

CHAPTER III

THE MISSION STATION

We made the remains of our rope fast to the other canoe, and sat waiting for the dawn and congratulating ourselves upon our merciful escape, which really seemed to result more from the special favour of Providence than from our own care or prowess. At last it came, and I have not often been more grateful to see the light, though so far as my canoe was concerned it revealed a ghastly sight. There in the bottom of the little boat lay the unfortunate Askari, the sime, or sword, in his bosom, and the severed hand gripping the handle. I could not bear the sight, so hauling up the stone which had served as an anchor to the other canoe, we made it fast to the murdered man and dropped him overboard, and down he went to the bottom, leaving nothing but a train of bubbles behind him. Alas! when our time comes, most of us like him leave nothing but bubbles behind, to show that we have been, and the bubbles soon burst. The hand of his murderer we threw into the stream, where it slowly sank. The sword, of which the handle was ivory, inlaid with gold (evidently Arab work), I kept and used as a hunting-knife, and very useful it proved.

Then, a man having been transferred to my canoe, we once more

started on in very low spirits and not feeling at all comfortable as to the future, but fondly hoping to arrive at the 'Highlands' station by night. To make matters worse, within an hour of sunrise it came on to rain in torrents, wetting us to the skin, and even necessitating the occasional baling of the canoes, and as the rain beat down the wind we could not use the sails, and had to get along as best as we could with our paddles.

At eleven o'clock we halted on an open piece of ground on the left bank of the river, and, the rain abating a little, managed to make a fire and catch and broil some fish. We did not dare to wander about to search for game. At two o'clock we got off again, taking a supply of broiled fish with us, and shortly afterwards the rain came on harder than ever. Also the river began to get exceedingly difficult to navigate on account of the numerous rocks, reaches of shallow water, and the increased force of the current; so that it soon became clear to us that we should not reach the Rev. Mackenzie's hospitable roof that night -- a prospect that did not tend to enliven us. Toil as we would, we could not make more than an average of a mile an hour, and at five o'clock in the afternoon (by which time we were all utterly worn out) we reckoned that we were still quite ten miles below the station. This being so, we set to work to make the best arrangements we could for the night. After our recent experience, we simply did not dare to land, more especially as the banks of the Tana were clothed with dense bush that would have given cover to five

thousand Masai, and at first I thought that we were going to have another night of it in the canoes. Fortunately, however, we espied a little rocky islet, not more than fifteen miles or so square, situated nearly in the middle of the river. For this we paddled, and, making fast the canoes, landed and made ourselves as comfortable as circumstances would permit, which was very uncomfortable indeed. As for the weather, it continued to be simply vile, the rain coming down in sheets till we were chilled to the marrow, and utterly preventing us from lighting a fire. There was, however, one consoling circumstance about this rain; our Askari declared that nothing would induce the Masai to make an attack in it, as they intensely disliked moving about in the wet, perhaps, as Good suggested, because they hate the idea of washing. We ate some insipid and sodden cold fish -- that is, with the exception of Umslopogaas, who, like most Zulus, cannot bear fish -- and took a pull of brandy, of which we fortunately had a few bottles left, and then began what, with one exception -- when we saw three white men nearly perished of cold on the snow of Sheba's Breast in the course of our journey to Kukuanaaland -- was, I think, the most trying night I ever experienced. It seemed absolutely endless, and once or twice I feared that two of the Askari would have died of the wet, cold, and exposure. Indeed, had it not been for timely doses of brandy I am sure that they would have died, for no African people can stand much exposure, which first paralyses and then kills them. I could see that even that iron old warrior Umslopogaas felt it keenly;

though, in strange contrast to the Wakwafis, who groaned and bemoaned their fate unceasingly, he never uttered a single complaint. To make matters worse, about one in the morning we again heard the owl's ominous hooting, and had at once to prepare ourselves for another attack; though, if it had been attempted, I do not think that we could have offered a very effective resistance. But either the owl was a real one this time, or else the Masai were themselves too miserable to think of offensive operations, which, indeed, they rarely, if ever, undertake in bush veldt. At any rate, we saw nothing of them.

At last the dawn came gliding across the water, wrapped in wreaths of ghostly mist, and, with the daylight, the rain ceased; and then, out came the glorious sun, sucking up the mists and warming the chill air. Benumbed, and utterly exhausted, we dragged ourselves to our feet, and went and stood in the bright rays, and were thankful for them. I can quite understand how it is that primitive people become sun worshippers, especially if their conditions of life render them liable to exposure.

In half an hour more we were once again making fair progress with the help of a good wind. Our spirits had returned with the sunshine, and we were ready to laugh at difficulties and dangers that had been almost crushing on the previous day.

And so we went on cheerily till about eleven o'clock. Just as

we were thinking of halting as usual, to rest and try to shoot something to eat, a sudden bend in the river brought us in sight of a substantial-looking European house with a veranda round it, splendidly situated upon a hill, and surrounded by a high stone wall with a ditch on the outer side. Right against and overshadowing the house was an enormous pine, the tope of which we had seen through a glass for the last two days, but of course without knowing that it marked the site of the mission station. I was the first to see the house, and could not restrain myself from giving a hearty cheer, in which the others, including the natives, joined lustily. There was no thought of halting now. On we laboured, for, unfortunately, though the house seemed quite near, it was still a long way off by river, until at last, by one o'clock, we found ourselves at the bottom of the slope on which the building stood. Running the canoes to the bank, we disembarked, and were just hauling them up on to the shore, when we perceived three figures, dressed in ordinary English-looking clothes, hurrying down through a grove of trees to meet us.

'A gentleman, a lady, and a little girl,' ejaculated Good, after surveying the trio through his eyeglass, 'walking in a civilized fashion, through a civilized garden, to meet us in this place. Hang me, if this isn't the most curious thing we have seen yet!'

Good was right: it certainly did seem odd and out of place -- more like a scene out of a dream or an Italian opera than a real

tangible fact; and the sense of unreality was not lessened when we heard ourselves addressed in good broad Scotch, which, however, I cannot reproduce.

'How do you do, sirs,' said Mr Mackenzie, a grey-haired, angular man, with a kindly face and red cheeks; 'I hope I see you very well. My natives told me an hour ago they spied two canoes with white men in them coming up the river; so we have just come down to meet you.'

'And it is very glad that we are to see a white face again, let me tell you,' put in the lady -- a charming and refined-looking person.

We took off our hats in acknowledgment, and proceeded to introduce ourselves.

'And now,' said Mr Mackenzie, 'you must all be hungry and weary; so come on, gentlemen, come on, and right glad we are to see you. The last white who visited us was Alphonse -- you will see Alphonse presently -- and that was a year ago.'

Meanwhile we had been walking up the slope of the hill, the lower portion of which was fenced off, sometimes with quince fences and sometimes with rough stone walls, into Kaffir gardens, just now full of crops of mealies, pumpkins, potatoes, etc. In the

corners of these gardens were groups of neat mushroom-shaped huts, occupied by Mr Mackenzie's mission natives, whose women and children came pouring out to meet us as we walked. Through the centre of the gardens ran the roadway up which we were walking. It was bordered on each side by a line of orange trees, which, although they had only been planted ten years, had in the lovely climate of the uplands below Mt Kenia, the base of which is about 5,000 feet above the coastline level, already grown to imposing proportions, and were positively laden with golden fruit. After a stiffish climb of a quarter of a mile or so -- for the hillside was steep -- we came to a splendid quince fence, also covered with fruit, which enclosed, Mr Mackenzie told us, a space of about four acres of ground that contained his private garden, house, church, and outbuildings, and, indeed, the whole hilltop. And what a garden it was! I have always loved a good garden, and I could have thrown up my hands for joy when I saw Mr Mackenzie's. First there were rows upon rows of standard European fruit-trees, all grafted; for on top of this hill the climate was so temperate that nearly all the English vegetables, trees, and flowers flourished luxuriantly, even including several varieties of the apple, which, generally, runs to wood in a warm climate and obstinately refuses to fruit. Then there were strawberries and tomatoes (such tomatoes!), and melons and cucumbers, and, indeed, every sort of vegetable and fruit.

'Well, you have something like a garden!' I said, overpowered

with admiration not untouched by envy.

'Yes,' answered the missionary, 'it is a very good garden, and has well repaid my labour; but it is the climate that I have to thank. If you stick a peach-stone into the ground it will bear fruit the fourth year, and a rose-cutting will bloom in a year. It is a lovely climate.'

Just then we came to a ditch about ten feet wide, and full of water, on the other side of which was a loopholed stone wall eight feet high, and with sharp flints plentifully set in mortar on the coping.

'There,' said Mr Mackenzie, pointing to the ditch and wall, 'this is my magnum opus; at least, this and the church, which is the other side of the house. It took me and twenty natives two years to dig the ditch and build the wall, but I never felt safe till it was done; and now I can defy all the savages in Africa, for the spring that fills the ditch is inside the wall, and bubbles out at the top of the hill winter and summer alike, and I always keep a store of four months' provision in the house.'

Crossing over a plank and through a very narrow opening in the wall, we entered into what Mrs Mackenzie called her domain -- namely, the flower garden, the beauty of which is really beyond my power to describe. I do not think I ever saw such roses,

gardenias, or camellias (all reared from seeds or cuttings sent from England); and there was also a patch given up to a collection of bulbous roots mostly collected by Miss Flossie, Mr Mackenzie's little daughter, from the surrounding country, some of which were surpassingly beautiful. In the middle of this garden, and exactly opposite the veranda, a beautiful fountain of clear water bubbled up from the ground, and fell into a stone-work basin which had been carefully built to receive it, whence the overflow found its way by means of a drain to the moat round the outer wall, this moat in its turn serving as a reservoir, whence an unfailing supply of water was available to irrigate all the gardens below. The house itself, a massively built single-storied building, was roofed with slabs of stone, and had a handsome veranda in front. It was built on three sides of a square, the fourth side being taken up by the kitchens, which stood separate from the house -- a very good plan in a hot country. In the centre of this square thus formed was, perhaps, the most remarkable object that we had yet seen in this charming place, and that was a single tree of the conifer tribe, varieties of which grow freely on the highlands of this part of Africa. This splendid tree, which Mr Mackenzie informed us was a landmark for fifty miles round, and which we had ourselves seen for the last forty miles of our journey, must have been nearly three hundred feet in height, the trunk measuring about sixteen feet in diameter at a yard from the ground. For some seventy feet it rose a beautiful tapering brown pillar without a single branch, but at that height splendid

dark green boughs, which, looked at from below, had the appearance of gigantic fern-leaves, sprang out horizontally from the trunk, projecting right over the house and flower-garden, to both of which they furnished a grateful proportion of shade, without -- being so high up -- offering any impediment to the passage of light and air.

'What a beautiful tree!' exclaimed Sir Henry.

'Yes, you are right; it is a beautiful tree. There is not another like it in all the country round, that I know of,' answered Mr Mackenzie. 'I call it my watch tower. As you see, I have a rope ladder fixed to the lowest bough; and if I want to see anything that is going on within fifteen miles or so, all I have to do is to run up it with a spyglass. But you must be hungry, and I am sure the dinner is cooked. Come in, my friends; it is but a rough place, but well enough for these savage parts; and I can tell you what, we have got -- a French cook.' And he led the way on to the veranda.

As I was following him, and wondering what on earth he could mean by this, there suddenly appeared, through the door that opened on to the veranda from the house, a dapper little man, dressed in a neat blue cotton suit, with shoes made of tanned hide, and remarkable for a bustling air and most enormous black mustachios, shaped into an upward curve, and coming to a point

for all the world like a pair of buffalo-horns.

'Madame bids me for to say that dinnar is sarved. Messieurs, my compliments;' then suddenly perceiving Umslopogaas, who was loitering along after us and playing with his battleaxe, he threw up his hands in astonishment. 'Ah, mais quel homme!' he ejaculated in French, 'quel sauvage affreux! Take but note of his huge choppare and the great pit in his head.'

'Ay,' said Mr Mackenzie; 'what are you talking about, Alphonse?'

'Talking about!' replied the little Frenchman, his eyes still fixed upon Umslopogaas, whose general appearance seemed to fascinate him; 'why I talk of him' -- and he rudely pointed -- 'of ce monsieur noir.'

At this everybody began to laugh, and Umslopogaas, perceiving that he was the object of remark, frowned ferociously, for he had a most lordly dislike of anything like a personal liberty.

'Parbleu!' said Alphonse, 'he is angered -- he makes the grimace. I like not his air. I vanish.' And he did with considerable rapidity.

Mr Mackenzie joined heartily in the shout of laughter which we indulged in. 'He is a queer character -- Alphonse,' he said.

'By and by I will tell you his history; in the meanwhile let us try his cooking.'

'Might I ask,' said Sir Henry, after we had eaten a most excellent dinner, 'how you came to have a French cook in these wilds?'

'Oh,' answered Mrs Mackenzie, 'he arrived here of his own accord about a year ago, and asked to be taken into our service. He had got into some trouble in France, and fled to Zanzibar, where he found an application had been made by the French Government for his extradition. Whereupon he rushed off up-country, and fell in, when nearly starved, with our caravan of men, who were bringing us our annual supply of goods, and was brought on here. You should get him to tell you the story.'

When dinner was over we lit our pipes, and Sir Henry proceeded to give our host a description of our journey up here, over which he looked very grave.

'It is evident to me,' he said, 'that those rascally Masai are following you, and I am very thankful that you have reached this house in safety. I do not think that they will dare to attack you here. It is unfortunate, though, that nearly all my men have gone down to the coast with ivory and goods. There are two hundred of them in the caravan, and the consequence is that I have not more than twenty men available for defensive purposes in case they should attack us. But, still, I will just give a few orders;' and, calling a black man who was loitering about

outside in the garden, he went to the window, and addressed him in a Swahili dialect. The man listened, and then saluted and departed.

'I am sure I devoutly hope that we shall bring no such calamity upon you,' said I, anxiously, when he had taken his seat again. 'Rather than bring those bloodthirsty villains about your ears, we will move on and take our chance.'

'You will do nothing of the sort. If the Masai come, they come, and there is an end on it; and I think we can give them a pretty warm greeting. I would not show any man the door for all the Masai in the world.'

'That reminds me,' I said, 'the Consul at Lamu told me that he had had a letter from you, in which you said that a man had arrived here who reported that he had come across a white people in the interior. Do you think that there was any truth in his story? I ask, because I have once or twice in my life heard rumours from natives who have come down from the far north of the existence of such a race.'

Mr Mackenzie, by way of answer, went out of the room and returned, bringing with him a most curious sword. It was long, and all the blade, which was very thick and heavy, was to within a quarter of an inch of the cutting edge worked into an ornamental pattern

exactly as we work soft wood with a fret-saw, the steel, however, being invariably pierced in such a way as not to interfere with the strength of the sword. This in itself was sufficiently curious, but what was still more so was that all the edges of the hollow spaces cut through the substance of the blade were most beautifully inlaid with gold, which was in some way that I cannot understand welded on to the steel {Endnote 5}.

'There,' said Mr Mackenzie, 'did you ever see a sword like that?'

We all examined it and shook our heads.

'Well, I have got it to show you, because this is what the man who said he had seen the white people brought with him, and because it does more or less give an air of truth to what I should otherwise have set down as a lie. Look here; I will tell you all that I know about the matter, which is not much. One afternoon, just before sunset, I was sitting on the veranda, when a poor, miserable, starved-looking man came limping up and squatted down before me. I asked him where he came from and what he wanted, and thereon he plunged into a long rambling narrative about how he belonged to a tribe far in the north, and how his tribe was destroyed by another tribe, and he with a few other survivors driven still further north past a lake named Laga. Thence, it appears, he made his way to another lake that lay up in the mountains, "a lake without a bottom" he called it, and here his wife and brother

died of an infectious sickness -- probably smallpox -- whereon the people drove him out of their villages into the wilderness, where he wandered miserably over mountains for ten days, after which he got into dense thorn forest, and was one day found there by some white men who were hunting, and who took him to a place where all the people were white and lived in stone houses. Here he remained a week shut up in a house, till one night a man with a white beard, whom he understood to be a "medicine-man", came and inspected him, after which he was led off and taken through the thorn forest to the confines of the wilderness, and given food and this sword (at least so he said), and turned loose.'

'Well,' said Sir Henry, who had been listening with breathless interest, 'and what did he do then?'

'Oh! he seems, according to his account, to have gone through sufferings and hardships innumerable, and to have lived for weeks on roots and berries, and such things as he could catch and kill. But somehow he did live, and at last by slow degrees made his way south and reached this place. What the details of his journey were I never learnt, for I told him to return on the morrow, bidding one of my headmen look after him for the night. The headman took him away, but the poor man had the itch so badly that the headman's wife would not have him in the hut for fear of catching it, so he was given a blanket and told to sleep outside. As it happened, we had a lion hanging about here just then,

and most unhappily he winded this unfortunate wanderer, and, springing on him, bit his head almost off without the people in the hut knowing anything about it, and there was an end of him and his story about the white people; and whether or no there is any truth in it is more than I can tell you. What do you think, Mr Quatermain?'

I shook my head, and answered, 'I don't know. There are so many queer things hidden away in the heart of this great continent that I should be sorry to assert that there was no truth in it. Anyhow, we mean to try and find out. We intend to journey to Lekakisera, and thence, if we live to get so far, to this Lake Laga; and, if there are any white people beyond, we will do our best to find them.'

'You are very venturesome people,' said Mr Mackenzie, with a smile, and the subject dropped.