

## CHAPTER XXII

### HOW UMSLOPOGAAS HELD THE STAIR

We looked at one another.

'Thou seest,' I said, 'they have taken away the door. Is there aught with which we may fill the place? Speak quickly for they will be on us ere the daylight.' I spoke thus, because I knew that we must hold this place or none, as there were no inner doors in the palace, the rooms being separated one from another by curtains. I also knew that if we could by any means defend this doorway the murderers could get in nowhere else; for the palace is absolutely impregnable, that is, since the secret door by which Sorais had entered on that memorable night of attempted murder had, by Nyleptha's order, been closed up with masonry.

'I have it,' said Nyleptha, who, as usual with her, rose to the emergency in a wonderful way. 'On the farther side of the courtyard are blocks of cut marble -- the workmen brought them there for the bed of the new statue of Incubu, my lord; let us block the door with them.'

I jumped at the idea; and having despatched one of the remaining maidens down the great stair to see if she could obtain assistance

from the docks below, where her father, who was a great merchant employing many men, had his dwelling-place, and set another to watch through the doorway, we made our way back across the courtyard to where the hewn marble lay; and here we met Kara returning from despatching the first two messengers. There were the marble blocks, sure enough, broad, massive lumps, some six inches thick, and weighing about eighty pounds each, and there, too, were a couple of implements like small stretchers, that the workmen used to carry them on. Without delay we got some of the blocks on to the stretchers, and four of the girls carried them to the doorway.

'Listen, Macumazahn,' said Umslopogaas, 'if those low fellows come, it is I who will hold the stair against them till the door is built up. Nay, nay, it will be a man's death: gainsay me not, old friend. It has been a good day, let it now be good night. See, I throw myself down to rest on the marble there; when their footsteps are nigh, wake thou me, not before, for I need my strength,' and without a word he went outside and flung himself down on the marble, and was instantly asleep.

At this time, I too was overcome, and was forced to sit down by the doorway, and content myself with directing operations. The girls brought the block, while Kara and Nyleptha built them up across the six-foot-wide doorway, a triple row of them, for less would be useless. But the marble had to be brought forty

yards and then there were forty yards to run back, and though the girls laboured gloriously, even staggering along alone, each with a block in her arms, it was slow work, dreadfully slow.

The light was growing now, and presently, in the silence, we heard a commotion at the far-bottom of the stair, and the faint clinking of armed men. As yet the wall was only two feet high, and we had been eight minutes at the building of it. So they had come. Alphonse had heard aright.

The clanking sound came nearer, and in the ghostly grey of the dawning we could make out long files of men, some fifty or so in all, slowly creeping up the stair. They were now at the half-way standing place that rested on the great flying arch; and here, perceiving that something was going on above, they, to our great gain, halted for three or four minutes and consulted, then slowly and cautiously advanced again.

We had been nearly a quarter of an hour at the work now, and it was almost three feet high.

Then I woke Umslopogaas. The great man rose, stretched himself, and swung Inkosi-kaas round his head.

'It is well,' he said. 'I feel as a young man once more. My strength has come back to me, ay, even as a lamp flares up before

it dies. Fear not, I shall fight a good fight; the wine and the sleep have put a new heart into me.

'Macumazahn, I have dreamed a dream. I dreamed that thou and I stood together on a star, and looked down on the world, and thou wast as a spirit, Macumazahn, for light flamed through thy flesh, but I could not see what was the fashion of mine own face. The hour has come for us, old hunter. So be it: we have had our time, but I would that in it I had seen some more such fights as yesterday's.

'Let them bury me after the fashion of my people, Macumazahn, and set my eyes towards Zululand;' and he took my hand and shook it, and then turned to face the advancing foe.

Just then, to my astonishment, the Zu-Vendi officer Kara clambered over our improvised wall in his quiet, determined sort of way, and took his stand by the Zulu, unsheathing his sword as he did so.

'What, comest thou too?' laughed out the old warrior. 'Welcome -- a welcome to thee, brave heart! Ow! for the man who can die like a man; ow! for the death grip and the ringing of steel. Ow! we are ready. We wet our beaks like eagles, our spears flash in the sun; we shake our assegais, and are hungry to fight. Who comes to give greeting to the Chieftainess [Inkosi-kaas]?

Who would taste her kiss, whereof the fruit is death? I, the Woodpecker, I, the Slaughterer, I the Swiftfooted! I, Umslopogaas, of the tribe of the Maquilisini, of the people of Amazulu, a captain of the regiment of the Nkomabakosi: I, Umslopogaas, the son of Indabazimbi, the son of Arpi the son of Mosilikaatze, I of the royal blood of T'Chaka, I of the King's House, I the Ringed Man, I the Induna, I call to them as a buck calls, I challenge them, I await them. Ow! it is thou, it is thou!

As he spake, or rather chanted, his wild war-song, the armed men, among whom in the growing light I recognized both Nasta and Agon, came streaming up the stair with a rush, and one big fellow, armed with a heavy spear, dashed up the ten semicircular steps ahead of his comrades and struck at the great Zulu with the spear. Umslopogaas moved his body but not his legs, so that the blow missed him, and next instant Inkosi-kaas crashed through headpiece, hair and skull, and the man's corpse was rattling down the steps. As he dropped, his round hippopotamus-hide shield fell from his hand on to the marble, and the Zulu stooped down and seized it, still chanting as he did so.

In another second the sturdy Kara had also slain a man, and then began a scene the like of which has not been known to me.

Up rushed the assailants, one, two, three at a time, and as fast as they came, the axe crashed and the sword swung, and down they

rolled again, dead or dying. And ever as the fight thickened, the old Zulu's eye seemed to get quicker and his arm stronger. He shouted out his war-cries and the names of chiefs whom he had slain, and the blows of his awful axe rained straight and true, shearing through everything they fell on. There was none of the scientific method he was so fond of about this last immortal fight of his; he had no time for it, but struck with his full strength, and at every stroke a man sank in his tracks, and went rattling down the marble steps.

They hacked and hewed at him with swords and spears, wounding him in a dozen places till he streamed red with blood; but the shield protected his head and the chain-shirt his vitals, and for minute after minute, aided by the gallant Zu-Vendi, he still held the stair.

At last Kara's sword broke, and he grappled with a foe, and they rolled down together, and he was cut to pieces, dying like the brave man that he was.

Umslopogaas was alone now, but he never blenched or turned. Shouting out some wild Zulu battle-cry, he beat down a foe, ay, and another, and another, till at last they drew back from the slippery blood-stained steps, and stared at him with amazement, thinking that he was no mortal man.

The wall of marble block was four feet six high now, and hope rose in my teeth as I leaned there against it a miserable helpless log, and ground my teeth, and watched that glorious struggle. I could do no more for I had lost my revolver in the battle.

And old Umslopogaas, he leaned too on his good axe, and, faint as he was with wounds, he mocked them, he called them 'women' -- the grand old warrior, standing there one against so many! And for a breathing space none would come against him, notwithstanding Nasta's exhortations, till at last old Agon, who, to do him justice, was a brave man, mad with baffled rage, and seeing that the wall would soon be built and his plans defeated, shook the great spear he held, and rushed up the dripping steps.

'Ah, ah!' shouted the Zulu, as he recognized the priest's flowing white beard, 'it is thou, old "witch-finder"! Come on! I await thee, white "medicine man"; come on! come on! I have sworn to slay thee, and I ever keep my faith.'

On he came, taking him at his word, and drove the big spear with such force at Umslopogaas that it sunk right through the tough shield and pierced him in the neck. The Zulu cast down the transfixed shield, and that moment was Agon's last, for before he could free his spear and strike again, with a shout of 'There's for thee, Rain-maker!' Umslopogaas gripped Inkosi-kaas with both hands and whirled on high and drove her right on to his venerable

head, so that Agon rolled down dead among the corpses of his fellow-murderers, and there was an end to him and his plots altogether. And even as he fell, a great cry rose from the foot of the stair, and looking out through the portion of the doorway that was yet unclosed, we saw armed men rushing up to the rescue, and called an answer to their shouts. Then the would-be murderers who yet remained on the stairway, and amongst whom I saw several priests, turned to fly, but, having nowhere to go, were butchered as they fled. Only one man stayed, and he was the great lord Nasta, Nyleptha's suitor, and the father of the plot. For a moment the black-bearded Nasta stood with bowed face leaning on his long sword as though in despair, and then, with a dreadful shout, he too rushed up at the Zulu, and, swinging the glittering sword around his head, dealt him such a mighty blow beneath his guard, that the keen steel of the heavy blade bit right through the chain armour and deep into Umslopogaas' side, for a moment paralysing him and causing him to drop his axe.

Raising the sword again, Nasta sprang forward to make an end of him, but little he knew his foe. With a shake and a yell of fury, the Zulu gathered himself together and sprang straight at Nasta's throat, as I have sometimes seen a wounded lion spring. He struck him full as his foot was on the topmost stair, and his long arms closing round him like iron bands, down they rolled together struggling furiously. Nasta was a strong man and a desperate, but he could not match the strongest man in Zululand,



sore wounded though he was, whose strength was as the strength of a bull. In a minute the end came. I saw old Umslopogaas stagger to his feet -- ay, and saw him by a single gigantic effort swing up the struggling Nasta and with a shout of triumph hurl him straight over the parapet of the bridge, to be crushed to powder on the rocks two hundred feet below.

The succour which had been summoned by the girl who had passed down the stair before the assassins passed up was at hand, and the loud shouts which reached us from the outer gates told us that the town was also aroused, and the men awakened by the women were calling to be admitted. Some of Nyleptha's brave ladies, who in their night-shifts and with their long hair streaming down their backs, just as they had been aroused from rest, went off to admit them at the side entrance, whilst others, assisted by the rescuing party outside, pushed and pulled down the marble blocks they had placed there with so much labour.

Soon the wall was down again, and through the doorway, followed by a crowd of rescuers, staggered old Umslopogaas, an awful and, in a way, a glorious figure. The man was a mass of wounds, and a glance at his wild eye told me that he was dying. The 'keshla' gum-ring upon his head was severed in two places by sword-cuts, one just over the curious hole in his skull, and the blood poured down his face from the gashes. Also on the right side of his neck was a stab from a spear, inflicted by Agon; there was a

deep cut on his left arm just below where the mail shirt-sleeve stopped, and on the right side of his body the armour was severed by a gash six inches long, where Nasta's mighty sword had bitten through it and deep into its wearer's vitals.

On, axe in hand, he staggered, that dreadful-looking, splendid savage, and the ladies forgot to turn faint at the scene of blood, and cheered him, as well they might, but he never stayed or heeded. With outstretched arms and tottering gait he pursued his way, followed by us all along the broad shell-strewn walk that ran through the courtyard, past the spot where the blocks of marble lay, through the round arched doorway and the thick curtains that hung within it, down the short passage and into the great hall, which was now filling with hastily-armed men, who poured through the side entrance. Straight up the hall he went, leaving behind him a track of blood on the marble pavement, till at last he reached the sacred stone, which stood in the centre of it, and here his strength seemed to fail him, for he stopped and leaned upon his axe. Then suddenly he lifted up his voice and cried aloud --

'I die, I die -- but it was a kingly fray. Where are they who came up the great stair? I see them not. Art thou there, Macumazahn, or art thou gone before to wait for me in the dark whither I go? The blood blinds me -- the place turns round -- I hear the voice of waters.'

Next, as though a new thought had struck him, he lifted the red axe and kissed the blade.

'Farewell, Inkosi-kaas,' he cried. 'Nay, nay, we will go together; we cannot part, thou and I. We have lived too long one with another, thou and I.

'One more stroke, only one! A good stroke! a straight stroke! a strong stroke!' and, drawing himself to his full height, with a wild heart-shaking shout, he with both hands began to whirl the axe round his head till it looked like a circle of flaming steel. Then, suddenly, with awful force he brought it down straight on to the crown of the mass of sacred stone. A shower of sparks flew up, and such was the almost superhuman strength of the blow, that the massive marble split with a rending sound into a score of pieces, whilst of Inkosi-kaas there remained but some fragments of steel and a fibrous rope of shattered horn that had been the handle. Down with a crash on to the pavement fell the fragments of the holy stone, and down with a crash on to them, still grasping the knob of Inkosi-kaas, fell the brave old Zulu -- dead.

And thus the hero died.

A gasp of wonder and astonishment rose from all those who witnessed the extraordinary sight, and then somebody cried, 'The prophecy!

the prophecy! He has shattered the sacred stone!' and at once a murmuring arose.

'Ay,' said Nyleptha, with that quick wit which distinguishes her. 'Ay, my people, he has shattered the stone, and behold the prophecy is fulfilled, for a stranger king rules in Zu-Vendis. Incubu, my lord, hath beat Sorais back, and I fear her no more, and to him who hath saved the Crown it shall surely be. And this man,' she said, turning to me and laying her hand upon my shoulder, 'wot ye that, though wounded in the fight of yesterday, he rode with that old warrior who lies there, one hundred miles 'twixt sun set and rise to save me from the plots of cruel men. Ay, and he has saved me, by a very little, and therefore because of the deeds that they have done -- deeds of glory such as our history cannot show the like -- therefore I say that the name of Macumazahn and the name of dead Umslopogaas, ay, and the name of Kara, my servant, who aided him to hold the stair, shall be blazoned in letters of gold above my throne, and shall be glorious for ever while the land endures. I, the Queen, have said it.'

This spirited speech was met with loud cheering, and I said that after all we had only done our duty, as it is the fashion of both Englishmen and Zulus to do, and there was nothing to make an outcry about; at which they cheered still more, and then I was supported across the outer courtyard to my old quarters, in order that I might be put to bed. As I went, my eyes lit

upon the brave horse Daylight that lay there, his white head outstretched on the pavement, exactly as he had fallen on entering the yard; and I bade those who supported me take me near him, that I might look on the good beast once more before he was dragged away. And as I looked, to my astonishment he opened his eyes and, lifting his head a little, whinnied faintly. I could have shouted for joy to find that he was not dead, only unfortunately I had not a shout left in me; but as it was, grooms were sent for and he was lifted up and wine poured down his throat, and in a fortnight he was as well and strong as ever, and is the pride and joy of all the people of Milosis, who, whenever they see him, point him out to the little children as the 'horse which saved the White Queen's life'.

Then I went on and got off to bed, and was washed and had my mail shirt removed. They hurt me a great deal in getting it off, and no wonder, for on my left breast and side was a black bruise the size of a saucer.

The next thing that I remember was the tramp of horsemen outside the palace wall, some ten hours later. I raised myself and asked what was the news, and they told me that a large body of cavalry sent by Curtis to assist the Queen had arrived from the scene of the battle, which they had left two hours after sundown. When they left, the wreck of Sorais' army was in full retreat upon M'Arstuna, followed by all our effective cavalry. Sir Henry

was encamping the remains of his worn-out forces on the site (such is the fortune of war) that Sorais had occupied the night before, and proposed marching to M'Arstuna on the morrow. Having heard this, I felt that I could die with a light heart, and then everything became a blank.

When next I awoke the first thing I saw was the round disc of a sympathetic eyeglass, behind which was Good.

'How are you getting on, old chap?' said a voice from the neighbourhood of the eyeglass.

'What are you doing here?' I asked faintly. 'You ought to be at M'Arstuna -- have you run away, or what?'

'M'Arstuna,' he replied cheerfully. 'Ah, M'Arstuna fell last week -- you've been unconscious for a fortnight, you see -- with all the honours of war, you know -- trumpets blowing, flags flying, just as though they had had the best of it; but for all that, weren't they glad to go. Israel made for his tents, I can tell you -- never saw such a sight in my life.'

'And Sorais?' I asked.

'Sorais -- oh, Sorais is a prisoner; they gave her up, the scoundrels,'

he added, with a change of tone -- 'sacrificed the Queen to save their skins, you see. She is being brought up here, and I don't know what will happen to her, poor soul!' and he sighed.

'Where is Curtis?' I asked.

'He is with Nyleptha. She rode out to meet us today, and there was a grand to-do, I can tell you. He is coming to see you tomorrow; the doctors (for there is a medical "faculty" in Zu-Vendis as elsewhere) thought that he had better not come today.'

I said nothing, but somehow I thought to myself that notwithstanding the doctors he might have given me a look; but there, when a man is newly married and has just gained a great victory, he is apt to listen to the advice of doctors, and quite right too.

Just then I heard a familiar voice informing me that 'Monsieur must now couch himself,' and looking up perceived Alphonse's enormous black mustachios curling away in the distance.

'So you are here?' I said.

'Mais oui, Monsieur; the war is now finished, my military instincts are satisfied, and I return to nurse Monsieur.'

I laughed, or rather tried to; but whatever may have been Alphonse's

failings as a warrior (and I fear that he did not come up to the level of his heroic grandfather in this particular, showing thereby how true is the saying that it is a bad thing to be overshadowed by some great ancestral name), a better or kinder nurse never lived. Poor Alphonse! I hope he will always think of me as kindly as I think of him.

On the morrow I saw Curtis and Nyleptha with him, and he told me the whole history of what had happened since Umslopogaas and I galloped wildly away from the battle to save the life of the Queen. It seemed to me that he had managed the thing exceedingly well, and showed great ability as a general. Of course, however, our loss had been dreadfully heavy -- indeed, I am afraid to say how many perished in the desperate battle I have described, but I know that the slaughter has appreciably affected the male population of the country. He was very pleased to see me, dear fellow that he is, and thanked me with tears in his eyes for the little that I had been able to do. I saw him, however, start violently when his eyes fell upon my face.

As for Nyleptha, she was positively radiant now that 'her dear lord' had come back with no other injury than an ugly scar on his forehead. I do not believe that she allowed all the fearful slaughter that had taken place to weigh ever so little in the balance against this one fact, or even to greatly diminish her joy; and I cannot blame her for it, seeing that it is the nature



of loving woman to look at all things through the spectacles of her love, and little does she reckon of the misery of the many if the happiness of the one be assured. That is human nature, which the Positivists tell us is just perfection; so no doubt it is all right.

'And what art thou going to do with Sorais?' I asked her.

Instantly her bright brow darkened to a frown.

'Sorais,' she said, with a little stamp of the foot;

'ah, but Sorais!'

Sir Henry hastened to turn the subject.

'You will soon be about and all right again now, old fellow,'

he said.

I shook my head and laughed.

'Don't deceive yourselves,' I said. 'I may be about for a little, but I shall never be all right again. I am a dying man, Curtis.

I may die slow, but die I must. Do you know I have been spitting blood all the morning? I tell you there is something working away into my lung; I can feel it. There, don't look distressed;

I have had my day, and am ready to go. Give me the mirror, will you?

I want to look at myself.'

He made some excuse, but I saw through it and insisted, and at last he handed me one of the discs of polished silver set in a wooden frame like a hand-screen, which serve as looking-glasses in Zu-Vendis. I looked and put it down.

'Ah,' I said quietly, 'I thought so; and you talk of my getting all right!' I did not like to let them see how shocked I really was at my own appearance. My grizzled stubby hair was turned snow-white, and my yellow face was shrunk like an aged woman's and had two deep purple rings painted beneath the eyes.

Here Nyleptha began to cry, and Sir Henry again turned the subject, telling me that the artists had taken a cast of the dead body of old Umslopogaas, and that a great statue in black marble was to be erected of him in the act of splitting the sacred stone, which was to be matched by another statue in white marble of myself and the horse Daylight as he appeared when, at the termination of that wild ride, he sank beneath me in the courtyard of the palace. I have since seen these statues, which at the time of writing this, six months after the battle, are nearly finished; and very beautiful they are, especially that of Umslopogaas, which is exactly like him. As for that of myself, it is good, but they have idealized my ugly face a little, which is perhaps as well, seeing that thousands of people will probably look at

it in the centuries to come, and it is not pleasant to look at ugly things.

Then they told me that Umslopogaas' last wish had been carried out, and that, instead of being cremated, as I shall be, after the usual custom here, he had been tied up, Zulu fashion, with his knees beneath his chin, and, having been wrapped in a thin sheet of beaten gold, entombed in a hole hollowed out of the masonry of the semicircular space at the top of the stair he defended so splendidly, which faces, as far as we can judge, almost exactly towards Zululand. There he sits, and will sit for ever, for they embalmed him with spices, and put him in an air-tight stone coffer, keeping his grim watch beneath the spot he held alone against a multitude; and the people say that at night his ghost rises and stands shaking the phantom of Inkosi-kaas at phantom foes. Certainly they fear during the dark hours to pass the place where the hero is buried.

Oddly enough, too, a new legend or prophecy has arisen in the land in that unaccountable way in which such things to arise among barbarous and semi-civilized people, blowing, like the wind, no man knows whence. According to this saying, so long as the old Zulu sits there, looking down the stairway he defended when alive, so long will the New House of the Stairway, springing from the union of the Englishman and Nyleptha, endure and flourish; but when he is taken from thence, or when, ages after, his bones

at last crumble into dust, the House will fall, and the Stairway  
shall fall, and the Nation of the Zu-Vendi shall cease to be  
a Nation.