

## CHAPTER V

### NOIE

That a girl should set out alone to bathe through a country inhabited chiefly by wild beasts and a few wandering savages, sounds a somewhat dangerous form of amusement. So it was indeed, but Rachel cared nothing for such dangers, in fact she never even thought of them. Long ago she had discovered that the animals would not harm her if she did not harm them, except perhaps the rhinoceros, which is given to charging on sight, and that was large and could generally be discovered at a distance. As for elephants and lions, or even buffalo, her experience was that they ran away, except on rare occasions when they stood still, and stared at her. Nor was she afraid of the savages, who always treated her with the utmost respect, even if they had never seen her before. Still, in case of accidents she took her double-barrelled gun, loaded in one barrel with ball, and in the other with loopers or slugs, and awakened Tom, the driver, to tell him where she was going. The man stared at her sleepily, and murmured a remonstrance, but taking no heed of him she pulled out some thorns from the fence to make a passage, and in another minute was lost to sight in the morning mist.

Following a game path through the dew-drenched grass which grew upon the swells and valleys of the veld, and passing many small buck upon her way, in about twenty minutes, just as the light was really beginning to grow,

Rachel reached the sea. It was dead calm, and the tide chancing to be out, soon she found the very place she sought--a large, rock-bound pool where there would be no fear of sharks that never stay in such a spot, fearing lest they should be stranded. Slipping off her clothes she plunged into the cool and crystal water and began to swim round and across the pool, for at this art she was expert, diving and playing like a sea-nymph. Her bath done she dried herself with a towel she had brought, all except her long, fair hair, which she let loose for the wind to blow on, and having dressed, stood a while waiting to see the glory of the sun rising from the ocean.

Whilst she remained thus, suddenly she heard the sound of horses galloping towards her, two of them she could tell that from the hoof beats, although the low-lying mist made them invisible. A few more seconds and they emerged out of the fog. The first thing that she saw were stripes which caused her to laugh, thinking that she had mistaken zebras for horses. Then the laugh died on her lips as she recognised that the stripes were those of Mr. Ishmael's trousers. Yes, there was no doubt about it, Mr. Ishmael, wearing a rough coat instead of his lion-skin, but with the rest of his attire unchanged, was galloping down upon her furiously, leading a riderless horse. Remembering her wet and dishevelled hair, Rachel threw the towel over it, whence it hung like an old Egyptian head-dress, setting her beautiful face in a most becoming frame. Next she picked up the double-barrelled gun and cocked it, for she misdoubted her of this man's intentions. Not many modern books came her way, but she had read stories of young women who were carried off by force.

For an instance she was frightened, but as she lifted the hammer of the second barrel her constitutional courage returned.

"Let him try it," she thought to herself. "If he had come ten minutes ago it would have been awful, but now I don't care."

By this time Mr. Ishmael had arrived, and was dragging his horse to its haunches; also she saw that evidently he was much more frightened than she had been. The man's handsome face was quite white, and his lips were trembling. "Perhaps that rhinoceros is after him again, thought Rachel, then added aloud quietly:

"What is the matter?"

"Forgive me," he answered in a rich, and to Rachel's astonishment, perfectly educated voice, "forgive me for disturbing you. I am ashamed, but it is necessary. The Zulus--" and he paused.

"Well, sir," asked Rachel, "what about the Zulus?"

"A regiment of them are coming down here on the warpath. They are hunting fugitives. The fugitives, about fifty of them, passed my camp over an hour ago, and I saw the Impi following them. I rode to warn you all. They told me you were down by the sea. I came to bring you back to your waggon lest you should be cut off."

"Thank you very much," said Rachel. "But I am not afraid of the Zulus. I do not think that they will hurt me."

"Not hurt you! Not hurt you! White and beautiful as you are. Why not?"

"Oh! I don't know," she replied with a laugh, "but you see I am called Inkosazana-y-Zoola. They won't touch one with that name."

"Inkosazana-y-Zoola," he repeated astonished. "Why she is their Spirit, yes, and I remember--white like you, so they say. How did you get that name? But mount, mount! They will kill you first, and ask how you were called afterwards. Your father is much afraid."

"My mother would not be afraid; she knows," muttered Rachel to herself, as she sprang to the saddle of the led-horse.

Then, without more words, they began to gallop back towards the camp. Before they reached the crest of the second rise the sun shone out in earnest, thinning the seaward mist, although between them and the camp it still hung thick. Then suddenly in the fog-edge Rachel saw this sight: Towards them ran a delicately shaped and beautiful native girl, naked except for her moocha, and of a very light, copper-colour, whilst after her, brandishing an assegai, came a Zulu warrior. Evidently the girl was in the last stage of exhaustion; indeed she reeled over the ground, her tongue protruded from her lips and her eyes seemed to be starting from her

head.

"Come on," shouted the man called Ishmael. "It is only one of the fugitives whom they are killing."

But Rachel did nothing of the sort; she pulled up her horse and waited. The girl caught sight of her and with a wild hoarse scream, redoubled her efforts, so that her pursuer, who had been quite close, was left behind. She reached Rachel and flung her arms about her legs gasping:

"Save me, white lady, save me!"

"Shoot her if she won't leave go," shouted Ishmael, "and come on."

But Rachel only sprang from the horse and stood face to face with the advancing Zulu.

"Stand," she said, and the man stopped.

"Now," she asked, "what do you want with this woman?"

"To take her or to kill her," gasped the soldier.

"By whose order?"

"By order of Dingaan the King,"

"For what crime?"

"Witchcraft; but who are you who question me, white woman?"

"One whom you must obey," answered Rachel proudly. "Go back and leave the girl. She is mine."

The man stared at her, then laughed aloud and began to advance again.

"Go back," repeated Rachel.

He took no heed but still came on.

"Go back or die," she said for the third time.

"I shall certainly die if I go back to Dingaan without the girl," replied the soldier who was a bold-looking savage. "Now you, Noie, will you return with me or shall I kill you? Say, witch," and he lifted his assegai.

The girl sank in a heap upon the veld. "Kill," she murmured faintly, "I will not go back. I did not bewitch him to make him dream of me, and I will be Death's wife, not his; a ghost in his kraal, not a woman."

"Good," said the man, "I will carry your word to the king. Farewell, Noie," and he raised the assegai still higher, adding: "Stand aside, white

woman, for I have no order to kill you also."

By way of answer Rachel put the gun to her shoulder and pointed it at him.

"Are you mad?" shouted Ishmael. "If you touch him they will murder every one of us. Are you mad?"

"Are you a coward?" she asked quietly, without taking her eyes off the soldier. Then she said in Zulu, "Listen. The land on this side of the Tugela has been given by Dingaan to the English. Here he has no right to kill. This girl is mine, not his. Come one step nearer and you die."

"We shall soon see who will die," answered the warrior with a laugh, and he sprang forward.

They were his last words. Rachel aimed and pressed the trigger, the gun exploded heavily in the mist; the Zulu leapt into the air and fell upon his back, dead. The white man, Ishmael, rode to them, pulled up his horse and sat still, staring. It was a strange picture in that lonely, silent spot. The soldier so very still and dead, his face hidden by the shield that had fallen across it; the tall, white girl, rigid as a statue, in whose hand the gun still smoked, the delicate, fragile Kaffir maiden kneeling on the veld, and looking at her wildly as though she were a spirit, and the two horses, one with its ears pricked in curiosity, and the other already cropping grass.

"My God! What have you done?" exclaimed Ishmael.

"Justice," answered Rachel.

"Then your blood be on your own head. I am not going to stop here to have my throat cut."

"Don't," answered Rachel. "I have a better guardian than you, and will look after my own blood."

To this speech the white man seemed to be able to find no answer. Turning his horse he galloped off swearing, but not towards the camp, whereon the other horse galloped after him, and presently they all vanished in the mist, leaving the two women alone.

At this moment from the direction of the waggon they heard the sound of shouting and of screams, which appeared to come from the valley between them and it.

"The king's men are killing my people," muttered the girl Noie. "Go, or they will kill you too."

Rachel thought a moment. Evidently it was impossible to get through to the camp; indeed, even had they tried to do so on the horses they would have been cut off. An idea came to her. They stood upon the edge of a steep, bush-clothed kloof, where in the wet season a stream ran down to the sea.



This stream was now represented by a chain of deep and muddy pools, one of which pools lay directly underneath them.

"Help me to throw him into the water," said Rachel.

The girl understood, and with desperate energy they seized the dead soldier, dragged him to the edge of the little cliff and thrust him over. He fell with a heavy splash into the pool and vanished.

"Crocodiles live there," said Rachel, "I saw one as I passed. Now take the shield and spear and follow me."

She obeyed, for with hope her strength seemed, to have returned to her, and the two of them scrambled down the cliffs into the kloof. As they reached the edge of the pool they saw great snouts and a disturbance in the water. Rachel was right, crocodiles lived there.

"Now," she said, "throw your moocha on that rock. They will find it and think----"

Noie nodded and did so, rending its fastening and wetting it in the water. Then quite naked she took Rachel's hand and swiftly, swiftly, the two of them leapt from stone to stone, so as to leave no footprints, heading for the sea. Only the fugitive stopped once to drink of the fresh water, for she was perishing with thirst. Now when Rachel was bathing she had observed upon the farther side of her pool and opening out of it, as it

were, a little pocket in the rock, where the water was not more than three feet deep and covered by a dense growth of beautiful seaweed, some black and some ribbon-like and yellow. The pool was long, perhaps two hundred paces in all, and to go round it they would be obliged to expose themselves upon the sand, and thus become visible from a long way off.

"Can you swim?" said Rachel to Noie.

Again she nodded, and the two of them slipped into the water and swam across the pool till they reached the pocket-like place, on the edge of which they sat down, covering themselves with the seaweed.

They had not been there five minutes when they heard the sound of voices drawing near down the kloof, and at once slid into the water, covering themselves in it in such fashion that only their heads remained above the surface, mixed with the black and yellow seaweed, so that without close search none could have said which was hair and which was weed.

"The Zulus," said Noie, shivering so that the water shook about her, "they seek me."

"Lie still, then," answered Rachel. "I can't shoot now, the gun is wet."

The voices died away, and the two girls thought that the speakers had gone, but rendered cautious, still remained hidden in the water. It was well for them that they did so for presently they heard the voices again

and much nearer. The Zulus were walking round the pool. Two of them came quite close to their little hiding-place, and sat down on some rocks to rest, and talk. Peeping through her covering of seaweed Rachel could see them, great men who held red spears in their hands.

"You are a fool," said one of them to the other, "and have given us this walk for nothing, as though our feet were not sore enough already. The crocodiles have that Noie, her witchcraft could not save her from them; it was a baboon's spoor you saw in the mud, not a woman's."

"It would seem so, brother," answered the other, "as we found the moocha. Still, if so, where is Bomba who was running her down? And what made that blood-mark on the grass?"

"Doubtless," replied the first man, "Bomba came up with her there and wounded her, whereon being a woman and a coward, she ran from him and jumped into the pool in which the crocodiles finished her. As for Bomba, I expect that he has gone back to Zululand, or is asleep somewhere resting. The other spoor we saw was that of a white woman, who puts skins upon her feet. There is a camp of them up yonder, but you remember, our orders were not to touch any of the people of George, so we need not trouble about them."

"Well, brother, if you are sure, we had better be starting back, lest there should be trouble with the white people. Dingaan will be satisfied when we show him the moocha, and sleep in peace henceforth. She must

really have been tagati (uncanny), that little Noie, for otherwise, although it is true she was pretty, why should Dingaana who has all Zululand to choose from, have fallen in love with her, and why should she have refused to enter his house, and persuaded all her kraal to run away? For my part, I don't believe that she is dead now, notwithstanding the moocha. I think that she is a witch, and has changed into something else--a bird or a snake, perhaps. Well, the rest of them will never change into anything, except black mould. Let us see. We have killed every one; all the common people, the mother of Noie, the dwarf-wizard Seyapi her father, and her other mothers, four of them, and her brothers and sisters, twelve in all."

At these words Noie again trembled beneath her seaweed, so that the water shook all about her.

"There is a fish there," said the first Kaffir, "I saw it rise. It is a small pool, shall we try to catch it?"

"No, brother," answered the other, "only coast people eat fish. I am hungry, but I will wait for man's food. Take that, fish!" and he threw a stone into the pool which struck Rachel on the side, and caused her fair hair to float about among the yellow seaweed.

Then the two of them got up and went away, walking arm-in-arm like friends and amiable men, as they were in their own fashion.

For a long time the girls remained beneath their seaweed, fearing lest the men or others should return, until at length they could bear the cold of the water no longer, and crept out of it to the brink of the little pool, where, still wreathed in seaweed, they sat and warmed themselves in the hot sunlight. Now Noie seemed to be half dead; indeed Rachel thought that she would die.

"Awake," she said, "life is still before you."

"Would that it were behind me, Lady," moaned the poor girl. "You understand our tongue--did you not hear? My father, my own mother, my other mothers, my brothers and sisters, all killed, all killed for my sake, and I left living. Oh! you meant kindly, but why did you not let Bomba pass his spear through me? It would have been quickly over, and now I should sleep with the rest."

Rachel made no answer, for she saw that talking was useless in such a case. Only she took Noie's hand and pressed it in silent sympathy, until at length the poor girl, utterly outworn with agony and the fatigue of her long flight, fell asleep, there in the sunshine. Rachel let her sleep, knowing that she would take no harm in that warmth. Quietly she sat at her side for hour after hour while the fierce sun, from which she protected her head with seaweed, dried her garments. At length the shadows told her that midday was past, and the sea water which began to trickle over the surrounding rocks that the tide was approaching its full. They could stop there no longer unless they wished to be drowned.

"Come," she said to Noie, "the Zulus have gone, and the sea is here. We must swim to the shore and go back to my father's camp."

"What place have I in your kraal, Lady?" asked the girl when her senses had returned to her.

"I will find you a place," Rachel answered; "you are mine now."

"Yes, Lady, that is true," said Noie heavily, "I am yours and no one else's," and taking Rachel's hand she pressed it to her forehead.

Then together once more they swam the pool, and not too soon, for the tide was pouring into it. Reaching the shore in safety, no easy task for Rachel, who must hold the heavy gun above her head, Noie tied Rachel's towel about her middle to take the place of her moocha, and very cautiously they crept up the kloof, fearing lest some of the Zulus might still be lurking in the neighbourhood.

At length they came to the pool into which they had thrown the soldier Bomba, and saw two crocodiles doubtless those that had eaten him, lying asleep in the sun upon flat rocks at its edge. Here they were obliged to leave the kloof both because they feared to pass the crocodiles, and for the reason that their road to the camp ran another way. So they climbed up the cliff and looked about, but could see only a pair of oribe bucks, one lying down under a tree, and one eating grass quite close to its mate.

"The Zulus have gone or there would be no buck here," said Rachel. "Come, now, hold the shield before you and the spear in your hand, to hide that you are a woman, and let us go on boldly."

So they went till they reached the crest of the next rise, and then sprang back behind it, for lying here and there they saw people who seemed to be asleep.

"The Zulus resting!" exclaimed Rachel.

"Nay," answered the girl with a sigh. "My people, dead! See the vultures gathered round them."

Rachel looked again, and saw that it was so. Without a word they walked forward, and as they passed each body Noie gave it its name. Here lay a brother, there a sister, yonder four folk of her father's kraal. They came to a tall and handsome woman of middle age, and she shivered as she had done in the pool and said in an icy voice:

"The mother who bore me!"

A few more steps and in a patch of high grass that grew round an ant-heap, they found two Zulu soldiers, each pierced through with a spear. Seated against the ant-heap also, as though he were but resting, was a light-coloured man, a dwarf in stature, spare of frame, and with sharp

features. His dress, if he wore any, seemed to have been removed from him, for he was almost naked, and Rachel noticed that no wound could be seen on him.

"Behold my father!" said Noie in the same icy voice.

"But," whispered Rachel, "he only sleeps. No spear has touched him."

"Not so, he is dead, dead by the White Death after the fashion of his people."

Now Rachel wondered what this White Death might be, and of which people the man was one. That he was not a Zulu who had been stunted in his growth she could see for herself, nor had she ever met a native who at all resembled him. Still she could ask no questions at that time; the thing was too awful. Moreover Noie had knelt down before the body, and with her arms thrown around its neck, was whispering into its ear. For a full minute she whispered thus, then set her own ear to the cold stirless lips, and for another minute or more, seemed to listen intently, nodding her head from time to time. Never before had Rachel witnessed anything so uncanny, and oddly enough, the fact that this scene was enacted in the bright sunlight added to its terrors. She stood paralysed, forgetting the Zulus, forgetting everything except that to all appearance the living was holding converse with the dead.

At length Noie rose, and turning to her companion said:



"My Spirit has been good to me; I thank my Spirit, which brought me here before it was too late for us to talk together. Now I have the message."

"The message! Oh! what message?" gasped Rachel.

An inscrutable look gathered on the face of the beautiful native girl.

"It is to me alone," she answered, "but this I may say, much of it was of you, Inkosazana-y-Zoola."

"Who told you that was my native name?" asked Rachel, springing back.

"It was in the message, O thou before whom kings shall bow."

"Nonsense," exclaimed Rachel, "you have heard it from our people."

"So be it, Lady; I have heard it from your people whom I have never seen. Now let us go, your father is troubled for you."

Again Rachel looked at her sideways, and Noie went on:

"Lady, from henceforth I am your servant, am I not? and that service will not be light."

"She thinks I shall make her dig," thought Rachel to herself, as the girl

continued in her low, soft voice:

"Now I ask you one thing--when I tell you my story, let it be for your breast alone. Say only that I am a common girl whom you saved from the soldier."

"Why not?" answered Rachel. "That is all I have to tell."

Then once more they went on, Rachel wondering if she dreamed, the girl Noie walking at her side, stern and cold-faced as a statue.