CHAPTER VII

THE RUSH OF THE SLAVES

Well, we did all that we could in the way of making ready. After we had strengthened the thorn fence of our boma as much as possible and lit several large fires outside of it to give us light, I allotted his place to each of the hunters and saw that their rifles were in order and that they had plenty of ammunition. Then I made Stephen lie down to sleep, telling him that I would wake him to watch later on. This, however, I had no intention of doing as I wanted him to rise fresh and with a steady nerve on the occasion of his first fight.

As soon as I saw that his eyes were shut I sat down on a box to think. To tell the truth, I was not altogether happy in my mind. To begin with I did not know how the twenty bearers would behave under fire. They might be seized with panic and rush about, in which case I determined to let them out of the boma to take their chance, for panic is a catching thing.

A worse matter was our rather awkward position. There were a good many trees round the camp among which an attacking force could take cover. But what I feared much more than this, or even than the reedy banks of the stream along which they could creep out of reach of our bullets, was a sloping stretch of land behind us, covered with thick grass and scrub and rising to a crest about two hundred yards away. Now if the Arabs got

round to this crest they would fire straight into our boma and make it untenable. Also if the wind were in their favour, they might burn us out or attack under the clouds of smoke. As a matter of fact, by the special mercy of Providence, none of these things happened, for a reason which I will explain presently.

In the case of a night, or rather a dawn attack, I have always found that hour before the sky begins to lighten very trying indeed. As a rule everything that can be done is done, so that one must sit idle. Also it is then that both the physical and the moral qualities are at their lowest ebb, as is the mercury in the thermometer. The night is dying, the day is not yet born. All nature feels the influence of that hour. Then bad dreams come, then infants wake and call, then memories of those who are lost to us arise, then the hesitating soul often takes its plunge into the depths of the Unknown. It is not wonderful, therefore, that on this occasion the wheels of Time drave heavily for me. I knew that the morning was at hand by many signs. The sleeping bearers turned and muttered in their sleep, a distant lion ceased its roaring and departed to its own place, an alert-minded cock crew somewhere, and our donkeys rose and began to pull at their tether-ropes. As yet, however, it was quite dark. Hans crept up to me; I saw his wrinkled, yellow face in the light of the watch-fire.

"I smell the dawn," he said and vanished again.

Mavovo appeared, his massive frame silhouetted against the blackness.

"Watcher-by-Night, the night is done," he said. "If they come at all, the enemy should soon be here."

Saluting, he too passed away into the dark, and presently I heard the sounds of spear-blades striking together and of rifles being cocked.

I went to Stephen and woke him. He sat up yawning, muttered something about greenhouses; then remembering, said:

"Are those Arabs coming? We are in for a fight at last. Jolly, old fellow, isn't it?"

"You are a jolly old fool!" I answered inconsequently; and marched off in a rage.

My mind was uneasy about this inexperienced young man. If anything should happen to him, what should I say to his father? Well, in that event, it was probable that something would happen to me too. Very possibly we should both be dead in an hour. Certainly I had no intention of allowing myself to be taken alive by those slaving devils. Hassan's remarks about fires and ant-heaps and the sun were too vividly impressed upon my memory.

In another five minutes everybody was up, though it required kicks to rouse most of the bearers from their slumbers. They, poor men, were

accustomed to the presence of Death and did not suffer him to disturb their sleep. Still I noted that they muttered together and seemed alarmed.

"If they show signs of treachery, you must kill them," I said to Mavovo, who nodded in his grave, silent fashion.

Only we left the rescued slave-woman and her child plunged in the stupor of exhaustion in a corner of the camp. What was the use of disturbing her?

Sammy, who seemed far from comfortable, brought two pannikins of coffee to Stephen and myself.

"This is a momentous occasion, Messrs. Quatermain and Somers," he said as he gave us the coffee, and I noted that his hand shook and his teeth chattered. "The cold is extreme," he went on in his copybook English by way of explaining these physical symptoms which he saw I had observed. "Mr. Quatermain, it is all very well for you to paw the ground and smell the battle from afar, as is written in the Book of Job. But I was not brought up to the trade and take it otherwise. Indeed I wish I was back at the Cape, yes, even within the whitewashed walls of the Place of Detention."

"So do I," I muttered, keeping my right foot on the ground with

difficulty.

But Stephen laughed outright and asked:

"What will you do, Sammy, when the fighting begins?"

"Mr. Somers," he answered, "I have employed some wakeful hours in making a hole behind that tree-trunk, through which I hope bullets will not pass. There, being a man of peace, I shall pray for our success."

"And if the Arabs get in, Sammy?"

"Then, sir, under Heaven, I shall trust to the fleetness of my legs."

I could stand it no longer, my right foot flew up and caught Sammy in the place at which I had aimed. He vanished, casting a reproachful look behind him.

Just then a terrible clamour arose in the slavers' camp which hitherto had been very silent, and just then also the first light of dawn glinted on the barrels of our guns.

"Look out!" I cried, as I gulped down the last of my coffee, "there's something going on there."

The clamour grew louder and louder till it seemed to fill the skies with

a concentrated noise of curses and shrieking. Distinct from it, as it were, I heard shouts of alarm and rage, and then came the sounds of gunshots, yells of agony and the thud of many running feet. By now the light was growing fast, as it does when once it comes in these latitudes. Three more minutes, and through the grey mist of the dawn we saw dozens of black figures struggling up the slope towards us. Some seemed to have logs of wood tied behind them, others crawled along on all fours, others dragged children by the hand, and all yelled at the top of their voices.

"The slaves are attacking us," said Stephen, lifting his rifle.

"Don't shoot," I cried. "I think they have broken loose and are taking refuge with us."

I was right. These unfortunates had used the two knives which our men smuggled to them to good purpose. Having cut their bonds during the night they were running to seek the protection of the Englishmen and their flag. On they surged, a hideous mob, the slave-sticks still fast to the necks of many of them, for they had not found time or opportunity to loose them all, while behind came the Arabs firing. The position was clearly very serious, for if they burst into our camp, we should be overwhelmed by their rush and fall victims to the bullets of their captors.

"Hans," I cried, "take the men who were with you last night and try

to lead those slaves round behind us. Quick! Quick now before we are stamped flat."

Hans darted away, and presently I saw him and the two other men running towards the approaching crowd, Hans waving a shirt or some other white object to attract their attention. At the time the foremost of them had halted and were screaming, "Mercy, English! Save us, English!" having caught sight of the muzzles of our guns.

This was a fortunate occurrence indeed, for otherwise Hans and his companions could never have stopped them. The next thing I saw was the white shirt bearing away to the left on a line which led past the fence of our boma into the scrub and high grass behind the camp. After it struggled and scrambled the crowd of slaves like a flock of sheep after the bell-wether. To them Hans's shirt was a kind of "white helmet of Navarre."

So that danger passed by. Some of the slaves had been struck by the Arab bullets or trodden down in the rush or collapsed from weakness, and at those of them who still lived the pursuers were firing. One woman, who had fallen under the weight of the great slave-stick which was fastened about her throat, was crawling forward on her hands and knees. An Arab fired at her and the bullet struck the ground under her stomach but without hurting her, for she wriggled forward more quickly. I was sure that he would shoot again, and watched. Presently, for by now the light was good, I saw him, a tall fellow in a white robe, step from behind the

shelter of a banana-tree about a hundred and fifty yards away, and take a careful aim at the woman. But I too took aim and--well, I am not bad at this kind of snap-shooting when I try. That Arab's gun never went off. Only he went up two feet or more into the air and fell backwards, shot through the head which was the part of his person that I had covered.

The hunters uttered a low "Ow!" of approval, while Stephen, in a sort of ecstasy, exclaimed:

"Oh! what a heavenly shot!"

"Not bad, but I shouldn't have fired it," I answered, "for they haven't attacked us yet. It is a kind of declaration of war, and," I added, as Stephen's sun-helmet leapt from his head, "there's the answer. Down, all of you, and fire through the loopholes."

Then the fight began. Except for its grand finale it wasn't really much of a fight when compared with one or two we had afterwards on this expedition. But, on the other hand, its character was extremely awkward for us. The Arabs made one rush at the beginning, shouting on Allah as they came. But though they were plucky villains they did not repeat that experiment. Either by good luck or good management Stephen knocked over two of them with his double-barrelled rifle, and I also emptied my large-bore breech-loader--the first I ever owned--among them, not without results, while the hunters made a hit or two.

After this the Arabs took cover, getting behind trees and, as I had feared, hiding in the reeds on the banks of the stream. Thence they harassed us a great deal, for amongst them were some very decent shots. Indeed, had we not taken the precaution of lining the thorn fence with a thick bank of earth and sods, we should have fared badly. As it was, one of the hunters was killed, the bullet passing through the loophole and striking him in the throat as he was about to fire, while the unfortunate bearers who were on rather higher ground, suffered a good deal, two of them being dispatched outright and four wounded. After this I made the rest of them lie flat on the ground close against the fence, in such a fashion that we could fire over their bodies.

Soon it became evident that there were more of these Arabs than we had thought, for quite fifty of them were firing from different places. Moreover, by slow degrees they were advancing with the evident object of outflanking us and gaining the high ground behind. Some of them, of course, we stopped as they rushed from cover to cover, but this kind of shooting was as difficult as that at bolting rabbits across a woodland ride, and to be honest, I must say that I alone was much good at the game, for here my quick eye and long practice told.

Within an hour the position had grown very serious indeed, so much so that we found it necessary to consider what should be done. I pointed out that with our small number a charge against the scattered riflemen, who were gradually surrounding us, would be worse than useless, while

it was almost hopeless to expect to hold the boma till nightfall. Once the Arabs got behind us, they could rake us from the higher ground. Indeed, for the last half-hour we had directed all our efforts to preventing them from passing this boma, which, fortunately, the stream on the one side and a stretch of quite open land on the other made it very difficult for them to do without more loss than they cared to face.

"I fear there is only one thing for it," I said at length, during a pause in the attack while the Arabs were either taking counsel or waiting for more ammunition, "to abandon the camp and everything and bolt up the hill. As those fellows must be tired and we are all good runners, we may save our lives in that way."

"How about the wounded," asked Stephen, "and the slave-woman and child?"

"I don't know," I answered, looking down.

Of course I did know very well, but here, in an acute form, arose the ancient question: Were we to perish for the sake of certain individuals in whom we had no great interest and whom we could not save by remaining with them? If we stayed where we were our end seemed fairly certain, whereas if we ran for it, we had a good chance of escape. But this involved the desertion of several injured bearers and a woman and child whom we had picked up starving, all of whom would certainly be massacred, save perhaps the woman and child.

As these reflections flitted through my brain I remembered that a drunken Frenchman named Leblanc, whom I had known in my youth and who had been a friend of Napoleon, or so he said, told me that the great emperor when he was besieging Acre in the Holy Land, was forced to retreat. Being unable to carry off his wounded men, he left them in a monastery on Mount Carmel, each with a dose of poison by his side. Apparently they did not take the poison, for according to Leblanc, who said he was present there (not as a wounded man), the Turks came and butchered them. So Napoleon chose to save his own life and that of his army at the expense of his wounded. But, after all, I reflected, he was no shining example to Christian men and I hadn't time to find any poison. In a few words I explained the situation to Mavovo, leaving out the story of Napoleon, and asked his advice.

"We must run," he answered. "Although I do not like running, life is more than stores, and he who lives may one day pay his debts."

"But the wounded, Mavovo; we cannot carry them."

"I will see to them, Macumazana; it is the fortune of war. Or if they prefer it, we can leave them--to be nursed by the Arabs," which of course was just Napoleon and his poison over again.

I confess that I was about to assent, not wishing that I and Stephen, especially Stephen, should be potted in an obscure engagement with some miserable slave-traders, when something happened.

It will be remembered that shortly after dawn Hans, using a shirt for a flag, had led the fugitive slaves past the camp up to the hill behind. There he and they had vanished, and from that moment to this we had seen nothing of him or them. Now of a sudden he reappeared still waving the shirt. After him rushed a great mob of naked men, two hundred of them perhaps, brandishing slave-sticks, stones and the boughs of trees. When they had almost reached the boma whence we watched them amazed, they split into two bodies, half of them passing to our left, apparently under the command of the Mazitu who had accompanied Hans to the slave-camp, and the other half to the right following the old Hottentot himself. I stared at Mavovo, for I was too thunderstruck to speak.

"Ah!" said Mavovo, "that Spotted Snake of yours" (he referred to Hans), "is great in his own way, for he has even been able to put courage into the hearts of slaves. Do you not understand, my father, that they are about to attack those Arabs, yes, and to pull them down, as wild dogs do a buffalo calf?"

It was true: this was the Hottentot's superb design. Moreover, it succeeded. Up on the hillside he had watched the progress of the fight and seen how it must end. Then, through the interpreter who was with him, he harangued those slaves, pointing out to them that we, their white friends, were about to be overwhelmed, and that they must either strike for themselves, or return to the yoke. Among them were some who had been warriors in their own tribes, and through these he stirred the

others. They seized the slave-sticks from which they had been freed, pieces of rock, anything that came to their hands, and at a given signal charged, leaving only the women and children behind them.

Seeing them come the scattered Arabs began to fire at them, killing some, but thereby revealing their own hiding-places. At these the slaves rushed. They hurled themselves upon the Arabs; they tore them, they dashed out their brains in such fashion that within another five minutes quite two-thirds of them were dead; and the rest, of whom we took some toll with our rifles as they bolted from cover, were in full flight.

It was a terrible vengeance. Never did I witness a more savage scene than that of these outraged men wreaking their wrongs upon their tormentors. I remember that when most of the Arabs had been killed and a few were escaped, the slaves found one, I think it was the captain of the gang, who had hidden himself in a little patch of dead reeds washed up by the stream. Somehow they managed to fire these; I expect that Hans, who had remained discreetly in the background after the fighting began, emerged when it was over and gave them a match. In due course out came the wretched Arab. Then they flung themselves on him as marching ants do upon a caterpillar, and despite his cries for mercy, tore him to fragments, literally to fragments. Being what they were, it was hard to blame them. If we had seen our parents shot, our infants pitilessly butchered, our homes destroyed and our women and children marched off in the slave-sticks to be sold into bondage, should we not have done the same? I think so, although we are not ignorant savages.

Thus our lives were saved by those whom we had tried to save, and for once justice was done even in those dark parts of Africa, for in that time they were dark indeed. Had it not been for Hans and the courage which he managed to inspire into the hearts of these crushed blacks, I have little doubt but that before nightfall we should have been dead, for I do not think that any attempt at retreat would have proved successful. And if it had, what would have happened to us in that wild country surrounded by enemies and with only the few rounds of ammunition that we could have carried in our flight?

"Ah! Baas," said the Hottentot a little while later, squinting at me with his bead-like eyes, "after all you did well to listen to my prayer and bring me with you. Old Hans is a drunkard, yes, or at least he used to be, and old Hans gambles, yes, and perhaps old Hans will go to hell. But meanwhile old Hans can think, as he thought one day before the attack on Maraisfontein, as he thought one day on the Hill of Slaughter by Dingaan's kraal, and as he thought this morning up there among the bushes. Oh! he knew how it must end. He saw that those dogs of Arabs were cutting down a tree to make a bridge across that deep stream and get round to the high ground at the back of you, whence they would have shot you all in five minutes. And now, Baas, my stomach feels very queer. There was no breakfast on the hillside and the sun was very hot. I think that just one tot of brandy--oh! I know, I promised not to drink, but if you give it me the sin is yours, not mine."

Well, I gave him the tot, a stiff one, which he drank quite neat, although it was against my principles, and locked up the bottle afterwards. Also I shook the old fellow's hand and thanked him, which seemed to please him very much, for he muttered something to the effect that it was nothing, since if I had died he would have died too, and therefore he was thinking of himself, not of me. Also two big tears trickled down his snub nose, but these may have been produced by the brandy.

Well, we were the victors and elated as may be imagined, for we knew that the few slavers who had escaped would not attack us again. Our first thought was for food, for it was now past midday and we were starving. But dinner presupposed a cook, which reminded us of Sammy. Stephen, who was in such a state of jubilation that he danced rather than walked, the helmet with a bullet-hole through it stuck ludicrously upon the back of his head, started to look for him, and presently called to me in an alarmed voice. I went to the back of the camp and, staring into a hole like a small grave, that had been hollowed behind a solitary thorn tree, at the bottom of which lay a huddled heap, I found him. It was Sammy to all appearance. We got hold of him, and up he came, limp, senseless, but still holding in his hand a large, thick Bible, bound in boards. Moreover, in the exact centre of this Bible was a bullet-hole, or rather a bullet which had passed through the stout cover and buried itself in the paper behind. I remember that the point of it reached to the First Book of Samuel.

As for Sammy himself, he seemed to be quite uninjured, and indeed after we had poured some water on him--he was never fond of water--he revived quickly enough. Then we found out what had happened.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I was seated in my place of refuge, being as I have told you a man of peace, enjoying the consolation of religion"--he was very pious in times of trouble. "At length the firing slackened, and I ventured to peep out, thinking that perhaps the foe had fled, holding the Book in front of my face in case of accidents. After that I remember no more."

"No," said Stephen, "for the bullet hit the Bible and the Bible hit your head and knocked you silly."

"Ah!" said Sammy, "how true is what I was taught that the Book shall be a shield of defence to the righteous. Now I understand why I was moved to bring the thick old Bible that belonged to my mother in heaven, and not the little thin one given to me by the Sunday school teacher, through which the ball of the enemy would have passed."

Then he went off to cook the dinner.

Certainly it was a wonderful escape, though whether this was a direct reward of his piety, as he thought, is another matter.

As soon as we had eaten, we set to work to consider our position, of

which the crux was what to do with the slaves. There they sat in groups outside the fence, many of them showing traces of the recent conflict, and stared at us stupidly. Then of a sudden, as though with one voice, they began to clamour for food.

"How are we to feed several hundred people?" asked Stephen.

"The slavers must have done it somehow," I answered. "Let's go and search their camp."

So we went, followed by our hungry clients, and, in addition to many more things, to our delight found a great store of rice, mealies and other grain, some of which was ground into meal. Of this we served out an ample supply together with salt, and soon the cooking pots were full of porridge. My word! how those poor creatures did eat, nor, although it was necessary to be careful, could we find it in our hearts to stint them of the first full meal that had passed their lips after weeks of starvation. When at length they were satisfied we addressed them, thanking them for their bravery, telling them that they were free and asking what they meant to do.

Upon this point they seemed to have but one idea. They said that they would come with us who were their protectors. Then followed a great indaba, or consultation, which really I have not time to set out.
The end of it was that we agreed that so many of them as wished should accompany us till they reached country that they knew, when they would

be at liberty to depart to their own homes. Meanwhile we divided up the blankets and other stores of the Arabs, such as trade goods and beads, among them, and then left them to their own devices, after placing a guard over the foodstuffs. For my part I hoped devoutly that in the morning we should find them gone.

After this we returned to our boma just in time to assist at a sad ceremony, that of the burial of my hunter who had been shot through the head. His companions had dug a deep hole outside the fence and within a few yards of where he fell. In this they placed him in a sitting position with his face turned towards Zululand, setting by his side two gourds that belonged to him, one filled with water and the other with grain. Also they gave him a blanket and his two assegais, tearing the blanket and breaking the handles of the spears, to "kill" them as they said. Then quietly enough they threw in the earth about him and filled the top of the hole with large stones to prevent the hyenas from digging him up. This done, one by one, they walked past the grave, each man stopping to bid him farewell by name. Mavovo, who came last, made a little speech, telling the deceased to namba kachle, that is, go comfortably to the land of ghosts, as, he added, no doubt he would do who had died as a man should. He requested him, moreover, if he returned as a spirit, to bring good and not ill-fortune on us, since otherwise when he, Mavovo, became a spirit in his turn, he would have words to say to him on the matter. In conclusion, he remarked that as his, Mavovo's Snake, had foretold this event at Durban, a fact with which the deceased would now be acquainted he, the said deceased, could never complain of

not having received value for the shilling he had paid as a divining fee.

"Yes," exclaimed one of the hunters with a note of anxiety in his voice, "but your Snake mentioned six of us to you, O doctor!"

"It did," replied Mavovo, drawing a pinch of snuff up his uninjured nostril, "and our brother there was the first of the six. Be not afraid, the other five will certainly join him in due course, for my Snake must speak the truth. Still, if anyone is in a hurry," and he glared round the little circle, "let him stop and talk with me alone. Perhaps I could arrange that his turn----" here he stopped, for they were all gone.

"Glad I didn't pay a shilling to have my fortune told by Mavovo," said Stephen, when we were back in the boma, "but why did they bury his pots and spears with him?"

"To be used by the spirit on its journey," I answered. "Although they do not quite know it, these Zulus believe, like all the rest of the world, that man lives on elsewhere."