

CHAPTER III. THE BUFFALO WITH THE CLEFT HORN

I slept very well that night, I suppose because I was so dog-tired I could not help it; but next day, on our long walk back to Umbezi's kraal, I thought a great deal.

Without doubt I had seen and heard very strange things, both of the past and the present--things that I could not in the least understand. Moreover, they were mixed up with all sorts of questions of high Zulu policy, and threw a new light upon events that happened to me and others in my youth.

Now, in the clear sunlight, was the time to analyse these things, and this I did in the most logical fashion I could command, although without the slightest assistance from Saduko, who, when I asked him questions, merely shrugged his shoulders.

These questions, he said, did not interest him; I had wished to see the magic of Zikali, and Zikali had been pleased to show me some very good magic, quite of his best indeed. Also he had conversed alone with me afterwards, doubtless on high matters--so high that he, Saduko, was not admitted to share the conversation--which was an honour he accorded to very few. I could form my own conclusions in the light of the White Man's wisdom, which everyone knew was great.

I replied shortly that I could, for Saduko's tone irritated me. Of course, the truth was that he felt aggrieved at being sent off to bed like a little boy while his foster-father, the old dwarf, made confidences to me. One of Saduko's faults was that he had always a very good opinion of himself. Also he was by nature terribly jealous, even in little things, as the readers of his history, if any, will learn.

We trudged on for several hours in silence, broken at length by my companion.

"Do you still mean to go on a shooting expedition with Umbezi, Inkoosi?" he asked, "or are you afraid?"

"Of what should I be afraid?" I answered tartly.

"Of the buffalo with the split horn, of which Zikali told you. What else?"

Now, I fear I used strong language about the buffalo with the split horn, a beast in which I declared I had no belief whatsoever, either with or without its accessories of dried river-beds and water-holes.

"If all this old woman's talk has made you afraid, however," I added, "you can stop at the kraal with Mameena."

"Why should the talk make me afraid, Macumazahn? Zikali did not say that this evil spirit of a buffalo would hurt me. If I fear, it is for you, seeing that if you are hurt you may not be able to go with me to look for Bangu's cattle."

"Oh!" I replied sarcastically; "it seems that you are somewhat selfish, friend Saduko, since it is of your welfare and not of my safety that you are thinking."

"If I were as selfish as you seem to believe, Inkoosi, should I advise you to stop with your wagons, and thereby lose the good gun with two mouths that you have promised me? Still, it is true that I should like well enough to stay at Umbezi's kraal with Mameena, especially if Umbezi were away."

Now, as there is nothing more uninteresting than to listen to other people's love affairs, and as I saw that with the slightest encouragement Saduko was ready to tell me all the history of his courtship over again, I did not continue the argument. So we finished our journey in silence, and arrived at Umbezi's kraal a little after sundown, to find, to the disappointment of both of us, that Mameena was still away.

Upon the following morning we started on our shooting expedition, the party consisting of myself, my servant Scowl, who, as I think I said, hailed from the Cape and was half a Hottentot; Saduko; the merry old

Zulu, Umbezi, and a number of his men to serve as bearers and beaters. It proved a very successful trip--that is, until the end of it--for in those days the game in this part of the country was extremely plentiful. Before the end of the second week I killed four elephants, two of them with large tusks, while Saduko, who soon developed into a very fair shot, bagged another with the double-barrelled gun that I had promised him. Also, Umbezi--how, I have never discovered, for the thing partook of the nature of a miracle--managed to slay an elephant cow with fair ivories, using the old rifle that went off at half-cock.

Never have I seen a man, black or white, so delighted as was that vainglorious Kafir. For whole hours he danced and sang and took snuff and saluted with his hand, telling me the story of his deed over and over again, no single version of which tale agreed with the other. He took a new title also, that meant "Eater-up-of-Elephants"; he allowed one of his men to "bonga"--that is, praise--him all through the night, preventing us from getting a wink of sleep, until at last the poor fellow dropped in a kind of fit from exhaustion, and so forth. It really was very amusing until it became a bore.

Besides the elephants we killed lots of other things, including two lions, which I got almost with a right and left, and three white rhinoceroses, that now, alas! are nearly extinct. At last, towards the end of the third week, we had as much as our men could carry in the shape of ivory, rhinoceros horns, skins and sun-dried buckflesh, or biltong, and determined to start back for Umbezi's kraal next day.

Indeed, this could not be long delayed, as our powder and lead were running low; for in those days, it will be remembered, breechloaders had not come in, and ammunition, therefore, had to be carried in bulk.

To tell the truth, I was very glad that our trip had come to such a satisfactory conclusion, for, although I would not admit it even to myself, I could not get rid of a kind of sneaking dread lest after all there might be something in the old dwarf's prophecy about a disagreeable adventure with a buffalo which was in store for me. Well, as it chanced, we had not so much as seen a buffalo, and as the road which we were going to take back to the kraal ran over high, bare country that these animals did not frequent, there was now little prospect of our doing so--all of which, of course, showed what I already knew, that only weak-headed superstitious idiots would put the slightest faith in the drivelling nonsense of deceiving or self-deceived Kafir medicine-men. These things, indeed, I pointed out with much vigour to Saduko before we turned in on the last night of the hunt.

Saduko listened in silence and said nothing at all, except that he would not keep me up any longer, as I must be tired.

Now, whatever may be the reason for it, my experience in life is that it is never wise to brag about anything. At any rate, on a hunting trip, to come to a particular instance, wait until you are safe at home till you begin to do so. Of the truth of this ancient adage I was now destined to experience a particularly fine and concrete example.

The place where we had camped was in scattered bush overlooking a great extent of dry reeds, that in the wet season was doubtless a swamp fed by a small river which ran into it on the side opposite to our camp. During the night I woke up, thinking that I heard some big beasts moving in these reeds; but as no further sounds reached my ears I went to sleep again.

Shortly after dawn I was awakened by a voice calling me, which in a hazy fashion I recognised as that of Umbezi.

"Macumazahn," said the voice in a hoarse whisper, "the reeds below us are full of buffalo. Get up. Get up at once."

"What for?" I answered. "If the buffalo came into the reeds they will go out of them. We do not want meat."

"No, Macumazahn; but I want their hides. Panda, the King, has demanded fifty shields of me, and without killing oxen that I can ill spare I have not the skins whereof to make them. Now, these buffalo are in a trap. This swamp is like a dish with one mouth. They cannot get out at the sides of the dish, and the mouth by which they came in is very narrow. If we station ourselves at either side of it we can kill many of them."

By this time I was thoroughly awake and had arisen from my blankets.

Throwing a kaross over my shoulders, I left the hut, made of boughs, in which I was sleeping and walked a few paces to the crest of a rocky ridge, whence I could see the dry vlei below. Here the mists of dawn still clung, but from it rose sounds of grunts, bellows and tramlings which I, an old hunter, could not mistake. Evidently a herd of buffalo, one or two hundred of them, had established themselves in those reeds.

Just then my bastard servant, Scowl, and Saduko joined us, both of them full of excitement.

It appeared that Scowl, who never seemed to sleep at any natural time, had seen the buffalo entering the reeds, and estimated their number at two or three hundred. Saduko had examined the cleft through which they passed, and reported it to be so narrow that we could kill any number of them as they rushed out to escape.

"Quite so. I understand," I said. "Well, my opinion is that we had better let them escape. Only four of us, counting Umbezi, are armed with guns, and assegais are not of much use against buffalo. Let them go, I say."

Umbezi, thinking of a cheap raw material for the shields which had been requisitioned by the King, who would surely be pleased if they were made of such a rare and tough hide as that of buffalo, protested violently, and Saduko, either to please one whom he hoped might be his father-in-law or from sheer love of sport, for which he always had a

positive passion, backed him up. Only Scowl--whose dash of Hottentot blood made him cunning and cautious--took my side, pointing out that we were very short of powder and that buffalo "ate up much lead." At last Saduko said:

"The lord Macumazana is our captain; we must obey him, although it is a pity. But doubtless the prophesying of Zikali weighs upon his mind, so there is nothing to be done."

"Zikali!" exclaimed Umbezi. "What has the old dwarf to do with this matter?"

"Never mind what he has or has not to do with it," I broke in, for although I do not think that he meant them as a taunt, but merely as a statement of fact, Saduko's words stung me to the quick, especially as my conscience told me that they were not altogether without foundation.

"We will try to kill some of these buffalo," I went on, "although, unless the herd should get bogged, which is not likely, as the swamp is very dry, I do not think that we can hope for more than eight or ten at the most, which won't be of much use for shields. Come, let us make a plan. We have no time to lose, for I think they will begin to move again before the sun is well up."

Half an hour later the four of us who were armed with guns were posted behind rocks on either side of the steep, natural roadway cut by water,

which led down to the vlei, and with us some of Umbezi's men. That chief himself was at my side--a post of honour which he had insisted upon taking. To tell the truth, I did not dissuade him, for I thought that I should be safer so than if he were opposite to me, since, even if the old rifle did not go off of its own accord, Umbezi, when excited, was a most uncertain shot. The herd of buffalo appeared to have lain down in the reeds, so, being careful to post ourselves first, we sent three of the native bearers to the farther side of the vlei, with instructions to rouse the beasts by shouting. The remainder of the Zulus--there were ten or a dozen of them armed with stabbing spears--we kept with us.

But what did these scoundrels do? Instead of disturbing the herd by making a noise, as we told them, for some reason best known to themselves--I expect it was because they were afraid to go into the vlei, where they might meet the horn of a buffalo at any moment--they fired the dry reeds in three or four places at once, and this, if you please, with a strong wind blowing from them to us. In a minute or two the farther side of the swamp was a sheet of crackling flame that gave off clouds of dense white smoke. Then pandemonium began.

The sleeping buffalo leapt to their feet, and, after a few moments of indecision, crashed towards us, the whole huge herd of them, snorting and bellowing like mad things. Seeing what was about to happen, I nipped behind a big boulder, while Scowl shinned up a mimosa with the swiftness of a cat and, heedless of its thorns, sat himself in an eagle's nest at the top. The Zulus with the spears bolted to take cover where they

could. What became of Saduko I did not see, but old Umbezi, bewildered with excitement, jumped into the exact middle of the roadway, shouting:

"They come! They come! Charge, buffalo folk, if you will. The Eater-up-of-Elephants awaits you!"

"You etcetera old fool!" I shouted, but got no farther, for just at this moment the first of the buffalo, which I could see was an enormous bull, probably the leader of the herd, accepted Umbezi's invitation and came, with its nose stuck straight out in front of it. Umbezi's gun went off, and next instant he went up. Through the smoke I saw his black bulk in the air, and then heard it alight with a thud on the top of the rock behind which I was crouching.

"Exit Umbezi," I said to myself, and by way of a requiem let the bull which had hoisted him, as I thought to heaven, have an ounce of lead in the ribs as it passed me. After that I did not fire any more, for it occurred to me that it was as well not to further advertise my presence.

In all my hunting experience I cannot remember ever seeing such a sight as that which followed. Out of the vlei rushed the buffalo by dozens, every one of them making remarks in its own language as it came. They jammed in the narrow roadway, they leapt on to each other's backs. They squealed, they kicked, they bellowed. They charged my friendly rock till I felt it shake. They knocked over Scowl's mimosa thorn, and would have shot him out of his eagle's nest had not its flat top fortunately caught

in that of another and less accessible tree. And with them came clouds of pungent smoke, mixed with bits of burning reed and puffs of hot air.

It was over at last. With the exception of some calves, which had been trampled to death in the rush, the herd had gone. Now, like the Roman emperor--I think he was an emperor--I began to wonder what had become of my legions.

"Umbezi," I shouted, or, rather, sneezed through the smoke, "are you dead, Umbezi?"

"Yes, yes, Macumazahn," replied a choking and melancholy voice from the top of the rock, "I am dead, quite dead. That evil spirit of a silwana [i.e. wild beast] has killed me. Oh! why did I think I was a hunter; why did I not stop at my kraal and count my cattle?"

"I am sure I don't know, you old lunatic," I answered, as I scrambled up the rock to bid him good-bye.

It was a rock with a razor top like the ridge of a house, and there, hanging across this ridge like a pair of nether garments on a clothes-line, I found the "Eater-up-of-Elephants."

"Where did he get you, Umbezi?" I asked, for I could not see his wounds because of the smoke.

"Behind, Macumazahn, behind!" he groaned, "for I had turned to fly, but, alas! too late."

"On the contrary," I replied, "for one so heavy you flew very well; like a bird, Umbezi, like a bird."

"Look and see what the evil beast has done to me, Macumazahn. It will be easy, for my moocha has gone."

So I looked, examining Umbezi's ample proportions with care, but could discover nothing except a large smudge of black mud, as though he had sat down in a half-dried puddle. Then I guessed the truth. The buffalo's horns had missed him. He had been struck only with its muddy nose, which, being almost as broad as that portion of Umbezi with which it came in contact, had inflicted nothing worse than a bruise. When I was sure he had received no serious injury, my temper, already sorely tried, gave out, and I administered to him the soundest smacking--his position being very convenient--that he had ever received since he was a little boy.

"Get up, you idiot!" I shouted, "and let us look for the others. This is the end of your folly in making me attack a herd of buffalo in reeds. Get up. Am I to stop here till I choke?"

"Do you mean to tell me that I have no mortal wound, Macumazahn?" he asked, with a return of cheerfulness, accepting the castigation in good

part, for he was not one who bore malice. "Oh, I am glad to hear it, for now I shall live to make those cowards who fired the reeds sorry that they are not dead; also to finish off that wild beast, for I hit him, Macumazahn, I hit him."

"I don't know whether you hit him; I know he hit you," I replied, as I shoved him off the rock and ran towards the tilted tree where I had last seen Scowl.

Here I beheld another strange sight. Scowl was still seated in the eagle's nest that he shared with two nearly fledged young birds, one of which, having been injured, was uttering piteous cries. Nor did it cry in vain, for its parents, which were of that great variety of kite that the Boers call "lammefange", or lamb-lifters, had just arrived to its assistance, and were giving their new nestling, Scowl, the best doing that man ever received at the beak and claws of feathered kind. Seen through those rushing smoke wreaths, the combat looked perfectly titanic; also it was one of the noisiest to which I ever listened, for I don't know which shrieked the more loudly, the infuriated eagles or their victim.

Seeing how things stood, I burst into a roar of laughter, and just then Scowl grabbed the leg of the male bird, that was planted in his breast while it removed tufts of his wool with its hooked beak, and leapt boldly from the nest, which had become too hot to hold him. The eagle's outspread wings broke his fall, for they acted as a parachute; and so

did Umbezi, upon whom he chanced to land. Springing from the prostrate shape of the chief, who now had a bruise in front to match that behind, Scowl, covered with pecks and scratches, ran like a lamp-lighter, leaving me to collect my second gun, which he had dropped at the bottom of the tree, but fortunately without injuring it. The Kafirs gave him another name after that encounter, which meant "He-who-fights-birds-and-gets-the-worst-of-it."

Well, we escaped from the line of the smoke, a dishevelled trio--indeed, Umbezi had nothing left on him except his head ring--and shouted for the others, if perchance they had not been trodden to death in the rush. The first to arrive was Saduko, who looked quite calm and untroubled, but stared at us in astonishment, and asked coolly what we had been doing to get in such a state. I replied in appropriate language, and asked in turn how he had managed to remain so nicely dressed.

He did not answer, but I believe the truth was that he had crept into a large ant-bear's hole--small blame to him, to be frank. Then the remainder of our party turned up one by one, some of them looking very blown, as though they had run a long way. None were missing, except those who had fired the reeds, and they thought it well to keep clear for a good many hours. I believe that afterwards they regretted not having taken a longer leave of absence; but when they finally did arrive I was in no condition to note what passed between them and their outraged chief.

Being collected, the question arose what we should do. Of course, I wished to return to camp and get out of this ill-omened place as soon as possible. But I had reckoned without the vanity of Umbezi. Umbezi stretched over the edge of a sharp rock, whither he had been hoisted by the nose of a buffalo, and imagining himself to be mortally wounded, was one thing; but Umbezi in a borrowed moocha, although, because of his bruises, he supported his person with one hand in front and with the other behind, knowing his injuries to be purely superficial, was quite another.

"I am a hunter," he said; "I am named 'Eater-up-of-Elephants';" and he rolled his eyes, looking about for someone to contradict him, which nobody did. Indeed, his "praiser," a thin, tired-looking person, whose voice was worn out with his previous exertions, repeated in a feeble way:

"Yes, Black One, 'Eater-up-of-Elephants' is your name;
'Lifted-up-by-Buffalo' is your name."

"Be silent, idiot," roared Umbezi. "As I said, I am a hunter; I have wounded the wild beast that subsequently dared to assault me. [As a matter of fact, it was I, Allan Quatermain, who had wounded it.] I would make it bite the dust, for it cannot be far away. Let us follow it."

He glared round him, whereon his obsequious people, or one of them, echoed:

"Yes, by all means let us follow it, 'Eater-up-of-Elephants.'

Macumazahn, the clever white man, will show us how, for where is the buffalo that he fears!"

Of course, after this there was nothing else to be done, so, having summoned the scratched Scowl, who seemed to have no heart in the business, we started on the spoor of the herd, which was as easy to track as a wagon road.

"Never mind, Baas," said Scowl, "they are two hours' march off by now."

"I hope so," I answered; but, as it happened, luck was against me, for before we had covered half a mile some over-zealous fellow struck a blood spoor.

I marched on that spoor for twenty minutes or so, till we came to a patch of bush that sloped downwards to a river-bed. Right to this river I followed it, till I reached the edge of a big pool that was still full of water, although the river itself had gone dry. Here I stood looking at the spoor and consulting with Saduko as to whether the beast could have swum the pool, for the tracks that went to its very verge had become confused and uncertain. Suddenly our doubts were ended, since out of a patch of dense bush which we had passed--for it had played the common trick of doubling back on its own spoor--appeared the buffalo, a huge bull, that halted on three legs, my bullet having broken one of its

thighs. As to its identity there was no doubt, since on, or rather from, its right horn, which was cleft apart at the top, hung the remains of Umbezi's moocha.

"Oh, beware, Inkoosi," cried Saduko in a frightened voice. "It is the buffalo with the cleft horn!"

I heard him; I saw. All the scene in the hut of Zikali rose before me--the old dwarf, his words, everything. I lifted my rifle and fired at the charging beast, but knew that the bullet glanced from its skull. I threw down the gun--for the buffalo was right on me--and tried to jump aside.

Almost I did so, but that cleft horn, to which hung the remains of Umbezi's moocha, scooped me up and hurled me off the river bank backwards and sideways into the deep pool below. As I departed thither I saw Saduko spring forward and heard a shot fired that caused the bull to collapse for a moment. Then with a slow, sliding motion it followed me into the pool.

Now we were together, and there was no room for both, so after a certain amount of dodging I went under, as the lighter dog always does in a fight. That buffalo seemed to do everything to me which a buffalo could do under the circumstances. It tried to horn me, and partially succeeded, although I ducked at each swoop. Then it struck me with its nose and drove me to the bottom of the pool, although I got hold of its

lip and twisted it. Then it calmly knelt on me and sank me deeper and deeper into the mud. I remember kicking it in the stomach. After this I remember no more, except a kind of wild dream in which I rehearsed all the scene in the dwarf's hut, and his request that when I met the buffalo with the cleft horn in the pool of a dried river, I should remember that he was nothing but a "poor old Kafir cheat."

After this I saw my mother bending over a little child in my bed in the old house in Oxfordshire where I was born, and then--blackness!

I came to myself again and saw, instead of my mother, the stately figure of Saduko bending over me upon one side, and on the other that of Scowl, the half-bred Hottentot, who was weeping, for his hot tears fell upon my face.

"He is gone," said poor Scowl; "that bewitched beast with the split horn has killed him. He is gone who was the best white man in all South Africa, whom I loved better than my father and all my relatives."

"That you might easily do, Bastard," answered Saduko, "seeing that you do not know who they are. But he is not gone, for the 'Opener-of-Roads' said that he would live; also I got my spear into the heart of that buffalo before he had kneaded the life out of him, as fortunately the mud was soft. Yet I fear that his ribs are broken"; and he poked me with his finger on the breast.

"Take your clumsy hand off me," I gasped.

"There!" said Saduko, "I have made him feel. Did I not tell you that he would live?"

After this I remember little more, except some confused dreams, till I found myself lying in a great hut, which I discovered subsequently was Umbezi's own, the same, indeed, wherein I had doctored the ear of that wife of his who was called "Worn-out-old-Cow."