

CHAPTER II

THE BOY

The river towards which Rachel headed, one of the mouths of the Umtavuna, was much further off than it looked; it was, indeed, not less than a mile and a half away. She had said that she feared nothing, and it was true, for extraordinary courage was one of this child's characteristics. She could scarcely ever remember having felt afraid--for herself, except sometimes of her father when he grew angry--or was it mad that he grew?--and raged at her, threatening her with punishment in another world in reward for her childish sins. Even then the sensation did not last long, because she could not believe in that punishment which he so vividly imagined. So it came about that now she had no fear when there was so much cause.

For this place was lonely; not a living creature could be seen. Moreover, a dreadful hush brooded on the face of earth, and in the sky above; only far away over the mountains the lightning flickered incessantly, as though a monster in the skies were licking their precipices and pinnacles with a thousand tongues of fire. Nothing stirred, not even an insect; every creature that drew breath had hidden itself away until the coming terror was overpast.

The atmosphere was full of electricity struggling to be free. Although she

knew not what it was, Rachel felt it in her blood and brain. In some strange way it affected her mind, opening windows there through which the eyes of her soul looked out. She became aware of some new influence drawing near to her life; of a sudden her budding womanhood burst into flower in her breast, shone on by an unseen sun; she was no more a child. Her being quickened and acknowledged the kinship of all things that are. That brooding, flame-threaded sky--she was a part of it, the earth she trod, it was a part of her; the Mind that caused the stars to roll and her to live, dwelt in her bosom, and like a babe she nestled within the arm of its almighty will.

Now, as in a dream, Rachel descended the steep, rock-strewn banks of the dry branch of the river-bed, wending her way between the boulders and noting that rotten weeds and peeled brushwood rested against the stems of the mimosa thorns which grew--there, tokens which told her that here in times of flood the water flowed. Well, there was little enough of it now, only a pool or two to form a mirror for the lightning. In front of her lay the island where grew the Cape gooseberries, or winter cherries as they are sometimes called, which she came to seek. It was a low piece of ground, a quarter of a mile long, perhaps, but in the centre of it were some great rocks and growing among the rocks, trees, one of them higher than the rest. Beyond it ran the true river, even now at the end of the dry season three or four hundred yards in breadth, though so shallow that it could be forded by an ox-drawn waggon.

It was raining on the mountains yonder, raining in torrents poured from

those inky clouds, as it had done off and on for the past twenty-four hours, and above their fire-laced bosom floated glorious-coloured masses of misty vapour, enflamed in a thousand hues by the arrows of the sinking sun. Above her, however, there was no sun, nothing but the curtain of cloud which grew gradually from grey to black and minute by minute sank nearer to the earth.

Walking through the dry river-bed, Rachel reached the island which was the last and highest of a line of similar islands that, separated from each other by narrow breadths of water, lay like a chain, between the dry donga and the river. Here she began to gather her gooseberries, picking the silvery, octagonal pods from the green stems on which they grew. At first she opened these pods, removing from each the yellow, sub-acid berry, thinking that thus her basket would hold more, but presently abandoned that plan as it took too much time. Also although the plants were plentiful enough, in that low and curious light it was not easy to see them among the dense growth of reedy vegetation.

While she was thus engaged she became aware of a low moaning noise and a stirring of the air about her which caused the leaves and grasses to quiver without bending. Then followed an ice-cold wind that grew in strength until it blew keen and hard, ruffling the surface of the marshy pools. Still Rachel went on with her task, for her basket was not more than half full, till presently the heavens above her began to mutter and to groan, and drops of rain as large as shillings fell upon her back and hands. Now she understood that it was time for her to be going, and

started to walk across the island--for at the moment she was near its farther side--to reach the deep, rocky river-bed or donga.

Before ever she came there, with awful suddenness and inconceivable fury, the tempest burst. A hurricane of wind tore down the valley to the sea, and for a few minutes the darkness became so dense that she could scarcely stumble forward. Then there was light, a dreadful light; all the heavens seemed to take fire, yes, and the earth, too; it was as though its last dread catastrophe had fallen on the world.

Buffeted, breathless, Rachel at length reached the edge of the deep river-bed that may have been fifty yards in width, and was about to step into it when she became aware of two things. The first was a seething, roaring noise so loud that it seemed to still even the bellowing of the thunder, and the next, now seen, now lost, as the lightning pulsed and darkened, the figure of a youth, a white youth, who had dismounted from a horse that remained near to but above him, and stood, a gun in his hand, upon a rock at the farther side of the donga.

He had seen her also and was shouting to her, of this she was sure, for although the sound of his voice was lost in the tumult, she could perceive his gesticulations when the lightning flared, and even the movement of his lips.

Wondering vaguely what a white boy could be doing in such a place and very glad at the prospect of his company, Rachel began to advance towards

him in short rushes whenever the lightning showed her where to set her feet. She had made two of these rushes when from the violence and character of his movements at length she understood that he was trying to prevent her from coming further, and paused confused.

Another instant and she knew why. Some hundreds of yards above her the river bed took a turn, and suddenly round this turn, crested with foam, appeared a wall of water in which trees and the carcasses of animals were whirled along like straws. The flood had come down from the mountains, and was advancing on her more swiftly than a horse could gallop. Rachel ran forward a little way, then understanding that she had no time to cross, stood bewildered, for the fearful tumult of the elements and the dreadful roaring of that advancing wall of foam overwhelmed her senses. The lightnings went out for a moment, then began to play again with tenfold frequency and force. They struck upon, the nearing torrent, they struck in the dry bed before it, and leapt upwards from the earth as though Titans and gods were hurling spears at one another.

In the lurid sheen of them she saw the lad leap from his rock and rush towards her. A flash fell and split a boulder not thirty paces from him, causing him to stagger, but he recovered himself and ran on. Now he was quite close, but the water was closer still. It was coming in tiers or ledges, a thin sheet of foam in front, then other layers laid upon it, each of them a few yards behind its fellow. On the top ledge, in its very crest, was a bull buffalo, dead, but held head on and down as though it were charging, and Rachel thought vaguely that from the direction in which

it came in a few moments its horns would strike her. Another second and an arm was about her waist--she noted how white it was where the sleeve was rolled up, dead white in the lightning--and she was being dragged towards the shore that she had left. The first film of water struck her and nearly washed her from her feet, but she was strong and active, and the touch of that arm seemed to have given her back her wit, so she regained them and splashed forward. Now the next tier took them both above the knees, but for a moment shallowed so that they did not fall. The high bank was scarce five yards away, and the wall of waters perhaps a score.

"Together for life or death!" said an English voice in her ear, and the shout of it only reached her in a whisper.

The boy and the girl leapt forward like bucks. They reached the bank and struggled up it. The hungry waters sprang at them like a living thing, grasping their feet and legs as though with hands; a stick as it whirled by them struck the lad upon the shoulder, and where it struck the clothes were rent away and red blood appeared. Almost he fell, but this time it was Rachel who supported him. Then one more struggle and they rolled exhausted on the ground just clear of the lip of the racing flood.

Thus through tempest, threatened by the waters of death from which he snatched her, and companioned by heaven's lightnings, did Richard Darrien come into the life of Rachel Dove.

Presently, having recovered their breath, they sat up and looked at each

other by lightning light, which was all there was. He was a handsome lad of about seventeen, though short for his years; sturdy in build, very fair-skinned and curiously enough with a singular resemblance to Rachel, except that his hair was a few shades darker than hers. They had the same clear grey eyes, and the same well-cut features; indeed seen together, most people would have thought them brother and sister, and remarked upon their family likeness. Rachel spoke the first.

"Who are you?" she shouted into his ear in one of the intervals of darkness, "and why did you come here?"

"My name is Richard Darrien," he answered at the top of his voice, "and I don't know why I came. I suppose something sent me to save you."

"Yes," she replied with conviction, "something sent you. If you had not come I should be dead, shouldn't I? In glory, as my father says."

"I don't know about glory, or what it is," he remarked, after thinking this saying over, "but you would have been rolling out to sea in the flood water, like that buffalo, with not a whole bone in you, which isn't my idea of glory."

"That's because your father isn't a missionary," said Rachel.

"No, he is an officer, naval officer, or at least he was, now he trades and hunts. We are coming down from Natal. But what's your name?"

"Rachel Dove."

"Well, Rachel Dove--that's very pretty, Rachel Dove, as you would be if you were cleaner--it is going to rain presently. Is there any place where we can shelter here?"

"I am as clean as you are," she answered indignantly. "The river muddied me, that's all. You can go and shelter, I will stop and let the rain wash me."

"And die of the cold or be struck by lightning. Of course I knew you weren't dirty really. Is there any, place?"

She nodded, mollified.

"I think I know one. Come," and she stretched out her hand.

He took it, and thus hand in hand they made their way to the highest point of the island where the trees grew, for here the rocks piled up together made a kind of cave in which Rachel and her mother had sat for a little while when they visited the place. As they groped their way towards it the lightning blazed out and they saw a great jagged flash strike the tallest tree and shatter it, causing some wild beast that had sheltered there to rush past them snorting.

"That doesn't look very safe," said Richard halting, "but come on, it isn't likely to hit the same spot twice."

"Hadn't you better leave your gun?" she suggested, for all this while that weapon had been slung to his back and she knew that lightning has an affinity for iron.

"Certainly not," he answered, "it is a new one which my father gave me, and I won't be parted from it."

Then they went on and reached the little cave just as the rain broke over them in earnest. As it chanced the place was dry, being so situated that all water ran away from it. They crouched in it shivering, trying to cover themselves with dead sticks and brushwood that had lodged here in the wet season when the whole island was under water.

"It would be nice enough if only we had a fire," said Rachel, her teeth chattering as she spoke.

The lad Richard thought a while. Then he opened a leather case that hung on his rifle sling and took from it a powder flask and flint and steel and some tinder. Pouring a little powder on the damp tinder, he struck the flint until at length a spark caught and fired the powder. The tinder caught also, though reluctantly, and while Rachel blew on it, he felt round for dead leaves and little sticks, some of which were coaxed into flame.

After this things were easy since fuel lay about in abundance, so that soon they had a splendid fire burning in the mouth of the cave whence the smoke escaped. Now they were able to warm and dry themselves, and as the heat entered into their chilled bodies, their spirits rose. Indeed the contrast between this snug hiding place and blazing fire of drift wood and the roaring tempest without, conduced to cheerfulness in young people who had just narrowly escaped from drowning.

"I am so hungry," said Rachel, presently.

Again Richard began to search, and this time produced from the pocket of his coat a long and thick strip of sun-dried meat.

"Can you eat biltong?" he asked.

"Of course," she answered eagerly.

"Then you must cut it up," he said, giving her the meat and his knife. "My arm hurts me, I can't."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "how selfish I am. I forgot about that stick striking you. Let me see the place."

He took off his coat and knelt down while she stood over him and examined his wound by the light of the fire, to find that the left upper arm was

bruised, torn and bleeding. As it will be remembered that Rachel had no handkerchief, she asked Richard for his, which she soaked in a pool of rain water just outside the cave. Then, having washed the hurt thoroughly, she bandaged his arm with the handkerchief and bade him put on his coat again, saying confidently that he would be well in a few days.

"You are clever," he remarked with admiration. "Who taught you to bandage wounds?"

"My father always doctors the Kaffirs and I help him," Rachel answered, as, having stretched out her hands for the pouring rain to wash them, she took the biltong and began to cut it in thin slices.

These she made him eat before she touched any herself, for she saw that the loss of blood had weakened him. Indeed her own meal was a light one, since half the strip of meat must, she declared, be put aside in case they should not be able to get off the island. Then he saw why she had made him eat first and was very angry with himself and her, but she only laughed at him and answered that she had learned from the Kaffirs that men must be fed before women as they were more important in the world.

"You mean more selfish," he answered, contemplating this wise little maid and her tiny portion of biltong, which she swallowed very slowly, perhaps to pretend that her appetite was already satisfied with its superabundance. Then he fell to imploring her to take the rest, saying that he would be able to shoot some game in the morning, but she only

shook her little head and set her lips obstinately.

"Are you a hunter?" she asked to change the subject.

"Yes," he answered with pride, "that is, almost. At any rate I have shot eland, and an elephant, but no lions yet. I was following the spoor of a lion just now, but it got up between the rocks and bolted away before I could shoot. I think that it must have been after you."

"Perhaps," said Rachel. "There are some about here; I have heard them roaring at night."

"Then," he went on, "while I was staring at you running across this island, I heard the sound of the water and saw it rushing down the donga, and saw too that you must be drowned, and--you know the rest."

"Yes, I know the rest," she said, looking at him with shining eyes. "You risked your life to save mine, and therefore," she added with quiet conviction, "it belongs to you."

He stared at her and remarked simply:

"I wish it did. This morning I wished to kill a lion with my new roer," and he pointed to the heavy gun at his side, "above everything else, but to-night I wish that your life belonged to me--above anything else."

Their eyes met, and child though she was, Rachel saw something in those of Richard that caused her to turn her head.

"Where are you going?" she asked quickly.

"Back to my father's farm in Graaf-Reinet, to sell the ivory. There are three others besides my father, two Boers and one Englishman."

"And I am going to Natal where you come from," she answered, "so I suppose that after to-night we shall never see each other again, although my life does belong to you--that is if we escape."

Just then the tempest which had lulled a little, came on again in fury, accompanied by a hurricane of wind and deluge of rain, through which the lightning blazed incessantly. The thunderclaps too were so loud and constant that the sound of them, which shook the earth, made it impossible for Richard and Rachel to hear each other speak. So they were silent perforce. Only Richard rose and looked out of the cave, then turned and beckoned to his companion. She came to him and watched, till suddenly a blinding sheet of flame lit up the whole landscape. Then she saw what he was looking at, for now nearly all the island, except that high part of it on which they stood, was under water, hidden by a brown, seething torrent, that tore past them to the sea.

"If it rises much more, we shall be drowned," he shouted in her ear.

She nodded, then cried back:

"Let us say our prayers and get ready," for it seemed to Rachel that the "glory" of which her father spoke so often was nearer to them than ever.

Then she drew him back into the cave and motioned to him to kneel beside her, which he did bashfully enough, and for a while the two children, for they were little more, remained thus with clasped hands and moving lips. Presently the thunder lessened a little so that once more they could hear each other speak.

"What did you pray about?" he asked when they had risen from their knees.

"I prayed that you might escape, and that my mother might not grieve for me too much," she answered simply. "And you?"

"I? Oh! the same--that you might escape. I did not pray for my mother as she is dead, and I forgot about father."

"Look, look!" exclaimed Rachel, pointing to the mouth of the cave.

He stared out at the darkness, and there, through the thin flames of the fire, saw two great yellow shapes which appeared to be walking up and down and glaring into the cave.

"Lions," he gasped, snatching at his gun.

"Don't shoot," she cried, "you might make them angry. Perhaps they only want to take refuge like ourselves. The fire will keep them away."

He nodded, then remembering that the charge and priming, of his flint-lock roer must be damp, hurriedly set to work by the help of Rachel to draw it with the screw on the end of his ramrod, and this done, to reload with some powder that he had already placed to dry on a flat stone near the fire. This operation took five minutes or more. When at length it was finished, and the lock reprimed with the dry powder, the two of them, Richard holding the roer, crept to the mouth of the cave and looked out again.

The great storm was passing now, and the rain grew thinner, but from time to time the lightning, no longer forked or chain-shaped, flared in wide sheets. By its ghastly illumination they saw a strange sight. There on the island top the two lions marched backwards and forwards as though they were in a cage, making a kind of whimpering noise as they went, and staring round them uneasily. Moreover, these were not alone, for gathered there were various other animals, driven down by the flood from the islands above them, reed and water bucks, and a great eland. Among these the lions walked without making the slightest effort to attack them, nor did the antelopes, which stood sniffing and staring at the torrent, take any notice of the lions, or attempt to escape.

"You are right," said Richard, "they are all frightened, and will not harm

us, unless the water rises more, and they rush into the cave. Come, make up the fire."

They did so, and sat down on its further side, watching till, as nothing happened, their dread of the lions passed away, and they began to talk again, telling to each other the stories of their lives.

Richard Darrien, it seemed, had been in Africa about five years, his father having emigrated there on the death of his mother, as he had nothing but the half-pay of a retired naval captain, and he hoped to better his fortunes in a new land. He had been granted a farm in the Graaf-Reinet district, but like many other of the early settlers, met with misfortunes. Now, to make money, he had taken to elephant-hunting, and with his partners was just returning from a very successful expedition in the coast lands of Natal, at that time an almost unexplored territory. His father had allowed Richard to accompany the party, but when they got back, added the boy with sorrow, he was to be sent for two or three years to the college at Capetown, since until then his father had not been able to afford him the luxury of an education. Afterwards he wished him to adopt a profession, but on this point he--Richard--had made up his mind, although at present he said little about that. He would be a hunter, and nothing else, until he grew too old to hunt, when he intended to take to farming.

His story done, Rachel told him hers, to which he listened eagerly.

"Is your father mad?" he asked when she had finished.

"No," she answered. "How dare you suggest it? He is only very good; much better than anybody else."

"Well, it seems to come to much the same thing, doesn't it?" said Richard, "for otherwise he would not have sent you to gather gooseberries here with such a storm coming on."

"Then why did your father send you to hunt lions with such a storm coming on?" she asked.

"He didn't send me. I came of myself; I said that I wanted to shoot a buck, and finding the spoor of a lion I followed it. The waggons must be a long way ahead now, for when I left them I returned to that kloof where I had seen the buck. I don't know how I shall overtake them again, and certainly nobody will ever think of looking for me here, as after this rain they can't spoor the horse."

"Supposing you don't find it--I mean your horse--tomorrow, what shall you do?" asked Rachel. "We haven't got any to lend you."

"Walk and try to catch them up," he replied.

"And if you can't catch them up?"

"Come back to you, as the wild Kaffirs ahead would kill me if I went on

alone."

"Oh! But what would your father think?"

"He would think there was one boy the less, that's all, and be sorry for a while. People often vanish in Africa where there are so many lions and savages."

Rachel reflected a while, then finding the subject difficult, suggested that he should find out what their own particular lions were doing. So Richard went to look, and reported that the storm had ceased, and that by the moonlight he could see no lions or any other animals, so he thought that they must have gone away somewhere. The flood waters also appeared to be running down. Comforted by this intelligence Rachel piled on the fire nearly all the wood that remained to them. Then they sat down again side by side, and tried to continue their conversation. By degrees it drooped, however, and the end of it was that presently this pair were fast asleep in each other's arms.