

The Ghost Kings

By

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EXTRACT

FROM LETTER HEADED "THE KING'S KRAAL, ZULULAND, 12TH MAY, 1855."

"The Zulus about here have a strange story of a white girl who in Dingaan's day was supposed to 'hold the spirit' of some legendary goddess of theirs who is also white. This girl, they say, was very beautiful and brave, and had great power in the land before the battle of the Blood River, which they fought with the emigrant Boers. Her title was Lady of the Zulus, or more shortly, Zoola, which means Heaven.

"She seems to have been the daughter of a wandering, pioneer missionary, but the king, I mean Dingaan, murdered her parents, of whom he was jealous, after which she went mad and cursed the nation, and it is to this curse that they still attribute the death of Dingaan, and their defeats and other misfortunes of that time.

"Ultimately, it appears, in order to be rid of this girl and her evil eye, they sold her to the doctors of a dwarf people, who lived far away in a forest and worshipped trees, since when nothing more has been heard of her. But according to them the curse stopped behind.

"If I can find out anything more of this curious story I will let you know, but I doubt if I shall be able to do so. Although fifteen years or so have passed since Dingaan's death in 1840 the Kaffirs are very shy of

talking about this poor lady, and, I think, only did so to me because I am neither an official nor a missionary, but one whom they look upon as a friend because I have doctored so many of them. When I asked the Indunas about her at first they pretended total ignorance, but on my pressing the question, one of them said that 'all that tale was unlucky and "went beyond" with Mopo.' Now Mopo, as I think I wrote to you, was the man who stabbed King Chaka, Dingaan's brother. He is supposed to have been mixed up in the death of Dingaan also, and to be dead himself. At any rate he vanished away after Panda came to the throne."

CHAPTER I

THE GIRL

The afternoon was intensely, terribly hot. Looked at from the high ground where they were encamped above the river, the sea, a mile or two to her right--for this was the coast of Pondo-land--to little Rachel Dove staring at it with sad eyes, seemed an illimitable sheet of stagnant oil. Yet there was no sun, for a grey haze hung like a veil beneath the arch of the sky, so dense and thick that its rays were cut off from the earth which lay below silent and stifled. Tom, the Kaffir driver, had told her that a storm was coming, a father of storms, which would end the great drought. Therefore he had gone to a kloof in the mountains where the oxen were in

charge of the other two native boys--since on this upland there was no pasturage to drive them back to the waggon. For, as he explained to her, in such tempests cattle are apt to take fright and rush away for miles, and without cattle their plight would be even worse than it was at present.

At least this was what Tom said, but Rachel, who had been brought up among natives and understood their mind, knew that his real reason was that he wished to be out of the way when the baby was buried. Kaffirs do not like death, unless it comes by the assegai in war, and Tom, a good creature, had been fond of that baby during its short little life. Well, it was buried now; he had finished digging its resting-place in the hard soil before he went. Rachel, poor child, for she was but fifteen, had borne it to its last bed, and her father had unpacked his surplice from a box, put it on and read the Burial Service over the grave. Afterwards together they had filled in that dry, red earth, and rolled stones on to it, and as there were few flowers at this season of the year, placed a shrivelled branch or two of mimosa upon the stones--the best offering they had to make.

Rachel and her father were the sole mourners at this funeral, if we may omit two rock rabbits that sat upon a shelf of stone in a neighbouring cliff, and an old baboon which peered at these strange proceedings from its crest, and finally pushed down a boulder before it departed, barking indignantly. Her mother could not come because she was ill with grief and fever in a little tent by the waggon. When it was all over they returned

to her, and there had been a painful scene.

Mrs. Dove was lying on a bed made of the cartel, or frame strung with strips of green hide, which had been removed from the waggon, a pretty, pale-faced woman with a profusion of fair hair. Rachel always remembered that scene. The hot tent with its flaps turned up to let in whatever air there might be. Her mother in a blue dressing-gown, dingy with wear and travel, from which one of the ribbon bows hung by a thread, her face turned to the canvas and weeping silently. The gaunt form of her father with his fanatical, saint-like face, pale beneath its tan, his high forehead over which fell one grizzled lock, his thin, set lips and far-away grey eyes, taking off his surplice and folding it up with quick movements of his nervous hands, and herself, a scared, wondering child, watching them both and longing to slip away to indulge her grief in solitude. It seemed an age before that surplice was folded, pushed into a linen bag which in their old home used to hold dirty clothes, and finally stowed away in a deal box with a broken hinge. At length it was done, and her father straightened himself with a sigh, and said in a voice that tried to be cheerful:

"Do not weep, Janey. Remember this is all for the best. The Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord."

Her mother sat up looking at him reproachfully with her blue eyes, and answered in her soft Scotch accent:

"You said that to me before, John, when the other one went, down at Grahamstown, and I am tired of hearing it. Don't ask me to bless the Lord when He takes my babes, no, nor any mother, He Who could spare them if He chose. Why should the Lord give me fever so that I could not nurse it, and make a snake bite the cow so that it died? If the Lord's ways are such, then those of the savages are more merciful."

"Janey, Janey, do not blaspheme," her father had exclaimed. "You should rejoice that the child is in Heaven."

"Then do you rejoice and leave me to grieve. From to-day I only make one prayer, that I may never have another. John," she added with a sudden outburst, "it is your fault. You know well I told you how it would be. I told you that if you would come this mad journey the babe would die, aye, and I tell you"--here her voice sank to a kind of wailing whisper--"before the tale is ended others will die too, all of us, except Rachel there, who was born to live her life. Well, for my part, the sooner the better, for I wish to go to sleep with my children."

"This is evil," broke in her husband, "evil and rebellious--"

"Then evil and rebellious let it be, John. But why am I evil if I have the second sight like my mother before me? Oh! she warned me what must come if I married you, and I would not listen; now I warn you, and you will not listen. Well, so be it, we must dree our own weird, everyone of us, a short one; all save Rachel, who was born to live her life. Man, I tell

you, that the Spirit drives you on to convert the heathen just for one thing, that the heathen may make a martyr of you."

"So let them," her father answered proudly. "I seek no better end."

"Aye," she moaned, sinking back upon the cartel, "so let them, but my babe, my poor babe! Why should my babe die because too much religion has made you mad to win a martyr's crown? Martyrs should not marry and have children, John."

Then, unable to bear any more of it, Rachel had fled from the tent, and sat herself down at a distance to watch the oily sea.

It has been said that Rachel was only fifteen, but in Southern Africa girls grow quickly to womanhood; also her experiences had been of a nature to ripen her intelligence. Thus she was quite able to form a judgment of her parents, their virtues and their weaknesses. Rachel was English born, but had no recollection of England since she came to South Africa when she was four years old. It was shortly after her birth that this missionary-fury seized upon her father as a result of some meetings which he had attended in London. He was then a clergyman with a good living in a quiet Hertfordshire parish, and possessed of some private means, but nothing would suit him short of abandoning all his prospects and sailing for South Africa, in obedience to his "call." Rachel knew all this because her mother had often told her, adding that she and her people, who were of a good Scotch family, had struggled against this South African scheme even

to the verge of open quarrel.

At length, indeed, it came to a choice between submission and separation. Mr. Dove had declared that not even for her sake would he be guilty of "sin against the Spirit" which had chosen him to bring light to those who sat in darkness--that is, the Kaffirs, and especially to that section of them who were in bondage to the Boers. For at this time an agitation was in progress in England which led ultimately to the freeing of the slaves of the Cape Dutch, and afterwards to the exodus of the latter into the wilderness and most of those wars with which our generation is familiar. So, as she was devoted to her husband, who, apart from his religious enthusiasm, or rather possession, was in truth a very lovable man, she gave way and came. Before they sailed, however, the general gloom was darkened by Mrs. Dove announcing that something in her heart told her that neither of them would ever see home again, as they were doomed to die at the hands of savages.

Now whatever the reason or explanation, scientifically impossible as the fact might be, it remained a fact that Janey Dove, like her mother and several of her Scottish ancestors, was foresighted, or at least so her kith and kin believed. Therefore, when she communicated to them her conviction as though it were a piece of everyday intelligence, they never doubted its accuracy for a minute, but only redoubled their efforts to prevent her from going to Africa. Even her husband did not doubt it, but remarked irritably that it seemed a pity she could not sometimes be foresighted as to agreeable future events, since for his part he was quite

willing to wait for disagreeable ones until they happened. Not that he quailed personally from the prospect of martyrdom; this he could contemplate with complacency and even enthusiasm, but, zealot though he was, he did shrink from the thought that his beautiful and delicate wife might be called upon to share the glory of that crown. Indeed, as his own purpose was unalterable, he now himself suggested that he should go forth to seek it alone.

Then it was that his wife showed an unsuspected strength of character. She said that she had married him for better or for worse against the wishes of her family; that she loved and respected him, and that she would rather be murdered by Kaffirs in due season than endure a separation which might be lifelong. So in the end the pair of them with their little daughter Rachel departed in a sailing ship, and their friends and relations knew them no more.

Their subsequent history up to the date of the opening of this story may be told in very few words. As a missionary the Reverend John Dove was not a success. The Boers in the eastern part of the Cape Colony where he laboured, did not appreciate his efforts to Christianise their slaves. The slaves did not appreciate them either, inasmuch as, saint though he might be, he quite lacked the sympathetic insight which would enable him to understand that a native with thousands of generations of savagery behind him is a different being from a highly educated Christian, and one who should be judged by another law. Their sins, amongst which he included all their most cherished inherited customs, appalled him, as he continually

proclaimed from the housetops. Moreover, when occasionally he did snatch a brand from the burning, and the said brand subsequently proved that it was still alight, or worse still, replaced its original failings by those of the white man, such as drink, theft and lying, whereof before it had been innocent, he would openly condemn it to eternal punishment. Further, he was too insubordinate, or, as he called it, too honest, to submit to the authority of his local superiors in the Church, and therefore would only work for his own hand. Finally he caused his "cup to overflow," as he described it, or, in plain English, made the country too hot to hold him, by becoming involved in a bitter quarrel with the Boers. Of these, on the whole, worthy folk, he formed the worst; and in the main a very unjust opinion, which he sent to England to be reprinted in Church papers, or to the Home Government to be published in Blue-books. In due course these documents reached South Africa again, where they were translated into Dutch and became incidentally one of the causes of the Great Trek.

The Boers were furious and threatened to shoot him as a slanderer. The English authorities were also furious, and requested him to cease from controversy or to leave the country. At last, stubborn as he might be, circumstances proved too much for him, and as his conscience would not allow him to be silent, Mr. Dove chose the latter alternative. The only question was whither he should go. As he was well off, having inherited a moderate fortune in addition to what he had before he left England, his poor wife pleaded with him to return home, pointing out that there he would be able to lay his case before the British public. This course had attractions for him, but after a night's reflection and prayer, he

rejected it as a specious temptation sent by Satan.

What, he argued, should he return to live in luxury in England not only unmartyred but a palpable failure, his mission quite unfulfilled? His wife might go if she liked, and take their surviving children, Rachel and the new-born baby boy, with her (they had buried two other little girls), but he would stick to his post and his duty. He had seen some Englishmen who had visited the country called Natal where white people were beginning to settle. In that land it seemed there were no slave-driving Boers, and the natives, according to all accounts, much needed the guidance of the Gospel, especially a certain king of the people called Zulus, who was named Chaka or Dingaan, he was not sure which. This ferocious person he particularly desired to encounter, having little doubt that in the absence of the contaminating Boer, he would be able to induce him to see the error of his ways and change the national customs, especially those of fighting and, worse still, of polygamy.

His unhappy wife listened and wept, for now the martyr's crown which she had always foreseen, seemed uncomfortably near, indeed as it were, it glowed blood red within reach of her hand. Moreover, in her heart she did not believe that Kaffirs could be converted, at any rate at present. They were fighting men, as her Highland forefathers had been, and her Scottish blood could understand the weakness, while, as for this polygamy, she had long ago secretly concluded that the practice was one which suited them very well, as it had suited David and Solomon, and even Abraham. But for all this, although she was sure in her uncanny fashion that her baby's

death would come of her staying, she refused to leave her husband as she had refused eleven years before.

Doubtless affection was at the bottom of it, for Janey Dove was a very faithful woman; also there were other things--her fatalism, and stronger still, her weariness. She believed that they were doomed. Well, let the doom fall; she had no fear of the Beyond. At the best it might be happy, and at the worst deep, everlasting rest and peace, and she felt as though she needed thousands of years of rest and peace. Moreover, she was sure no harm would come to Rachel, the very apple of her eye; that she was marked to live and to find happiness even in this wild land. So it came about that she refused her husband's offer to allow her to return home where she had no longer any ties, and for perhaps the twentieth time prepared herself to journey she knew not whither.

Rachel, seated there in the sunless, sweltering heat, reflected on these things. Of course she did not know all the story, but most of it had come under her observation in one way or other, and being shrewd by nature, she could guess the rest, for she who was companionless had much time for reflection and for guessing. She sympathised with her father in his ideas, understanding vaguely that there was something large and noble about them, but in the main, body and mind, she was her mother's child. Already she showed her mother's dreamy beauty, to which were added her father's straight features and clear grey eyes, together with a promise of his height. But of his character she had little, that is outside of a courage and fixity of purpose which marked them both.

For the rest she was far, or fore-seeing, like her mother, apprehending the end of things by some strange instinct; also very faithful in character.

Rachel was unhappy. She did not mind the hardship and the heat, for she was accustomed to both, and her health was so perfect that it would have needed much worse things to affect her. But she loved the baby that was gone, and wondered whether she would ever see it again. On the whole she thought so, for here that intuition of hers came in, but at the best she was sure that there would be long to wait. She loved her mother also, and grieved more for her than for herself, especially now when she was so ill. Moreover, she knew and shared her mind. This journey, she felt, was foolishness; her father was a man "led by a star" as the natives say, and would follow it over the edge of the world and be no nearer. He was not fit to have charge of her mother.

Of herself she did not think so much. Still, at Grahamstown, for a year or so there had been other children for companions, Dutch most of them, it is true, and all rough in mind and manner. Yet they were white and human. While she played with them she could forget she knew so much more than they did; that, for instance, she could read the Gospels in Greek--which her father had taught her ever since she was a little child--while they could scarcely spell them out in the Taal, or Boer dialect, and that they had never heard even of William the Conqueror. She did not care particularly about Greek and William the Conqueror, but she did care for

friends, and now they were all gone from her, gone like the baby, as far off as William the Conqueror. And she, she was alone in the wilderness with a father who talked and thought of Heaven all day long, and a mother who lived in memories and walked in the shadow of doom, and oh! she was unhappy.

Her grey eyes filled with tears so that she could no longer see that everlasting ocean, which she did not regret as it wearied her. She wiped them with the back of her hand that was burnt quite brown by the sun, and turning impatiently, fell to watching two of those strange insects known as the Praying Mantis, or often in South Africa as Hottentot gods, which after a series of genuflections, were now fighting desperately among the dead stalks of grass at her feet. Men could not be more savage, she reflected, for really their ferocity was hideous. Then a great tear fell upon the head of one of them, and astonished by this phenomenon, or thinking perhaps that it had begun to rain, it ran away and hid itself, while its adversary sat up and looked about it triumphantly, taking to itself all the credit of conquest.

She heard a step behind her, and having again furtively wiped her eyes with her hand, the only handkerchief available, looked round to see her father stalking towards her.

"Why are you crying, Rachel?" he asked in an irritable voice. "It is wrong to cry because your little brother has been taken to glory."

"Jesus cried over Lazarus, and He wasn't even His brother," she answered in a reflective voice, then by way of defending herself added inconsequently: "I was watching two Hottentot gods fight."

As Mr. Dove could think of no reply to her very final Scriptural example, he attacked her on the latter point.

"A cruel amusement," he said, "especially as I have heard that boys, yes, and men, too, pit these poor insects against each other, and make bets upon them."

"Nature, is cruel, not I father. Nature is always cruel," and she glanced towards the little grave under the rock. Then, while for the second time her father hesitated, not knowing what to answer, she added quickly, "Is mother better now?"

"No," he said, "worse, I think, very hysterical and quite unable to see things in the true light."

She rose and faced him, for she was a courageous child, then asked:

"Father, why don't you take her back? She isn't fit to go on. It is wrong to drag her into this wilderness."

At this question he grew very angry, and began to scold and to talk of the wickedness of abandoning his "call."

"But mother has not got a 'call,'" she broke in.

Then, as for the third time he could find no answer, he declared vehemently that they were both in league against him, instruments used by the Evil One to tempt him from his duty by working on his natural fears and affections, and so forth.

The child watched him with her clear grey eyes, saying nothing further, till at last he grew calm and paused.

"We are all much upset," he went on, rubbing his high forehead with his thin hand. "I suppose it is the heat and this--this--trial of our faith. What did I come to speak to you about? Oh! I remember; your mother will eat nothing, and keeps asking for fruit. Do you know where there is any fruit?"

"It doesn't grow here, father." Then her face brightened, and she added: "Yes, it does, though. The day that we outspanned in this camp mother and I went down to the river and walked to that kind of island beyond the dry donga to get some flowers that grow on the wet ground. I saw lots of Cape gooseberries there, all quite ripe."

"Then go and get some, dear. You will have plenty of time before dark."

She started up as though to obey, then checked herself and said:

"Mother told me that I was not to go to the river alone, because we saw the spoor of lions and crocodiles in the mud."

"God will guard you from the lions and the crocodiles, if there are any," he answered doggedly, for was not this an opportunity to show his faith?

"You are not afraid, are you?"

"No, father. I am afraid of nothing, perhaps because I don't care what happens. I will get the basket and go at once."

In another minute she was walking quickly towards the river, a lonely little figure in that great place. Mr. Dove watched her uneasily till she was hidden in the haze, for his reason told him that this was a foolish journey.

"The Lord will send His angels to protect her," he muttered to himself.

"Oh! if only I could have more faith, all these troubles come upon me from a lack of faith, and through that I am continually tempted. I think I will run after her and go, too. No, there is Janey calling me, I cannot leave her alone. The Lord will protect her, but I need not mention to Janey that she has gone, unless she asks me outright. She will be quite safe, the storm will not break to-night."