

CHAPTER VIII

ALPHONSE EXPLAINS

And so the fight was ended. On returning from the shocking scene it suddenly struck me that I had seen nothing of Alphonse since the moment, some twenty minutes before -- for though this fight has taken a long while to describe, it did not take long in reality -- when I had been forced to hit him in the wind with the result of nearly getting myself shot. Fearing that the poor little man had perished in the battle, I began to hunt among the dead for his body, but, not being able either to see or hear anything of it, I concluded that he must have survived, and walked down the side of the kraal where we had first taken our stand, calling him by name. Now some fifteen paces back from the kraal wall stood a very ancient tree of the banyan species. So ancient was it that all the inside had in the course of ages decayed away, leaving nothing but a shell of bark.

'Alphonse,' I called, as I walked down the wall. 'Alphonse!'

'Oui, monsieur,' answered a voice. 'Here am I.'

I looked round but could see nobody. 'Where?' I cried.

'Here am I, monsieur, in the tree.'

I looked, and there, peering out of a hole in the trunk of the banyan about five feet from the ground, I saw a pale face and a pair of large mustachios, one clipped short and the other as lamentably out of curl as the tail of a newly whipped pug. Then, for the first time, I realized what I had suspected before -- namely, that Alphonse was an arrant coward. I walked up to him. 'Come out of that hole,' I said.

'Is it finished, monsieur?' he asked anxiously; 'quite finished? Ah, the horrors I have undergone, and the prayers I have uttered!'

'Come out, you little wretch,' I said, for I did not feel amiable; 'it is all over.'

'So, monsieur, then my prayers have prevailed? I emerge,' and he did.

As we were walking down together to join the others, who were gathered in a group by the wide entrance to the kraal, which now resembled a veritable charnel-house, a Masai, who had escaped so far and been hiding under a bush, suddenly sprang up and charged furiously at us. Off went Alphonse with a howl of terror, and after him flew the Masai, bent upon doing some execution before he died. He soon overtook the poor little Frenchman, and would

have finished him then and there had I not, just as Alphonse made a last agonized double in the vain hope of avoiding the yard of steel that was flashing in his immediate rear, managed to plant a bullet between the Elmoran's broad shoulders, which brought matters to a satisfactory conclusion so far as the Frenchman was concerned. But just then he tripped and fell flat, and the body of the Masai fell right on the top of him, moving convulsively in the death struggle. Thereupon there arose such a series of piercing howls that I concluded that before he died the savage must have managed to stab poor Alphonse. I ran up in a hurry and pulled the Masai off, and there beneath him lay Alphonse covered with blood and jerking himself about like a galvanized frog. Poor fellow! thought I, he is done for, and kneeling down by him I began to search for his wound as well as his struggles would allow.

'Oh, the hole in my back!' he yelled. 'I am murdered. I am dead. Oh, Annette!'

I searched again, but could see no wound. Then the truth dawned on me -- the man was frightened, not hurt.

'Get up!' I shouted, 'Get up. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? You are not touched.'

Thereupon he rose, not a penny the worse. 'But, monsieur, I

thought I was,' he said apologetically; 'I did not know that I had conquered.' Then, giving the body of the Masai a kick, he ejaculated triumphantly, 'Ah, dog of a black savage, thou art dead; what victory!'

Thoroughly disgusted, I left Alphonse to look after himself, which he did by following me like a shadow, and proceeded to join the others by the large entrance. The first thing that I saw was Mackenzie, seated on a stone with a handkerchief twisted round his thigh, from which he was bleeding freely, having, indeed, received a spear-thrust that passed right through it, and still holding in his hand his favourite carving knife now bent nearly double, from which I gathered that he had been successful in his rough and tumble with the Elmoran.

'Ah, Quatermain!' he sang out in a trembling, excited voice, 'so we have conquered; but it is a sorry sight, a sorry sight;' and then breaking into broad Scotch and glancing at the bent knife in his hand, 'It fashes me sair to have bent my best carver on the breastbone of a savage,' and he laughed hysterically. Poor fellow, what between his wound and the killing excitement he had undergone his nerves were much shaken, and no wonder! It is hard upon a man of peace and kindly heart to be called upon to join in such a gruesome business. But there, fate puts us sometimes into very comical positions!

At the kraal entrance the scene was a strange one. The slaughter was over by now, and the wounded men had been put out of their pain, for no quarter had been given. The bush-closed entrance was trampled flat, and in place of bushes it was filled with the bodies of dead men. Dead men, everywhere dead men -- they lay about in knots, they were flung by ones and twos in every position upon the open spaces, for all the world like the people on the grass in one of the London parks on a particularly hot Sunday in August. In front of this entrance, on a space which had been cleared of dead and of the shields and spears which were scattered in all directions as they had fallen or been thrown from the hands of their owners, stood and lay the survivors of the awful struggle, and at their feet were four wounded men. We had gone into the fight thirty strong, and of the thirty but fifteen remained alive, and five of them (including Mr Mackenzie) were wounded, two mortally. Of those who held the entrance, Curtis and the Zulu alone remained. Good had lost five men killed, I had lost two killed, and Mackenzie no less than five out of the six with him. As for the survivors they were, with the exception of myself who had never come to close quarters, red from head to foot -- Sir Henry's armour might have been painted that colour -- and utterly exhausted, except Umslopogaas, who, as he grimly stood on a little mound above a heap of dead, leaning as usual upon his axe, did not seem particularly distressed, although the skin over the hole in his head palpitated violently.

'Ah, Macumazahn!' he said to me as I limped up, feeling very sick, 'I told thee that it would be a good fight, and it has. Never have I seen a better, or one more bravely fought. As for this iron shirt, surely it is "tagati" [bewitched]; nothing could pierce it. Had it not been for the garment I should have been there,' and he nodded towards the great pile of dead men beneath him.

'I give it thee; thou art a brave man,' said Sir Henry, briefly.

'Koos!' answered the Zulu, deeply pleased both at the gift and the compliment. 'Thou, too, Incubu, didst bear thyself as a man, but I must give thee some lessons with the axe; thou dost waste thy strength.'

Just then Mackenzie asked about Flossie, and we were all greatly relieved when one of the men said he had seen her flying towards the house with the nurse. Then bearing such of the wounded as could be moved at the moment with us, we slowly made our way towards the Mission-house, spent with toil and bloodshed, but with the glorious sense of victory against overwhelming odds glowing in our hearts. We had saved the life of the little maid, and taught the Masai of those parts a lesson that they will not forget for ten years -- but at what a cost!

Painfully we made our way up the hill which, just a little more

than an hour before, we had descended under such different circumstances. At the gate of the wall stood Mrs Mackenzie waiting for us. When her eyes fell upon us, however, she shrieked out, and covered her face with her hands, crying, 'Horrible, horrible!' Nor were her fears allayed when she discovered her worthy husband being borne upon an improvized stretcher; but her doubts as to the nature of his injury were soon set at rest. Then when in a few brief words I had told her the upshot of the struggle (of which Flossie, who had arrived in safety, had been able to explain something) she came up to me and solemnly kissed me on the forehead.

'God bless you all, Mr Quatermain; you have saved my child's life,' she said simply.

Then we went in and got our clothes off and doctored our wounds; I am glad to say I had none, and Sir Henry's and Good's were, thanks to those invaluable chain shirts, of a comparatively harmless nature, and to be dealt with by means of a few stitches and sticking-plaster. Mackenzie's, however, were serious, though fortunately the spear had not severed any large artery. After that we had a bath, and what a luxury it was! And having clad ourselves in ordinary clothes, proceeded to the dining-room, where breakfast was set as usual. It was curious sitting down there, drinking tea and eating toast in an ordinary nineteenth-century sort of way just as though we had not employed the early hours in a regular primitive hand-to-hand Middle-Ages kind of struggle. As Good

said, the whole thing seemed more as though one had had a bad nightmare just before being called, than as a deed done. When we were finishing our breakfast the door opened, and in came little Flossie, very pale and tottery, but quite unhurt. She kissed us all and thanked us. I congratulated her on the presence of mind she had shown in shooting the Masai with her Derringer pistol, and thereby saving her own life.

'Oh, don't talk of it!' she said, beginning to cry hysterically; 'I shall never forget his face as he went turning round and round, never -- I can see it now.'

I advised her to go to bed and get some sleep, which she did, and awoke in the evening quite recovered, so far as her strength was concerned. It struck me as an odd thing that a girl who could find the nerve to shoot a huge black ruffian rushing to kill her with a spear should have been so affected at the thought of it afterwards; but it is, after all, characteristic of the sex. Poor Flossie! I fear that her nerves will not get over that night in the Masai camp for many a long year. She told me afterwards that it was the suspense that was so awful, having to sit there hour after hour through the livelong night utterly ignorant as to whether or not any attempt was to be made to rescue her. She said that on the whole she did not expect it, knowing how few of us, and how many of the Masai -- who, by the way, came continually to stare at her, most of them never having seen

a white person before, and handled her arms and hair with their filthy paws. She said also that she had made up her mind that if she saw no signs of succour by the time the first rays of the rising sun reached the kraal she would kill herself with the pistol, for the nurse had heard the Lygonani say that they were to be tortured to death as soon as the sun was up if one of the white men did not come in their place. It was an awful resolution to have to take, but she meant to act on it, and I have little doubt but what she would have done so. Although she was at an age when in England girls are in the schoolroom and come down to dessert, this 'child of the wilderness' had more courage, discretion, and power of mind than many a woman of mature age nurtured in idleness and luxury, with minds carefully drilled and educated out of any originality or self-resource that nature may have endowed them with.

When breakfast was over we all turned in and had a good sleep, only getting up in time for dinner; after which meal we once more adjourned, together with all the available population -- men, women, youths, and girls -- to the scene of the morning's slaughter, our object being to bury our own dead and get rid of the Masai by flinging them into the Tana River, which ran within fifty yards of the kraal. On reaching the spot we disturbed thousands upon thousands of vultures and a sort of brown bush eagle, which had been flocking to the feast from miles and miles away. Often have I watched these great and repulsive birds,

and marvelled at the extraordinary speed with which they arrive on a scene of slaughter. A buck falls to your rifle, and within a minute high in the blue ether appears a speck that gradually grows into a vulture, then another, and another. I have heard many theories advanced to account for the wonderful power of perception nature has given these birds. My own, founded on a good deal of observation, is that the vultures, gifted as they are with powers of sight greater than those given by the most powerful glass, quarter out the heavens among themselves, and hanging in mid-air at a vast height -- probably from two to three miles above the earth -- keep watch, each of them, over an enormous stretch of country. Presently one of them spies food, and instantly begins to sink towards it. Thereon his next neighbour in the airy heights sailing leisurely through the blue gulf, at a distance perhaps of some miles, follows his example, knowing that food has been sighted. Down he goes, and all the vultures within sight of him follow after, and so do all those in sight of them. In this way the vultures for twenty miles round can be summoned to the feast in a few minutes.

We buried our dead in solemn silence, Good being selected to read the Burial Service over them (in the absence of Mr Mackenzie, confined to bed), as he was generally allowed to possess the best voice and most impressive manner. It was melancholy in the extreme, but, as Good said, it might have been worse, for we might have had 'to bury ourselves'. I pointed out that this

would have been a difficult feat, but I knew what he meant.

Next we set to work to load an ox-wagon which had been brought round from the Mission with the dead bodies of the Masai, having first collected the spears, shields, and other arms. We loaded the wagon five times, about fifty bodies to the load, and emptied it into the Tana. From this it was evident that very few of the Masai could have escaped. The crocodiles must have been well fed that night. One of the last bodies we picked up was that of the sentry at the upper end. I asked Good how he managed to kill him, and he told me that he had crept up much as Umslopogaas had done, and stabbed him with his sword. He groaned a good deal, but fortunately nobody heard him. As Good said, it was a horrible thing to have to do, and most unpleasantly like cold-blooded murder.

And so with the last body that floated away down the current of the Tana ended the incident of our attack on the Masai camp. The spears and shields and other arms we took up to the Mission, where they filled an outhouse. One incident, however, I must not forget to mention. As we were returning from performing the obsequies of our Masai friends we passed the hollow tree where Alphonse had secreted himself in the morning. It so happened that the little man himself was with us assisting in our unpleasant task with a far better will than he had shown where live Masai were concerned. Indeed, for each body that he handled he found

an appropriate sarcasm. Alphonse throwing Masai into the Tana was a very different creature from Alphonse flying for dear life from the spear of a live Masai. He was quite merry and gay, he clapped his hands and warbled snatches of French songs as the grim dead warriors went 'splash' into the running waters to carry a message of death and defiance to their kindred a hundred miles below. In short, thinking that he wanted taking down a peg, I suggested holding a court-martial on him for his conduct in the morning.

Accordingly we brought him to the tree where he had hidden, and proceeded to sit in judgment on him, Sir Henry explaining to him in the very best French the unheard-of cowardice and enormity of his conduct, more especially in letting the oiled rag out of his mouth, whereby he nearly aroused the Masai camp with teeth-chattering and brought about the failure of our plans: ending up with a request for an explanation.

But if we expected to find Alphonse at a loss and put him to open shame we were destined to be disappointed. He bowed and scraped and smiled, and acknowledged that his conduct might at first blush appear strange, but really it was not, inasmuch as his teeth were not chattering from fear -- oh, dear no! oh, certainly not! he marvelled how the 'messieurs' could think of such a thing -- but from the chill air of the morning. As for the rag, if monsieur could have but tasted its evil flavour, being compounded

indeed of a mixture of stale paraffin oil, grease, and gunpowder, monsieur himself would have spat it out. But he did nothing of the sort; he determined to keep it there till, alas! his stomach 'revolted', and the rag was ejected in an access of involuntary sickness.

'And what have you to say about getting into the hollow tree?' asked Sir Henry, keeping his countenance with difficulty.

'But, monsieur, the explanation is easy; oh, most easy! it was thus: I stood there by the kraal wall, and the little grey monsieur hit me in the stomach so that my rifle exploded, and the battle began. I watched whilst recovering myself from monsieur's cruel blow; then, messieurs, I felt the heroic blood of my grandfather boil up in my veins. The sight made me mad. I ground my teeth! Fire flashed from my eyes! I shouted "En avant!" and longed to slay. Before my eyes there rose a vision of my heroic grandfather! In short, I was mad! I was a warrior indeed! But then in my heart I heard a small voice: "Alphonse," said the voice, "restrain thyself, Alphonse! Give not way to this evil passion! These men, though black, are brothers! And thou wouldst slay them? Cruel Alphonse!" The voice was right. I knew it; I was about to perpetrate the most horrible cruelties: to wound! to massacre! to tear limb from limb! And how restrain myself? I looked round; I saw the tree, I perceived the hole. "Entomb thyself," said the voice, "and hold on tight! Thou wilt thus overcome temptation

by main force!" It was bitter, just when the blood of my heroic grandfather boiled most fiercely; but I obeyed! I dragged my unwilling feet along; I entombed myself! Through the hole I watched the battle! I shouted curses and defiance on the foe! I noted them fall with satisfaction! Why not? I had not robbed them of their lives. Their gore was not upon my head. The blood of my heroic --'

'Oh, get along with you, you little cur!' broke out Sir Henry, with a shout of laughter, and giving Alphonse a good kick which sent him flying off with a rueful face.

In the evening I had an interview with Mr Mackenzie, who was suffering a good deal from his wounds, which Good, who was a skilful though unqualified doctor, was treating him for. He told me that this occurrence had taught him a lesson, and that, if he recovered safely, he meant to hand over the Mission to a younger man, who was already on his road to join him in his work, and return to England.

'You see, Quatermain,' he said, 'I made up my mind to it, this very morning, when we were creeping down those benighted savages.

"If we live through this and rescue Flossie alive," I said to myself, "I will go home to England; I have had enough of savages."

Well, I did not think that we should live through it at the time; but thanks be to God and you four, we have lived through

it, and I mean to stick to my resolution, lest a worse thing befall us. Another such time would kill my poor wife. And besides, Quatermain, between you and me, I am well off; it is thirty thousand pounds I am worth today, and every farthing of it made by honest trade and savings in the bank at Zanzibar, for living here costs me next to nothing. So though it will be hard to leave this place, which I have made to blossom like a rose in the wilderness, and harder still to leave the people I have taught, I shall go.'

'I congratulate you on your decision,' answered I, 'for two reasons. The first is, that you owe a duty to your wife and daughter, and more especially to the latter, who should receive some education and mix with girls of her own race, otherwise she will grow up wild, shunning her kind. The other is, that as sure as I am standing here, sooner or later the Masai will try to avenge the slaughter inflicted on them today. Two or three men are sure to have escaped the confusion who will carry the story back to their people, and the result will be that a great expedition will one day be sent against you. It might be delayed for a year, but sooner or later it will come. Therefore, if only for that reason, I should go. When once they have learnt that you are no longer here they may perhaps leave the place alone.'

{Endnote 8}

'You are quite right,' answered the clergyman. 'I will turn my back upon this place in a month. But it will be a wrench,

it will be a wrench.'