

CHAPTER X

THE OMEN OF THE STAR

As it chanced and can easily be understood, Rachel could not have made a more effective entry into Zululand, or one more calculated to confirm her supernatural reputation. When the "wild beast" she rode plunged about she had remained seated on it as though she grew there, whereas every warrior knew that he would have fallen off. When the bull charged her that bull had died, slain by the Heavens. When the Isanuzi, a witch of repute, had lifted voice and hand against her she had commanded her death, showing that she feared no rival magic. True the woman would have been killed in any case, for such was the order of the King as to all who should dare to affront the Inkosazana, yet the captains had waited to see what Rachel would do that they might judge her accordingly. If she had shown fear, if she had even neglected to avenge, they might have marvelled whether after all she were more than a beautiful white maiden filled with the wisdom of the whites.

Now they knew better; she was a Spirit having the power of a Spirit over beast and man, who smote as a Spirit should. The fame of it went throughout the land, and little chance thence forward had Rachel of escaping from the shadow of her own fearful renown.

Towards sundown they came to a kraal set upon a hill, and it was asked of

her if she were pleased to spend the night there. She bowed her head in assent, and they entered the kraal. It was quite empty save for certain maidens dressed in bead petticoats, who waited there to serve her. All the other inhabitants had gone. They took her to a large and beautifully clean hut. Kneeling on their knees, the maidens presented her with food--meat and curdled milk, and roasted cobs of corn. She ate of the corn and the milk, but the meat she sent away as a gift to the captains. Then alone in that kraal, in which after they had served her even the girls seemed to fear to stay, Rachel slept as best she might in such solitude, while without the fence two thousand armed savages watched over her safety.

It was a troubled sleep, for she dreamed always of that dreadful-looking Isanuzi with the fish-bladders in her hair, yelling to her that her path through life was watered with blood, and bidding her go back to her own kraal and see whether the words were true, an ominous saying of which she could not read the riddle. She dreamed also of the woman's coarse, furious face turned suddenly to one of abject terror, and then of the dreadful end the red death without mercy and without appeal which she had let loose by a motion of her hand. Another dream she had was of her father and her mother, who seemed to be lying side by side staring towards her with wide-open eyes, and that when she spoke to them they would not answer.

So the long night wore away, till at length Rachel woke with a start thinking that a hand had been laid upon her face, to see by the faint light of dawn which struggled into the hut through the cracks of the door-boards that the hand was only a great rat that had crawled over her

and now nibbled at her hair. She sat up, frightening it and its companions away, then rose and washed herself with water that stood by in great gourds while without she heard the women singing some kind of song or hymn of which she could not catch the words.

Scarcely was she ready than they entered the hut, saluting her and bringing more food. Rachel ate, then bade one of them say to the captain of the impi that she was ready to start. Presently the girl returned with the message that all was prepared. She walked from the kraal to find her mare, which had been well fed and groomed by Tamboosa, who had seen horses in Natal, and knew how they should be treated, saddled and waiting, whilst before and behind it, arranged as on the previous day, stood the warriors, who received her in dead, respectful silence.

She mounted, and the procession went forward. With a two hours' halt at midday they marched on over hill and dale, passing many villages of beehive-shaped huts. As they came the inhabitants of these places deserted them and fled, crying "Nomkubulwana! Nomkubulwana!" It was evident to Rachel that the tale of the death of the Isanuzi had preceded her, and they feared lest, should they cross her path, her fate would be their fate. Indeed, one of the strangest circumstances of this strange adventure was the complete loneliness in which she lived. Except those who were actually ordered to wait upon her, none dared come near to Rachel; she was holy, a Spirit, to approach whom unbidden might mean death.

At nightfall they reached another empty kraal, where again she slept

alone. When they left it in the morning she called Tamboosa to her and asked him at what hour they would come to Dingaan's great town, Umgugundhlovo, which means the Place of the trumpeting of the Elephant. He answered, at sunset.

So she rode on all that day also till as the sun began to sink, from a hill whereon grew large euphorbia trees, on a plain backed by mountains, she saw the town surrounded by a fence, inside of which were thousands of huts, that in their turn surrounded a great open space. Now they pushed forward quickly, and as darkness fell approached the main gate of the place, where, as usual, there was no one to be seen. But here they did not enter, marching on till they came to another gate, that of the Intunkulu, the King's house, where, their escort done, the regiment turned and went away, leaving Rachel alone with the envoy, Tamboosa, who still led the white ox. They entered this gate, and presently came to a second. It was that of the Emposeni, the Dwelling of the King's wives, out of which appeared women crawling on the ground before Rachel, and holding in their left hands torches of grass. These undid the baggage from the ox, and at their signals, for they did not seem to dare to speak to her, Rachel dismounted. Thereon Tamboosa saluted her, and taking the horse by the bridle, led it away with the ox.

Then Rachel felt that she was indeed alone, for Tamboosa at any rate had seen her home, which now was so far away. Still proudly enough she followed the women, who, bent double as before, led her to a great hut lit by a rude lamp filled with melted hippopotamus fat, where they set down

her bags, and departed, to return presently with food and water.

Having washed off the dust of her long journey, and combed out her hair, Rachel ate all she could, for she was hungry, and guessed that she might need her strength that night. Then she lay down upon a pile of beautiful karosses that had been placed ready for her, and rested. An hour or more went by, and just as she was beginning to fall asleep the door-board of the hut was thrust aside, and a tall woman entered, who knelt to her and said:

"Hail, Inkosazana! The King asks whether it be thy pleasure to appear before him this night."

"It is my pleasure," answered Rachel; "for that purpose have I travelled here. Lead me to the King."

So the woman went out of the hut, Rachel following her to find that the moon shone brightly in a clear sky. The woman conducted her through tortuous reed fences, until presently they came to an open court where, in the shadow of a hut, sat a number of men wrapped about with fur karosses. Guessing that she was in the presence of Dingaan, Rachel drew her white cloak round her tall form and walked forward slowly, till she reached the centre of the space, where she stopped and stood quite still, looking like a ghost in the moonlight. Then all the men to right and left rose and saluted her silently by the uplifting of one arm; only he who was in the midst of them remained seated and did not salute. Still she stayed

motionless, uttering no word for a long while, six or seven minutes, perhaps. Her silence fought against theirs, and she knew that the one who spoke first would own to inferiority.

At length, in answering salutation, she lifted the little wand of white horn that she carried and turned slowly as though to leave the place, so that now the moonlight glistened on her lovely hair. Then, fearing perhaps lest she should depart or vanish away, the man seated in the centre said in a low half-awed voice:

"I am Dingaan, King of the Amazulu. Say, White One, who art thou?"

"By what name am I known here, O Dingaan the King?" she replied, answering the question with a question.

"By a high name, White One, a name that is seldom spoken, the name of Inkosazana-y-Zoola, the title of Nomkubulwana, the Spirit of our people. How camest thou by that name?"

"My name is my name," she said.

"We know, White One; the wind has borne all that story through the land, it whispers it from the leaves of the forest and the reeds of the water and the grass of the plains. We know that the Heavens gave thee their own name, O Child of Heaven, O Holder of the Spirit of Nomkubulwana."

"Thou sayest it, King. I do not say it, thou sayest it."

"I say it, and having seen thee I know that it is true, for thy beauty, White One, is not the beauty of woman alone, although still thou beest woman. Now I confirm to thee the words my messengers bore thee in past days. Here, with me, thou rulest. The land is thine, my impis wait thy word. Death and life are in thy hands; command, and they go forth to slay; command, and they return again. Only thou rulest alone with me, and the black folk, not the white, shall be thy servants."

"I hear thee, King. Now, as a first fruit, give to me Noie, daughter of Seyapi, my slave whom the soldiers stole away from Ramah beyond the river where I dwell."

"She is dead, White One, she is dead for her crimes," answered Dingaan, looking at her.

Now Rachel's heart sank in her, for it might well be that a trick had been played on her, and that this was true. Or perhaps this tale of Noie's death was but a trap to test her powers; moreover, it was not likely that the King, who had promised that she should live, would dare to break his word to one whom he believed or half-believed to be a spirit.

For a moment she thought; then, after her nature, determined to be bold and hazard all upon a throw. Therefore she did not argue or reproach, but said:

"She is not dead. I have questioned every spear in Zululand, and none of them is red with her blood."

"Thou art right," he answered; "the spears are clean. She died in the river."

Now Rachel was sure, and answered in her clear voice:

"I have questioned the waters, and I have questioned the crocodiles, and they answer that Noie has passed them safely."

"Thou art right, White One. She died by a rope in yonder huts."

Now Rachel looked at the huts and cried:

"Noie, I hear thee, I see thee, I smell thee out. Come forth, Noie."

The King and his councillors stared at her, whispering to one another, and before ever they had done their whisperings out from among the gloom of the huts crept Noie.

To Rachel she crept, taking no heed even of the King, and crouching down in the faint shadow of her that the moonlight threw, she flung her arms about her knees and pressed her forehead on her feet. Now Rachel's heart bounded with joy at the sight of her, and she longed to bend down and kiss

her, but did not, lest her great dignity should be lessened in the eyes of the King; only she said:

"I greet you, Noie; be seated in my shadow, where you are safe, and tell me, have these men dealt well by you?"

"Not so ill, Inkosazana, that is since I reached the Great Kraal. But one of them, he who sits yonder," and she pointed to a certain induna, "struck me on the journey, and took away my food."

Now Rachel looked at the man angrily, playing with the little wand in her hand, whereon this induna shivered with terror, fearing lest she should point it at him. Rising, he came to Rachel and flung himself down before her.

"What have you to say," asked Rachel, "you who have dared to strike my servant?"

"Inkosazana," he mumbled, "the maid was obstinate, and tried to run away, and our orders were to bring her to the King. Spare my life, I pray thee."

"King," said Rachel, "I have power over this man, have I not?"

"It is so," answered Dingaan. "Kill him if thou wilt."

Rachel seemed to consider while the poor wretch, with chattering teeth,

implored her to forgive. Then she turned to Noie, saying:

"He struck you, not me. I give him to you to do by as you will. Shall he sleep to-night with the living or the dead?"

Noie looked at him, and next at a mark on her arm, and the induna, ceasing from his prayers to Rachel, clutched Noie by the ankle, and begged her mercy.

"Your life has been given to you," he said, "give mine to me, lest ill-fortune follow you."

"Do you remember," asked Noie contemptuously, "how, when you had beaten me, yonder by the Tugela, you said you hoped that it would be your luck to put a spear through this heart of mine? And do you remember that I answered you that the spear would be over your own heart first, and that thereon you called me 'Daughter of Wizards' and struck me again--me, the child of Seyapi, upon whom the mantle of the Inkosazana lies, me who have drunk of her wisdom and of his--you struck me, you dog," and lifting her foot she spurned him in the face.

Now the King and his company, concluding that the thing was finished, glanced at Rachel to see her point with the rod and thus give the man to death. But Rachel waited, sure that Noie had not done. Moreover, whatever Noie might say, she had determined to save him.

Meanwhile, the girl, after a pause, said:

"Were you a man you would be too proud to ask your life of me, but you are a dog; and, Dog, I remember that you have children, among them a daughter of my own age, whom, I saw come out to greet you. For her sake, then, take your life, and with it this new name that I give you--'Soldier-who-strikes-girls.'"

So the man rose, and weak with shame and the agony of suspense, crept swiftly from the place, fearing lest the Inkosazana or her servant might change her mind and kill him after all. But Noie's name clung to him so closely that at length, unable to bear the ridicule of it, he and his family fled from Zululand.

So this matter ended.

Now the King spoke, saying:

"White One, thy magic is great, and thine eyes could pierce the darkness and see thy servant hidden, and call her forth to thee. Yet know, she is mine, not thine, for when she fled I had already chosen her to be my wife, and afterwards I sent and killed the wizard Seyapi, and all his House."

"But this girl thou didst not kill, O King, for I saved her."

"It is so, White One. I have heard lately how thou didst call down the

lightning and burn up my soldier who followed after her, so that nothing of him remained."

"Yes," said Rachel quietly, "as, were it to please me, I could burn thee up also, O King," a saying at which. Dingaan looked afraid.

"Yet," he went on, waving his hand as though to put aside this unpleasant suggestion, "the maid is mine, not thine, and therefore I took her."

"How didst thou learn that she dwelt at my kraal?" asked Rachel.

The King hesitated.

"The white man, Ishmael, he whom thou callest Ibubesi, told thee, did he not?"

Dingaan bowed his head.

"And he told thee that thou couldst make what promises thou wouldst to me as to the girl's life, but that afterwards when thou hadst called me here to claim it, thou mightest kill her or keep her as a wife, as it pleased thee."

"I can hide nought from thee; it is so," said Dingaan.

"Is that still in thy mind, O King?" asked Rachel again, beginning to play

with the little wand.

"Not so, not so," he answered hurriedly. "Hadst thou not come the girl would have died, as she deserved to do according to our law. But thou hast come and claimed her, O Holder of the Spirit of Nomkubulwana, and she sits in thy shadow and is clothed with thy garment. Take her then, for henceforth she is holy, as thou art holy."

Rachel heard, and without any change of countenance waved her hand to show that this question was finished. Then she asked suddenly:

"What is this great matter whereof thou wouldst speak with me, O King?"

"Surely thy wisdom has told thee, White One," he answered uneasily.

"Perchance, yet I would have it from thy lips, and now."

Now Dingaan consulted a little with his council.

"White One," he said presently, "the thing is grave, and we need guidance. Therefore, as the circle of the witch-doctors have declared must be done, we ask it of thee who art named with the name of the Spirit of our people and hast of her wisdom. Thou knowest, White One, of the fights in past years between the white people of Natal and the Zulus, in which many were slain on either side. But now, when we are at peace with the English, we hear of another white people, the Amaboona" (i.e. the Dutch Boers), "who

are marching towards us from the Cape, and have already fought with Moselikatze--the traitor who was once my captain--and killed thousands of his men. These Amaboona threaten us also, and say aloud that they will eat us up, for they are brave and armed with the white man's weapons that spit out lightning. Now, White One, what shall we do? Shall I send out my impis and fall on them while they are unprepared, and make an end of them, as seems wisest, and is the wish of my indunas? Or, shall I sit at home and watch, trying to be at peace with them, and only strike back if they strike at me? Answer not lightly, O Zoola, for much may hang upon thy words. Remember also that he whose name may not be spoken, the Lion who ruled before me and is gone, with his last breath uttered a certain prophecy concerning the white people and this land."

"Let me hear that prophecy, O King."

"Come forth," said Dingaan pointing to a councillor who sat in the circle, "come forth, thou who knowest, and tell the tale in the ears of this White One."

A figure rose, a draped figure whose face was hidden in a hood of blanket. It came forward, and as it came it drew the blanket tighter about it. Rachel, watching all things, saw, or thought she saw, that one of its hands was white as though it had been burned with fire. Surely she had seen such a hand before.

"Speak," she said.

"Name me by my name and tell me who I am and I will obey thee," answered the man.

Then she was sure, for she remembered the voice. She looked at him indifferently and asked:

"By what name shall I name you, O Slayer of a King? Will you be called Mopo or Umbopa, who have borne them both?"

Now Dingaan stared, and the shrouded form before her started as though in surprise.

"Why do you seek to mock me?" she went on. "Can a blanket of bark hide that face of yours from these eyes of mine which saw it a while ago at Ramah, when you came thither to judge of me, O Mouth of the King?"

Now the man let the blanket slip from his head and looked at her.

"It seems that it cannot," he answered. "Then I told thee that I had dreamed of the Spirit of our people, and that thou, White One, wast like to her of whom I had dreamed. Canst thou tell me what was the fashion of that dream of mine?"

Now Rachel understood that notwithstanding his words at Ramah, this man still doubted her, and was set up to prove her, and all that Noie had told

her about him and the secret history of the Zulus came back into her mind.

"Surely Mopo or Umbopa," she replied, "you dreamed three dreams, not one. Is it of the last you speak?--that dream at the kraal Duguza, when the Inkosazana rode past you on a storm clothed in lightning, and shaking in her hand a spear of fire?"

"Yes, I speak of it," he replied in an awed voice, "but if thou art but a woman as thou hast said, how knowest thou these things?"

"Perchance I am both woman and spirit, and perchance the past tells them to me," Rachel answered; "but the past has many voices, and now that I dwell in the flesh I cannot hear them all. Let me search you out. Let me read your heart," and she bent forward and fixed her eyes upon him, holding him with her eyes.

"Ah! now I see and I hear," she said presently. "Had you not a sister, Mopo, a certain Baleka, who afterwards entered the house of the Black One and bore a son and died in the Tatiyana Cleft? Shall I tell you how she died?"

"Tell it not! Tell it not!" exclaimed the old man quaveringly.

"So be it. There is no need. Yet ere she died you made a promise to this Baleka, and that promise you kept at the kraal Duguza, you and the prince Umhlangana, and another prince whose name I forget," and she looked at

Dingaan, who put his hand before his face. "You kept that promise with an assegai--let me look, let me look into your heart--yes, with a little assegai handled with the royal red wood, an assegai that had drunk much blood."

Now a low moan broke from the lips of Dingaan, and those who sat with them, while Umbopa shivered as though with cold.

"Have mercy, I pray thee," he gasped. "Forgive me if at times since we met at Ramah I thought thee but a white maiden, beautiful and bold, as thou didst declare thyself to be. Now I see thou hast the spirit, or else how didst thou know these things?"

Noie heard and smiled in the shadow, but Rachel stood silent.

"I was bidden to tell thee of the last words of the Black One," went on Umbopa hurriedly; "but what need is there to tell thee anything who knowest all? They were that he heard the sound of the running of the feet of a great white people which shall stamp out the children of the Zulus."

"Nay," answered Rachel, "I think they were; 'Where-fore wouldst thou kill me, Mopo?'"

Again Dingaan moaned, for he had heard these very words spoken. Umbopa turned and stared at him, and he stared at Umbopa.

"Come hither," said Rachel, beckoning to the old man.

He obeyed, and she threw the corner of her cloak over his head, and whispered into his ear. He listened to her whisperings, then with a cry broke from her and fled away out of the council of the King.

When he had gone there was silence, though Dingaan looked a question with his eyes.

"Ask it not," she said, "ask it not of me, or of him. I think this Mopo here had his secrets in the past. I think that once he sat in a hut at night and bargained with certain Great Ones, a prince who lives, and a prince who died. Come hither, come hither, thou son of Senzangacona, come from the fields of Death and tell me what was that bargain which thou madest with Mopo, thou and another?" and once again Rachel beckoned, this time upwards in the air.

Now the face of Dingaan went grey, even in the moonlight it went grey beneath the blackness of his skin, for there rose before his mind a vision of a hut and of Mopo and of Umhlangana, the prince his brother whom he had slain, and of himself, seated in the darkness, their heads together beneath a blanket whispering of the murder of a king.

"Thou knowest all," he gasped, "thou art Nomkubulwana and no other. Spare us, Spirit who canst summon our dead sins from the grave of time, and make them walk alive before us."

"Nay, nay," she answered, mockingly, "surely I am but a woman, daughter of a Teacher who lives yonder over the Tugela, a white maiden who eats and sleeps and drinks as other maidens do. Take notice, King, and you his captains, that I am no spirit, nothing but a woman who chanced to bear a high name, and to have some wisdom. Only," she added with meaning, "if any harm should come to me, if I should die, then I think that I should become a spirit, a terrible spirit, and that ill would it go with that people against whom my blood was laid."

"Oh!" said the King, who still shook with fear, "we know, we know. Mock us not, I pray. Thou art the Spirit who hast chosen to wear the robe of woman, as flame hides itself in flint, and woe be to the hand that strikes the fire from this stone. White One, give us now that wisdom whereof thou speakest. Shall I fall upon the Boers or shall I let them be?"

Rachel looked upwards, studying the stars.

"She takes counsel with the Heavens, she who is their daughter," muttered one of the indunas in a low voice.

As he spoke it chanced that a bright meteor travelling from the south-west swept across the sky to burst and vanish over the kraal of Umgugundhlovo.

"It is a messenger to her," said one. "I saw the fire shine upon her hair and vanish in her breast."

"Nay," answered another, "it is the Ehlose, the guardian ghost of the Amazulu that appears and dies."

"Not so," broke in a third, "that light shows the Amaboona travelling from the south-west to be eaten up in the blackness of our impis."

"Such a star runs ever before the death of king. It fell the night ere the Black One died," murmured a fourth as though he spoke to himself.

Only Dingaan, taking no heed of them, said, addressing Rachel:

"Read thou the omen."

"Nay," she replied upon the swift impulse of the moment, "I read it not. Interpret it as ye will. Here is my answer to thy question, King. Those who lift the spear shall perish by the spear."

At this saying the captains murmured a little, for they, who desired war, understood that she counselled peace between them and the Boers, though others thought that she meant that the Boers would perish. Dingaan also looked downcast. Watching their faces, Rachel was sure that not even her hand could hold them back from their desire. That war must come. Again she spoke:

"The star travels whither it is thrown by the hand of the Umkulunkulu, the

Master of men; the spear finds the heart to which it is appointed. Read you the omen as you will. I have spoken, but ye will not understand. That which shall be, shall be."

She bent her head, and turned her ear towards the ground as though to hearken.

"What was that tale of the last words of the Great Lion who is gone?" she went on. "Ask it of Mopo, ask it of Dingaan the King. It seems to me that I also hear the feet of a people travelling over plain and mountain, and the rivers behind them run red with blood. Are they black feet or white feet? Read ye the omen as ye will. I have spoken for the first time and the last; trouble me no more with this matter of the white men and your war," and turning, Rachel glided from the court, followed by Noie with bowed head.