

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE MARBLE KRAALS

At length the last platform, or terrace, was reached, and we pulled up outside the wall surrounding the central group of marble huts--for so I must call them, for want of a better name. Our approach had been observed by a crowd of natives, whose race I have never been able to determine accurately; they belonged to the Basutu and peaceful section of the Bantu peoples rather than to the Zulu and warlike. Several of these ran up to take the horses, gazing on us with astonishment, not unmixed with awe. We dismounted--speaking for myself, not without difficulty--indeed, had it not been for Stella's support I should have fallen.

"Now you must come and see my father," she said. "I wonder what he will think of it, it is all so strange. Hendrika, take the child to my hut and give her milk, then put her into my bed; I will come presently."

Hendrika went off with a somewhat ugly grin to do her mistress's bidding, and Stella led the way through the narrow gateway in the marble wall, which may have enclosed nearly half an "erf," or three-quarters of an acre of ground in all. It was beautifully planted as a garden, many European vegetables and flowers were growing in it, besides others with which I was not acquainted. Presently we came to the centre hut, and it was then that I noticed the extraordinary beauty and finish of the

marble masonry. In the hut, and facing the gateway, was a modern door, rather rudely fashioned of Buckenhout, a beautiful reddish wood that has the appearance of having been sedulously pricked with a pin. Stella opened it, and we entered. The interior of the hut was the size of a large and lofty room, the walls being formed of plain polished marble. It was lighted somewhat dimly, but quite effectively, by peculiar openings in the roof, from which the rain was excluded by overhanging eaves. The marble floor was strewn with native mats and skins of animals. Bookcases filled with books were placed against the walls, there was a table in the centre, chairs seated with rimpi or strips of hide stood about, and beyond the table was a couch on which a man was lying reading.

"Is that you, Stella?" said a voice, that even after so many years seemed familiar to me. "Where have you been, my dear? I began to think that you had lost yourself again."

"No, father, dear, I have not lost myself, but I have found somebody else."

At that moment I stepped forward so that the light fell on me. The old gentleman on the couch rose with some difficulty and bowed with much courtesy. He was a fine-looking old man, with deep-set dark eyes, a pale face that bore many traces of physical and mental suffering, and a long white beard.

"Be welcome, sir," he said. "It is long since we have seen a white face in these wilds, and yours, if I am not mistaken, is that of an Englishman. There has been but one Englishman here for twelve years, and he, I grieve to say, was an outcast flying from justice," and he bowed again and stretched out his hand.

I looked at him, and then of a sudden his name flashed back into my mind. I took his hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Carson?" I said.

He started as though he had been stung.

"Who told you that name?" he cried. "It is a dead name. Stella, is it you? I forbade you to let it pass your lips."

"I did not speak it, father. I have never spoken it," she answered.

"Sir," I broke in, "if you will allow me I will show you how I came to know your name. Do you remember many years ago coming into the study of a clergyman in Oxfordshire and telling him that you were going to leave England for ever?"

He bowed his head.

"And do you remember a little boy who sat upon the hearthrug writing

with a pencil?"

"I do," he said.

"Sir, I was that boy, and my name is Allan Quatermain. Those children who lay sick are all dead, their mother is dead, and my father, your old friend, is dead also. Like you he emigrated, and last year he died in the Cape. But that is not all the story. After many adventures, I, one Kaffir, and a little girl, lay senseless and dying in the Bad Lands, where we had wandered for days without water, and there we should have perished, but your daughter, Miss----"

"Call her Stella," he broke in, hastily. "I cannot bear to hear that name. I have forsworn it."

"Miss Stella found us by chance and saved our lives."

"By chance, did you say, Allan Quatermain?" he answered. "There is little chance in all this; such chances spring from another will than ours. Welcome, Allan, son of my old friend. Here we live as it were in a hermitage, with Nature as our only friend, but such as we have is yours, and for as long as you will take it. But you must be starving; talk no more now. Stella, it is time to eat. To-morrow we will talk."

To tell the truth I can recall very little of the events of that evening. A kind of dizzy weariness overmastered me. I remember sitting

at a table next to Stella, and eating heartily, and then I remember nothing more.

I awoke to find myself lying on a comfortable bed in a hut built and fashioned on the same model as the centre one. While I was wondering what time it was, a native came bringing some clean clothes on his arm, and, luxury of luxuries, produced a bath hollowed from wood. I rose, feeling a very different man, my strength had come back again to me; I dressed, and following a covered passage found myself in the centre hut. Here the table was set for breakfast with all manner of good things, such as I had not seen for many a month, which I contemplated with healthy satisfaction. Presently I looked up, and there before me was a more delightful sight, for standing in one of the doorways which led to the sleeping huts was Stella, leading little Tota by the hand.

She was very simply dressed in a loose blue gown, with a wide collar, and girdled in at the waist by a little leather belt. In the bosom of her robe was a bunch of orange blooms, and her rippling hair was tied in a single knot behind her shapely head. She greeted me with a smile, asking how I had slept, and then held Tota up for me to kiss. Under her loving care the child had been quite transformed. She was neatly dressed in a garment of the same blue stuff that Stella wore, her fair hair was brushed; indeed, had it not been for the sun blisters on her face and hands, one would scarcely have believed that this was the same child whom Indaba-zimbi and I had dragged for hour after hour through the burning, waterless desert.

"We must breakfast alone, Mr. Allan," she said; "my father is so upset by your arrival that he will not get up yet. Oh, you cannot tell how thankful I am that you have come. I have been so anxious about him of late. He grows weaker and weaker; it seems to me as though the strength were ebbing away from him. Now he scarcely leaves the kraal, I have to manage everything about the farm; he does nothing but read and think."

Just then Hendrika entered, bearing a jug of coffee in one hand and of milk in the other, which she set down upon the table, casting a look of little love at me as she did so.

"Be careful, Hendrika; you are spilling the coffee," said Stella. "Don't you wonder how we come to have coffee here, Mr. Allan? I will tell you--we grow it. That was my idea. Oh, I have lots of things to show you. You don't know what we have managed to do in the time that we have been here. You see we have plenty of labour, for the people about look upon my father as their chief."

"Yes," I said, "but how do you get all these luxuries of civilization?" and I pointed to the books, the crockery, and the knives and forks.

"Very simply. Most of the books my father brought with him when we first trekked into the wilds; there was nearly a waggon load of them. But every few years we have sent an expedition of three waggons right down to Port Natal. The waggons are loaded with ivory and other goods, and

come back with all kinds of things that been sent out from England for us. So you see, although we live in this wild place, we are not altogether cut off. We can send runners to Natal and back in three months, and the waggons get there and back in a year. The last lot arrived quite safe about three months ago. Our servants are very faithful, and some of them speak Dutch well."

"Have you ever been with the waggons?" I asked.

"Since I was a child I have never been more than thirty miles from Babyan's Peak," she answered. "Do you know, Mr. Allan, that you are, with one exception, the first Englishman that I have known out of a book. I suppose that I must seem very wild and savage to you, but I have had one advantage--a good education. My father has taught me everything, and perhaps I know some things that you don't. I can read French and German, for instance. I think that my father's first idea was to let me run wild altogether, but he gave it up."

"And don't you wish to go into the world?" I asked.

"Sometimes," she said, "when I get lonely. But perhaps my father is right--perhaps it would frighten and bewilder me. At any rate he would never return to civilization; it is his idea, you know, although I am sure I do not know where he got it from, nor why he cannot bear that our name should be spoken. In short, Mr. Quatermain, we do not make our lives, we must take them as we find them. Have you done your breakfast?"

Let us go out, and I will show you our home."

I rose and went to my sleeping-place to fetch my hat. When I returned, Mr. Carson--for after all that was his name, though he would never allow it to be spoken--had come into the hut. He felt better now, he said, and would accompany us on our walk if Stella would give him an arm.

So we started, and after us came Hendrika with Tota and old Indaba-zimbi whom I found sitting outside as fresh as paint. Nothing could tire that old man.

The view from the platform was almost as beautiful as that from the lower ground looking up to the peak. The marble kraals, as I have said, faced west, consequently all the upper terrace lay in the shadow of the great peak till nearly eleven o'clock in the morning--a great advantage in that warm latitude. First we walked through the garden, which was beautifully cultivated, and one of the most productive that I ever saw. There were three or four natives working in it, and they all saluted my host as "Baba," or father. Then we visited the other two groups of marble huts. One of these was used for stables and outbuildings, the other as storehouses, the centre hut having been, however, turned into a chapel. Mr. Carson was not ordained, but he earnestly tried to convert the natives, most of whom were refugees who had come to him for shelter, and he had practised the more elementary rites of the church for so long that I think he began to believe that he really was a clergyman. For instance, he always married those of his people who would consent to a

monogamous existence, and baptized their children.

When we had examined those wonderful remains of antiquity, the marble huts, and admired the orange trees, the vines and fruits which thrive like weeds in this marvellous soil and climate, we descended to the next platform, and saw the farming operations in full swing. I think that it was the best farm I have ever seen in Africa. There was ample water for purposes of irrigation, the grass lands below gave pasturage for hundreds of head of cattle and horses, and, for natives, the people were most industrious. Moreover, the whole place was managed by Mr. Carson on the co-operative system; he only took a tithe of the produce--indeed, in this land of teeming plenty, what was he to do with more? Consequently the tribesmen, who, by the way, called themselves the "Children of Thomas," were able to accumulate considerable wealth. All their disputes were referred to their "father," and he also was judge of offences and crimes. Some were punished by imprisonment, whipping, and loss of goods, other and graver transgressions by expulsion from the community, a fiat which to one of these favoured natives must have seemed as heavy as the decree that drove Adam from the Garden of Eden.

Old Mr. Carson leaned upon his daughter's arm and contemplated the scene with pride.

"I have done all this, Allan Quatermain," he said. "When renouncing civilization, I wandered here by chance; seeking a home in the remotest places of the world, I found this lonely spot a wilderness. Nothing

was to be seen except the site, the domes of the marble huts, and the waterfalls. I took possession of the huts. I cleared the path of garden land and planted the orange grove. I had only six natives then, but by degrees others joined me, now my tribe is a thousand strong. Here we live in profound peace and plenty. I have all I need, and I seek no more. Heaven has prospered me so far--may it do so to the end, which for me draws nigh. And now I am tired and will go back. If you wish to see the old quarry and the mouth of the ancient mines, Stella will show them to you. No, my love, you need not trouble to come, I can manage. Look! some of the headmen are waiting to see me."

So he went; but still followed by Hendrika and Indaba-zimbi, we turned, and, walking along the bank of one of the rivers, passed up behind the marble kraals, and came to the quarry, whence the material of which they were built had been cut in some remote age. The pit opened up a very thick seam of the whitest and most beautiful marble. I know another like it in Natal. But by whom it had been worked I cannot say; not by natives, that is certain, though the builders of these kraals had condescended to borrow the shape of native huts for their model. By the way, the only relic of those builders that I ever saw was a highly finished bronze pick-axe which Stella had found one day in the quarry.

After we had examined this quarry we climbed the slope of the hill till we came to the mouth of the ancient mines which were situated in a gorge. I believe them to have been silver mines. The gorge was long and narrow, and the moment we entered it there rose from every side a sound

of groaning and barking that was almost enough to deafen us. I knew what it was at once: the whole place was filled with baboons, which clambered down the rocks towards us from every direction, and in a manner that struck me as being unnaturally fearless. Stella turned a little pale and clung to my arm.

"It is very silly of me," she whispered. "I am not at all nervous, but ever since they killed Hendrik I cannot bear the sight of those animals. I always think that there is something human about them."

Meanwhile the baboons drew nearer, talking to each other as they came. Tota began to cry, and clung to Stella. Stella clung to me, while I and Indaba-zimbi put as bold a front on the matter as we could. Only Hendrika stood looking at the brutes with an unconcerned smile on her monkey face. When the great apes were quite near, she suddenly called aloud. Instantly they stopped their hideous clamour as though at a word of command. Then Hendrika addressed them: I can only describe it so. That is to say, she began to make a noise such as baboons do when they converse with each other. I have known Hottentots and Bushmen who said that they could talk with the baboons and understand their language, but I confess I never heard it done before or since.

From the mouth of Hendrika came a succession of grunts, groans, squeals, clicks, and every other abominable noise that can be conceived, conveying to my mind a general idea of expostulation. At any rate the baboons listened. One of them grunted back some answer, and then the

whole mob drew off to the rocks.

I stood astonished, and without a word we turned back to the kraal, for Hendrika was too close to allow me to speak. When we reached the dining hut Stella went in, followed by Hendrika. But Indaba-zimbi plucked me by the sleeve, and I stopped outside.

"Macumazahn," he said. "Baboon-woman--devil-woman. Be careful, Macumazahn. She loves that Star (the natives aptly enough called Stella the Star), and is jealous. Be careful, Macumazahn, or the Star will set!"