

## CHAPTER XV

### RACHEL COMES HOME

As Rachel had travelled up from the Tugela to the Great Place, so she travelled back from the Great Place to the Tugela in state and dignity such as became a thing divine, perhaps the first white woman, moreover, who had ever entered Zululand. All day she rode alone, Tamboosa leading the white ox before her and Richard following behind, while in front and to the rear marched the serried ranks of the impi, her escort. At night, as before, she slept alone in the empty kraals provided for her, attended by the best-born maidens, Richard being lodged in some hut without the fence.

So at length, about noon one day, they reached the banks of the Tugela, not many hours after Ishmael had crossed it, and camped there. Now, after she had eaten, Rachel sent for Richard, with whom she had found but few opportunities to talk during that journey. He came and stood before her, as all must do, and she addressed him in English while the spies and captains watched him sullenly, for they were angry at this use of a foreign tongue which they could not understand. Preserving a cold and distant air, she asked him of his health, and how he had fared.

"Well enough," he answered. "And now, what are your plans? The river is in flood, you will find it difficult to cross. Still it can be done, for I

hear that the white man, Ishmael, of whom you told me, forded it this morning with a company of armed men."

Aware of the eyes that watched her, with an effort Rachel showed no surprise.

"How is that?" she asked. "I thought the man fled from Zululand many days ago. Why then does he leave the country with soldiers?"

"I can't tell you, Rachel. There is something queer about the business. When I inquire, everyone shrugs his shoulders. They say that the King knows his own business. If I were you I would ask no questions, for you will learn nothing, and if you do not ask they will think that you know all."

"I understand," she said. "But, Richard, I must cross the river to-day. You and I must cross it alone and reach Ramah to-night. Richard, something weighs upon my heart; I am terribly afraid."

"How will you manage it?" he asked, ignoring the rest.

"I can't tell you yet, Richard, but keep my horse and yours saddled there where you are encamped," and she nodded towards a hut about fifty yards away. "I think that I shall come to you presently. Now go."

So he saluted her and went.

Presently Rachel sent for Tamboosa and the captains, and asked the state of the river which was out of sight about half a mile from them. They replied that it was "very angry"; none could think of attempting its passage, as much water was coming down.

"Is it so?" she said indifferently. "Well, I must look," and with slow steps she walked towards the hut where she knew the horses were, followed by Tamboosa and the captains.

Reaching it, she saw them standing saddled on its further side, and by them Richard, seated on the ground smoking. As she came he rose and saluted her, but, taking no heed of him, she went to her grey mare, and, placing her foot in the stirrup, sprang to the saddle, motioning to him to do likewise.

"Whither goest thou, Inkosazana?" asked Tamboosa anxiously.

"To throw a charm on the waters," she answered, "so that they may run down and I can cross them to morrow. Come, Dario, and come Tamboosa, but let the rest stay behind, since common eyes must not look upon my magic, and he who dares to look shall be struck with blindness."

The captains hesitated, and turning on them fiercely she commanded them to obey her word lest some evil should befall them.

Then they fell back and she rode towards the Tugela, followed by Richard on horseback and Tamboosa on foot. Arrived at that spot on the bank where she had received the salutation of the regiment when she entered Zululand, Rachel saw at once that although the great river was full it could easily be forded on horseback. Calling Richard to her, she said:

"We must go, and now, while there is no one to stop us but Tamboosa. Do not hurt him unless he tries to spear you, for he has been kind to me."

Then she addressed Tamboosa, saying:

"I have spoken to the waters and they will not harm me. The hour has come when I must leave my people for a while, and go forward alone with my white servant, Dario. These are my commands, that none should dare to follow me save only yourself, Tamboosa, who can bring on the white ox with its load so soon as the water has run down and deliver them to me at Ramah. Do you hear me?"

"I hear, Inkosazana," answered the old induna, "and thy words split my heart."

"Yet you will obey them, Tamboosa."

"Yes, I will obey them who know what would befall me otherwise, and that it is the King's will that none should dare to thwart thee, even if they could. Yet I think that very soon thou wilt return to thy children."

Therefore, why not abide with us until to-morrow, when the waters will be low?"

"Tamboosa," said Rachel, leaning forward and looking him in the eyes, "why did Ibubesi cross this river with soldiers but a few hours ago--Ibubesi, who fled from the Great Place when the moon was young that now is full? Look, there goes their spoor in the mud."

"I know not," he answered, looking down. "Inkosazana, to-morrow I will bring on the white ox to Ramah, and I will bring it alone."

"So be it, Tamboosa, but if by chance you should not find me, ask where Ibubesi is, and if need be, seek for me with an impi, Tamboosa--for me and for this white man, Dario," and again she bent forward and looked at him.

"I know not what thou meanest, Inkosazana," he replied. "But of this be sure, that if I cannot find thee, then I will seek for thee, if need be with every spear in Zululand at my back."

"Farewell, then, Tamboosa, and to the regiment farewell also. Say to the captains that it is my will that they should return to the Great Place, bearing my greetings to the King and those of the white lord, Dario. Look for me to-morrow at Ramah."

Then, followed by Richard, she rode her horse past him into the lip of the water. As she went Tamboosa drew himself up and gave her the Bayète, the

royal salute.

Although it was red with earth and flecked with foam and the roar of it was loud as it sped towards the sea, the river did not prove very difficult to ford. But once, indeed, were the horses swept off their feet and forced to swim, and then but for a few paces, after which they regained them, and plunged to the farther bank without accident.

"Free at last, Rachel, with our lives before us and nothing more to fear," called Richard in his cheery voice, as he forced his horse alongside of hers. Then suddenly he caught sight of her face and saw that it was white and drawn as though with pain; also that she leaned forward on her saddle, clasping its pommel as though she were about to faint.

"What is it?" he exclaimed in alarm. "Did the flood frighten you, Rachel--are you ill?"

For a few moments she made no answer, then straightened herself with a sigh and said in a low voice:

"Richard, I have been so long among those Zulus playing the part of a spirit that I begin to think I am one, or that their magic has got hold of me. I tell you that in the roar of the water I heard voices--the voices of my father and mother calling me and speaking of you--and, Richard, they seemed to be in great fear and pain, for a minute or more I heard them, then a dreadful cold wind blew on me not this wind, it seemed to come from

above--and everything passed away, leaving my mind numb and empty so that I do not remember how we came out of the river. Don't laugh at me, Richard; it is so. The Kaffirs are right; I have some power of the sort. Remember how I saw you travelling towards me in the pool."

"Why should I laugh at you, dearest?" he asked anxiously, for something of this uncanny fear passed from her mind into his, with which it was in tune. "Indeed, I don't laugh who know that you are not quite like other women. But, Rachel, the strain of those two months has worn you out, and now the reaction is too much. Perhaps it is nothing."

"Perhaps," she answered sadly, "I hope so. Richard, what is the time?"

"About a quarter to six, to judge by the sun," he answered,

"Then we shall not be able to reach Ramah before dark."

"No, Rachel, but there is a good moon."

"Yes, there is a good moon; I wonder what it will show us," and she shivered.

Then they pressed their horses to a canter and rode on, speaking little, for the fount of words seemed to be frozen in them, although Richard recollected, with a curious sense of wonder how he had looked forward to this opportunity of long, unfettered talk with Rachel and how much he had

to tell her. Over hill and valley, through bush and stream they rode, till at last with the short twilight they reached the plain that ran to Ramah. Then came the dark in which they must ride slowly, till presently the round edge of the moon pushed itself up above the shoulder of a hill and there was light again--pure, peaceful light that turned the veld to silver and shone whitely on the pale face of Rachel.

Ramah was before them. They had met no living thing save some wild game trekking to the water, and heard no sound save the distant roar of some beast of prey. Ramah was before them. The moon shone on the roofs of the Mission-house and the little church and the clusters of Kaffir huts beyond. But, oh! it was silent: no cattle lowed, no child cried, nor did the bell of the church ring for evening prayer as at this hour it should have done. Also no lamp showed in the windows of the Mission-house and no smoke rose from the cooking fires of the kraals.

"Where are all the people, Richard?" whispered Rachel. "There is the place unharmed, but where are the people?"

But Richard could only shake his head: the terror of something dreadful had got hold of him also, and he knew not what to say.

Now they had come to the wall of the Mission-house and sprang from their horses which they left loose. As they advanced side by side towards the open gate, something leapt the stoep and rushed through it. It was a striped hyena; they could see the hair bristle on its back as it passed



them with a whining growl. Hand in hand they ran to the house across the little garden patch--Rachel, led by some instinct, guiding her companion straight to her parents' room whereof the windows, that opened like doors, stood wide as the gate had done.

One more moment and they were there; another, and the moonlight showed them all.

For a long while--to Richard it seemed hours--Rachel said nothing; only stood still like the statue of a woman, staring at those cold faces that looked back at her through the unearthly moonlight. Indeed, it was Richard who spoke first, feeling that if he did not this dreadful silence would choke him or cause him to faint.

"The Zulus have murdered them," he said hoarsely, glancing at the dead Kaffir on the floor.

"No," she answered in a cold, small voice; "Ishmael, Ishmael!" and she pointed to something that lay at his feet.

Richard stooped and picked it up. It was a fly wisp of rhinoceros horn which the man had let fall when the Zulu's spear struck him.

"I know it," she went on; "he always carried it. He is the real murderer. The Zulus would not have dared," and she choked and was silent.

"Let me think," said Richard confusedly. "There is something in my mind. What is it? Oh! I know. If you are right that devil has not done this for nothing. He is somewhere near; he wants to take you"; and he ground his teeth at the thought, then added: "Rachel, we must get out of this and ride for Durban, at once--at once; the white people will protect you there."

"Who will bury my father and mother?" she asked in the same cold voice.

"I do not know, it does not matter, the living are more than the dead. I can return and see to it afterwards."

"You are right," she answered. Then she knelt down by the bed and lifting her beautiful, agonised face, put up some silent prayer. Next she rose and kissed first her father, then her mother, kissed their dead brows in a last farewell and turned to go. As she went her eyes fell upon the assegai that lay near to the dead Zulu. Stooping down, she took it and with it in her hand passed on to the stoep. Here her strength seemed to fail her, for she reeled against the wall, then with an effort flung herself into Richard's arms, moaning:

"Only you left, Richard, only you. Oh! if you were taken from me also, what would become of me?"

A moment later she became aware that the stoep was swarming with men who seemed to arise out of the shadows. A voice said in the Kaffir tongue:

"Seize that fellow and bind him."

Instantly, before he could do anything, before he could even turn, Richard was torn from her, struggling furiously, and thrown to the ground. Rachel sprang to the wall and stood with her back to it, raising the spear she held. It flashed into her mind that these were Zulus, and of Zulus she was not afraid.

"What dogs are these," she cried, "that dare to lift a hand against the Inkosazana and her servant?"

The black men about her swayed and murmured, then made way for a man who walked up the steps of the stoep. The moonlight fell upon him and she saw that it was Ishmael.

"Rachel," he said, taking off his hat politely, "these are my people. We saw that white scoundrel assault you, and of course seized him at once. As you know a dreadful thing has happened here. This afternoon the Zulus killed your father and mother, or rather they killed your father, and your mother, who was ill, died with the shock, because they refused to go to Zululand whither Dingaan had ordered that they should be taken. So seeing that you were travelling here I came to rescue you, lest you should fall into their hands, and," he added lamely, "you know the rest."

Ishmael had spoken in English, but Rachel answered him in Zulu.

"I know all, Night-prowler," she cried aloud. "I know that my father and mother were killed by your order, and in your presence; their spirits told me so but now, and for that crime I sentence you to death!" and she pointed at him with the spear. "Heaven above and earth beneath," she went on, "bear witness that I sentence this man to death. People of the Zulus, hear me in your kraals far away. Hear me, Dingaan, sitting in your Great Place. Hear me, every captain and induna, hear the voice of your Inkosazana: I sentence this man to death, since because of him there is blood between me and my people, the blood of my father and my mother. Now, Night-prowler, do your worst before you die, but know this, you his servants, that if I am harmed, or if this white man, the chief Dario, is harmed, then you shall die also, every one of you. What is your will, Night-prowler?"

"I will tell you that at Mafooti," answered Ishmael, trying to look bold. "I am not afraid of you like those Zulu savages, and Dingaan is a long way off. Will you come quietly? I hope so, for I don't want to hurt you or put you to shame, but you've got to come, and this Dario, too. If you make any trouble, I will have him killed at once. Understand, Rachel, that if you don't come, he shall be killed at once. My people may be afraid of you, but they won't mind cutting his throat," he added significantly.

"Never mind about me," said Richard in a choked voice from the ground where he was pinned down by the Kaffirs. "Do what you think best for yourself, Rachel."

Now Rachel, whose wits were made keen by doubt and anguish, looked at the faces of the natives about her, and even in that dim moonlight read them like a book, as she could always do. She saw that they were afraid of her, and that if she commanded them, they would let her go free, whatever their master might say or do. But she saw also that Ishmael spoke truth when he declared that they had no such dread of Richard, and might even believe that he was doing her some violence. If she escaped therefore it would be at the cost of Richard's life. Instantly in her bold fashion she made up her mind. It was borne in upon her that she had declared the truth; that Ishmael was doomed, that he had no power to work her any hurt, however sore her case might seem. Since Richard's life hung on it she would go with him.

"Servants of Ibubesi," she said, "lift the white chief Dario to his feet, and listen to my words."

They obeyed her at once, without even waiting for their master to speak, only holding Richard by the arms.

Now the most of the men went into the garden followed by Ishmael, and taking Richard with them, but a few remained to watch her. From this garden presently arose a sound of great quarrelling. Rachel was too far off to understand what was said, but from the sounds she judged that Ishmael was giving orders to his people which they refused to obey, for she could hear him cursing them furiously. Presently she heard something

else--the loud report of a gun followed by groans. Then a Kaffir ran up to them and whispered something to those who surrounded her; it was that head man whom Ishmael had struck on the mouth in the bush when he told him that a dog had howled upon his hut, and his face was very frightened.

Rachel leaned against the wall and looked at him, for she could not speak, she who thought that Richard had been murdered.

"Have no fear, Inkosazana," said the man, answering the question in her eyes. "Ibubesi has killed one of us because we do not like this business and would clean it off our hands, that is all. The chief Dario is safe, and I swear to thee that no harm shall come to him from us. We will care for him and protect him to the death, and if we lead him away a prisoner it is because we must, since otherwise Ibubesi will kill us all. Therefore be merciful to us when the spear of thy power is lifted."

Before Rachel could answer Ishmael's voice was heard asking why they did not bring the Inkosazana as the horses were ready.

"I pray thee come, Zoola," said the man hurriedly "or he will shoot more of us."

So Rachel walked down the steps of the stoep in front of them, holding her head high, leaving behind her the house of Ramah and its dead. At the gate of the garden stood the horses, on one of which, his own, Richard was already mounted, his arms bound, his feet made fast beneath it with a hide

rope. Her path lay past him, and as she went by he said in a voice that was choking with rage:

"I am helpless, I cannot save you, but our hour will come."

"Yes, Richard," she answered quietly, "our hour will come when his has gone," and with the spear in her hand once more she pointed at Ishmael, who stood by watching them sullenly. Then she mounted her horse--how she could never remember--and they were separated.

After this she seemed to hear Ishmael talking to her, arguing, explaining, but she made no answer to his words. Her mind was a blank, and all she knew was that they were riding on for hours. Her tired horse stumbled up a pass and down its further side. Then she heard dogs bark and saw lights. The horse stopped and she slid from it, and as she was too exhausted to walk, was supported or carried into a hut, as she thought by women who seemed very much afraid of touching her, after which she seemed to sink into blackness.

Rachel woke from her stupor to find herself lying on a bed in a great Kaffir hut that was furnished like a European room, for in it were chairs and a table, also rough window places closed with reed mats that took the place of glass. Through the smoke-hole at the top of the hut struck a straight ray of sunlight, by which she judged that it must be about midday. She began to think, till by degrees everything came back to her, and in that hour she nearly died of horror and of grief. Indeed she was

mind to die. There at her side lay a means of death--the assegai which she had found by the body of the Zulu in Ramah, and none had taken from her. She lifted it and felt its edge, then laid it down again. Into the darkness of her despair some comfort seemed to creep. She was sure that Richard lived, and if she died, he would die also. While he lived, why should she die? Moreover, it would be a crime which she should only dare when all hope had gone and she stood face to face with shame.

Thrusting aside these thoughts she rose. On the table stood curdled milk and other food of which she forced herself to eat, that her strength might return to her, for she knew that she would need it all. Then she washed and dressed herself, for in a corner of the hut was water in wooden bowls, and even a comb and other things, that apparently had been set there for her to use. This done, she went to the door, which was made like that of a house, and finding that it was not secured, opened it and looked out.

Beyond was a piece of ground floored with the soil taken from ant-heaps, and polished black after the native fashion. This space was surrounded by a high stone wall, and had at the end of it another very strong door. In its centre grew a large, shady tree under which was placed a bench. Taking the assegai with her she went to the door in the high wall and found that it was barred on the further side. Then she returned and sat down on the bench under the tree.

It seemed that she had been observed, for a little while afterwards bolts were shot back, the door in the wall opened, and Ishmael entered, closing it behind him. She looked at the man, and at the sight of his handsome,



furtive face, his dark, guilt-laden eyes, her gorge rose. She was alone in this secret place with the murderer of her father and her mother, who sought her love. Yet, strangely enough, her heart was filled not with tears, but with contempt and icy anger. She did not shrink away from him as he came towards her in his gaudy clothes, with an assumed air of insolent confidence, but sat pale and proud, as she had sat at Umgugundhlovu, when the Zulus brought their causes before her for judgment.

He advanced into the shadow of the tree, took off his hat with a flourish and bowed. Then as she made no answer to these salutations, but only searched him with her grey eyes, he began to speak in jerky sentences.

"I hope you have slept well, Rachel; I am, glad to see you looking so fresh. I was afraid that you would be over-tired after your long day. You rode many miles. Of course what you found at Ramah must have been a great shock to you. I want to explain to you quietly that I am not in the least to blame about that terrible business. It was those accursed Zulus who exceeded their orders."

So he went on, pausing between each remark for an answer, but no answer came. At length he stopped, confused, and Rachel, lifting the assegai, examined its blade, and asked him suddenly:

"Whose blood is on this spear? Yours?"

"A little of it, perhaps," he answered. "That fool of a Kaffir flourished it about after your father shot him and cut me with it accidentally," and he pointed to the wound on his face.

Rachel bent down and began to rub the blade against the foot of the bench as though to clean it. He did not know what she meant by this act, yet it frightened him.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She paused in her task and said, looking up at him:

"I do not wish that your blood should defile mine even in death," and went on with her cleansing of the spear.

He watched her for a little while, then broke out:

"Curse it all! I don't understand you. What do you mean?"

"Ask the Zulus," she answered. "They understand me, and they will tell you. Or if there is no time, ask my father and mother--afterwards."

Ishmael paled visibly, then recovered himself with an effort and said:

"Let us finish with all this witch-doctor nonsense, and come to business. I had nothing to do with the death of your parents, indeed, I was wounded

in trying to protect them----"

"Then why do I see both of them behind you with such accusing eyes?" she asked quietly.

He stalled, turned his head and stared about him.

"You won't frighten me like that," he went on. "I am not a silly Kaffir, so give it up. Look here, Rachel, you know I have loved you for a long while, and though you treat me so badly I love you more than ever now. Will you marry me?"

"I told you last night that you would be dead in a few days. Do not waste your time in talking of marriage. Sit in the dust and repent your sins before you go down into the dust."

"All right, Rachel, I know you are a good prophet----"

"Noie, too, is a good prophet," she broke in reflectively. "You used the Zulus to kill her father and mother also, did you not? Do you remember a message that she gave you from Seyapi one evening, down by the sea, before you kidnapped her to be a bait to trap me in Zululand?"

"Remember!" he answered, scowling. "Am I likely to forget her devilries? If you are the witch, she is the familiar, the black ehlosé (spirit) who whispers in your ears. Had she not gone I should never have caught you."

"But she will come back--although I fear not in time to bid you farewell."

"You tell me that I shall soon be dead," he exclaimed, ignoring this talk of Noie. "Well, I am not frightened. I don't believe you know anything about it, but if you are right the more reason I should live while I can. According to you, Rachel, we have no time to waste in a long engagement. When is it to be?"

"Never!" she answered contemptuously, "in this or any other world. Never! Why, you are hateful to me; when I see you, I shiver as though a snake crawled across my foot, and when I look at your hands they are red with blood, the blood of my parents and of Noie's parents, and of many others. That is my answer."

He looked at her a while, then said:

"You seem to forget that I am only asking for what I can take. No one can see you or hear you here, except my women. You are in my power at last, Rachel Dove."

These words which Ishmael intended should frighten her, as they might well have done, produced, as it chanced, a quite different effect. Rachel broke into a scornful laugh.

"Look," she said, pointing to an eagle that circled so high in the blue

heavens above them that it seemed no larger than a hawk, "that bird is more in your power, and nearer to you than I am. Before you laid a finger on me I would find a dozen means of death, but that, I tell you again, you will never live to do."

For a while Ishmael was silent, weighing her words in his mind. Apparently he could find no answer to them, for when he spoke again it was of another matter.

"You say that you hate me, Rachel. If so, it is because of that accursed fellow, Darrien--whom you don't hate. Well, he, at any rate, is in my power. Now look here. You've got to make your choice. Either you stop all this nonsense and become my wife, or--your friend Darrien dies. Do you hear me?"

Rachel made no answer. Now for the first time she was really frightened, and feared lest her speech should show it.

"You have been through a lot," he went on, slowly; "you are tired out, and don't know what you say, and you believe that I killed the old people, which I didn't, and, of course, that has set you against me. Now, I don't want to be rough, or to hurry you, especially as I have plenty of things to see about before we are married. So I give you three days. If you don't change your mind at the end of them, the young man dies, that's all, and afterwards we will see whether or no you are in my power. Oh! you needn't stare. I've gone too far to turn back, and I don't mind a few extra risks.

Meanwhile make yourself easy, dear Richard shall be well looked after, and I won't bother you with any more love-making. That can wait."

Rachel rose from her seat and pointed with the spear to the door in the wall.

"Go," she said.

"All right, I am going, Rachel. Good-bye till this time three days. I hope my women will make you as comfortable as possible in this rough place. Ask them for anything you want. Good-bye, Rachel," and he went, bolting the wall door behind him.