

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE CITY OF THE DEAD

Nya led the way down the cave, followed by Rachel and Noie. Squatted in its entrance, so as to be out of reach of the rays of the sun, sat Eddo, looking like a malevolent toad, and with him were Hana and some other priests. As Rachel approached they all rose and saluted, but to Nya and Noie they gave no salute. Only to Nya Eddo said:

"Why art thou not within the Fence, old woman?" and he pointed with his chin towards the place of death above. "Thy tree is down, and all last night we were hacking off its branches that it may dry up the sooner. It is time for thee to die."

"I die when my tree dies, not before, Priest," answered Nya. "I have still some work to do before I die, also I have planted my tree again in good soil, and it may grow."

"I saw," said Eddo; "it is without the wall there, but many a generation must go by before a new Mother sits beneath its shade. Well, die when it pleases you, it does not matter when, since thou art no more our Mother. Moreover, learn that all have deserted thee, save a very few, most of whom have just now passed within the Fence above that they may attend thee amongst the ghosts."

"I thank them," said Nya simply, "and in that world we will rule together."

"The rest," went on Eddo, "have turned against thee, having heard how thou didst bring one of us to the Red Death yesterday by thy evil magic, him upon whom the bough fell."

"Who was it that strove to bring me to the Red Death before I reached the sanctuary? Who shot the poisoned arrow, Priest?"

"I do not know," answered Eddo, "but it seems that he shot badly for thou art still here. Now enough of thee, old woman. For many years we bore thy rule, which was always foolish, and sometimes bad, because we could not help it, for the tree of her who went before thee fell at thy feet, as thy tree has fallen at the feet of the White Virgin there. For long thou and I have struggled for the mastery, and now thou art dead and I have won, so be silent, old woman, and since that arrow missed thee, go hence in peace, for none need thee any more, who hast neither youth, nor comeliness, nor power."

"Aye," answered Nya, stung to fury by these insults, "I shall go hence in peace, but thou shalt not abide in peace, thou traitor, nor those who follow thee. When youth and comeliness fade then wisdom grows, and wisdom is power, Eddo, true power. I tell thee that last night I looked in my bowl and saw things concerning thee--aye, and all of our people, that are

hid from thy eyes, terrible things, things that have not befallen since the Tree of the Tribe was a seed, and the Spirit of the Tribe came to dwell within it."

"Speak them, then," said Eddo, striving to hide the fear which showed through his round eyes.

"Nay, Priest, I speak them not. Live on and thou shalt discover them, thou and thy traitors. Well have I served you all for many years, mercy have I given to all, white magic have I practised and not black, none have died that I could save, none have suffered whom I could protect, no, not even the slave-peoples beneath our rule. All this have I done, knowing that ye plotted against me, knowing that ye strove to kill my tree by spells, knowing what the end must be. It has come at last, as come it must, and I do not grieve. Fool, I knew that it would come, and I knew the manner of its coming. It was I who sent for this virgin queen whom ye would set up to rule over you, foreseeing that at her feet my tree would fall. The ghost of Seyapi, who is of my blood, Seyapi whom years ago ye drove away for no offence, to dwell in a strange land, told me of her and of this Noie, his daughter, and of the end of it all. So she came; thou didst not bring her as thou thoughtest, I brought her, and my tree fell at her feet as it was doomed to fall, and she saved me from the Red Death as she was doomed to do, giving me love, not hate, as I gave her love not hate. For the rest ye shall see--all of you. I am finished--I am dead--but I live on elsewhere, and ye shall see."

Now Eddo would have answered, but the priest Hana, who appeared to be much frightened by Nya's words, plucked at his sleeve, whispering in his ear, and he was silent. Presently he spoke again, but to Rachel, bidding Noie translate:

"Thou White Maid," he said, "who wast called Princess of the Zulus, pay no heed to this old dotard, but listen to me. When thy Spirit wandered yonder, even then I saw the seeds of greatness in thee, and begged thee from the savage Dingaen. Also I and Pani, who is dead, and Hana, who lives, read by our magic that at thy feet the tree of Nya would fall, and that after her thou wast appointed to rule over us. All the Ghost-people read it also, and now they have named thee their Mother, and chosen thee a tree, a great tree, but young and strong, that shall stand for ages. Come forth, then, and take thy seat beneath that tree, and be our queen."

"Why should I come?" asked Rachel. "It seems that you dwarfs bring your queens to ill ends. Choose you another Mother."

"Inkosazana, we cannot if we would," answered Eddo, "for these matters are not in our hands, but in those of our Spirit. Hearken, we will deal well with thee; we will make thee great, and grow in thy greatness, for thou shall give us of thy wisdom, that although thou knowest it not, thou hast above all other women. We weary of little things, we would rule the world. All the nations from sea to sea shall bow down before thee, and seek thine oracle. Thou shall take their wealth, thou shalt drive them hither and thither as the wind drives clouds. Thou shalt make war, thou shalt ordain

peace. At thy pleasure they shall rise up in life and lie down in death. Their kings shall cower before thee, their princes shall bring thee tribute, thou shalt reign a god."

"Until it shall please Eddo to bring thee to thine end, Lady, as it pleases him to bring me to mine," muttered Nya behind her. "Be not beguiled, Maiden; remain a woman and uncrowned, for so thou shalt find most joy."

"Thou meanest, Eddo," said Rachel, "that thou wilt rule and I do thy bidding. Noie, tell him that I will have none of it. When I came here a great sorrow had made me mad, and I knew nothing. Now I have found my Spirit again, and presently I go hence."

At this answer Eddo grew very angry.

"One thing I promise thee, Zoola," he said; "in the name of all the Ghost-people I promise it, that thou shalt not go hence alive. In this sanctuary thou art safe indeed, seated in the shadow of the Death-tree that is the Tree of Life, but soon or late a way will be found to draw thee hence, and then thou shalt learn who is the stronger--thou or Eddo--as the old woman behind thee has learned. Fare thee well for a while. I will tell the people that thou art weary and retest, and meanwhile I rule in thy name. Fare thee well, Inkosazana, till we meet without the wall," and he rose and went, accompanied by Hana and the other priests.

When he had gone a little way he turned, and pointing up the hill, screamed back to Nya:

"Go and look within the Fence, old hag. There thou wilt see the best of those that clung to thee, seeking for peace. Art thou a coward that thou lingerest behind them?"

"Nay, Eddo," she answered, "thou art the coward that hast driven them to death, because they are good and thou art evil. When my hour is ripe I join them, not before. Nor shalt thou abide here long behind me. One short day of triumph for thee, Eddo, and then night, black night for ever."

Eddo heard, and his yellow face grew white with rage, or fear. He stamped upon the ground, he shook his small fat fists, and spat out curses as a toad spits venom. Nya did not stay to listen to them, but walked up the cave and sat herself down upon her mat.

"Why does he hate thee so, Mother?" asked Rachel.

"Because those that are bad hate those that are good, Maiden. For many a year Eddo has sought to rule through me, and to work evil in the world, but I have not suffered it. He would abandon our secret, ancient faith, and reign a king, as Dingaan the Zulu reigns. He would send the slave-tribes out to war and conquer the nations, and build him a great house, and have many wives. But I held him fast, so that he could do few

of these things. Therefore he plotted against me, but my magic was greater than his, and while my tree stood he could not prevail. At length it fell at thy feet, as he knew that it was doomed to fall, for all these things are fore-ordained, and at once he would have slain me by the Red Death, but thou didst protect me, and for that blessed be thou for ever."

"And why does he wish to make me Mother in thy place, Nya?"

"Because my tree fell at thy feet, and all the people demand it. Because he thinks that once the bond of the priesthood is tied between you, and his blood runs in thee, thy pure spirit will protect his spirit from its sins, and that thy wisdom, which he sees in thee, will make him greater than any of the Ghost-people that ever lived. Yet consent not, for afterwards if thou dost thwart him, he will find a way to bring down thy tree, and with it thy life, and set another to rule in thy place. Consent not, for know that here thou art safe from him."

"It may be so, Mother, but how can I dwell on in this dismal place? Already my heart is broken with its sorrows, and soon, like those poor folk, I should seek peace within the Fence."

"Tell me of those sorrows," said Nya gently. "Perhaps I do not know them all, and perhaps I could help thee."

So Rachel sat herself down also, and Noie, interpreting for her, told all her tale up to that point when she saw the body of Richard borne away, for

after this she remembered nothing until she found herself standing upon the fallen tree in the land of the Ghost Kings. It was a long tale, and before ever she finished it night fell, but throughout its telling the old dwarf-woman said never a word, only watched Rachel's face with her kind, soft eyes. At last it was done, and she said:

"A sad story. Truly there is much evil in the world beyond the country of the Trees, for here at least we shed little blood. Now, Maiden, what is thy desire?"

"This is my desire," said Rachel, "to be joined again to him I love, whom Ishmael slew; yes, and to my father and mother also, whom the Zulus slew at the command of Ishmael."

"If they are all dead, how can that be, Maiden, unless thou seekest them in death? Pass within the Fence yonder, and let the poison of the Tree of the Tribe fall upon thee, and soon thou wilt find them."

"Nay, Mother, I may not, for it would be self-murder, and my faith knows few greater crimes."

"Then thou must wait till death finds thee, and that road may be very long."

"Already it is long, Mother, so long that I know not how to travel it, who am alone in the world without a friend save Noie here," and she began to



weep.

"Not so. Thou hast another friend," and she laid her hand upon Rachel's heart, "though it is true that I may bide with thee but a little while."

After this they were all silent for a space, until Nya looked up at Rachel and asked suddenly:

"Art thou brave?"

"The Zulus and others thought so, Mother; but what can courage avail me now?"

"Courage of the body, nothing, Maiden; courage of the spirit much, perhaps. If thou sawest this lover of thine, and knew for certain that he lives on beneath the world awaiting thee, would it bring thee comfort?"

Rachel's breast heaved and her eyes sparkled with joy, as she answered:

"Comfort! What is there that could bring so much? But how can it be, Mother, seeing that the last gulf divides us, a gulf which mortals may not pass and live?"

"Thou sayest it; still I have great power, and thy spirit is white and clean. Perhaps I could despatch it across that gulf and call it back to earth again. Yet there are dangers, dangers to me of which I reckon little,

and dangers to thee. Whither I sent thee, there thou mightest bide."

"I care not if I bide there, Mother, if only it be with him! Oh! send me on this journey to his side, and living or dead I will bless thee."

Now Nya thought a while and answered:

"For thy sake I will try what I would try for none other who has breathed, or breathes, for thou didst save me from the Red Death at the hands of Eddo. Yes, I will try, but not yet--first thou must eat and rest. Obey, or I do nothing."

So Rachel ate, and afterwards, feeling drowsy, even slept a while, perhaps because she was still weary with her journeying and her new-found mind needed repose, or perhaps because some drug had been mingled with her drink. When she awoke Nya led her to the mouth of the cave. There they stood awhile studying the stars. No breath of air stirred, and the silence was intense, only from time to time the sound of trees falling in the forest reached their ears. Sometimes it was quite soft, as though a fleece of wool had been dropped to the earth, that was when the tree that died had grown miles and miles away from them; and sometimes the crash was as that of sudden thunder, that was when the tree which died had grown near to them.

A sense of the mystery and wonder of the place and hour sank into Rachel's heart. The stars above, the mighty entombing forest, in which the trees

fell unceasingly after their long centuries of life, the encircling wall, built perhaps by hands that had ceased from their labours hundreds of thousands of years before those trees began to grow; the huge moss-clad cedar upon the mound beneath the shadow of whose branches day by day its worshippers gave up their breath, that immemorial cedar whereof, as they believed, the life was the life of the nation; the wizened little witch-woman at her side with the seal of doom already set upon her brow and the stare of farewell in her eyes; the sad, spiritual face of Noie, who held her hand, the loving, faithful Noie, who in that light seemed half a thing of air; the grey little dwarf-mutes who squatted on their mats staring at the ground, or now and again passed down the hill from the Fence of Death above, bearing between them a body to its burial; all were mysterious, all were wonderful.

As she looked and listened, a new strength stirred in Rachel's heart. At first she had felt afraid, but now courage flowed into her, and it seemed to come from the old, old woman at her side, the mistress of mysteries, the mother of magic, in whom was gathered the wisdom of a hundred generations of this half human race.

"Look at the stars, and the night," she was saying in her soft voice, "for soon thou shalt be beyond them all, and perchance thou shall never see them more. Art thou fearful? If so, speak, and we will not try this journey in search of one whom we may not find."

"No," answered Rachel; "but, Mother, whither go we?"

"We go to the Land, of Death. Come, then, the moment is at hand. It is hard on midnight. See, yonder star stands above the holy Tree," and she pointed to a bright orb that hung almost over the topmost bough of the cedar, "it marks thy road, and if thou wouldst pass it, now is the hour."

"Mother," asked Noie, "may I come with her? I also have my dead, and where my Sister goes I follow."

"Aye, if thou wilt, daughter of Seyapi, the path is wide enough for three, and if I stay on high, perchance thou that art of my blood mayest find strength to guide her earthwards through the wandering worlds."

Then Nya walked up the cave and sat herself down within the circle of the lamps with her back to the stalactite that was shaped like a tree, bidding Rachel and Noie be seated in front of her. Two of the dwarf-mutes appeared, women both of them, and squatted to right and left, each gazing into a bowl of limpid dew. Nya made a sign, and still gazing into their bowls, these dwarfs began to beat upon little drums that gave out a curious, rolling noise, while Nya sang to the sound of the drums a wild, low song. With her thin little hands she grasped the right hand of Rachel and of Noie and gazed into their eyes.

Things changed to Rachel. The dwarfs to right and left vanished away, but the low murmuring of their drums grew to a mighty music, and the stars danced to it. The song of Nya swelled and swelled till it filled all the

space between earth and heaven; it was the rush of the gale among the forests, it was the beating of the sea upon an illimitable coast, it was the shout of all the armies of the world, it was the weeping of all the women of the world. It lessened again, she seemed to be passing away from it, she heard it far beneath her, it grew tiny in its volume--tiny as if it were an infinite speck or point of sound which she could still discern for millions and millions of miles, till at length distance and vastness overcame it, and it ceased. It ceased, this song of the earth, but a new song began, the song of the rushing worlds. Far away she could hear it, that ineffable music, far in the utter depths of space. Nearer it would come and nearer, a ringing, glorious sound, a sound and yet a voice, one mighty voice that sang and was answered by other voices as sun crossed the path of sun, and caught up and re-echoed by the innumerable choir of the constellations.

They were falling past her, those vast, glowing suns, those rounded planets that were now vivid with light, and now steeped in gloom, those infinite showers of distant stars. They were gone, they and their music together; she was far beyond them in a region where all life was forgotten, beyond the rush of the uttermost comet, beyond the last glimmer of the spies and outposts of the universe. One shape of light she sped into the black bosom of fathomless space, and its solitude shrivelled up her soul. She could not endure, she longed for some shore on which to set her mortal feet.

Behold! far away a shore appeared, a towering, cliff-bound shore, upon

whose iron coasts all the black waves of space beat vainly and were eternally rolled back. Here there was light, but no such light as she had ever known; it did not fall from sun or star, but, changeful and radiant, welled upward from that land in a thousand hues, as light might well from a world of opal. In its dazzling, beautiful rays she saw fantastic palaces and pyramids, she saw seas and pure white mountains, she saw plains and new-hued flowers, she saw gulfs and precipices, and pale lakes pregnant with wavering flame. All that she had ever conceived of as lovely or as fearful, she beheld, far lovelier or a thousandfold more fearful.

Like a great rose of glory that world bloomed and changed beneath her. Petal by petal its splendours fell away and were swallowed in the sea of space, whilst from the deep heart of the immortal rose new splendours took their birth, and fresh-fashioned, mysterious, wonderful, reappeared the measureless city with its columns, its towers, and its glittering gates. It endured a moment, or a million years, she knew not which, and lo! where it had been, stood another city, different, utterly different, only a hundred times more glorious. Out of the prodigal heart of the world-rose were they created, into the black bosom of nothingness were they gathered; whilst others, ever more perfect, pressed into their place. So, too, changed the mountains, and so the trees, while the gulfs became a garden and the fiery lakes a pleasant stream, and from the seed of the strange flowers grew immemorial forests wreathed about with rosy mists and bedecked in glimmering dew. With music they were born, on the wings of music they fled away, and after them that sweet music wailed like memories.

A hand took hers and drew her downwards, and up to meet her leapt myriads of points of light, in every point a tiny face. They gazed at her with their golden eyes; they whispered together concerning her, and the sound of their whispering was the sound of a sea at peace. They accompanied her to the very heart of the opal rose of life whence all these wonders welled, they set her in a great grey hall roofed in with leaning cliffs, and there they left her desolate.

Fear came upon her, the loneliness choked her, it held her by the throat like a thing alive. She seemed about to die of it, when she became aware that once more she was companioned. Shapes stood about her. She could not see the shapes, save dimly now and again as they moved, but their eyes she could see, their great calm, pitiful eyes, which looked down on her, as the eye of a giant might look down upon a babe. They were terrible, but she did not fear them so much as the loneliness, for at least they lived.

One of the shapes bent over her, for its holy eyes drew near to her, and she heard a voice in her heart asking her for what great cause she had dared to journey hither before the time. She answered, in her heart, not with her lips, that she was bereaved of all she loved and came to seek them. Then; still in her heart, she heard that voice command:

"Let all this Rachel's dead be brought before her."

Instantly doors swung open at the end of that grey hall, and through them

with noiseless steps, with shadowy wings, floated a being that bore in its arms a child. Before her it stayed, and the light of its starry head illumined the face of the child. She knew it at once--it was that baby brother whose bones lay by the shore of the African sea. It awoke from its sleep, it opened its eyes, it stretched out its arms and smiled at her. Then it was gone.

Other Shapes appeared, each of them bearing its burden--a companion who had died at school, friends of her youth and childhood whom she had thought yet living, a young man who once had wished to marry her and who was drowned, the soldier whom she had killed to save the life of Noie. At the sight of him she shrank, for his blood was on her hands, but he only smiled like the rest, and was borne away, to be followed by that witch-doctress whom the Zulus had slain because of her, who neither smiled nor frowned but passed like one who wonders.

Then another shadow swept down the hall, and in its arms her mother--her mother with joyful eyes, who held thin hands above her as though in blessing, and to whom she strove to speak but strove in vain. She was borne on still blessing her, and where she had been was her father, who blessed her also, and whose presence seemed to shed peace upon her soul. He pointed upwards and was gone, gazing at her earnestly, and lo! a form of darkness cast something at her feet. It was Ishmael who knelt before her, Ishmael whose tormented face gazed up at her as though imploring pardon.



A struggle rent her heart. Could she forgive? Oh! could she forgive him who had slain them all? Now she was aware that the place was filled with the points of light that were Spirits, and that every one of them looked at her awaiting the free verdict of her heart. Rank upon rank, also, the mighty Shapes gathered about her, and in their arms her dead, and all of them looked and looked, awaiting the free verdict of her heart. Then it arose within her, drawn how she knew not from every fibre of her infinite being, it arose within her, that spirit of pity and of pardon. As the dead had stretched out their arms above her, so she stretched out her arms over the head of that tortured soul, and for the first time her lips were given power to speak.

"As I hope for pardon, so I pardon," she said. "Go in peace!"

Voices and trumpets caught up the words, and through the grey hall they rang and echoed, proclaimed for ever and as they died away he too was gone, and with him went the myriad points of flame, in each of which gleamed a tiny face. She looked about her seeking another Spirit, that Spirit she had, travelled so far and dared so much to find. But there came only a little dwarf that shambled alone down the great hall. She knew him at once for Pani, the priest, he who had been crushed in the tempest, Pani, the brother of Eddo. No Shape bore him, for he who on earth had been half a ghost, could walk this ghost-world on his mortal feet, or so her mind conceived. Past her he shuffled shamefaced, and was gone.

Now the great doors at the end of the hall closed; from far away she could

see them roll together like lightning-severed clouds, and once more that awful loneliness overcame her. Her knees gave way beneath her, she sank down upon the floor, one little spot of white in its expanse, wishing that the roof of rock would fall and hide her. She covered her face with her golden hair, and wept behind its veil. She looked up and saw two great eyes gazing at her--no face, only two great, steady eyes. Then a voice speaking in her heart asked her why she wept, whose desire had been fulfilled, and she answered that it was because she could not find him whom she sought, Richard Darrien. Instantly the tongues and trumpets took up the name.

"Richard Darrien!" they cried, "Richard Darrien!"

But no Shape swept in bearing the spirit of Richard in its arms.

"He is not here," said the voice in her heart. "Go, seek him in some other world."

She grew angry.

"Thou mockest me," she answered, "He is dead, and this is the home of the dead; therefore he must be here. Shadow, thou mockest me."

"I mock not," came the swift answer. "Mortal, look now and learn."

Again the doors burst open, and through them poured the infinite rout of

the dead. That hall would not hold them all, therefore it grew and grew till her sight could scarcely reach from wall to wall. Shapes headed and marshalled them by races and by generations, perhaps because thus only could her human heart imagine them, but now none were borne in their arms. They came in myriads and in millions, in billions and tens of billions, men and women and children, kings and priests and beggars, all wearing the garments of their age and country. They came like an ocean-tide, and their floating hair was the foam on the tide, and their eyes gleamed like the first shimmer of dawn above the snows. They came for hours and days and years and centuries, they came eternally, and as they came every finger of that host, compared to which all the sands of all the seas were but as a handful, was pointed at her, and every mouth shaped the words:

"Is it I whom thou seekest?"

Million by million she scanned them all, but the face of Richard Darrien was not there.

Now the dead Zulus were marching by. Down the stream of Time they marched in their marshalled regiments. Chaka stood over her--she knew him by his likeness to Dingaan--and threatened her with a little, red-handled spear, asking her how she dared to sit upon the throne of the Spirit of his nation. She began to tell him her story, but as she spoke the wide receding walls of that grey hall fell apart and crumbled, and amidst a mighty laughter the great-eyed Shapes rebuilt them to the fashion of the cave in the mound beneath the tree of the dwarf-folk. The sound of the

trumpets died away, the shrill, sweet music of the spheres grew far and faint.

Rachel opened her eyes. There in front of her sat Nya, crooning her low song, and there, on either side crouched the mutes tapping upon their little drums and gazing into their bowls of water, while against her leaned Noie, who stirred like one awaking from sleep. Ages and ages ago when she started on that dread journey, the dwarf to her left was stretching out her hand to steady the bowl at her feet, and now it had but just reached the bowl. A great moth had singed its wings in the lamp, and was fluttering to the ground--it was still in mid-air. Noie was placing her arm about her neck, and it had but begun to fall upon her shoulder!