

CHAPTER V

THE END OF THE LAAGER

I gasped with wonder and rage. What did that scoundrel Indaba-zimbi mean? Why had I been drawn out of the laager and seized, and why, being seized, was I not instantly killed? They called me the "White Spirit." Could it be that they were keeping me to make me into medicine? I had heard of such things being done by Zulus and kindred tribes, and my blood ran cold at the thought. What an end! To be pounded up, made medicine of, and eaten!

However, I had little time for further reflection, for now the whole Impi was pouring back from the donga and river-banks where it had hidden while their ruse was carried out, and once more formed up on the side of the slope. I was taken to the crest of the slope and placed in the centre of the reserve line in the especial charge of a huge Zulu named Bombyane, the same man who had come forward as a herald. This brute seemed to regard me with an affectionate curiosity. Now and again he poked me in the ribs with the handle of his assegai, as though to assure himself that I was solid, and several times he asked me to be so good as to prophesy how many Zulus would be killed before the "Amaboona," as they called the Boers, were "eaten up."

At first I took no notice of him beyond scowling, but presently, goaded into anger, I prophesied that he would be dead in an hour!

He only laughed aloud. "Oh! White Spirit," he said, "is it so? Well, I've walked a long way from Zululand, and shall be glad of a rest."

And he got it shortly, as will be seen.

Now the Zulus began to sing again--

"We have caught the White Spirit, my brother! my brother!

Iron-Tongue whispered of him, he smelt him out, my brother.

Now the Maboona are ours--they are already dead, my brother."

So that treacherous villain Indaba-zimbi had betrayed me. Suddenly the chief of the Impi, a grey-haired man named Sususa, held up his assegai, and instantly there was silence. Then he spoke to some indunas who stood near him. Instantly they ran to the right and left down the first line, saying a word to the captain of each company as they passed him. Presently they were at the respective ends of the line, and simultaneously held up their spears. As they did so, with an awful roar of "Bulala Amaboona"--"Slay the Boers," the entire line, numbering nearly a thousand men, bounded forward like a buck startled from its form, and rushed down upon the little laager. It was a splendid sight to see them, their assegais glittering in the sunlight as they rose and fell above their black shields, their war-plumes bending back upon the wind, and their fierce faces set intently on the foe, while the solid earth shook beneath the thunder of their rushing feet. I thought of my

poor friends the Dutchmen, and trembled. What chance had they against so many?

Now the Zulus, running in the shape of a bow so as to wrap the laager round on three sides, were within seventy yards, and now from every waggon broke tongues of fire. Over rolled a number of the Umtetwa, but the rest cared little. Forward they sped straight to the laager, striving to force a way in. But the Boers plied them with volley after volley, and, packed as the Zulus were, the elephant guns loaded with slugs and small shot did frightful execution. Only one man even got on to a waggon, and as he did so I saw a Boer woman strike him on the head with an axe. He fell down, and slowly, amid howls of derision from the two lines on the hill-side, the Zulus drew back.

"Let us go, father!" shouted the soldiers on the slope, among whom I was, to their chief, who had come up. "You have sent out the little girls to fight, and they are frightened. Let us show them the way."

"No, no!" the chief Sususa answered, laughing. "Wait a minute and the little girls will grow to women, and women are good enough to fight against Boers!"

The attacking Zulus heard the mockery of their fellows, and rushed forward again with a roar. But the Boers in the laager had found time to load, and they met with a warm reception. Reserving their fire till the Zulus were packed like sheep in a kraal, they loosed into them with the

roers, and the warriors fell in little heaps. But I saw that the blood of the Umtetwas was up; they did not mean to be beaten back this time, and the end was near. See! six men had leapt on to a waggon, slain the man behind it, and sprung into the laager. They were killed there, but others followed, and then I turned my head. But I could not shut my ears to the cries of rage and death, and the terrible S'gee! S'gee! of the savages as they did their work of murder. Once only I looked up and saw poor Hans Botha standing on a waggon smiting down men with the butt of his rifle. The assegais shot up towards him like tongues of steel, and when I looked again he was gone.

I turned sick with fear and rage. But alas! what could I do? They were all dead now, and probably my own turn was coming, only my death with not be so swift.

The fight was ended, and the two lines on the slope broke their order, and moved down to the laager. Presently we were there, and a dreadful sight it was. Many of the attacking Zulus were dead--quite fifty I should say, and at least a hundred and fifty were wounded, some of them mortally. The chief Sususa gave an order, the dead men were picked up and piled in a heap, while those who were slightly hurt walked off to find some one to tie up their wounds. But the more serious cases met with a different treatment. The chief or one of his indunas considered each case, and if it was in any way bad, the man was taken up and thrown into the river which ran near. None of them offered any objection, though one poor fellow swam to shore again. He did not stop there long,

however, for they pushed him back and drowned him by force.

The strangest case of all was that of the chief's own brother. He had been captain of the line, and his ankle was smashed by a bullet. Sususa came up to him, and, having examined the wound, rated him soundly for failing in the first onslaught.

The poor fellow made the excuse that it was not his fault, as the Boers had hit him in the first rush. His brother admitted the truth of this, and talked to him amicably.

"Well," he said at length, offering him a pinch of snuff, "you cannot walk again."

"No, chief," said the wounded man, looking at his ankle.

"And to-morrow we must walk far," went on Sususa.

"Yes, chief."

"Say, then, will you sit here on the veldt, or----" and he nodded towards the river.

The man dropped his head on his breast for a minute as though in thought. Presently he lifted it and looked Sususa straight in the face.

"My ankle pains me, my brother," he said; "I think I will go back to Zululand, for there is the only kraal I wish to see again, even if I creep about it like a snake."[*]

[*] The Zulus believe that after death their spirits enter into the bodies of large green snakes, which glide about the kraals. To kill these snakes is sacrilege.

"It is well, my brother," said the chief. "Rest softly," and having shaken hands with him, he gave an order to one of the indunas, and turned away.

Then men came, and, supporting the wounded man, led him down to the banks of the stream. Here, at his request, they tied a heavy stone round his neck, and then threw him into a deep pool. I saw the whole sad scene, and the victim never even winced. It was impossible not to admire the extraordinary courage of the man, or to avoid being struck with the cold-blooded cruelty of his brother the chief. And yet the act was necessary from his point of view. The man must either die swiftly, or be left to perish of starvation, for no Zulu force will encumber itself with wounded men. Years of merciless warfare had so hardened these people that they looked on death as nothing, and were, to do them justice, as willing to meet it themselves as to inflict it on others.

When this very Impi had been sent out by the Zulu King Dingaan, it consisted of some nine thousand men. Now it numbered less than three; all the rest were dead. They, too, would probably soon be dead. What did

it matter? They lived by war to die in blood. It was their natural end.

"Kill till you are killed." That is the motto of the Zulu soldier. It has the merit of simplicity.

Meanwhile the warriors were looting the waggons, including my own, having first thrown all the dead Boers into a heap. I looked at the heap; all of them were there, including the two stout fraus, poor things. But I missed one body, that of Hans Botha's daughter, little Tota. A wild hope came into my heart that she might have escaped; but no, it was not possible. I could only pray that she was already at rest.

Just then the great Zulu, Bombyane, who had left my side to indulge in the congenial occupation of looting, came out of a waggon crying that he had got the "little white one." I looked; he was carrying the child Tota, gripping her frock in one of his huge black hands. He stalked up to where we were, and held the child before the chief. "Is it dead, father?" he said, with a laugh.

Now, as I could well see, the child was not dead, but had been hidden away, and fainted with fear.

The chief glanced at it carelessly, and said--

"Find out with your kerrie."

Acting on this hint the black devil held up the child, and was about to

kill it with his knobstick. This was more than I could bear. I sprang at him and struck him with all my force in the face, little caring if I was speared or not. He dropped Tota on the ground.

"Ou!" he said, putting his hand to his nose, "the White Spirit has a hard fist. Come, Spirit, I will fight you for the child."

The soldiers cheered and laughed. "Yes! yes!" they said, "let Bombyane fight the White Spirit for the child. Let them fight with assegais."

For a moment I hesitated. What chance had I against this black giant? But I had promised poor Hans to save the child if I could, and what did it matter? As well die now as later. However, I had wit enough left to make a favour of it, and intimated to the chief through Indaba-zimbi that I was quite willing to condescend to kill Bombyane, on condition that if I did so the child's life should be given to me. Indaba-zimbi interpreted my words, but I noticed that he would not look on me as he spoke, but covered his face with his hands and spoke of me as "the ghost" or the "son of the spirit." For some reason that I have never quite understood, the chief consented to the duel. I fancy it was because he believed me to be more than mortal, and was anxious to see the last of Bombyane.

"Let them fight," he said. "Give them assegais and no shields; the child shall be to him who conquers."

"Yes! yes!" cried the soldiers. "Let them fight. Don't be afraid, Bombyane; if he is a spirit, he's a very small one."

"I never was frightened of man or beast, and I am not going to run away from a White Ghost," answered the redoubtable Bombyane, as he examined the blade of his great bangwan or stabbing assegai.

Then they made a ring round us, gave me a similar assegai, and set us some ten paces apart. I kept my face as calm as I could, and tried to show no signs of fear, though in my heart I was terribly afraid. Humanly speaking, my doom was on me. The giant warrior before me had used the assegai from a child--I had no experience of the weapon. Moreover, though I was quick and active, he must have been at least twice as strong as I am. However, there was no help for it, so, setting my teeth, I grasped the great spear, breathed a prayer, and waited.

The giant stood awhile looking at me, and, as he stood, Indaba-zimbi walked across the ring behind me, muttering as he passed, "Keep cool, Macumazahn, and wait for him. I will make it all right."

As I had not the slightest intention of commencing the fray, I thought this good advice, though how Indaba-zimbi could "make it all right" I failed to see.

Heavens! how long that half-minute seemed! It happened many years ago, but the whole scene rises up before my eyes as I write. There behind us

was the blood-stained laager, and near it lay the piles of dead; round us was rank upon rank of plumed savages, standing in silence to wait the issue of the duel, and in the centre stood the grey-haired chief and general, Sususa, in all his war finery, a cloak of leopard skin upon his shoulders. At his feet lay the senseless form of little Tota, to my left squatted Indaba-zimbi, nodding his white lock and muttering something--probably spells; while in front was my giant antagonist, his spear aloft and his plumes wavering in the gentle wind. Then over all, over grassy slope, river, and koppie, over the waggons of the laager, the piles of dead, the dense masses of the living, the swooning child, over all shone the bright impartial sun, looking down like the indifferent eye of Heaven upon the loveliness of nature and the cruelty of man. Down by the river grew thorn-trees, and from them floated the sweet scent of the mimosa flower, and came the sound of cooing turtle-doves. I never smell the one or hear the other without the scene flashing into my mind again, complete in its every detail.

Suddenly, without a sound, Bombyane shook his assegai and rushed straight at me. I saw his huge form come; like a man in a dream, I saw the broad spear flash on high; now he was on me! Then, prompted to it by some providential impulse--or had the spells of Indaba-zimbi anything to do with the matter?--I dropped to my knee, and quick as light stretched out my spear. He drove at me: the blade passed over my head. I felt a weight on my assegai; it was wrenched from my hand; his great limbs knocked against me. I glanced round. Bombyane was staggering along with head thrown back and outstretched arms from which his spear had fallen.

His spear had fallen, but the blade of mine stood out between his shoulders--I had transfixed him. He stopped, swung slowly round as though to look at me: then with a sigh the giant sank down--dead.

For a moment there was silence; then a great cry rose--a cry of "Bombyane is dead. The White Spirit has slain Bombyane. Kill the wizard, kill the ghost who has slain Bombyane by witchcraft."

Instantly I was surrounded by fierce faces, and spears flashed before my eyes. I folded my arms and stood calmly waiting the end. In a moment it would have come, for the warriors were mad at seeing their champion overthrown thus easily. But presently through the tumult I heard the high, cracked voice of Indaba-zimbi.

"Stand back, you fools!" it cried; "can a spirit then be killed?"

"Spear him! spear him!" they roared in fury. "Let us see if he is a spirit. How did a spirit slay Bombyane with an assegai? Spear him, rain-maker, and we shall see."

"Stand back," cried Indaba-zimbi again, "and I will show you if he can be killed. I will kill him myself, and call him back to life again before your eyes."

"Macumazahn, trust me," he whispered in my ear in the Sisutu tongue, which the Zulus did not understand. "Trust me; kneel on the grass before

me, and when I strike at you with the spear, roll over like one dead; then, when you hear my voice again, get up. Trust me--it is your only hope."

Having no choice I nodded my head in assent, though I had not the faintest idea of what he was about to do. The tumult lessened somewhat, and once more the warriors drew back.

"Great White Spirit--Spirit of victory," said Indaba-zimbi, addressing me aloud, and covering his eyes with his hand, "hear me and forgive me. These children are blind with folly, and think thee mortal because thou hast dealt death upon a mortal who dared to stand against thee. Deign to kneel down before me and let me pierce thy heart with this spear, then when I call upon thee, arise unhurt."

I knelt down, not because I wished to, but because I must. I had not overmuch faith in Indaba-zimbi, and thought it probable that he was in truth about to make an end of me. But really I was so worn out with fears, and the horrors of the night and day had so shaken my nerves, that I did not greatly care what befell me. When I had been kneeling thus for about half a minute Indaba-zimbi spoke.

"People of the Umtetwa, children of T'Chaka," he said, "draw back a little way, lest an evil fall on you, for now the air is thick with ghosts."

They drew back a space, leaving us in a circle about twelve yards in diameter.

"Look on him who kneels before you," went on Indaba-zimbi, "and listen to my words, to the words of the witch-finder, the words of the rain-maker, Indaba-zimbi, whose fame is known to you. He seems to be a young man, does he not? I tell you, children of the Umtetwa, he is no man. He is the Spirit who gives victory to the white men, he it is who gave them assegais that thunder and taught them how to slay. Why were the Impis of Dingaan rolled back at the Blood River? Because he was there. Why did the Amaboona slay the people of Mosilikatze by the thousand? Because he was there. And so I say to you that, had I not drawn him from the laager by my magic but three hours ago, you would have been conquered--yes, you would have been blown away like the dust before the wind; you would have been burnt up like the dry grass in the winter when the fire is awake among it. Ay, because he had but been there many of your bravest were slain in overcoming a few--a pinch of men who could be counted on the fingers. But because I loved you, because your chief Sususa is my half-brother--for had we not one father?--I came to you, I warned you. Then you prayed me and I drew the Spirit forth. But you were not satisfied when the victory was yours, when the Spirit, of all you had taken asked but one little thing--a white child to take away and sacrifice to himself, to make the medicine of his magic of----"

Here I could hardly restrain myself from interrupting, but thought

better of it.

"You said him nay; you said, 'Let him fight with our bravest man, let him fight with Bombyane the giant for the child.' And he deigned to slay Bombyane as you have seen, and now you say, 'Slay him; he is no spirit.' Now I will show you if he is a spirit, for I will slay him before your eyes, and call him to life again. But you have brought this upon yourselves. Had you believed, had you offered no insult to the Spirit, he would have stayed with you, and you should have become unconquerable. Now he will arise and leave you, and woe be on you if you try to stay him.

"Now all men," he went on, "look for a space upon this assegai that I hold up," and he lifted the bangwan of the deceased Bombyane high above his head so that all the multitude could see it. Every eye was fixed upon the broad bright spear. For a while he held it still, then he moved it round and round in a circle, muttering as he did so, and still their gaze followed it. For my part, I watched his movements with the greatest anxiety. That assegai had already been nearer my person than I found at all pleasant, and I had no desire to make a further acquaintance with it. Nor, indeed, was I sure that Indaba-zimbi was not really going to kill me. I could not understand his proceedings at all, and at the best I did not relish playing the corpus vile to his magical experiments.

"Look! look! look!" he screamed.

Then suddenly the great spear flashed down towards my breast. I felt nothing, but, to my sight, it seemed as though it had passed through me.

"See!" roared the Zulus. "Indaba-zimbi has speared him; the red assegai stands out behind his back."

"Roll over, Macumazahn," Indaba-zimbi hissed in my ear, "roll over and pretend to die--quick! quick!"

I lost no time in following these strange instructions, but falling on to my side, threw my arms wide, kicked my legs about, and died as artistically as I could. Presently I gave a stage shiver and lay still.

"See!" said the Zulus, "he is dead, the Spirit is dead. Look at the blood upon the assegai!"

"Stand back! stand back!" cried Indaba-zimbi, "or the ghost will haunt you. Yes, he is dead, and now I will call him back to life again. Look!" and putting down his hand, he plucked the spear from wherever it was fixed, and held it aloft. "The spear is red, is it not? Watch, men, watch! it grows white!"

"Yes, it grows white," they said. "Ou! it grows white."

"It grows white because the blood returns to whence it came," said Indaba-zimbi. "Now, great Spirit, hear me. Thou art dead, the breath has

gone out of thy mouth. Yet hear me and arise. Awake, White Spirit, awake and show thy power. Awake! arise unhurt!"

I began to respond cheerfully to this imposing invocation.

"Not so fast, Macumazahn," whispered Indaba-zimbi.

I took the hint, and first held up my arm, then lifted my head and let it fall again.

"He lives! by the head of T'Chaka he lives!" roared the soldiers, stricken with mortal fear.

Then slowly and with the greatest dignity I gradually arose, stretched my arms, yawned like one awaking from heavy sleep, turned and looked upon them unconcernedly. While I did so, I noticed that old Indaba-zimbi was almost fainting from exhaustion. Beads of perspiration stood upon his brow, his limbs trembled, and his breast heaved.

As for the Zulus, they waited for no more. With a howl of terror the whole regiment turned and fled across the rise, so that presently we were left alone with the dead, and the swooning child.

"How on earth did you do that, Indaba-zimbi?" I asked in amaze.

"Do not ask me, Macumazahn," he gasped. "You white men are very clever,

but you don't quite know everything. There are men in the world who can make people believe they see things which they do not see. Let us be going while we may, for when those Umtetwas have got over their fright, they will come back to loot the waggons, and then perhaps they will begin asking questions that I can't answer."

And here I may as well state that I never got any further information on this matter from old Indaba-zimbi. But I have my theory, and here it is for whatever it may be worth. I believe that Indaba-zimbi mesmerized the whole crowd of onlookers, myself included, making them believe that they saw the assegai in my heart, and the blood upon the blade. The reader may smile and say, "Impossible;" but I would ask him how the Indian jugglers do their tricks unless it is by mesmerism. The spectators seem to see the boy go under the basket and there pierced with daggers, they seem to see women in a trance supported in mid-air upon the point of a single sword. In themselves these things are not possible, they violate the laws of nature, as those laws are known to us, and therefore must surely be illusion. And so through the glamour thrown upon them by Indaba-zimbi's will, that Zulu Impi seemed to see me transfixed with an assegai which never touched me. At least, that is my theory; if any one has a better, let him adopt it. The explanation lies between illusion and magic of a most imposing character, and I prefer to accept the first alternative.