

CHAPTER XII. DINGAAN'S BET

As I advanced to the wagons accompanied by Kambula and his two companions, I saw that Marais, in a state of great excitement, was engaged in haranguing the two Prinsloo men and Meyer, while the Vrouw Prinsloo and Marie appeared to be attempting to calm him.

"They are unarmed," I heard him shout. "Let us seize the black devils and hold them as hostages."

Thereon, led by Marais, the three Boer men came towards us doubtfully, their guns in their hands.

"Be careful what you are doing," I called to them. "These are envoys," and they hung back a little while Marais went on with his haranguing.

The Zulus looked at them and at me, then Kambula said:

"Are you leading us into a trap, Son of George?"

"Not so," I answered; "but the Boers are afraid of you and think to take you prisoners."

"Tell them," said Kambula quietly, "that if they kill us or lay a hand on us, as no doubt they can do, very soon every one of them will be dead

and their women with them."

I repeated this ultimatum energetically enough, but Marais shouted:

"The Englishman is betraying us to the Zulus! Do not trust him; seize them as I tell you."

What would have happened I am sure I do not know; but just then the Vrouw Prinsloo came up and caught her husband by the arm, exclaiming:

"You shall have no part in this fool's business. If Marais wishes to seize the Zulus, let him do so himself. Are you mad or drunk that you should think that Allan would wish to betray Marie to the Kaffirs, to say nothing of the rest of us?" and she began to wave an extremely dirty "vatdoek", or dishcloth, which she always carried about with her and used for every purpose, towards Kambula as a sign of peace.

Now the Boers gave way, and Marais, seeing himself in a minority, glowered at me in silence.

"Ask these white people, O Macumazahn," said Kambula, "who is their captain, for to the captain I would speak."

I translated the question, and Marais answered:

"I am."

"No," broke in Vrouw Prinsloo, "I am. Tell them, Allan, that these men are all fools and have given the rule to me, a woman."

So I told them. Evidently this information surprised them a little, for they discussed together. Then Kambula said:

"So be it. We have heard that the people of George are now ruled by a woman, and as you, Macumazahn, are one of that people, doubtless it is the same among your party."

Here I may add that thenceforward the Zulus always accepted the Vrouw Prinsloo as the "Inkosikaas" or chieftainess of our little band, and with the single exception of myself, whom they looked upon as her "mouth," or induna, would only transact business with or give directions to her. The other Boers they ignored completely.

This point of etiquette settled, Kambula bade me repeat what he had already told me, that we were prisoners whom he was instructed by Dingaan to convey to his Great Place, and that if we made no attempt to escape we should not be hurt upon the journey.

I did so, whereon the vrouw asked as I had done, who had informed Dingaan that we were coming.

I repeated to her word for word what the Zulus had told me, that it

was Pereira, whose object seems to have been to bring about my death or capture.

Then the vrouw exploded.

"Do you hear that, Henri Marais?" she screamed. "It is your stinkcat of a nephew again. Oh! I thought I smelt him! Your nephew has betrayed us to these Zulus that he may bring Allan to his death. Ask them, Allan, what this Dingaen has done with the stinkcat."

So I asked, and was informed they believed that the king had let Pereira go on to his own people in payment of the information that he had given him.

"My God!" said the vrouw, "I hoped that he had knocked him on the head. Well, what is to be done now?"

"I don't know," I answered. Then an idea occurred to me, and I said to Kambula:

"It seems to be me, the son of George, that your king wants. Take me, and let these people go on their road."

The three Zulus began to discuss this point, withdrawing themselves a little way so that I could not overhear them. But when the Boers understood the offer that I had made, Marie, who until now had been

silent, grew more angry than ever I had seen her before.

"It shall not be!" she said, stamping her foot. "Father, I have been obedient to you for long, but if you consent to this I will be obedient no more. Allan saved my cousin Hernan's life, as he saved all our lives. In payment for that good deed Hernan tried to murder him in the kloof--oh! be quiet, Allan; I know all the story. Now he has betrayed him to the Zulus, telling them that he is a terrible and dangerous man who must be killed. Well, if he is to be killed, I will be killed with him, and if the Zulus take him and let us free, I go with him. Now make up your mind."

Marais tugged at his beard, staring first at his daughter and then at me. What he would have answered I do not know, for at that moment Kambula stepped forward and gave his decision.

It was to the effect that although it was the Son of George whom Dingaan wanted, his orders were that all with him were to be taken also. Those orders could not be disobeyed. The king would settle the matter as to whether some of us were to be killed and some let free, or if all were to be killed or let free, when we reached his House. Therefore he commanded that "we should tie the oxen to the moving huts and cross the river at once."

This was the end of that scene. Having no choice we inspanned and continued our journey, escorted by the company of two hundred savages.

I am bound to say that during the four or five days that it took us to reach Dingaan's kraal they behaved very well to us. With Kambula and his officers, all of them good fellows in their way, I had many conversations, and from them learned much as to the state and customs of the Zulus. Also the peoples of the districts through which we passed flocked round us at every outspan, for most of them had never seen a white man before, and in return for a few beads brought us all the food that we required. Indeed, the beads, or their equivalents, were nothing but a present, since, by the king's command, they must satisfy our wants. This they did very thoroughly. For instance, when on the last day's trek, some of our oxen gave out, numbers of Zulus were inspanned in place of them, and by their help the wagons were dragged to the great kraal, Umgungundhlovu.

Here an outspan place was assigned to us near to the house, or rather the huts, of a certain missionary of the name of Owen, who with great courage had ventured into this country. We were received with the utmost kindness by him and his wife and household, and it is impossible for me to say what pleasure I found, after all my journeyings, in meeting an educated man of my own race.

Near to our camp was a stone-covered koppie, where, on the morning after our arrival, I saw six or eight men executed in a way that I will not describe. Their crime, according to Mr. Owen, was that they had bewitched some of the king's oxen.

While I was recovering from this dreadful spectacle, which, fortunately, Marie did not witness, the captain Kambula arrived, saying that Dingaan wished to see me. So taking with me the Hottentot Hans and two of the Zulus whom I had hired at Delagoa Bay--for the royal orders were that none of the other white people were to come, I was led through the fence of the vast town in which stood two thousand huts--the "multitude of houses" as the Zulus called it--and across a vast open space in the middle.

On the farther side of this space, where, before long, I was fated to witness a very tragic scene, I entered a kind of labyrinth. This was called "siklohlo", and had high fences with numerous turns, so that it was impossible to see where one was going or to find the way in or out. Ultimately, however, I reached a great hut named "intunkulu", a word that means the "house of houses," or the abode of the king, in front of which I saw a fat man seated on a stool, naked except for the moocha about his middle and necklaces and armlets of blue beads. Two warriors held their broad shields over his head to protect him from the sun. Otherwise he was alone, although I felt sure that the numerous passages around him were filled with guards, for I could hear them moving.

On entering this place Kambula and his companions flung themselves upon their faces and began to sing praises of which the king took no notice. Presently he looked up, and appearing to observe me for the first time asked:

"Who is that white boy?"

Then Kambula rose and said:

"O king, this is the Son of George, whom you commanded me to capture. I have taken him and the Amaboona" (that is, the Boers), "his companions, and brought them all to you, O king."

"I remember," said Dingaan. "The big Boer who was here, and whom Tambusa"--he was one of Dingaan's captains--"let go against my will, said that he was a terrible man who should be killed before he worked great harm to my people. Why did you not kill him, Kambula, although it is true he does not look very terrible?"

"Because the king's word was that I should bring him to the king living," answered Kambula. Then he added cheerfully: "Still, if the king wishes it, I can kill him at once."

"I don't know," said Dingaan doubtfully; "perhaps he can mend guns." Next, after reflecting a while, he bade a shield-holder to fetch someone, I could not hear whom.

"Doubtless," thought I to myself, "it is the executioner," and at that thought a kind of mad rage seized me. Why should my life be ended thus in youth to satisfy the whim of a savage? And if it must be so, why should I go alone?

In the inside pocket of my ragged coat I had a small loaded pistol with two barrels. One of those barrels would kill Dingaan--at five paces I could not miss that bulk--and the other would blow out my brains, for I was not minded to have my neck twisted or to be beaten to death with sticks. Well, if it was to be done, I had better do it at once. Already my hand was creeping towards the pocket when a new idea, or rather two ideas, struck me.

The first was that if I shot Dingaan the Zulus would probably massacre Marie and the others--Marie, whose sweet face I should never see again. The second was that while there is life there is hope. Perhaps, after all, he had not sent for an executioner, but for someone else. I would wait. A few minutes more of existence were worth the having.

The shield-bearer returned, emerging from one of the narrow, reed-hedged passages, and after him came no executioner, but a young white man, who, as I knew from the look of him, was English. He saluted the king by taking off his hat, which I remember was stuck round with black ostrich feathers, then stared at me.

"O Tho-maas" (that is how he pronounced "Thomas"), said Dingaan, "tell me if this boy is one of your brothers, or is he a Boer?"

"The king wants to know if you are Dutch or British," said the white lad, speaking in English.

"As British as you are," I answered. "I was born in England, and come from the Cape."

"That may be lucky for you," he said, "because the old witch-doctor, Zikali, has told him that he must not kill any English. What is your name? Mine is Thomas Halstead. I am interpreter here."

"Allan Quatermain. Tell Zikali, whoever he may be, that if he sticks to his advice I will give him a good present."

"What are you talking about?" asked Dingaan suspiciously.

"He says he is English, no Boer, O king; that he was born across the Black Water, and that he comes from the country out of which all the Boers have trekked."

At this intelligence Dingaan pricked up his ears.

"Then he can tell me about these Boers," he said, "and what they are after, or could if he were able to speak my tongue. I do not trust you to interpret, you Tho-maas, whom I know to be a liar," and he glowered at Halstead.

"I can speak your tongue, though not very well, O king," I interrupted, "and I can tell you all about the Boers, for I have lived among them."

"Ow!" said Dingaan, intensely interested. "But perhaps you are also a liar. Or are you a praying man, like that fool yonder, who is named Oweena?"--he meant the missionary Mr. Owen--"whom I spare because it is not lucky to kill one who is mad, although he tries to frighten my soldiers with tales of a fire into which they will go after they are dead. As though it matters what happens to them after they are dead!" he added reflectively, taking a pinch of snuff.

"I am no liar," I answered. "What have I to lie about?"

"You would lie to save your own life, for all white men are cowards; not like the Zulus, who love to die for their king. But how are you named?"

"Your people call me Macumazahn."

"Well, Macumazahn, if you are no liar, tell me, is it true that these Boers rebelled against their king who was named George, and fled from him as the traitor Umsilikazi did from me?"

"Yes," I answered, "that is true."

"Now I am sure that you are a liar," said Dingaan triumphantly. "You say that you are English and therefore serve your king, or the Inkosikaas" (that is the Great Lady), "who they tell me now sits in his place. How does it come about then that you are travelling with a party of these

very Amaboona who must be your enemies, since they are the enemies of your king, or of her who follows after him?"

Now I knew that I was in a tight place, for on this matter of loyalty, Zulu, and indeed all native ideas, are very primitive. If I said that I had sympathy with the Boers, Dingaan would set me down as a traitor. If I said that I hated the Boers, then still I should be a traitor because I associated with them, and a traitor in his eyes would be one to be killed. I do not like to talk religion, and anyone who has read what I have written in various works will admit that I have done so rarely, if ever. Yet at that moment I put up a prayer for guidance, feeling that my young life hung upon the answer, and it came to me--whence I do not know. The essence of that guidance was that I should tell the simple truth to this fat savage. So I said to him:

"The answer is this, O king. Among those Boers is a maiden whom I love and who betrothed herself to me since we were 'so high.' Her father took her north. But she sent a message to me saying that her people died of fever and she starved. So I went up in a ship to save her, and have saved her, and those who remained alive of her people with her."

"Ow!" said Dingaan; "I understand that reason. It is a good reason. However many wives he may have, there is no folly that a man will not commit for the sake of some particular girl who is not yet his wife. I have done as much myself, especially for one who was called Nada the Lily, of whom a certain Umslopogaas robbed me, one of my own blood of

whom I am much afraid."*

[*--See the Author's book named "Nada the Lily."]

For a while he brooded heavily, then went on:

"Your reason is good, Macumazahn, and I accept it. More, I promise you this. Perhaps I shall kill these Boers, or perhaps I shall not kill them. But if I make up my mind to kill them, this girl of yours shall be spared. Point her out to Kambula here--not to Tho-maas, for he is a liar and would tell me the wrong one--and she shall be spared."

"I thank you, O king," I said; "but what is the use of that if I am to be killed?"

"I did not say that you were to be killed, Macumazahn, though perhaps I shall kill you, or perhaps I shall not kill you. It depends upon whether I find you to be a liar, or not a liar. Now the Boer whom Tambusa let go against my wish said that you are a mighty magician as well as a very dangerous man, one who can shoot birds flying on the wing with a bullet, which is impossible. Can you do so?"

"Sometimes," I answered.

"Very good, Macumazahn. Now we will see if you are a wizard or a liar. I will make a bet with you. Yonder by your camp is a hill called 'Hloma

Amabutu,' a hill of stones where evildoers are slain. This afternoon some wicked ones die there, and when they are dead the vultures will come to devour them. Now this is my bet with you. When those vultures come you shall shoot at them, and if you kill three out of the first five on the wing--not on the ground, Macumazahn--then I will spare these Boers. But if you miss them, then I shall know that you are a liar and no wizard, and I will kill them every one on the hill Hloma Amabutu. I will spare none of them except the girl, whom perhaps I will take as a wife. As to you, I will not yet say what I will do with you."

Now my first impulse was to refuse this monstrous wager, which meant that the lives of a number of people were to be set against my skill in shooting. But young Thomas Halstead, guessing the words that were about to break from me, said in English:

"Accept unless you are a fool. If you don't he will cut the throats of every one of them and stick your girl into the emposeni" (that is harem), "while you will become a prisoner as I am."

These were words that I could not resent or neglect, so although despair was in my heart, I said coolly:

"Be it so, O king. I take your wager. If I kill three vultures out of five as they hover over the hill, then I have your promise that all those who travel with me shall be allowed to go hence in safety."

"Yes, yes, Macumazahn; but if you fail to kill them, remember that the next vultures you shoot at shall be those that come to feed upon their flesh, for then I shall know that you are no magician, but a common liar. And now begone, Tho-maas. I will not have you spying on me; and you, Macumazahn, come hither. Although you talk my tongue so badly, I would speak with you about the Boers."

So Halstead went, shrugging his shoulders and muttering as he passed me:

"I hope you really can shoot."

After he had left I sat alone for a full hour with Dingaan while he cross-examined me about the Dutch, their movements and their aims in travelling to the confines of his country.

I answered his questions as best I could, trying to make out a good case for them.

At length, when he grew weary of talking, he clapped his hands, whereon a number of fine girls appeared, two of whom carried pots of beer, from which he offered me drink.

I replied that I would have none, since beer made the hand shake and that on the steadiness of my hand that afternoon depended the lives of many. To do him justice he quite understood the point. Indeed, he ordered me to be conducted back to the camp at once that I might rest,

and even sent one of his own attendants with me to hold a shield over my head as I walked so that I should be protected from the sun.

"Hamba gachlé" (that is "Go softly"), said the wicked old tyrant to me as I departed under the guidance of Kambula. "This afternoon, one hour before sundown, I will meet you at Hloma Amabutu, and there shall be settled the fate of these Amaboona, your companions."

When I reached the camp it was to find all the Boers clustered together waiting for me, and with them the Reverend Mr. Owen and his people, including a Welsh servant of his, a woman of middle age who, I remember, was called Jane.

"Well," said the Vrouw Prinsloo, "and what is your news, young man?"

"My news, aunt," I answered, "is that one hour before sundown to-day I have to shoot vultures on the wing against the lives of all of you. This you owe to that false-hearted hound Hernan Pereira, who told Dingaan that I am a magician. Now Dingaan would prove it. He thinks that only by magic can a man shoot soaring vultures with a bullet, and as he is determined to kill you all, except perhaps Marie, in the form of a bet he has set me a task which he believes to be impossible. If I fail, the bet is lost, and so are your lives. If I succeed I think your lives will be spared, since Kambula there tells me that the king always makes it a point of honour to pay his bets. Now you have the truth, and I hope you

like it," and I laughed bitterly.

When I had finished a perfect storm of execration broke from the Boers. If curses could have killed Pereira, surely he would have died upon the spot, wherever he might be. Only two of them were silent, Marie, who turned very pale, poor girl, and her father. Presently one of them, I think it was Meyer, rounded on him viciously and asked him what he thought now of that devil, his nephew.

"I think there must be some mistake," answered Marais quietly, "since Hernan cannot have wished that we should all be put to death."

"No," shouted Meyer; "but he wished that Allan Quatermain should, which is just as bad; and now it has come about that once more our lives depend upon this English boy."

"At any rate," replied Marais, looking at me oddly, "it seems that he is not to be killed, whether he shoots the vultures or misses them."

"That remains to be proved, mynheer," I answered hotly, for the insinuation stung me. "But please understand that if all of you, my companions, are to be slaughtered, and Marie is to be put among this black brute's women, as he threatens, I have no wish to live on."

"My God! does he threaten that?" said Marais. "Surely you must have misunderstood him, Allan."

"Do you think that I should lie to you on such a matter--" I began.

But, before I could proceed, the Vrouw Prinsloo thrust herself between us, crying:

"Be silent, you, Marais, and you too, Allan. Is this a time that you should quarrel and upset yourself, Allan, so that when the trial comes you will shoot your worst and not your best? And is this a time, Henri Marais, that you should throw insults at one on whom all our lives hang, instead of praying for God's vengeance upon your accursed nephew? Come, Allan, and take food. I have fried the liver of that heifer which the king sent us; it is ready and very good. After you have eaten it you must lie down and sleep a while."

Now among the household of the Reverend Mr. Owen was an English boy called William Wood, who was not more than twelve or fourteen years of age. This lad knew both Dutch and Zulu, and acted as interpreter to the Owen family during the absence on a journey of a certain Mr. Hulley, who really filled that office. While this conversation was taking place in Dutch he was engaged in rendering every word of it into English for the benefit of the clergyman and his family. When Mr. Owen understood the full terror of the situation, he broke in saying:

"This is not a time to eat or to sleep, but a time to pray that the heart of the savage Dingaan may be turned. Come, let us pray!"

"Yes," rejoined Vrouw Prinsloo, when William Wood had translated. "Do you pray, prédicant, and all the rest of you who have nothing else to do, and while you are about it pray also that the bullets of Allan Quatermain may not be turned. As for me and Allan, we have other things to see to, so you must pray a little harder to cover us as well as yourselves. Now you come along, nephew Allan, or that liver may be overdone and give you indigestion, which is worse for shooting than even bad temper. No, not another word. If you try to speak any more, Henri Marais, I will box your ears," and she lifted a hand like a leg of mutton, then, as Marais retreated before her, seized me by the collar as though I were a naughty boy and led me away to the wagons.