

CHAPTER XII

THE WHITE WITCH

I descended from the litter and told the others what the old fellow had said. Robertson did not want to come, and indeed refused to do so until I suggested to him that such conduct might prejudice a powerful person against us. Umslopogaas was indifferent, putting, as he remarked, no faith in a ruler who was a woman.

Only Hans, although he was so tired, acquiesced with some eagerness, the fact being that his brain was more alert and that he had all the curiosity of the monkey tribe which he so much resembled in appearance, and wanted to see this queen whom Zikali revered.

In the end we started, conducted by Billali and by men who carried torches whereof the light showed me that we were passing between houses, or at any rate walls that had been those of houses, and along what seemed to be a paved street.

Walking under what I took to be a great arch or portico, we came into a court that was full of towering pillars but unroofed, for I could see the stars above. At its end we entered a building of which the doorway was hung with mats, to find that it was lighted with lamps and that all down its length on either side guards with long spears stood at intervals.

"Oh, Baas," said Hans hesitatingly, "this is the mouth of a trap," while Umslopogaas glared about him suspiciously, fingering the handle of his great axe.

"Be silent," I answered. "All this mountain is a trap, therefore another does not matter, and we have our pistols."

Walking forward between the double line of guards who stood immovable as statues, we came to some curtains hung at the end of a long, narrow hall which, although I know little of such things, were, I noted, made of rich stuff embroidered in colours and with golden threads. Before these curtains Billali motioned us to halt.

After a whispered colloquy with someone beyond carried on through the join of the curtains, he vanished between them, leaving us alone for five minutes or more. At length they opened and a tall and elegant woman with an Arab cast of countenance and clad in white robes, appeared and beckoned to us to enter. She did not speak or answer when I spoke to her, which was not wonderful as afterwards I discovered that she was a mute. We went in, I wondering very much what we were going to see.

On the further side of the curtains was a room of no great size illumined with lamps of which the light fell upon sculptured walls. It looked to me as though it might once have been the inmost court or a sanctuary of some temple, for at its head was a dais upon which once

perhaps had stood the shrine or statue of a god. On this dais there was now a couch and on the couch--a goddess!

There she sat, straight and still, clothed in shining white and veiled, but with her draperies so arranged that they emphasised rather than concealed the wonderful elegance of her tall form. From beneath the veil, which was such as a bride wears, appeared two plaits of glossy, raven hair of great length, to the end of each of which was suspended a single large pearl. On either side of her stood a tall woman like to her who had led us through the curtains, and on his knees in front, but to the right, knelt Billali.

About this seated personage there was an air of singular majesty, such as might pervade a queen as fancy paints her, though she had a nobler figure than any queen I ever saw depicted. Mystery seemed to flow from her; it clothed her like the veil she wore, which of course heightened the effect. Beauty flowed from her also; although it was shrouded I knew that it was there, no veil or coverings could obscure it--at least, to my imagination. Moreover she breathed out power also; one felt it in the air as one feels a thunderstorm before it breaks, and it seemed to me that this power was not quite human, that it drew its strength from afar and dwelt a stranger to the earth.

To tell the truth, although my curiosity, always strong, was enormously excited and though now I felt glad that I had attempted this journey with all its perils, I was horribly afraid, so much afraid that I should

have liked to turn and run away. From the beginning I knew myself to be in the presence of an unearthly being clothed in soft and perfect woman's flesh, something alien, too, and different from our human race.

What a picture it all made! There she sat, quiet and stately as a perfect marble statue; only her breast, rising and falling beneath the white robe, showed that she was alive and breathed as others do. Another thing showed it also--her eyes. At first I could not see them through the veil, but presently either because I grew accustomed to the light, or because they brightened as those of certain animals have power to do when they watch intently, it ceased to be a covering to them. Distinctly I saw them now, large and dark and splendid with a tinge of deep blue in the iris; alluring and yet awful in their majestic aloofness which seemed to look through and beyond, to embrace all without seeking and without effort. Those eyes were like windows through which light flows from within, a light of the spirit.

I glanced round to see the effect of this vision upon my companions. It was most peculiar. Hans had sunk to his knees; his hands were joined in the attitude of prayer and his ugly little face reminded me of that of a big fish out of water and dying from excess of air. Robertson, startled out of his abstraction, stared at the royal-looking woman on the couch with his mouth open.

"Man," he whispered, "I've got them back although I have touched nothing for weeks, only this time they are lovely. For yon's no human lady, I

feel it in my bones."

Umslopogaas stood great and grim, his hands resting on the handle of his tall axe; and he stared also, the blood pulsing against the skin that covered the hole in his head.

"Watcher-by-Night," he said to me in his deep voice, but also speaking in a whisper, "this chieftainess is not one woman, but all women. Beneath those robes of hers I seem to see the beauty of one who has 'gone Beyond,' of the Lily who is lost to me. Do you not feel it thus, Macumazahn?"

Now that he mentioned it, certainly I did; indeed, I had felt it all along although amid the rush of sensations this one had scarcely disentangled itself in my mind. I looked at the draped shape and saw--well, never mind whom I saw; it was not one only but several in sequence; also a woman who at that time I did not know although I came to know her afterwards, too well, perhaps, or at any rate quite enough to puzzle me. The odd thing was that in this hallucination the personalities of these individuals seemed to overlap and merge, till at last I began to wonder whether they were not parts of the same entity or being, manifesting itself in sundry shapes, yet springing from one centre, as different coloured rays flow from the same crystal, while the beams from their source of light shift and change. But the fancy is too metaphysical for my poor powers to express as clearly as I would. Also no doubt it was but a hallucination that had its origin, perhaps, in the

mischievous brain of her who sat before us.

At length she spoke and her voice sounded like silver bells heard over water in a great calm. It was low and sweet, oh! so sweet that at its first notes for a moment my senses seemed to swoon and my pulse to stop. It was to me that she addressed herself.

"My servant here," and ever so slightly she turned her head towards the kneeling Billali, "tells me that you who are named Watcher-in-the-Night, understand the tongue in which I speak to you. Is it so?"

"I understand Arabic of a kind well enough, having learned it on the East Coast and from Arabs in past years, but not such Arabic as you use, O----" and I paused.

"Call me Hiya," she broke in, "which is my title here, meaning, as you know, She, or Woman. Or if that does not please you, call me Ayesha. It would rejoice me after so long to hear the name I bore spoken by the lips of one of my colour and of gentle blood."

I blushed at the compliment so artfully conveyed, and repeated stupidly enough,

"--Not such Arabic as you use, O--Ayesha."

"I thought that you would like the sound of the word better than that

of Hiya, though afterwards I will teach you to pronounce it as you should, O--have you any other name save Watcher-by-Night, which seems also to be a title?"

"Yes," I answered. "Allan."

"--O--Allan. Tell me of these," she went on quickly, indicating my companions with a sweep of her slender hand, "for they do not speak Arabic, I think. Or stay, I will tell you of them and you shall say if I do so rightly. This one," and she nodded towards Robertson, "is a man bemused. There comes from him a colour which I see if you cannot, and that colour betokens a desire for revenge, though I think that in his time he has desired other things also, as I remember men always did from the beginning, to their ruin. Human nature does not change, Allan, and wine and women are ancient snares. Enough of him for this time. The little yellow one there is afraid of me, as are all of you. That is woman's greatest power, although she is so weak and gentle, men are still afraid of her just because they are so foolish that they cannot understand her. To them after a million years she still remains the Unknown and to us all the Unknown is also the awful. Do you remember the proverb of the Romans that says it well and briefly?"

I nodded, for it was one of the Latin tags that my father had taught me.

"Good. Well, he is a little wild man, is he not, nearer to the apes from whose race our bodies come? But do you know that, Allan?"

I nodded again, and said,

"There are disputes upon the point, Ayesha."

"Yes, they had begun in my day and we will discuss them later. Still, I say--nearer to the ape than you or I, and therefore of interest, as the germ of things is always. Yet he has qualities, I think; cunning, and fidelity and love which in its round is all in all. Do you understand, Allan, that love is all in all?"

I answered warily that it depended upon what she meant by love, to which she replied that she would explain afterwards when we had leisure to talk, adding,

"What this little yellow monkey understands by it at least has served you well, or so I believe. You shall tell me the tale of it some day. Now of the last, this Black One. Here I think is a man indeed, a warrior of warriors such as there used to be in the early world, if a savage. Well, believe me, Allan, savages are often the best. Moreover, all are still savage at heart, even you and I. For what is termed culture is but coat upon coat of paint laid on to hide our native colour, and often there is poison in the paint. That axe of his has drunk deep, I think, though always in fair fight, and I say that it shall drink deeper yet. Have I read these men aright, Allan?"

"Not so ill," I answered.

"I thought it," she said with a musical laugh, "although at this place I rust and grow dull like an unused sword. Now you would rest. Go--all of you. To-morrow you and I will talk alone. Fear nothing for your safety; you are watched by my slaves and I watch my slaves. Until to-morrow, then, farewell. Go now, eat and sleep, as alas we all must do who linger on this ball of earth and cling to a life we should do well to lose. Billali, lead them hence," and she waved her hand to signify that the audience was ended.

At this sign Hans, who apparently was still much afraid, rose from his knees and literally bolted through the curtains. Robertson followed him. Umslopogaas stood a moment, drew himself up and lifting the great axe, cried Bayéte, after which he too turned and went.

"What does that word mean, Allan?" she asked.

I explained that it was the salutation which the Zulu people only give to kings.

"Did I not say that savages are often the best?" she exclaimed in a gratified voice. "The white man, your companion, gave me no salute, but the Black One knows when he stands before a woman who is royal."

"He too is of royal blood in his own land," I said.

"If so, we are akin, Allan."

Then I bowed deeply to her in my best manner and rising from her couch for the first time she stood up, looking very tall and commanding, and bowed back.

After this I went to find the others on the further side of the curtains, except Hans, who had run down the long narrow hall and through the mats at its end. We followed, marching with dignity behind Billali and between the double line of guards, who raised their spears as we passed them, and on the further side of the mats discovered Hans, still looking terrified.

"Baas," he said to me as we threaded our way through the court of columns, "in my life I have seen all kinds of dreadful things and faced them, but never have I been so much afraid as I am of that white witch. Baas, I think that she is the devil of whom your reverend father, the Predikant, used to talk so much, or perhaps his wife."

"If so, Hans," I answered, "the devil is not so black as he is painted. But I advise you to be careful of what you say as she may have long ears."

"It doesn't matter at all what one says, Baas, because she reads thoughts before they pass the lips. I felt her doing it there in that

room. And do you be careful, Baas, or she will eat up your spirit and make you fall in love with her, who, I expect, is very ugly indeed, since otherwise she would not wear a veil. Whoever saw a pretty woman tie up her head in a sack, Baas?"

"Perhaps she does this because she is so beautiful, Hans, that she fears the hearts of men who look upon her would melt."

"Oh, no, Baas, all women want to melt men's hearts; the more the better. They seem to have other things in their minds, but really they think of nothing else until they are too old and ugly, and it takes them a long while to be sure of that."

So Hans went on talking his shrewd nonsense till, following so far as I could see, the same road as that by which we had come, we reached our quarters, where we found food prepared for us, broiled goat's flesh with corncakes and milk, I think it was; also beds for us two white men covered with skin rugs and blankets woven of wool.

These quarters, I should explain, consisted of rooms in a house built of stone of which the walls had once been painted. The roof of the house was gone now, for we could see the stars shining above us, but as the air was very soft in this sheltered plain, this was an advantage rather than otherwise. The largest room was reserved for Robertson and myself, while another at the back was given to Umslopogaas and his Zulus, and a third to the two wounded men.

Billali showed us these arrangements by the light of lamps and apologised that they were not better because, as he explained, the place was a ruin and there had been no time to build us a house. He added that we might sleep without fear as we were guarded and none would dare to harm the guests of She-who-commands, on whom he was sure we, or at any rate I and the black Warrior, had produced an excellent impression. Then he bowed himself out, saying that he would return in the morning, and left us to our own devices.

Robertson and I sat down on stools that had been set for us, and ate, but he seemed so overcome by his experiences, or by his sombre thoughts, that I could not draw him into conversation. All he remarked was that we had fallen into queer company and that those who supped with Satan needed a long spoon. Having delivered himself of this sentiment he threw himself upon the bed, prayed aloud for a while as had become his fashion, to be "protected from warlocks and witches," amongst other things, and went to sleep.

Before I turned in I visited Umslopogaas's room to see that all was well with him and his people, and found him standing in the doorway staring at the star-spangled sky.

"Greeting, Macumazahn," he said, "you who are white and wise and I am black and a fighter have seen many strange things beneath the sun, but never such a one as we have looked upon to-night. Who and what is that

chieftainess, Macumazahn?"

"I do not know," I said, "but it is worth while to have lived to see her, even though she be veiled."

"Nor do I, Macumazahn. Nay, I do know, for my heart tells me that she is the greatest of all witches and that you will do well to guard your spirit lest she should steal it away. If she were not a witch, should I have seemed to behold the shape of Nada the Lily who was the wife of my youth, beneath those white robes of hers, and though the tongue in which she spoke was strange to me, to hear the murmur of Nada's voice between her lips, of Nada who has gone further from me than those stars. It is good that you wear the Great Medicine of Zikali upon your breast, Macumazahn, for perhaps it will shield you from harm at those hands that are shaped of ivory."

"Zikali is another of the tribe," I answered, laughing, "although less beautiful to see. Also I am not afraid of any of them, and from this one, if she be more than some white woman whom it pleases to veil herself, I shall hope to gather wisdom."

"Yes, Macumazahn, such wisdom as Spirits and the dead have to give."

"Mayhap, Umslopogaas, but we came here to seek Spirits and the dead, did we not?"

"Aye," answered Umslopogaas, "these and war, and I think that we shall find enough of all three. Only I hope that war will come the first, lest the Spirits and the dead should bewitch me and take away my skill and courage."

Then we parted, and too tired even to wonder any more, I threw myself down on my bed and slept.

I was awakened when the sun was already high, by the sound of Robertson, who was on his knees, praying aloud as usual, a habit of his which I confess got on my nerves. Prayer, in my opinion, is a private matter between man and his Creator, that is, except in church; further, I did not in the least wish to hear all about Robertson's sins, which seemed to have been many and peculiar. It is bad enough to have to bear the burden of one's own transgressions without learning of those of other people, that is, unless one is a priest and must do so professionally. So I jumped up to escape and make arrangements for a wash, only to butt into old Billali, who was standing in the doorway contemplating Robertson with much interest and stroking his white beard.

He greeted me with his courteous bow and said,

"Tell your companion, O Watcher, that it is not necessary for him to go upon his knees to She-who-commands--and must be obeyed," he added with

emphasis, "when he is not in her presence, and that even then he would do well to keep silent, since so much talking in a strange tongue might trouble her."

I burst out laughing and answered,

"He does not go upon his knees and pray to She-who-commands, but to the Great One who is in the sky."

"Indeed, Watcher. Well, here we only know a Great One who is upon the earth, though it is true that perhaps she visits the skies sometimes."

"Is it so, Billali?" I answered incredulously. "And now, I would ask you to take me to some place where I can bathe."

"It is ready," he replied. "Come."

So I called to Hans, who was hanging about with a rifle on his arm, to follow with a cloth and soap, of which fortunately we had a couple of pieces left, and we started along what had once been a paved roadway running between stone houses, whereof the time-eaten ruins still remained on either side.

"Who and what is this Queen of yours, Billali?" I asked as we went.

"Surely she is not of the Amahagger blood."

"Ask it of herself, O Watcher, for I cannot tell you. All I know is that I can trace my own family for ten generations and that my tenth forefather told his son on his deathbed, for the saying has come down through his descendants--that when he was young She-who-commands had ruled the land for more scores of years than he could count months of life."

I stopped and stared at him, since the lie was so amazing that it seemed to deprive me of the power of motion. Noting my very obvious disbelief he continued blandly,

"If you doubt, ask. And now here is where you may bathe."

Then he led me through an arched doorway and down a wrecked passage to what very obviously once had been a splendid bath-house such as some I have seen pictures of that were built by the Romans. Its size was that of a large room; it was constructed of a kind of marble with a sloping bottom that varied from three to seven feet in depth, and water still ran in and out of it through large glazed pipes. Moreover round it was a footway about five feet across, from which opened chambers, unroofed now, that the bathers used as dressing-rooms, while between these chambers stood the remains of statues. One at the end indeed, where an alcove had protected it from sun and weather, was still quite perfect, except for the outstretched arms which were gone (the right hand I noticed lying at the bottom of the bath). It was that of a nude young woman in the attitude of diving, a very beautiful bit of work, I

thought, though of course I am no judge of sculpture. Even the smile mingled with trepidation upon the girl's face was most naturally portrayed.

This statue showed two things, that the bath was used by females and that the people who built it were highly civilised, also that they belonged to an advanced if somewhat Eastern race, since the girl's nose was, if anything, Semitic in character, and her lips, though prettily shaped, were full. For the rest, the basin was so clean that I presume it must have been made ready for me or other recent bathers, and at its bottom I discovered gratings and broken pipes of earthenware which suggested that in the old days the water could be warmed by means of a furnace.

This relic of a long-past civilisation excited Hans even more than it did myself, since having never seen anything of the sort, he thought it so strange that, as he informed me, he imagined that it must have been built by witchcraft. In it I had a most delightful and much-needed bath. Even Hans was persuaded to follow my example--a thing I had rarely known him to do before--and seated in its shallowest part, splashed some water over his yellow, wrinkled anatomy. Then we returned to our house, where I found an excellent breakfast had been provided which was brought to us by tall, silent, handsome women who surveyed us out of the corners of their eyes, but said nothing.

Shortly after I had finished my meal, Billali, who had disappeared, came

back again and said that She-who-commands desired my presence as she would speak with me; also that I must come alone. So, after attending to the wounded, who both seemed to be getting on well, I went, followed by Hans armed with his rifle, though I only carried my revolver. Robertson wished to accompany me, as he did not seem to care about being left alone with the Zulus in that strange place, but this Billali would not allow. Indeed, when he persisted, two great men stepped forward and crossed their spears before him in a somewhat threatening fashion. Then at my entreaty, for I feared lest trouble should arise, he gave in and returned to the house.

Following our path of the night before, we walked up a ruined street which I could see was only one of scores in what had once been a very great city, until we came to the archway that I have mentioned, a large one now overgrown with plants that from their yellow, sweet-scented bloom I judged to be a species of wallflower, also with a kind of houseleek or saxifrage.

Here Hans was stopped by guards, Billali explaining to me that he must await my return, an order which he obeyed unwillingly enough. Then I went on down the narrow passage, lined as before by guards who stood silent as statues, and came to the curtains at the end. Before these at a motion from Billali, who did not seem to dare to speak in this place, I stood still and waited.