

## CHAPTER IX

### THE TAKING OF NOIE

Presently Mrs. Dove, who seemed to have quite recovered from, her curious seizure, went to bed.

"I don't like it, father," said Rachel when the door had closed behind her. "Of course it is contrary to experience and all that, but I believe that mother is fore-sighted."

"Nonsense, dear, nonsense," said her father. "It is her Scotch superstition, that is all. We have been married for five-and-twenty years now, and I have heard this sort of thing again and again, but although we have lived in wild places where anything might happen to us, nothing out of the way ever has happened; in fact, we have always been most mercifully preserved."

"That's true, father, still I am not sure; perhaps because I am rather that way myself, sometimes. Thus I know that she is right about me; no harm will happen to me, at least no permanent harm. I feel that I shall live out my life, as I feel something else."

"What else, Rachel?"

"Do you remember the lad, Richard Darrien?" she asked, colouring a little.

"What? The boy who was with you that night on the island? Yes, I remember him, although I have not thought of him for years."

"Well, I feel that I shall see him again."

Mr. Dove laughed. "Is that all?" he said. "If he is still alive and in Africa, it wouldn't be very wonderful if you did, would it? And at any rate, of course, you will one day when we all cease to be alive. Really," he added with irritation, "there are enough bothers in life without rubbish of this kind, which comes from living among savages and absorbing their ideas. I am beginning to think that I shall have to give way and leave Africa, though it will break my heart just when, after all the striving, my efforts are being crowned with success."

"I have always told you, father, that I don't want to leave Africa, still, there is mother to be considered. Her health is not what it was."

"Well," he said impatiently, "I will talk to her and weigh the thing. Perhaps I shall receive guidance, though for my part I cannot see what it matters. We've got to die some time, and if necessary I prefer that it should be while doing my duty. 'Take no thought for the morrow, sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,' has always been my motto, who am content with what it pleases Providence to send me."

Then Rachel, seeing no use in continuing the conversation, bade him good-night, and went to look for Noie, only to discover that she was not in the house. This disturbed her very much, although it occurred to her that she might possibly be with friends in the village, hiding till she was sure the Zulu embassy had gone. So she went to bed without troubling her father.

At daybreak next morning she rose, not having slept very well, and went out to look for the girl, without success, for no one had heard or seen anything of her. As she was returning to the house, however, she met a solitary Zulu, a dignified middle-aged man, whom she thought she recognised as one of the embassy, although of this she could not be sure, as she had only seen these people in the moonlight. The man, who was quite unarmed, except for a kerry which he carried, crouched down on catching sight of her in token of respect. As she approached he rose, and gave her the royal salute. Then she was sure.

"Speak," she said.

"Inkosazana," he answered humbly, "be not angry with me, I am Tamboosa, one of the King's indunas. You saw me with the others last night."

"I saw you."

"Inkosazana, there has been dwelling with you one Noie, the daughter of Seyapi the wizard, who with all his house was slain at this place by order

of the King. She also should have been slain, but we have learned that you called down lightning from Heaven, and that with it you slew the soldier who had run her down, slew him and burned him up, as you had the right to do, and took the girl to be your slave, as you had the right to do."

"Speak on," said Rachel, showing none of the surprise which she felt.

"Inkosazana, we know that you have come to love this girl. Therefore, yesterday before we spoke with you we seized her as we were commanded, and hid her away, awaiting your answer to our message. Had you consented to visit the King at his Great Place, we would have let her go. But as you did not consent my companions have taken her to the King."

"An ill deed. What more, Tamboosa?"

"This; the King says by my mouth--Let the Inkosazana come and command, and her servant Noie shall go free and unharmed, for is she not a dog in her hut? But if she comes not and at once, then the girl dies."

"How know I that this tale is true, Tamboosa?" asked Rachel, controlling herself with an effort, for she loved Noie dearly.

The man turned towards some bushes that grew at a distance of about twenty paces, and cried: "Come hither."

Thereon from among the bushes where she lay hidden, rose a little maid of

about fourteen, whom Rachel knew well as a girl that Noie often took with her to carry baskets and other things.

"Tell now the tale of the taking of Noie and deliver the message that she gave to you," commanded Tamboosa.

Thereon the trembling child began, and after the native fashion, suppressing no detail or circumstance, however small, narrated how the Zulus had surprised her and Noie while they were gathering flowers, and having bound their arms, had caused them to be hurried away unseen to some dense bush about four miles off. Here they had been kept hidden till in the night the embassy returned. Then they had spoken with Noie, who in the end called her and gave her a message. This was the message: "Say to the Inkosazana that the Zulus have caught me, and are taking me to Dingaan the King. Say that they declare that if she is pleased to come and speak the word, I shall be set free unharmed, that is, if she comes at once. But if she does not come, then I shall be killed. Say to her that I do not ask that she should come who am ready to die, and that though I believe that no harm will happen to her in Zululand, I think that she had better not come. Say that, living or dead, I love her."

Then the maid described how the embassy went on with Noie, leaving her in the charge of the man Tamboosa, who at the first break of dawn brought her back to Ramah, and made her hide in the bush.

Now Rachel had no more doubts. Clearly the tale was true, and the question

was--what must be done? She thought a while, then bade Tamboosa and the child to follow her to the mission-house. On the stoep she found her father and mother sitting in the sun and drinking coffee, after the South African fashion.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Dove, looking at the man anxiously.

Rachel ordered him to repeat his story, and this he did, addressing Rachel alone, for of her father and mother he would take no notice. When he had done the child told her tale also.

"Go now, and wait without," said Rachel, when it was finished.

"Inkosazana, I go," answered the man, "but if it pleases you to save your servant, know that you must come swiftly. If you are not across the Tugela by sunset this night, word will be passed to the King, and she dies at once. Know also that you must come alone with me, for if any, white or black, accompany you, they will be killed."

"Now," said Rachel when the three of them were left alone, "now what is to be done?"

Mrs. Dove shook her head helplessly, and looked at her husband, who broke into a tirade against the Zulus, their superstitions, cruelties, customs, and everything that was theirs, and ended by declaring that it was of course utterly impossible that Rachel should go upon such a mad errand,

and thus place herself in the power of savages.

"But, father," she said when he had done, "do you understand that you are pronouncing Noie's death sentence? If you were in my place, would you not go?"

"Of course I would. In fact I propose to do so as it is. No doubt Dingaan will listen to me."

"You mean that Dingaan will kill you. Did you not hear what that man Tamboosa said? Father, you must not go."

"No, John," broke in Mrs. Dove, "Rachel is right, you must not go, for you would never come back again. Also, how can you be so cruel as to think of leaving me here alone?"

"Then I suppose that we must abandon that poor girl to her fate," exclaimed Mr. Dove.

"How can you suppose anything so merciless, father, when it is in my power to save her?" asked Rachel. "If I let those horrible Zulus kill her I shall never be happy again all my life."

"And what if the horrible Zulus kill you?"

"They will not kill me, father; mother knows they will not, and so do I."

But as they have got this madness into their heads, I am sure that if I do not go they will send an impi here to kill everybody else, and take me prisoner. The kidnapping of Noie is only a first move. It is one of two things: either I must visit Zululand, save Noie, and play my part there as best I can, or we must desert Noie, and all leave this place at once, tomorrow if possible. But then, as I told you, I shall never forgive myself, especially as I am not in the least afraid of the Zulus."

"It is true that God can protect you as much in Zululand as He can here," replied Mr. Dove, beginning to weaken in face of this desperate alternative.

"Of course, father, but if I go to Zululand I want you and mother to trek to Durban, and remain there till I return."

"Why, Rachel? It is absurd."

"Because I do not think that you are safe here, and it is not at all absurd," she answered stubbornly. "These people choose to believe that I am in some way in bondage to you; you remember all their talk about the heavens and the cloud. Of course it may mean nothing, but you will be much better in Durban for a while, where you can take to the water if necessary."

Now Mr. Dove's obstinacy asserted itself. He refused to entertain any such idea, giving reason after reason why he should not do so. Thus for another



half hour the argument raged till at length a compromise was arrived at, as usual in such cases, not of too satisfactory an order. Rachel was to be allowed to undertake her mission on behalf of Noie, and her parents were to remain at Ramah. On her return, which they hoped would be within a week or eight days, the question of the abandonment of the mission was to be settled by the help of the experience she had gained. To this arrangement, then, they agreed, reluctantly enough all of them, in order, to save Noie's life, and for no other reason.

The momentous decision once taken, in half an hour Rachel was ready for her journey, which she determined she would make upon her own horse, a grey mare that she had ridden for a long while, and could rely on in every way. The white riding-ox that Dingaan had sent as a present was also to accompany her, to carry her spare garments and other articles packed in skin bags, such as coffee, sugar and a few medicines, and to serve as a remount in case anything should happen to the horse. When it was laden Rachel sent for the Zulu, Tamboosa, and, pointing to the ox, said:

"I come to visit Dingaan the king, and to claim my servant. Lead the beast on, I will overtake you presently."

The man saluted and began to bonga, that is, to give her titles of praise, but she cut him short with a wave of her hand, and he departed leading the ox.

Now while Mr. Dove saw to the saddling of the horses, for he was to ride

with her as far as the Tugela, Rachel went to bid farewell to her mother. She found her by herself in the sitting-room, seated at an open window, and looking out sadly towards the sea.

"I am quite ready, dear," she said in a cheerful voice. "Don't look so sad, I shall be back again in a week with Noie."

"Yes," answered Mrs. Dove, "I think that you and Noie will come back safely, but--" and she paused.

"But what, mother?"

"Oh! I don't know. I am very much oppressed, my heart is heavy in me. I hate parting with you, Rachel. Remember we have never been separated since you were born."

Her daughter looked at her, and was filled with grief and compunction.

"Mother," she said, "if you feel like that--well, I love Noie, but after all you are more to me than Noie, and if you wish I will give up this business and stop with you. It is very terrible, but it can't be helped; Noie will understand, poor thing," and her eyes filled with tears at the thought of the girl's dreadful fate.

"No, Rachel, somehow I think it best that you should go, not only for Noie's sake, but for your own. If your father would leave here to-day or

to-morrow, as you suggested, it might be otherwise, but he won't do that, so it is no use talking of it. Let us hope for the best."

"As you wish, mother."

"Now, dear kiss me and go. I hear your father calling you; and, Rachel, if we should not meet again in this world, I know you won't forget me, or that there is another where we shall. I did not want to frighten you with my fancies, which come from my not being well. Goodbye, my love, good-bye. God be with you, and make you happy, always--always."

Then Rachel kissed her in silence, for she could not trust herself to speak, and turning, left the room whence her mother watched her go, also in silence. In another minute she was mounted, and, accompanied by her father, riding on the road along which Tamboosa had led the white ox.

Presently they overtook him, whereon he stopped, and looking at Mr. Dove, said:

"Inkosazana, the King's orders are that none should accompany you into Zululand."

"Be silent," answered Rachel, proudly. "He rides with me as far as the river bank."

Then they went on, and Rachel was relieved to find that whatever might

have been her mother's mood, that of her father was fairly cheerful. Indeed, his mind was so occupied with the details and object of her journey that he quite forgot its dangers.

Two hours' steady riding brought them to the ford of the Tugela river, across which lay Zululand. On the hills beyond it they could see a number of Kaffirs watching, who on catching sight of Rachel, ran down to the river and entered it, shouting and beating the water with their sticks, as she guessed, to scare away any crocodiles that might be lurking there.

Now that the moment of separation had come, Mr. Dove grew loth to part with his daughter, and again suggested to Tamboosa that he should accompany her to Dingaan's Great Place.

"If you set a foot across that river, Praying Man," answered the induna grimly, "you shall die; look, there are the spears that will kill you."

As he spoke he pointed to the crest of the opposing hill over which, running swiftly in ordered companies, now appeared a Zulu regiment who carried large white shields and wore white plumes rising from their head rings.

"It is the escort of the Inkosazana," he added. "Do you think that she can take hurt among so many? And do you think, if you dare to disobey the words of Dingaan, that you can escape so many? Go back now, lest they should come over and kill you where you are."

Then, seeing that both argument and resistance were useless, and that Tamboosa would brook no delay, Mr. Dove hurriedly embraced his daughter in farewell. Indeed, Rachel was glad that there was no time for words, for this parting was more terrible to her than she cared to own, and she feared lest she should break down before the Zulu who was watching her, and thereby be lowered in his eyes and in those of his people.

It was over and done. She had entered the water, riding her grey mare while Tamboosa led the white ox at her side. Presently she looked, back, and saw her father kneeling in prayer upon the bank.

"What does the man?" asked Tamboosa, uneasily. "Is he bewitching us?"

"Nay," she answered, "he prays to the Heavens for us."

On they went between the two lines of natives, who ceased their beating of the water, and were silent as she passed. The river was shallow, and they crossed it with ease. By now the regiment was gathered on its further bank, two thousand men or more, brought hither to do honour to this white girl in whom they chose to consider that the guardian spirit of their people was incarnate. Contemplating them, Rachel wondered how it came about that they should be thus prepared for her advent. The answer rose in her mind. If she had refused to visit Zululand, it was their mission to fetch her. It was wise, therefore, that she had come of her own will.

Forward she rode, a striking figure in her long white cloak, down which her bright hair hung, sitting very proud and upright on her horse, without a sign of doubt or fear. As she approached, the captains of the regiment ran forward to meet her with lifted shield and crouching bodies.

"Hail!" cried their leader. "In the name of the Great Elephant, of Dingaan the King, hail to thee, Princess of the Heavens, Holder of the Spirit of Nomkubulwana."

Rachel rode on, taking no notice, marvelling who Nomkubulwana, whose spirit she was supposed to enshrine, might be. Afterwards she discovered that it was only another name for the Inkosazana-y-Zoola, that mysterious white ghost believed by this people to control their destinies, with whom it had pleased them to identify her. As her horse left the wide river and set foot upon dry land, every man of the two thousand soldiers, who were watching, as it seemed to her, with wonder and awe, began to beat his ox-hide shield with the handle of his spear. They beat very softly at first, producing a sound like the distant murmur of the sea, then harder and harder till its volume grew to a mighty roar, impossible to describe, a sound like the sound of thunder that echoed along the water and from hill to hill. The mighty noise sank and died away as it had begun, and for a moment there was silence. Then at some signal every spear flashed aloft in the sunlight, and from every throat came the royal salute--Bayète. It was a tremendous and most imposing welcome, so tremendous that Rachel could no longer doubt that this people regarded her as a being apart, and above the other white folk whom they knew.

At the time, however, she had little space for such thoughts, since the mare she rode, terrified by the tumult, bucked and shied so violently that she could scarcely keep her seat. She was a good rider, which was fortunate for her, since, had she been ignominiously thrown upon such an occasion, her prestige must have suffered, if indeed it were not destroyed. As it proved, it was greatly enhanced by this accident. Many of the Zulus of that day had never even seen a horse, which was considered by all of them to be a dangerous if not a magical beast. That a woman could remain seated on such a wild animal when it sprang into the air, and swerved from side to side, struck them, therefore, as something marvellous and out of experience, a proof indeed that she was not as others are.

She quieted the mare, and rode on between the white-shielded ranks, who, their greeting finished, remained absolutely still like bronze statues watching her with wondering eyes. When at length they were passed, the captains and a guard of about fifty men ran ahead of her.

Then she came, and after her Tamboosa, leading the white ox, followed by another guard, which in turn was followed by the entire regiment. Thus royally escorted, asking no questions, and speaking no word, did Rachel make her entry into Zululand. Only in her heart she wondered whither she was going, and how that strange journey would end, wondered, too, how it would fare with her father and her mother till she returned to them.

Well might she wonder.

When she had ridden thus for about two hours an incident occurred which showed her how great, and indeed how dreadful was the eminence on which she had been set among these people. Suddenly some cattle, frightened by the approach of the impi, rushed through it towards their kraal, and a bull that was with them, seeing this unaccustomed apparition of a white woman mounted on a strange animal, put down its head and charged her furiously. She saw it coming, and by pulling the mare on to its haunches, avoided its rush. Now at the time she was riding on a path which ran along the edge of a little rock-strewn donga not more than eight or ten feet deep, but steep-sided. Into this donga the bull, which had shut its eyes to charge after the fashion of its kind, plunged headlong, and as it chanced struck its horns against a stone, twisting and dislocating the neck, so that it lay there still and dead.

When the Zulus saw what had happened they uttered a long-drawn Ow-w of amazement, for had not the beast dared to attack the White Spirit, and had not the Spirit rewarded it with instant death? Then a captain made a motion with his hand and instantly men sprang upon the remaining cattle, four or five of them that were following the bull, and despatched them with assegais. Before Rachel could interfere they were pierced with a hundred wounds. Now there was a little pause, while the carcasses of the beasts were dragged out of her path, and the bloodstains covered from her eyes with fresh earth. Just as this task was finished there appeared, scrambling up the denga, and followed, by some men, a fat and hideous-looking woman, with fish bladders in her hair, and snake-skins



tied about her, who, from her costume, Rachel knew at once must be an Isanuzi or witch-doctoress. Evidently she was in a fury, as might be seen by the workings of her face, and the extraordinary swiftness with which she moved notwithstanding her years and bulk.

"Who has dared to kill my cattle?" she screamed. "Is it thou whom men name Nomkubulwana?"

"Woman," answered Rachel quietly, "the Heavens killed the bull which would have hurt me. For the rest, ask of the captains of the King."

The witch-doctoress glanced at the dead bull which lay in the donga, its head twisted up in an unnatural fashion at right angles to the body, and for a moment seemed afraid. Then her rage at the loss of her herd broke out afresh, for she was a person in authority, one accustomed to be feared because of her black arts and her office.

"When the Inkosazana is seen in Zululand," she gasped, "death walks with her. There is the token of it," and she pointed to the dead cattle. "So it has ever been and so shall it ever be. Red is thy road through life, White One. Go back, go back now to thine own kraal, and see whether or no my words are true," and springing at the horse she seized it by the bridle as though she would drag it round.

Now in her hand Rachel held a little rod of white rhinoceros horn which she used as a riding whip, and with this rod she pointed at the woman,

meaning that some of those with her should cause her to loose the bridle. Too late she remembered that in this savage land such a motion when made by the King or one in supreme command, had another dreadful interpretation--death without pity or reprieve.

In an instant, before she could interfere, before she could speak, the witch-doctoress lay dead upon the carcass of the dead bull.

"What of the others, Queen, what of the others?" asked the chief of the slayers, bending low before her, and pointing with his spear to the attendants of the witch-doctoress, who fled aghast. "Do they join this evil-doer who dared to lift her hand against thee?"

"Nay," she answered in a low voice, for horror had made her almost dumb. "I give them life. Forward."

"She gives them life!" shouted the praisers about her. "The Bearer of life and death gives life to the children of the evil-doer," and as the great cavalcade marched forward, company after company took up these words and sang them as a song.