

## CHAPTER XXII

### IN THE SANCTUARY

Nya ceased her singing, and the dwarf women their beating on the drums.

"Hast thou been a journey, Maiden?" she asked, looking at Rachel curiously.

"Aye, Mother," she answered in a faint voice, "and a journey far and strange."

"And thou, Noie, my niece?"

"Aye, Mother," she answered, shivering as though with cold or fear, "but I went not with my Sister here, I went alone--for years and years."

"A far journey thou sayest, Inkosazana, and one that was for years and years, thou sayest, Noie, yet the eyes of both of you have been shut for so long only as it takes a burnt moth to fall from the lamp flame to the ground. I think that you slept and dreamed a moment, that is all."

"Mayhap, Mother," replied Rachel, "but if so mine was a most wondrous dream, such as has never visited me before, and as I pray, never may again. For I was borne beyond the stars into the glorious cities of the

dead, and I saw all the dead, and those that I had known in life were brought to me by Shapes and Powers whereof I could only see the eyes."

"And didst thou find him whom thou soughtest most of all?"

"Nay," she answered, "him alone I did not find. I sought him, I prayed the Guardians of the dead to show him to me, and they called up all the dead, and I scanned them every one, and they summoned him by his name, but he was not of their number, and he came not. Only they spoke in my heart, bidding me to look for him in some other world."

"Ah!" exclaimed Nya starting a little, "they said that to thee, did they? Well, worlds are many, and such a search would be long." Then as though to turn the subject, she added, "And what sawest thou, Noie?"

"I, Mother? I went not beyond the stars, I climbed down endless ladders into the centre of the earth, my feet are still sore with them. I reached vast caves full of a blackness that shone, and there many dead folk were walking, going nowhere, and coming back from nowhere. They seemed strengthless but not unhappy, and they looked at me and asked me tidings of the upper world, but I could not answer them, for whenever I opened my lips to speak a cold hand was laid upon my mouth. I wandered among them for many moons, only there was no moon, nothing but the blackness that shone like polished coal, wandered from cave to cave. At length I came to a cave in which sat my father, Seyapi, and near to him my mother, and my other mothers, his wives, and my brothers and sisters, all of whom the

Zulus killed, as the wild beast, Ibubesi, told them to do."

"I saw Ibubesi, and he prayed me for my pardon, and I granted it to him,"  
broke in Rachel.

"I did not see him," went on Noie fiercely, "nor would I have pardoned him  
if I had. Nor do I think that my father and his family pardon him; I think  
that they wait to bear testimony against him before the Lord of the dead."

"Did Seyapi tell you so?" asked Rachel.

"Nay, he sat there beneath a black tree whereof I could not see the top,  
and gazed into a bowl of black water, and in that bowl he showed me many  
pictures of things that have been and things that are to come, but they  
are secret, I may say nothing of them."

"And what was the end of it, my niece?" asked Nya, bending forward  
eagerly.

"Mother, the end of it was that the black tree which was shaped like the  
tree of our tribe above us, took fire and went up in a fierce flame. Then  
the roofs of the caves fell in and all the people of the dwarfs flew  
through the roofs, singing and rejoicing, into a place of light; only,"  
she added slowly, "it seemed to me that I was left alone amidst the ruins  
of the caves, I and the white ghost of the tree. Then a voice cried to me  
to make my heart bold, to bear all things with patience, since to those

who dare much for love's sake, much will be forgiven. So I woke, but what those words mean I cannot guess, seeing that I love no man, and never shall," and she rested her chin upon her hand and sat there musing.

"No," replied Nya, "thou lovest no man, and therefore the riddle is hard," but as she spoke her eyes fell upon Rachel.

"Mother," said Rachel presently, "my heart is the hungrier for all that it has fed upon. Can thy magic send me back to that country of the dead that I may search for him again? If so, for his sake I will dare the journey."

"Not so," answered Nya shaking her head; "it is a road that very few have travelled, and none may travel twice and live."

Now Rachel began to weep.

"Weep not, Maiden, there are other roads and perchance to-morrow thou shall walk them. Now lie down and sleep, both of you, and fear no dreams."

So they laid themselves down and slept, but the old witch-wife, Nya, sat waiting and watched them.

"I think I understand," she murmured to herself, as She gazed at the slumbering Rachel, "for to her who is so pure and good, and who has suffered such cruel wrong, the Guardians would not lie. I think that I understand and that I can find a path. Sleep on, sweet maiden, sleep on in

hope."

Then she looked at Noie and shook her grey head.

"I do not understand," she muttered. "The black tree shaped like the Tree of our Tribe, and Seyapi of the old blood seated beneath it. The tree that went up in fire, and the maid of the old blood left alone with the ghost of it, while the dwarf people fled into light and freedom. What does it mean? Ah! that picture in the bowl! Now I can guess. 'Those who dare much for love.' It did not say for love of man, and woman can love woman. But would she dare a deed that none of our race could even dream? Well, the Zulu blood is bold. Perhaps, perhaps. Oh! Eddo, thou black sorcerer, whither art thou leading the Children of the Tree? On thy head be it, Eddo, not on mine; on thy head for ever and for ever."

When Rachel awoke, refreshed, on the following day, she lay a while thinking. Every detail of her vision was perfectly clear in her mind, only now she was sure that it had been but a dream. Yet what a wonderful dream! How, even in her sleep, had she found the imagination to conceive circumstances so inconceivable? That magic rush beyond the stars; that mighty world set round with black cliffs against which rolled the waves of space; that changeful, wondrous world which unfolded itself petal by petal like a rose, every petal lovelier and different from the last; that grey hall roofed with tilted precipices; and then those dead, those multitudes of the dead!

What power had been born in her that she could imagine such things as these? Vision she had, like her mother, but not after this sort. Perhaps it was but an aftermath of her madness, for into the minds of the mad creep strange sights and sounds, and this place, and the people amongst whom she sojourned, the Ghost-people, the grey Dwarf-people, the Dealers in dreams, the Dwellers in the sombre forest, might well open new doors in such a soul as hers. Or perhaps she was still mad. She did not know, she did not greatly care. All she knew was that her poor heart ached with love for a man who was dead, and yet whom she could not find even among the dead. She had wished to die, but now she longed for death no more, fearing lest after all there should be something in that vision which the magic of Nya had summoned up, and that when she reached the further shore she might not find him who dwelt in a different world. Oh! if only she could find him, then she would be glad enough to go wherever it was that he had gone.

Now Noie was awake at her side, and they talked together.

"We must have dreamt dreams, Noie," she said. "Perhaps the Mother mingled some drug with our food."

"I do not know, Zoola," answered Noie; "but, if so, I want no more of those dreams which bode no good to me. Besides, who can tell what is dream and what is truth? Mayhap this world is the dream, and the truth is such things as we saw last night," and she would say no more on the matter.

Nothing happened within the Wall that day--that is, nothing out of the

common. A certain number of the privileged, priestly caste of the dwarfs were carried or conducted into the holy place, and up to the Fence of Death that they might die there, and a certain number were brought out for burial. Some of those who came in were folk weary of life, or, in other words, suicides, and these walked; and some were sick of various diseases, and these were carried. But the end was the same, they always died, though whether this result was really brought about by some poison distilled from the tree, as Nya alleged, or whether it was the effect of a physical collapse induced by that inherited belief, Rachel never discovered.

At least they died, some almost at once, and some within a day or two of entering that deadly shade, and were borne away to burial by the mutes who spent their spare time in the digging of little graves which they must fill. Indeed, these mutes either knew, or pretended that they knew who would be the occupant of each grave. At least they intimated by signs that this was revealed to them in their bowls, and when the victims appeared within the Wall, took pleasure in leading them to the holes they had prepared, and showing to them with what care these had been dug to suit their stature. For this service they received a fee that such moribund persons brought with them, either of finely woven robes, or of mats, or of different sorts of food, or sometimes of gold and copper rings manufactured by the Umkulu or other subject savages, which they wore upon their wrists and ankles.

Certain of these doomed folk, however, went to their fate with no light hearts, which was not wonderful, as it seemed that these were neither ill

nor sought a voluntary euthanasia. They were political victims sent thither by Eddo as an alternative to the terror of the Red Death, whereby according to their strange and ancient creed, they would have risked the spilling of their souls. For the most part the crime of these poor people was that they had been adherents and supporters of the old Mother of the Tree, Nya, over whom Eddo was at last triumphant. On their way up to the Fence such individuals would stop to exchange a last few, sad words with their dethroned priestess.

Then without any resistance they went on with the rest, but from them the mutes received scant offerings, or none at all, with the result that they were cast into the worst situated and most inconvenient graves, or even tumbled two or three together into some shapeless corner hole. But, after all, that mattered nothing to them so long as they received sepulchre within the Wall, which was their birth-or, rather, their death-right.

The priest-mutes themselves were a strange folk, and, oddly enough, Rachel observed, by comparison, quite cheerful in their demeanour, for when off duty they would smile and gibber at each other like monkeys, and carry on a kind of market between themselves. They lived in that part of the circumference of the Wall which was behind the hill whereon grew the sacred tree. Here no burials took place, and instead of graves appeared their tiny huts arranged in neat streets and squares. In these they and their forefathers had dwelt from time immemorial; indeed, each little hut with a few yards of fenced-in ground about it ornamented with dwarf trees, was a freehold that descended from father to son. For the mutes married,



and were given in marriage, like other folk, though their children were few, a family of three being considered very large, while many of the couples had none at all. But those who were born to them were all deaf-mutes, although their other senses seemed to be singularly acute.

These mutes had their virtues; thus some of them were very kind to each other, and especially to those from the outer forest world who came hither to bid farewell to that world, and others, renouncing marriage and all earthly joys, devoted their lives, which appeared to be long, to the worship of the Spirit of the Tree. Also they had their vices, such as theft, and the seducing away of the betrothed of others, but the chief of them was jealousy, which sometimes led to murder by poisoning, an art whereof they were great masters.

When such a crime was discovered, and a case of it happened during the first days of Rachel's sojourn among them, the accused was put upon his trial before the chief of the mutes, evidence for and against him being given by signs which they all understood. Then if a case were established against him, he was forced to drink a bowl of medicine. If he did this with impunity he was acquitted, but if it disagreed with him his guilt was held to be established. Now came the strange part of the matter. All his life the evil-doer had been accustomed to go within the Fence about his business and take no harm, but after such condemnation he was conducted there with the usual ceremonies and very shortly perished like any other uninitiated person. Whether this issue was due to magic or to mental collapse, or to the previous administration of poison, no one seemed to

know, not even Nya herself. So, at least, she declared to Rachel.

At each new moon these mutes celebrated what Rachel was informed they looked upon as a festival. That is, they climbed the Tree of the Tribe and scattered themselves among its enormous branches, where for several hours they mumbled and gibbered in the dark like a troop of baboons. Then they came down, and mounting the huge, surrounding wall, crept around its circumference. Occasionally this journey resulted in an accident, as one of them would fall from the wall and be dashed to pieces, although it was noticed that the unfortunate was generally a person who, although guilty of no actual crime, chanced to be out of favour with the other priests and priestesses. After the circuit of the wall had been accomplished, with or without accidents, the dwarfs feasted round a fire, drinking some spirit that threw them into a sleep in which wonderful visions appeared to them. Such was their only entertainment, if so it could be called, since doubtless the ceremony was of a religious character. For the rest they seldom if ever left the holy place, which was known as "Within the Wall," most of them never doing so in the course of a long life.

Beyond the burial of the dead they did no work, as their food was brought to them daily by outside people, who were called "the slaves of the Wall." Their only method of conversation was by signs, and they seemed to desire no other. Indeed, if, as occasionally happened, a child was born to any of them who could hear or speak like other human beings, it was either given over to the other dwarfs, or if the discovery was not made until it was old enough to observe, it was sacrificed by being bound to the trunk of

the tribal tree "lest it should tell the secret of the Tree."

Such were the weird, half-human folk among whom Rachel was destined to dwell. The Zulus had been bad and bloodthirsty, but compared to these little wizards they seemed to her as angels. The Zulus at any rate had left her her thoughts, but these stunted wretches, she was sure, pried into them and read them with the help of their bowls, for often she caught sight of them signing to each other about her as she passed, and pointing with grins to pictures which they saw in the water.

It was night again, still, silent night made odorous with the heavy cedar scents of the huge tree upon the mound. Rachel and Noie sat before Nya in the cave beneath the burning lamp about which fluttered the big-winged, gilded moths.

"Thou didst not find him yonder among the Shades," said Nya suddenly, as though she were continuing a conversation. "Say now, Maiden, art thou satisfied, or wouldst thou seek for him again?"

"I would seek him through all the heavens and all the earths. Mother, my soul burns for a sight of him, and if I cannot find him, then I must die, and go perchance where he is not."

"Good," said Nya; "the effort wearies me, for I grow weak, yet for thy

sake I will try to help thee, who saved me from the Red Death."

Then the dwarf-women came in and beat upon their drums, and, as before, the old Mother of the Trees began to sing, but Noie sat aside, for in this night's play she would take no part. Again Rachel sank into sleep, and again it seemed to her that she was swept from the earth into the region of the stars and there searched world after world.

She saw many strange and marvellous things, things so wonderful that her memory was buried beneath the mass of them, so that when she woke again she could not recall their details. Only of Richard she saw nothing. Yet as her life returned to her, it seemed to Rachel that for one brief moment she was near to Richard. She could not see him, and she could not hear him, yet certainly he was near her. Then her eyes opened, and Nya ceasing from her song, asked:

"What tidings, Wanderer?"

"Little," she answered feebly, for she was very tired, and in a faint voice she told her all.

"Good," said Nya, nodding her grey head. "This time he was not so far away. To-morrow I will make thy spirit strong, and then perhaps he will come to thee. Now rest."

So next night Nya laid her charm upon Rachel as before, and again her

spirit sought for Richard. This time it seemed to her that she did not leave the earth, but with infinite pain, with terrible struggling, wandered to and fro about it, bewildered by a multitude of faces, led astray by myriads of footsteps. Yet in the end she found him. She heard him not, she saw him not, she knew not where he was, but undoubtedly for a while she was with him, and awoke again, exhausted, but very happy.

Nya heard her story, weighing every word of it but saying nothing. Then she signed to the dwarfs to bring her a bowl of dew, and stared in it for a long while. The dwarf-women also stared into their bowls, and afterwards came to her, talking to her on their fingers, after which all three of them upset the dew upon a rock, "breaking the pictures."

"Hast thou seen aught?" asked Rachel eagerly.

"Yes, Maiden," answered the mother. "I and these wise women have seen something, the same thing, and therefore a true thing. But ask not what it was, for we may not tell thee, nor would it help thee if we did. Only be of a good courage, for this I say, there is hope for thee."

So Rachel went to sleep, pondering on these words, of which neither she nor Noie could guess the meaning. The next night when she prayed Nya to lay the spell upon her, the old Mother would not.

"Not so," she said. "Thrice have I rent thy soul from thy body and sent it afar, and this I may do no more and keep thee living, nor could I if I

would, for I grow feeble. Neither is it necessary, seeing that although thou knowest it not, that spirit of thine, having found him, is with him wherever he may be, yes, at his side comforting him."

"Aye, but Where is he, Mother? Let me look in the bowl and see his face, as I believe that thou hast done."

"Look if thou wilt," and she motioned to one of the dwarf-women to place a bowl before her.

So Rachel looked long and earnestly, but saw nothing of Richard, only many fantastic pictures, most of which she knew again for scenes from her own past. At length, worn out, she thrust away the bowl, and asked in a bitter voice why they mocked her, and how it came about that she who had seen the coming of Richard in the pool in Zululand, and the fate of Dingaan the King in the bowl of Eddo, could now see nothing of any worth.

"As regards the vision of the pool I cannot say, Maiden," replied Nya, "for that was born of thine own heart, and had nothing to do with our magic. As regards the visions in the bowl of Eddo, they were his visions, not thine, or rather my visions that I saw before he started hence. I passed them on to him, and he passed them on to thee, and thou didst pass them on to King Dingaan. Far-sighted and pure-souled as thou art, yet not having been instructed in their wizardry, thou wilt see nothing in the bowls of the dwarfs unless their blood is mingled with thy blood."

"Their blood mingled with my blood?' What dost thou mean, Mother?"

"What I say, neither more nor less. If Eddo has his will, thou wilt rule after me here as Mother of the Trees. But first thy veins must be opened, and the veins of Eddo must be opened, and Eddo's blood must be poured into thee, and thy blood into him. Then thou wilt be able to read in the bowls as we can, and Eddo will be thy master, and thou must do his bidding while you both shall live."

"If so," answered Rachel, "I think that neither of us will live long."

That night Rachel felt too exhausted to sleep, though why this should be she could not guess, as she had done nothing all day save watch the mutes at their dreary tasks, and it was strange, therefore, that she should feel as though she had made a long journey upon her feet. About an hour before the dawn she saw Nya rise and glide past her towards the mouth of the cave, carrying in her hand a little drum, like those used by the mute women. Something impelled her to follow, and waking Noie at her side, she bade her come also.

Outside of the cave by the faint starlight they saw the little shape of Nya creeping down the mound, and thence across the open space towards the wall, and went after her, thinking that she intended to pass the wall. But this she did not do, for when she came to its foot Nya, notwithstanding her feebleness, began to climb the rough stones as actively as any cat, and though their ascent seemed perilous enough, reached the crest of the

wall sixty feet above in safety, and there sat herself down. Next they heard her beating upon the drum she bore, single strokes always, but some of them slow, and some rapid, with a pause between every five or ten strokes, "as though she were spelling out words," thought Rachel.

After a while Nya ceased her beating, and in the utter silence of the night, which was broken only, as always, by the occasional crash of falling trees, for no breath of air stirred, and all the beasts of prey had sought their lairs before light came, both she and Noie seemed to hear, far, infinitely far away, the faint beat of an answering drum. It would appear that Nya heard it also, for she struck a single note upon hers as though in acknowledgement, after which the distant beating went on, paused as though for a reply from some other unheard drum, and again from time to time went on, perhaps repeating that reply.

For a long while this continued until the sky began to grow grey indeed, when Nya beat for several minutes and was answered by a single, far-off note. Then glancing at the heavens she prepared to descend the wall, while Rachel and Noie slipped back to the cave and feigned to be asleep. Soon she entered, and stood over them shaking her grey head and asking how it came about that they thought that she, the Mother of the Trees, should be so easily deceived.

"So thou sawest us," said Rachel, trying not to look ashamed.

"No; I saw you not with my eyes, either of you, but I felt both of you



following me, and heard in my heart what you were whispering to each other. Well, Inkosazana, art thou the wiser for this journey?"

"No, Mother, but tell us if thou wilt what thou wast beating on that drum."

"Gladly," she answered. "I was sending certain orders to the slave peoples who still know me as Mother of the Trees, and obey my words. Perhaps thou dost not believe that while I sat upon yonder wall I talked across the desert to the chiefs of the marches upon the far border of the land of the Umkulu, and that by now at my bidding they have sent out men upon an errand of mine."

"What was the errand, Mother?" asked Rachel curiously.

"I said the errand was mine, not thine, Maiden. It is not pressing, but as I do not know how long my strength will last, I thought it well that it should be settled." Then without more words she coiled herself up on her mat and seemed to go to sleep.

It was after this incident of the drums that Rachel experienced the strangest days, or rather weeks of her life. Nya sent her into no more trances, and to all outward seeming nothing happened. Yet within her much did happen. Her madness had utterly left her and still she was not as other women are, or as she herself had been in health. Her mind seemed to wander and she knew not whither it wandered. Yet for long hours, although

she was awake and, so Noie said, talking or eating or walking as usual, it was away from her, and afterwards she could remember nothing. Also this happened at night as well as during the day, and ever more and more often.

She could remember nothing, yet out of this nothingness there grew upon her a continual sense of the presence of Richard Darrien, a presence that seemed to come nearer and nearer, closer and closer to her heart. It was the assurance of this presence that made those long days so happy to her, though when she was herself, she felt that it could be naught but a dream. Yet why should a dream move her so strangely, and why should a dream weary her so much? Why, after sleeping all night, should she awake feeling as though she had journeyed all night? Why should her limbs ache and she grow thin like one who travels without cease? Why should she seem time after time to have passed great dangers, to have known cold, and heat and want and struggle against waters and the battling against storms? Why should her knowledge of this Richard, of the very heart and soul of Richard, grow ever deeper till it was as though they were not twain, but one?

She could not answer these questions, and Noie could not answer them, and when she asked Nya the old Mother shook her head and could not, or would not answer. Only the dwarf-mutes seemed to know the answer, for when she passed them they nudged each other, and grinned and thrust their little woolly heads together staring, several of them, into one bowl. But if Noie and Nya knew nothing of the cause of these things the effect of them stirred them both, for they saw that Rachel, the tall and strong, grew faint and weak and began to fade away as one fades upon whom deadly

sickness has laid its hand.

Thus three weeks or so went by, until one day in some fashion of her own Nya caused to arise in the mind of Eddo a knowledge of her desire to speak with him. Early the next morning Eddo arrived at the Holy Place accompanied only by his familiar, Hana, and Nya met them alone in the mouth of the cave.

"I see that thou art very white and thin, but still alive, old woman," sneered Eddo, adding: "All the thousands of the people yonder thought that long ere this thou wouldst have passed within the Fence. May I take back that good tidings to them?"

The ancient Mother of the Trees looked at him sternly.

"It is true, thou evil mocker," she said, "that I am white and thin. It is true that I grow like to the skeleton of a rotted leaf, all ribs and netted veins without substance. It is true that my round eyes start from my head like to those of a bush plover, or the tree lizard, and that soon I must pass within the Fence, as thou hast so long desired that I should do that thou mayest reign alone over the thousands of the People of the Dwarfs and wield their wisdom to increase thy power, thou poison-bloated toad. All these things are true, Eddo, yet ere I go I have a word to say to thee to which thou wilt do well to listen."

"Speak on," said Eddo. "Without doubt thou hast wisdom of a sort; honey

thou hast garnered during many years, and it is well that I should suck the store before it is too late."

"Eddo," said Nya, "I am not the only one in this Holy Place who grows white and thin. Look, there is another," and she nodded towards Rachel, who walked past them aimlessly with dreaming eyes, attended by Noie, upon whose arm she leant.

"I see," answered Eddo; "this haunted death-prison presses the life out of her, also I think that thou hast sent her Spirit travelling, as thou knowest how to do, and such journeys sap the strength of flesh and blood."

"Perhaps; but now before it is too late I would send her body travelling also; only thou, who hast the power for a while, dost bar the road."

"I know," said Eddo, nodding his head and looking at his companion. "We all know, do we not, Hana? we who have heard certain beatings of drums in the night, and studied dew drops beneath the trees at dawn. Thou wouldst send her to meet another traveller."

"Yes, and if thou art wise thou wilt let her go."

"Why should I let her go," asked the priest passionately, "and with her all my greatness? She must reign here after thee, for at her feet thy Tree fell, and it is the will of the people, who weary of dwarf queens and desire one that is tall and beautiful and white. Moreover, when my blood

has been poured into her, her wisdom will be great, greater than thine or that of any Mother that went before thee, for she is 'Wensi' the Virgin, and her soul is purer than them all. I will not let her go. If she leaves this Holy Place where none may do her harm, she shall die, and then her Spirit may go to seek that other traveller."

"Thou art mad, Eddo, mad and blind with pride and folly. Let her be, and choose another Mother. Now, there is Noie."

"Thy great-niece, Nya, who thinks as thou thinkest, and hates those whom thou hatest. Nay, I will have none of that half-breed. Yonder white Inkosazana shall be our queen and no other."

"Then, Eddo," whispered Nya, leaning forward and looking into his eyes, "she shall be the last Mother of this people. Fool, there are those who fight for her against whom thou canst not prevail. Thou knowest them not, but I know them, and I tell thee that they make ready thy doom. Have thy way, Eddo; it was not for her that I pleaded with thee, but for the sake of the ancient People of the Ghosts, whose fate draws nigh to them. Fool, have thy way, spin thy web, and be caught in it thyself. I tell thee, Eddo, that thy death shall be redder than any thou hast ever dreamed, nor shall it fall on thee alone. Begone now, and trouble me no more till in another place all that is left of thee shall creep to my feet, praying me for a pardon thou shalt not find. Begone, for the last leaf withers on my Tree and to-morrow I pass within the Fence. Say to the people that their Mother against whom they rebelled is dead, and that she bids them prepare

to meet the evil which, alive, she warded from their heads."

Now Eddo strove to answer, but could not, for there was something in the flaming eyes of Nya which frightened him. He looked at Hana, and Hana looked back at him, then taking each other's hand they slunk away towards the wall, staggering blindly through the sunshine towards the shade.