

CHAPTER XX

THE BATTLE OF THE GATE

By now heavy firing had begun at the north gate of the town, accompanied by much shouting. The mist was still too thick to enable us to see anything at first. But shortly after the commencement of the firing a strong, hot wind, which always followed these mists, got up and gradually gathered to a gale, blowing away the vapours. Then from the top of the crest, Hans, who had climbed a tree there, reported that the Arabs were advancing on the north gate, firing as they came, and that the Mazitu were replying with their bows and arrows from behind the palisade that surrounded the town. This palisade, I should state, consisted of an earthen bank on the top of which tree trunks were set close together. Many of these had struck in that fertile soil, so that in general appearance this protective work resembled a huge live fence, on the outer and inner side of which grew great masses of prickly pear and tall, finger-like cacti. A while afterwards Hans reported that the Mazitu were retreating and a few minutes later they began to arrive through the south gate, bringing several wounded with them. Their captain said that they could not stand against the fire of the guns and had determined to abandon the town and make the best fight they could upon the ridge.

A little later the rest of the Mazitu came, driving before them all the non-combatants who remained in the town. With these was King Bausi, in a

terrible state of excitement.

"Was I not wise, Macumazana," he shouted, "to fear the slave-traders and their guns? Now they have come to kill those who are old and to take the young away in their gangs to sell them."

"Yes, King," I could not help answering, "you were wise. But if you had done what I said and kept a better look-out Hassan could not have crept on you like a leopard on a goat."

"It is true," he groaned; "but who knows the taste of a fruit till he has bitten it?"

Then he went to see to the disposal of his soldiers along the ridge, placing, by my advice, the most of them at each end of the line to frustrate any attempt to out-flank us. We, for our part, busied ourselves in serving out those guns which we had taken in the first fight with the slavers to the thirty or forty picked men whom I had been instructing in the use of firearms. If they did not do much damage, at least, I thought, they could make a noise and impress the enemy with the idea that we were well armed.

Ten minutes or so later Babemba arrived with about fifty men, all the Mazitu soldiers who were left in the town. He reported that he had held the north gate as long as he could in order to gain time, and that the Arabs were breaking it in. I begged him to order the soldiers to pile

up stones as a defence against the bullets and to lie down behind them. This he went to do.

Then, after a pause, we saw a large body of the Arabs who had effected an entry, advancing down the central street towards us. Some of them had spears as well as guns, on which they carried a dozen or so of human heads cut from the Mazitus who had been killed, waving them aloft and shouting in triumph. It was a sickening sight, and one that made me grind my teeth with rage. Also I could not help reflecting that ere long our heads might be upon those spears. Well, if the worst came to the worst I was determined that I would not be taken alive to be burned in a slow fire or pinned over an ant-heap, a point upon which the others agreed with me, though poor Brother John had scruples as to suicide, even in despair.

It was just then that I missed Hans and asked where he had gone. Somebody said that he thought he had seen him running away, whereon Mavovo, who was growing excited, called out:

"Ah! Spotted Snake has sought his hole. Snakes hiss, but they do not charge."

"No, but sometimes they bite," I answered, for I could not believe that Hans had showed the white feather. However, he was gone and clearly we were in no state to send to look for him.

Now our hope was that the slavers, flushed with victory, would advance across the open ground of the market-place, which we could sweep with our fire from our position on the ridge. This, indeed, they began to do, whereon, without orders, the Mazitu to whom we had given the guns, to my fury and dismay, commenced to blaze away at a range of about four hundred yards, and after a good deal of firing managed to kill or wound two or three men. Then the Arabs, seeing their danger, retreated and, after a pause, renewed their advance in two bodies. This time, however, they followed the streets of huts that were built thickly between the outer palisade of the town and the market-place, which, as it had been designed to hold cattle in time of need, was also surrounded with a wooden fence strong enough to resist the rush of horned beasts. On that day, I should add, as the Mazitu never dreamed of being attacked, all their stock were grazing on some distant veldt. In this space between the two fences were many hundreds of huts, wattle and grass built, but for the most part roofed with palm leaves, for here, in their separate quarters, dwelt the great majority of the inhabitants of Beza Town, of which the northern part was occupied by the king, the nobles and the captains. This ring of huts, which entirely surrounded the market-place except at the two gateways, may have been about a hundred and twenty yards in width.

Down the paths between these huts, both on the eastern and the western side, advanced the Arabs and half-breeds, of whom there appeared to be about four hundred, all armed with guns and doubtless trained to fighting. It was a terrible force for us to face, seeing that although

we may have had nearly as many men, our guns did not total more than fifty, and most of those who held them were quite unused to the management of firearms.

Soon the Arabs began to open fire on us from behind the huts, and a very accurate fire it was, as our casualties quickly showed, notwithstanding the stone schanzes we had constructed. The worst feature of the thing also was that we could not reply with any effect, as our assailants, who gradually worked nearer, were effectively screened by the huts, and we had not enough guns to attempt organised volley firing. Although I tried to keep a cheerful countenance I confess that I began to fear the worst and even to wonder if we could possibly attempt to retreat. This idea was abandoned, however, since the Arabs would certainly overtake and shoot us down.

One thing I did. I persuaded Babemba to send about fifty men to build up the southern gate, which was made of trunks of trees and opened outwards, with earth and the big stones that lay about in plenty. While this was being done quickly, for the Mazitu soldiers worked at the task like demons and, being sheltered by the palisade, could not be shot, all of a sudden I caught sight of four or five wisps of smoke that arose in quick succession at the north end of the town and were instantly followed by as many bursts of flame which leapt towards us in the strong wind.

Someone was firing Beza Town! In less than an hour the flames, driven by

the gale through hundreds of huts made dry as tinder by the heat, would reduce Beza to a heap of ashes. It was inevitable, nothing could save the place! For an instant I thought that the Arabs must have done this thing. Then, seeing that new fires continually arose in different places, I understood that no Arabs, but a friend or friends were at work, who had conceived the idea of destroying the Arabs with fire.

My mind flew to Sammy. Without doubt Sammy had stayed behind to carry out this terrible and masterly scheme, of which I am sure none of the Mazitu would have thought, since it involved the absolute destruction of their homes and property. Sammy, at whom we had always mocked, was, after all, a great man, prepared to perish in the flames in order to save his friends!

Babemba rushed up, pointing with a spear to the rising fire. Now my inspiration came.

"Take all your men," I said, "except those who are armed with guns. Divide them, encircle the town, guard the north gate, though I think none can win back through the flames, and if any of the Arabs succeed in breaking through the palisade, kill them."

"It shall be done," shouted Babemba, "but oh! for the town of Beza where I was born! Oh! for the town of Beza!"

"Drat the town of Beza!" I holloaed after him, or rather its native

equivalent. "It is of all our lives that I'm thinking."

Three minutes later the Mazitu, divided into two bodies, were running like hares to encircle the town, and though a few were shot as they descended the slope, the most of them gained the shelter of the palisade in safety, and there at intervals halted by sections, for Babemba managed the matter very well.

Now only we white people, with the Zulu hunters under Mavovo, of whom there were twelve in all, and the Mazitu armed with guns, numbering about thirty, were left upon the slope.

For a little while the Arabs did not seem to realise what had happened, but engaged themselves in peppering at the Mazitu, who, I think, they concluded were in full flight. Presently, however, they either heard or saw.

Oh! what a hubbub ensued. All the four hundred of them began to shout at once. Some of them ran to the palisade and began to climb it, but as they reached the top of the fence were pinned by the Mazitu arrows and fell backwards, while a few who got over became entangled in the prickly pears on the further side and were promptly speared. Giving up this attempt, they rushed back along the lane with the intention of escaping at the north-gate. But before ever they reached the head of the market-place the roaring, wind-swept flames, leaping from hut to hut, had barred their path. They could not face that awful furnace.

Now they took another counsel and in a great confused body charged down the market-place to break out at the south gate, and our turn came. How we raked them as they sped across the open, an easy mark! I know that I fired as fast as I could using two rifles, swearing the while at Hans because he was not there to load for me. Stephen was better off in this respect, for, looking round, to my astonishment I saw Hope, who had left her mother on the other side of the hill, in the act of capping his second gun. I should explain that during our stay in Beza Town we had taught her how to use a rifle.

I called to him to send her away, but again she would not go, even after a bullet had pierced her dress.

Still, all our shooting could not stop that rush of men, made desperate by the fear of a fiery death. Leaving many stretched out behind them, the first of the Arabs drew near to the south gate.

"My father," said Mavovo in my ear, "now the real fighting is going to begin. The gate will soon be down. We must be the gate."

I nodded, for if the Arabs once got through, there were enough of them left to wipe us out five times over. Indeed, I do not suppose that up to this time they had actually lost more than forty men. A few words explained the situation to Stephen and Brother John, whom I told to take his daughter to her mother and wait there with them. The Mazitu I

ordered to throw down their guns, for if they kept these I was sure they would shoot some of us, and to accompany us, bringing their spears only.

Then we rushed down the slope and took up our position in a little open space in front of the gate, that now was tottering to its fall beneath the blows and draggings of the Arabs. At this time the sight was terrible and magnificent, for the flames had got hold of the two half-circles of huts that embraced the market-place, and, fanned by the blast, were rushing towards us like a thing alive. Above us swept a great pall of smoke in which floated flakes of fire, so thick that it hid the sky, though fortunately the wind did not suffer it to sink and choke us. The sounds also were almost inconceivable, for to the crackling roar of the conflagration as it devoured hut after hut, were added the coarse, yelling voices of the half-bred Arabs, as in mingled rage and terror they tore at the gateway or each other, and the reports of the guns which many of them were still firing, half at hazard.

We formed up before the gate, the Zulus with Stephen and myself in front and the thirty picked Mazitu, commanded by no less a person than Bausi, the king, behind. We had not long to wait, for presently down the thing came and over it and the mound of earth and stones we had built beyond, began to pour a mob of white-robed and turbaned men whose mixed and tumultuous exit somehow reminded me of the pips and pulp being squeezed out of a grenadilla fruit.

I gave the word, and we fired into that packed mass with terrible

effect. Really I think that each bullet must have brought down two or three of them. Then, at a command from Mavovo, the Zulus threw down their guns and charged with their broad spears. Stephen, who had got hold of an assegai somehow, went with them, firing a Colt's revolver as he ran, while at their backs came Bausi and his thirty tall Mazitu.

I will confess at once that I did not join in this terrific onslaught. I felt that I had not weight enough for a scrimmage of the sort, also that I should perhaps be better employed using my wits outside and watching for a chance to be of service, like a half-back in a football field, than in getting my brains knocked out in a general row. Or mayhap my heart failed me and I was afraid. I dare say, for I have never pretended to great courage. At any rate, I stopped outside and shot whenever I got the chance, not without effect, filling a humble but perhaps a useful part.

It was really magnificent, that fray. How those Zulus did go in. For quite a long while they held the narrow gateway and the mound against all the howling, thrusting mob, much as the Roman called Horatius and his two friends held the entrance to some bridge or other long ago at Rome against a great force of I forget whom. They shouted their Zulu battle-cry of Laba! Laba! that of their regiment, I suppose, for most of them were men of about the same age, and stabbed and fought and struggled and went down one by one.

Back the rest of them were swept; then, led by Mavovo, Stephen and

Bausi, charged again, reinforced with the thirty Mazitu. Now the tongues of flame met almost over them, the growing fence of prickly pear and cacti withered and crackled, and still they fought on beneath that arch of fire.

Back they were driven again by the mere weight of numbers. I saw Mavovo stab a man and go down. He rose and stabbed another, then fell again for he was hard hit.

Two Arabs rushed to kill him. I shot them both with a right and left, for fortunately my rifle was just reloaded. He rose once more and killed a third man. Stephen came to his support and grappling with an Arab, dashed his head against the gate-post so that he fell. Old Bausi, panting like a grampus, plunged in with his remaining Mazitu and the combatants became so confused in the dark gloom of the overhanging smoke that I could scarcely tell one from the other. Yet the maddened Arabs were winning, as they must, for how could our small and ever-lessening company stand against their rush?

We were in a little circle now of which somehow I found myself the centre, and they were attacking us on all sides. Stephen got a knock on the head from the butt end of a gun, and tumbled against me, nearly upsetting me. As I recovered myself I looked round in despair.

Now it was that I saw a very welcome sight, namely Hans, yes, the lost Hans himself, with his filthy hat whereof I noticed even then the frayed

ostrich feathers were smouldering, hanging by a leather strap at the back of his head. He was shambling along in a sly and silent sort of way, but at a great rate with his mouth open, beckoning over his shoulder, and behind him came about one hundred and fifty Mazitu.

Those Mazitu soon put another complexion upon the affair, for charging with a roar, they drove back the Arabs, who had no space to develop their line, straight into the jaws of that burning hell. A little later the rest of the Mazitu returned with Babemba and finished the job. Only quite a few of the Arabs got out and were captured after they had thrown down their guns. The rest retreated into the centre of the market-place, whither our people followed them. In this crisis the blood of these Mazitu told, and they stuck to the enemy as Zulus themselves would certainly have done.

It was over! Great Heaven! it was over, and we began to count our losses. Four of the Zulus were dead and two others were badly wounded--no, three, including Mavovo. They brought him to me leaning on the shoulder of Babemba and another Mazitu captain. He was a shocking sight, for he was shot in three places, and badly cut and battered as well. He looked at me a little while, breathing heavily, then spoke.

"It was a very good fight, my father," he said. "Of all that I have fought I can remember none better, although I have been in far greater battles, which is well as it is my last. I foreknew it, my father, for though I never told it you, the first death lot that I drew down yonder

in Durban was my own. Take back the gun you gave me, my father. You did but lend it me for a little while, as I said to you. Now I go to the Underworld to join the spirits of my ancestors and of those who have fallen at my side in many wars, and of those women who bore my children. I shall have a tale to tell them there, my father, and together we will wait for you--till you, too, die in war!"

Then he lifted up his arm from the neck of Babemba, and saluted me with a loud cry of Baba! Inkosi! giving me certain great titles which I will not set down, and having done so sank to the earth.

I sent one of the Mazitu to fetch Brother John, who arrived presently with his wife and daughter. He examined Mavovo and told him straight out that nothing could help him except prayer.

"Make no prayers for me, Dogeetah," said the old heathen; "I have followed my star," (i.e. lived according to my lights) "and am ready to eat the fruit that I have planted. Or if the tree prove barren, then to drink of its sap and sleep."

Waving Brother John aside he beckoned to Stephen.

"O Wazela!" he said, "you fought very well in that fight; if you go on as you have begun in time you will make a warrior of whom the Daughter of the Flower and her children will sing songs after you have come to join me, your friend. Meanwhile, farewell! Take this assegai of mine and

clean it not, that the red rust thereon may put you in mind of Mavovo, the old Zulu doctor and captain with whom you stood side by side in the Battle of the Gate, when, as though they were winter grass, the fire burnt up the white-robed thieves of men who could not pass our spears."

Then he waved his hand again, and Stephen stepped aside muttering something, for he and Mavovo had been very intimate and his voice choked in his throat with grief. Now the old Zulu's glazing eye fell upon Hans, who was sneaking about, I think with a view of finding an opportunity of bidding him a last good-bye.

"Ah! Spotted Snake," he cried, "so you have come out of your hole now that the fire has passed it, to eat the burnt frogs in the cinders. It is a pity that you who are so clever should be a coward, since our lord Macumazana needed one to load for him on the hill and would have killed more of the hyenas had you been there."

"Yes, Spotted Snake, it is so," echoed an indignant chorus of the other Zulus, while Stephen and I and even the mild Brother John looked at him reproachfully.

Now Hans, who generally was as patient under affront as a Jew, for once lost his temper. He dashed his hat upon the ground, and danced on it; he spat towards the surviving Zulu hunters; he even vituperated the dying Mavovo.

"O son of a fool!" he said, "you pretend that you can see what is hid from other men, but I tell you that there is a lying spirit in your lips. You called me a coward because I am not big and strong as you were, and cannot hold an ox by the horns, but at least there is more brain in my stomach than in all your head. Where would all of you be now had it not been for poor Spotted Snake the 'coward,' who twice this day has saved every one of you, except those whom the Baas's father, the reverend Predikant, has marked upon the forehead to come and join him in a place that is even hotter and brighter than that burning town?"

Now we looked at Hans, wondering what he meant about saving us twice, and Mavovo said:

"Speak on quickly, O Spotted Snake, for I would hear the end of your story. How did you help us in your hole?"

Hans began to grub about in his pockets, from which finally he produced a match-box wherein there remained but one match.

"With this," he said. "Oh! could none of you see that the men of Hassan had all walked into a trap? Did none of you know that fire burns thatched houses, and that a strong wind drives it fast and far? While you sat there upon the hill with your heads together, like sheep waiting to be killed, I crept away among the bushes and went about my business. I said nothing to any of you, not even to the Baas, lest he should answer me, 'No, Hans, there may be an old woman sick in one of those

huts and therefore you must not fire them.' In such matters who does not know that white people are fools, even the best of them, and in fact there were several old women, for I saw them running for the gateway. Well, I crept up by the green fence which I knew would not burn and I came to the north gate. There was an Arab sentry left there to watch.

"He fired at me, look! Well for Hans his mother bore him short"; and he pointed to a hole in the filthy hat. "Then before that Arab could load again, poor coward Hans got his knife into him from behind. Look!" and he produced a big blade, which was such as butchers use, from his belt and showed it to us. "After that it was easy, since fire is a wonderful thing. You make it small and it grows big of itself, like a child, and never gets tired, and is always hungry, and runs fast as a horse. I lit six of them where they would burn quickest. Then I saved the last match, since we have few left, and came through the gate before the fire ate me up; me, its father, me the Sower of the Red Seed!"

We stared at the old Hottentot in admiration, even Mavovo lifted his dying head and stared. But Hans, whose annoyance had now evaporated, went on in a jog-trot mechanical voice:

"As I was returning to find the Baas, if he still lived, the heat of the fire forced me to the high ground to the west of the fence, so that I saw what was happening at the south gate, and that the Arab men must break through there because you who held it were so few. So I ran down to Babemba and the other captains very quickly, telling them there was

no need to guard the fence any more, and that they must get to the south gate and help you, since otherwise you would all be killed, and they, too, would be killed afterwards. Babemba listened to me and started sending out messengers to collect the others and we got here just in time. Such is the hole I hid in during the Battle of the Gate, O Mavovo. That is all the story which I pray that you will tell to the Baas's reverend father, the Predikant, presently, for I am sure that it will please him to learn that he did not teach me to be wise and help all men and always to look after the Baas Allan, to no purpose. Still, I am sorry that I wasted so many matches, for where shall we get any more now that the camp is burnt?" and he gazed ruefully at the all but empty box.

Mavovo spoke once more in a slow, gasping voice.

"Never again," he said, addressing Hans, "shall you be called Spotted Snake, O little yellow man who are so great and white of heart. Behold! I give you a new name, by which you shall be known with honour from generation to generation. It is 'Light in Darkness.' It is 'Lord of the Fire.'"

Then he closed his eyes and fell back insensible. Within a few minutes he was dead. But those high names with which he christened Hans with his dying breath, clung to the old Hottentot for all his days. Indeed from that day forward no native would ever have ventured to call him by any other. Among them, far and wide, they became his titles of honour.

The roar of the flames grew less and the tumult within their fiery circle died away. For now the Mazitu were returning from the last fight in the market-place, if fight it could be called, bearing in their arms great bundles of the guns which they had collected from the dead Arabs, most of whom had thrown down their weapons in a last wild effort to escape. But between the spears of the infuriated savages on the one hand and the devouring fire on the other what escape was there for them? The blood-stained wretches who remained in the camps and towns of the slave-traders, along the eastern coast of Africa, or in the Isle of Madagascar, alone could tell how many were lost, since of those who went out from them to make war upon the Mazitu and their white friends, none returned again with the long lines of expected captives. They had gone to their own place, of which sometimes that flaming African city has seemed to me a symbol. They were wicked men indeed, devils stalking the earth in human form, without pity, without shame. Yet I could not help feeling sorry for them at the last, for truly their end was awful.

They brought the prisoners up to us, and among them, his white robe half-burnt off him, I recognised the hideous pock-marked Hassan-ben-Mohammed.

"I received your letter, written a while ago, in which you promised to make us die by fire, and, this morning, I received your message, Hassan," I said, "brought by the wounded lad who escaped from you when you murdered his companions, and to both I sent you an answer. If none reached you, look around, for there is one written large in a tongue

that all can read."

The monster, for he was no less, flung himself upon the ground, praying for mercy. Indeed, seeing Mrs. Eversley, he crawled to her and catching hold of her white robe, begged her to intercede for him.

"You made a slave of me after I had nursed you in the spotted sickness," she answered, "and tried to kill my husband for no fault. Through you, Hassan, I have spent all the best years of my life among savages, alone and in despair. Still, for my part, I forgive you, but oh! may I never see your face again."

Then she wrenched herself free from his grasp and went away with her daughter.

"I, too, forgive you, although you murdered my people and for twenty years made my time a torment," said Brother John, who was one of the truest Christians I have ever known. "May God forgive you also"; and he followed his wife and daughter.

Then the old king, Bausi, who had come through that battle with a slight wound, spoke, saying:

"I am glad, Red Thief, that these white people have granted you what you asked--namely, their forgiveness--since the deed is greatly to their honour and causes me and my people to think them even nobler than we did

before. But, O murderer of men and woman and trafficker in children, I am judge here, not the white people. Look on your work!" and he pointed first to the lines of Zulu and Mazitu dead, and then to his burning town. "Look and remember the fate you promised to us who have never harmed you. Look! Look! Look! O Hyena of a man!"

At this point I too went away, nor did I ever ask what became of Hassan and his fellow-captives. Moreover, whenever any of the natives or Hans tried to inform me, I bade them hold their tongues.

EPILOGUE

I have little more to add to this record, which I fear has grown into quite a long book. Or, at any rate, although the setting of it down has amused me during the afternoons and evenings of this endless English winter, now that the spring is come again I seem to have grown weary of writing. Therefore I shall leave what remains untold to the imagination of anyone who chances to read these pages.

We were victorious, and had indeed much cause for gratitude who still lived to look upon the sun. Yet the night that followed the Battle of the Gate was a sad one, at least for me, who felt the death of my friend

the foresighted hero, Mavovo, of the bombastic but faithful Sammy, and of my brave hunters more than I can say. Also the old Zulu's prophecy concerning me, that I too should die in battle, weighed upon me, who seemed to have seen enough of such ends in recent days and to desire one more tranquil.

Living here in peaceful England as I do now, with no present prospect of leaving it, it does not appear likely that it will be fulfilled. Yet, after my experience of the divining powers of Mavovo's "Snake"--well, those words of his make me feel uncomfortable. For when all is said and done, who can know the future? Moreover, it is the improbable that generally happens[*]

[*] As the readers of "Allan Quatermain" will be aware, this prophecy of the dying Zulu was fulfilled. Mr. Quatermain died at Zuvendis as a result of the wound he received in the battle between the armies of the rival Queens.--Editor.

Further, the climatic conditions were not conducive to cheerfulness, for shortly after sunset it began to rain and poured for most of the night, which, as we had little shelter, was inconvenient both to us and to all the hundreds of the homeless Mazitu.

However, the rain ceased in due time, and on the following morning the welcome sun shone out of a clear sky. When we had dried and warmed ourselves a little in its rays, someone suggested that we should visit

the burned-out town where, except for some smouldering heaps that had been huts, the fire was extinguished by the heavy rain. More from curiosity than for any other reason I consented and accompanied by Bausi, Babemba and many of the Mazitu, all of us, except Brother John, who remained behind to attend to the wounded, climbed over the debris of the south gate and walked through the black ruins of the huts, across the market-place that was strewn with dead, to what had been our own quarters.

These were a melancholy sight, a mere heap of sodden and still smoking ashes. I could have wept when I looked at them, thinking of all the trade goods and stores that were consumed beneath, necessities for the most part, the destruction of which must make our return journey one of great hardship.

Well, there was nothing to be said or done, so after a few minutes of contemplation we turned to continue our walk through what had been the royal quarters to the north gate. Hans, who, I noted, had been ferreting about in his furtive way as though he were looking for something, and I were the last to leave. Suddenly he laid his hand upon my arm and said:

"Baas, listen! I hear a ghost. I think it is the ghost of Sammy asking us to bury him."

"Bosh!" I answered, and then listened as hard as I could.

Now I also seemed to hear something coming from I knew not where, words which were frequently repeated and which seemed to be:

"O Mr. Quatermain, I beg you to be so good as to open the door of this oven."

For a while I thought I must be cracked. However, I called back the others and we all listened. Of a sudden Hans made a pounce, like a terrier does at the run of a mole that he hears working underground, and began to drag, or rather to shovel, at a heap of ashes in front of us, using a bit of wood as they were still too hot for his hands. Then we listened again and this time heard the voice quite clearly coming from the ground.

"Baas," said Hans, "it is Sammy in the corn-pit!"

Now I remembered that such a pit existed in front of the huts which, although empty at the time, was, as is common among the Bantu natives, used to preserve corn that would not immediately be needed. Once I myself went through a very tragic experience in one of these pits, as any who may read the history of my first wife, that I have called Marie, can see for themselves.

Soon we cleared the place and had lifted the stone, with ventilating holes in it--well was it for Sammy that those ventilating holes existed; also that the stone did not fit tight. Beneath was a bottle-shaped and

cemented structure about ten feet deep by, say, eight wide. Instantly through the mouth of this structure appeared the head of Sammy with his mouth wide open like that of a fish gasping for air. We pulled him out, a process that caused him to howl, for the heat had made his skin very tender, and gave him water which one of the Mazitu fetched from a spring. Then I asked him indignantly what he was doing in that hole, while we wasted our tears, thinking that he was dead.

"Oh! Mr. Quatermain," he said, "I am a victim of too faithful service. To abandon all these valuable possessions of yours to a rapacious enemy was more than I could bear. So I put every one of them in the pit, and then, as I thought I heard someone coming, got in myself and pulled down the stone. But, Mr. Quatermain, soon afterwards the enemy added arson to murder and pillage, and the whole place began to blaze. I could hear the fire roaring above and a little later the ashes covered the exit so that I could no longer lift the stone, which indeed grew too hot to touch. Here, then, I sat all night in the most suffocating heat, very much afraid, Mr. Quatermain, lest the two kegs of gunpowder that were with me should explode, till at last, just as I had abandoned hope and prepared to die like a tortoise baked alive by a bushman, I heard your welcome voice. And Mr. Quatermain, if there is any soothing ointment to spare, I shall be much obliged, for I am scorched all over."

"Ah! Sammy, Sammy," I said, "you see what comes of cowardice? On the hill with us you would not have been scorched, and it is only by the merest chance of owing to Hans's quick hearing that you were not left to

perish miserably in that hole."

"That is so, Mr. Quatermain. I plead guilty to the hot impeachment. But on the hill I might have been shot, which is worse than being scorched. Also you gave me charge of your goods and I determined to preserve them even at the risk of personal comfort. Lastly, the angel who watches me brought you here in time before I was quite cooked through. So all's well that ends well, Mr. Quatermain, though it is true that for my part I have had enough of bloody war, and if I live to regain civilized regions I propose henceforth to follow the art of food-dressing in the safe kitchen of an hotel; that is, if I cannot obtain a berth as an instructor in the English tongue!"

"Yes," I answered, "all's well that ends well, Sammy my boy, and at any rate you have saved the stores, for which we should be thankful to you. So go along with Mr. Stephen and get doctored while we haul them out of that grain-pit."

Three days later we bid farewell to old Bausi, who almost wept at parting with us, and the Mazitu, who were already engaged in the re-building of their town. Mavovo and the other Zulus who died in the Battle of the Gate, we buried on the ridge opposite to it, raising a mound of earth over them that thereby they might be remembered in generations to come, and laying around them the Mazitu who had fallen in the fight. As we passed that mound on our homeward journey, the Zulus who remained alive, including two wounded men who were carried

in litters, stopped and saluted solemnly, praising the dead with loud songs. We white people too saluted, but in silence, by raising our hats.

By the way, I should add that in this matter also Mavovo's "Snake" did not lie. He had said that six of his company would be killed upon our expedition, and six were killed, neither more nor less.

After much consulting we determined to take the overland route back to Natal, first because it was always possible that the slave-trading fraternity, hearing of their terrible losses, might try to attack us again on the coast, and secondly for the reason that even if they did not, months or perhaps years might pass before we found a ship at Kilwa, then a port of ill repute, to carry us to any civilized place. Moreover, Brother John, who had travelled it, knew the inland road well and had established friendly relations with the tribes through whose country we must pass, till we reached the brothers of Zululand, where I was always welcome. So as the Mazitu furnished us with an escort and plenty of bearers for the first part of the road and, thanks to Sammy's stewardship in the corn-pit, we had ample trade goods left to hire others later on, we made up our minds to risk the longer journey.

As it turned out this was a wise conclusion, since although it took four weary months, in the end we accomplished it without any accident whatsoever, if I except a slight attack of fever from which both Miss Hope and I suffered for a while. Also we got some good shooting on the road. My only regret was that this change of plan obliged us to abandon

the tusks of ivory we had captured from the slavers and buried where we alone could find them.

Still, it was a dull time for me, who, for obvious reasons, of which I have already spoken, was literally a fifth wheel to the coach. Hans was an excellent fellow, and, as the reader knows, quite a genius in his own way, but night after night in Hans's society began to pall on me at last, while even his conversation about my "reverend father," who seemed positively to haunt him, acquired a certain sameness. Of course, we had other subjects in common, especially those connected with Retief's massacre, whereof we were the only two survivors, but of these I seldom cared to speak. They were and still remain too painful.

Therefore, for my part I was thankful when at last, in Zululand, we fell in with some traders whom I knew, who hired us one of their wagons. In this vehicle, abandoning the worn-out donkeys and the white ox, which we presented to a chief of my acquaintance, Brother John and the ladies proceeded to Durban, Stephen attending them on a horse that we had bought, while I, with Hans, attached myself to the traders.

At Durban a surprise awaited us since, as we trekked into the town, which at that time was still a small place, whom should we meet but Sir Alexander Somers, who, hearing that wagons were coming from Zululand, had ridden out in the hope of obtaining news of us. It seemed that the choleric old gentleman's anxiety concerning his son had so weighed on his mind that at length he made up his mind to proceed to Africa to hunt

for him. So there he was. The meeting between the two was affectionate but peculiar.

"Hullo, dad!" said Stephen. "Whoever would have thought of seeing you here?"

"Hullo, Stephen," said his father. "Whoever would have expected to find you alive and looking well--yes, very well? It is more than you deserve, you young ass, and I hope you won't do it again."

Having delivered himself thus, the old boy seized Stephen by the hair and solemnly kissed him on the brow.

"No, dad," answered his son, "I don't mean to do it again, but thanks to Allan there we've come through all right. And, by the way, let me introduce you to the lady I am going to marry, also to her father and mother."

Well, all the rest may be imagined. They were married a fortnight later in Durban and a very pleasant affair it was, since Sir Alexander, who by the way, treated me most handsomely from a business point of view, literally entertained the whole town on that festive occasion. Immediately afterwards Stephen, accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. Eversley and his father, took his wife home "to be educated," though what that process consisted of I never heard. Hans and I saw them off at the Point and our parting was rather sad, although Hans went back the richer

by the £500 which Stephen had promised him. He bought a farm with the money, and on the strength of his exploits, established himself as a kind of little chief. Of whom more later--as they say in the pedigree books.

Sammy, too, was set up as the proprietor of a small hotel, where he spent most of his time in the bar dilating to the customers in magnificent sentences that reminded me of the style of a poem called "The Essay on Man" (which I once tried to read and couldn't), about his feats as a warrior among the wild Mazitu and the man-eating, devil-worshipping Pongo tribes.

Two years or less afterwards I received a letter, from which I must quote a passage:

"As I told you, my father has given a living which he owns to Mr. Eversley, a pretty little place where there isn't much for a parson to do. I think it rather bores my respected parents-in-law. At any rate, 'Dogeetah' spends a lot of his time wandering about the New Forest, which is near by, with a butterfly-net and trying to imagine that he is back in Africa. The 'Mother of the Flower' (who, after a long course of boot-kissing mutes, doesn't get on with English servants) has another amusement. There is a small lake in the Rectory grounds in which is a little island. Here she has put up a reed fence round a laurustinus bush which flowers at

the same time of year as did the Holy Flower, and within this reed fence she sits whenever the weather will allow, as I believe going through 'the rites of the Flower.' At least when I called upon her there one day, in a boat, I found her wearing a white robe and singing some mystical native song."

Many years have gone by since then. Both Brother John and his wife have departed to their rest and their strange story, the strangest almost of all stories, is practically forgotten. Stephen, whose father has also departed, is a prosperous baronet and rather heavy member of Parliament and magistrate, the father of many fine children, for the Miss Hope of old days has proved as fruitful as a daughter of the Goddess of Fertility, for that was the "Mother's" real office, ought to be.

"Sometimes," she said to me one day with a laugh, as she surveyed a large (and noisy) selection of her numerous offspring, "sometimes, O Allan"--she still retains that trick of speech--"I wish that I were back in the peace of the Home of the Flower. Ah!" she added with something of a thrill in her voice, "never can I forget the blue of the sacred lake or the sight of those skies at dawn. Do you think that I shall see them again when I die, O Allan?"

At the time I thought it rather ungrateful of her to speak thus, but after all human nature is a queer thing and we are all of us attached to the scenes of our childhood and long at times again to breathe our natal

air.

I went to see Sir Stephen the other day, and in his splendid greenhouses the head gardener, Woodden, an old man now, showed me three noble, long-leaved plants which sprang from the seed of the Holy Flower that I had saved in my pocket.

But they have not yet bloomed.

Somehow I wonder what will happen when they do. It seems to me as though when once more the glory of that golden bloom is seen of the eyes of men, the ghosts of the terrible god of the Forest, of the hellish and mysterious Motombo, and perhaps of the Mother of the Flower herself, will be there to do it reverence. If so, what gifts will they bring to those who stole and reared the sacred seed?

P.S.--I shall know ere long, for just as I laid down my pen a triumphant epistle from Stephen was handed to me in which he writes excitedly that at length two of the three plants are showing for flower.

Allan Quatermain.