

## CHAPTER IV

### ALPHONSE AND HIS ANNETTE

After dinner we thoroughly inspected all the outbuildings and grounds of the station, which I consider the most successful as well as the most beautiful place of the sort that I have seen in Africa. We then returned to the veranda, where we found Umslopogaas taking advantage of this favourable opportunity to clean all the rifles thoroughly. This was the only work that he ever did or was asked to do, for as a Zulu chief it was beneath his dignity to work with his hands; but such as it was he did it very well. It was a curious sight to see the great Zulu sitting there upon the floor, his battleaxe resting against the wall behind him, whilst his long aristocratic-looking hands were busily employed, delicately and with the utmost care, cleaning the mechanism of the breech-loaders. He had a name for each gun. One -- a double four-bore belonging to Sir Henry -- was the Thunderer; another, my 500 Express, which had a peculiarly sharp report, was 'the little one who spoke like a whip'; the Winchester repeaters were 'the women, who talked so fast that you could not tell one word from another'; the six Martinis were 'the common people'; and so on with them all. It was very curious to hear him addressing each gun as he cleaned it, as though it were an individual, and in a vein of the quaintest humour. He did the same with his

battle-axe, which he seemed to look upon as an intimate friend, and to which he would at times talk by the hour, going over all his old adventures with it -- and dreadful enough some of them were. By a piece of grim humour, he had named this axe 'Inkosi-kaas', which is the Zulu word for chieftainness. For a long while I could not make out why he gave it such a name, and at last I asked him, when he informed me that the axe was very evidently feminine, because of her womanly habit of prying very deep into things, and that she was clearly a chieftainness because all men fell down before her, struck dumb at the sight of her beauty and power. In the same way he would consult 'Inkosi-kaas' if in any dilemma; and when I asked him why he did so, he informed me it was because she must needs be wise, having 'looked into so many people's brains'.

I took up the axe and closely examined this formidable weapon. It was, as I have said, of the nature of a pole-axe. The haft, made out of an enormous rhinoceros horn, was three feet three inches long, about an inch and a quarter thick, and with a knob at the end as large as a Maltese orange, left there to prevent the hand from slipping. This horn haft, though so massive, was as flexible as cane, and practically unbreakable; but, to make assurance doubly sure, it was whipped round at intervals of a few inches with copper wire -- all the parts where the hands grip being thus treated. Just above where the haft entered the head were scored a number of little nicks, each nick representing

a man killed in battle with the weapon. The axe itself was made of the most beautiful steel, and apparently of European manufacture, though Umslopogaas did not know where it came from, having taken it from the hand of a chief he had killed in battle many years before. It was not very heavy, the head weighing two and a half pounds, as nearly as I could judge. The cutting part was slightly concave in shape -- not convex, as it generally the case with savage battleaxes -- and sharp as a razor, measuring five and three-quarter inches across the widest part. From the back of the axe sprang a stout spike four inches long, for the last two of which it was hollow, and shaped like a leather punch, with an opening for anything forced into the hollow at the punch end to be pushed out above -- in fact, in this respect it exactly resembled a butcher's pole-axe. It was with this punch end, as we afterwards discovered, that Umslopogaas usually struck when fighting, driving a neat round hole in his adversary's skull, and only using the broad cutting edge for a circular sweep, or sometimes in a melee. I think he considered the punch a neater and more sportsmanlike tool, and it was from his habit of pecking at his enemy with it that he got his name of 'Woodpecker'. Certainly in his hands it was a terribly efficient one.

Such was Umslopogaas' axe, Inkosi-kaas, the most remarkable and fatal hand-to-hand weapon that I ever saw, and one which he cherished as much as his own life. It scarcely ever left his hand except when he was eating, and then he always sat with it under his

leg.

Just as I returned his axe to Umslopogaas, Miss Flossie came up and took me off to see her collection of flowers, African liliiums, and blooming shrubs, some of which are very beautiful, many of the varieties being quite unknown to me and also, I believe, to botanical science. I asked her if she had ever seen or heard of the 'Goya' lily, which Central African explorers have told me they have occasionally met with and whose wonderful loveliness has filled them with astonishment. This lily, which the natives say blooms only once in ten years, flourishes in the most arid soil. Compared to the size of the bloom, the bulb is small, generally weighing about four pounds. As for the flower itself (which I afterwards saw under circumstances likely to impress its appearance fixedly in my mind), I know not how to describe its beauty and splendour, or the indescribable sweetness of its perfume. The flower -- for it has only one bloom -- rises from the crown of the bulb on a thick fleshy and flat-sided stem, the specimen that I saw measured fourteen inches in diameter, and is somewhat trumpet-shaped like the bloom of an ordinary 'longiflorum' set vertically. First there is the green sheath, which in its early stage is not unlike that of a water-lily, but which as the bloom opens splits into four portions and curls back gracefully towards the stem. Then comes the bloom itself, a single dazzling arch of white enclosing another cup of richest velvety crimson, from the heart of which rises a golden-coloured

pistil. I have never seen anything to equal this bloom in beauty or fragrance, and as I believe it is but little known, I take the liberty to describe it at length. Looking at it for the first time I well remember that I realized how even in a flower there dwells something of the majesty of its Maker. To my great delight Miss Flossie told me that she knew the flower well and had tried to grow it in her garden, but without success, adding, however, that as it should be in bloom at this time of the year she thought that she could procure me a specimen.

After that I fell to asking her if she was not lonely up here among all these savage people and without any companions of her own age.

'Lonely?' she said. 'Oh, indeed no! I am as happy as the day is long, and besides I have my own companions. Why, I should hate to be buried in a crowd of white girls all just like myself so that nobody could tell the difference! Here,' she said, giving her head a little toss, 'I am I; and every native for miles around knows the "Water-lily", -- for that is what they call me -- and is ready to do what I want, but in the books that I have read about little girls in England it is not like that. Everybody thinks them a trouble, and they have to do what their schoolmistress likes. Oh! it would break my heart to be put in a cage like that and not to be free -- free as the air.'

'Would you not like to learn?' I asked.

'So I do learn. Father teaches me Latin and French and arithmetic.'

'And are you never afraid among all these wild men?'

'Afraid? Oh no! they never interfere with me. I think they believe that I am "Ngai" (of the Divinity) because I am so white and have fair hair. And look here,' and diving her little hand into the bodice of her dress she produced a double-barrelled nickel-plated Derringer, 'I always carry that loaded, and if anybody tried to touch me I should shoot him. Once I shot a leopard that jumped upon my donkey as I was riding along. It frightened me very much, but I shot it in the ear and it fell dead, and I have its skin upon my bed. Look there!' she went on in an altered voice, touching me on the arm and pointing to some far-away object, 'I said just now that I had companions; there is one of them.'

I looked, and for the first time there burst upon my sight the glory of Mount Kenia. Hitherto the mountain had always been hidden in mist, but now its radiant beauty was unveiled for many thousand feet, although the base was still wrapped in vapour so that the lofty peak or pillar, towering nearly twenty thousand feet into the sky, appeared to be a fairy vision, hanging between earth and heaven, and based upon the clouds. The solemn majesty

and beauty of this white peak are together beyond the power of my poor pen to describe. There it rose straight and sheer -- a glittering white glory, its crest piercing the very blue of heaven. As I gazed at it with that little girl I felt my whole heart lifted up with an indescribable emotion, and for a moment great and wonderful thoughts seemed to break upon my mind, even as the arrows of the setting sun were breaking upon Kenia's snows. Mr Mackenzie's natives call the mountain the 'Finger of God', and to me it did seem eloquent of immortal peace and of the pure high calm that surely lies above this fevered world. Somewhere I had heard a line of poetry,

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever,

and now it came into my mind, and for the first time I thoroughly understood what it meant. Base, indeed, would be the man who could look upon that mighty snow-wreathed pile -- that white old tombstone of the years -- and not feel his own utter insignificance, and, by whatever name he calls Him, worship God in his heart. Such sights are like visions of the spirit; they throw wide the windows of the chamber of our small selfishness and let in a breath of that air that rushes round the rolling spheres, and for a while illumine our darkness with a far-off gleam of the white light which beats upon the Throne.

Yes, such things of beauty are indeed a joy for ever, and I can well understand what little Flossie meant when she talked of Kenia as her companion. As Umslopogaas, savage old Zulu that he was, said when I pointed out to him the peak hanging in the glittering air: 'A man might look thereon for a thousand years and yet be hungry to see.' But he gave rather another colour to his poetical idea when he added in a sort of chant, and with a touch of that weird imagination for which the man was remarkable, that when he was dead he should like his spirit to sit upon that snow-clad peak for ever, and to rush down the steep white sides in the breath of the whirlwind, or on the flash of the lightning, and 'slay, and slay, and slay'.

'Slay what, you old bloodhound?' I asked.

This rather puzzled him, but at length he answered --

'The other shadows.'

'So thou wouldst continue thy murdering even after death?' I said.

'I murder not,' he answered hotly; 'I kill in fair fight. Man is born to kill. He who kills not when his blood is hot is a woman, and no man. The people who kill not are slaves. I say I kill in fair fight; and when I am "in the shadow", as you white



men say, I hope to go on killing in fair fight. May my shadow be accursed and chilled to the bone for ever if it should fall to murdering like a bushman with his poisoned arrows!' And he stalked away with much dignity, and left me laughing.

Just then the spies whom our host had sent out in the morning to find out if there were any traces of our Masai friends about, returned, and reported that the country had been scoured for fifteen miles round without a single Elmoran being seen, and that they believed that those gentry had given up the pursuit and returned whence they came. Mr Mackenzie gave a sigh of relief when he heard this, and so indeed did we, for we had had quite enough of the Masai to last us for some time. Indeed, the general opinion was that, finding we had reached the mission station in safety, they had, knowing its strength, given up the pursuit of us as a bad job. How ill-judged that view was the sequel will show.

After the spies had gone, and Mrs Mackenzie and Flossie had retired for the night, Alphonse, the little Frenchman, came out, and Sir Henry, who is a very good French scholar, got him to tell us how he came to visit Central Africa, which he did in a most extraordinary lingo, that for the most part I shall not attempt to reproduce.

'My grandfather,' he began, 'was a soldier of the Guard, and

served under Napoleon. He was in the retreat from Moscow, and lived for ten days on his own leggings and a pair he stole from a comrade. He used to get drunk -- he died drunk, and I remember playing at drums on his coffin. My father --'

Here we suggested that he might skip his ancestry and come to the point.

'Bien, messieurs!' replied this comical little man, with a polite bow. 'I did only wish to demonstrate that the military principle is not hereditary. My grandfather was a splendid man, six feet two high, broad in proportion, a swallower of fire and gaiters. Also he was remarkable for his moustache. To me there remains the moustache and -- nothing more.

'I am, messieurs, a cook, and I was born at Marseilles. In that dear town I spent my happy youth. For years and years I washed the dishes at the Hotel Continental. Ah, those were golden days!' and he sighed. 'I am a Frenchman. Need I say, messieurs, that I admire beauty? Nay, I adore the fair. Messieurs, we admire all the roses in a garden, but we pluck one. I plucked one, and alas, messieurs, it pricked my finger. She was a chambermaid, her name Annette, her figure ravishing, her face an angel's, her heart -- alas, messieurs, that I should have to own it! -- black and slippery as a patent leather boot. I loved to desperation, I adored her to despair. She transported me -- in every sense;

she inspired me. Never have I cooked as I cooked (for I had been promoted at the hotel) when Annette, my adored Annette, smiled on me. Never' -- and here his manly voice broke into a sob -- 'never shall I cook so well again.' Here he melted into tears.

'Come, cheer up!' said Sir Henry in French, smacking him smartly on the back. 'There's no knowing what may happen, you know. To judge from your dinner today, I should say you were in a fair way to recovery.'

Alphonse stopped weeping, and began to rub his back. 'Monsieur,' he said, 'doubtless means to console, but his hand is heavy. To continue: we loved, and were happy in each other's love. The birds in their little nest could not be happier than Alphonse and his Annette. Then came the blow -- sapristi! -- when I think of it. Messieurs will forgive me if I wipe away a tear. Mine was an evil number; I was drawn for the conscription. Fortune would be avenged on me for having won the heart of Annette.

'The evil moment came; I had to go. I tried to run away, but I was caught by brutal soldiers, and they banged me with the butt-end of muskets till my mustachios curled with pain. I had a cousin a linen-draper, well-to-do, but very ugly. He had drawn a good number, and sympathized when they thumped me. "To thee, my cousin," I said, "to thee, in whose veins flows the blue blood

of our heroic grandparent, to thee I consign Annette. Watch over her whilst I hunt for glory in the bloody field."

"Make your mind easy," said he; "I will." As the sequel shows, he did!

'I went. I lived in barracks on black soup. I am a refined man and a poet by nature, and I suffered tortures from the coarse horror of my surroundings. There was a drill sergeant, and he had a cane. Ah, that cane, how it curled! Alas, never can I forget it!

'One morning came the news; my battalion was ordered to Tonquin. The drill sergeant and the other coarse monsters rejoiced. I -- I made enquiries about Tonquin. They were not satisfactory. In Tonquin are savage Chinese who rip you open. My artistic tastes -- for I am also an artist -- recoiled from the idea of being ripped open. The great man makes up his mind quickly. I made up my mind. I determined not to be ripped open. I deserted.

'I reached Marseilles disguised as an old man. I went to the house of my cousin -- he in whom runs my grandfather's heroic blood -- and there sat Annette. It was the season of cherries. They took a double stalk. At each end was a cherry. My cousin put one into his mouth, Annette put the other in hers. Then they drew the stalks in till their eyes met -- and alas, alas

that I should have to say it! -- they kissed. The game was a pretty one, but it filled me with fury. The heroic blood of my grandfather boiled up in me. I rushed into the kitchen. I struck my cousin with the old man's crutch. He fell -- I had slain him. Alas, I believe that I did slay him. Annette screamed. The gendarmes came. I fled. I reached the harbour. I hid aboard a vessel. The vessel put to sea. The captain found me and beat me. He took an opportunity. He posted a letter from a foreign port to the police. He did not put me ashore because I cooked so well. I cooked for him all the way to Zanzibar. When I asked for payment he kicked me. The blood of my heroic grandfather boiled within me, and I shook my fist in his face and vowed to have my revenge. He kicked me again. At Zanzibar there was a telegram. I cursed the man who invented telegraphs. Now I curse him again. I was to be arrested for desertion, for murder, and que sais-je? I escaped from the prison. I fled, I starved. I met the men of Monsieur le Cure. They brought me here. I am full of woe. But I return not to France. Better to risk my life in these horrible places than to know the Bagne.'

He paused, and we nearly choked with laughter, having to turn our faces away.

'Ah! you weep, messieurs,' he said. 'No wonder -- it is a sad story.'

'Perhaps,' said Sir Henry, 'the heroic blood of your grandparent will triumph after all; perhaps you will still be great. At any rate we shall see. And now I vote we go to bed. I am dead tired, and we had not much sleep on that confounded rock last night.'

And so we did, and very strange the tidy rooms and clean white sheets seemed to us after our recent experiences.