

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE END AND THE BEGINNING

On the day following that when she had summoned Eddo to speak with her, Nya sat at the mouth of the cave. It was late afternoon, and already the shadows gathered so quickly that save for her white hair, her little childlike shape, withered now almost to a skeleton, was scarcely visible against the black rock. Walking to and fro in her aimless fashion, as she would do for hours at a time, Rachel accompanied by Noie passed and repassed her, till at length the old woman lifted her head and listened to something which was quite inaudible to their ears. Then she beckoned to Noie, who led Rachel to her.

"Maiden beloved," she said in a feeble voice, after they had sat down in front of her, "my hour has come, I have sent for thee to bid thee farewell till we meet again in a country where thou hast travelled for a little while. Before the sun sets I pass within the Fence."

At this tidings Rachel began to weep, for she had learned to love this old dwarf-woman who had been so kind to her in her misery, and she was now so weak that she could not restrain her fears.

"Mother," she said, "for thee it is joy to go. I know it, and therefore cannot wish that thou shouldst stay. Yet what shall I do when thou hast

left me alone amidst all these cruel folk? Tell me, what shall I do?"

"Perchance thou wilt seek another helper. Maiden, and perchance thou shall find another to guard and comfort thee. Follow thy heart, obey thy heart, and remember the last words of Nya--that no harm shall come to thee. Nay--if I know it, I may tell thee no more, thou who couldst not hear what the drums said to me but now. Farewell," and turning round she made a sign to certain dwarf-mutes who were gathered behind her as though they awaited her commands.

"Hast thou no last word for me, Mother?" asked Noie.

"Aye, Child," she answered. "Thy heart is very bold, and thou also must follow it. Though thy sin should be great, perchance thy greater love may pay its price. At least thou art but an arrow set upon the string, and that which must be, will be. I think that we shall meet again ere long. Come hither and kneel at my side."

Noie obeyed, and for a little space Nya whispered in her ear, while as she listened Rachel saw strange lights shining in Noie's eyes, lights of terror and of pride, lights of hope and of despair.

"What did she say to you, Noie?" asked Rachel presently.

"I may not tell, Zoola," she answered. "Question me no more."

Now the mutes brought forward a slight litter woven of boughs on which the withered leaves still hung, boughs from Nya's fallen tree. In this litter they placed her, for she could no longer walk, and lifted it on to their shoulders. For one moment she bade them halt, and calling Rachel and Noie to her, kissed them upon the brow, holding up her thin child-like hands over them in blessing. Then followed by them both, the bearers went forward with their burden, taking the road that ran up the hill towards the sacred tree. As the sun set they passed within the Fence, and laying down the litter without a word by the bole of the tree, turned and departed.

The darkness fell, and through it Rachel and Noie heard Nya singing for a little while. The song ceased, and they descended the hill to the cave, for there they feared to stay lest the Tree should draw them also. They ate a little food whilst the two women mutes who had sat on each side of Nya when she showed her magic, stared, now at them, and now into the bowls of dew that were set before them, wherein they seemed to find something that interested them much. Noie prayed Rachel to sleep, and she tried to do so, and could not. For hour after hour she tossed and turned, and at length sat up, saying to Noie:

"I have fought against it, and I can stay here no longer. Noie, I am being drawn from this place out into the forest, and I must go."

"What draws thee, Sister?" asked Noie. "Is it Eddo?"

"No, I think not, nothing to do with Eddo. Oh! Noie, Noie, it is the spirit of Richard Darrien. He is dead, but for days and weeks his spirit has been with my spirit, and now it draws me into the forest to die and find him."

"Then that is an evil journey thou wouldst take, Zoola?"

"Not so, Noie, it is the best and happiest of journeys. The thought of it fills me with joy. What said Nya? Follow thy heart. So I follow it. Noie, farewell, for I must go away."

"Nay," answered Noie, "if thou goest I go, who also was bidden to follow my heart that is sister to thy heart."

Rachel reasoned with her, but she would not listen. The end of it was that the two of them rose and threw on their cloaks; also Rachel took the great Umkulu spear which she had used as a staff on her journey from the desert to the forest. All this while the dwarf-women watched her, but did nothing, only watched.

They left the cave and walked to the mouth of the zig-zag slit in the great wall which was open.

"Perhaps the mutes will kill us in the heart of the wall," said Noie.

"If so the end will be soon and swift," answered Rachel.

Now they were in the cleft, following its slopes and windings. Above them they could hear the movements of the guardians of the wall who sat amongst the rough stones, but these did not try to stop them; indeed once or twice when they did not know which way to turn in the darkness, little hands took hold of Rachel's cloak and guided her. So they passed through the wall in safety. Outside of it Rachel paused a moment, looking this way and that. Then of a sudden she turned and walked swiftly towards the south.

It was dark, densely dark in the forest, yet she never seemed to lose her path. Holding Noie by the hand she wound in and out between the tree-trunks without stumbling or even striking her foot against a root. For an hour or more they walked on this, the strangest of strange journeys, till at length Rachel whispered;

"Something tells me to stay here," and she leaned against a tree and stayed, while Noie, who was tired, sat down between the jutting roots of the tree.

It was a dead tree, and the top of it had been torn off in some hurricane so that they could see the sky above them, and by the grey hue of it knew that it was drawing near to dawn.

The sun rose, and its arrows, that even at midday could never pass the canopy of foliage, shot straight and vivid between the tall bare trunks. Oh! Rachel knew the place. It was that place which she had dreamed of as a

child in the island of the flooded river. Just so had the light of the rising sun fallen on the boles of the great trees, and on her white cloak and out-spread hair, fallen on her and on another. She strained her eyes into the gloom. Now those rays pierced it also, and now by them she saw the yellow-bearded, half-naked man of that long-dead dream leaning against the tree. His eyes were shut, without doubt he was dead, this was but a vision of him who had drawn her hither to share his death. It was the spirit of Richard Darrien!

She drew a little nearer, and the eyes opened, gazing at her. Also from that form of his was cast a long shadow--there it lay upon the dead leaves. How came it, she wondered, that a spirit could throw a shadow, and why was a spirit bound to a tree, as now she perceived he was? He saw her, and in those grey eyes of his there came a wonderful look. He spoke.

"You have drawn me from far, Rachel, but I have never seen all of you before, only your face floating in the air before me, although others saw you. Now I see you also, so I suppose that my time has come. It will soon be over. Wait a little there, where I can look at you, and presently we shall be together again. I am glad."

Rachel could not speak. A lump rose in her throat and choked her. Betwixt fear and hope her heart stood still. Only with the spear in her hand she pointed at her own shadow thrown by the level rays of the rising sun. He looked, and notwithstanding the straitness of his bonds she saw him start.

"If you are a ghost why have you a shadow?" he asked hoarsely. "And if you are not a ghost, how did you come into this haunted place?"

Still Rachel did not seem to be able to speak. Only she glided up to him and kissed him on the lips. Now at length he understood--they both understood that they were still living creatures beneath the sky, not the denizens of some dim world which lies beyond.

"Free me," he said in a faint voice, for his brain reeled. "I was bound here in my sleep. They will be back presently."

Her intelligence awoke. With a few swift cuts of the spear she held Rachel severed his bonds, then picked up his own assegai that lay at his feet she thrust it into his numbed hand. As he took it the forest about them seemed to become alive, and from behind the boles of the trees around appeared a number of dwarfs who ran towards them, headed by Eddo. Noie sprang forward also, and stood at their side. Rachel turned on Eddo swiftly as a startled deer. She seemed to tower over him, the spear in her hand.

"What does this mean, Priest?" she asked.

"Inkosazana," he answered humbly, "it means that I have found a way to tempt thee from within the Wall where none might break thy sanctuary. Thou drewest this man to thee from far with the strength that old Nya gave thee. We knew it all, we saw it all, and we waited. Day by day in our bowls of dew we watched him coming nearer to thee. We heard the messages

of Nya on the drums, bidding the Umkulu meet and escort him; we heard the last answering message from the borders of the desert, telling her that he was nigh. Then while he followed his magic path through the darkness of the forest we seized and bound him, knowing well that if he could not come to thee, thou wouldst come to him. And thou hast come."

"I understand. What now, Eddo?"

"This, Inkosazana: Thou hast been named Mother of the Trees by the people of the Dwarfs; be pleased to come with us that we may instal thee in thy great office."

"This lord here," said Rachel, "is my promised husband. What of him?"

Eddo bowed and smiled, a fearful smile, and answered:

"The Mother of the Trees has no husband. Wisdom is her husband. He has served his purpose, which was to draw thee from within the Wall, and for this reason only we permitted him to enter the holy forest living. Now he bides here to die, and since he has won thy love we will honour him with the White Death. Bind him to the tree again."

In an instant the spear that Rachel held was at Eddo's throat.

"Dwarf," she cried, "this is my man, and I am no Mother of Trees and no pale ghost, but a living woman. Let but one of these monkeys of thine lay



a hand upon him, and thou diest, by the Red Death, Eddo, aye, by the Red Death. Stir a single inch, and this spear goes through thy heart, and thy spirit shall be spilled with thy blood."

The little priest sank to his knees trembling, glancing about him for a means of escape.

"If thou killest me, thou diest also," he hissed.

"What do I care if I die?" she answered. "If my man dies, I wish to die," then added in English: "Richard, take hold of him by one arm, and Noie, take the other. If he tries to escape kill him at once, or if you are afraid, I will."

So they seized him by his arms.

"Now," said Rachel, "let us go back to the Sanctuary, for there they dare not touch, us. We cannot try the desert without water; also they would follow and kill us with their poisoned arrows. Tell them, Noie, that if they do not attempt to harm us, we will set this priest of theirs free within the Wall. But if a hand is lifted against us, then he dies at once--by the Red Death,"

"Touch them not, touch them not," piped Eddo, "lest my ghost should be spilt with my blood. Touch them not, I command you."

The company of dwarfs chattered together like parrots at the dawn, and the march began. First went Eddo, dragged along between Richard and Noie, and after them, the raised spear in her hand, followed Rachel, while on either side, hiding themselves behind the boles of the trees, scrambled the people of the dwarfs. Back they went thus through the forest, Rachel telling them the road till at length the huge grey wall loomed up before them. They came to the slit in it, and Noie asked:

"What shall we do now? Kill this priest, take him in with us as a hostage, or let him go?"

"I said that he should be set free," answered Rachel, "and he would do us more harm dead than living; also his blood would be on our hands. Take him through the Wall, and loose him there."

So once more they passed the slopes and passages, while the mutes above watched them from their stones with marvelling eyes, till they reached the open space beyond, and there they loosed Eddo. The priest sprang back out of reach of the dreaded spears, and in a voice thick with rage, cried to them:

"Fools! You should have killed me while you could, for now you are in a trap, not I. You are strong and great, but you cannot live without food. We may not enter here to hurt you, but you shall starve, you shall starve until you creep out and beg my mercy."

Then making signs to the dwarfs who sat about above, he vanished between the stones.

"You should have killed him, Zoola," said Noie, "for now he will live to kill us."

"I think not, Sister," answered Rachel. "Nya said that I should follow my heart, and my heart bid me let him go. Our hands are clean of his blood, but if he had died, who can tell? Blood is a bad seed to sow."

Then, forgetting Eddo, she turned to Richard and began to ply him with questions.

But he seemed to be dazed and could answer little. It was as though some unnatural, supporting strength had been withdrawn, and now all the fatigues of his fearful journey were taking effect upon him. He could scarcely stand, but reeled to and fro like a man in drink, so that the two women were obliged to support him across the burial ground towards the cave. Advancing thus they entered into the shadow of the Holy Tree, and there at the edge of it met another procession descending from the mound. Eight mutes bore a litter of boughs, and on it lay Nya, dead, her long white hair hanging down on either side of the litter. With bowed heads they stood aside to let her pass to the grave made ready for her in a place of honour near the Wall where for a thousand years only the Mothers of the Trees had been laid to rest.

Then they went on, and entered the cave where the lamps burned before the great stalactite and the heap of offerings that were piled about it. Here sat the two women priests gazing into their bowls as they had left them. The death of Nya had not moved them, the advent of this white man did not seem to move them. Perhaps they expected him; at any rate food was made ready, and a bed of rugs prepared on which he could lie.

Richard ate some of the food, staring at Rachel all the while with vacant eyes as though she were still but a vision, the figment of a dream. Then he muttered something about being very tired, and sinking back upon the rugs fell into a deep sleep.

In that sleep he remained scarcely stirring for full four-and-twenty hours, while Rachel watched by his side, till at length her weariness overcame her, and she slept also. When she opened her eyes again they saw no other light than that which crept in from the mouth of the cave. The lamps which always burned there were out. Noie, who was seated near by, heard her stir, and spoke.

"If thou art rested, Zoola," she said, "I think that we had better carry the white lord from this place, for the two witch-women have gone, and I can find no more oil to fill the lamps."

So they felt their way to Richard, purposing to lift him between them, but at Rachel's touch he awoke, and with their help walked out of the cave. In the open space beyond they saw a strange sight, for across it were

streaming all the dwarf-mutes carrying their aged and sick and infants, and bearing on their backs or piled up in litters their mats and cooking utensils. Evidently they were deserting the Sanctuary.

"Why are they going?" asked Rachel.

"I do not know," answered Noie, "but I think it is because no food has been brought to them as usual, and they are hungry. You remember that Eddo said we should starve. Only fear of death by hunger would make them leave a place where they and their forefathers have lived for generations."

Presently they were all gone. Not a living creature was left within the Wall except these three, nor were any more dwarfs brought in to die beneath the Holy Tree. Now, at length Richard seemed to awake, and taking Rachel by the hand began to ask questions of her in a low stammering voice, since words did not seem to come readily to him who had not spoken his own language for so long.

"Before you begin to talk, Sister," broke in Noie, "let us go and see if we can close the cleft in the Wall, for otherwise how shall we sleep in peace? Eddo and the dwarfs might creep in by night and murder us."

"I do not think they dare shed blood in their Holy Place," answered Rachel. "Still, let us see what we can do; it may be best."

So they went to the cleft, and as the stone door was open and they could

not shut it, at one very narrow spot they rolled down rocks from the loose sides of the ancient wall above in such a fashion that it would be difficult to pass through or over them from without. This hard task took them many hours, moreover, it was labour wasted, since, as Rachel had thought probable, the dwarfs never tried to pass the Wall, but waited till hunger forced them to surrender.

Towards evening they returned to the cave and collected what food they could find. It was but little, enough for two spare meals, no more; nor could they discover any in the town of the dwarfs behind the Tree. Only of water they had plenty from the stream that ran out of the cave.

They ate a few mouthfuls, then took their mats and cloaks and went to camp by the opening in the wall, so that they might guard against surprise. Now for the first time they found leisure to talk, and Rachel and Richard told each other a little of their wonderful stories. But they did not tell them all, for their minds seemed to be bewildered, and there was much that they were not able to explain. It was enough for them to know that they had been brought together again thus marvellously, by what power they knew not, and that still living, they who for long weeks had deemed the other dead, were able to hold each other's hands and gaze into each other's eyes. Moreover, now that this had been brought about they were tired, so tired that they could scarcely speak above a whisper. The end of it was that they fell asleep, all of them, and so slept till morning, when they awoke somewhat refreshed, and ate what remained of the food.

The second day was like the first, only hotter and more sultry. Noie climbed to the top of the wall to watch, while Richard and Rachel wandered about among the little, antheap-like graves, and through the dwarf village, talking and wondering, happy even in their wretchedness. But before the day was gone hunger began to get a hold of them; also the terrible, stifling heat oppressed them so that their words seemed to die between their lips, and they could only sit against the wall, looking at one another.

Towards evening Noie descended from the Wall and reported that large numbers of the dwarfs were keeping watch without, flitting to and fro between the trunks of the trees like shadows. The stifling night went by, and another day dawned. Having no food they went to the stream and drank water. Then they sat down in the shadow and waited through the long hot hours. Towards evening, when it grew a little cooler, they gathered up their strength and tried to find some way of escape before it was too late. Richard suggested that as flight was impossible they should give themselves up to the dwarfs, but Rachel answered No, for then Eddo would certainly kill him and Noie, and take her to fill the place of Mother of the Trees until she became useless to him, when she would be murdered also.

"Then there is nothing left for us but to die," said Richard.

"Nothing but to die," she answered, "to die together; and, dear, that should not be so hard, seeing that for so long we have thought each other

dead apart."

"Yet it is hard," answered Richard, "after living through so much and being led so far to die at last and go whither we know not, before our time."

Rachel looked at Noie, who sat opposite to them, her head rested on her hand.

"Have you anything to say, Sister?" she asked.

"Yes, Zoola. Here is a little moss that I have found upon the stones," and she produced a small bundle. "Let us boil it and eat, it will keep us alive for another day."

"What is the use?" asked Rachel, "unless there is more."

"There is no more," said Noie, "for the leaves of yonder tree are deadly poison, and here grows no other living thing. Still, eat and live on, for I wait a message."

"A message from whom?" asked Rachel.

"A message from the dead, Sister. It was promised to me by Nya before she passed, and if it does not come, then it will be time to die."



So they made fire and boiled the moss till it was a horrible, sticky substance, which they swallowed as best they could, washing it down with gulps of water. Still it was food of a kind, and for a while stayed the gnawing, empty pains within them; only Noie ate but little, so that there might be more for the others.

That night was even hotter than those that had gone before, and during the day which followed the place became like a hell. They crept into the cave and lay there gasping, while from without came loud cracking sounds, caused, as they thought, by the trees of the forest splitting in the heat. About midday the sky suddenly became densely overcast, although no breath stirred; the air was thicker than ever, to breathe it was like breathing hot cream. In their restless despair they wandered out of the cave, and to their surprise saw a dwarf standing upon the top of the wall. It was Eddo, who called to them to come out and give themselves up.

"What are the terms?" asked Noie.

"That thou and the Wanderer shall die by the White Death, and that the Inkosazana shall be installed Mother of the Trees," was the answer.

"We refuse them," said Noie. "Let us go now and give us food and escort, and thou shall be spared. Refuse, and it is thou and thy people who will die by that Red Death which Nya promised thee."

"That we shall learn before to-morrow," said Eddo with a mocking laugh,

and vanished down the wall.

As he went a hot gust of wind burst upon them, causing the forest without to rock and groan. Noie turned her face towards it and seemed to listen.

"What is it?" asked Rachel.

"I heard a voice in the wind, Sister," she answered. "The message I awaited has come to me."

"What message?" asked Richard listlessly.

"That I will tell you by and by, Chief," she answered. "Come to the cave, it is no longer safe here, the hurricane breaks."

So supporting each other they crept back to the cave, and there Noie made fire, feeding it with the idols and precious woods that had been brought thither as offerings. Richard and Rachel watched her wondering, for it seemed strange that she should make a fire in that heat where there was nothing to cook. Meanwhile gust succeeded gust, until a tempest of screaming wind swept over them, though no rain fell. Soon it was so fierce that the deep-rooted Tree of the Tribe rocked above them, and loose stones were blown from the crest of the great wall.

Then of a sudden Noie sprang up, and seized a flaming brand from the fire; it was the limb of a fetish, made of some resinous wood. She ran from the

cave swiftly, before they could stop her, and vanished in the gathering gloom, to return again in a few moments weak and breathless. "Come out, now," she said, "and see a sight such as you shall never behold again," and there was something so strange in her voice that, notwithstanding their weakness, they rose and followed her.

Outside the cave they could not stand because of the might of the hurricane, but cast themselves upon the ground, and following Noie's outstretched arm, looked up towards the top of the mound. Then they saw that the Tree of the Tribe was on fire. Already its vast trunk and boughs were wrapped in flame, which burnt furiously because of the resin within them, while long flakes of blazing moss were being swept away to leeward, to fall among the forest that lay beyond the wall.

"Did you do this?" cried Rachel to Noie.

"Aye, Zoola, who else? That was the message which came to me. Now my office is fulfilled, but you two will live though I must die, I who have destroyed the People of the Dwarfs; I who was born that I should destroy them."

"Destroyed them!" exclaimed Rachel. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that when their Tree dies, they die, the whole race of them. Oh! Nya told me, Nya told me--they die as their Tree dies, by fire. To the Wall, to the Wall now, and look. Follow me."

Forgetting their hunger-bred weakness in the wild excitement of that moment, Rachel and Richard struggled hand in hand, after Noie's thin, ethereal form. Across the open space they struggled, through the furious bufferrings of the gale, sometimes on their feet, sometimes on their hands and knees, till they came to the great wall where a stairway ran up it to an outlook tower. Up this stair they climbed slowly since at times the weight of the wind pinned them against the blocks of stone, till at length they reached its crest and crept into the shelter of the hollow tower.

Hence, looking through the loopholes in the ancient masonry, they saw a fearful sight. The flakes of burning moss from the Tree of the Tribe had fallen among the tops of the forest, parched almost to tinder with drought and heat, and fired them here and there. Fanned by the screaming gale the flames spread rapidly, leaping from tree to tree, now in one direction, now in another, as the hurricane veered, which it did continually, till the whole green forest became a sheet of fire, an ever-widening sheet which spread east and west and north and south for miles and miles and tens of miles.

Earth and sky were one blaze of light given out by the torch-like resinous trees as they burned from the top downwards. By that intense light the three watchers could see hundreds of the People of the Dwarfs flitting about between the trunks. Waving their arms and gibbering, they rushed this way and that, to the north to be met by fire, to the south to be met by fire, till at length the blazing boughs and boles fell upon them and they disappeared in showers of red sparks, or, more fortunate, fled away,

never to return, before the flame that leapt after them. One company of them ran towards the Sanctuary; they could see them threading their path between the trees, and growing ever fewer as the burning branches fell among them from above. They leapt, they ran, they battled, springing this way and that, but ever the great flaring boughs crashed down among them, crushing them, shrivelling them up, till at length of all their number but a single man staggered into the open belt between the edge of the forest and the wall. His white hair and his garments seemed to be smouldering. He gripped at them with his hands, then coming to a little bush--it was the top of Nya's tree which she had thrust into the ground to grow there--dragged it up and began to beat himself with it as though to extinguish the flames. In an instant it took fire also, burning him horribly, so that with a yell he threw it to the ground, and ran on towards the wall. As he came they saw his face. It was that of Eddo.

At this moment, seized by some sudden weakness, Noie sank down upon the stones. Richard bent over her to lift her to her feet again, but she thrust him away, saying slowly and in gasps:

"Let me be, the doom has hold of me, I am dying. I passed within the Fence to fire the Tree, and its poison is at work within me, and the curse of all my people has fallen on my head. Yet I have saved thee, my sister, I have saved thee and thy lover, for the Dwarfs are no more, the Grey People are grey ashes. For my love's sake I did the sin; let my love atone the sin if it may, or at the least think kindly of me through the long, happy years that are to come, and at the end of them then seek for lost Noie in

the World of Ghosts if she may be found there."

As she spoke they heard a sound of something scrambling among the stones, and at one of the four entrances of the turret there appeared a hideous, fire-twisted face, and a little form about which hung charred and smouldering strips of raiment. It was Eddo, who had climbed the wall and found them out. There he sat glowering at them, or rather at Noie, who was crouched upon the floor.

"Come hither, daughter of Seyapi," he screamed in his hissing, snake-like voice, "come hither, and see thy work, thou who hast made an end of the ancient People of the Ghosts. Come hither and tell me why thou didst this thing, for I would learn the truth before I die, that I may make report of it to the Fathers of our race."

Noie heard, and crept towards him; to Rachel and Richard it seemed as though she could not disobey that summons. Now they sat face to face outside the turret, clinging to the stones, and her long hair flowed outwards on the gale.

"I did it, Eddo," she said, "to save one whom I love, and him whom she loves. I did it to avenge the death of Nya upon you all, as she bade me to do. I did it because the cup of thy wickedness is full, and because I was appointed to bring thy doom upon thee. Thus ends the greatness thou hast plotted so many years to win, Eddo."

"Aye," he answered, "thus it ends, for the magic of the White One there has overcome me, and thus with it ends the reign of the Ghost Kings, and the forest wherein they reigned, and thus too, thou endest, traitress, who hast murdered them and whose soul shall be spilt with their souls."

As the words left his lips suddenly Eddo sprang upon Noie and gripped her about the middle. Richard and Rachel leapt forward, but before ever they could lay a hand upon her to save her, the dwarf in his rage and agony had dragged her to the edge of the wall. For a moment they struggled there in the vivid light of the flaming forest. Then Eddo screamed aloud, one wild savage shriek, and still holding Noie in his arms hurled himself from the wall, to fall crushed upon its foundation stones sixty feet beneath.

Thus perished Noie, who, for love's sake, gave her life to save Rachel, as once Rachel had saved her.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was morning, and after the tempest the sky was clear and cool, for heavy rain had fallen when the wind dropped, although far away the dense clouds of rolling smoke showed where the great fire still ate into the heart of the forest. Rachel and Richard, seated hand in hand in the little tower on the wall, looked at one another in that pure light, and saw signs in each other's face that could not be mistaken.

"What shall we do?" asked Richard. "Death is very near to us."

Rachel thought awhile, then answered:

"The dwarfs are gone, we have nothing more to fear from them. Yonder where the fire did not burn, dwell their slaves, whose villages are full of food, and beyond them live the Umkulu, who know and would befriend me. Let us go and seek food who desire to live on together, if we may."

So they climbed down the wall, and with difficulty, for they were very feeble, crawled over the stones which they had piled up in the passage to keep out the dwarfs, and thus passed to the open belt beyond. A strange scene met their eyes, all the wide lands that had been covered with giant trees were now piled over with white ashes amongst which, here and there, stood a black and smouldering trunk. The journey was terrible, but following a ridge of rock whereon no great trees had grown, hand in hand they passed through the outer edge of the burnt forest in safety, until they came to one of the towns of the slaves upon the fertile plain beyond, which led up to the desert. No human being could they see, since all had fled, but the kraal was full of sheep and cattle that had been penned there before the fire began, and in the huts were milk and food in plenty. They drank of the milk and, after a while, ate a little, then rested and drank more milk, till their strength began to return to them. Towards evening they went out of the town, and standing on a mound looked at the fire-wasted plain behind, and the green, grassy slopes in front.

They seemed quite alone in the world, those two, and yet their hearts were



full of joy and thankfulness, for while they were left to each other they knew that they could never be alone.

"See, Rachel," said Richard, pointing to the smouldering wreck of the forest, "there lies our past, and here in front of us spreads the future clothed with flowers."

"Yes, Richard," she answered, "but Noie and all whom I love save you are buried in that past, and in front of us the desert is not far away."

"Life is ours, Rachel, and love is ours, and that which saved us through many a danger and brought me back to you, will surely keep us safe. Do you fear to pass the desert at my side?"

She looked at him with shining eyes, and answered:

"No, Richard, I fear no more, for now I seem to hear the voice of Noie speaking in my heart, telling me that trouble is behind us, and that we shall live out our lives together, as my mother foresaw that we should do."

And there on the mound, standing between that dead sea of ashes and the green slopes of flowering plain, Rachel stretched out her arms to the man to whom she was decreed.