

CHAPTER XIII. THE REHEARSAL

By the women's wagon we found the liver cooked in its frying-pan, as the vrouw had said. Indeed, it was just done to a turn. Selecting a particularly massive slice, she proceeded to take it from the pan with her fingers in order to set it upon a piece of tin, from which she had first removed the more evident traces of the morning meal with her constant companion, the ancient and unwashen vatdoek. As it chanced the effort was not very successful, since the boiling liver fat burnt the vrouw's fingers, causing her to drop it on the grass, and, I am sorry to add, to swear as well. Not to be defeated, however, having first sucked her fingers to ease their smart, she seized the sizzling liver with the vatdoek and deposited it upon the dirty tin.

"There, nephew," she said triumphantly, "there are more ways of killing a cat than by drowning. What a fool I was not to think of the vatdoek at first. Allemachte! how the flesh has burnt me; I don't suppose that being killed would hurt much more. Also, if the worst comes to the worst, it will soon be over. Think of it, Allan, by to-night I may be an angel, dressed in a long white nightgown like those my mother gave me when I was married, which I cut up for baby-clothes because I found them chilly wear, having always been accustomed to sleep in my vest and petticoat. Yes, and I shall have wings, too, like those on a white gander, only bigger if they are to carry my weight."

"And a crown of Glory," I suggested.

"Yes, of course, a crown of Glory--very large, since I shall be a martyr; but I hope one will only have to wear it on Sundays, as I never could bear anything heavy on my hair; moreover, it would remind me of a Kaffir's head-ring done in gold, and I shall have had enough of Kaffirs. Then there will be the harp," she went on as her imagination took fire at the prospect of these celestial delights. "Have you ever seen a harp, Allan? I haven't except that which King David carries in the picture in the Book, which looks like a broken rimpie chair frame set up edgewise. As for playing the thing, they will have to teach me, that's all, which will be a difficult business, seeing that I would sooner listen to cats on the roof than to music, and as for making it--"

So she chattered on, as I believe with the object of diverting and amusing me, for she was a shrewd old soul who knew how important it was that I should be kept in an equable frame of mind at this crisis in our fates.

Meanwhile I was doing my best with the lump of liver, that tasted painfully of vatdoek and was gritty with sand. Indeed, when the vrouw's back was turned I managed to throw the most of it to Hans behind me, who swallowed it at a gulp as a dog does, since he did not wish to be caught chewing it.

"God in heaven! how fast you eat, nephew," said the vrouw, catching

sight of my empty tin. Then, eyeing the voracious Hottentot suspiciously, she added: "That yellow dog of yours hasn't stolen it, has he? If so, I'll teach him."

"No, no, vrouw," answered Hans in alarm. "No meat has passed my lips this day, except what I licked out of the pan after breakfast."

"Then, Allan, you will certainly have indigestion, which is just what I wanted to avoid. Have I not often told you that you should chew your bit twenty times before you swallow, which I would do myself if I had any back teeth left? Here, drink this milk; it is only a little sour and will settle your stomach," and she produced a black bottle and subjected it to the attentions of the vatdoek, growing quite angry when I declined it and sent for water.

Next she insisted upon my getting into her own bed in the wagon to sleep, forbidding me to smoke, which she said made the hand shake. Thither, then, I went, after a brief conversation with Hans, whom I directed to clean my rifle thoroughly. For I wished to be alone and knew that I had little chance of solitude outside of that somewhat fusty couch.

To tell the truth, although I shut my eyes to deceive the vrouw, who looked in occasionally to see how I was getting on, no sleep came to me that afternoon--at least, not for a long while. How could I sleep in that hot place when my heart was torn with doubt and terror? Think of

it, reader, think of it! An hour or two, and on my skill would hang the lives of eight white people--men, women, and children, and the safety or the utter shame of the woman whom I loved and who loved me. No, she should be spared the worst. I would give her my pistol, and if there were need she would know what to do.

The fearful responsibility was more than I could bear. I fell into a veritable agony; I trembled and even wept a little. Then I thought of my father and what he would do in such circumstances, and began to pray as I had never prayed before.

I implored the Power above me to give me strength and wisdom; not to let me fail in this hour of trouble, and thereby bring these poor people to a bloody death. I prayed till the perspiration streamed down my face; then suddenly I fell into sleep or swoon. I don't know how long I lay thus, but I think it must have been the best part of an hour. At last I woke up all in an instant, and as I woke I distinctly heard a tiny voice, unlike any other voice in the whole world, speak inside my head, or so it seemed to me, saying:

"Go to the hill Hloma Amabutu, and watch how the vultures fly. Do what comes into your mind, and even if you seem to fail, fear nothing."

I sat up on the old vrouw's bed, and felt that some mysterious change had come over me. I was no longer the same man. My doubts and terrors had gone; my hand was like a rock; my heart was light. I knew that I

should kill those three vultures. Of course the story seems absurd, and easy to be explained by the state of my nerves under the strain which was being put upon them, and for aught I know that may be its true meaning. Yet I am not ashamed to confess that I have always held, and still hold, otherwise. I believe that in my extremity some kindly Power did speak to me in answer to my earnest prayers and to those of others, giving me guidance and, what I needed still more, judgment and calmness. At any rate, that this was my conviction at the moment may be seen from the fact that I hastened to obey the teachings of that tiny, unnatural voice.

Climbing out of the wagon, I went to Hans, who was seated near by in the full glare of the hot sun, at which he seemed to stare with unblinking eyes.

"Where's the rifle, Hans?" I said.

"Intombi is here, baas, where I have put her to keep her cool, so that she may not go off before it is wanted," and he pointed to a little grave-like heap of gathered grass at his side.

The natives, I should explain, named this particular gun "Intombi", which means a young girl, because it was so much slimmer and more graceful than other guns.

"Is it clean?" I asked.

"Never was she cleaner since she was born out of the fire, baas. Also, the powder has been sifted and set to dry in the sun with the caps, and the bullets have been trued to the barrel, so that there may be no accidents when it comes to the shooting. If you miss the aasvogels, baas, it will not be the fault of Intombi or of the powder and the bullets; it will be your own fault."

"That's comforting," I answered. "Well, come on, I want to go to the Death-hill yonder."

"Why, baas, before the time?" asked the Hottentot, shrinking back a little. "It is no place to visit till one is obliged. These Zulus say that ghosts sit there even in the daylight, haunting the rocks where they were made ghosts."

"Vultures sit or fly there also, Hans; and I would see how they fly, that I may know when and where to shoot at them."

"That is right, baas," said the clever Hottentot. "This is not like firing at geese in the Groote Kloof. The geese go straight, like an assegai to its mark. But the aasvogels wheel round and round, always on the turn; it is easy to miss a bird that is turning, baas."

"Very easy. Come on."

Just as we were starting Vrouw Prinsloo appeared from behind the other wagon, and with her Marie, who, I noticed, was very pale and whose beautiful eyes were red, as though with weeping.

The vrouw asked me where we were going. I told her. After considering a little, she said that was a good thought of mine, as it was always well to study the ground before a battle.

I nodded, and led Marie aside behind some thorn trees that grew near.

"Oh! Allan, what will be the end of this?" she asked piteously. High as was her courage it seemed to fail her now.

"A good end, dearest," I answered. "We shall come out of this hole safely, as we have of many others."

"How do you know that, Allan, which is known to God alone?"

"Because God told me, Marie," and I repeated to her the story of the voice I had heard in my dream, which seemed to comfort her.

"Yet, yet," she exclaimed doubtfully, "it was but a dream, Allan, and dreams are such uncertain things. You may fail, after all."

"Do I look like one who will fail, Marie?"

She studied me from head to foot, then answered:

"No, you do not, although you did when you came back from the king's huts. Now you are quite changed. Still, Allan, you may fail, and then--what? Some of those dreadful Zulus have been here while you were sleeping, bidding us all make ready to go to the Hill of Death. They say that Dingaan is in earnest. If you do not kill the vultures, he will kill us. It seems that they are sacred birds, and if they escape he will think he has nothing to fear from the white men and their magic, and so will make a beginning by butchering us. I mean the rest of us, for I am to be kept alive, and oh! what shall I do, Allan?"

I looked at her, and she looked at me. Then I took the double-barrelled pistol out of my pocket and gave it to her.

"It is loaded and on the half-cock," I said.

She nodded, and hid it in her dress beneath her apron. Then without more words we kissed and parted, for both of us feared to prolong that scene.

The hill Hloma Amabutu was quite close to our encampment and the huts of the Reverend Mr. Owen, scarcely a quarter of a mile off, I should say, rising from the flat veld on the further side of a little depression that hardly amounted to a valley. As we approached it I noticed its peculiar and blasted appearance, for whereas all around the grass was

vivid with the green of spring, on this place none seemed to grow. An eminence strewn with tumbled heaps of blackish rock, and among them a few struggling, dark-leaved bushes; that was its appearance. Moreover, many of these boulders looked as though they had been splashed and lined with whitewash, showing that they were the resting-place of hundreds of gorged vultures.

I believe it is the Chinese who declare that particular localities have good or evil influences attached to them, some kind of spirit of their own, and really Hloma Amabutu and a few other spots that I am acquainted with in Africa give colour to the fancy. Certainly as I set foot upon that accursed ground, that Golgotha, that Place of Skulls, a shiver went through me. It may have been caused by the atmosphere, moral and actual, of the mount, or it may have been a prescience of a certain dreadful scene which within a few months I was doomed to witness there. Or perhaps the place itself and the knowledge of the trial before me sent a sudden chill through my healthy blood. I cannot say which it was, but the fact remains as I have stated, although a minute or two later, when I saw what kind of sleepers lay upon that mount, it would not have been necessary for me to seek any far-fetched explanation of my fear.

Across this hill, winding in and out between the rough rocks that lay here, there and everywhere like hailstones after a winter storm, ran sundry paths. It seems that the shortest road to various places in the neighbourhood of the Great Kraal ran over it, and although no Zulu ever dared to set foot there between sun-set and rise, in the daytime they

used these paths freely enough. But I suppose that they also held that this evil-omened field of death had some spirit of its own, some invisible but imminent fiend, who needed to be propitiated, lest soon he should claim them also.

This was their method of propitiation, a common one enough, I believe, in many lands, though what may be its meaning I cannot tell. As the traveller came to those spots where the paths cut across each other, he took a stone and threw it on to a heap that had been accumulated there by the hands of other travellers. There were many such heaps upon the hill, over a dozen, I think, and the size of them was great. I should say that the biggest contained quite fifty loads of stones, and the smallest not fewer than twenty or thirty.

Now, Hans, although he had never set foot there before, seemed to have learned all the traditions of the place, and what rites were necessary to avert its curse. At any rate, when we came to the first heap, he cast a stone upon it, and begged me to do the same. I laughed and refused, but when we reached the second heap the same thing happened. Again I refused, whereon, before we came to a third and larger pile, Hans sat down upon the ground and began to groan, swearing that he would not go one step farther unless I promised to make the accustomed offering.

"Why not, you fool?" I asked.

"Because if you neglect it, baas, I think that we shall stop here for

ever. Oh! you may laugh, but I tell you that already you have brought ill-luck upon yourself. Remember my words, baas, when you miss two of the five aasvogels."

"Bosh!" I exclaimed, or, rather, its Dutch equivalent. Still, as this talk of missing vultures touched me nearly, and it is always as well to conform to native prejudices, at the next and two subsequent heaps I cast my stone as humbly as the most superstitious Zulu in the land.

By this time we had reached the summit, which may have been two hundred yards long. It was hog-backed in shape, with a kind of depression in the middle cleared of stones, either by the hand of man or nature, and not unlike a large circus in its general conformation.

Oh! the sight that met my eyes. All about lay the picked and scattered bones of men and women, many of them broken up by the jaws of hyenas. Some were quite fresh, for the hair still clung to the skulls, others blanched and old. But new or ancient there must have been hundreds of them. Moreover, on the sides of the hill it was the same story, though there, for the most part, the bones had been gathered into gleaming heaps. No wonder that the vultures loved Hloma Amabutu, the Place of Slaughter of the bloody Zulu king.

Of these horrible birds, however, at the moment not one was to be seen. As there had been no execution for a few hours they were seeking their food elsewhere. Now, for my own purposes, I wanted to see them, since

otherwise my visit was in vain, and presently bethought myself of a method of securing their arrival.

"Hans," I said, "I am going to pretend to kill you, and then you must lie quite still out there like one dead. Even if the aasvogels settle on you, you must lie quite still, so that I may see whence they come and how they settle."

The Hottentot did not take at all kindly to this suggestion. Indeed, he flatly refused to obey me, giving sundry good reasons. He said that this kind of rehearsal was ill-omened; that coming events have a way of casting their shadow before, and he did not wish to furnish the event. He said that the Zulus declared that the sacred aasvogels of Hloma Amabutu were as savage as lions, and that when once they saw a man down they would tear him to pieces, dead or living. In short, Hans and I came to an acute difference of opinion. As for every reason it was necessary that my view should prevail, however, I did not hesitate to put matters to him very plainly.

"Hans," I said, "you have to be a bait for vultures; choose if you will be a live bait or a dead bait," and I cocked the rifle significantly, although, in truth, the last thing that I wished or intended to do was to shoot my faithful old Hottentot friend. But Hans, knowing all I had at stake, came to a different conclusion.

"Allemachte! baas," he said, "I understand, and I do not blame you.

Well, if I obey alive, perhaps my guardian Snake" (or spirit) "will protect me from the evil omen, and perhaps the aasvogels will not pick out my eyes. But if once you send a bullet through my stomach--why, then everything is finished, and for Hans it is 'Good night, sleep well.' I will obey you, baas, and lie where you wish, only, I pray you, do not forget me and go away, leaving me with those devil birds."

I promised him faithfully that I would not. Then we went through a very grim little pantomime. Proceeding to the centre of the arena-like space, I lifted the gun, and appeared to dash out Hans' brains with its butt. He fell upon his back, kicked about a little, and lay still. This finished Act 1.

Act 2 was that, capering like a brute of a Zulu executioner, I retired from my victim and hid myself in a bush on the edge of the plateau at a distance of forty yards. After this there was a pause. The place was intensely bright with sunshine and intensely silent; as silent as the skeletons of the murdered men about me; as silent as Hans, who lay there looking so very small and dead in that big theatre where no grass grew. It was an eerie wait in such surroundings, but at length the curtain rang up for Act 3.

In the infinite arch of blue above me I perceived a speck, no larger than a mote of dust. The aasvogel on watch up there far out of the range of man's vision had seen the deed, and, by sinking downwards, signalled it to his companions that were quartering the sky for fifty miles round;

for these birds prey by sight, not by smell. Down he came and down, and long before he had reached the neighbourhood of earth other specks appeared in the distant blue. Now he was not more than four or five hundred yards above me, and began to wheel, floating round the place upon his wide wings, and sinking as he wheeled. So he sank softly and slowly until he was about a hundred and fifty feet above Hans. Then suddenly he paused, hung quite steady for a few seconds, shut his wings and fell like a bolt, only opening them again just before he reached the earth.

Here he settled, tilting forward in that odd way which vultures have, and scrambling a few awkward paces until he gained his balance. Then he froze into immobility, gazing with in awful, stony glare at the prostrate Hans, who lay within about fifteen feet of him. Scarcely was this aasvogel down, when others, summoned from the depths of sky, did as he had done. They appeared, they sank, they wheeled, always from east to west, the way the sun travels. They hovered for a few seconds, then fell like stones, pitched on to their beaks, recovered themselves, waddled forward into line, and sat gazing at Hans. Soon there was a great ring of them about him, all immovable, all gazing, all waiting for something.

Presently that something appeared in the shape of an aasvogel which was nearly twice as big as any of the others. This was what the Boers and the natives call the "king vulture," one of which goes with every flock. He it is who rules the roost and also the carcass, which without his presence and permission none dare to attack. Whether this vile fowl is

of a different species from the others, or whether he is a bird of more vigorous growth and constitution that has outgrown the rest and thus become their overlord, is more than I can tell. At least it is certain, as I can testify from long and constant observation, that almost every flock of vultures has its king.

When this particular royalty had arrived, the other aasvogels, of which perhaps there were now fifty or sixty gathered round Hans, began to show signs of interested animation. They looked at the king bird, they looked at Hans, stretching out their naked red necks and winking their brilliant eyes. I, however, did not pay particular attention to those upon the earth, being amply occupied in watching their fellows in the air.

With delight I observed that the vulture is a very conservative creature. They all did what doubtless they have done since the days of Adam or earlier--wheeled, and then hung that little space of time before they dropped to the ground like lead. This, then, would be the moment at which to shoot them, when for four or five seconds they offered practically a sitting target. Now, at that distance, always under a hundred yards, I knew well that I could hit a tea plate every shot, and a vulture is much larger than a tea plate. So it seemed to me that, barring accidents, I had little to fear from the terrible trial of skill which lay before me. Again and again I covered the hovering birds with my rifle, feeling that if I had pressed the trigger I should have pierced them through.

Thinking it well to practise, I continued this game for a long while, till at last it came to an unexpected end. Suddenly I heard a scuffling sound. Dropping my glance I saw that the whole mob of aasvogels were rushing in upon Hans, helping themselves forward by flapping their great wings, and that about three feet in front of them was their king. Next instant Hans vanished, and from the centre of that fluffy, stinking mass there arose a frightful yell.

As a matter of fact, as I found afterwards, the king vulture had fastened on to his snub nose, whilst its dreadful companions, having seized other portions of his frame, were beginning to hang back after their fashion in order to secure some chosen morsel. Hans kicked and screamed, and I rushed in shouting, causing them to rise in a great, flapping cloud that presently vanished this way and that. Within a minute they had all gone, and the Hottentot and I were left alone.

"That is good," I said. "You played well."

"Good! baas," he answered, "and I with two cuts in my nose in which I can lay my finger, and bites all over me. Look how my trousers are torn. Look at my head--where is the hair? Look at my nose. Good! Played well! It is those verdomde aasvogels that played. Oh! baas, if you had seen and smelt them, you would not say that it was good. See, one more second and I, who have two nostrils, should have had four."

"Never mind, Hans," I said, "it is only a scratch, and I will make you a present of some new trousers. Also, here is tobacco for you. Come to the bush; let us talk."

So we went, and when Hans was a little composed I told him all that I had observed about the habits of the aasvogel in the air, and he told me all that he had observed about their habits on the ground, which, as I might not shoot them sitting, did not interest me. Still, he agreed with me that the right moment to fire would be just before they pounced.

Whilst we were still talking we heard a sound of shouts, and, looking over the brow of the hill that faced towards Umgungundhlovu, we saw a melancholy sight. Being driven up the slope towards us by three executioners and a guard of seven or eight soldiers, their hands tied behind their backs, were three men, one very old, one of about fifty years of age, and one a lad, who did not look more than eighteen. As I soon heard, they were of a single family, the grandfather, the father, and the eldest son, who had been seized upon some ridiculous charge of witchcraft, but really in order that the king might take their cattle.

Having been tried and condemned by the Nyangas, or witch-doctors, these poor wretches were now doomed to die. Indeed, not content with thus destroying the heads of the tribe, present and to come, for three generations, all their descendants and collaterals had already been wiped out by Dingaan, so that he might pose as sole heir to the family cattle.

Such were the dreadful cruelties that happened in Zululand in those days.