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THE LADY OF THE HEAVENS.
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(Continued.)

"I do not know, but it has, it has! I was but to cast a stone at it. My wife died in a day, and 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 hence to rule as Mother of the Trees after me, for it pleases thee better, 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. As Rachel looked at it, she 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, putting 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 a man and a woman and a child, and precious things. There was gold in dust and heaps, and rings and nuggets; there were shining stones, red and green, and white, and some of them were jewels; there were tusks of ivory and carvings in ivory; there were karosses and furs mouldering to decay; there were grotesque gods, fetichs 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, 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 the great Dingsaan of the Zulus in payment for the oracle of his death. Thou broughtest them, Nya, my child."

"Yes," answered Nya. "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 Dingsaan."

"Nay, nay," said the old woman testily, "it was I who saw the pictures, and I showed them to the great Dingsaan. By-and-by thou shalt learn all that story. Now you are very weary and must rest."

"Yes," said Rachel with a sob, "I think I died when I died, but now I seem to have come to life again—that is the worst of it. Oh! Note, Note, 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 Nya, "no, do not begin to laugh and cry, it was other wise 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 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 Note 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 veins of thine. What hast thou to do with death and death, and the darkness of the trees, thou child of the air and sunshine? Death for the dwarf-woman, the death for the dealers in dreams, death

for the death-lovers, but for thee—life!"

"Tell her, Note," said Rachel, "that my mother who was fore-sighted, always said that I should live out my days, and that I should be a true, who must live them out alone."

"Yes, yes, she was right, that mother of thine," answered Nya, "and for the tree, 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 Note 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 done so, the three women washed themselves in the water of the fountain. Then Note combed out Rachel's hair, and clothed her again in her robe of silken fur, and she had cleaned, throwing over it a mantle of snowy white fibre, such as the dwarfs wear, and which she had seen when she had made ready with Rachel sleep.

As Note 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 will not go," exclaimed Rachel.

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

CHAPTER XXI.
The City of the Dead.

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

"Why art thou not within the Fence, old woman?" and he pointed with his arm towards the place of the Mother's tomb.

"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 planned my tree again in good soil, and it may grow."

"I saw," said Eddo; "it is without the wall here, 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 as have deserted thee, save a very few, most of whom have just now passed within the wall above that above that 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 get rid of it. It was a man who went before thee fell at the feet of the White Virgin there. For long thou art, since thou art no more our Mother. Moreover, learn that as have deserted thee, save a very few, most of whom have just now passed within the wall above that above that may attend thee amongst the ghosts."

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