

CHAPTER XIV

WHAT CHANCED AT RAMAH

The news which reached Rachel that Ishmael had been ill after the rough handling of the captains in her presence, was true enough. For many days he was far too ill to travel, and when he recovered sufficiently to start he could only journey slowly to the Tugela.

It will be remembered that she was told that he had escaped, as indeed he seemed to do, slipping off at night, but this escape of his was carefully arranged beforehand, nor did any attempt to re-capture him upon his way. When at length he came to the river he found the small impi awaiting him, not knowing whither they were to go or what they were to do, their only orders being that they must obey him in all things. He found also that the Tugela was in furious flood, so that to ford it proved quite impossible. Here, then, he was obliged to remain for ten full days while the water ran down.

Ishmael was not idle during those ten days, which he spent in recovering his health, and incidentally in reflection. Thus he thought a great deal of his past life, and did not find the record satisfactory. With his exact history we need not trouble ourselves. He was well-born, as he had told Rachel, but had been badly brought up. His strong passions had led him into trouble while young, and instead of trying to reform him his

belongings had cast him off. Then he had enlisted in the army, and so reached South Africa. There he committed a crime--as a matter of fact it was murder or something like it--and fled from justice far into the wilderness, where a touch of imagination prompted him to take the name of Ishmael.

For a while this new existence suited him well enough. Thus he had wives in plenty of a sort, and he grew rich, becoming just such a person as might be expected from his environment and unchecked natural tendencies. At length it happened that he met Rachel, who awoke in him certain forgotten associations. She was an English lady, and he remembered that once he had been an English gentleman, years and years ago. Also she was beautiful, which appealed to his strong animal nature, and spiritual, which appealed to a materialist soaked in Kaffir superstition. So he fell in love with her, really in love; that is to say, he came to desire to make her his wife more than he desired anything else on earth. For her sake he grew to dislike his black consorts, however handsome; even the heaping up of herds of cattle after the native fashion ceased to appeal to him. He wanted to live as his forbears had lived, quietly, respectably, with a woman of his own class.

So he made advances to her, with the results we know. For fifteen years or more he had been a savage, and he could not hide his savagery from her eyes any more than he could break off the ties and entanglements that had grown up about him. Had she happened to care for him, it is very possible, however, that in this he would have succeeded in time. He might even have

reformed himself completely, and died in old age a much-respected colonial gentleman; perhaps a member of the local Legislature. But she did not; she detested him; she knew him for what he was, a cowardly outcast whose good looks did not appeal to her. So the spark of his new aspirations was trampled out beneath her merciless heel, and there remained only the acquired savagery and superstition mixed with the inborn instincts of a blackguard.

It was this superstition of his that had, brought all her troubles upon Rachel, for however it came about, he had conceived the idea that she was something more than an ordinary woman and, with many tales of her mysterious origin and powers, imparted it to the Zulus, in whose minds it was fostered by the accident of the coincidence of her native name and personal loveliness with those of the traditional white Spirit of their race, and by Mopo's identification of her with that Spirit. Thus she became their goddess and his; at any rate for a time. But while they desired to worship her only, and use her rumoured wisdom as an oracle, he sought to make her his wife; the more impossible it became, the more he sought it. She refused him with contumely, and he laid plots to decoy her to Zululand, thinking that there she would be in his power. In the end he succeeded, basely enough, only to find that he was in her power, and that the contumely, and more, were still his share.

But all this did not in the least deter him from his aim, and as it chanced, fortune had put other cards into his hand. He knew that Rachel would not stay among the Zulus, as they knew it. Therefore they had

commissioned him to bring her people to her. If her people were not brought he was sure that she would come to seek them, and if she found no one, then where could she go, or at least who would be at hand to help her? Surely his opportunity had come at last, and marriage by capture did not occur to him, who had spent so many years among savages, as a crime from which to shrink. Only he feared that the prospective captive, the Inkosazana-y-Zoola, was not one with whom it was safe to trifle. But his love was stronger than his fear. He thought that he would take the risk.

Such were the reflections of Ishmael upon the banks of the flooded Tugela, and when at length the waters went down sufficiently to enable him and the soldiers under his command to cross into Natal, he was fully determined to put them into practice, if the chance came his way. How this might best be done he left to luck, for if it could be avoided he did not wish to have more blood upon his hands. Only Rachel must be rendered homeless and friendless, for then who could protect her from him? An answer came into his mind--she might protect herself, or that Power which seemed to go with her might protect her. Something warned him that this evil enterprise was very dangerous. Yet the fire that burnt within him drove him on to face the danger.

Ishmael was still on the Zululand bank of the river when one day about noon an urgent message reached him from Dingaan. It said that the King was angry as a wounded buffalo to learn, as he had just done, that he, Ibubesi, still lingered on his road, and had not carried out his mission. The Inkosazana, accompanied by a white man, was travelling to Ramah, and

unless he went forward at once, would overtake him. Therefore he must march instantly and bring back the old Teacher and his wife as he had been bidden. Should he meet the Inkosazana and her companion as he returned with the white prisoners she must not be touched or insulted in any way, only his ears and those of the soldiers with him were to be deaf to her orders or entreaties to release them, for then she would surely turn and follow of her own accord back to the Great Place. If the white man with her made trouble or resisted, he was to be bound, but on no account must his blood be made to flow, for if this happened it would bring a curse upon the land, and he, Dingaan, swore by the head of the Black One who was gone (that is Chaka) that he would kill him, Ibubesi, in payment. Yes, he would smear him with honey and bind him over an ant-heap in the sun till he died, if he hunted Africa from end to end to catch him. Moreover, should he fail in the business, he would send a regiment and destroy his town at Mafooti, and, put his wives and people to the spear, and seize his cattle. All this also he swore by the head of the Black One.

Now when Ishmael received this message he was much frightened, for he knew that these were not idle threats. Indeed, the exhausted messenger told him that never had any living man seen Dingaan so mad with rage as he was when he learned that he, Ibubesi, was still lingering on the banks of the Tugela, adding that he had foamed at the mouth with fury and uttered terrible threats. Ishmael sent him back with a humble answer, pointing out that it had been impossible to cross the river, which was "in wrath," but that now he would do all things as he was commanded, and especially that not a hair of the white man's head should be harmed.

"Then you must do them quickly," said the messenger with a grim smile as he rose and prepared to go, "for know that the Inkosazana is not more than half a day's march behind you, accompanied by the white Inkoos Dario."

"What is this Dario like?" asked Ishmael.

"Oh! he is young and very handsome, with hair and beard of gold, and eyes that are such as those of the Inkosazana herself. Some say that he is her brother, another child of the Heavens, and some that he is her husband. Who am I that I should speak of such high things? But it is evident that she loves him very much, for by her magic she told the King of his coming, and even when he is behind her she is always trying to turn her head to look at him."

"Oh! she loves him very much, does she?" said Ishmael, setting his white teeth. Then he turned, and calling the captain of the impi, gave orders that the river must be crossed at once, for so the King commanded, and it was better to die with honour by water than with shame by the spear.

So they waded and swam the river with great difficulty, but, as it chanced, without loss of life, Ishmael being borne over it upon the shoulders of the strongest men. Upon its further bank he summoned the captains and delivered to them the orders of the King. Then they set out for Ramah, Ishmael carried in a litter made of boughs.

Whilst the soldiers were constructing this litter, he called two men of the Swamp-dwellers, who had their homes upon the banks of the Tugela, and promising them a reward, bade them run to his town, Mafooti, and tell his head man there to come at once with thirty of the best soldiers, and to hide them in the bush of the kloof above Ramah, where he would join them that night. The men, who knew Ibubesi, and what happened to those who failed upon his business, went swiftly, and a little while afterwards, the litter being finished, Ishmael entered it, and the impi started for Ramah.

Before sundown they appeared upon a ridge overlooking the settlement, just as the herds were driving the cattle into their kraals. Seeing the Zulus while as yet they were some way off, these herds shouted an alarm, whereon the people of the place, thinking that Dingaan had sent a regiment to wipe them out, fled to the bush, the herds driving the cattle after them. Man, woman, and child, deserting their pastor, who knew nothing of all this, being occupied with a sad business, they fled, incontinently, so that when Ishmael and the impi entered Ramah, no one was left in it save a few aged and sick people, who could not walk.

At the outskirts of the town Ishmael descended from his litter and commanded the soldiers to surround it, with orders that they were to hurt no one, but if the white Umfundusi, who was called Shouter, or his wife attempted to escape, they were to be seized and brought to him. Then taking with him some of the captains and a guard of ten men, he advanced to the mission-house.

The door was open, and, followed by the Zulus, he entered to search the place, for he feared that its inhabitants might have seen them, and have gone with the others. Looking into the first room that they reached, of which, as it chanced, the door was also open, Ishmael saw that this was not so, for there upon the bed lay Mrs. Dove, apparently very ill, while by the side of the bed knelt her husband, praying. For a few moments Ishmael and the savages behind him stood still, staring at the pair, till suddenly Mrs. Dove turned her head and saw them. Lifting herself in the bed she pointed with her finger, and Ishmael noticed that her lips were quite blue, and that she did not seem to be able to speak. Then Mr. Dove, observing her outstretched hand, looked round. He had not seen Ishmael since that day when he struck him after their stormy interview at Mafooti, but recognising the man at once, he asked sternly:

"What are you doing, sir, with these savages in my house? Cannot you see that my wife is sick, and must not be disturbed?"

"I am sorry," Ishmael answered shamefacedly, for in his heart he was afraid of Mr. Dove, "but I am sent to you with a message from Dingaan the King, and," he added as an afterthought, "from your daughter."

"From my daughter!" exclaimed Mr. Dove eagerly. "What of her? Is she well? We cannot get any certain news of her, only rumours."

"I saw her but once." replied Ishmael, "and she was well enough, then. You

know the Zulus have made her their Inkosazana, and keep her guarded."

"Does she live quite alone then with these savages?"

"She did, but I am sorry I must tell you that she seems to have a companion now, some scoundrel of a white man with whom she has taken up," he sneered.

"My daughter take up with a scoundrel of a white man! It is false. What is this man's name?"

"I don't know, but the natives call him Dario, and say that he is young, and has fair hair, and that she is in love with him. That's all I can tell you about the man."

Mr. Dove shook his head, but his wife sat up suddenly in bed, and plucked him by the sleeve, for she had been listening intently to everything that passed.

"Dario! Young, fair hair, in love with him--" she repeated in a thick whisper, then added, "John, it is Richard Darrien grown up--the boy who saved her in the Umtooma River, years ago, and whom she has never forgotten. Oh! thank God! Thank God! With him she will be safe. I always knew that he would find her, for they belong to each other," and she sank back exhausted.

"That's what the Zulus say, that they belong to each other," replied Ishmael, with another sneer. "Perhaps they are married native fashion."

"Stop insulting my daughter, sir," said Mr. Dove angrily. "She would not take a husband as you take your wives, nor if this man is Richard Darrien, as I pray, would he be a party to such a thing. Tell me, are they coming here?"

"Not they, they are far too comfortable where they are. Also the Zulus would prevent them. But don't be sad about it, for I am sent to take you both to join her at the Great Place where you are to live."

"To join her! It is impossible," ejaculated Mr. Dove, glancing at his sick wife.

"Impossible or not, you've got to come at once, both of you. That is the King's order and the Inkosazana's wish, and what is more there is an impi outside to see that you obey. Now I give you five minutes to get ready, and then we start."

"Man, are you mad? How can my wife travel to Zululand in her state? She cannot walk a step."

"Then she can be carried," answered Ishmael callously. "Come, don't waste time in talking. Those are my orders, and I am not going to have my throat cut for either of you. If Mrs. Dove won't dress wrap her up in blankets."

"You go, John, you go," whispered his wife, "or they will kill you. Never mind about me; my time has come, and I die happy, for Richard Darrien is with Rachel."

The mention of Richard's name seemed to infuriate Ishmael. At any rate he said brutally:

"Are you coming, or must I use force?"

"Coming, you wicked villain! How can I come?" shouted Mr. Dove, for he was mad with grief and rage. "Be off with your savages. I will shoot the first man who lays a finger on my wife," and as he spoke he snatched a double-barrelled pistol which hung upon the wall and cocked it.

Ishmael turned to the Zulus who stood behind him watching this scene with curiosity.

"Seize the Shouter," he said, "and bind him. Lift the old woman on her mattress, and carry her. If she dies on the road we cannot help it."

The captains hesitated, not from fear, but because Mrs. Dove's condition moved even their savage hearts to pity.

"Why do you not obey?" roared Ishmael. "Dogs and cowards, it is the King's word. Take her up or you shall die, every man of you, you know how. Knock

down the old Evildoer with your sticks if he gives trouble."

Now the men hesitated no longer. Springing forward, several of them seized the mattress and began to lift it bodily. Mrs. Dove rose and tried to struggle from the bed, then uttered a low moaning cry, fell back, and lay still.

"You devils, you have killed her!" gasped Mr. Dove, as lifting the pistol he fired at the Zulu nearest to him, shooting him through the body so that he sank upon the floor dying. Then, fearing lest he should shoot again, the captains fell upon the poor old man, striking him with kerries and the handles of their spears, for they sought to disable him and make him drop the pistol.

As it chanced, though this was not their intention, in the confusion a heavy blow from a knobstick struck him on the temple. The second barrel of the pistol went off, and the bullet from it but just missed Ishmael who was standing to one side. When the smoke cleared away it was seen that Mr. Dove had fallen backwards on to the bed. The martyrdom he always sought and expected had overtaken him. He was quite dead. They were both dead!

The head induna in command of the impi stepped forward and looked at them, then felt their hearts.

"Wow!" he said, "these white people have 'gone beyond.' They have gone to join the spirits, both of them. What now, Ibubesi?"

Ishmael, who stood in the corner, very white-faced, and staring with round eyes, for the tragedy had taken a turn that he did not intend or expect, shook himself and rubbed his forehead with his hand, answering:

"Carry them into the Great Place, I suppose. The King ordered that they should be brought there. Why did you kill that old Shouter, you fools?" he added with irritation. "You have brought his blood and the curse of the Inkosazana on our heads."

"Wow!" answered the induna again, "you bade us strike him with sticks, and our orders were to obey you. Who would have guessed that the old man's skull was so thin from thinking? You or I would never have felt a tap like that. But they are 'gone beyond,' and we will not defile ourselves by touching them. Dead bones are of no use to anyone, and their ghosts might haunt us. Come, brethren, let us go back to the King and make report. The order was Ibubesi's, and we are not to blame."

"Yes," they answered, "let us go back and make report. Are you coming, Ibubesi?"

"Not I," he answered. "Do I want to have my neck twisted because of your clumsiness? Go you and win your own peace if you can, but if you see the Inkosazana, my advice is that you avoid her lest she learn the truth, and bring your deaths upon you, for, know, she travels hither, and she called these folk father and mother."

"Without doubt we will avoid her," said the captain, "who fear her terrible curse. But, Ibubesi, it is on you that it will fall, not on us who did but obey you as we were bidden; yes, on you she will bring down death before this moon dies. Make your peace with the Heavens, if you can, Ibubesi, as we go to try to make ours with the King."

"Would you bewitch me, you ill-omened dog?" shouted Ishmael, wiping the sweat of fear off his brow, "May you soon be stiff!"

"Nay, nay, Ibubesi, it is you who shall be stiff. The Inkosazana will see to that, and were I not sure of it I would make you so myself, who am a noble who will not be called names by a white umfagozan, a low-born fellow who plots for blood, but leaves its shedding to brave men. Farewell, Ibubesi; if the jackals leave anything of you after the Inkosazana has spoken, we will return to bury your bones," and he turned to go.

"Stay," cried the dying man on the floor, "would you leave me here in pain, my brothers?"

The induna stepped to him and examined him.

"It is mortal," he said, shaking his head, "right through the liver. Why did not the white man's thunder smite Ibubesi instead of you, and save the Inkosazana some trouble? Well, your arms are still strong and here is a

spear; you know where to strike. Be quick with your messages. Yes, yes, I will see that they are delivered. Good-night, my brother. Do you remember how we stood side by side in that big fight twenty years ago, when the Pondo giant got me down and you fell on the top of me and thrust upwards and killed him? It was a very good fight, was it not? We will talk it over again in the World of Spirits. Good-night, my brother. Yes, yes, I will deliver the message to your little girl, and tell her where the necklace is to be found, and that you wish her to name her firstborn son after you. Good-night. Use that assegai at once, for your wound must be painful, or perhaps as you are down upon the ground Ibubesi will do it for you. Good-night, my brother, and Ibubesi, goodnight to you also. We cross the Tugela by another drift, wait you here for the Inkosazana, and tell her how the Shouter died."

Then they turned and went. The wounded man watched them pass the door, and when the last of them had gone he used the assegai upon himself, and with his failing hand flung it feebly at Ishmael.

The dying Zulu's spear struck Ishmael, who had turned his head away, upon the cheek, just pricking it and causing the blood to flow, no more.

Ishmael was still also, paralysed almost, or so he seemed, for even the pain of the cut did not make him move. He stared at the bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Dove; he stared at the dead Zulu, and in his heart a voice cried:

"You have murdered them. By now they are pleading to God for vengeance on you, Ishmael, the outcast. You will never dare to be alone again, for they will haunt you."

As he thought it the relaxed hand of the old clergyman who had fallen in a sitting posture on the bed, slipped from his wounded head which he had clasped just before he died, and for a moment seemed to point at him. He shivered, but still he could not stir. How dreadful and solemn was that face! And those eyes, how they searched out the black record of his heart! The quiet rays of the afternoon sun suddenly flowed in through the window place and illumined the awful, accusing face till it shone like that of a saint in glory. A drop of blood from the cut upon his cheek splashed on to the floor, and the noise of it struck on his strained nerves loud as a pistol-shot. Blood, his own blood wherewith he must pay for that which he had shed. The sight and the thought seemed to break the spell. With an oath he bounded out of the room like a frightened wolf, those dead staring at him as he went, and rushed from the house that held them.

Beyond its walls Ishmael paused. The Zulus had fled in one direction, and the inhabitants of Ramah in another; there was no one to be seen. His eye fell upon the dense mass of bush above the station, and he remembered the message that he had sent to his own people to meet him there. Perhaps they had already arrived. He would go to see, he who was in such sore need of human company. As he went his numbed faculties returned to him, and in the open light of day some of his terror passed. He began to think again. What was done was done; he could not bring the dead back to life. He was not really to blame, and after all, things had worked out well for him. Save for this white man, Dario, Rachel was now alone in the world, and dead people did not speak, there was no one to tell her of his share in the

tragedy. Why should she not turn to him who had no one else to whom she could go? The white man, if he were still with her, could be got rid of somehow; very likely he would run away, and they two would be left quite alone. At any rate it was for her sake that he had entered on this black road of sin, and what did one step more matter, the step that led him to his reward? Of course it might lead him somewhere else. Rachel was a woman to be feared, and the Zulus were to be feared, and other things to which he could give no shape or name, but that he felt pressing round him, were still more to be feared. Perhaps he would do best to fly, far into the interior, or by ship to some other land where none would know him and his black story. What! Fly companioned by those ghosts, and leave Rachel, the woman for whom he burned, with this Dario, whom the Zulus said she loved, and with whom her mother, just before her end, had declared that she would be safe? Never. She was his; he had bought her with blood, and he would have the due the devil owed him.

He was in the bush now, and a voice called him, that of his head man.

"Come out, you dog," he said, searching the dense foliage with his eyes, and the man appeared, saluting him humbly.

"We received your message and we have come, Inkoos. We are but just arrived. What has chanced here that the town is so still?"

"The Zulus have been and gone. They have killed the white Teacher and his wife, though I thought to save them--look at my wound. Also the people are

fled."

"Ah!" replied the head man, "that was an ill deed, for he was holy, and a great prophet, and doubtless his spirit is strong to revenge. Well for you is it, Master, that you had no hand in the deed, as at first I feared might be the case, for know that last night a strange dog climbed on to your hut and howled there and would not be driven away, nor could we kill it with spears, so we think it was a ghost. All your wives thought that evil had drawn near to you."

Ishmael struck him across the mouth, exclaiming.

"Be silent, you accursed wizard, or you shall howl louder than your ghost-dog."

"I meant no harm," answered the man humbly, but with a curious gleam in his eye. "What are your commands, Chief?"

"That we watch here. I think that the daughter of the Shouter, she who is called Inkosazana-y-Zoola, is coming, and she may need help. Have you brought thirty men with you as I bade you through my messengers?"

"Aye, Ibubesi, they are all hidden in the bush. I go to summon them, though I think that the mighty Inkosazana, who can command all the Zulu impis and all the spirits of the dead, will need little help from us."