

CHAPTER XX

THE MOTHER OF THE TREES

When Eddo understood these words he lifted his head and stared at Rachel amazed.

"This is thy doing, Bastard," he said savagely, addressing Noie, who had translated them. "I have felt thee fighting against me for long, and now thou causest this Inkosazana to defy me. It was thou who didst work upon that old woman, thine aunt, to command that the white witch should be brought hither, and because as yet I dared not disobey, I made a terrible journey to bring her. Yes, and I did this gladly, for when my eyes fell upon her, there in the town of Dingaan, I saw that she was great and beautiful, but that her Spirit had gone, and I knew that I could make her mouth to speak my words, and her pure eyes to see things that are denied to mine, even the future as, when I bade her, she saw it yonder in the court of Dingaan. But now it seems that her Spirit has returned to her, so that there is no room for mine in her heart, and she speaks her own words, not my words. And thou hast done this thing, O Bastard."

"Perhaps," answered Noie unconcernedly.

"Thou thinkest," went on Eddo, in his fury beating the bole on which he

sat, "thou thinkest to protect that old hag, Nya, because her blood runs in thee. But, fool, it is in vain, for her tree is down, her tree is down, and as its leaves wither, and its sap dries up, so must she wither and her blood dry up until she dies, she who thought to live on for many years."

"What does that matter?" asked Noie, "seeing that then she will only join the great company of the ghosts with whom she longs to be, and return with them to torment thee, Eddo, until thou, too, art one of them, and lookest on the face of Judgment."

"Thou thinkest," screamed the dwarf, ignoring this ominous suggestion, "thou thinkest, when she is gone, to be queen in her place, or to rule as high priestess through this White One."

"If I do, that will be a bad hour for thee, Eddo," replied Noie.

"It shall not be, woman. No bastard shall reign here as Mother of the Trees while the nations round cringe before her feet. I have spells; I have poisons; I have slaves who can shoot with arrows."

"Then use them if thou canst, thou evil-doer," said "Noie contemptuously.

"Aye, I will use them all, and not on thee only, but on that white witch whom thou lovest. She shall never pass living from this land that is ringed in by the desert and the forest. She shall choose me to reign through her as her high priest, or she shall die--die miserably. For a

little while that old hag, Nya, may protect her with her wisdom, but when she passes, as she must, and quickly, for I will light fires beneath this fallen tree of hers, then I tell thee the Beautiful One shall choose between my rule and doom."

Now Noie would hear no more.

"Dog," she cried, "filthy night-bird, darest thou speak thus of the Inkosazana? Another word and I will offer that heart of thine to the sun thou hatest," and snatching the spear from Rachel's hand, she charged at him, holding it aloft.

Eddo saw her come. With a scream of fear he leapt to his feet, and ran swiftly along the bole till he reached the mass of the fallen branches. Into these he sprang, swinging himself from bough to bough like an ape until he vanished amongst the dark green foliage. Then, having quite lost sight of him, Noie returned laughing to Rachel, by whom stood the old Mother of the Trees who had slid from her arms, and gave her back the spear, saying in the dwarf language:

"This Eddo speaks great words, but he is also a great coward."

"Yes, yes," answered the old woman, "he is a great coward, because like all our folk he fears the Red Death; but, child, I tell thee he is terrible. He hates me because I rule through the white art, not the black, but while my tree stood he must obey me, and I was safe. Now it is down,

and he may kill me if he can, according to the custom of my land, and set up another to be queen, she at whose feet my tree bowed itself and fell by the will of the Heavens, and whom, therefore, the people will accept.

Through her he will wield all the power of the Ghost-kings, over whom no man may rule, but a woman only. Come, Child, and thou, White One, come also. I know where we may hide. Lady, the power that was mine is thine; protect me till I die, and in payment I will give thee whatever thy heart desires."

"I ask no payment," Rachel answered wearily, when she understood the words; "and I think that it is I who need protection from that wicked dwarf."

Then, guided by Nya, who clung to Rachel's hand, they walked down the bole of the tree and along a great branch, till at length they reached a place whence they could climb to the ground. Before they were clear of the boughs the dethroned Mother, from whose round eyes the tears fell, turned and kissed the bark of one of them, wailing aloud.

"Farewell, thou mighty one, under whose shade I, and the queens of my race before me, have dreamed for centuries. Thou art fallen beneath the stroke of Heaven, and great was thy fall, and I am fallen with thee. Save me from the Red Death, O Spirit of my tree, that in the land of ghosts I still may sleep beneath thy shade for ever."

Then she ran to the very point of the tree and broke off its topmost twig,

which was covered with narrow and shining green leaves, and holding it in her hand, returned to Rachel.

"I will plant it," she said, "and perchance it will grow to be the house of queens unborn. Come, now, come," and she turned her face towards the forest.

The thunder had rolled away, and from time to time the sun shone fiercely, so fiercely that, unable to bear its rays, all the dwarfs who were gathered about the fallen tree had retreated into the shadow of the other trees around the open space. There they stood and sat watching the three of them go by. Men, women and children, they all watched, and Rachel they saluted with their raised hands; but to her who had been their mother for unknown years they did no reverence. Only one hideous little man ran up to her and called out:

"Thou didst punish me once, old woman, now why should I not kill thee in payment? Thy tree is down at last."

Nya looked at him sadly, and answered:

"I remember. Thou shouldst have died, for thy sin was great, but I laid a lesser burden on thee. Man, thou canst not kill me yet; my tree is down, but it is not dead."

She held up the green bough in her hand and looked at him from beneath it,

then went on slowly: "Man, my wisdom remains within me, and I tell thee that before I die thou shalt die, and not as thou desirest. Remember my words, people of the Ghosts."

Then she walked on with the others, leaving the dwarf staring after her with a face wherein hate struggled with fear.

"Thou liest," he screamed after her; "thy power is gone with thy tree."

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth when they heard a crash which caused them to look round. A bough, broken by the storm, had fallen from on high. It had fallen on to the head of the dwarf, and there he lay crushed and dead.

"Ah!" piped the other dwarfs, pointing towards the corpse with their fingers, and closing their eyes to shut out the sight of blood, "ah! Nya is right; she still has power. Those who would kill her must wait till her tree dies."

Taking no heed of what had happened, Nya walked on into the forest. For a while Rachel noted the little huts built, each of them, at the foot of a tree. There were hundreds of these huts that they could see, showing that the people were many, but by degrees they grew fewer, only one was visible here and there, set beneath some particularly vigorous and handsome timber. At last they ceased altogether; they had passed through that city, the strangest city in the world.

Trees--everywhere trees, hundreds of trees, tens of thousands of trees soaring up to heaven, making a canopy of their interlacing boughs, shutting out the light so that beneath them was a deep oppressive gloom. There was silence also, for if any beasts or birds dwelt there the hurricane had scared them away, silence only broken from time to time by the crash of some giant of the forest that, its length of days fulfilled at last, sank suddenly to ruin, to be buried in a tomb of brushwood whence in due course its successor would arise.

"Another life gone," said the old woman, Nya, flitting before them like a little grey ghost, every time that this weird sound struck upon their ears; "whose was it, I wonder? I will look in my bowl, I will look in my bowl."

For, as Rachel discovered afterwards, these people believed that the spirit of each tree of the forest is attached to the spirit of a human being, although that being may dwell in other lands, far away, which dies when the tree dies, sometimes slowly by disease, and sometimes in swift collapse, so that they pass together into the world of ghosts.

On they flitted through the gloom, on for mile after mile. Although the leaf-strewn ground showed no traces of it, evidently they were following some kind of path, for no fallen trunks barred their progress, nor were there any creepers or brushwood, although to right and left of them all these could be seen in plenty. At last, quite of a sudden, for the bole of

a tree at the end of the path had hidden it from them, they came upon a clearing in the forest. It seemed to be a natural, or, at any rate, a very ancient clearing, since in it no stumps were visible, nor any scrub, or creepers, only tall grass and flowering plants. In the centre of this place, covering a quarter of it, perhaps, was a vast circular wall, fifty feet or more in height, and clothed with ferns. This wall, they noted, was built of huge blocks of stone, so huge indeed that it seemed wonderful that they could have been moved by human beings. At the sight of that marvellous wall Rachel and Noie halted involuntarily, and Noie asked:

"Who made it, Mother?"

"The giants who lived when the world was young. Can our hands lift such stones?" Nya answered, as, bending down, she thrust the top shoot from her fallen tree deep into the humid soil, then added: "On, child; there is danger here."

As she spoke something hissed through the air just above her head, and stuck fast in the bark of a sapling. Noie sprang forward and plucked it out. It was a little reed, feathered with grasses, and having a sharp ivory point, smeared with some green substance.

"Touch it not," cried Nya, "it is deadly poison. Eddo's work, Eddo's work! but my hour is not yet. Into the open before another comes."

So they ran forward, all three of them, seeing and bearing nothing of the

shooter of the arrow. As they approached the titanic wall they saw that it enclosed a mound, on the top of which mound grew a cedar-like tree with branches so wide that they seemed to overshadow half of the enclosure. There were no gates to this wall, but while they wondered how it could be entered, Nya led them to a kind of cleft in its stones, not more than two feet in width, across which cleft were stretched strings of plaited grass. She pressed herself against them, breaking them, and walked forward, followed by Rachel and Noie. Suddenly they heard a noise above them, and, looking up, saw white-robed dwarfs perched upon the stones of the cleft, holding bent bows in their hands, whereof the arrows were pointed at their breasts. Nya halted, beckoning to them, whereon, recognising her, they dropped the arrows into the little quivers which they wore, and scrambled off, whither Rachel could not see.

"These are the guardians of the Temple that cannot either speak or hear, who were summoned by the breaking of the thread," said Nya, and went forward again.

Now to the right, and now to the left, ran the narrow path that wound its way in the thickness of the mighty wall, which towered so high above them that they walked almost in darkness, and at each turn of it were recesses; and above these projecting stones, where archers could stand for its defence. At length this path ended in a cul-de-sac, for in front of them was nothing but blank masonry. Whilst Rachel and Noie stared at it wondering whither they should go now, a large stone in this wall turned, leaving a narrow doorway through which they passed, whereon it shut again

behind them, though by what machinery they could not see.

Thus they passed through the wall, emerging, however, at a different point in its circumference to that at which they had entered. In the centre of the enclosure rose the hill of earth that they had seen from without, which evidently was kept free from weeds and swept, and on its crest grew the huge cedar-like tree, the Tree of the Tribe. Between the base of this hill and the foot of the wall was a wide ring of level ground, also swept and weeded, and on this space, neatly arranged in lines, were hundreds of little hillocks that resembled ant-heaps.

"The burying-place of the Ghost-priests, Lady," said Nya, nodding at the hillocks. "Soon my bones will be added to them."

Walking across this strange cemetery, they came to the foot of the mound that was entirely overshadowed by the cedar above, from the outspread limbs of which hung long grey moss, that swayed ceaselessly in the wind. Here dwarfs appeared from right and left, the same whom they had seen within the thickness of the wall, or others like to them, some male and some female; melancholy-eyed little creatures who bowed to Nya, and looked with fear and wonder at the tall while Rachel. Evidently they were all of them deaf mutes, for they made signs to Nya, who answered them with other signs, the purport of which seemed to sadden and disturb them greatly.

"They have seen the fall of my tree in their bowls," explained Nya to Noie, "and ask me if it is a true vision. I tell them that I am come here

to die and that is why they are sad. This is the place of dying of all the Ghost-priests, whence they pass into the world of spirits, and here no blood may be shed, no, not that of the most wicked evil-doer. If any one of the family of the priests reaches this place living, the glory of the White Death is won. Follow and see."

So they followed her up the mound, past what looked like the entrance to a cave, until they reached a low fence of reeds whereof the gate stood open.

"The gate is open, but enter not there," whispered the old Mother of the Trees, "for those who enter there live not long. Look, Lady, look."

Rachel peered through the gate, but so dense was the gloom in that holy spot that at first she could only see the enormous red bole of the cedar, and the ghostly, moss-clad branches which sprang from it at no great height above the ground. Presently, however, her eyes, grown accustomed to the light, distinguished several little white-robed figures seated upon the earth at some distance from the trunk staring into vessels of wood which were placed before them. These figures appeared to be those of both men and women, while one was that of a child. Even as they watched, the figure nearest to them fell forward over its bowl and lay quite still, whereon those around it set up a feeble, piping cry, that yet had in it a note of gladness. The dwarf-mutes who had accompanied them, and who alone seemed to have a right of entry into this sad place, ran forward and looked. Then very gently they lifted up the fallen figure and bore it out. As it was carried past them Rachel noted that it was the body of quite a

young woman, whose little face, wasted to nothing, still looked sweet and gentle.

"Was she ill?" asked Rachel in an awed voice.

"Perhaps," answered the Mother, shaking her grey head, "or perhaps she was very unhappy, and came here to die. What does it matter? She is happy now."

"Ask her, Noie, if all must die who sit beneath that tree," said Rachel.

"Aye," answered Nya, "all save these dumb people who have been priests of the Tree from generation to generation. To touch its stem is to perish soon or late, for it is the Tree of Life and Death, and in it dwells the Spirit of the whole race."

"What then would happen if it fell down, or was destroyed like your tree, Mother?"

"Then the race would perish also," answered Nya, "since their Spirit would lack a home and depart to the world of Ghosts, whither they must follow. When it dies of old age, if it should ever die, then the race will die with it."

"And if someone should cut it down, Mother, what then?"

Now when Noie translated these words to her, the face of the old queen was filled with horror, and as her face was, so was Noie's face.

"White Maiden," she gasped, "speak not such wickedness lest the very thought of it should bring the curse upon us all. He who destroyed that tree would bring ruin upon this people. They would fly away, every one of them, far into the heart of the forest, and be seen no more by man. Moreover, he who did this evil thing would perish and pass down to vengeance among the ghosts, such vengeance as may not be spoken. Put that thought from thy mind, I pray thee, and let it never pass thy lips again."

"Do you believe all this, Noie?" asked Rachel in English with a smile.

"Yes, Zoola," answered Noie, shuddering, "for it is true. My father told me of it, and of what happened once to some wild men who broke into the sanctuary, and shot arrows at the Tree. No, no, I will not tell the story; it is dreadful."

"Yet it must be foolishness, Noie, for how can a tree have power over the lives of men?"

"I do not know, but it has, it has! If I were but to cast a stone at it, I should be dead in a day, and so would you--yes, even you--nothing could save you. Oh!" she went on earnestly, "swear to me, Sister, that you will never so much as touch that tree; I pray you, swear."

So Rachel swore, to please her, for she was tired of this tree and its powers.

Then they went down the hill again, till they came to the mouth of the cave.

"Enter, Lady," Nya said, "for this must be thy home a while until thou goest to rule as Mother of the Trees after me, or, if it pleases thee better, up yonder to die."

They went into the cave, having no choice. It was a great place lit dimly by the outer light, and farther down its length with lamps. Looking round her, Rachel saw that its roof was supported by white columns which she knew to be stalactites, for as a child she had seen their like. At the end of it, where the lamps burned and a fountain bubbled from the ground, rose a very large column shaped like the trunk of a tree, with branches at the top that looked like the boughs of a tree. Gazing at it Rachel understood why these dwarfs, or some ancient people before them, had chosen this cave as their temple.

"The ghost Tree of my race," said old Nya, pointing to it, "the only tree that never falls, the Tree that lives and grows for ever. Yes, it grows, for it is larger now than when my mother was a child."

As they drew near to this wondrous and ghostly looking object Rachel saw piled around and beyond it many precious things. There was gold in dust

and heaps, and rings and nuggets; there were shining stones, red and green and white, that she knew were jewels; there were tusks of ivory and carvings in ivory; there were karosses and furs mouldering to decay; there were grotesque gods, fetishes of wood and stone.

"Offerings," said Nya, "which all the nations that live in darkness bring to the Mother of the Trees, and the priests of the Cave. Costly things which they value, but we value them not, who prize power and wisdom only. Yes, yes, costly things which they give to the Mother of the Trees, the fools without a spirit, when they come here to ask her oracle. Look, there are some of the gifts which were sent by Dingaan of the Zulus in payment for the oracle of his death. Thou broughtest them, Noie, my child."

"Yes," answered Noie, "I brought them, and the Inkosazana here, she delivered the oracle. Eddo gave her the bowl, and she saw pictures in the bowl and showed them to Dingaan."

"Nay, nay," said the old woman testily, "it was I who saw the pictures, and I showed them to Eddo and to this white virgin. You cannot understand, but it was so, it was so. Eddo's gift of vision is small, mine is great. None have ever had it as I have it, and that is why Eddo and the others have suffered my tree to live so long, because the light of my wisdom has shone about their heads and spoken through their tongues, and when I am gone they will seek and find it not. In thee they might have found it, Maiden, had thy heart remained empty, but now, it is full again and what room is there for wisdom such as ours?--the wisdom of the ghosts, not the

wisdom of life and love and beating hearts."

Noie translated the words, but Rachel seemed to take no heed of them.

"Dingaan?" she asked. "Is Dingaan dead? He was well enough when--when Richard came to Zululand, and since then I have seen nothing of him. How did he die?"

"He did not die, Zoola," answered Noie, "though I think that ere long he will die, for you told him so. It was you who died for a while, not Dingaan. By-and-bye you shall learn all that story. Now you are very weary and must rest."

"Yes," said Rachel with a sob, "I think I died when Richard died, but now I seem to have come to life again--that is the worst of it. Oh!! Noie, Noie, why did you not let me remain dead, instead of bringing me to life again in this dreadful place?"

"Because it was otherwise fated, Sister," replied Noie. "No, do not begin to laugh and cry; it was otherwise fated," and bending down she whispered something into Nya's ear.

The old dwarf nodded, then, taking Rachel by the hand, led her to where some skins were spread upon the floor.

"Lie down," she said, "and rest. Rest, beautiful White One, and wake up to

eat and be strong again," and she gazed into Rachel's eyes as Eddo had done when the fits of wild laughter were on her, singing something as she gazed.

While she sang the madness that was gathering there again went out of Rachel's eyes, the lids closed over them, and presently they were fast shut in sleep, nor did she open them again for many hours.

Rachel awoke and sat up looking round her wonderingly. Then by the dim light of the lamps she saw Noie seated at her side, and the old dwarf-woman, who was called Mother of the Trees, squatted at a little distance watching them both--and remembered.

"Thou hast had happy dreams, Lady, and thou art well again, is it not so?" queried Nya.

"Aye, Mother," she answered, "too happy, for they make my waking the more sad. And I am well, I who desire to die."

"Then go up through the open gate which thou sawest not so long ago, and satisfy thy desire, as it is easy to do," replied Nya grimly. "Nay," she added in a changed voice, "go not up, thou art too young and fair, the blood runs too red in those blue veins of thine. What hast thou to do with ghosts and death, and the darkness of the trees, thou child of the air and sunshine? Death for the dwarf-folk, death for the dealers in dreams, death for the death-lovers, but for thee life--life."

"Tell her, Noie," said Rachel, "that my mother, who was fore-sighted, always said that I should live out my days, and I fear that it is true, who must live them out alone."

"Yes, yes, she was right, that mother of thine," answered Nya, "and for the rest, who knows? But thou art hungry, eat; afterwards we will talk," and she pointed to a stool upon which was food.

Rachel tasted and found it very good, a kind of porridge, made of she knew not what, and with it forest fruits, but no flesh. So she ate heartily, and Noie ate with her. Nya ate also, but only a very little.

"Why should I trouble to eat?" she said, "I to whom death draws near?"

When they had finished eating, at some signal which Rachel did not perceive, mutes came in who bore away the fragments of the meal. After they had gone the three women washed themselves in the water of the fountain. Then Noie combed out Rachel's golden hair, and clothed her again in her robe of silken fur that she had cleansed, throwing over it a mantle of snowy white fibre, such as the dwarfs wove into cloth, which she and Nya had made ready while Rachel slept.

As Noie put it about her mistress and stepped back to see how it became her beauty, two of the dwarf-mutes appeared creeping up the cave, and squatting down before Nya began to make signs to her.

"What is it?" asked Rachel nervously.

"Eddo is without," answered the Mother, "and would speak with us."

"I fear Eddo and will not go," exclaimed Rachel.

"Nay, have no fear, Maiden, for here he can not harm thee or any of us; it is the place of sanctuary. Come, let us see this priest; perhaps we may learn something from him."