

CHAPTER VIII

MR. DOVE VISITS ISHMAEL

When Rachel and Noie reached the house, which they did not do for some time, as they waited to make sure that Ishmael had really gone, it was to see the man himself riding away from its gate.

"Be prepared," said Noie; "I think that he has been here before us to pour poison into your father's ears."

So it proved to be, indeed, for on the stoep or verandah they found Mr. Dove walking up and down evidently much disturbed in mind.

"What is all this trouble, Rachel?" he asked. "What have you done to Mr. Smith"--for Mr. Dove in pursuance of the suggestion made by the man, had adopted that name for him which he considered less peculiar than Ishmael. "He has been here much upset, declaring that you have used him cruelly, and that Nonha threatened him with terrible things in the future, of which, of course, she can know nothing."

"Well, father, if you wish to hear," answered Rachel, "Mr. Ishmael, or Mr. Smith as you call him, has been asking me to marry him, and when I refused, as of course I did, behaved very unpleasantly."

"Indeed, Rachel. I gathered from him that something of the sort had happened, only his story is that it was you who behaved unpleasantly, speaking to him as though he were dirt. Now, Rachel, of course I do not want you to marry this person, in fact, I should dislike it, although I have seen a great change for the better in him lately--I mean spiritually, of course--and an earnest repentance for the errors of his past life. All I mean is that the proffered affection of an honest man should not be met with scorn and sharp words."

Up to this point Rachel endured the lecture in silence, but now she could bear no more.

"Honest man!" she exclaimed. "Father, are you deaf and blind, or only so good yourself that you cannot see evil in others? Do you know that it was this 'honest man' who brought about the murder of all Noie's people in order that he might curry favour with the Zulus?"

Mr. Dove started, and turning, asked:

"Is that so, Nonha?"

"It is so, Teacher," answered Noie, "although I have never spoken of it to you. Afterwards I will tell you the story, if you wish."

"And do you know," went on Rachel, "why he will never let you visit his kraal among the hills yonder? Well, I will tell you. It is because this

'honest man,' who wishes me to marry him, keeps his Kaffir wives and children there!"

"Rachel!" replied her father, in much distress, "I will never believe it; you are only repeating native scandal. Why, he has often spoken to me with horror of such things."

"I daresay he has, father. Well, now, I ask you to judge for yourself. Take a guide and start two hours before daybreak to-morrow morning to visit that kraal, and see if what I say is not true."

"I will, indeed," exclaimed Mr. Dove, who was now thoroughly aroused, for it was conduct of this sort that had caused his bitter quarrel with the first settlers in Natal. "I cannot believe the story, Rachel, I really cannot; but I promise you that if I should find cause to do so, the man shall never put foot in my house again."

"Then I think that I am rid of him," said Rachel, with a sigh of relief, "only be careful, dear, that he does not do you a mischief, for such men do not like to be found out." Then she left the stoep, and went to tell her mother all that had happened.

When she had heard the story, Mrs. Dove, who detested Ishmael as much as her daughter did, tried to persuade her husband not to visit his kraal, saying that it would only breed a feud, and that under the circumstances, it would be easy to forbid him the house upon other grounds. But Mr. Dove,

obstinate as usual, refused to listen to her, saying that he would not judge the man without evidence, and that of the natives could not be relied on. Also, if the tale were true, it was his duty as his spiritual adviser to remonstrate with him.

So his poor wife gave up arguing, as she always did, and long before dawn on the following morning, Mr. Dove, accompanied by two guides, departed upon his errand.

After he had ridden some twelve miles across the plain which lay behind Ramah, just at daybreak, he reached a pass or nek between two swelling hills, beyond which the guides said lay the kraal that was called Mafoti. Presently he saw it, a place situated in a cup-like valley, chosen evidently because the approaches to it were easy to defend. On a knoll in the centre of this rich valley stood the kraal, a small native town surrounded by walls, and stone enclosures full of cattle. As they approached the kraal, from its main entrance issued four or five good-looking native women, one of them accompanied by a boy, and all carrying hoes in their hands, for they were going out at sunrise to work in the mealie fields. When they saw Mr. Dove they stood still, staring at him, till he called to them not to be afraid, and riding up, asked them who they were.

"We are of the number of the wives of Ibubesi, the Lion," answered their spokeswoman, who held the little boy by the hand.

"Do you mean the Umlungu (that is, the white man), Ishmael?" he asked again.

"Whom else should we mean?" she answered. "I am his head wife, now that he has put away old Mami, and this is his son. If the light were stronger you would see that he is almost white," she added, with pride.

Mr. Dove knew not what to answer; this intelligence overwhelmed him, and he sat silent on his horse. The wives of Ishmael prepared to pass on to the mealie fields, then stopped, and began to whisper together. At length the mother of the boy turned and addressed him, while the others crowded behind her to listen.

"We desire to ask you a question, Teacher," she said, somewhat shyly, for evidently they knew well enough who he was. "Is it true that we are to have a new sister?"

"A new sister! What do you mean?" asked Mr. Dove.

"We mean, Teacher," she replied smiling, "that we have heard that Ibubesi is courting the beautiful Zoola, the daughter of your head wife, and we thought that perhaps you had come to arrange about the cattle that he must pay for her. Doubtless if she is so fair, it will be a whole herd."

This was too much, even for Mr. Dove.

"How dare you talk so, you heathen hussies?" he gasped. "Where is the white man?"

"Teacher," she replied with indignation, and drawing herself up, "why do you call us bad names? We are respectable women, the wives of one husband, as respectable as your own, although not so numerous, or so we hear from Ibubesi. If you desire to see him, he is in the big hut, yonder, with our youngest sister, she whom he married last month. We wish you good day, as we go to hoe our lord's fields, and we hope that when she comes, the Inkosazana, your daughter, will not be as rude as you are, for if so, how shall we love her as we wish to do?" Then wrapping her blanket round her with a dignified air, the offended lady stalked off, followed by her various "sisters."

As for Mr. Dove, who for once in his life was in a towering rage, he cut his horse viciously with the sjambok, or hippopotamus-hide whip, which he carried, and followed by his guides, galloped forward to a big hut in the centre of the kraal.

Apparently Ishmael heard the sound of his horse's hoofs, for as the missionary was dismounting he crawled out of the bee-hole of the hut upon his hands and knees, as a Kaffir does, followed by a young woman in the lightest of attire, who was yawning as though she had just been aroused from sleep. What is more, except for the colour of his skin, he was a Kaffir and nothing else, for his costume consisted of a skin moocha such as the natives wear, and a fur kaross thrown over his shoulders.

Straightening himself, Ishmael saw for the first time who was his visitor. His jaw dropped, and he uttered an ejaculation that need not be recorded, then stood silent. Mr. Dove was silent also; for his wrath would not allow him to speak.

"How do you do, sir?" Ishmael jerked out at last. "You are an early visitor, and find me somewhat unprepared. If I had known that you were coming I would"--then suddenly he remembered his attire, or the lack of it, also his companion who was leaning on his shoulder, and peeping at the white man over it. Drawing the kaross tightly about him, he gave the poor girl a backward kick, and with a Kaffir oath bade her begone, then went on hurriedly: "I am afraid my dress is not quite what you are accustomed to, but among these poor heathens I find it necessary to conform more or less to their ways in order to gain their confidence and--um--affection. Will you come into the hut? My servant there will get you some tywala (Kaffir beer)--I mean some amasi (curdled milk) at once, and I will have a calf killed for breakfast."

Mr. Dove could bear it no longer.

"Ishmael, or Smith, or Ibubesi--whichever name you may prefer," he broke out, "do not lie to me about your servant, for now I know all the truth, which I refused to believe when my daughter and Nonha told it me. You are a black-hearted villain. But yesterday you dared to come and ask Rachel to marry you, and now I find that you are living--oh! I cannot say it, it makes me ashamed of my race. Listen to me, sir. If ever you dare to set

foot in Ramah again, or to speak to my wife and daughter, the Kaffirs shall whip you off the place. Indeed," he added, shaking his sjambok in Ishmael's face, "although I am an older man than you are, were it not for my office I would give you the thrashing you deserve."

At first Ishmael had shrunk beneath this torrent of invective, but the threat of violence roused his fierce nature. His face grew evil, and his long black hair and beard bristled with wrath.

"You had best get out of this, you prayer-snuffling old humbug," he said savagely, "for if you stop much longer I will make you sing another tune. We have sea-cow whips here, too, and you shall learn what a hiding means, such a hiding that your own family won't know you, if you live to get back to them. Look here, I offered to marry your daughter on the square, and I meant what I said. I'd have got rid of all this black baggage, and she should have been the only one. Well, I'll marry her yet, only now she'll just take her place with the others. We are all one flesh and blood, black and white, ain't we? I have often heard you preach it. So what will she have to complain of?" he sneered. "She can go and hoe mealies like the rest."

As this brutal talk fell upon his ears Mr. Dove's reason departed from him entirely. After all, he was an English gentleman first, and a clergyman afterwards; also he loved his daughter, and to hear her spoken of like this was intolerable to him, as it would have been to any father. Lifting the sjambok he cut Ishmael across the mouth so sharply that the blood came

from his lips, then suddenly remembering that this deed would probably mean his death, stood still awaiting the issue. As it chanced it did not, for the man, like most brutes and bullies, was a coward, as Rachel had already found out. Obeying his first impulse he sprang at the clergyman with an oath, then seeing that his two guides, who carried assegais, had ranged themselves beside him, checked himself, for he feared lest those spears should pierce his heart.

"You are in my house," he said, wiping the blood from his beard, "and an old man, so I can't kill you as I would anyone else. But you have made me your enemy now, you fool, and others can. I have protected you so far for your daughter's sake, but I won't do it any longer. You think of that when your time comes."

"My time, like yours, will come when God wills," answered Mr. Dove unflinchingly, "not when you or anyone else wills. I do not fear you in the least. Still, I am sorry that I struck you, it was a sin of which I repent as I pray that you may repent."

Then he mounted his horse and rode away from the kraal Mafooti.

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When Mr. Dove reached Ramah he only said to Rachel that what she had heard was quite true, and that he had forbidden Ishmael the house. Of course, however, Noie soon learnt the whole story from the Kaffir guides, and

repeated it to her mistress. To his wife, on the other hand, he told everything, with the result that she was very much disturbed. She pointed out to him that this white outcast was a most dangerous man, who would certainly be revenged upon them in one way or another. Again she implored him, as she had often done before, to leave these savage countries wherein he had laboured for all the best years of his life, saying that it was not right that he should expose their daughter to the risks of them.

"But," answered her husband, "you have often told me that you were sure no harm would come to Rachel, and I think that, too."

"Yes, dear, I am sure; still, for many reasons it does not seem right to keep her here." She did not add, poor, unselfish woman, that there was another who should be considered as well as Rachel.

"How can I go away," he went on excitedly, "just when all the seed that I have sown is ripening to harvest? If I did so, my work would be utterly lost, and my people relapse into barbarism again. I am not afraid of this man, or of anything that he can do to my body, but if I ran away from him it would be injuring my soul, and what account should I give of my cowardice when my time comes? Do you go, my love, and take Rachel with you if you wish, leaving me to finish my work alone."

But now, as before, Mrs. Dove would not go, and Rachel, when she was asked, shrugged her shoulders and answered laughing that she was not afraid of anybody or anything, and, except for her mother's sake, did not

care whether she went or stayed. Certainly she would not leave her, nor, she added, did she wish to say goodbye to Africa.

When she was asked why, she replied vaguely that she had grown up there, and it was her home. But her mother, watching her, knew well enough that she had another reason, although no word of it every passed her lips. In Africa she had met Richard Darrien as a child, and in Africa and nowhere else she believed she would meet him again as a woman.

The weeks and months went by, bringing to the Ramah household no sight or tidings of the white man, Ishmael. They heard through the Kaffirs, indeed, that although he still kept his kraal at Mafooti, he himself had gone away on some trading journey far to the north, and did not expect to return for a year, news at which everyone rejoiced, except Noie, who shook her wise little head and said nothing.

So all fear of the man gradually died away, and things were very peaceful and prosperous at Ramah.

In fact this quiet proved to be but the lull before the storm.

One day, about eight months after Mr. Dove had visited the kraal Mafooti, another embassy came to Rachel from the Zulu king, Dingaan, bringing with it a present of more white cattle. She received them as she had done before, at night and alone, for they refused to speak to her in the presence of other people.

In substance their petition was the same that it had been before, namely, that she would visit Zululand, as the king and his indunas desired her counsel upon an important matter. When asked what this matter was they either were, or pretended to be, ignorant, saying that it had not been confided to them. Thereon she said that if Dingaan chose to submit the question to her by messenger, she would give him her opinion on it, but that she could not come to his kraal. They asked why, seeing that the whole nation would guard her, and no hair of her head be harmed.

"Because I am a child in the house of my people, and they will not allow me to leave even for a day," she answered, thinking that this reply would appeal to a race who believe absolutely in obedience to parents and every established authority.

"Is it so?" remarked the old induna who spoke as Dingaan's Mouth--not Mopo, but another. "Now, how can the Inkosazana-y-Zoola, before whom a whole nation will bow, be in bonds to a white Umfundusi, a mere sky-doctor? Shall the wide heavens obey a cloud?"

"If they are bred of that cloud," retorted Rachel.

"The heavens breed the cloud, not the cloud the heavens," answered the induna aptly.

Now it occurred to Rachel that this thing was going further than it

should. To be set up as a kind of guardian spirit to the Zulus had seemed a very good joke, and naturally appealed to the love of power which is common to women. But when it involved, at any rate in the eyes of that people, dominion over her own parents, the joke was, she felt, becoming serious. So she determined suddenly to bring it to an end.

"What mean you, Messenger of the King?" she asked. "I am but the child of my parents, and the parents are greater than the child, and must be obeyed of her."

"Inkosazana," answered the old man with a deprecatory smile, "if it pleases you to tell us such tales, our ears must listen, as if it pleased you to order us to be killed, we must be killed. But learn that we know the truth. We know how as a child you came down from above in the lightning, and how these white people with whom you dwell found you lying in the mist on the mountain top, and took you to their home in place of a babe whom they had buried."

"Who told you that story?" asked Rachel amazed.

"It was revealed to the council of the doctors, Lady."

"Then that was revealed which is not true. I was born as other women are, and my name of 'Lady of the Heavens' came to me by chance, as by chance I resemble the Spirit of your people."

"We hear you," answered the "Mouth" politely. "You were born as other women are, by chance you had your high name, by chance you are tall and fair and golden-haired like the Spirit of our people. We hear you."

Then Rachel gave it up.

"Bear my words to the King," she said, and they rose, saluted her with a Bayète, that royal salute which never before had been given to woman, and departed.

When they had gone Rachel went into supper and told her parents all the story. Mr. Dove, now that she seemed to take a serious view of the matter, affected to treat it as absurd, although when she had laughed, his attitude, it may be remembered, was different. He talked of the silly Zulu superstitions, showed how they had twisted up the story of the death of her baby brother, and her escape from the flood in the Umtavuna river, into that which they had narrated to her. He even suggested that the whole thing was nonsense, part of some political move to enable the King, or a party in the state, to declare that they had with them the word of their traditional spirit and oracle.

Mrs. Dove, however, who that night was strangely depressed and uneasy, thought far otherwise. She pointed out that they were playing with vast and cruel forces, and that whatever these people exactly believed about Rachel, it was a dreadful thing for a girl to be put in a position in which the lives of hundreds might hang upon her nod.

"Yes, and," she added hysterically, "perhaps our own lives also--perhaps our own lives also!"

To change the conversation, which was growing painful, Rachel asked if anyone had seen Noie. Her father answered that two hours ago, just before the embassy arrived, he had met her going down to the banks of the stream, as he supposed, to gather flowers for the table. Then he began to talk about the girl, saying what a sweet creature she was, and how strange it seemed to him that although she appeared to accept all the doctrines of the Christian faith, as yet she had never consented to be baptised.

It was while he was speaking thus that Rachel suddenly observed her mother fall forward, so that her body rested on the table, as though a kind of fit had seized her. Rachel sprang towards her, but before she reached her she appeared to have quite recovered, only her face looked very white.

"What on earth is the matter, mother?"

"Oh! don't ask me," she answered, "a terrible thing, a sort of fancy that came to me from talking about those Zulus. I thought I saw this place all red with blood and tongues of fire licking it up. It went as quickly as it came, and of course I know that it is nonsense."