

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ZULU IMPI

After burying the elephant tusks, and having taken careful notes of the bearings and peculiarities of the country so that I might be able to find the spot again, we proceeded on our journey. For a month or more I trekked along the line which now divides the Orange Free State from Griqualand West, and the Transvaal from Bechuanaland. The only difficulties met with were such as are still common to African travellers--occasional want of water and troubles about crossing sluits and rivers. I remember that I outspanned on the spot where Kimberley now stands, and had to press on again in a hurry because there was no water. I little dreamed then that I should live to see Kimberley a great city producing millions of pounds worth of diamonds annually, and old Indaba-zimbi's magic cannot have been worth so much after all, or he would have told me.

I found the country almost entirely depopulated. Not very long before Mosilikatze the Lion, Chaka's General had swept across it in his progress towards what is now Matabeleland. His footsteps were evident enough. Time upon time I trekked up to what had evidently been the sites of Kaffir kraals. Now the kraals were ashes and piles of tumbled stones, and strewn about among the rank grass were the bones of hundreds of men, women, and children, all of whom had kissed the Zulu assegai. I remember that in one of these desolate places I found the skull of a child in

which a ground-lark had built its nest. It was the twittering of the young birds inside that first called my attention to it. Shortly after this we met with our second great adventure, a much more serious and tragic one than the first.

We were trekking parallel with the Kolong river when a herd of blesbock crossed the track. I fired at one of them and hit it behind. It galloped about a hundred yards with the rest of the herd, then lay down. As we were in want of meat, not having met with any game for a few days past, I jumped on to my horse, and, telling Indaba-zimbi that I would overtake the waggons or meet them on the further side of a rise about an hour's trek away, I started after the wounded buck. As soon as I came within a hundred yards of it, however, it jumped up and ran away as fast

as though it were untouched, only to lie down again at a distance. I followed, thinking that strength would soon fail it. This happened three times. On the third occasion it vanished behind a ridge, and, though by now I was out of both temper and patience, I thought I might as well ride to the crest and see if I could get a shot at it on the further side.

I reached the ridge, which was strewn with stones, looked over it, and saw--a Zulu Impi!

I rubbed my eyes and looked again. Yes, there was no doubt of it. They were halted about a thousand yards away, by the water; some were lying

down, some were cooking at fires, others were stalking about with spears and shields in their hands; there might have been two thousand or more of them in all. While I was wondering--and that with no little uneasiness--what on earth they could be doing there, suddenly I heard a wild cry to the right and left of me. I glanced first one way, then the other. From either side a great Zulu was bearing down on me, their broad stabbing assegais aloft, and black shields in their left hands. The man to the right was about fifteen yards away, he to the left was not more than ten. On they came, their fierce eyes almost starting out of their heads, and I felt, with a cold thrill of fear, that in another three seconds those broad "bangwans" might be buried in my vitals. On such occasions we act, I suppose, more from instinct than from anything else--there is no time for thought. At any rate, I dropped the reins and, raising my gun, fired point blank at the left-hand man. The bullet struck him in the middle of his shield, pierced it, and passed through him, and over he rolled upon the veldt. I swung round in the saddle; most happily my horse was accustomed to standing still when I fired from his back, also he was so surprised that he did not know which way to shy. The other savage was almost on me; his outstretched shield reached the muzzle of my gun as I pulled the trigger of the left barrel. It exploded, the warrior sprung high into the air, and fell against my horse dead, his spear passing just in front of my face.

Without waiting to reload, or even to look if the main body of the Zulus had seen the death of their two scouts, I turned my horse and drove my heels into his sides. As soon as I was down the slope of the rise I

pulled a little to the right in order to intercept the waggons before the Zulus saw them. I had not gone three hundred yards in this new direction when, to my utter astonishment, I struck a trail marked with waggon-wheels and the hoofs of oxen. Of waggons there must have been at least eight, and several hundred cattle. Moreover, they had passed within twelve hours; I could tell that by the spoor. Then I understood; the Impi was following the track of the waggons, which, in all probability, belonged to a party of emigrant Boers.

The spoor of the waggons ran in the direction I wished to go, so I followed it. About a mile further on I came to the crest of a rise, and there, about five furlongs away, I saw the waggons drawn up in a rough laager upon the banks of the river. There, too, were my own waggons trekking down the slope towards them.

In another five minutes I was there. The Boers--for Boers they were--were standing about outside the little laager watching the approach of my two waggons. I called to them, and they turned and saw me. The very first man my eyes fell on was a Boer named Hans Botha, whom I had known well years ago in the Cape. He was not a bad specimen of his class, but a very restless person, with a great objection to authority, or, as he expressed it, "a love of freedom." He had joined a party of the emigrant Boers some years before, but, as I learned presently, had quarrelled with its leader, and was now trekking away into the wilderness to found a little colony of his own. Poor fellow! It was his last trek.

"How do you do, Meinheer Botha?" I said to him in Dutch.

The man looked at me, looked again, then, startled out of his Dutch stolidity, cried to his wife, who was seated on the box of the waggon--

"Come here, Frau, come. Here is Allan Quatermain, the Englishman, the son of the 'Predicant.' How goes it, Heer Quatermain, and what is the news down in the Cape yonder?"

"I don't know what the news is in the Cape, Hans," I answered, solemnly; "but the news here is that there is a Zulu Impi upon your spoor and within two miles of the waggons. That I know, for I have just shot two of their sentries," and I showed him my empty gun.

For a moment there was a silence of astonishment, and I saw the bronzed faces of the men turn pale beneath their tan, while one or two of the women gave a little scream, and the children crept to their sides.

"Almighty!" cried Hans, "that must be the Umtetwa Regiment that Dingaan sent against the Basutus, but who could not come at them because of the marshes, and so were afraid to return to Zululand, and struck north to join Mosilikatze."

"Laager up, Carles! Laager up for your lives, and one of you jump on a horse and drive in the cattle."

At this moment my own waggons came up. Indaba-zimbi was sitting on the box of the first, wrapped in a blanket. I called him and told him the news.

"Ill tidings, Macumazahn," he said; "there will be dead Boers about to-morrow morning, but they will not attack till dawn, then they will wipe out the laager so!" and he passed his hand before his mouth.

"Stop that croaking, you white-headed crow," I said, though I knew his words were true. What chance had a laager of ten waggons all told against at least two thousand of the bravest savages in the world?

"Macumazahn, will you take my advice this time?" Indaba-zimbi said, presently.

"What is it?" I asked.

"This. Leave your waggons here, jump on that horse, and let us two run for it as hard as we can go. The Zulus won't follow us, they will be looking after the Boers."

"I won't leave the other white men," I said; "it would be the act of a coward. If I die, I die."

"Very well, Macumazahn, then stay and be killed," he answered, taking

a pinch of snuff. "Come, let us see about the waggons," and we walked towards the laager.

Here everything was in confusion. However, I got hold of Hans Botha and put it to him if it would not be best to desert the waggons and make a run for it.

"How can we do it?" he answered; "two of the women are too fat to go a mile, one is sick in childbed, and we have only six horses among us. Besides, if we did we should starve in the desert. No, Heer Allan, we must fight it out with the savages, and God help us!"

"God help us, indeed. Think of the children, Hans!"

"I can't bear to think," he answered, in a broken voice, looking at his own little girl, a sweet, curly-haired, blue-eyed child of six, named Tota, whom I had often nursed as a baby. "Oh, Heer Allan, your father, the Predicant, always warned me against trekking north, and I never would listen to him because I thought him a cursed Englishman; now I see my folly. Heer Allan, if you can, try to save my child from those black devils; if you live longer than I do, or if you can't save her, kill her," and he clasped my hand.

"It hasn't come to that yet, Hans," I said.

Then we set to work on the laager. The waggons, of which, including

my two, there were ten, were drawn into the form of a square, and the disselboom of each securely lashed with reims to the underworks of that in front of it. The wheels also were locked, and the space between the ground and the bed-planks of the waggons was stuffed with branches of the "wait-a-bit" thorn that fortunately grew near in considerable quantities. In this way a barrier was formed of no mean strength as against a foe unprovided with firearms, places being left for the men to fire from. In a little over an hour everything was done that could be done, and a discussion arose as to the disposal of the cattle, which had been driven up close to the camp. Some of the Boers were anxious to get them into the laager, small as it was, or at least as many of them as it would hold. I argued strongly against this, pointing out that the brutes would probably be seized with panic as soon as the firing began, and trample the defenders of the laager under foot. As an alternative plan I suggested that some of the native servants should drive the herd along the valley of the river till they reached a friendly tribe or some other place of safety. Of course, if the Zulus saw them they would be taken, but the nature of the ground was favourable, and it was possible that they might escape if they started at once. The proposition was promptly agreed to, and, what is more, it was settled that one Dutchman and such of the women and children as could travel should go with them. In half an hour's time twelve of them started with the natives, the Boer in charge, and the cattle. Three of my own men went with the latter, the three others and Indaba-zimbi stopped with me in the laager.

The parting was a heart-breaking scene, upon which I do not care to



dwell. The women wept, the men groaned, and the children looked on with scared white faces. At length they were gone, and I for one was thankful of it. There remained in the laager seventeen white men, four natives, the two Boer fraus who were too stout to travel, the woman in childbed and her baby, and Hans Bother's little daughter Tota, whom he could not make up his mind to part with. Happily her mother was already dead. And here I may state that ten of the women and children, together with about half of the cattle, escaped. The Zulu Impi never saw them, and on the third day of travel they came to the fortified place of a Griqua chief, who sheltered them on receiving half the cattle in payment. Thence by slow degrees they journeyed down to the Cape Colony, reaching a civilized region within a little more than a year from the date of the attack on the laager.

The afternoon was now drawing towards evening, but still there were no signs of the Impi. A wild hope struck us that they might have gone on about their business. Ever since Indaba-zimbi had heard that the regiment was supposed to belong to the Umtetwa tribe, he had, I noticed, been plunged in deep thought. Presently he came to me and volunteered to go out and spy upon their movements. At first Hans Botha was against this idea, saying that he was a "verdomde swartzel"--an accursed black creature--and would betray us. I pointed out that there was nothing to betray. The Zulus must know where the waggons were, but it was important for us to gain information of their movements. So it was agreed that Indaba-zimbi should go. I told him this. He nodded his white lock, said "All right, Macumazahn," and started. I noticed with some surprise,

however, that before he did so he went to the waggon and fetched his "mouti," or medicine, which, together with his other magical apparatus, he always carried in a skin bag. I asked him why he did this. He answered that it was to make himself invulnerable against the spears of the Zulus. I did not in the least believe his explanation, for in my heart I was sure that he meant to take the opportunity to make a bolt of it, leaving me to my fate. I did not, however, interfere to prevent this, for I had an affection for the old fellow, and sincerely hoped that he might escape the doom which overshadowed us.

So Indaba-zimbi sauntered off, and as I looked at his retreating form I thought I should never see it again. But I was mistaken, and little knew that he was risking his life, not for the Boers whom he hated one and all, but for me whom in his queer way he loved.

When he had gone we completed our preparations for defence, strengthening the waggons and the thorns beneath with earth and stones. Then at sunset we ate and drank as heartily as we could under the circumstances, and when we had done, Hans Botha, as head of the party, offered up prayer to God for our preservation. It was a touching sight to see the burly Dutchman, his hat off, his broad face lit up by the last rays of the setting sun, praying aloud in homely, simple language to Him who alone could save us from the spears of a cruel foe. I remember that the last sentence of his prayer was, "Almighty, if we must be killed, save the women and children and my little girl Tota from the accursed Zulus, and do not let us be tortured."

I echoed the request very earnestly in my own heart, that I know, for in common with the others I was dreadfully afraid, and it must be admitted not without reason.

Then the darkness came on, and we took up our appointed places each with a rifle in his hands and peered out into the gloom in silence.

Occasionally one of the Boers would light his pipe with a brand from the smouldering fire, and the glow of it would shine for a few moments on his pale, anxious face.

Behind me one of the stout "fraus" lay upon the ground. Even the terror of our position could not keep her heavy eyes from their accustomed sleep, and she snored loudly. On the further side of her, just by the fire, lay little Tota, wrapped in a kaross. She was asleep also, her thumb in her mouth, and from time to time her father would come to look at her.

So the hours wore on while we waited for the Zulus. But from my intimate knowledge of the habits of natives I had little fear that they would attack us at night, though, had they done so, they could have compassed our destruction with but small loss to themselves. It is not the habit of this people, they like to fight in the light of day--at dawn for preference.

About eleven o'clock, just as I was nodding a little at my post, I heard

a low whistle outside the laager. Instantly I was wide awake, and all along the line I heard the clicking of locks as the Boers cocked their guns.

"Macumazahn," said a voice, the voice of Indaba-zimbi, "are you there?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Then hold a light so that I can see how to climb into the laager," he said.

"Yah! yah! hold a light," put in one of the Boers. "I don't trust that black schepsel of yours, Heer Quatermain; he may have some of his countrymen with him." Accordingly a lantern was produced and held towards the voice. There was Indaba-zimbi alone. We let him into the laager and asked him the news.

"This is the news, white men," he said. "I waited till dark, and creeping up to the place where the Zulus are encamped, hid myself behind a stone and listened. They are a great regiment of Umtetwas as Baas Botha yonder thought. They struck the spoor of the waggons three days ago and followed it. To-night they sleep upon their spears, to-morrow at daybreak they will attack the laager and kill everybody. They are very bitter against the Boers, because of the battle at Blood River and the other fights, and that is why they followed the waggons instead of going straight north after Mosilikatze."

A kind of groan went up from the group of listening Dutchmen.

"I tell you what it is, Heeren," I said, "instead of waiting to be butchered here like buck in a pitfall, let us go out now and fall upon the Impi while it sleeps."

This proposition excited some discussion, but in the end only one man could be found to vote for it. Boers as a rule lack that dash which makes great soldiers; such forlorn hopes are not in their line, and rather than embark upon them they prefer to take their chance in a laager, however poor that chance may be. For my own part I firmly believe that had my advice been taken we should have routed the Zulus. Seventeen desperate white men, armed with guns, would have produced no small effect upon a camp of sleeping savages. But it was not taken, so it is no use talking about it.

After that we went back to our posts, and slowly the weary night wore on towards the dawn. Only those who have watched under similar circumstances while they waited the advent of almost certain and cruel death, can know the torturing suspense of those heavy hours. But they went somehow, and at last in the far east the sky began to lighten, while the cold breath of dawn stirred the tilts of the waggons and chilled me to the bone. The fat Dutchwoman behind me woke with a yawn, then, remembering all, moaned aloud, while her teeth chattered with cold and fear. Hans Botha went to his waggon and got a bottle of peach

brandy, from which he poured into a tin pannikin, giving us each a stiff dram, and making attempts to be cheerful as he did so. But his affected jocularly only seemed to depress his comrades the more. Certainly it depressed me.

Now the light was growing, and we could see some way into the mist which still hung densely over the river, and now--ah! there it was. From the other side of the hill, a thousand yards or more from the laager, came a faint humming sound. It grew and grew till it gathered to a chant--the awful war chant of the Zulus. Soon I could catch the words. They were simple enough:

"We shall slay, we shall slay! Is it not so, my brothers? Our spears shall blush blood-red. Is it not so, my brothers? For we are the sucklings of Chaka, blood is our milk, my brothers. Awake, children of the Umtetwa, awake! The vulture wheels, the jackal sniffs the air; Awake, children of the Umtetwa--cry aloud, ye ringed men: There is the foe, we shall slay them. Is it not so, my brothers? S'gee! S'gee! S'gee!"

Such is a rough translation of that hateful chant which to this very day I often seem to hear. It does not look particularly imposing on paper, but if, while he waited to be killed, the reader could have heard it as it rolled through the still air from the throats of nearly three thousand warriors singing all to time, he would have found it impressive enough.

Now the shields began to appear over the brow of the rise. They came by companies, each company about ninety strong. Altogether there were thirty-one companies. I counted them. When all were over they formed themselves into a triple line, then trotted down the slope towards us. At a distance of a hundred and fifty yards or just out of the shot of such guns as we had in those days, they halted and began singing again--

"Yonder is the kraal of the white man--a little kraal, my brothers;  
We shall eat it up, we shall trample it flat, my brothers.  
But where are the white man's cattle--where are his oxen, my brothers?"

This question seemed to puzzle them a good deal, for they sang the song again and again. At last a herald came forward, a great man with ivory rings about his arm, and, putting his hands to his mouth, called out to us asking where our cattle were.

Hans Botha climbed on to the top of a waggon and roared out that they might answer that question themselves.

Then the herald called again, saying that he saw the cattle had been sent away.

"We shall go and find the cattle," he said, "then we shall come and kill

you, because without cattle you must stop where you are, but if we wait to kill you before we get the cattle, they may have trekked too far for us to follow. And if you try to run away we shall easily catch you white men!"

This struck me as a very odd speech, for the Zulus generally attack an enemy first and take his cattle afterwards; still, there was a certain amount of plausibility about it. While I was still wondering what it all might mean, the Zulus began to run past us in companies towards the river. Suddenly a shout announced that they had found the spoor of the cattle, and the whole Impi of them started down it at a run till they vanished over a rise about a quarter of a mile away.

We waited for half an hour or more, but nothing could we see of them.

"Now I wonder if the devils have really gone," said Hans Botha to me.

"It is very strange."

"I will go and see," said Indaba-zimbi, "if you will come with me, Macumazahn. We can creep to the top of the ridge and look over."

At first I hesitated, but curiosity overcame me. I was young in those days and weary with suspense.

"Very well," I said, "we will go."



So we started. I had my elephant gun and ammunition. Indaba-zimbi had his medicine bag and an assegai. We crept to the top of the rise like sportsmen stalking a buck. The slope on the other side was strewn with rocks, among which grew bushes and tall grass.

"They must have gone down the Donga," I said to Indaba-zimbi, "I can't see one of them."

As I spoke there came a roar of men all round me. From every rock, from every tuft of grass rose a Zulu warrior. Before I could turn, before I could lift a gun, I was seized and thrown.

"Hold him! Hold the White Spirit fast!" cried a voice. "Hold him, or he will slip away like a snake. Don't hurt him, but hold him fast. Let Indaba-zimbi walk by his side."

I turned on Indaba-zimbi. "You black devil, you have betrayed me!" I cried.

"Wait and see, Macumazahn," he answered, coolly. "Now the fight is going to begin."