

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE THREE DAYS

He was gone, his presence had ceased to poison the air, and, the long strain over, Rachel gave a gasp of relief. Then she sat down upon the bench and began to think. Her position, and that of Richard, was desperate; it seemed scarcely possible that they could escape with their lives, for if he died, she would die also--as to that she was quite determined. But at least they had three days, and who could say what would happen in three days? For instance, they might escape somehow, the Providence in which she believed might intervene, or the Zulus might come to seek her, if they only knew where she was gone. Oh! why had she not brought a guard of them with her to Ramah? At least they would never have insulted her, and Ishmael's shrift would have been short.

She wondered why he had given her three days. A reason suggested itself to her mind. Perhaps he believed what she had told him--that she was as safe from him as the eagle in the air--and was sure that the only way to snare her was by using Richard as a lure, in other words, by threatening to murder him. It is true that he could have brought the matter to a head at once, but then, if she remained obdurate, he must carry out his threat, and this, she believed, he was afraid to do unless it was absolutely forced upon him. Doubtless he had reflected that in three days she might weaken and give way.

Whilst Rachel brooded thus the door in the wall opened, and through it came three women, who saluted her respectfully, and announced that they were sent to clean the hut, and attend upon her. Rachel took stock of them carefully. Two of them were young, ordinary, good-looking Kaffirs, but the third was between thirty and forty, and no longer attractive, having become old early, as natives do. Moreover, her face was sad and sympathetic. Rachel asked her her name. She answered that it was Mami, and that they were all the wives of Ibubesi.

The women went about their duties in the hut in silence, and a while afterwards announced that all was made clean, and that they would return presently with food. Rachel answered that it was not necessary that three of them should be put to so much trouble. It would be enough if Mami came. She desired to be waited on by Mami alone, her sisters need not come any more.

They all three saluted again, and said that she should be obeyed; the two younger ones with alacrity. To Rachel it was evident that these women were much afraid of her. Her reputation had reached them, and they shrank from this task of attending on the mighty Inkosazana of the Zulus in her cage, not knowing what evil it might bring upon them.

An hour later the door was unbolted, and Mami reappeared with the food that had been very carefully cooked. Rachel ate of it, for she was determined to grow strong again, she who might need all her strength, and

while she ate talked to Mami, who squatted on the ground before her. Soon she drew her story from her. The woman was Ishmael's first Kaffir wife, but he had never cared for her, and against all law and custom she was discarded, and made a slave. Even some of her cattle had been taken from her and given to other wives. So her heart was bitter against Ishmael, and she said that although once she was proud to be the wife of a white man, now she wished that she had never seen his face.

Here, then, was material ready to Rachel's hand, but she did not press the matter too far at this time. Only she said that she wished Mami to stay with her after the evening meal, and to sleep in her hut, as she was not accustomed to be alone at night. Mami replied that she would do so gladly if Ibubesi allowed it, although she was not worthy of such honour.

As it happened, Ishmael did allow it, for he thought that he could trust this old drudge, and told her to act as a spy upon Rachel, and report to him all that she said or did. Very soon Rachel found this out and warned her against obeying him, since if she did so it would come to her knowledge, and then great evil would fall on one who betrayed the words of the Inkosazana.

Mami answered that she knew it, and that Rachel need not be afraid. Any tale would do for Ishmael, whom she hated. Then, saying little herself, Rachel encouraged her to talk, which Mami did freely. So she heard some news. She learned, for instance, that the whole town of Mafooti, whereof Ibubesi was chief, which counted some sixty or seventy heads of families,

was much disturbed by the events of the last few days. They did not like the Inkosazana being brought there, thinking that where she went the Zulus would follow, and as they were of Zulu blood themselves, they knew what that meant. They were alarmed at the deaths of the white sky-doctor, who was called Shouter, and his wife, with which Ibubesi had something to do, for they feared lest they should be held responsible for their blood. They objected to the imprisonment of the white chief, Dario, among them, because "he had hurt no one, and was under the mantle of the Inkosazana, who was a spirit, not a woman," and who had warned them that if any harm came to her or to him, death would be their reward. They were angry, also, because Ibubesi had killed one of them in some quarrel about the chief Dario at Ramah. Still, they were so much afraid of Ibubesi, who was a great tyrant, that they did not dare to interfere with him and his plans, lest they should lose their cattle, or, perhaps, their lives. So they did not know what to do. As for Ibubesi himself, he was actively engaged in strengthening the fortifications of the place; even the old people and the children were being forced to carry stones to the walls, from which it was evident that he feared some attack.

When Rachel had gathered this and much other information concerning Ishmael's past and habits, she asked Mami if she could convey a message from her to Richard. The woman answered that she would try on the following morning. So Rachel told her to say that she was safe and well, but that he must watch his footsteps, as both of them were in great danger. More she did not dare to say, fearing lest Mami should betray her, or be beaten till she confessed everything. Then, as there was nothing

more to be done, Rachel lay down and slept as best she could.

The next day passed in much the same fashion as the first had done. For the most of it Rachel sat under the tree in the walled yard, companioned only by her terrible thoughts and fears. Nobody came near her, and nothing happened. In the morning Mami went out, and returning at the dinner hour, told Rachel that she had seen Ishmael, who had questioned her closely as to what the Inkosazana had done and said, to which she replied that she had only eaten and slept, and invoked the spirits on her knees. As for words, none had passed her lips. She had not been able to get near the huts where Dario was in prison, as Ishmael was watching her. For the rest, the work of fortification went on without cease, even Ishmael's own wives being employed thereon.

In the afternoon Mami went out again and did not return till night, when she had much to tell. To begin with, while the sentry was dozing, being wearied with carrying stones to the wall, she had managed to approach the fence of the hut where Richard was confined. She said that he was walking up and down inside the fence with his hands tied, and she had spoken to him through a crack in the reeds, and given him Rachel's message. He listened eagerly, and bade her tell the Inkosazana that he thanked her for her words; that he, too, was strong and well, though much troubled in mind, but the future was in the hands of the Heavens, and that she must keep a high heart. Just then the sentry woke up, so Mami could not wait to hear any more.

That evening, however, a lad who had been sent out of the town to drive in some cattle, had returned with the tidings which she, Mami, heard him deliver to Ibubesi with her own ears.

He said that whilst he was collecting the oxen, a ringed Zulu came upon him, who from his manner and bearing he took to be a great chief, although he was alone, and seemed to be tired with walking. The Zulu has asked him if it were true that the Inkosazana and the white chief Dario were in prison at Mafooti, and when he hesitated about replying, threatened him with his assegai, saying that he would cut out his heart unless he told the truth. The Zulu replied that he knew it, as he had just come from Ramah, where he had seen strange things, and spoken with a man of Ibubesi's, whom he found dying in the garden of the house. Then he had given him this message:

"Say to Ibubesi that I know all his wickedness, and that if the Inkosazana is harmed, or if drop of the blood of the white chief, Dario, is shed, I will destroy him and everything that lives in his town down to the rats. Say to him also that he cannot escape, as already he is ringed in by the children of the Shouter, who have come back, and are watching him."

The lad had asked who it was that sent such a message, whereon he answered, "I am the Horn of the Black Bull; I am the Trunk of the Elephant; I am the Mouth of Dinga'an."

Then straightway he turned and departed at a run towards Zululand.

Moreover, Mami described the man in the words of the lad, and Rachel thought that he could be none other than Tamboosa, whom she had commanded to follow her with the white ox. Mami added that when he received this message Ibubesi seemed much disturbed, though to his people he declared that it was all nonsense, as Dingaan's Mouth would not come alone, or deliver the King's word to a boy. But the people thought otherwise, and murmured among themselves, fearing the terrible vengeance of Dingaan.

On the next day Mami went out again. At nightfall, when she returned, she told Rachel that she had not found it possible to approach the huts where Dario was, as the hole she made in the fence to speak with him had been discovered, and a stricter watch was kept over him. Ibubesi, she said, was in an ill humour, and working furiously to finish his fortifications, as he was now sure that the town was being watched, either by the Kaffirs of Ramah, or others. As for the people of Mafooti, they were grumbling very much, both on account of the heavy-labour of working at the walls, and because they were in terror of being attacked and killed in payment for the evil deeds of their chief. Mami declared, indeed, that so great was their fear and discontent, that she thought they would desert the town in a body, were it not that they dreaded lest they should fall into the hands of the Kaffirs who were watching it. Rachel asked her whether they would not then take her and Dario and deliver them up to the Zulus, or to the white people on the coast. Mami answered she thought they would be afraid to do this, as Ibubesi alone had guns, and would shoot plenty of them; also if the Zulus found them with their Inkosazana they would kill them. She added that she had seen Ibubesi, who bade her tell the Inkosazana that

he was coming for her answer on the morrow.

Rachel slept ill that night. The space of her reprieve had gone by, and next morning she must face the issue. For herself she did not so greatly care, for at the worst she had a refuge whither Ishmael could not follow her--the grave. After all she had endured it seemed to her that this must be a peaceful place; moreover, in her case what Power could blame her? But there was Richard to be thought of. If she refused Ishmael he swore that he would kill Richard. And yet how could she pay that price even to save her lover's life? Perhaps he would not kill him after all; perhaps he would be afraid of the vengeance of the Zulus, and was only trying to frighten her. Ah! if only the Zulus would come--before it was too late! It was scarcely to be hoped for. Tamboosa, if it were he who had spoken with the lad, would not have had time to return to Zululand and collect an impi, and when they did come, the deed might be done. If only these servants of Ibubesi would rise against him and kill him, or carry off Richard and herself! Alas! they feared the man too much, and she could not get at them to persuade them. There was nothing that she could do except pray. Richard and she must take their chance. Things must go as they were decreed.

If she could have seen Ishmael at this hour and read his thoughts, that sight and knowledge might have brought some comfort to her tortured heart. The man was seated in his hut alone, staring at the floor and pulling his long black beard with hands rough from toiling at the walls. He was drinking also, stiff tots of rum and water, but the fiery liquor seemed to



bring him no comfort. As he drank, he thought. He was determined to get possession of Rachel; that desire had become a madness with him. He could never abandon it while he lived. But she might not live. She had sworn that she would rather die than become his wife, and she was not a woman who broke her word. Also she hated him bitterly, and with good cause. There was only one way to work on her--through her love for this man, Richard Darrien; for that she did love him, he had little doubt. If it were choice between yielding and the death of Darrien, then perhaps she might give way. But there came the rub.

Dingaan had sworn to him that if he made Darrien's blood to flow, then he should be killed, and, like Rachel, Dingaan kept his oaths. Moreover, that Zulu who met the cattle herd had sworn it again in almost the same words. Therefore it would seem that if he wished to continue to breathe, Darrien's blood must not be made to flow. All the rest might be explained when the impi came, as it would do sooner or later, especially if he could show to them that the Inkosazana was his willing wife, but the murder of Darrien could never be explained. Well, the man might die, or seem to die, and then who could hold him responsible? Or if they did, if any of his people remained faithful to him, an attack might be beaten off. Brave as they were, the Zulus could not storm those walls on which he had spent so much labour, though now he almost wished that he had left the walls alone and settled the affair of Rachel and of Darrien first.

Ishmael poured out more rum and drank it, neat this time, as though to nerve himself for some undertaking. Then he went to the door of the hut

and called, whereon presently a hideous old woman crept in and squatted down in the circle of light thrown by the lamp. She was wrinkled and deformed, and her snake-skin moocha, with the inflated fish-bladder in her hair, showed that she was a witch-doctoress.

"Well, Mother," he said, "have you made the poison?"

"Yes, Ibubesi, yes. I have made it as I alone can do. Oh! it is a wonderful drug, worth many cows. How many did you say you would give me? Six?"

"No, three; but if it does what is wanted you shall have the other three as well. Tell me again, how does it work?"

"Thus, Ibubesi. Whoever drinks this medicine becomes like one dead--none can tell the difference, no, not a doctor even--and remains so for a long while--perhaps one day, perhaps two, perhaps even three. Then life returns, and by degrees strength, but not memory; for whole moons the memory is gone, and he who has drunk remains like a child that has everything to learn."

"You lie, Mother. I never heard of such a medicine."

"You never heard of it because none can make it save me, and I had its secret from my grandmother; also few can afford to pay me for it. Still, it has been used, and were I not afraid I could give you cases. Stay, I

will show you. Call that beast," and she pointed to a dog that was asleep at the side of the hut. "Here is milk; I will show you."

Ishmael hesitated, for he was fond of this dog; then as he wished to test the stuff he called it. It came and sat down beside him, looking up in his face with faithful eyes. Then the old witch poured milk into a bowl, and in the milk mixed some white powder which she took out of a folded leaf, and offered it to the animal. The dog sniffed the milk, growled slightly, and refused it.

"The evil beast does not like me; he bit me the other day," said the old doctress. "Do you give it to him, Ibubesi; he will trust you."

So Ishmael patted the dog on the head, then, offered it the milk, which it lapped up to the last drop.

"There, evil beast," said the woman, with a chuckle, "you won't bite me any more; you'll forget all about me for a long time. Look at him, Ibubesi, look at him."

As she spoke, the poor dog's coat began to stare; then it uttered a low howl, ran to Ishmael, tried to lick his hand, and rolled over, to all appearance quite dead.

"You have killed my dog, which I love, you hag!" he said angrily.

"Then why did you give medicine to what you love, Ibubesi? But have no fear, the evil beast has only taken a small dose; to-morrow morning it will awake, but it will not know you or anyone. Who is the medicine for, Ibubesi? The Lady Zoola? If so, it may not work on her, for she is mighty, and cannot be harmed."

"Fool! Do you think that I would play tricks with the Inkosazana?"

"No, you want to marry her, don't you? but it seems to me that she has no mind that way. Then it is for the man for whom she has a mind for? Well, Ibubesi, you have promised the six cows, and you saved me once from being killed for witchcraft, so I will say something. Don't give it to the chief Dario."

"Why not, you old fool; will it kill him after all?"

"No, no; it will do what I said, no less and no more, in this quantity," and she handed him another powder wrapped in dry leaves; "but I have had bad dreams about you, Ibubesi, and they were mixed up with the Inkosazana and this white man Dario. I dreamed they brought your death upon you--a dreadful death. Ibubesi, be wise, set Dario free, and change your mind as to marrying the Inkosazana, who is not for you."

"How can I change my mind, Descendant of Wizards?" broke out Ishmael. "Can a river penned between rocks change its course? Can it run backwards from the sea to the hill? This woman draws me as the sea draws the river;

because of her my blood is afire. I had rather win her and die, than live rich and safe without her to old age. The more she hates and scorns me, the more I love her."

"I understand," said the doctress, nodding her head till the bladder in her hair bobbed about like a float at which a fish is pulling. "I understand. I have seen people like this before--men and women too--when a bad spirit enters into them because of some crime they have committed. The Inkosazana, or those who guard her, have sent you this bad spirit, and, Ibubesi, you must run the road upon which it is appointed that you should travel; for joy or sorrow you must run that road. But when we meet in the world of ghosts, which I think will be soon, do not blame me, do not say that I did not warn you. Now it is all right about those cows, is it not? although I dare say the Zulus will milk them and not I, for to-night I seem to smell Zulus in the air," and she lifted her broad nose and sniffed like a hound. "I wish you could have left the Inkosazana alone, and that Dario too, for he is a part of her; in my dreams they seemed to be one. But you won't, you will walk your own path; so good night, Ibubesi. The dog will wake again in the morning, but he will not know you. Good night, Ibubesi--of course I understand that the cows will be young ones that have not had more than two calves. Mix the powder in milk, or water, or anything; it is without taste or colour. Good night, Ibubesi," and without waiting for an answer the old wretch crept out of the hut.

When she was gone Ishmael cursed her aloud, then drank some more rum, which he seemed to need. The place was very lonely, and the sight of his

dog, lying to all appearance dead at his side, oppressed him. He patted its head and it did not move; he lifted its paw and it fell down flabbily. The brute was as dead as anything could be. It occurred to him that before night came again he might look like that dog. His story might be told; he might have left the earth in company of all the deeds that he had done thereon. He had imagination enough to know his sins, and they were an evil host to face. Old Dove and his wife, for instance--holy people who believed in God and Vengeance, and had never done any wrong, only striven for years and years to benefit others; it would not be pleasant to meet them. Rachel had said that she saw them standing behind him, and he felt as though they were there at that moment. Look, one of them crossed between him and the lamp--there was the mark of the kerry on his head--and the woman followed; he could see her blue lips as she bent down to look at the dog. It was unbearable. He would go and talk to Rachel, and ask her if she had made up her mind. No, for if he broke in on her thus at night, he was sure that she would kill either herself or him with that spear she had taken from the dead Zulu, reddened with his own blood. He would keep faith with her and wait till the morrow. He would send for one of his wives. No, the thought of those women made him sick. He would go round the fortifications and beat any sentries whom he found asleep, or receive the reports of the spies. To stop in that hut in the company of a dog which seemed to be dead, and of imaginations that no rum could drown, was impossible.

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Once more the morning came, and Rachel sat in the walled yard awaiting the dreadful hour of her trial, for it was the day and time that Ishmael had appointed for her answer. Until now Rachel had cherished hopes that something might happen: that the people of Mafooti might intervene to save her and Richard; that the Zulus might appear, even that Ishmael might relent and let them go. But Mami had been out that morning and brought back tidings which dispelled these hopes. She had ventured to sound some of the leading men, and said that, like all the people, they were very sullen and alarmed, but declared, as she had expected, that they dare do nothing, for Ibubesi would kill them, and if they escape him the Zulus would kill them because the Inkosazana was found in their possession. Of the Zulus themselves, scouts who had been out for miles, reported that they had seen no sign. It was clear also that Ishmael was as determined as ever, for he had sent her a message by Mami that he would wait upon her as he had promised, and bring the white man with him.

Then what should she say and what should she do? Rachel could think of no plan; she could only sit still and pray while the shadow of that awful hour crept ever nearer.

It had come; she heard voices without the wall, among them Ishmael's. Her heart stopped, then bounded like a live thing in her breast. He was commanding someone to "catch that dog and tie it up, for it was bewitched, and did not know him or anyone," then the sound of a dog being dragged away, whining feebly, and then the door opened. First Ishmael came in with

an affectation of swaggering boldness, but looking like a man suffering from the effects of a long debauch. About his eyes were great black rings, and in them was a stare of sleeplessness. He carried a double-barrelled gun under his arm, but the hand with which he supported it shook visibly, and at every unusual sound he started. After him came Richard, his wrists bound together behind him, and on his legs hide shackles which only just allowed him to shuffle forward slowly. Moreover he was guarded by four men who carried spears. Rachel glanced quickly at his face, and saw that it was pale and resolute; quite untouched by fear.

"Are you well?" she asked quietly, taking no note of Ishmael.

"Yes," he answered, "and you, Rachel?"

"Quite well bodily, Richard, but oh! my soul is sick."

Before he could reply Ishmael turned on him savagely, and bade him be silent, or it would be the worse for him. Then he took off his hat with his shaking hand, and bowed to Rachel.

"Rachel," he said, "I have kept my promise, and left you alone for three days, but time is up and now this gentleman and I have come to hear your decision, which is so important to both of us."

"What am I to decide?" she asked in a low voice, looking straight before her.



"Have you forgotten? Your memory must be very bad. Well, it is best to have no mistake, and no doubt our friend here would like to know exactly how things stand. You have to decide whether you will take me as your husband to-day of your own free will, or whether Mr. Richard Darrien shall suffer the punishment of death, for having tried to kill his sentry and escape, a crime of which he has been guilty, and afterwards I should take you as my wife with, or without, your consent."

When Richard heard these words the veins in his forehead swelled with rage and horror till it seemed as though they would burst.

"You unutterable villain," he gasped, "you cowardly hound! Oh! if only my hands were free."

"Well, they ain't, Mr. Darrien, and it's no use your tugging at that buffalo hide, so hold your tongue, and let us hear the lady's answer," sneered Ishmael.

"Richard, Richard," said Rachel in a kind of wail, "you have heard. It is a matter of your life. What am I to do?"

"Do?" he answered, in loud, firm tones, "do? How can you ask me such a question? The matter is not one of my life, but of your--of your--oh! I cannot say it. Let this foul beast kill me, of course, and then, if you care enough, follow the same road. A few years sooner or later make little

difference, and so we shall soon be together again."

She thought a moment, then said quietly:

"Yes, I care enough, and a hundred times more than that. Yes, that is the only way out. Listen, you Ishmael:--Richard Darrien, the man to whom I am sworn, and I, give you this answer. Murder him if you will, and bring God's everlasting vengeance on your head. He will not buy his life on such terms, and if I consented to them I should be false to him. Murder him as you murdered my father and mother, and when I know that he is dead I will go to join him and them."

"All right, Rachel," said Ishmael, whose face was white with fury, "I think I will take you at your word, and you can go to look for him down below, if you like, for if I am not to get you here, he shan't. Now then, say your prayers, Mr. Darrien," and stepping forward slowly he cocked the double-barrelled gun.

"Men of Mafooti," exclaimed Rachel in Zulu, "Ibubesi is about to do murder on one who like myself is under the mantle of Dingaan. If his blood should flow to-day or to-morrow, yours shall flow in payment, yours, and that of your wives and children, for the crime of the chief is the crime of the people."

At her words the four natives who had been watching this scene uneasily, although they could not understand the English talk, called out to Ishmael

in remonstrance. His only answer was to lift the gun, and for an instant that seemed infinite Rachel waited to hear its explosion, and to see the grey-eyed, open-faced man she loved, who stood there like a rock, fall a shattered corpse. Then one of the Kaffirs, bolder than the rest, struck up the barrels with his arm, and not too soon, for whether or no he had meant to pull the trigger, the rifle went off.

"Try the other barrel," said Richard sarcastically, as the smoke cleared away, "that shot was too high."

Perhaps Ishmael might have done so, for the man was beside himself, but the Kaffirs would have no more of it. They rushed between them, lifting their spears threateningly, and shouting that they would not allow the blood of the white lord and the curse of the Inkosazana to be brought upon their heads and those of their families. Rather than that they would bind him, Ibubesi, and give him over to the Zulus. Then, whether or not he had really meant to kill Richard, Ishmael thought it politic to give way.

"So be it," he said to Rachel, "I am merciful, and both of you shall have another chance. I am going with this fellow, but the woman, Mami, shall come to you. If within three hours you send her to me with a message to say that you have changed your mind, he shall be spared. If not, before nightfall you shall see his body, and afterwards we will settle matters."

"Rachel, Rachel," cried Richard, "swear that you will send no such message."

Now the brute, Ishmael, rushed at him to strike him in the face. But Richard saw him coming, and bound though he was, put down his head and butted at him so fiercely, that being much the stronger man, he knocked him to the ground, where he lay breathless.

"Swear, Rachel, swear," he repeated, "or dead or living, I will never forgive you."

"I swear," she said, faintly.

Then he shuffled towards her. Bending down he kissed her on the face, and she kissed him back; no more words passed between them; this was their farewell. Two of the Kaffirs lifted Ishmael, and helped him from the yard, whilst the other two led away Richard, who made no resistance. At the gate he turned, and their eyes met for a moment. Then it closed behind him, and she was left alone again.