

CHAPTER XI

ISHMAEL VISITS THE INKOSAZANA

When at last they were in the hut and the door-board had been safely closed, Rachel took Noie in her arms and kissed her. But Noie did not kiss her back; she only pressed her hand against her forehead.

"Why do you not kiss me, Noie?" asked Rachel.

"How can I kiss you, Inkosazana," replied the girl humbly, "I who am but the dog at your feet, the dog whom twice it has pleased you to save from death."

"Inkosazana!" exclaimed Rachel. "I weary of that name. I am but a woman like yourself, and I hate this part which I must play."

"Yet it is a high part, and you play it very well. While I listened to you to-night, Zoola, twice and thrice I wondered if you are not something more than you deem yourself to be. That beautiful body of yours is but a cup like those of other women, but say, who fills the cup with the wine of wisdom? Why do kings and councillors fear you, and why do you fear nothing? Why did dead Seyapi talk to me of you in dreams? What strange chance gave you that name of yours and made you holy in these men's eyes? What power teaches you the truth and gives you wit and strength to speak

it? Why are you different from the rest of maidens, white or black?"

"I do not know, Noie. Something tells me what to do and say. Also, I understand these Zulus, and you have taught me much. You told me all the hidden tale of yonder Mopo a year gone by, or more, as you have told me many of the darkest secrets of this people that you had from your father, who knew them all. At the pinch I remembered it, no more, and played upon them by my knowledge."

"What was it you said to Mopo under your cloak, Lady?"

Rachel smiled as she answered:

"I only asked him if it were not in his mind, having killed one king, to kill another also, and that spear went home."

"Ah!" exclaimed Noie in admiration, "at least I never told you that."

"No; I read it in his eyes; for a moment all his heart was open to me--yes, and the heart of Dingaan also. He fears Mopo, and Mopo hates him, and one day hate and fear will come together."

"Ah!" said Noie again, "you know much."

"Yes," answered Rachel with sudden passion, "more than I wish to know. Noie, you are right, I am not altogether as others are; there is a power

in my blood. I see and hear what should not be seen and heard; at times fears fill me, or joys lift me up, and I think that I draw hear to another world than ours. No; it is folly. I am over-wrought. Who would not be that must endure so much and be set upon this throne, a goddess among barbarians with life and death upon my lips? Oh! when the King asked me his riddle I knew not what to answer, who feared lest ten thousand lives might pay the price of a girl's incautious words. Then that meteor broke; there have been several this night, but none noted them till I looked upwards, and you know the rest. Let them guess its meaning, which they cannot, for it has none."

"Why did you not speak more plainly, Zoola?"

"Oh! because I dared not. Who am I to meddle with such matters, who came here but to save you? I warned them not to make war upon the Boers; what more could I do? Moreover, it is useless, for fight they must and will and pay the price. Of that I am sure. I feel it here," and she pressed her hand upon her heart. "Yes, and other nearer things! Oh! Noie, I would that I were back at home. Say, can we start to-morrow at the dawn?"

Noie shook her head.

"I do not think that they will let you go; they will keep you to be their great doctress. You should not have come. I sent you word--what did my life matter?"

"Keep me," answered Rachel, stamping her foot. "They dare not; here at least I am the Inkosazana, and I will be obeyed."

Noie made no answer; only she said:

"Ishmael is here. I have seen him. He wished to have me killed at once because he is afraid of me. But when he was sure that you were coming, Dingaan would not break his word which he had sent to you."

Rachel's face fell.

"Ishmael!" she exclaimed in dismay, then recovered herself and added: "Well, I am not afraid of Ishmael, for here his life is in my hand. Oh! I am worn out; I cannot talk of the man to-night. I must sleep, Noie, I must sleep. Come, lie at my side and let us sleep."

"Nay," answered the girl; "my place is at the door. But drink this milk and lay you down without fear, for I will watch."

Rachel obeyed, and Noie sat by her, holding her hand, till presently her eyes shut and she slept. But Noie did not sleep. All that night she sat there watching and listening, till at length the dawn came and she lay down also by the door and rested.

The sun was high in the heavens when Rachel woke.

"Good morrow to you, Zoola," said the sweet voice of Noie. "You have slept well. Now you must rise, bathe yourself and eat, for already messengers from the King have been to the outer gate, saying that they wait to escort you to a better house that has been made ready for you."

"I hoped that they waited to escort me out of Zululand," answered Rachel.

"I asked them of that, Zoola, but they declared it must not be, as the council of the doctors had been summoned to consider your sayings, and two days will pass before it can meet. Also they declare that your horse is sick and not fit to travel, meaning that they will not let you go."

"But I have the right to go, Noie."

"The bird has the right to fly, but what if it is in a cage, Zoola?"

"I am queen here, Noie; the bars will burst at my word."

"It may be so, Zoola, but what if the bird should find that it has no nest to fly to?"

"What do you mean?" asked Rachel, paling.

"Only that it seems best that you should not anger these Zulus, Lady, lest it should come into their minds to destroy your nest, thinking that so you might come to love this cage. No, no, I have heard nothing, but I guess

their thoughts. You need rest; bide here, where you are safe, a day or two, and let us see what happens."

"Speak plainly, Noie. I do not understand your parable of birds and cages."

"Zoola, I obey. I think that if you say you will go, none, not the King himself, would dare to stay you, though you would have to go on foot, for then that horse would die. But an impi would go with you, or before you, and woe betide those who held you from returning to Zululand! Do you understand me now?"

"Yes," answered Rachel. "You mean!--oh! I cannot speak it. I will remain here a few days."

So she rose and bathed herself and was dressed by Noie, and ate of the food that had been brought to the door of the hut. Then she went out, and in the little courtyard found a litter waiting that was hung round with grass mats.

"The King's word is that you should enter the litter," said Noie.

She did so, whereon Noie clapped her hands and girls in bead dresses ran in, and having prostrated themselves before the litter, lifted it up and carried it away, Noie walking at its side.

Rachel, peeping between the mats, saw that she was borne out of the town, surrounded, but at a distance, by a guard of hundreds of armed men. Presently they began to ascend a hill, whereon grew many trees, and after climbing it for a while, reached a large kraal with huts between the outer and inner fence, and in its centre a great space of park-like land through which ran a stream.

Here, by the banks of the stream, stood a large new hut, and behind at a little distance two or three other huts. In front of this great hut the litter was set down by, the bearers, who at once went away. Then at Noie's bidding Rachel came out of it and looked at the place which had been given her in which to dwell.

It was a beautiful spot, away from the dust and the noises of the Great Kraal, and so placed upon a shoulder of the hillside that the soldiers who guarded this House of the Inkosazana, as it was called, could not be seen or heard. Yet Rachel looked at it with distaste, feeling that it was that cage of which Noie had spoken,

A cage it proved indeed, a solitary cage, for here Rachel abode in regal seclusion and in state that could only be called awful. No man might approach her house unbidden, and the maidens who waited upon her did so with downcast eyes, never speaking, and falling on to their knees if addressed. On the first day of her imprisonment, for it was nothing less, an unhappy Zulu, through ignorance or folly, slipped through the outer guard and came near to the inner fence. Rachel, who was seated above,

heard some shouts of rage and horror, and saw soldiers running towards him, and in another minute a body being carried away upon a shield. He had died for his sacrilege.

Once a day ambassadors came to her from the King to ask of her health, and if she had orders to give, but now even these, men were not allowed to look upon her. They were led in by the women, each of them with a piece of bark cloth over his head, and from beneath this cloth they addressed her as though she were in truth divine. On the first day she bade them tell the King that her mission being ended, it was her desire to depart to her own home beyond the river. They heard her words in silence, then asked if she had anything to add. She replied--yes, it was her will that they should cease to wear veils in her presence, also that no more men should be killed upon her account as had happened that morning. They said that they would convey the order at once, as several were under sentence of death who had argued as to whether she were really the Inkosazana, So she sent them away instantly, fearing lest they should be too late, and they were led off backwards bowing and giving the royal salute. Afterwards she rejoiced to hear that her commands had arrived just in time, and that the blood of these poor people was not upon her head.

Next day the messengers returned at the same hour, unveiled as she desired, bearing the answer of the King and his council. It was to the effect that the Inkosazana had no need to ask permission to come or to go. Her Spirit, they knew, was mighty and could wander where it willed; all the impis of the Zulus could not hold her Sprint. But--and here came the

sting of this clever answer--it was necessary, until her sayings had been considered, that the body in which that Spirit abode should remain with them a while. Therefore the King and his counsellors and the whole nation of the Zulus prayed her to be satisfied with the sending of her Spirit across the Tugela, leaving her body to dwell a space in the House of the Inkosazana.

Rachel looked at them in despair, for what was she to reply to such reasoning as this? Before she could make up her mind, their spokesman said that a white man, Ibubesi, who said that he had often spoken with her, asked leave to visit her in her house.

Now Rachel thought a while. Ishmael was the last person in the whole world whom she wished to see. After the interview when they parted, and all that had happened since, it could not be otherwise. She remembered the threats he had uttered then, and to her father afterwards, the brutal and revolting threats. Some of these had been directed against Noie, and subsequently Noie was kidnapped by the Zulus. That those directed at herself had not been fulfilled was, she felt sure, due to a lack of opportunity alone.

Little wonder, then, that she feared and hated the man. Still he was of white blood, and perhaps for this reason had authority among the Zulus, who, as she knew, often consulted him. Moreover, notwithstanding his vapourings, like the Zulus whose superstitions he had contracted, he looked upon herself with something akin to fear. If she saw him she had no

cause to dread anything that he could do to her, at any rate in this country where she was supreme, whereas on the other hand she might obtain information from him which would be very useful, or make use of him to enable her to escape from Zululand. On the whole, then, it seemed wisest to grant him an interview, especially as she gathered from the fact that the question was raised by Dingaan's indunas, that for some reason of his own, the King hoped that she would do so.

Still she hesitated, loathing and despising him as she did.

"You have heard," she said in English to Noie, who stood behind her. "Now what shall I say?"

"Say--come," answered Noie in the same tongue.

"Read his black heart and find out truth; he no can keep it from you.

Say--come with soldiers. If he behave bad, tell them kill him. They obey you. No mind me. I not afraid of that wild beast now."

Then Rachel said to the indunas:

"I hear the King's word, and understand that he wishes me to receive this Ibubesi. Yet I know that man, as I know all men, white and black. He is an evil man, and it is not my pleasure to speak with him alone. Let him come with a guard of six captains, and let the captains be armed with spears, so that if I give the word there may be an end of this Ibubesi."

Then the messengers saluted and departed as before.

On the morrow at about the same hour a praiser, or herald, arrived outside the inner fence of the kraal, and after he had shouted out Rachel's titles, attributes, beauties and supernatural powers for at least ten minutes, never repeating himself, announced that the indunas of the King were without accompanied by the white man, Ibubesi, awaiting her permission to enter. She gave it through Noie; and, the horn wand in her hand, seated herself upon a carved stool in front of the great hut. Presently an altercation arose upon the further side of the reed fence in which she recognised Ishmael's strident voice, mingled with the deeper tones of the Zulus, who seemed to be insisting upon something.

"They command him to take off his headdress," said Noie, "and threaten to beat him if he will not."

"Go, tell them to admit him as he is, that I may see his face, and learn if he be the white man whom I knew, or another," answered Rachel, and she went.

Then the gate was opened and the messengers were led in by women. After these came six captains, carrying broad spears, as she had commanded, and last of all Ishmael himself. Rachel's whole nature shrank at the sight of his dark, handsome features. She loathed the man now as always; her instinct warned her of danger at his hands. Also she remembered his

threats when last they met and she rejected him, and what had passed between him and her father on the following day. But of all this she showed nothing, remaining seated in silence with calm, set face.

Ishmael was advancing with a somewhat defiant air. Except for a kaross upon his shoulders he wore European dress, and the ridiculous hat with the white ostrich feather in it, both of them now much the worse for wear, which she remembered so well. Also he had a lighted pipe in his mouth. Presently one of the captains appeared to become suddenly aware of this pipe, for, stretching out his hand, he snatched it away, and the hat with it, throwing them upon the ground. Ishmael, whose teeth and lips were hurt, turned on the man with an oath and struck him, whereon instantly he was seized, and would perhaps have been killed before Rachel could interfere had it not been unlawful to shed blood in her presence. As it was, with a motion of her wand, she signified that he was to be loosed, a command that Noie interpreted to them. At any rate, they let him go, though a captain placed his feet on the hat and pipe. Then Ishmael came forward and said awkwardly:

"How do you do? I did not expect to see you here," and he devoured her beauty with his bold, greedy eyes, though not without doubt and dread, or so thought Rachel.

Taking no notice of his greeting, she said in a cold voice:

"I have sent for you here to ask if you have any reason as to why I should

not order you to be killed for your crime against my servant, Noie, and therefore against me?"

Now Ishmael paled, for he had not expected such a welcome, and began to deny the thing.

"Spare your falsehoods," went on Rachel. "I have it from the King's lips, and from my own knowledge. Remember only that here I am the Inkosazana, with power of life and death. If I speak the word, or point at you with this wand, in a minute you will have gone to your account."

"Inkosazana or not," he answered in a cowed voice, "you know too much. Well, then, she was taken that you might follow her to Zululand to ask her life, and you see that the plan was good, for you came; and," he added, recovering some of his insolence and familiarity: "we are here together, two white people among all these silly niggers."

Rachel looked him up and down; then she looked at the indunas seated in silence before her, at the great limbed captains with their broad spears beyond, reminding her in their plumes and attitudes of some picture that she had seen of Roman gladiators about to die. Lastly she looked at the delicately shaped Noie by her side, with her sweet, inscrutable face, the woman whose parents and kin this outcast had brought to a bloody death, the woman whom to forward his base ends he had vilely striven to murder. Slowly she looked at them all and at him, and said:

"Shall I explain to these nobles and captains what you call them, and what you are called among your own people? Shall I tell them something of your story, Mr. Ishmael?"

"You can do what you like," he answered sullenly. "You know why I got you here--because I love you: I told you that many months ago. While you were down at Ramah I had no chance with you, because of that old hypocrite of a father of yours, and this black girl," and he looked at Noie viciously.

"Here I thought that it would be different--that you would be glad of my company, but you have turned yourself into a kind of goddess and hold me off," and he paused.

"Go on," said Rachel.

"All right, I will. You may think yourself a goddess, as I do myself sometimes. But I know that you are a woman too, and that soon you will get tired of this business. You want to go home to your father and mother, don't you? Well, you can't. You are a prisoner here, for these fools have got it into their heads that you are their Spirit, and that it would be unlucky to let you out of the country. So here you must stop, for years perhaps, or till they are sick of you and kill you. Just understand, Rachel, that nobody can help you to escape except me, and that I shan't do so for nothing."

Rachel straightened herself upon her seat, gripping the edge of it with her hands, for her temper was rising, while Noie bent forward and said

something in her ear.

"What is that black devil whispering to you?" he asked. "Telling you to have me killed, I expect. Well, you daren't, for what would your holy parents say? It would be murder, wouldn't it, and you would go to hell, where I daresay you come from, for otherwise how could you be such a witch? Look here," he went on, changing his tone, "don't let's squabble. Make it up with me. I'll get you clear of this and marry you afterwards on the square. If you won't, it will be the worse for you--and everybody else, yes, everybody else."

"Mr. Ishmael," answered Rachel calmly, "you are making a very great mistake, about my scruples as to taking life I mean, amongst other things. Once when it was necessary you saw me kill a man. Well, if I am forced to it, what I did then I will do again, only not with my own hand. Mr. Ishmael, you said just now that you could get me out of Zululand. I take you at your word, not for my own sake, for I am comfortable enough here, but for that of my father and mother, who will be anxious," and her voice weakened a little as she spoke of them.

"Do you? Well, I won't. I am comfortable here also, and shall be more so as the husband of the Inkosazana. This is a very pretty kraal, and it is quite big enough for two," he added with an amorous sneer.

Now for a minute at least Rachel sat still and rigid. When she spoke again it was in a kind of gasp:

"Never," she said, "have you gone nearer to your death, you wanderer without name or shame. Listen now. I give you one week to arrange my escape home. If it is not done within that time, I will pay you back for those words. Be silent, I will hear no more."

Then she called out:

"Rise, men, and bear the message of the Inkosazana to Dingaan, King of the Zulus. Say to Dingaan that this wandering white dog whom he has sent into my house has done me insult. Say that he has asked me, the Inkosazana-y-Zoola, to be one of his wives."

At these words the counsellors and captains uttered a shout of rage, and two of the latter seized Ishmael by the arm, lifting their spears to plunge them into him. Rachel waved her wand and they let them fall again.

"Not yet," she said. "Take him to the King, and if my word comes to the King, then he dies, and not till then. I would not have his vile blood on my hands. Unless I speak, I, Queen of the Heavens, leave him to the vengeance of the Heavens. My mantle is over him, lead him back to the King and let me see his face no more."

"We hear and it shall be so," they answered with one voice, then forgetting their ceremony hustled Ishmael from the kraal.

"Have I done well?" asked Rachel of Noie, when they were alone.

"No, Zoola," she answered, "you should have killed the snake while you were hot against him, since when your blood grows cold you can never do it, and he will live to bite you."

"I have no right to kill a man, Noie, just because he makes love to me, and I hate him. Also, if I did so he could not help me to escape from Zululand, which he will do now because he is afraid of me."

"Will he be afraid of you when you are both across the Tugela?" asked Noie. "Inkosazana, give me power and ask no questions. Ibubesi killed my father and mother and brethren, and has tried to kill me. Therefore my heart would not be sore if, after the fashion of this land, I paid him spears for battle-axes, for he deserves to die."

"Perhaps, Noie, but not by my word."

"Perhaps by your hand, then," said Noie, looking at her curiously. "Well, soon or late he will die a red death--the reddest of deaths, I learned that from the spirit of my father."

"The spirit of your father?" said Rachel, looking at her.

"Certainly, it speaks to me often and tells me many things, though I may not repeat them to you till they are accomplished. Thus I was not afraid

in the hands of Dingaan, for it told me that you would save me."

"I wish it would speak to me and tell me when I can go home," said Rachel with a sigh.

"It would if it could, Zoola, but it cannot because the curtain is too thick. Had all you loved been slain before your eyes, then the veil would be worn thin as mine is, and through it, you who are akin to them, would hear the talk of the ghosts, and dimly see them wandering beneath their trees."

"Beneath their trees----!"

"Yes, the trees of their life, of which all the boughs are deeds and all the leaves are words, under the shadow of which they must abide for ever. My people could tell you of those trees, and perhaps they will one day when we visit them together. Nay, pay no heed, I was wandering in my talk. It is the sight of that wild beast, Ibubesi. You will not let me kill him! Well, doubtless it is fated so. I think one day you will be sorry--but too late."