CHAPTER IV

MAVOVO AND HANS

We arrived safely at Durban at the beginning of March and took up our quarters at my house on the Berea, where I expected that Brother John would be awaiting us. But no Brother John was to be found. The old, lame Griqua, Jack, who looked after the place for me and once had been one of my hunters, said that shortly after I went away in the ship, Dogeetah, as he called him, had taken his tin box and his net and walked off inland, he knew not where, leaving, as he declared, no message or letter behind him. The cases full of butterflies and dried plants were also gone, but these, I found he had shipped to some port in America, by a sailing vessel bound for the United States which chanced to put in at Durban for food and water. As to what had become of the man himself I could get no clue. He had been seen at Maritzburg and, according to some Kaffirs whom I knew, afterwards on the borders of Zululand, where, so far as I could learn, he vanished into space.

This, to say the least of it, was disconcerting, and a question arose as to what was to be done. Brother John was to have been our guide. He alone knew the Mazitu people; he alone had visited the borders of the mysterious Pongo-land, I scarcely felt inclined to attempt to reach that country without his aid.

When a fortnight had gone by and still there were no signs of him,

Stephen and I held a solemn conference. I pointed out the difficulties and dangers of the situation to him and suggested that, under the circumstances, it might be wise to give up this wild orchid-chase and go elephant-hunting instead in a certain part of Zululand, where in those days these animals were still abundant.

He was inclined to agree with me, since the prospect of killing elephants had attractions for him.

"And yet," I said, after reflection, "it's curious, but I never remember making a successful trip after altering plans at the last moment, that is, unless one was driven to it."

"I vote we toss up," said Somers; "it gives Providence a chance. Now then, heads for the Golden Cyp, and tails for the elephants."

He spun a half-crown into the air. It fell and rolled under a great, yellow-wood chest full of curiosities that I had collected, which it took all our united strength to move. We dragged it aside and not without some excitement, for really a good deal hung upon the chance, I lit a match and peered into the shadow. There in the dust lay the coin.

"What is it?" I asked of Somers, who was stretched on his stomach on the chest.

"Orchid--I mean head," he answered. "Well, that's settled, so we needn't

bother any more."

The next fortnight was a busy time for me. As it happened there was a schooner in the bay of about one hundred tons burden which belonged to a Portuguese trader named Delgado, who dealt in goods that he carried to the various East African ports and Madagascar. He was a villainous-looking person whom I suspected of having dealings with the slave traders, who were very numerous and a great power in those days, if indeed he were not one himself. But as he was going to Kilwa whence we proposed to start inland, I arranged to make use of him to carry our party and the baggage. The bargain was not altogether easy to strike for two reasons. First, he did not appear to be anxious that we should hunt in the districts at the back of Kilwa, where he assured me there was no game, and secondly, he said that he wanted to sail at once. However, I overcame his objections with an argument he could not resist--namely, money, and in the end he agreed to postpone his departure for fourteen days.

Then I set about collecting our men, of whom I had made up my mind there must not be less than twenty. Already I had sent messengers summoning to Durban from Zululand and the upper districts of Natal various hunters who had accompanied me on other expeditions. To the number of a dozen or so they arrived in due course. I have always had the good fortune to be on the best of terms with my Kaffirs, and where I went they were ready to go without asking any questions. The man whom I had selected to be their captain under me was a Zulu of the name of Mavovo. He was a

short fellow, past middle age, with an enormous chest. His strength was proverbial; indeed, it was said that he could throw an ox by the horns, and myself I have seen him hold down the head of a wounded buffalo that had fallen, until I could come up and shoot it.

When I first knew Mavovo he was a petty chief and witch doctor in Zululand. Like myself, he had fought for the Prince Umbelazi in the great battle of the Tugela, a crime which Cetewayo never forgave him. About a year afterwards he got warning that he had been smelt out as a wizard and was going to be killed. He fled with two of his wives and a child. The slayers overtook them before he could reach the Natal border, and stabbed the elder wife and the child of the second wife. They were four men, but, made mad by the sight, Mavovo turned on them and killed them all. Then, with the remaining wife, cut to pieces as he was, he crept to the river and through it to Natal. Not long after this wife died also; it was said from grief at the loss of her child. Mavovo did not marry again, perhaps because he was now a man without means, for Cetewayo had taken all his cattle; also he was made ugly by an assegai wound which had cut off his right nostril. Shortly after the death of his second wife he sought me out and told me he was a chief without a kraal and wished to become my hunter. So I took him on, a step which I never had any cause to regret, since although morose and at times given to the practice of uncanny arts, he was a most faithful servant and brave as a lion, or rather as a buffalo, for a lion is not always brave.

Another man whom I did not send for, but who came, was an old Hottentot

named Hans, with whom I had been more or less mixed up all my life. When I was a boy he was my father's servant in the Cape Colony and my companion in some of those early wars. Also he shared some very terrible adventures with me which I have detailed in the history I have written of my first wife, Marie Marais. For instance, he and I were the only persons who escaped from the massacre of Retief and his companions by the Zulu king, Dingaan. In the subsequence campaigns, including the Battle of the Blood River, he fought at my side and ultimately received a good share of captured cattle. After this he retired and set up a native store at a place called Pinetown, about fifteen miles out of Durban. Here I am afraid he got into bad ways and took to drink more or less; also to gambling. At any rate, he lost most of his property, so much of it indeed that he scarcely knew which way to turn. Thus it happened that one evening when I went out of the house where I had been making up my accounts, I saw a yellow-faced white-haired old fellow squatted on the verandah smoking a pipe made out of a corn-cob.

"Good day, Baas," he said, "here am I, Hans."

"So I see," I answered, rather coldly. "And what are you doing here, Hans? How can you spare time from your drinking and gambling at Pinetown to visit me here, Hans, after I have not seen you for three years?"

"Baas, the gambling is finished, because I have nothing more to stake, and the drinking is done too, because but one bottle of Cape Smoke makes me feel quite ill next morning. So now I only take water and as little

of that as I can, water and some tobacco to cover up its taste."

"I am glad to hear it, Hans. If my father, the Predikant who baptised you, were alive now, he would have much to say about your conduct as indeed I have no doubt he will presently when you have gone into a hole (i.e., a grave). For there in the hole he will be waiting for you, Hans."

"I know, I know, Baas. I have been thinking of that and it troubles me. Your reverend father, the Predikant, will be very cross indeed with me when I join him in the Place of Fires where he sits awaiting me. So I wish to make my peace with him by dying well, and in your service, Baas. I hear that the Baas is going on an expedition. I have come to accompany the Baas."

"To accompany me! Why, you are old, you are not worth five shillings a month and your scoff (food). You are a shrunken old brandy cask that will not even hold water."

Hans grinned right across his ugly face.

"Oh! Baas, I am old, but I am clever. All these years I have been gathering wisdom. I am as full of it as a bee's nest is with honey when the summer is done. And, Baas, I can stop those leaks in the cask."

"Hans, it is no good, I don't want you. I am going into great danger. I

must have those about me whom I can trust."

"Well, Baas, and who can be better trusted than Hans? Who warned you of the attack of the Quabies on Maraisfontein, and so saved the life of----"

"Hush!" I said.

"I understand. I will not speak the name. It is holy not to be mentioned. It is the name of one who stands with the white angels before God; not to be mentioned by poor drunken Hans. Still, who stood at your side in that great fight? Ah! it makes me young again to think of it, when the roof burned; when the door was broken down; when we met the Quabies on the spears; when you held the pistol to the head of the Holy One whose name must not be mentioned, the Great One who knew how to die. Oh! Baas, our lives are twisted up together like the creeper and the tree, and where you go, there I must go also. Do not turn me away. I ask no wages, only a bit of food and a handful of tobacco, and the light of your face and a word now and again of the memories that belong to both of us. I am still very strong. I can shoot well--well, Baas, who was it that put it into your mind to aim at the tails of the vultures on the Hill of Slaughter yonder in Zululand, and so saved the lives of all the Boer people, and of her whose holy name must not be mentioned? Baas, you will not turn me away?"

"No," I answered, "you can come. But you will swear by the spirit of my

father, the Predikant, to touch no liquor on this journey."

"I swear by his spirit and by that of the Holy One," and he flung himself forward on to his knees, took my hand and kissed it. Then he rose and said in a matter-of-fact tone, "If the Baas can give me two blankets, I shall thank him, also five shillings to buy some tobacco and a new knife. Where are the Baas's guns? I must go to oil them. I beg that the Baas will take with him that little rifle which is named Intombi (Maiden), the one with which he shot the vultures on the Hill of Slaughter, the one that killed the geese in the Goose Kloof when I loaded for him and he won the great match against the Boer whom Dingaan called Two-faces."

"Good," I said. "Here are the five shillings. You shall have the blankets and a new gun and all things needful. You will find the guns in the little back room and with them those of the Baas, my companion, who also is your master. Go see to them."

At length all was ready, the cases of guns, ammunition, medicines, presents and food were on board the Maria. So were four donkeys that I had bought in the hope that they would prove useful, either to ride or as pack beasts. The donkey, be it remembered, and man are the only animals which are said to be immune from the poisonous effects of the bite of tsetse fly, except, of course, the wild game. It was our last night at Durban, a very beautiful night of full moon at the end of March, for the Portugee Delgado had announced his intention of sailing

on the following afternoon. Stephen Somers and I were seated on the stoep smoking and talking things over.

"It is a strange thing," I said, "that Brother John should never have turned up. I know that he was set upon making this expedition, not only for the sake of the orchid, but also for some other reason of which he would not speak. I think that the old fellow must be dead."

"Very likely," answered Stephen (we had become intimate and I called him Stephen now), "a man alone among savages might easily come to grief and never be heard of again. Hark! What's that?" and he pointed to some gardenia bushes in the shadow of the house near by, whence came a sound of something that moved.

"A dog, I expect, or perhaps it is Hans. He curls up in all sorts of places near to where I may be. Hans, are you there?"

A figure arose from the gardenia bushes.

"Ja, I am here, Baas."

"What are you doing, Hans?"

"I am doing what the dog does, Baas--watching my master."

"Good," I answered. Then an idea struck me. "Hans, you have heard of the

white Baas with the long beard whom the Kaffirs call Dogeetah?"

"I have heard of him and once I saw him, a few moons ago passing through Pinetown. A Kaffir with him told me that he was going over the Drakensberg to hunt for things that crawl and fly, being quite mad, Baas."

"Well, where is he now, Hans? He should have been here to travel with us."

"Am I a spirit that I can tell the Baas whither a white man has wandered. Yet, stay. Mavovo may be able to tell. He is a great doctor, he can see through distance, and even now, this very night his Snake of divination has entered into him and he is looking into the future, yonder, behind the house. I saw him form the circle."

I translated what Hans said to Stephen, for he had been talking in Dutch, then asked him if he would like to see some Kaffir magic.

"Of course," he answered, "but it's all bosh, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, all bosh, or so most people say," I answered evasively. "Still, sometimes these Inyangas tell one strange things."

Then, led by Hans, we crept round the house to where there was a five-foot stone wall at the back of the stable. Beyond this wall, within

the circle of some huts where my Kaffirs lived, was an open space with an ant-heap floor where they did their cooking. Here, facing us, sat Mavovo, while in a ring around him were all the hunters who were to accompany us; also Jack, the lame Griqua, and the two house-boys. In front of Mavovo burned a number of little wood fires. I counted them and found that there were fourteen, which, I reflected, was the exact number of our hunters, plus ourselves. One of the hunters was engaged in feeding these fires with little bits of stick and handfuls of dried grass so as to keep them burning brightly. The others sat round perfectly silent and watched with rapt attention. Mavovo himself looked like a man who is asleep. He was crouched on his haunches with his big head resting almost upon his knees. About his middle was a snake-skin, and round his neck an ornament that appeared to be made of human teeth. On his right side lay a pile of feathers from the wings of vultures, and on his left a little heap of silver money--I suppose the fees paid by the hunters for whom he was divining.

After we had watched him for some while from our shelter behind the wall he appeared to wake out of his sleep. First he muttered; then he looked up to the moon and seemed to say a prayer of which I could not catch the words. Next he shuddered three times convulsively and exclaimed in a clear voice:

"My Snake has come. It is within me. Now I can hear, now I can see."

Three of the little fires, those immediately in front of him, were

larger than the others. He took up his bundle of vultures' feathers, selected one with care, held it towards the sky, then passed it through the flame of the centre one of the three fires, uttering as he did so, my native name, Macumazana. Withdrawing it from the flame he examined the charred edges of the feather very carefully, a proceeding that caused a cold shiver to go down my back, for I knew well that he was inquiring of his "Spirit" what would be my fate upon this expedition. How it answered, I cannot tell, for he laid the feather down and took another, with which he went through the same process. This time, however, the name he called out was Mwamwazela, which in its shortened form of Wazela, was the Kaffir appellation that the natives had given to Stephen Somers. It means a Smile, and no doubt was selected for him because of his pleasant, smiling countenance.

Having passed it through the right-hand fire of the three, he examined it and laid it down.

So it went on. One after another he called out the names of the hunters, beginning with his own as captain; passed the feather which represented each of them through the particular fire of his destiny, examined and laid it down. After this he seemed to go to sleep again for a few minutes, then woke up as a man does from a natural slumber, yawned and stretched himself.

"Speak," said his audience, with great anxiety. "Have you seen? Have you heard? What does your Snake tell you of me? Of me? Of me? Of me?"

"I have seen, I have heard," he answered. "My Snake tells me that this will be a very dangerous journey. Of those who go on it six will die by the bullet, by the spear or by sickness, and others will be hurt."

"Ow?" said one of them, "but which will die and which will come out safe? Does not your Snake tell you that, O Doctor?"

"Yes, of course my Snake tells me that. But my Snake tells me also to hold my tongue on the matter, lest some of us should be turned to cowards. It tells me further that the first who should ask me more, will be one of those who must die. Now do you ask? Or you? Or you? Or you? Ask if you will."

Strange to say no one accepted the invitation. Never have I seen a body of men so indifferent to the future, at least to every appearance. One and all they seemed to come to the conclusion that so far as they were concerned it might be left to look after itself.

"My Snake told me something else," went on Mavovo. "It is that if among this company there is any jackal of a man who, thinking that he might be one of the six to die, dreams to avoid his fate by deserting, it will be of no use. For then my Snake will point him out and show me how to deal with him."

Now with one voice each man present there declared that desertion from

the lord Macumazana was the last thing that could possibly occur to him. Indeed, I believe that those brave fellows spoke truth. No doubt they put faith in Mavovo's magic after the fashion of their race. Still the death he promised was some way off, and each hoped he would be one of the six to escape. Moreover, the Zulu of those days was too accustomed to death to fear its terrors over much.

One of them did, however, venture to advance the argument, which Mavovo treated with proper contempt, that the shillings paid for this divination should be returned by him to the next heirs of such of them as happened to decease. Why, he asked, should these pay a shilling in order to be told that they must die? It seemed unreasonable.

Certainly the Zulu Kaffirs have a queer way of looking at things.

"Hans," I whispered, "is your fire among those that burn yonder?"

"Not so, Baas," he wheezed back into my ear. "Does the Baas think me a fool? If I must die, I must die; if I am to live, I shall live. Why then should I pay a shilling to learn what time will declare? Moreover, yonder Mavovo takes the shillings and frightens everybody, but tells nobody anything. I call it cheating. But, Baas, do you and the Baas Wazela have no fear. You did not pay shillings, and therefore Mavovo, though without doubt he is a great Inyanga, cannot really prophesy concerning you, since his Snake will not work without a fee."

The argument seems remarkably absurd. Yet it must be common, for now that I come to think of it, no gipsy will tell a "true fortune" unless her hand is crossed with silver.

"I say, Quatermain," said Stephen idly, "since our friend Mavovo seems to know so much, ask him what has become of Brother John, as Hans suggested. Tell me what he says afterwards, for I want to see something."

So I went through the little gate in the wall in a natural kind of way, as though I had seen nothing, and appeared to be struck by the sight of the little fires.

"Well, Mavovo," I said, "are you doing doctor's work? I thought that it had brought you into enough trouble in Zululand."

"That is so, Baba," replied Mavovo, who had a habit of calling me "father," though he was older than I. "It cost me my chieftainship and my cattle and my two wives and my son. It made of me a wanderer who is glad to accompany a certain Macumazana to strange lands where many things may befall me, yes," he added with meaning, "even the last of all things. And yet a gift is a gift and must be used. You, Baba, have a gift of shooting and do you cease to shoot? You have a gift of wandering and can you cease to wander?"

He picked up one of the burnt feathers from the little pile by his side

and looked at it attentively. "Perhaps, Baba, you have been told--my ears are very sharp, and I thought I heard some such words floating through the air just now--that we poor Kaffir Inyangas can prophesy nothing true unless we are paid, and perhaps that is a fact so far as something of the moment is concerned. And yet the Snake in the Inyanga, jumping over the little rock which hides the present from it, may see the path that winds far and far away through the valleys, across the streams, up the mountains, till it is lost in the 'heaven above.' Thus on this feather, burnt in my magic fire, I seem to see something of your future, O my father Macumazana. Far and far your road runs," and he drew his finger along the feather. "Here is a journey," and he flicked away a carbonised flake, "here is another, and another, and another," and he flicked off flake after flake. "Here is one that is very successful, it leaves you rich; and here is yet one more, a wonderful journey this in which you see strange things and meet strange people. Then"--and he blew on the feather in such a fashion that all the charred filaments (Brother John says that laminae is the right word for them) fell away from it--"then, there is nothing left save such a pole as some of my people stick upright on a grave, the Shaft of Memory they call it. O, my father, you will die in a distant land, but you will leave a great memory behind you that will live for hundreds of years, for see how strong is this quill over which the fire has had no power. With some of these others it is quite different," he added.

"I daresay," I broke in, "but, Mavovo, be so good as to leave me out of your magic, for I don't at all want to know what is going to happen to

me. To-day is enough for me without studying next month and next year. There is a saying in our holy book which runs: 'Sufficient to the day is its evil.'"

"Quite so, O Macumazana. Also that is a very good saying as some of those hunters of yours are thinking now. Yet an hour ago they were forcing their shillings on me that I might tell them of the future. And you, too, want to know something. You did not come through that gate to quote to me the wisdom of your holy book. What is it, Baba? Be quick, for my Snake is getting very tired. He wishes to go back to his hole in the world beneath."

"Well, then," I answered in rather a shamefaced fashion, for Mavovo had an uncanny way of seeing into one's secret motives, "I should like to know, if you can tell me, which you can't, what has become of the white man with the long beard whom you black people call Dogeetah? He should have been here to go on this journey with us; indeed, he was to be our guide and we cannot find him. Where is he and why is he not here?"

"Have you anything about you that belonged to Dogeetah, Macumazana?"

"No," I answered; "that is, yes," and from my pocket I produced the stump of pencil that Brother John had given me, which, being economical, I had saved up ever since. Mavovo took it, and after considering it carefully as he had done in the case of the feathers, swept up a pile of ashes with his horny hand from the edge of the largest of the little

fires, that indeed which had represented myself. These ashes he patted flat. Then he drew on them with the point of the pencil, tracing what seemed to me to be the rough image of a man, such as children scratch upon whitewashed walls. When he had finished he sat up and contemplated his handiwork with all the satisfaction of an artist. A breeze had risen from the sea and was blowing in little gusts, so that the fine ashes were disturbed, some of the lines of the picture being filled in and others altered or enlarged.

For a while Mavovo sat with his eyes shut. Then he opened them, studied the ashes and what remained of the picture, and taking a blanket that lay near by, threw it over his own head and over the ashes. Withdrawing it again presently he cast it aside and pointed to the picture which was now quite changed. Indeed, in the moonlight, it looked more like a landscape than anything else.

"All is clear, my father," he said in a matter-of-fact voice. "The white wanderer, Dogeetah, is not dead. He lives, but he is sick. Something is the matter with one of his legs so that he cannot walk. Perhaps a bone is broken or some beast has bitten him. He lies in a hut such as Kaffirs make, only this hut has a verandah round it like your stoep, and there are drawings on the wall. The hut is a long way off, I don't know where."

"Is that all?" I asked, for he paused.

"No, not all. Dogeetah is recovering. He will join us in that country whither we journey, at a time of trouble. That is all, and the fee is half-a-crown."

"You mean one shilling," I suggested.

"No, my father Macumazana. One shilling for simple magic such as foretelling the fate of common black people. Half-a-crown for very difficult magic that has to do with white people, magic of which only great doctors, like me, Mavovo, are the masters."

I gave him the half-crown and said:

"Look here, friend Mavovo, I believe in you as a fighter and a hunter, but as a magician I think you are a humbug. Indeed, I am so sure of it that if ever Dogeetah turns up at a time of trouble in that land whither we are journeying, I will make you a present of that double-barrelled rifle of mine which you admired so much."

One of his rare smiles appeared upon Mavovo's ugly face.

"Then give it to me now, Baba," he said, "for it is already earned. My Snake cannot lie--especially when the fee is half-a-crown."

I shook my head and declined, politely but with firmness.

"Ah!" said Mavovo, "you white men are very clever and think that you know everything. But it is not so, for in learning so much that is new, you have forgotten more that is old. When the Snake that is in you, Macumazana, dwelt in a black savage like me a thousand thousand years ago, you could have done and did what I do. But now you can only mock and say, 'Mavovo the brave in battle, the great hunter, the loyal man, becomes a liar when he blows the burnt feather, or reads what the wind writes upon the charmed ashes.'"

"I do not say that you are a liar, Mavovo, I say that you are deceived by your own imaginings. It is not possible that man can know what is hidden from man."

"Is it indeed so, O Macumazana, Watcher by Night? Am I, Mavovo, the pupil of Zikali, the Opener of Roads, the greatest of wizards, indeed deceived by my own imaginings? And has man no other eyes but those in his head, that he cannot see what is hidden from man? Well, you say so and all we black people know that you are very clever, and why should I, a poor Zulu, be able to see what you cannot see? Yet when to-morrow one sends you a message from the ship in which we are to sail, begging you to come fast because there is trouble on the ship, then bethink you of your words and my words, and whether or no man can see what is hidden from man in the blackness of the future. Oh! that rifle of yours is mine already, though you will not give it to me now, you who think that I am a cheat. Well, my father Macumazana, because you think I am a cheat, never again will I blow the feather or read what the wind writes upon

the ashes for you or any who eat your food."

Then he rose, saluted me with uplifted right hand, collected his little pile of money and bag of medicines and marched off to the sleeping hut.

On our way round the house we met my old lame caretaker, Jack.

"Inkoosi," he said, "the white chief Wazela bade me say that he and the cook, Sam, have gone to sleep on board the ship to look after the goods. Sam came up just now and fetched him away; he says he will show you why to-morrow."

I nodded and passed on, wondering to myself why Stephen had suddenly determined to stay the night on the Maria.