

CHAPTER XX

THE BATTLE OF THE PASS

It was on the third morning after this incident of the map that Sir Henry and I started. With the exception of a small guard, all the great host had moved on the night before, leaving the Frowning City very silent and empty. Indeed, it was found impossible to leave any garrison with the exception of a personal guard for Nyleptha, and about a thousand men who from sickness or one cause or another were unable to proceed with the army; but as Milosis was practically impregnable, and as our enemy was in front of and not behind us, this did not so much matter.

Good and Umslopogaas had gone on with the army, but Nyleptha accompanied Sir Henry and myself to the city gates, riding a magnificent white horse called Daylight, which was supposed to be the fleetest and most enduring animal in Zu-Vendis. Her face bore traces of recent weeping, but there were no tears in her eyes now, indeed she was bearing up bravely against what must have been a bitter trial to her. At the gate she reined in her horse and bade us farewell. On the previous day she had reviewed and addressed the officers of the great army, speaking to them such high, eloquent words, and expressing so complete a confidence in their valour and in their ultimate victory, that she quite

carried their hearts away, and as she rode from rank to rank they cheered her till the ground shook. And now today the same mood seemed to be on her.

'Fare thee well, Macumazahn!' she said. 'Remember, I trust to thy wits, which are as a needle to a spear-handle compared to those of my people, to save us from Sorais. I know that thou wilt do thy duty.'

I bowed and explained to her my horror of fighting, and my fear lest I should lose my head, at which she laughed gently and turned to Curtis.

'Fare thee well, my lord!' she said. 'Come back with victory, and as a king, or on thy soldiers' spears.' {Endnote 19}

Sir Henry said nothing, but turned his horse to go; perhaps he had a bit of a lump in his throat. One gets over it afterwards, but these sort of partings are trying when one has only been married a week.

'Here,' added Nyleptha, 'will I greet thee when ye return in triumph. And now, my lords, once more, farewell!'

Then we rode on, but when we had gone a hundred and fifty yards or so, we turned and perceived her still sitting on her horse

at the same spot, and looking out after us beneath her hand, and that was the last we saw of her. About a mile farther on, however, we heard galloping behind us, and looking round, saw a mounted soldier coming towards us, leading Nyleptha's matchless steed -- Daylight.

'The Queen sends the white stallion as a farewell gift to her Lord Incubu, and bids me tell my lord that he is the fleetest and most enduring horse in all the land,' said the soldier, bending to his saddle-bow before us.

At first Sir Henry did not want to take the horse, saying that he was too good for such rough work, but I persuaded him to do so, thinking that Nyleptha would be hurt if he did not. Little did I guess at the time what service that noble horse would render in our sorest need. It is curious to look back and realize upon what trivial and apparently coincidental circumstances great events frequently turn as easily and naturally as a door on its hinges.

Well, we took the horse, and a beauty he was, it was a perfect pleasure to see him move, and Curtis having sent back his greetings and thanks, we proceeded on our journey.

By midday we overtook the rear-guard of the great army of which Sir Henry then formally took over the command. It was a heavy

responsibility, and it oppressed him very much, but the Queen's injunctions on the point were such as did not admit of being trifled with. He was beginning to find out that greatness has its responsibilities as well as its glories.

Then we marched on without meeting with any opposition, almost indeed without seeing anybody, for the populations of the towns and villages along our route had for the most part fled, fearing lest they should be caught between the two rival armies and ground to powder like grain between the upper and the nether stones.

On the evening of the fourth day, for the progress of so great a multitude was necessarily slow, we camped two miles this side of the neck or ridge I have spoken of, and our outposts brought us word that Sorais with all her power was rolling down upon us, and had pitched her camp that night ten miles the farther side of the neck.

Accordingly before dawn we sent forward fifteen hundred cavalry to seize the position. Scarcely had they occupied it, however, before they were attacked by about as many of Sorais' horsemen, and a very smart little cavalry fight ensued, with a loss to us of about thirty men killed. On the advance of our supports, however, Sorais' force drew off, carrying their dead and wounded with them.

The main body of the army reached the neck about dinner-time, and I must say that Nyleptha's judgment had not failed her, it was an admirable place to give battle in, especially to a superior force.

The road ran down a mile or more, through ground too broken to admit of the handling of any considerable force, till it reached the crest of a great green wave of land, that rolled down a gentle slope to the banks of a little stream, and then rolled away again up a still gentler slope to the plain beyond, the distance from the crest of the land-wave down to the stream being a little over half a mile, and from the stream up to the plain beyond a trifle less. The length of this wave of land at its highest point, which corresponded exactly with the width of the neck of the land between the wooded hills, was about two miles and a quarter, and it was protected on either side by dense, rocky, bush-clad ground, that afforded a most valuable cover to the flanks of the army and rendered it almost impossible for them to be turned.

It was on the hither slope of this neck of land that Curtis encamped his army in the same formation that he had, after consultation with the various generals, Good, and myself, determined that they should occupy in the great pitched battle which now appeared to be imminent.

Our force of sixty thousand men was, roughly speaking, divided as follows. In the centre was a dense body of twenty thousand foot-soldiers, armed with spears, swords, and hippopotamus-hide shields, breast and back plates. {Endnote 20} These formed the chest of the army, and were supported by five thousand foot, and three thousand horse in reserve. On either side of this chest were stationed seven thousand horse arranged in deep, majestic squadrons; and beyond and on either side but slightly in front of them again were two bodies, each numbering about seven thousand five hundred spearmen, forming the right and left wings of the army, and each supported by a contingent of some fifteen hundred cavalry. This makes in all sixty thousand men.

Curtis commanded in chief, I was in command of the seven thousand horse between the chest and right wing, which was commanded by Good, and the other battalions and squadrons were entrusted to Zu-Vendis generals.

Scarcely had we taken up our positions before Sorais' vast army began to swarm on the opposite slope about a mile in front of us, till the whole place seemed alive with the multitude of her spearpoints, and the ground shook with the tramp of her battalions. It was evident that the spies had not exaggerated; we were outnumbered by at least a third. At first we expected that Sorais was going to attack us at once, as the clouds of cavalry which hung upon her flanks executed some threatening demonstrations, but she

thought better of it, and there was no fight that day. As for the formation of her great forces I cannot now describe it with accuracy, and it would only serve to bewilder if I did, but I may say, generally, that in its leading features it resembled our own, only her reserve was much greater.

Opposite our right wing, and forming Sorais' left wing, was a great army of dark, wild-looking men, armed with sword and shield only, which, I was informed, was composed of Nasta's twenty-five thousand savage hillsmen.

'My word, Good,' said I, when I saw them, 'you will catch it tomorrow when those gentlemen charge!' whereat Good not unnaturally looked rather anxious.

All day we watched and waited, but nothing happened, and at last night fell, and a thousand watch-fires twinkled brightly on the slopes, to wane and die one by one like the stars they resembled. As the hours wore on, the silence gradually gathered more deeply over the opposing hosts.

It was a very wearying night, for in addition to the endless things that had to be attended to, there was our gnawing suspense to reckon with. The fray which tomorrow would witness would be so vast, and the slaughter so awful, that stout indeed must the heart have been that was not overwhelmed at the prospect.

And when I thought of all that hung upon it, I own I felt ill,
and it made me very sad to reflect that these mighty forces were
gathered for destruction, simply to gratify the jealous anger
of a woman. This was the hidden power which was to send those
dense masses of cavalry, flashing like human thunderbolts across
the plain, and to roll together the fierce battalions as clouds
when hurricane meets hurricane. It was a dreadful thought, and
set one wondering about the responsibilities of the great ones
of the earth. Deep into the night we sat, with pale faces and
heavy hearts, and took counsel, whilst the sentries tramped up
and down, down and up, and the armed and plumed generals came
and went, grim and shadow-like.

And so the time wore away, till everything was ready for the
coming slaughter; and I lay down and thought, and tried to get
a little rest, but could not sleep for fear of the morrow --
for who could say what the morrow would bring forth? Misery
and death, this was certain; beyond that we knew not, and I confess
I was very much afraid. But as I realized then, it is useless
to question that eternal Sphinx, the future. From day to day
she reads aloud the riddles of the yesterday, of which the puzzled
wordlings of all ages have not answered one, nor ever will, guess
they never so wildly or cry they never so loud.

And so at length I gave up wondering, being forced humbly to
leave the issue in the balancing hands of Providence and the

morrow.

And at last up came the red sun, and the huge camps awoke with a clash, and a roar, and gathered themselves together for battle. It was a beautiful and awe-inspiring scene, and old Umslopogaas, leaning on his axe, contemplated it with grim delight.

'Never have I seen the like, Macumazahn, never,' he said. 'The battles of my people are as the play of children to what this will be. Thinkest thou that they will fight it out?'

'Ay,' I answered sadly, 'to the death. Content thyself, "Woodpecker", for once shalt thou peck thy fill.'

Time went on, and still there was no sign of an attack. A force of cavalry crossed the brook, indeed, and rode slowly along our front, evidently taking stock of our position and numbers. With this we did not attempt to interfere, as our decision was to stand strictly on the defensive, and not to waste a single man. The men breakfasted and stood to their arms, and the hours wore on. About midday, when the men were eating their dinner, for we thought they would fight better on full stomachs, a shout of 'Sorais, Sorais' arose like thunder from the enemy's extreme right, and taking the glass, I was able to clearly distinguish the 'Lady of the Night' herself, surrounded by a glittering staff, and riding slowly down the lines of her battalions. And as she

went, that mighty, thundering shout rolled along before her like the rolling of ten thousand chariots, or the roaring of the ocean when the gale turns suddenly and carries the noise of it to the listener's ears, till the earth shook, and the air was full of the majesty of sound.

Guessing that this was a prelude to the beginning of the battle, we remained still and made ready.

We had not long to wait. Suddenly, like flame from a cannon's mouth, out shot two great tongue-like forces of cavalry, and came charging down the slope towards the little stream, slowly at first, but gathering speed as they came. Before they got to the stream, orders reached me from Sir Henry, who evidently feared that the shock of such a charge, if allowed to fall unbroken upon our infantry, would be too much for them, to send five thousand sabres to meet the force opposite to me, at the moment when it began to mount the steepest of the rise about four hundred yards from our lines. This I did, remaining behind myself with the rest of my men.

Off went the five thousand horsemen, drawn up in a wedge-like form, and I must say that the general in command handled them very ably. Starting at a hand gallop, for the first three hundred yards he rode straight at the tip of the tongue-shaped mass of cavalry which, numbering, so far as I could judge, about eight

thousand sabres, was advancing to charge us. Then he suddenly swerved to the right and put on the pace, and I saw the great wedge curl round, and before the foe could check himself and turn to meet it, strike him about halfway down his length, with a crashing rending sound, like that of the breaking-up of vast sheets of ice. In sank the great wedge, into his heart, and as it cut its way hundreds of horsemen were thrown up on either side of it, just as the earth is thrown up by a ploughshare, or more like still, as the foaming water curls over beneath the bows of a rushing ship. In, yet in, vainly does the tongue twist its ends round in agony, like an injured snake, and strive to protect its centre; still farther in, by Heaven! right through, and so, amid cheer after cheer from our watching thousands, back again upon the severed ends, beating them down, driving them as a gale drives spray, till at last, amidst the rushing of hundreds of riderless horses, the flashing of swords, and the victorious clamour of their pursuers, the great force crumples up like an empty glove, then turns and gallops pell-mell for safety back to its own lines.

I do not think it reached them more than two-thirds as strong as it went out ten minutes before. The lines which were now advancing to the attack, opened and swallowed them up, and my force returned, having only suffered a loss of about five hundred men -- not much, I thought, considering the fierceness of the struggle. I could also see that the opposing bodies of cavalry

on our left wing were drawing back, but how the fight went with them I do not quite know. It is as much as I can do to describe what took place immediately around me.

By this time the dense masses of the enemy's left, composed almost entirely of Nasta's swordsmen, were across the little stream, and with alternate yells of 'Nasta' and 'Sorais', with dancing banners and gleaming swords, were swarming up towards us like ants.

Again I received orders to try and check this movement, and also the main advance against the chest of our army, by means of cavalry charges, and this I did to the best of my ability, by continually sending squadrons of about a thousand sabres out against them. These squadrons did the enemy much damage, and it was a glorious sight to see them flash down the hillside, and bury themselves like a living knife in the heart of the foe. But, also, we lost many men, for after the experience of a couple of these charges, which had drawn a sort of bloody St Andrew's cross of dead and dying through the centre of Nasta's host, our foes no longer attempted to offer an unyielding front to their irresistible weight, but opened out to let the rush go through, throwing themselves on the ground and hamstringing hundreds of horses as they passed.

And so, notwithstanding all that we could do, the enemy drew nearer, till at last he hurled himself upon Good's force of seven

thousand five hundred regulars, who were drawn up to receive them in three strong squares. About the same time, too, an awful and heartshaking roar told me that the main battle had closed in on the centre and extreme left. I raised myself in my stirrups and looked down to my left; so far as the eye could see there was a long dazzling shimmer of steel as the sun glanced upon falling sword and thrusting spear.

To and fro swung the contending lines in that dread struggle, now giving way, now gaining a little in the mad yet ordered confusion of attack and defence. But it was as much as I could do to keep count of what was happening to our own wing; and, as for the moment the cavalry had fallen back under cover of Good's three squares, I had a fair view of this.

Nasta's wild swordsmen were now breaking in red waves against the sullen rock-like squares. Time after time did they yell out their war-cries, and hurl themselves furiously against the long triple ridges of spear points, only to be rolled back as billows are when they meet the cliff.

And so for four long hours the battle raged almost without a pause, and at the end of that time, if we had gained nothing we had lost nothing. Two attempts to turn our left flank by forcing a way through the wood by which it was protected had been defeated; and as yet Nasta's swordsmen had, notwithstanding

their desperate efforts, entirely failed to break Good's three squares, though they had thinned their numbers by quite a third.

As for the chest of the army where Sir Henry was with his staff and Umslopogaas, it had suffered dreadfully, but it had held its own with honour, and the same may be said of our left battle.

At last the attacks slackened, and Sorais' army drew back, having, I began to think, had enough of it. On this point, however, I was soon undeceived, for splitting up her cavalry into comparatively small squadrons, she charged us furiously with them, all along the line, and then once more sullenly rolled her tens of thousands of sword and spearmen down upon our weakened squares and squadrons; Sorais herself directing the movement, as fearless as a lioness heading the main attack. On they came like an avalanche -- I saw her golden helm gleaming in the van -- our counter charges of cavalry entirely failing to check their forward sweep. Now they had struck us, and our centre bent in like a bow beneath the weight of their rush -- it parted, and had not the ten thousand men in reserve charged down to its support it must have been utterly destroyed. As for Good's three squares, they were swept backwards like boats upon an incoming tide, and the foremost one was burst into and lost half its remaining men. But the effort was too fierce and terrible to last. Suddenly the battle came, as it were, to a turning-point, and for a minute or two stood still.

Then it began to move towards Sorais' camp. Just then, too, Nasta's fierce and almost invincible highlanders, either because they were disheartened by their losses or by way of a ruse, fell back, and the remains of Good's gallant squares, leaving the positions they had held for so many hours, cheered wildly, and rashly followed them down the slope, whereon the swarms of swordsmen turned to envelop them, and once more flung themselves upon them with a yell. Taken thus on every side, what remained of the first square was quickly destroyed, and I perceived that the second, in which I could see Good himself mounted on a large horse, was on the point of annihilation. A few more minutes and it was broken, its streaming colours sank, and I lost sight of Good in the confused and hideous slaughter that ensued.

Presently, however, a cream-coloured horse with a snow-white mane and tail burst from the ruins of the square and came rushing past me riderless and with wide streaming reins, and in it I recognized the charger that Good had been riding. Then I hesitated no longer, but taking with me half my effective cavalry force, which now amounted to between four and five thousand men, I commended myself to God, and, without waiting for orders, I charged straight down upon Nasta's swordsmen. Seeing me coming, and being warned by the thunder of my horses' hoofs, the majority of them faced round, and gave us a right warm welcome. Not an inch would they yield; in vain did we hack and trample them down as we ploughed a broad red furrow through their thousands; they seemed to re-arise

by hundreds, driving their terrible sharp swords into our horses, or severing their hamstrings, and then hacking the troopers who came to the ground with them almost into pieces. My horse was speedily killed under me, but luckily I had a fresh one, my own favourite, a coal-black mare Nyleptha had given me, being held in reserve behind, and on this I afterwards mounted. Meanwhile I had to get along as best I could, for I was pretty well lost sight of by my men in the mad confusion of the moment. My voice, of course, could not be heard in the midst of the clanging of steel and the shrieks of rage and agony. Presently I found myself mixed up with the remnants of the square, which had formed round its leader Good, and was fighting desperately for existence. I stumbled against somebody, and glancing down, caught sight of Good's eyeglass. He had been beaten to his knee. Over him was a great fellow swinging a heavy sword. Somehow I managed to run the man through with the sime I had taken from the Masai whose hand I had cut off; but as I did so, he dealt me a frightful blow on the left side and breast with the sword, and though my chain shirt saved my life, I felt that I was badly hurt. For a minute I fell on to my hands and knees among the dead and dying, and turned sick and faint. When I came to again I saw that Nasta's spearmen, or rather those of them who remained, were retreating back across the stream, and that Good was there by me smiling sweetly.

'Near go that,' he shouted; 'but all's well that ends well.'

I assented, but I could not help feeling that it had not ended well for me. I was sorely hurt.

Just then we saw the smaller bodies of cavalry stationed on our extreme right and left, and which were now reinforced by the three thousand sabres which we had held in reserve, flash out like arrows from their posts and fall upon the disordered flanks of Sorais' forces, and that charge decided the issue of the battle. In another minute or two the enemy was in slow and sullen retreat across the little stream, where they once more re-formed. Then came another lull, during which I managed to get a second horse, and received my orders to advance from Sir Henry, and then with one fierce deep-throated roar, with a waving of banners and a wide flashing of steel, the remains of our army took the offensive and began to sweep down, slowly indeed, but irresistibly from the positions they had so gallantly held all day.

At last it was our turn to attack.

On we moved, over the piled-up masses of dead and dying, and were approaching the stream, when suddenly I perceived an extraordinary sight. Galloping wildly towards us, his arms tightly clasped around his horse's neck, against which his blanched cheek was tightly pressed, was a man arrayed in the full costume of a Zu-Vendi general, but in whom, as he came nearer, I recognized none other than our lost Alphonse. It was impossible even then to mistake

those curling mustachios. In a minute he was tearing through our ranks and narrowly escaped being cut down, till at last somebody caught his horse's bridle, and he was brought to me just as a momentary halt occurred in our advance to allow what remained of our shattered squares to form into line.

'Ah, monsieur,' he gasped out in a voice that was nearly inarticulate with fright, 'grace to the sky, it is you! Ah, what I have endured! But you win, monsieur, you win; they fly, the laches. But listen, monsieur -- I forget, it is no good; the Queen is to be murdered tomorrow at the first light in the palace of Milosis; her guards will leave their posts, and the priests are going to kill her. Ah yes! they little thought it, but I was ensconced beneath a banner, and I heard it all.'

'What?' I said, horror-struck; 'what do you mean?'

'What I say, monsieur; that devil of a Nasta he went last night to settle the affair with the Archbishop [Agon]. The guard will leave open the little gate leading from the great stair and go away, and Nasta and Agon's priests will come in and kill her. Themselves they would not kill her.'

'Come with me,' I said, and, shouting to the staff-officer next to me to take over the command, I snatched his bridle and galloped as hard as I could for the spot, between a quarter and half a

mile off, where I saw the royal pennon flying, and where I knew that I should find Curtis if he were still alive. On we tore, our horses clearing heaps of dead and dying men, and splashing through pools of blood, on past the long broken lines of spearmen to where, mounted on the white stallion Nyleptha had sent to him as a parting gift, I saw Sir Henry's form towering above the generals who surrounded him.

Just as we reached him the advance began again. A bloody cloth was bound around his head, but I saw that his eye was as bright and keen as ever. Beside him was old Umslopogaas, his axe red with blood, but looking quite fresh and uninjured.

'What's wrong, Quatermain?' he shouted.

'Everything. There is a plot to murder the Queen tomorrow at dawn. Alphonse here, who has just escaped from Sorais, has overheard it all,' and I rapidly repeated to him what the Frenchman had told me.

Curtis' face turned deadly pale and his jaw dropped.

'At dawn,' he gasped, 'and it is now sunset; it dawns before four and we are nearly a hundred miles off -- nine hours at the outside. What is to be done?'

An idea entered into my head. 'Is that horse of yours fresh?'

I said.

'Yes, I have only just got on to him -- when my last was killed, and he has been fed.'

'So is mine. Get off him, and let Umslopogaas mount; he can ride well. We will be at Milosis before dawn, or if we are not -- well, we cannot help it. No, no; it is impossible for you to leave now. You would be seen, and it would turn the fate of the battle. It is not half won yet. The soldiers would think you were making a bolt of it. Quick now.'

In a moment he was down, and at my bidding Umslopogaas sprang into the empty saddle.

'Now farewell,' I said. 'Send a thousand horsemen with remounts after us in an hour if possible. Stay, despatch a general to the left wing to take over the command and explain my absence.'

'You will do your best to save her, Quatermain?' he said in a broken voice.

'Ay, that I will. Go on; you are being left behind.'

He cast one glance at us, and accompanied by his staff galloped

off to join the advance, which by this time was fording the little brook that now ran red with the blood of the fallen.

As for Umslopogaas and myself, we left that dreadful field as arrows leave a bow, and in a few minutes had passed right out of the sight of slaughter, the smell of blood, and the turmoil and shouting, which only came to our ears as a faint, far-off roaring like the sound of distant breakers.