where I stood five hundred feet below I could see the flash of spear and knife as they struck and struck again.

At length a blow went home; the Zulu assegai sank deep into Van Vooren's chest and he hung backwards over the edge of the abyss, supported only by his grip of the dead arm--from below it looked as though he were drawing the corpse to him against its will. Yes, he hung back and groaned aloud. Ralph looked at him and laughed again, since though he was gentle-hearted, for this man he had no pity. He laughed, and crying "That curse of God you mocked at falls at last," with a sudden stroke he drew the sharp edge of the spear across the lashing that held the body to the seat.

The rimpi parted, and with a swift and awful rush, like that of a swooping bird, the dead woman and the living man plunged headlong into space. One dreadful yell echoed down the pitiless precipices, followed presently by a soft thudding sound, and there, lodged upon a flat rock hundreds of feet beneath, lay what had been Piet Van Vooren, though, indeed, none could have told that it was he.

Thus ended the life of this man, this servant of the devil upon earth, and even now, after all these years, I can find but one excuse for him, that the excess of his own wickedness had made him drunk and mad. Yes,

I believe that he who was always near to it, went quite mad when Ralph struck him with the whip after the fight by the sheep kraal, mad with hate of Ralph and love of Suzanne. Also his father was wicked before him, and he had Kaffir blood in his veins. Ah! for how much must our blood be called upon to answer, and how good is that man who can conquer the natural promptings of his blood!

Jan and I were following Ralph when he entered the river scherm, and reached it just in time to see pursued and pursuer vanishing up the narrow cleft. I caught sight of Van Vooren's back only, but although I had not seen him for years, I knew it at once.

"We have found the tiger at home," I said, "yonder goes Swart Piet."

"Allemachter! it is so," answered Jan. "Look, there lies the tiger's prey," and pointing to Sihamba he followed them up the mountain side as fast as his weight would allow, for in those days Jan was a very heavy man.

Meanwhile I made my way to the little figure that was stretched upon the rock at the edge of the river. She had fainted, but even before I reached her I saw from her small size and the strange hoop of stiff hair that she wore about her head, that it was none other than Sihamba, Sihamba whom I had last seen upon the eve of that unlucky marriage day.

But oh! she was sadly changed. One of her legs, I forget which, had been broken by a gunshot; the blood trickled from the wound where Van Vooren had stabbed her in the back; her little body was wasted by the want of water, and her face had shrunk to the size of that of a small child, although strangely enough it still was pretty. I knelt down by her, and placing my hand upon her heart felt that it still beat, though very slowly. Then I took water and sprinkled it upon her, and at the touch of it she opened her eyes at once.

"Give me to drink," she moaned, and I did so, pouring the water down her throat, which was ridged and black like a dog's palate. Her eyes opened and she knew me.

"Greeting, mother of Swallow," she said, "you come in a good hour, for now I shall be able to tell you all before I die, and I am glad that I was strong enough to endure the torment of thirst for so many hours."

"Tell me one thing, Sihamba," I said. "Does Suzanne live, and is she safe?"

"Yes, she lives, and I hope that this night she will be safe with your own people, the Boers, for she has crossed the mountains to seek shelter in that laager which is by the white-topped koppie near the banks of the Tugela in Natal."

"The laager by the white-topped koppie----" I gasped. "Oh, my God! that must be the camp which the Zulus attack to-morrow at the dawn."

"What do you say?" Sihamba asked.

In a few words I told her the tale that we had heard from the dying soldier, and she listened eagerly.

"I fear it must be true," she said, when I had finished, "for while he was tormenting me Bull-Head let it fall that Dingaan's regiments had gone hence by order of the King to make war upon the Boers in Natal, but I took little heed, thinking that he lied.

"Well," she went on after resting a while, "they may be beaten off, or--stay, in the glade yonder is the great schimmel horse; Bull-Head's people brought him down for him and I know that hours ago he has been well fed and watered. If her husband mounts him at sunset, he can be with the Swallow in the laager well before the dawn, in time to warn them all. Presently, when he returns from killing Bull-Head, I will show him the road, for I shall live till sunset. Give me more water, I pray you."

Now I saw that nothing could be done till Ralph and Jan returned, if they ever should return, so I prayed of Sihamba to tell me what had passed, for I saw that she could not live long, and desired to know the truth before she died. And she told me, with many rests and at no great length indeed, but very clearly, and as I listened I marvelled more and more at this Kaffir woman's love, faithfulness, and courage. At last she came to the tale of how she had disguised Suzanne, and set up the corpse

in her place in the chair of rock.

"Step but a few paces there to the right," she said, "and you will see it."

I did as she bade me, and then it was that on looking upwards I saw Ralph and Swart Piet struggling together. They were so high above me that their shapes seemed small, but I could see the light flashing from the stabbing steel and I called out to Sihamba what I saw.

"Have no fear, lady," she answered, "it will only end one way." So indeed it did as has been told, for presently Van Vooren and the corpse rushed downwards to vanish in the abyss, while Ralph remained standing by the empty chair of stone.

"It is finished," I said, returning to Sihamba.

"I know it, lady," she answered. "Bull-Head's last cry reached my ears, and do you give thanks to the Spirit you worship that he is dead. You wished to know what happened after the Swallow and I parted. Well, I went and stood by the body on the pinnacle of rock, and there, as I expected, came Bull-Head to seek his captive. He commanded us to come down, but I refused, telling him that if he attempted to take the Swallow--for he thought that the body wrapped in the white cloak was she--she would certainly escape him by hurling herself from the cliff. Thus I gained much time, for now from my height I could see her whom I knew to be the lady Swallow travelling across the plain towards the



saw-edge rock, although I was puzzled because she seemed to carry a child upon her back; but perhaps it was a bundle.

"At last he grew impatient, and without warning lifted his gun and fired at me, aiming low, for he feared lest the ball should pierce my mistress. The shot struck my leg where you see, and being unable to stop myself, although I broke my fall by clutching with my hands, I rolled down the rock to the ground beneath, but not over the edge of the precipice as I could have wished to do, for at the last I had intended to escape him by throwing myself from it.

"Leaving me unable to move he began to ascend the pinnacle, calling your daughter Swallow by sweet names as a man calls a shy horse which he fears will escape him. I watched from below, and even in my pain I laughed, for now I knew what must come. Since the Swallow did not answer, Bull-Head, wishing to be cunning, crept behind her in silence, and of a sudden seized the cloak and the arm beneath it, for he feared lest she should choose death and cheat him.

"Then it was that the body rolled over toward him; then it was that he saw the whitened face and the black breast beneath. Ah! lady, you should have heard his oaths and his yell of rage as he scrambled down the rocks towards me.

"'What think you of your bride?' I asked him as he came, for I knew that I must die and did not care how soon.

"This is your trick, witch,' he gasped, 'and now I will kill you.'

"Kill on, butcher,' I answered, 'at least I shall die happy, having beaten you at last.'

"No, not yet,' he said presently, 'for if you grow silent, how shall I learn where you have hidden Suzanne Botmar?'

"Suzanne Kenzie, wife of the Englishman, butcher,' I answered again.

"Also,' he went on, grinding his teeth, 'I desire that you should die slowly.' Then he called some of his men, and they carried me in a kaross to this place. Here by the river he lashed me to the stone, and, knowing that already, from loss of blood and lack of drink, I was in the agonies of thirst, he tormented me by holding water to my lips and snatching it away.

"All day long, lying in the burning sun, have I suffered thus, waiting for death to heal my pain. But in vain did he torture and question, for not one word could he wring from my lips as to where he should seek for the lady Swallow. He thought that she was hidden somewhere on the mountain, and sent men to search for her till they grew tired and ran away to steal the cattle; he never guessed that disguised as a black woman she had passed beneath his very eyes.

"Yet this was so, for I, Sihamba, know it from the talk I overheard between Bull-Head and one of his servants, who had held her awhile

wishing to take her for a wife.[\*] Yes, she passed beneath his eyes and escaped him, and I--I have won the game."

[\*] In after days, when there was talk far and wide of the wonderful escape of my daughter Suzanne, disguised as a Kaffir woman, the man who had sought to take her captive told the story of the white mark which his grip left upon her arm. He said, indeed, that both he and Bull-Head saw the mark when she was at a little distance from them, but believing it to be an ivory ring they took no heed.

Now the effects of the water, which for a little while had given new life to Sihamba, began to pass off, and she grew weak and silent. Presently I saw Ralph returning down the steep cleft, and with him Jan, and went to meet them.

"It is finished," Ralph said, looking at me with quiet eyes.

"I know it," I answered, "but, son, there is still work to do if you want to save your wife----" and I told him what I had learned.

"The schimmel," he exclaimed, growing pale to the lips, "where is the schimmel?" and he turned to seek him.

"No, no," I said, "let Jan fetch the horse. Come you to Sihamba, that she may show you the path before she dies."

Now Jan went to the glade that I pointed out to find the schimmel, while I led Ralph to Sihamba. She heard him coming and opened her eyes.

"Welcome, husband of Swallow," she said, "you have done well and bravely, yet it was the hand of fate and not yours that smote yonder on the rock point. Now hearken----" and she told the road which he must follow across the Quathlamba, if he would hope to reach the white koppie camp by dawn.

Before she had done, for the dying Sihamba spoke slowly and with pain, Jan came leading the schimmel saddled and bridled, for Swart Piet's saddle had been put upon it, the mare he was riding having been taken by one of his men whom he had sent to drive in the captured cattle.

The great roan horse, which I rejoiced to see once more, was somewhat thin, for he had lacked water like the rest, but throughout the siege he had been well tended by Sihamba and Zinti, and fed with green corn, and since that morning he had drunk all he would, so that now he was strong again and fit to run.

"Bring me the schimmel," said Sihamba, but there was no need, for the brute which loved her now as always, had wined her, and coming to where she lay, put down his head and fondled her with his black lips. Catching him by the forelock, she drew herself up, and as once before she had done when he swam the Red Water, she whispered into his ear, and as I live the beast seemed to listen and understand.

"Not I, not I," she said aloud when she had finished whispering, "not I but the Englishman, yet, Horse, I think that I shall ride you again, but it will be beyond the darkness. Stay not, stumble not, for you go on your last and greatest gallop. Speed like the swallow to save the Swallow, for so shall you live on when your swift bones are dust. Now, Englishman, away."

Ralph stooped down and kissed the woman, the angel whom God had sent to save him and his, and with her dying lips she blessed him and Suzanne, prophesying to them life and joy. Then he leapt into the saddle, and with a snort and a quick shake of its head the schimmel plunged forward in the red glow of the sunset.

Sihamba leaned against the rock and watched the light pass. As its last ray fell upon her quivering face, she lifted her arms and cried, "Swallow, I have kept my oath. Swallow, I have served you well and saved you. Sister, forget me not."

With these words upon her lips Sihamba Ngenyanga died; yes, she and the daylight died together, while Jan and I stood over her and wept.