

CHAPTER XXII

THE MADNESS OF NOMBE

The dog reached Nombe first and began to lick her face, its tongue removing patches of the white which had not had time to dry. She was lying, her back supported by one of the boulders. With her left hand she patted the dog's head feebly and with her right drew out the assegai from her body, letting it fall upon the ground. Recognizing me she smiled in her usual mysterious fashion and said--

"All is well, Macumazahn, all is very well. I have deserved to die and I do not die in vain."

"Don't talk, let me see your wound," I exclaimed.

She opened her robe and pointed; it was quite a small gash beneath the breast from which blood ebbed slowly.

"Let it be, Macumazahn," she said. "I am bleeding inside and it is mortal. But I shall not die yet. Listen to me while I have my mind. Yesterday when Mauriti and Heddana went up to the plain I wished to go with them because I had news that Zulus were wandering everywhere and thought that I might be able to protect my mistress from danger. Mauriti spoke to me roughly, telling me that I was not wanted. Of that I thought little, for to such words I am accustomed from him; moreover, they are to be forgiven to a man in love. But it did not end there, for my lady Heddana also pierced me with her tongue, which hurt more than this spear thrust does, Macumazahn, for I could see that her speech had been prepared and that she took this chance to throw it at me. She said that I did not know where I should sit; that I was a thorn beneath her nail, and that whenever she wished to talk with Mauriti, or with you, Macumazahn, I was ever there with my ear open like the mouth of a gourd. She commanded me in future to come only when I was called; all of which things I am sure Mauriti had taught her, who in herself is too gentle even to think them--unless you taught her, Macumazahn."

I shook my head and she went on--

"No, it was not you who also are too gentle, and having suffered yourself, can feel for those who suffer, which Mauriti who has never suffered cannot do. Still, you too thought me a trouble,

one that sticks in the flesh like a hooked thorn, or a tick from the grass, and cannot be unfastened. You spoke to the Master about it and he spoke to me."

This time I nodded in assent.

"I do not blame you, Macumazah; indeed now I see that you were wise, for what right has a poor black doctress to seek the love, or even to look upon the face of the great white lady whom for a little while Fate has caused to walk upon the same path with her? But yesterday I forgot that, Macumazah, for you see we are all of us, not one self, but many selves, and each self has its times of rule. Nombe alive and well was one woman, Nombe dying is another, and doubtless Nombe dead will be a third, unless, as she prays, she should sleep for ever.

"Macumazah, those words of Heddana's were to me what gall is to sweet milk. My blood clotted and my heart turned sour. It was not against her that I was angry, because that can never happen, but against Mauriti and against you. My Spirit whispered in my ear. It said, 'If Mauriti and Macumazah were dead the lady Heddana would be left alone in a strange land. Then she would learn to rest upon you as upon a stick, and learn to love the stick on which she rested, though it be so rough and homely.' But how can I kill them, I asked of my Spirit, and myself escape death?"

"Poison is forbidden to you by the pact between us,' answered my Spirit, 'yet I will show you a way, who am bound to serve you in all things good or ill.'

"Then we nodded to each other in my breast, Macumazahn, and I waited for what should happen who knew that my Spirit would not lie. Yes, I waited for a chance to kill you both, forgetting, as the wicked forget in their madness, that even if I were not found out, soon or late Heddana would guess the truth and then, even if she had learned to love me a thousand times more than she ever could, would come to hate me as a mother hates a snake that has slain her child. Or even if she never learned or guessed in life, after death she would learn and hunt me and spit on me from world to world as a traitoress and a murderer, one who has sinned past pardon."

Here she seemed to grow faint and I turned to seek for help. But she caught hold of my coat and said--

"Hear me out, Macumazahn, or I will run after you till I fall and die."

So thinking it best, I stayed and she went on--

"My Spirit, which must be an evil one since Zikali gave it me

when I was made a doctress, dealt truly with me, for presently the king and his people came. Moreover, my Spirit brought it about that the king would have no other guide but me to lead him to the kraal where he slept last night, and I went as though unwillingly. At the kraal the king sent for me and questioned me in a dark hut, pretending to be alone, but I who am a doctress knew that two other men were in that hut, taking note of all my words. He asked me of the Inkosazana-y-Zulu who appeared in the Vale of Bones and of the little assegai she held in her hand, and of the magic of the Opener of Roads, and many other things. I said that I knew nothing of the Inkosazana, but that without doubt my Master was a great magician. He did not believe me. He threatened that I should be tortured very horribly and was about to call his servants to torment me till I told the truth. Then my Spirit spoke in my heart saying, 'Now the door is open to you, as I promised. Tell the king of the two white men whom the Master hides, and he will send to kill them, leaving the lady Heddana and you alone together.' So I pretended to be afraid and told him, whereon he laughed and answered--

"For your sake I am glad, girl, that you have spoken the truth; besides it is useless to torture a witch, since then the spirit in her only vomits lies.'

"Next he called aloud and a man came, who it was I could not see in the dark. The king commanded him to take me to one of the

other huts and tie me up there to the roof-pole. The man obeyed, but he did not tie me up; he only blocked the hut with the door-board, and sat with me there in the dark alone.

"Now I grew cunning and began to talk with him, spreading a net of sweet words, as the fowler spreads a net for cranes from which he would tear the crests. Soon by his talk I found out that the king and his people knew more than I guessed. Macumazahn, they had seen the cart which still stands under the overhanging rock by the mouth of the cave. I asked him if that were all, pretending that the cart belonged to my Master, to whom it had been brought from the field of Isandhlwana, that he might be drawn about in it, who was too weak to walk.

"The man said that if I would kiss him he would tell me everything. I bade him tell me first, swearing that then I would kiss him. Yes, Macumazahn, I, whom no man's lips have ever touched, fell as low as this. So he grew foolish and told me. He told me that they had also seen a kappje such as white women wear, hanging on the hut fence, and I remembered that after washing the headdress of my mistress I had set it there to dry in the sun. He told me also that the King suspected that she who wore that kappje was she who had played the part of the Inkosazana in the Vale of Bones. I asked him what the king would do about the matter, at the same time denying that there was any white woman in the Black Kloof. He said that at dawn the king

would send and kill these foreign rats, whom the Opener of Roads kept in the thatch of his hut. Now he drew near and asked his pay. I gave it to him--with a knife-point, Macumazahn. Oh! that was a good thrust. He never spoke again. Then I slipped away, for all the others were asleep, and was here a little after midnight."

"I thought I saw you, Nombe," I said, "but was not sure, so I did nothing."

She smiled and answered--

"Ah! I was afraid that the Watcher-by-Night would be watching by night; also the dog ran up to me, but he knew me and I sent him back again. Now while I was coming home, thoughts entered my heart. I saw, as one sees by a lightning flash, all that I had done. The king and his people were not sure that the Master was hiding white folk here and would never have sent back to kill them on the chance. I had made them sure, as indeed, being mad, I meant to do. Moreover, in throwing spears at the kites I had killed my own dove, since it was on the false Inkosazana who had caused them to declare war and brought the land to ruin, that they wished to be avenged, and perchance on him who taught her her part, not on one or two wandering white men. I saw that when Cetewayo's people came, and there were many more of them outside, several hundreds I think, they would shave the whole head and

burn the whole tree. Every one in the kloof would be killed.

"How could I undo the knot that I had tied and stamp out the fire that I had lit? That was the question. I bethought me of coming to you, but without arms how could you help? I bethought me of going to the Master, but I was ashamed. Also, what could he do with but a few servants, for the most of his people are away with the cattle? He is too weak to climb the steep path to the plain above, nor was there time to gather folk to carry him. Lastly, even if there were time which there was not, and we went thither they would track us out and kill us. For the rest I did not care, nor for myself, but that the lady Heddana should be butchered who was more to me than a hundred lives, and through my treachery--ah! for that I cared.

"I called on my Spirit to help me, but it would not come. My Spirit was dead in me because now I would do good and not ill. Yet another Spirit came, that of one Mameena whom once you knew. She came angrily, like a storm, and I shrank before her. She said, 'Vile witch, you have plotted to murder Macumazahn, and for that you shall answer to me before another sun has set over this earth of yours. Now you seek a way of escape from your own wickedness. Well, it can be had, but at a price.'

"'What price, O Lady of Death?' I asked.

"The price of your own life, Witch.'

"I laughed into that ghost face of hers and said--

"Is this all? Be swift and show me the way, O Lady of Death,
and afterwards we will balance our account.'

"Then she whispered into the ear of my heart and was gone. I ran on, for the dawn was near. I whitened myself with lime, I put on the glittering cloak and powdered my hair with the sparkling earth. I took a little stick in my hand since I could find no spear and had no time to search, and just as day began to break, I crept out and stood in the bend of the path. The slayers came, twelve or so of them, but behind were many more. They saw the Inkosazana-y-Zulu barring their way and were much afraid. They fled, but out of his fright one of them threw a spear which went home, as I knew it would. He watched to see if I should fall, but I would not fall. Then he fled faster than the rest, knowing himself accursed who had lifted steel against the Queen of Heaven, and oh! I am glad, I am glad!"

She ceased, exhausted, yet with a great exultation in her beautiful eyes; indeed at that moment she looked a most triumphant creature. I stared at her, thrilled through and through. She had been wicked, no doubt, but how splendid was her end; and, thank Heaven! she was troubled with no thought of what

might befall her after that end, although I was sure she believed that she would live again to face Mameena.

I knew not what to do. I did not like to leave her, especially as no earthly power could help her case, since slowly but quite surely she was bleeding to death from an internal wound. By now the sun was up and Zikali's people were about. One of them appeared suddenly and saw, then with a howl of terror turned to fly away.

"Fool! Fool!" I cried, "go summon the lady Heddana and the Inkosi Mauriti. Bid them come swiftly if they would see the doctress Nombe before she dies."

The man leapt off like a buck, and within a few minutes I saw Heda and Anscombe running towards us, half dressed, and went to meet them.

"What is it?" she gasped.

"I have only time to tell you this," I answered. "Nombe is dying. She gave her life to save you, how I will explain afterwards. The assegai that pierced her was meant for your heart. Go, thank her, and bid her farewell. Anscombe, stop back with me."

We stood still and watched from a little distance. Heda knelt down and put her arms about Nombe. They whispered together into each other's ears. Then they kissed.

It was at this moment that Zikali appeared, leaning on two of his servants. By some occult art or instinct he seemed to know all that had happened, and oh! he looked terrible. He crouched down in front of the dying woman and, toadlike, spat his venom at her.

"You lost your Spirit, did you?" he said. "Well, it came back to me laden with the black honey of your treachery, to me, its home, as a bee comes to its hive. It has told me everything, and well for you, Witch, it is that you are dying. But think not that you shall escape me there in the world below, for thither I will follow you. Curses on you, traitress, who would have betrayed me and brought all my plans to naught. Ow! in a day to come I will pay you back a full harvest for this seed of shame that you have sown."

She opened her eyes and looked at him, then answered quite softly--

"I think your chain is broken, O Zikali, no more my master. I think that love has cut your chain in two and I fear you never more. Keep the spirit you lent to me; it is yours, but the rest of me is my own, and in the house of my heart another comes to

dwell."

Then once more she stretched out her arms towards Heda and murmuring, "Sister, forget me not, Sister, who will await you for a thousand years," she passed away.

It was a good ending to a bad business, and I confess I felt glad when it was finished. Only afterwards I regretted very much that I had not found an opportunity to ask her whether or no she had masqueraded as Mameena in the Valley of Bones. Now it is too late.

We buried poor Nombe decently in her own little hut where she used to practise her incantations. Zikali and his people wished apparently to throw her to the vultures for some secret reason that had to do with their superstitions. But Heda, who, now that Nombe was dead, developed a great affection for her not unmixed with a certain amount of compunction for which really she had no cause, withstood him to his face and insisted upon a decent interment. So she was laid to earth still plastered with the white pigment and wrapped in the bloodstained feather robe. I may add that on the following morning one of Zikali's servants informed me solemnly that because of this she had been seen during the night riding up and down the rocks on a baboon as Zulu

umtagati are supposed to do. I have small doubt that as soon as we were gone they dug her up again and threw her to the vultures and the jackals according to their first intention.

On this day we at length escaped from the Black Kloof, and in our own cart, for during the night our horses arrived mysteriously from somewhere, in good condition though rather wild. I went to say good-bye to Zikali, who said little, except that we should meet once more after many moons. Anscombe and Heda he would not see at all, but only sent them a message, to the effect that he hoped they would think kindly of him through the long years to come, since he had kept his promise and preserved them safe through many dangers. I might have answered that he had first of all put them into the dangers, but considered it wise to hold my tongue. I think, however, that he guessed my thought, if one can talk of guessing in connection with Zikali, for he said that they had no reason to thank him, since if he had served their turn they had served his, adding--

"It will be strange in the times to be for the lady Heddana to remember that it was she and no other who crumpled up the Zulus like a frostbitten winter reed, since had she not appeared upon the rock in the Valley of Bones, there would have been no war."

"She did not do this, you did it, Zikali," I said, "making her your tool through love and fear."

"Nay, Macumazahn, I did not do it; it was done by what you call God and I call Fate in whose hand I am the tool. Well, say to the lady Heddana that in payment I will hold back the ghost of Nombe from haunting her, if I can. Say also that if I had not brought her and her lover to Zululand they would have been killed."

So we went from that hateful kloof which I have never seen since and hope I shall never see again, two of Zikali's men escorting us until we got into touch with white people. To these we said as little as possible. I think they believed that we were only premature tourists who had made a dash into Zululand to visit some of the battlefields. Indeed none of us ever reported our strange adventures, and after my experience with Kaatje we were particularly careful to say nothing in the hearing of any gentleman connected with the Press. But as a matter of fact there were so many people moving about and such a continual coming and going of soldiers and their belongings, that after we had managed to buy some decent clothes, which we did at the little town of Newcastle, nobody paid any attention to us.

On our way to Maritzburg one amusing thing did happen. We met Kaatje! It was about sunset that we were driving up a steep hill not far from Howick. At least I was driving, but Anscombe and

Heda were walking about a hundred yards ahead of the cart, when suddenly Kaatje appeared over a rise and came face to face with them while taking an evening stroll, or as I concluded afterwards, making some journey. She saw, she stared, she uttered one wild yell, and suddenly bundled over the edge of the road. Never would I have believed that such a fat woman could have run so fast. In a minute she was down the slope and had vanished into a dense kloof where, as night was closing in and we were very tired, it was impossible for us to follow her. Nor did subsequent inquiry in Howick tell us where she was living or whence she came, for some months before she had left the place she had taken there as a cook.

Such was the end of Kaatje so far as we were concerned.

Doubtless to her dying day she remained, or will remain, a firm believer in ghosts.

Anscombe and Heda were married at Maritzburg as soon as the necessary formalities had been completed. I could not attend the ceremony, which was a disappointment to me and I hope to them, but unfortunately I had a return of my illness and was laid up for a week. Perhaps this was owing to the hot sun that struck me on the neck one afternoon coming down the Town Hill where I was obliged to hang on to the rear of the cart because the brakes had given out. However I was able to send Heda a wedding gift in the shape of her jewels and money that I recovered from the bank,

which she had never expected to see again; also to arrange everything about her property.

They went down to Durban for their honeymoon and, some convenient opportunity arising, sailed thence for England. I received an affectionate letter from them both, which I still treasure, thanking me very much for all I had done for them, that after all was little enough. Also Anscombe enclosed a blank cheque, begging me to fill it in for whatever sum I considered he was indebted to me on the balance of account. I thought this very kind of him and a great mark of confidence, but the cheque remained blank.

I never saw either of them again, and though I believe that they are both living, for the most part abroad--in Hungary I think--I do not suppose that I ever shall. When I came to England some years later after King Solomon's mines had made me rich, I wrote Anscombe a letter. He never answered it, which hurt me at the time. Afterwards I remembered that in their fine position it was very natural that they should not wish to renew acquaintance with an individual who had so intimate a knowledge of certain incidents that they probably regarded as hateful, such as the deaths of Marnham and Dr. Rodd, and all the surrounding circumstances. If so, I daresay that they were wise, but of course it may have been only carelessness. It is so easy for busy and fashionable folk not to answer a rather troublesome

letter, or to forget to put that answer in the post. Or, indeed, the letter may never have reached them--such things often go astray, especially when people live abroad. At any rate, perhaps through my own fault, we have drifted apart. I daresay they believe that I am dead, or not to be found somewhere in Africa. However, I always think of them with affection, for Anscombe was one of the best travelling companions I ever had, and his wife a most charming girl, and wonder whether Zikali's prophecy about their children will come true. Good luck go with them!

As it chances, since then I passed the place where the Temple stood, though at a little distance. I had the curiosity, however, at some inconvenience, to ride round and examine the spot. I suppose that Heda had sold the property, for a back-veld Boer, who was absent at the time, had turned what used to be Rodd's hospital into his house. Close by, grim and gaunt, stood the burnt-out marble walls of the Temple. The verandah was still roofed over, and standing on the spot whence I had shot the pistol out of Rodd's hand, I was filled with many memories.

I could trace the whole plan of the building and visited that part of it which had been Marnham's room. The iron safe that stood in the corner had been taken away, but the legs of the bedstead remained. Also not far from it, over grown with running plants, was a little heap which I took to be the ashes of his desk, for bits of burnt wood protruded. I grubbed among them

with my foot and riding crop and presently came across the remains of a charred human skull. Then I departed in a hurry.

My way took me through the Yellow-wood grove, past the horns of the blue wildebeeste which still lay there, past that mud-hole also into which Rodd had fallen dead. Here, however, I made no more search, who had seen enough of bones. To this day I do not know whether he still lies beneath the slimy ooze, or was removed and buried.

Also I saw the site of our wagon camp where the Basutos attacked us. But I will have done with these reminiscences which induce melancholy, though really there is no reason why they should.

Tout lasse, tout casse, tout passe--everything wears out, everything crumbles, everything vanishes--in the words of the French proverb that my friend Sir Henry Curtis is so fond of quoting, that at last I wrote it down in my pocket-book, only to remember afterwards that when I was a boy I had heard it from the lips of an old scamp of a Frenchman, of the name of Leblanc, who once gave me and another lessons in the Gallic tongue. But of him I have already written in Marie, which is the first chapter in the Book of the fall of the Zulus. That headed Child of Storm is the second. These pages form the third and last.

Ah! indeed, tout lasse, tout casse, tout passe!