

CHAPTER IV

ISHMAEL

It may be doubted whether any well-born young English lady ever had a stranger bringing-up than that which fell to the lot of Rachel Dove. To begin with, she had absolutely no associates, male or female, of her own age and station, for at that period in its history such people did not exist in the country where she dwelt. Practically her only companions were her father, a religious enthusiast, and her mother, a half broken-hearted woman, who never for a single hour could forget the children she had lost, and whose constitutional mysticism increased upon her continually until at times it seemed as though she had added some new quality to her normal human nature.

Then there were the natives, amongst whom from the beginning Rachel was a sort of queen. In those first days of settlement they had never seen anybody in the least like her, no one so beautiful--for she grew up beautiful--so fearless, or so kind. The tale of that adventure of hers as a child upon the island in the midst of the flooded torrent spread all through the country with many fabulous additions. Thus the Kaffirs said that she was a "Heaven-herd," that is, a magical person who can ward off or direct the lightnings, which she was supposed to have done upon this night; also that she could walk upon the waters, for otherwise how did she escape the flood? And, lastly, that the wild beasts were her servants, for

had not the driver Tom and the natives seen the spoor of great lions right at the mouth of the cave where she and her companion sheltered, and had they not heard that she called these lions into the cave to protect her and him from the other creatures? Therefore, as has been said, they gave her a name, a very long name that meant Chieftainess, or Lady of Heaven, Inkosazana-y-Zoola; for Zulu or Zoola, which we know as the title of that people, means Heaven, and Udade-y-Silwana, or Sister of wild beasts. As these appellations proved too lengthy for general use, even among the Bantu races, who have plenty of time for talking, ultimately it was shortened to Zoola alone, so that throughout that part of South-Eastern Africa Rachel came to enjoy the lofty title of "Heaven," the first girl, probably, who was ever so called.

With all natives from her childhood up, Rachel was on the best of terms. She was never familiar with them indeed, for that is not the way for a white person to win the affection, or even the respect of a Kaffir. But she was intimate in the sense that she could enter into their thoughts and nature, a very rare gift. We whites are apt to consider ourselves the superior of such folk, whereas we are only different. In fact, taken altogether, it is quite a question whether the higher sections of the Bantu peoples are not our equals. Of course, we have learned more things, and our best men are their betters. But, on the other hand, among them there is nothing so low as the inhabitants of our slums, nor have they any vices which can surpass our vices. Is an assegai so much more savage than a shell? Is there any great gulf fixed between a Chaka and a Napoleon? At least they are not hypocrites, and they are not vulgar; that is the

privilege of civilised nations.

Well, with these folk Rachel was intimate. She could talk to the warrior of his wars, to the woman of her garden and her children to the children of that wonder world which surrounds childhood throughout the universe. And yet there was never a one of these but lifted the hand to her in salute when her shadow fell upon them. To them all she was the Inkosazana, the Great Lady. They would laugh at her father and mimic him behind his back, but Rachel they never laughed at or mimicked. Of her mother also, although she kept herself apart from them, much the same may be said. For her they had a curious name which they would not, or were unable to explain. They called her "Flower-that-grows-on-a-grave." For Mr. Dove their appellation was less poetical. It was "Shouter-about-Things-he-does-not-understand," or, more briefly, "The Shouter," a name that he had acquired from his habit of raising his voice when he grew moved in speaking to them. The things that he did not understand, it may be explained, were not to their minds his religious views, which, although they considered them remarkable, were evidently his own affair, but their private customs. Especially their family customs that he was never weary of denouncing to the bewilderment of these poor heathens, who for their part were not greatly impressed by those of the few white people with whom they came in contact. Therefore, with native politeness, they concluded that he spoke thus rudely because he did not understand. Hence his name.

But Rachel had other friends. In truth she was Nature's child, if in a

better and a purer sense than Byron uses that description. The sea, the veld, the sky, the forest and the river, these were her companions, for among them she dwelt solitary. Their denizens, too, knew her well, for unless she were driven to it, never would she lift her hand against anything that drew the breath of life. The buck would let her pass quite close to them, nor at her coming did the birds stir from off their trees. Often she stood and watched the great elephants feeding or at rest, and even dared to wander among the herds of savage buffalo. Of only two living things was she afraid--the snake and the crocodile, that are cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field, because being cursed they have no sympathy or gentleness. She feared nothing else, she who was always fearless, nor brute or bird, did they fear her.

After Rachel's adventure in the flooded river she and her parents pursued their journey by slow and tedious marches, and at length, though in those days this was strange enough, reached Natal unharmed. At first they went to live where the city of Durban now stands, which at that time had but just received its name. It was inhabited by a few rough men, who made a living by trading and hunting, and surrounded themselves with natives, refugees for the most part from the Zulu country. Amongst these people and their servants Mr. Dove commenced his labours, but ere long a bitter quarrel grew up between him and them.

These dwellers in the midst of barbarism led strange lives, and Mr. Dove, who rightly held it to be his duty to denounce wrong-doing of every sort, attacked them and their vices in no measured terms, and upon all

occasions. For long years he kept up the fight, until at length he found himself ostracised. If they could avoid it, no white men would speak to him, nor would they allow him to instruct their Kaffirs. Thus his work came to an end in Durban as it had done in other places. Now, again, his wife and daughter hoped that he would leave South Africa for good, and return home. But it was not to be, for once more he announced that it was laid upon him to follow the example of his divine Master, and that the Spirit drove him into the wilderness. So, with a few attendants, they trekked away from Durban.

On this occasion it was his wild design to settle in Zululand--where Chaka, the great king, being dead, Dingaan, his brother and murderer, ruled in his place--and there devote himself to the conversion of the Zulus. Indeed, it is probable that he would have carried out this plan had he not been prevented by an accident. One night when they were about forty miles from Durban they camped on a stream, a tributary of the Tugela River, which ran close by, and formed the boundary of the Zulu country. It was a singularly beautiful spot, for to the east of them, about a mile away, stretched the placid Indian Ocean, while to the west, overshadowing them almost, rose a towering cliff, over which the stream poured itself, looking like a line of smoke against its rocky face. They had outspanned upon a rising hillock at the foot of which this little river wound away like a silver snake till it joined the great Tugela. In its general aspect the country was like an English park, dotted here and there with timber, around which grazed or rested great elands and other buck, and amongst them a huge rhinoceros.

When the waggon had creaked to the top of the rise, for, of course, there was no road, and the Kaffirs were beginning to unyoke the hungry oxen, Rachel, who was riding with her father, sprang from her horse and ran to it to help her mother to descend. She was now a tall young woman, full of health and vigour, strong and straightly shaped. Mrs. Dove, frail, delicate, grey-haired, placed her foot upon the disselboom and hesitated, for to her the ground seemed far off, and the heels of the cattle very near.

"Jump," said Rachel in her clear, laughing voice, as she smacked the near after-ox to make it turn round, which it did obediently, for all the team knew her. "I'll catch you."

But her mother still hesitated, so thrusting her way between the ox and the front wheel Rachel stretched out her arms and lifted her bodily to the ground.

"How strong you are, my love!" said her mother, with a sort of wondering admiration and a sad little smile; "it seems strange to think that I ever carried you."

"One had need to be in this country, dear," replied Rachel cheerfully.

"Come and walk a little way, you must be stiff with sitting in that horrid waggon," and she led her quite to the top of the knoll. "There," she added, "isn't the view lovely? I never saw such a pretty place in all

Africa. And oh! look at those buck, and yes--that is a rhinoceros. I hope it won't charge us."

Mrs. Dove obeyed, gazing first at the glorious sea, then at the plain and the trees, and lastly behind her at the towering cliff steeped in shadow--for the sun was westering--down the face of which the waterfall seemed to hang like a silver rope.

As her eyes fell upon this cliff Mrs. Dove's face changed.

"I know this spot," she said in a hurried voice. "I have seen it before."

"Nonsense, mother," answered Rachel. "We have never trekked here, so how could you?"

"I can't say, love, but I have. I remember that cliff and the waterfall; yes, and those three trees, and the buck standing under them."

"One often feels like that, about having seen places, I mean, mother, but of course it is all nonsense, because it is impossible, unless one dreams of them first."

"Yes, love, unless one dreams. Well, I think that I must have dreamt. What was the dream now? Rachel weeping--Rachel weeping--my love, I think that we are going to live here, and I think--I think----"

"All right," broke in her daughter quickly, with a shade of anxiety in her voice as though she did not wish to learn what her mother thought. "I don't mind, I am sure. I don't want to go to Zululand, and see this horrid Dingaan, who is always killing people, and I am quite sure that father would never convert him, the wicked monster. It is like the Garden of Eden, isn't it, with the sea thrown in. There are all the animals, and that green tree with the fruit on it might be the Tree of Life, and--oh, my goodness, there is Adam!"

Mrs. Dove followed the line of her daughter's outstretched hand, and perceived three or four hundred yards away, as in that sparkling atmosphere it was easy to do, a white man apparently clad in skins. He was engaged in crawling up a little rise of ground with the obvious intention of shooting at some blesbuck which stood in a hollow beyond with quaggas and other animals, while behind him was a mounted Kaffir who held his master's horse.

"I see," said Mrs. Dove, mildly interested. "But he looks more like Robinson Crusoe without his umbrella. Adam did not kill the animals in the Garden, my dear."

"He must have lived on something besides forbidden apples," remarked Rachel, "unless perhaps he was a vegetarian as father wants to be. There--he has fired!"

As she spoke a cloud of smoke arose above the man, and presently the loud

report of a roer reached their ears. One of the buck rolled over and lay struggling on the ground, while the rest, together with many others at a distance, turned and galloped off this way and that, frightened by this new and terrible noise. The old rhinoceros under the tree rose snorting, sniffed the air, then thundered away up wind towards the man, its pig-like tail held straight above its back.

"Adam has spoilt our Eden; I hope the rhinoceros will catch him," said Rachel viciously. "Look, he has seen it and is running to his horse."

Rachel was right. Adam--or whatever his name might be--was running with remarkable swiftness. Reaching the horse just as the rhinoceros appeared within forty yards of him, he bounded to the saddle, and with his servant galloped off to the right. The rhinoceros came to a standstill for a few moments as though it were wondering whether it dared attack these strange creatures, then making up its mind in the negative, rushed on and vanished. When it was gone, the white man and the Kaffir, who had pulled up their horses at a distance, returned to the fallen buck, cut its throat, and lifted it on to the Kaffir's horse, then rode slowly towards the waggon.

"They are coming to call," said Rachel. "How should one receive a gentleman in skins?"

Apparently some misgivings as to the effect that might be produced by his appearance occurred to the hunter. At any rate, he looked first at the two

white women standing on the brow, and next at his own peculiar attire, which appeared to consist chiefly of the pelt of a lion, plus a very striking pair of trousers manufactured from the hide of a zebra, and halted about sixty yards away, staring at them. Rachel, whose sight was exceedingly keen, could see his face well, for the light of the setting sun fell on it, and he wore no head covering. It was a dark, handsome face of a man about thirty-five years of age, with strongly-marked features, black eyes and beard, and long black hair that fell down on to his shoulders. They gazed at each other for a while, then the man turned to his after-rider, gave him an order in a clear, strong voice, and rode away inland. The after-rider, on the contrary, directed his horse up the rise until he was within a few yards of them, then sprang to the ground and saluted.

"What is it?" asked Rachel in Zulu, a language which she now spoke perfectly.

"Inkosikaas" (that is--Lady), answered the man, "my master thinks that you may be hungry and sends you a present of this buck," and, as he spoke, he loosed the riem or hide rope by which it was fastened behind his saddle, and let the animal fall to the ground.

Rachel turned her eyes from it, for it was covered with blood, and unpleasant to look at, then replied:

"My father and my mother thank your master. How is he named, and where

does he dwell?"

"Lady, among us black people he is named Ibubesi (lion), but his white name is Hishmel."

"Hishmel, Hishmel?" said Rachel. "Oh! I know, he means Ishmael. There, mother, I told you he was something biblical, and of course Ishmael dwelt in the wilderness, didn't he, after his father had behaved so badly to poor Hagar, and was a wild man whose hand was against every man's."

"Rachel, Rachel," said her mother suppressing a little smile. "Your father would be very angry if he heard you. You should not speak lightly of holy persons."

"Well, mother, Abraham may have been a holy person, but we should think him a mean old thing nowadays, almost as mean as Sarah. You know they were most of them mean, so what is the use of pretending they were not?"

Then without waiting for an answer she asked the Kaffir again: "Where does the Inkoos Ishmael dwell?"

"In the wilderness," answered the man appropriately. "Now his kraal is yonder, two hours' ride away. It is called Mafooti," and he pointed over the top of the precipice, adding: "he is a hunter and trades with the Zulus."

"Is he Dutch?" asked Rachel, whose curiosity was excited.

The Kaffir shook his head. "No, he hates the Dutch; he is of the people of George."

"The people of George? Why, he must mean a subject of King George--an Englishman."

"Yes, yes, Lady, an Englishman, like you," and he grinned at her. "Have you any message for the Inkoos Hishmel?"

"Yes. Say to the Inkoos Ishmael or Lion-who-dwells-in-the-wilderness, hates the Dutch and wears zebra-skin trousers, that my father and my mother thank him very much for his present, and hope that his health is good. Go. That is all."

The man grinned again, suspecting a joke, for the Zulus have a sense of humour, then repeated the message word for word, trying to pronounce Ishmael as Rachel did, saluted, mounted his horse, and galloped off after his master.

"Perhaps you should have kept that Kaffir until your father came," suggested Mrs. Dove doubtfully.

"What was the good?" said Rachel. "He would only have asked Mr. Ishmael to call in order that he might find out his religious opinions, and I don't

want to see any more of the man."

"Why not, Rachel?"

"Because I don't like him, mother. I think he is worse than any of the rest down there, too bad to stop among them probably, and--" she added with conviction, "I think we shall have more of his company than we want before all is done. Oh! it is no good to say that I am prejudiced--I do, and what is more, he came into our Garden of Eden and shot the buck. I hope he will meet that rhinoceros on the way home. There!"

Although she disapproved, or tried to think that she did, of such strong opinions so strongly expressed, Mrs. Dove offered no further opposition to them. The fact was that her daughter's bodily and mental vigour overshadowed her, as they did her husband also. Indeed, it seemed curious that this girl, so powerful in body and in mind, should have sprung from such a pair, a wrong-headed, narrow-viewed saint whose right place in the world would have been in a cell in the monastery or one of the stricter orders, and a gentle, uncomplaining, high-bred woman with a mind distinguished by its affectionate and mystical nature, a mind so unusual and refined that it seemed to be, and in truth was, open to influences whereof, mercifully enough, the majority of us never feel the subtle, secret power.

Of her father there was absolutely no trace in Rachel, except a certain physical resemblance--so far as he was concerned she must have thrown back

to some earlier progenitor. Even their intellects and moral outlook were quite different. She had, it is true, something of his scholarly power; thus, notwithstanding her wild upbringing, as has been said, she could read the Greek Testament almost as well as he could, or even Homer, which she liked because the old, bloodthirsty heroes reminded her of the Zulus. He had taught her this and other knowledge, and she was an apt pupil. But there the resemblance stopped. Whereas his intelligence was narrow and enslaved by the priestly tradition, hers was wide and human. She searched and she criticised; she believed in God as he did, but she saw His purpose working in the evil as in the good. In her own thought she often compared these forces to the Day and Night, and believed both of them to be necessary to the human world. For her, savagery had virtues as well as civilisation, although it is true of the latter she knew but little.

From her mother Rachel had inherited more, for instance her grace of speech and bearing, and her intuition, or foresight. Only in her case this curious gift did not dominate her, her other forces held it in check. She felt and she knew, but feeling and knowledge did not frighten or make her weak, any more than the strength of her frame or of her spirit made her unwomanly. She accepted these things as part of her mental equipment, that was all, being aware that to her a door was opened which is shut firmly enough in the faces of most folk, but not on that account in the least afraid of looking through it as her mother was.

Thus when she saw the man called Ishmael, she knew well enough that he was destined to bring great evil upon her and hers, as when as a child she met

the boy Richard Darrien, she had known other things. But she did not, therefore, fear the man and his attendant evil. She only shrank from the first and looked through the second, onward and outward to the ultimate good which she was convinced lay at the end of everything, and meanwhile, being young and merry, she found his zebra-skin trousers very ridiculous.

Just as Rachel and her mother finished their conversation about Mr. Ishmael, Mr. Dove arrived from a little Kloof, where he had been engaged with the Kaffirs in cutting bushes to make a thorn fence round their camp as a protection against lions and hyenas. He looked older than when we last met him, and save for a fringe of white hair, which increased his monkish appearance, was quite bald. His face, too, was even thinner and more eager, and his grey eyes were more far-away than formerly; also he had grown a long white beard.

"Where did that buck come from?" he asked, looking at the dead creature.

Rachel told him the story with the result that, as her mother had expected, he was very indignant with her. It was most unkind, and indeed, un-Christian, he said, not to have asked this very courteous gentleman into the camp, as he would much have liked to converse with him. He had often reprobated her habit of judging by external, and in the veld, lion and zebra skins furnish a very suitable covering. She should remember that such were given to our first parents.

"Oh! I know, father," broke in Rachel, "when the climate grew too cold for

leaf petticoats and the rest. Now don't begin to scold me, because I must go to cook the dinner. I didn't like the look of the man; besides, he rode off. Then it wasn't my business to ask him here, but mother's, who stood staring at him and never said a single word. If you want to see him so much, you can go to call upon him to-morrow, only don't take me, please. And now will you send Tom to skin the buck?"

Mr. Dove answered that Tom was busy with the fence, and, ceasing from argument which he felt to be useless with Rachel, suggested doubtfully that he had better be his own butcher.

"No, no," she replied, "you know you hate that sort of thing, as I do. Let it be till the Kaffirs have time. We have the cold meat left for supper, and I will boil some mealies. Go and help with the fence, father while I light the fire."

Usually Rachel was the best of sleepers. So soon as she laid her head upon whatever happened to serve her for a pillow, generally a saddle, her eyes shut to open no more till daylight came. On this night, however, it was not so. She had her bed in a little flap tent which hooked on to the side of the waggon that was occupied by her parents. Here she lay wide awake for a long while, listening to the Kaffirs who, having partaken heartily of the buck, were now making themselves drunk by smoking dakka, or Indian hemp, a habit of which Mr. Dove had tried in vain to break them. At length the fire around which they sat near the thorn fence on the further side of the waggon, grew low, and their incoherent talk ended in silence,

punctuated by snores. Rachel began to dose but was awakened by the laughing cries of the hyenas quite close to her. The brutes had scented the dead buck and were wandering round the fence in hope of a midnight meal. Rachel rose, and taking the gun that lay at her side, threw a cloak over her shoulders and left the tent.

The moon was shining brightly and by its light she saw the hyenas, two of them, wolves as they are called in South Africa, long grey creatures that prowled round the thorn fence hungrily, causing the oxen that were tied to the trek tow and the horses picketed on the other side of the waggon, to low and whinny in an uneasy fashion. The hyenas saw her also, for her head rose above the rough fence, and being cowardly beasts, slunk away. She could have shot them had she chose, but did not, first because she hated killing anything unnecessarily, even a wolf, and secondly because it would have aroused the camp. So she contented herself by throwing more dry wood on to the fire, stepping over the Kaffirs, who slept like logs, in order to do so. Then, resting upon her gun like some Amazon on guard, she gazed a while at the lovely moonlit sea, and the long line of game trekking silently to their drinking place, until seeing no more of the wolves or other dangerous beasts, she turned and sought her bed again.

She was thinking of Mr. Ishmael and his zebra-skin trousers; wondering why the man should have filled her with such an unreasoning dislike. If she had disliked him at a distance of fifty paces, how she would hate him when he was near! And yet he was probably only one of those broken soldiers of fortune of whom she had met several, who took to the wilderness as a last

resource, and by degrees sank to the level of the savages among whom they lived, a person who was not worth a second thought. So she tried to put him from her mind, and by way of an antidote, since still she could not sleep, filled it with her recollections of Richard Darrien. Some years had gone by since they had met, and from that time to this she had never heard a word of him in which she could put the slightest faith. She did not even know whether he were alive or dead, only she believed that if he were dead she would be aware of it. No, she had never heard of him, and it seemed probable that she never would hear of him again. Yet she did not believe that either. Had she done so her happiness--for on the whole Rachel was a happy girl--would have departed from her, since this once seen lad never left her heart, nor had she forgotten their farewell kiss.

Reflecting thus, at length Rachel fell off to sleep and began to dream, still of Richard Darrien. It was a long dream whereof afterwards she could remember but little, but in it there were shoutings, and black faces, and the flashing of spears; also the white man Ishmael was present there. One part, however, she did remember; Richard Darrien, grown taller, changed and yet the same, leaning over her, warning her of danger to come, warning her against this man Ishmael.

She awoke suddenly to see that the light of dawn was creeping into her tent, that low, soft light which is so beautiful in Southern Africa.

Rachel was disturbed, she felt the need of action, of anything that would change the current of her thoughts. No one was about yet. What should she do? She knew; the sea was not more than a mile away, she would go down to

it and bathe, and be back before the rest of them were awake.