CHAPTER VI

THE CASTING OF THE LOTS

They reached the crest of the last rise, and there, facing them on the slope of the opposite wave of land, stood the waggon, surrounded by the thorn fence, within which the cattle and horses were still enclosed, doubtless for fear of the Zulus. Nothing could be more peaceful than the aspect of that camp. To look at it no one would have believed that within a few hundred yards a hideous massacre had just taken place. Presently, however, voices began to shout, and heads to bob up over the fence. Then it occurred to Rachel that they must think she was a prisoner in the charge of a Zulu, and she told Noie to lower the shield which she still held in front of her. The next instant some thorns were torn out, and her father, a gun in his hand, appeared striding towards them.

"Thank God that you are safe," he said as they met. "I have suffered great anxiety, although I hoped that the white man Israel--no, Ishmael--had rescued you. He came here to warn us," he added in explanation, "very early this morning, then galloped off to find you. Indeed his after-rider, whose horse he took, is still here. Where on earth have you been, Rachel, and"--suddenly becoming aware of Noie, who, arrayed only in a towel, a shield, and a stabbing spear, presented a curious if an impressive spectacle--"who is this young person?"

"She is a native girl I saved from the massacre," replied Rachel, answering the last question first. "It is a long story, but I shot the man who was going to kill her, and we hid in a pool. Are you all safe, and where is mother?"

"Shot the man! Shed human blood! Hid in a pool!" ejaculated Mr. Dove, overcome. "Really, Rachel, you are a most trying daughter. Why should you go out before daybreak and do such things?"

"I don't know, I am sure, father; predestination, I suppose--to save her life, you know."

Again he contemplated the beautiful Noie, then, murmuring something about a blanket, ran back to the camp. By this time Mrs. Dove had climbed out of the waggon, and arrived with the Kaffirs.

"I knew you would be safe, Rachel," she said in her gentle voice, "because nothing can hurt you. Still you do upset your poor father dreadfully, and--what are you going to do with that naked young woman?"

"Give her something to eat, dear," answered Rachel. "Don't ask me any more questions now. We have been sitting up to our necks in water for hours, and are starved and frozen, to say nothing of worse things."

At this moment Mr. Dove arrived with a blanket, which he offered to Noie, who took it from him and threw it round her body. Then they went into the

camp, where Rachel changed her damp clothes, whilst Noie sat by her in a corner of the tent. Presently, too, food was brought, and Rachel ate hungrily, forcing Noie to do the same. Then she went out, leaving the girl to rest in the tent, and with certain omissions, such as the conduct of Noie when she found her dead father, told all the story which, wild as were the times and strange as were the things that happened in them, they found wonderful enough.

When she had done Mr. Dove knelt down and offered up thanks for his daughter's preservation through great danger, and with them prayers that she might be forgiven for having shot the Zulu, a deed that, except for the physical horror of it, did not weigh upon Rachel's mind.

"You know, father, you would have done the same yourself," she explained, "and so would mother there, if she could hold a gun, so what is the good of pretending that it is a sin? Also no one saw it except that white man and the crocodiles which buried the body, so the less we say about the matter the better it will be for all of us."

"I admit," answered Mr. Dove, "that the circumstances justified the deed, though I fear that the truth will out, since blood calls for blood. But what are we to do with the girl? They will come to seek her and kill us all."

"They will not seek, father, because they think that she is dead, and will never know otherwise unless that white man tells them, which he will

scarcely do, as the Zulus would think that he shot the soldier, not I. She has been sent to us, and it is our duty to keep her."

"I suppose so," said her father doubtfully. "Poor thing! Truly she has cause for gratitude to Providence: all her relations killed by those bloodthirsty savages, and she saved!"

"If all of you were killed and I were saved, I do not know that I should feel particularly grateful," answered Rachel. "But it is no use arguing about such things, so let us be thankful that we are not killed too. Now I am tired out, and going to lie down, for of course we can't leave this place at present, unless we trek back to Durban."

Such was the finding of Noie.

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When Rachel awoke from the sleep into which she had fallen, sunset was near at hand. She left the tent where Noie still lay slumbering or lost in stupor, to find that only her mother and Ishmael's after-rider remained in the camp, her father having gone out with the Kaffirs, in order to bury as many of the dead as possible before night came, and with it the jackals and hyenas. Rachel made up the fire and set to work with her mother's help to cook their evening meal. Whilst they were thus engaged her quick ears caught the sound of horses' hoofs, and she looked up to perceive the white man, Ishmael, still leading the spare horse on which she had ridden that

morning. He had halted on the crest of ground where she had first seen him upon the previous day, and was peering at the camp, with the object apparently of ascertaining whether its occupants were still alive.

"I will go and ask him in," said Rachel, who, for reasons of her own, wished to have a word or two with the man.

Presently she came up to him, and saw at once that he seemed to be very much ashamed of himself.

"Well," she said cheerfully, "you see here I am, safe enough, and I am glad that you are the same."

"You are a wonderful woman," he replied, letting his eyes sink before her clear gaze, "as wonderful as you are beautiful."

"No compliments, please," said Rachel, "they are out of place in this savage land."

"I beg your pardon, I could not help speaking the truth. Did they kill the girl and let you go?"

"No, I managed to hide up with her; she is here now."

"That is very dangerous, Miss Dove. I know all about it; it is she whom Dingaan was after. When he hears that you have sheltered her he will send

and kill you all. Take my advice and turn her out at once. I say it is most dangerous."

"Perhaps," answered Rachel calmly, "but all the same I shall do nothing of the sort unless she wishes to go, nor do I think that my father will either. Now please listen a minute. If this story comes to the ears of the Zulus--and I do not see why it should, as the crocodiles have eaten that soldier--who will they think shot him, I or the white man who was with me? Do you understand?"

"I understand and shall hold my tongue, for your sake."

"No, for your own. Well, by way of making the bargain fair, for my part I shall say as little as possible of how we separated this morning. Not that I blame you for riding off and leaving an obstinate young woman whom you did not know to take her chance. Still, other people might think differently."

"Yes," he answered, "they might, and I admit that I am ashamed of myself. But you don't know the Zulus as I do, and I thought that they would be all on us in a moment; also I was mad with you and lost my nerve. Really I am very sorry."

"Please don't apologise. It was quite natural, and what is more, all for the best. If we had gone on we should have ridden right into them, and perhaps never ridden out again. Now here comes my father; we have agreed

that you will not say too much about this girl, have we not?"

He nodded and advanced with her, leading the horses, for he had dismounted, to meet Mr. Dove at the opening in the fence.

"Good evening," said the clergyman, who seemed depressed after his sad task, as he motioned to one of the Kaffirs to put down his mattock and take the horses. "I don't quite know what happened this morning, but I have to thank you for trying to save my daughter from those cruel men. I have been burying their victims in a little cleft that we found, or rather some of them. The vultures you know----" and he paused.

"I didn't save her, sir," answered the stranger humbly. "It seemed hopeless, as she would not leave the Kaffir girl."

Mr. Dove looked at him searchingly, and there was a suspicion of contempt in his voice as he replied:

"You would not have had her abandon the poor thing, would you? For the rest, God saved them both, so it does not much matter exactly how, as everything has turned out for the best. Won't you come in and have some supper, Mr.--Ishmael--I am afraid I do not know the rest of your name."

"There is no more to know, Mr. Dove," he replied doggedly, then added: "Look here, sir, as I daresay you have found out, this is a rough country, and people come to it, some of them, whose luck has been rough elsewhere.

Now, perhaps I am as well born as you are, and perhaps my luck was rough in other lands, so that I chose to come and live in a place where there are no laws or civilisation. Perhaps, too, I took the name of another man who was driven into the wilderness--you will remember all about him--also that it does not seem to have been his fault. Any way, if we should be thrown up together I'll ask you to take me as I am, that is, a hunter and a trader 'in the Zulu,' and not to bother about what I have been. Whatever I was christened, my name is Ishmael now, or among the Kaffirs Ibubesi, and if you want another, let us call it Smith."

"Quite so, Mr. Ishmael. It is no affair of mine," replied Mr. Dove with a smile, for he had met people of this sort before in Africa.

But within himself already he determined that this white and perchance fallen wanderer was one whom, perhaps, it would be his duty to lead back into the paths of Christian propriety and peace.

These matters settled, they went into the little camp, and a sentry having been set, for now the night was falling fast, Ishmael was introduced to Mrs. Dove, who looked him up and down and said little, after which they began their supper. When their simple meal was finished, Ishmael lit his pipe and sat himself upon the disselboom of the waggon, looking extremely handsome and picturesque in the flare of the firelight which fell upon his dark face, long black hair and curious garments, for although he had replaced his lion-skin by an old coat, his zebra-hide trousers and waistcoat made of an otter's pelt still remained. Contemplating him,

Rachel felt sure that whatever his present and past might be, he had spoken the truth when he hinted that he was well-born. Indeed, this might be gathered from his voice and method of expressing himself when he grew more at ease, although it was true that sometimes he substituted a Zulu for an English word, and employed its idioms in his sentences, doubtless because for years he had been accustomed to speak and even to think in that language.

Now he was explaining to Mr. Dove the political and social position among that people, whose cruel laws and customs led to constant fights on the part of tribes or families, who knew that they were doomed, and their consequent massacre if caught, as had happened that day. Of course, the clergyman, who had lived for some years at Durban, knew that this was true, although, never having actually witnessed one of these dreadful events till now, he did not realise all their horror.

"I fear that my task will be even harder than I thought," he said with a sigh.

"What task?" asked Ishmael.

"That of converting the Zulus. I am trekking to the king's kraal now, and propose to settle there."

Ishmael knocked out his pipe and filled it again before he answered. Apparently he could find no words in which to express his thoughts, but

when at length these came they were vigorous enough.

"Why not trek to hell and settle there at once?" he asked, "I beg pardon, I meant heaven, for you and your likes. Man," he went on excitedly, "have you any heart? Do you care about your wife and daughter?"

"I have always imagined that I did, Mr. Ishmael," replied the missionary in a cold voice.

"Then do you wish to see their throats cut before your eyes, or," and he looked at Rachel, "worse?"

"How can you ask such questions?" said Mr. Dove, indignantly. "Of course I know that there are risks among all wild peoples, but I trust to Providence to protect us."

Mr. Ishmael puffed at his pipe and swore to himself in Zulu.

"Yes," he said, when he had recovered a little, "so I suppose did Seyapi and his people, but you have been burying them this afternoon--haven't you?--all except the girl, Noie, whom you have sheltered, for which deed Dingaan will bury you all if you go into Zululand, or rather throw you to the vultures. Don't think that your being an umfundusi, I mean a teacher, will save you. The Almighty Himself can't save you there. You will be dead and forgotten in a month. What's more, you will have to drive your own waggon in, for your Kaffirs won't, they know better. A Bible

won't turn the blade of an assegai."

"Please, Mr. Ishmael, please do not speak so--so irreligiously," said Mr. Dove in an irritated but nervous voice. "You do not seem to understand that I have a mission to perform, and if that should involve martyrdom----"

"Oh! bother martyrdom, which is what you are after, no doubt, 'casting down your golden crown upon a crystal sea,' and the rest of it--I remember the stuff. The question is, do you wish to murder your wife and daughter, for that's the plain English of it?"

"Of course not. How can you suggest such a thing?"

"Then you had better not cross the Tugela. Go back to Durban, or stop where you are at least, for, unless he finds out anything, Dingaan is not likely to interfere with a white man on this side of the river."

"That would involve abandoning my most cherished ambition, and impulses that--but I will not speak to you of things which perhaps you might not understand."

"I dare say I shouldn't, but I do understand what it feels like to have your neck twisted out of joint. Look here, sir, if you want to go into Zululand, you should go alone; it is no place for white ladies."

"That is for them to judge, sir," answered Mr. Dove. "I believe that their faith will be equal to this trial," and he looked at his wife almost imploringly.

For once, however, she failed him.

"My dear John," she said, "if you want my opinion, I think that this gentleman is quite right. For myself I don't care much, but it can never have been intended that we should absolutely throw away our lives. I have always given way to you, and followed you to many strange places without grumbling, although, as you know, we might be quite comfortable at home, or at any rate in some civilised town. Now I say that I think you ought not to go to Zululand, especially as there is Rachel to think of."

"Oh! don't trouble about me," interrupted that young lady, with a shrug of her shoulders. "I can take my chance as I have often done before--to-day, for instance."

"But I do trouble about you, my dear, although it is true I don't believe that you will be killed; you know I have always said so. Still I do trouble, and John--John," she added in a kind of pitiful cry, "can't you see that you have worn me out? Can't you understand that I am getting old and weak? Is there nobody to whom you have a duty as well as to the heathen? Are there not enough heathen here?" she went on with gathering passion. "If you must mix with them, do what this gentleman says, and stop here, that is, if you won't go back. Build a house and let us have a

little peace before we die, for death will come soon enough, and terribly enough, I am sure," and she burst into a fit of weeping.

"My dear," said Mr. Dove, "you are upset; the unhappy occurrences of to-day, which--did we but know it--are doubtless all for the best, and your anxiety for Rachel have been too much for you. I think that you had better go to bed, and you too, Rachel. I will talk the matter over further with Mr. Ishmael, who, perhaps, has been sent to guide me. I am not unreasonable, as you think, and if he can convince me that there is any risk to your lives--for my own I care nothing--I will consider the suggestion of building a mission-station outside Zululand, at any rate for a few years. It may be that it is not intended that we should enter that country at present."

So Mrs. Dove and her daughter went, but for two hours or more Rachel heard her father and the hunter talking earnestly, and wondered in a sleepy fashion to what conclusion he had come. Personally she did not mind much on which side of the Tugela they were to live, if they must bide at all in the region of that river. Still, for her mother's sake she determined that if she could bring it about, they should stay where they were. Indeed there was no choice between this and returning to England, as her father had quarrelled too bitterly with the white men at Durban to allow of his taking up his residence among them again.

When Rachel woke on the following morning the first thing she saw in the growing light was the orphaned native Noie, seated on the further side of

the little tent, her head resting upon her hand, and gazing at her vacantly. Rachel watched her a while, pretending to be still asleep, and for the first time understood how beautiful this girl was in her own fashion. Although small, that is in comparison with most Kaffir women, she was perfectly shaped and developed. Her soft skin in that light looked almost white, although it had about it nothing of the muddy colour of the half-breed; her hair was long, black and curly, and worn naturally, not forced into artificial shapes as is common among the Kaffirs. Her features were finely cut and intellectual, and her eyes, shaded by long lashes, somewhat oblong in shape, of a brown colour, and soft as those of a buck. Certainly for a native she was lovely, and what is more, quite unlike any Bantu that Rachel had ever seen, except indeed that dead man whom she said was her father, and who, although he was so small, had managed to kill two great Zulu warriors before, mysteriously enough, he died himself.

"Noie," said Rachel, when she had completed her observations, whereon with a quick and agile movement the girl rose, sank again on her knees beside her, took the hand that hung from the bed between her own, and pressed it to her lips, saying in the soft Zulu tongue,

"Inkosazana, I am here."

"Is that white man still asleep, Noie?"

"Nay, he has gone. He and his servant rode away before the light, fearing lest there might still be Zulus between him and his kraal."

"Do you know anything about him, Noie?"

"Yes, Lady, I have seen him in Zululand. He is a bad man. They call him there 'Lion,' not because he is brave, but because he hunts and springs by night."

"Just what I should have thought of him," answered Rachel, "and we know that he is not brave," she added with a smile. "But never mind this jackal in a lion's hide; tell me your story, Noie, if you will, only speak low, for this tent is thin."

"Lady," said the girl, "you who were born white in body and in spirit, hear me. I am but half a Zulu. My father who died yesterday in the flesh, departing back to the world of ghosts, was of another people who live far to the north, a small people but a strong. They live among the trees, they worship trees; they die when their tree dies; they are dealers in dreams; they are the companions of ghosts, little men before whom the tribes tremble; who hate the sun, and dwell in the deep of the forest. Myself I do not know them; I have never seen them, but my father told me these things, and others that I may not repeat. When he was a young man my father fled from his people."

"Why?" asked Rachel, for the girl paused.

"Lady, I do not know; I think it was because he would have been their

priest, or one of their priests, and he feared I think that he had seen a woman, a slave to them, whom therefore he might not marry. I think that woman was my mother. So he fled from them--with her, and came to live among the Zulus. He was a great doctor there in Chaka's time, not one of the Abangomas, not one of the 'Smellers-out-of-witches,' not a 'Bringer-down-to-death,' for like all his race he hated bloodshed. No, none of these things, but a doctor of medicines, a master of magic, an interpreter of dreams, a lord of wisdom; yes, it was his wisdom that made Chaka great, and when he withdrew it from him because of his cruelties, then Chaka died.

"Lady, Dingaan rules in Chaka's place, Dingaan who slew him, but although he had been Chaka's doctor, my father was spared because they feared him. I was the only child of my mother, but he took other wives after the Zulu fashion, not because he loved them, I think, but that he might not seem different to other men. So he grew great and rich, and lived in peace because they feared him. Lady, my father loved me, and to me alone he taught his language and his wisdom. I helped him with his medicines; I interpreted the dreams which he could not interpret, his blanket fell upon me. Often I was sought in marriage, but I did not wish to marry, Wisdom is my husband.

"There came an evil day; we knew that it must come, my father and I, and I wished to fly the land, but he could not do so because of his other wives and children. The maidens of my district were marshalled for the king to see. His eye fell upon me, and he thought me fair because I am different

from Zulu women, and--you can guess. Yet I was saved, for the other doctors and the head wives of the king said that it was not wise that I should be taken into his house, I who knew too many secrets and could bewitch him if I willed, or prison him with drugs that leave no trace. So I escaped a while and was thankful. Now it came about that because he might not take me Dingaan began to think much of me, and to dream of me at nights. At last he asked me of my father, as a gift, not as a right, for so he thought that no ill would come with me. But I prayed my father to keep me from Dingaan, for I hated Dingaan, and told him that if I were sent to the king, I would poison him. My father listened to me because he loved me and could not bear to part with me, and said Dingaan nay. Now Dingaan grew very angry and asked counsel of his other doctors, but they would give him none because they feared my father. Then he asked counsel of that white man, Hishmel, who is called the Lion, and who is much at the kraal of Umgungundhlovu."

"Ah!" said Rachel, "now I understand why he wished you to be killed."

"The white man, Hishmel, the jackal in a lion's skin, as you named him, laughed at Dingaan's fears. He said to him, 'It is of the father, Seyapi, you should be afraid. He has the magic, not the girl. Kill the father, and his house, and take the daughter whom your heart desires, and be happy.'

"So spoke Hishmel, and Dingaan thought his counsel good, and paid him for it with the teeth of elephants, and certain women for whom he asked. Now my father foreboded ill, and I also, for both of us had dreamed a dream.

Still we did not fly until the slayers were almost at the gates, because of his other wives and his children. Nor, save for them would he have fled then, or I either, but would have died after the fashion of his people, as he did at last."

"The White Death?" queried Rachel.

"Yes, Lady, the White Death. Still in the end we fled, thinking to gain the protection of the white men down yonder. I went first to escape the king's men who had orders to take me alive and bring me to him, that is why we were not together at the end. Lady, you know the rest. Hishmel doubtless had seen you, and thinking that the Impi would kill you, came to warn you. Then we met just as I was about to die, though perhaps not by that soldier's spear, as you thought. I have spoken."

"What message came to you when you knelt down before your dead father?" asked Rachel for the second time, since on this point she was intensely curious.

Again that inscrutable look gathered on the girl's face, and she answered.

"Did I not tell you it was for my ear alone, O Inkosazana-y-Zoola? I dare not say it, be satisfied. But this I may say. Your fate and mine are intertwined; yours and mine and another's, for our spirits are sisters which have dwelt together in past days."

"Indeed," said Rachel smiling, for she who had mixed with them from her childhood knew something of the mysticism of the natives, also that it was often nonsense. "Well, Noie, I love you, I know not why. Perhaps, for all you have suffered. Yet I say to you that if you wish to remain my sister in the spirit, you had better separate from me in the flesh. That jackal man knows your secret, girl, and soon or late will loose the assegai on you."

"Doubtless," she answered, "doubtless many things will come about. But they are doomed to come about. Whether I go or whether I stay they will happen. Say you therefore, Lady, and I will obey. Shall I go or shall I stay, or shall I die before your eyes?"

"It is on your own head," answered Rachel shrugging her shoulders.

"Nay, nay, Lady, you forget, it is on yours also, seeing that if I stay I may bring peril on you and your house. Have you then no order for me?"

"Noie, I have answered--one. Judge you."

"I will not judge. Let Heaven-above judge. Lady, give me a hair from your head."

Rachel plucked out the hair and handed it, a shining thread of gold, to Noie who drew one from her own dark tresses, and laid them side by side.

"See," she said, "they are of the same length. Now, without the wind blows gently; come then to the door of the tent, and I will throw these two hairs into the wind. If that which is black floats first to the ground, then I stay, if that which is golden, then I go to seek my hair. Is it agreed?"

"It is agreed."

So the two girls went to the entrance of the tent, and Noie with a swift motion tossed up the hairs. As it happened one of those little eddies of wind which are common in South Africa, caught them, causing them to rise almost perpendicularly into the air. At a certain height, about forty feet, the supporting wind seemed to fail, that is so far as the hair from Noie's head was concerned, for there it floated high above them like a black thread in the sunlight, and gently by slow degrees came to the earth just at their feet. But the hair from Rachel's head, being caught by the fringe of the whirlwind, was borne upwards and onwards very swiftly, until at length it vanished from their sight.

"It seems that I stay," said Noie.

"Yes," answered Rachel. "I am very glad; also if any evil comes of it we are not to blame, the wind is to blame."

"Yes, Lady, but what makes the wind to blow?"

Again Rachel shrugged her shoulders, and asked a question in her turn.

"Whither has that hair of mine been borne, Noie?"

"I do not know, Lady. Perhaps my father's spirit took it for his own ends. I think so. I think it went northwards. At any rate when mine fell, it was snatched away, was it not? And yet they both floated up together. I think that one day you will follow that hair of yours, Lady, follow it to the land where great trees whisper secrets to the night."