

CHAPTER XVII

RACHEL LOSES HER SPIRIT

A little while later Mami entered, and said that she had been sent by Ibubesi to serve the Inkosazana as a messenger, should she need one. Rachel, seated on the bench, motioned to her to go into the hut and bide there, and she obeyed.

Minute by minute the time ebbed away, and still Rachel sat motionless on the bench. Towards the end of the third hour someone unbolted and knocked at the door. Mami opened it and reported that Ibubesi stood without, and desired to know whether she had any word for him.

"None," answered Rachel, remembering her oath, and the door was barred again.

After this a great silence seemed to fall upon the place. The sky was grey with distant rain, and the air heavy, and whatever may have been the cause, no sound came from man or beast without. To Rachel's strained nerves it seemed as though the Angel of Death had spread his wings above the town. There she sat paralysed, wondering what evil thing was being worked upon her lover; wondering if she had done right to give him as a sacrifice to this savage in order to save herself from dreadful wrong--wondering, wondering till the powers of her mind seemed to die

within her, leaving it grey and empty as the grey and empty sky above.

Night drew on and the setting sun, bursting through the envelope of cloud, filled earth and sky with fire, and it came into Rachel's heart, she knew not whence, that fire was near, that soon it would swallow up all this place.

Look! the door was opening; it swung wide, and through it advanced eight Kaffirs, carrying something on a litter made of shields, something that was covered with a blanket of bark. They drew near to her with bent heads, and set down their burden at her feet. Then one of them lifted the blanket, revealing the body of Richard Darrien, and saying in an awed voice,

"Inkosazana, Ibubesi sends you this to look or to show you that he keeps his word. Later he will visit you himself."

Rachel knelt down by the litter of shields and looked at Richard's face. The stamp of death was on it. She felt his hand, it was turning cold; she felt his heart, it did not beat.

"Show me this dead lord's wounds," she said in an awful whisper, "that presently mine may be like to them."

"Inkosazana," said the spokesman, "he has no wound."

"How, then, did he die? Strange that he should die, and I not feel his spirit pass."

"Inkosazana, he was thirsty, and drank, then he died."

"So, so! he was slain by poison, and I have no poison. Mami, come forth and look on the white lord whom Ibubesi has murdered by poison."

The woman Mami, who had been sleeping in the hut, awoke and obeyed. She saw, and wailed aloud.

"Woe to Mafooti!" she cried, like one inspired, "and woe, woe to those that dwell therein, for now vengeance, red vengeance, shall fall on them from Heaven. The blood of the innocent is upon them, the curse of the Inkosazana is upon them, the spears of the Zulus are upon them. Slay the silwana, the wild beast--Ibubesi, and fly, people of Mafooti, fly, fly with that dead thing. Leave it not here to bear witness against you. Carry it far away, and heap a mountain on it. Bury it in a valley that no man can find; bury it in the black water, lest it should arise and bear witness against you. Leave it not here, but let the darkness cover it, and fly with it into the darkness, as I do," and turning she sped to the door and through it.

The light from the sunk sun went out smothered in the gathering thunder-clouds. Through the gloom the terrified bearers muttered to each other.

"Throw it down and away!" said one.

"Nay," answered another, "wisdom has come to Mami, her ehlosé has spoken to her. Take it with you, lest it should remain to bear witness against us."

"Remember what the Zulu swore," said a third, "that if harm came to this lord they would kill all, down to the rats. Take it away so that it may not be found. If you meet Ibubesi, spear him. If not, leave him the vengeance for his share."

Now, moved as though by a common impulse, the bearers cast back the blanket over the corpse, and lifting the litter, departed at a run. The door was shut and bolted behind them, and darkness fell upon the earth.

For a while Rachel stood still in the darkness.

"Now I am alone," she said in a quiet voice, yet to her ears the words seemed to be uttered with a roar of thunder that echoed through the firmament, and pierced upwards to the feet of God.

Then suddenly something snapped in her brain and she was changed. The horror left her, the terror left her, she felt very well and strong, so well that she laughed aloud, and again that laugh filled earth and heaven. Oh! she was hungry, and food stood on a table near by. She sprang to it

and ate, ate heartily. Then she drank, muttering to herself, "Richard drank before he died. Let me drink also and cease to be alone."

Her meal finished, she walked up and down the place singing a song that seemed to be caught up triumphantly by a million voices, the voices of all who had ever lived and died. Their awful music stunned her and she ceased. Look! Wild beasts wearing the face of Ibubesi were licking the clouds with their tongues of fire. It was curious, but in that high-walled place she could not see it well. Now from the top of the hut the view would be better. Yes, and Ishmael was coming to visit her. Well, they would meet for the last time on the top of the hut. She was not afraid of him, not at all; but it would be strange to see him scrambling up the hut, and they would talk there for a little while with their faces close together, till--ah!--till what--? Till something strange happened, something unhappy for Ishmael. Oh! no, no, she would not kill herself, she would wait to see what it was that happened to Ishmael, that strange thing which she knew so well, and yet could not remember.

How easy this hut was to climb, a cat could not have run up with less trouble. Now she stood on the top of it, her spear in one hand, and holding with the other to the pole that was set there to scare away the lightning; stood for a long time watching the wild beasts licking the clouds with their red tongues.

The beasts grew weary of lapping up clouds. Their appetites were satisfied for a while, at any rate she saw their tongues no more. The air was very

hot and heavy, and the darkness very dense, it seemed to press about her as though she were plunged in cream. Yet Rachel thought that she heard sounds through it, a sound of feet to the west and a sound of feet to the east.

Then she heard another sound, that of the door in the wall opening, and of a soft, tentative footfall, like to the footfall of a questing wolf. She knew it at once, for now her senses were sharper than those of any savage; it was the step of Ibubesi, the Night-prowler. She felt inclined to laugh; it was so funny to think of herself standing there on the top of a hut while the Night-prowler slunk about below looking for her. But she refrained, remembering the dreadful noise when all the Heavens began to laugh in answer. So she was silent, for the Heavens do not reverberate silence, although she could hear her own thoughts passing through them, passing up one by one on their infinite journey.

Listen! He was walking round and round the yard. He went to the bench beneath the tree and felt along it with his fingers to see if she were there. Now he was entering the hut and groping at the bedstead, and now he had kindled a light, for the rays of it shone faintly up through the smoke-hole. Discovering nothing he came out again, leaving the lamp burning within, and called her softly.

"Rachel," he said, "Rachel, where are you?"

There was no answer, and he began to talk to himself.

"Has she got away?" he muttered. "Some of them have gone, I know, the accursed, cowardly fools. No, it is not possible, the watch was too good, unless she is really a spirit, and has melted, as spirits do. I hope not, for if so she will haunt me, and I want her company in the flesh, not in the spirit. I ought to have it too, for it has cost me pretty dear. She must have bewitched me, or why should I risk everything for her, just one white woman who hates the sight of me? The devil is at the back of it. This was his road from the first."

So he went on until Rachel could bear it no more, the thing was too absurd.

"Yes, yes," she said from the top of the hut, "his road from the first, and it ends not far away, at the red gates of Hell, Night-prowler."

The man below gasped, and fell against the fence.

"Whose voice is that? Where are you?" he asked of the air.

Then as there was no answer, he added: "It sounded like Rachel, but it spoke above me. I suppose that she has killed herself. I thought she might, but better that she should be dead than belong to that fellow. Only then why does she speak?"

He started to feel his way towards the hut, perhaps to fetch the lamp,

when suddenly the skies behind were illumined in a blaze of light, a broad slow blaze that endured for several seconds. By it the eyes of Rachel, made quick with madness, saw many things. From her perch on the top of the hut she saw the town of Mafooti. On the plain to the west she saw a number of black dots, which she took to be people and cattle travelling away from the town. In the nek to the east she saw more dots, each of them crested with white, and carrying something white. Surely it was a Zulu impi marching! Some of these dots had come to the wall of the town; yes, and some of them were on the crest of it, while yet others were creeping down its main street not a hundred yards away.

Also these caught sight of something, for they paused and seemed to fall together as though in fear. Lastly, just before the light went out, she perceived Ishmael in the yard below, glaring up at her, for he, too, had seen her. Seen her standing above him in the air, the spear in her hand, and in her eyes fire. But of the dots to the east and of the dots to the west he had seen nothing. He appeared to fall to his knees and remain there muttering. Then the Heavens blazed again, for the storm was coming up, and by the flare of them he read the truth. This was no ghost, but the living woman.

"Oh!" he said, recovering himself, "that's where you've got to, is it? Come down, Rachel, and let us talk."

She made no answer, none at all, she who was so curious to see what he would do. For quite a long while he harangued her from below, walking

round and round the hut. Then at length in despair he began to climb it. But in that darkness which now and again turned to dazzling light, unlike Rachel, he found the task difficult, and once, missing his hold, he fell to the ground heavily. Finding his feet he rushed at the hut with an oath, and clutching the straw and the grass strings that bound it, struggled almost to the top, to be met by the point of Rachel's spear held in his face. There then he hung, looking like a toad on the slope of a rock, unable to advance because of that spear, and unwilling to go down, lest his labour must be begun again.

"Rachel," he said, "come down, Rachel. Whatever I have done has been for your sake, come down and tell me that you forgive me."

She laughed out loud, a wild, screaming laugh, for really he looked most ridiculous, sprawling there on the bend of the hut, and the lightning showed her all sorts of pictures in his eyes.

"Did Richard Darrien forgive you?" she asked. "And what did you mix that poison with? Milk? The milk of human kindness! It was a very good poison, Toad, so good that I think you must have drawn it from your own blood. When you are dead all the Bushmen should come and dip their arrows in you, for then even crocodiles and the big snakes would die at a scratch."

He made no answer, so she went on.

"Have your people forgiven you? If so, why do they flee away, carrying

that white thing which was a man? Have my father and mother forgiven you? Do you hear what they are saying to me--that judgment is the Lord's? Have the Zulus forgiven you, the Zulus who believe that judgment is the King's--and the Inkosazana's? Turn now, and ask them, for here they are," and she pointed over his head with her spear. "Turn, Toad, and set out your case and I will stand above and try it, the case of Dingaan against Ibubesi, and one by one I will call up all those who died through you, and they shall give their evidence, and I, the Judge, will sum it up to a jury of sharp spears. See, here come the spears. Look at the wall, Toad, look at the wall!"

As she raved on and pointed with her assegai, the lightning blazed out, and Ishmael, who had looked round at her bidding, saw Zulu warriors leaping down from the crest of the wall, and Zulu captains rushing in by the opened door. At this terrible sight he slid to the ground purposing to reach his gun which he had left there, and defend or kill himself, who knows which? But before ever he could lay a hand upon it, those fierce men had pounced upon him like leopards on a goat. Now they held him fast, and a voice--it was that of Tamboosa, called through the darkness,

"Hail to thee! Inkosazana. Come down now and pass judgment on this wild beast who would have harmed thee."

"Tamboosa," she cried, "the Inkosazana has fled away, only the white woman in whom she dwelt remains; her spirit hangs in wrath over the people of the Zulus, as an eagle hangs above a hare. Tamboosa, there is blood

between the Inkosazana and the people of the Zulus, the blood of those who gave her the body that she wore, who lie slain by them upon the bed at Kamah. Tamboosa, there is blood between her and Ibubesi, the blood of the white man who loved the body that she wore, and whom she loved, the white lord whom Ibubesi did to death this day because she who was the Inkosazana would not give herself to him. Tamboosa, the Inkosazana has suffered much from this Ibubesi, many an insult, many a shame, and when she called upon the Zulus, out of all their thousand thousands there was not a single spear to help her, because they were too busy killing those holy ones whom she called her father and her mother. And so, Tamboosa, the spirit of the Inkosazana departed like a bird from the egg, leaving but this shell behind, that is full of sorrows and of dreams. Yet, Tamboosa, she still speaks through these lips of mine, and she says that from the seed of blood that they have sown, her people, the Zulus, must harvest woe upon woe, as while she dwelt among them, she warned them that it would be if ill came to those she loved. Tamboosa, this is her command--that ye shield the breast in which she hid from the wild beast, Ibubesi and all evil men, and that ye lead this shape to Noie, the daughter of Seyapi, whom Ibubesi brought to death, for with Noie it would dwell."

Thus she wailed through the deep darkness, while the soldiers who packed the space below groaned in their grief and terror because the soul of the Inkosazana had been made a wanderer by their sins, and the curse of the Inkosazana had fallen on their land.

Again the lightning flared, and in it they saw her standing on the crest

of the hut. She had let drop the spear as though she needed it no more, and her arms were outstretched to the Heavens, and her beautiful face was upturned, and her long hair floated in the wind. Seen thus by that quick, white light, which shone in the madness of her eyes, she seemed no woman but what they had fabled her to be, a queen of Spirits, and at the vision of her they groaned again, while some of them fell to the earth and hid their faces with their hands.

The darkness fell once more, and a man went into the hut to bring out the lamp that burned there. When he returned Rachel stood among them; they had not seen or heard her descend. Ishmael saw her also, and feeling his doom in the fierce eyes that glowered at him, stretched out his hand and caught her by the robe, praying for pity.

At his touch she uttered a wild scream, which pierced like a knife through the hearts of all that heard it.

"Suffer it not," she cried, "oh! my people, suffer not that I be thus defiled."

They rent him from her with blows and execrations, looking up to their chief for his word to tear him to pieces.

"No," said Tamboosa, grimly, "he shall to the King to tell this story ere he die."

"Save me, Rachel, save me," he moaned. "You don't know what they mean. I was mad with love for you, do not judge me harshly and send me to be tortured."

This appeal of his seemed to pierce the darkness of her brain, and for a little while her face grew human.

"I judge not," she answered in Zulu; "pray to the Great One above who judges. Oh! man, man," she went on in a kind of eerie whisper, "what have I done to you that you should treat me thus? Why did you command the soldiers to kill my father and my mother? Why did you poison my lover? Why did you drive away my soul, and fill me with this madness? Take me away from this accursed town, Tamboosa, before Heaven's vengeance falls on it, and let me see that face no more."

Then some of them made a guard about her and led her thence, along the central street, and through the barricaded gates, that they broke down for her passage. They led her to a little cave in the slope of the opposing hill, for although no rain fell, the gathered storm was breaking; the lightning flashed thick and fast, the thunder groaned and bellowed, and a wild wind beat the screeching trees.

Here in the mouth of this cave Rachel sat herself down and looked at the kraal, Mafoti, awaiting she knew not what, while the impi pillaged the town, and Ishmael, already half dead with fear, remained bound to the roof-tree of the hut that had been her prison.

Whilst she waited thus, and watched, of a sudden one of the outer huts began to burn, though whether the lightning or some soldier had fired it none could tell. Then, in an instant, as it seemed, driven by the raging wind, the flame leapt from roof to roof till Mafooti was but a sheet of fire. The soldiers at their work of pillage saw, and rushed hither and thither, confusedly, for they did not know the paths, and were tangled in the fences.

A figure appeared running down the central street, a figure of flame, for his clothes burned on him, and those by Rachel said,

"See, see, Ibubesi!"

He could not reach the gate, for a blazing hut fell across his path. Turning he sped to the edge of a cliff that rose near by, where, because of its steepness, there was no wall. Here for a while he ran up and down till the wind-driven fire from new-lit huts at its brink leapt out upon him like thin, scarlet tongues. He threw himself to the ground, he rose again, beating his head with his hand, for his long hair was ablaze. Then in his torment and despair, of a sudden he threw himself backwards into the dark gulf beneath. Fifty feet and more he fell to the rocks below, and where he fell there he lay till he died, and on the morrow the Zulus found and buried him.

Thus did Ishmael depart out of the life of Rachel to the end which he had

earned.

Nor did he go alone, for of the Zulus in the town many were caught by the fire, and perished, so many that when the regiment mustered at dawn, that same regiment which had escorted the Inkosazana to the banks of the Tugela, fifty and one men were missing, whilst numbers of others appeared burned and blistered.

"Ah!" said Tamboosa as he surveyed the injured and counted the dead, "the curse is quickly at work among us, and I think that this is but the beginning of evil. Well, I expected it, no less."

As for the town of Mafooti it was utterly destroyed. To this day the place is a wilderness where the grass grows rank between the crumbling, fire-blackened walls. For the people of Ibubesi who had fled, returned thither no more, nor would others build where it had been, since still they swear that the spot is haunted by the figure of a white man who, in times of thunder, rushes across it wrapped in fire, and plunges blazing into the gulf upon its northern side.

After the storm came the rain which poured all night long, a steady sheet of water reaching from earth to heaven. Rachel watched it vacantly for a while, then went to the head of the little cave and lay down wrapped in karosses that they had made ready for her. Moreover, she slept as a child sleeps until the sun shone bright on the morrow, then she woke and asked for food.

But the impi did not sleep. All night long the soldiers stood in huddled groups beneath such shelter as the trees and rocks would give to them, while the water poured on them pitilessly till their teeth chattered and their limbs were frozen. Some died of the cold that night, and afterwards many others fell sick of agues and fevers of the lungs which killed a number of them.

In the morning when the storm was past and the sun shone hotly Tamboosa called the Council of the captains together, and consulted with them as to whether they should follow after the people of Mafooti who had fled, and destroy them, or return straight to Zululand. Most of the captains answered that of Mafooti and its people they had seen enough. Ibubesi was dead, slain by the vengeance of Heaven; the Inkosazana they had rescued, alive, though filled with madness; the white lord, Dario, had been murdered by Ibubesi, it was said with poison, and doubtless his body was burned in the fire. As for the people of Mafooti themselves, it would seem that most of them were innocent as they had fled the place, deserting their chief. To these arguments other captains answered that the people of Mafooti were not innocent inasmuch as they had helped Ibubesi to carry off the Inkosazana and the white lord, Dario, from Ramah, and consented to their imprisonment and to the death of one of them, only flying when they had tidings that the impi was on the way. Moreover the command was that every one of these dogs should be killed, whereas they had killed none of them, but only taken those cattle which were left behind in their flight. At length the dispute growing fierce, the captains being unable to come to

an agreement, decided that they would lay the matter before the Inkosazana, and be guided by the words that fell from her, if they could understand them.

So Tamboosa went into the cave with one other man, and talked to Rachel, who sat staring at him with stony eyes as though she understood nothing. When at length he ceased, however, she cried:

"Lead me to Noie at the Great Place. Lead me to Noie," nor would she say any more.

So, as the people of Mafooti had fled they knew not where, and they had secured some of the cattle, and as many of the soldiers were sick from the cold and burns received in the fire, Tamboosa told the regiment that it was the will of the Inkosazana that they should return to Zululand.

A while later they started, those of them who were so badly burned that they could not travel, being carried on shields. But Rachel would not be carried, choosing to walk alone surrounded at a distance by a ring of soldiers who guarded her. For hours she walked thus, showing no sign of weariness, but now and again bursting out into shrill laughter, as though she saw things that moved her to merriment. Only the regiment that listened was not merry, for it had heard the words that the Inkosazana spoke in the town of Mafooti, foretelling evil to the Zulus because of the blood that was between them and her. They thought that she laughed over the misfortunes that were to come, and over those that had already

befallen them in the fire and in the rain.

About midday they halted to eat, and as before Rachel took food in plenty, for now that her mind was wandering her body seemed to call for sustenance. When their meal was finished they moved down to the banks of the Buffalo River, which ran near by, to find that it was in great flood after the heavy rain and that it was not safe to try the ford. So they determined to camp there on the banks, murmuring among themselves that all went ill with them upon this journey, as was to be expected, and that they would have done better if they had spent the time in hunting down the people of Mafooti, instead of sitting idle like tired storks upon the banks of a river. Yet bad as things might seem, they were destined to be worse, for while some of them were cutting boughs and grass to make a hut for the Inkosazana, Rachel, who stood watching them with empty eyes, of a sudden laughed in her mad fashion, and sped like a swallow to the lip of the foaming ford. Here, before they could come up with her, she threw off the outer cloak she wore and rushed into the water till the current bore her from her feet. Then while the whole regiment shouted in dismay, she began to swim, striking out for the further bank, and being swept downwards by the stream. Now Tamboosa, who was almost crazed with fear lest she should drown, called out that where the Inkosazana went, they must follow, even to their deaths.

"It is so!" answered the soldiers, as each man locking his arms round the middle of him who stood in front, company by company, they plunged into the water in a fourfold chain, hoping thus to bridge it from bank to bank.

Meanwhile Rachel swam on in the strength of her madness as a woman has seldom swum before. Again and again the muddy waters broke over her head and the soldiers groaned, thinking that she was drowned. But always that golden hair reappeared above them. A great tree swept down upon her but she dived beneath it. She was dashed against a tall rock, but she warded herself away from it with her hands and still swam on, till at length with a shout of joy the Zulus saw her find her feet and struggle slowly to the further bank. Yes, and up it till she reached its crest where she stood and watched them idly as though unconscious of the danger she had passed, and of the water that ran from her hair and breast.

"Where a woman can go, we can follow," said some, but others answered:

"She is not a woman, but a spirit. Death himself cannot kill her."

Now the fourfold chain was near the centre of the ford, when suddenly those at the tip of it were lifted from their feet as Rachel had been, nor could those behind hold on to them. They were torn from their grasp and swept away, the most of them never to be seen again, for of these men but few could swim. Thrice this happened until strong swimmers were sent to the front, and at length these men won across as Rachel had done, and caught hold of the stones on the further side, thus forming a living chain from bank to bank, whereof the centre floated and was bent outwards by the weight of the water as the back of a bow bends when the string is drawn.

By the help of this human rope thus formed the companies began to come over, supporting themselves against it, till presently the strain and the push of them and of the angry river overcame its strength, and the chain burst in the middle so that many were borne down the stream and drowned. Yet with risk and toil and loss it joined itself together again and held fast until every man was over, save the sick and some lads who were left to tend them and the cattle on the further bank. Then that cable of brave warriors began to struggle forward like a great snake dragging its tail after it, and, so by degrees drew itself to safety and gasping out foam and water saluted the Inkosazana where she stood.

Many were drowned, and others were bruised by rocks, but of this they thought little since she was safe and they had found her again, to have lost whom would have been a shame from generation to generation. She watched the captains reckoning up the number of the dead, and when Tamboosa and some of them came to make report of it to her, a shadow as of pity floated across her stony eyes.

"Not on my head," she cried, "not on my head! There is blood between the Inkosazana and her people of the Zulus, and that blood avenges itself in blood," and she laughed her eerie laugh.

"It is true, it is just, O Queen," answered Tamboosa solemnly; "the nation must pay for the sin of its children as the wild beast, Ibubesi, has paid for his sins."

Then as they could travel no further that day, they built a hut, and lit a great fire by which Rachel sat and dried herself, nor did she take any harm from the water, for as the Zulus had said, it seemed as though nothing could harm her now.

The soldiers also lit fires and despatched messengers to neighbouring kraals commanding them to bring food, and to send maidens to attend on the Inkosazana, while others went to a mountain to call all this ill-tidings from hill to hill till it came to the Great Place of the King.