

The Jug and the Shadows
extract

Many years ago, a hundred and fifteen to be exact, a woman stepped slowly off a dark steam train and onto a red velvet carpet, helped down by a servant. She strolled under a canopy of parasols, held by barefooted black men in linen shirts and kilts, and into the little palace, recently completed for the princess's first visit to South Africa. A quick glance around; she tightened her slight smile and followed a servant to her rooms, where she sat regally in an ornate mahogany chair, lifting a finger very slightly. The lady in waiting rushed over to Anna's side and listened to her demands. She was to have some servants to fan her constantly during the day. She expected things to run exactly the same as at her home in England, especially the cleaning. And then she cleared her throat and spoke louder for all the servants lined around the room to hear.

'I expect that all members of my staff, whether hired or ... housed, shall be extremely careful about hygiene. I expect them to wash their hands and feet as often as possible and to take regular baths, especially before touching my clothes or food.' She turned her cheek to the lady in waiting, who scuttled off to the side, fanned her flushed cheeks and sighed, 'That will be all.'

The staff did not move. She stopped fanning and looked incredulously at them.

'You may go.'

The servants pushed to get out of the room as fast as possible. The princess sat back and thought of the following night's grand welcoming party.

A woman with ebony skin, so dark the moonlight made it appear silver, straightened her flowered pinafore and pushed her hair behind her ear before entering the chambers of the princess. She tiptoed to the princess's bed and gingerly laid out an immaculately clean silk linen gown.

Anna sat in her sleeping gown at her dressing table, applying kohl round her eyes with scented fingers. She remained facing the mirror when the slave entered, eyeing her reflected movements until she left, noticing with a sneer a stray hair hanging over Maria's face. As the door shut softly, Anna rose and reached for the dress. She felt the crushed silk and pressed muslin beneath her fingertips and was fascinated by the intricate lace design of the covering lace shroud, so unlike the uniform flowers of home. The geometric figures made her think of the games she had seen children play on the train to the Transvaal. The local women had given her many gifts from their villages, but had been trained in lace by British seamstresses to make this stunning masterpiece for the princess. Anna had been impressed and was as excited about wearing it the following night as the villagers were excited about pleasing her and seeing her too. Now, as she examined it at arm's length, she saw black smudges where she had rubbed the silk.

Her lip curled in a snarl. She ran to the door and it sprang open like retractable fangs as she hissed at Maria, sitting quietly in front of the door. Maria, startled, jumped to attention. Anna swivelled on her heel and stalked back into the room.

‘Come!’

Maria tried to walk in after her as quietly as she could, but she was half-bent over, her stomach muscles contracted with nerves to the point where she was going to vomit.

‘Did you clean this?’ Anna held the dress with her thumbs and forefingers, pinkies in the air.

‘Yes ma’am.’

‘Then what is *this*?’ She indicated the black marks.

‘I ... I,’ Maria stuttered.

‘You ... you. You what? Do you *speak* English? How did you clean it?’

‘I ... I put it in the cold water and leave. Then I put in warm water and I carefully clean. Then I spend half the hour to dry and press. Teto check and I bring ... bring here.’ Maria was shaking a little now.

‘Let me see your hands.’

Anna scratched Maria as she grabbed her smooth black hands, and when she saw them to be perfectly clean, she sneered.

‘They’re filthy.’

Maria’s eyes widened.

‘No ma’am.’

‘No? No?!’

‘I’m sorry m’am. I just washed them, ma’am!’ Maria’s voice had risen.

‘Your filthy hands have ruined my dress!’ Anna threw the garment on the floor and stamped on it as Maria lifted her chin to make her tears afraid to fall.

‘Get out of here and take a bath. Stop your snivelling. Don’t let this happen again.’

Anna turned her back on Maria and went to her dressing table, picking up her jewel encrusted comb. After a few minutes she noticed the silence and opened her window to hear the crickets who promptly adjourned their evening orchestra. The moon shone grey in Africa, she noted, shutting her window and facing her empty room. She let the candle burn out that night.