CHAPTER XIX. DEPART IN PEACE

A tall Kaffir, one of the king's household guards, who carried an assegai, came up to me and whispered:

"Hearken, little Son of George. The king would save you, if he can, because you are not Dutch, but English. Yet, know that if you try to cry out, if you even struggle, you die," and he lifted the assegai so as to be ready to plunge it through my heart.

Now I understood, and a cold sweat broke out all over me. My companions were to be murdered, every one! Oh! gladly would I have given my life to warn them. But alas! I could not, for the cloth upon my mouth was so thick that no sound could pass it.

One of the Zulus inserted a stick between the reeds of the fence. Working it to and fro sideways, he made an opening just in a line with my eyes--out of cruelty, I suppose, for now I must see everything.

For some time--ten minutes, I dare say--the dancing and beer-drinking went on. Then Dingaan rose from his chair and shook the hand of Retief warmly, bidding him "Hamba gachlé," that is, Depart gently, or in peace. He retreated towards the gate of the labyrinth, and as he went the Boers took off their hats, waving them in the air and cheering him. He was almost through it, and I began to breathe again.

Doubtless I was mistaken. After all, no treachery was intended.

In the very opening of the gate Dingaan turned, however, and said two words in Zulu which mean:

"Seize them!"

Instantly the warriors, who had now danced quite close and were waiting for these words, rushed upon the Boers. I heard Thomas Halstead call out in English:

"We are done for," and then add in Zulu, "Let me speak to the king!"

Dingaan heard also, and waved his hand to show that he refused to listen, and as he did so shouted thrice:

"Bulala abatagati!" that is, Slay the wizards!

I saw poor Halstead draw his knife and plunge it into a Zulu who was near him. The man fell, and again he struck at another soldier, cutting his throat. The Boers also drew their knives--those of them who had time--and tried to defend themselves against these black devils, who rushed on them in swarms. I heard afterwards that they succeeded in killing six or eight of them and wounding perhaps a score. But it was soon over, for what could men armed only with pocket-knives do against

such a multitude?

Presently, amidst a hideous tumult of shouts, groans, curses, prayers for mercy, and Zulu battle cries, the Boers were all struck down--yes, even the two little lads and the Hottentot servants. Then they were dragged away, still living, by the soldiers, their heels trailing on the ground, just as wounded worms or insects are dragged by the black ants.

Dingaan was standing by me now, laughing, his fat face working nervously.

"Come, Son of George," he said, "and let us see the end of these traitors to your sovereign."

Then I was pulled along to an eminence within the labyrinth, whence there was a view of the surrounding country. Here we waited a little while, listening to the tumult that grew more distant, till presently the dreadful procession of death reappeared, coming round the fence of the Great Kraal and heading straight for the Hill of Slaughter, Hloma Amabutu. Soon its slopes were climbed, and there among the dark-leaved bushes and the rocks the black soldiers butchered them, every one.

I saw and swooned away.

I believe that I remained senseless for many hours, though towards the

end of that time my swoon grew thin, as it were, and I heard a hollow voice speaking over me in Zulu.

"I am glad that the little Son of George has been saved," said the echoing voice, which I did not know, "for he has a great destiny and will be useful to the black people in time to come." Then the voice went on:

"O House of Senzangacona! now you have mixed your milk with blood, with white blood. Of that bowl you shall drink to the dregs, and afterwards must the bowl be shattered"; and the speaker laughed--a deep, dreadful laugh that I was not to hear again for years.

I heard him go away, shuffling along like some great reptile, and then, with an effort, opened my eyes. I was in a large hut, and the only light in the hut came from a fire that burned in its centre, for it was night time. A Zulu woman, young and good-looking, was bending over a gourd near the fire, doing something to its contents. I spoke to her light-headedly.

"O woman," I said, "is that a man who laughed over me?"

"Not altogether, Macumazahn," she answered in a pleasant voice. "That was Zikali, the Mighty Magician, the Counsellor of Kings, the Opener of Roads; he whose birth our grandfathers do not remember; he whose breath causes the trees to be torn out by the roots; he whom Dingaan fears and

obeys."

"Did he cause the Boers to be killed?" I asked.

"Mayhap," she answered. "Who am I that I should know of such matters?"

"Are you the woman who was sick whom I was sent to visit?" I asked again.

"Yes, Macumazahn, I was sick, but now I am well and you are sick, for so things go round. Drink this," and she handed me a gourd of milk.

"How are you named?" I inquired as I took it.

"Naya is my name," she replied, "and I am your jailer. Don't think that you can escape me, though, Macumazahn, for there are other jailers without who carry spears. Drink."

So I drank and bethought me that the draught might be poisoned. Yet so thirsty was I that I finished it, every drop.

"Now am I a dead man?" I asked, as I put down the gourd.

"No, no, Macumazahn," she who called herself Naya replied in a soft voice; "not a dead man, only one who will sleep and forget."

Then I lost count of everything and slept--for how long I know not.

When I awoke again it was broad daylight; in fact, the sun stood high in the heavens. Perhaps Naya had put some drug into my milk, or perhaps I had simply slept. I do not know. At any rate, I was grateful for that sleep, for without it I think that I should have gone mad. As it was, when I remembered, which it took me some time to do, for a while I went near to insanity.

I recollect lying there in that hut and wondering how the Almighty could have permitted such a deed as I had seen done. How could it be reconciled with any theory of a loving and merciful Father? Those poor Boers, whatever their faults, and they had many, like the rest of us, were in the main good and honest men according to their lights. Yet they had been doomed to be thus brutally butchered at the nod of a savage despot, their wives widowed, their children left fatherless, or, as it proved in the end, in most cases murdered or orphaned!

The mystery was too great--great enough to throw off its balance the mind of a young man who had witnessed such a fearsome scene as I have described.

For some days really I think that my reason hung just upon the edge of that mental precipice. In the end, however, reflection and education, of which I had a certain amount, thanks to my father, came to my aid. I recalled that such massacres, often on an infinitely larger scale,

had happened a thousand times in history, and that still through them, often, indeed, by means of them, civilisation has marched forward, and mercy and peace have kissed each other over the bloody graves of the victims.

Therefore even in my youth and inexperience I concluded that some ineffable purpose was at work through this horror, and that the lives of those poor men which had been thus sacrificed were necessary to that purpose. This may appear a dreadful and fatalistic doctrine, but it is one that is corroborated in Nature every day, and doubtless the sufferers meet with their compensations in some other state. Indeed, if it be not so, faith and all the religions are vain.

Or, of course, it may chance that such monstrous calamities happen, not through the will of the merciful Power of which I have spoken, but in its despite. Perhaps the devil of Scripture, at whom we are inclined to smile, is still very real and active in this world of ours. Perhaps from time to time some evil principle breaks into eruption, like the prisoned forces of a volcano, bearing death and misery on its wings, until in the end it must depart strengthless and overcome. Who can say?

The question is one that should be referred to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope of Rome in conclave, with the Lama of Thibet for umpire in case they disagreed. I only try to put down the thoughts that struck me so long ago as my mind renders them to-day. But very likely they are not quite the same thoughts, for a full generation has gone by

me since then, and in that time the intelligence ripens as wine does in a bottle.

Besides these general matters, I had questions of my own to consider during those days of imprisonment--for instance, that of my own safety, though of this, to be honest, I thought little. If I were going to be killed, I was going to be killed, and there was an end. But my knowledge of Dingaan told me that he had not massacred Retief and his companions for nothing. This would be but the prelude to a larger slaughter, for I had not forgotten what he said as to the sparing of Marie and the other hints he gave me.

From all this I concluded, quite rightly as it proved, that some general onslaught was being made upon the Boers, who probably would be swept out to the last man. And to think that here I was, a prisoner in a Kaffir kraal, with only a young woman as a jailer, and yet utterly unable to escape to warn them. For round my hut lay a courtyard, and round it again ran a reed fence about five feet six inches high. Whenever I looked over this fence, by night or by day, I saw soldiers stationed at intervals of about fifteen yards. There they stood like statues, their broad spears in their hands, all looking inwards towards the fence. There they stood--only at night their number was doubled. Clearly it was not meant that I should escape.

A week went by thus--believe me, a very terrible week. During that time my sole companion was the pretty young woman, Naya. We became friends

in a way and talked on a variety of subjects. Only, at the end of our conversations I always found that I had gained no information whatsoever about any matter of immediate interest. On such points as the history of the Zulu and kindred tribes, or the character of Chaka, the great king, or anything else that was remote she would discourse by the hour. But when we came to current events, she dried up like water on a red-hot brick. Still, Naya grew, or pretended to grow, quite attached to me. She even suggested naïvely that I might do worse than marry her, which she said Dingaan was quite ready to allow, as he was fond of me and thought I should be useful in his country. When I told her that I was already married, she shrugged her shining shoulders and asked with a laugh that revealed her beautiful teeth:

"What does that matter? Cannot a man have more wives than one? And, Macumazahn," she added, leaning forward and looking at me, "how do you know that you have even one? You may be divorced or a widower by now."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I? I mean nothing; do not look at me so fiercely, Macumazahn. Surely such things happen in the world, do they not?"

"Naya," I said, "you are two bad things--a bait and a spy--and you know it."

"Perhaps I do, Macumazahn," she answered. "Am I to blame for that, if my

life is on it, especially when I really like you for yourself?"

"I don't know," I said. "Tell me, when am I going to get out of this place?"

"How can I tell you, Macumazahn?" Naya replied, patting my hand in her genial way, "but I think before long. When you are gone, Macumazahn, remember me kindly sometimes, as I have really tried to make you as comfortable as I could with a watcher staring through every straw in the hut."

I said whatever seemed to be appropriate, and next morning my deliverance came. While I was eating my breakfast in the courtyard at the back of the hut, Naya thrust her handsome and pleasant face round the corner and said that there was a messenger to see me from the king. Leaving the rest of the meal unswallowed, I went to the doorway of the yard and there found my old friend, Kambula.

"Greeting, Inkoos," he said to me; "I am come to take you back to Natal with a guard. But I warn you to ask me no questions, for if you do I must not answer them. Dingaan is ill, and you cannot see him, nor can you see the white praying-man, or anyone; you must come with me at once."

"I do not want to see Dingaan," I replied, looking him in the eyes.

"I understand," answered Kambula; "Dingaan's thoughts are his thoughts and your thoughts are your thoughts, and perhaps that is why he does not want to see you. Still, remember, Inkoos, that Dingaan has saved your life, snatching you unburned out of a very great fire, perhaps because you are of a different sort of wood, which he thinks it a pity to burn. Now, if you are ready, let us go."

"I am ready," I answered.

At the gate I met Naya, who said:

"You never thought to say good-bye to me, White Man, although I have tended you well. Ah! what else could I expect? Still, I hope that if I should have to fly from this land for my life, as may chance, you will do for me what I have done for you."

"That I will," I answered, shaking her by the hand; and, as it happened, in after years I did.

Kambula led me, not through the kraal Umgungundhlovu, but round it. Our road lay immediately past the death mount, Hloma Amabutu, where the vultures were still gathered in great numbers. Indeed, it was actually my lot to walk over the new-picked bones of some of my companions who had been despatched at the foot of the hill. One of these skeletons I recognised by his clothes to be that of Samuel Esterhuizen, a very good fellow, at whose side I had slept during all our march. His empty

eye-sockets seemed to stare at me reproachfully, as though they asked me why I remained alive when he and all his brethren were dead. I echoed the question in my own mind. Why of that great company did I alone remain alive?

An answer seemed to rise within me: That I might be one of the instruments of vengeance upon that devilish murderer, Dingaan. Looking upon those poor shattered and desecrated frames that had been men, I swore in my heart that if I lived I would not fail in that mission. Nor did I fail, although the history of that great repayment cannot be told in these pages.

Turning my eyes from this dreadful sight, I saw that on the opposite slope, where we had camped during our southern trek from Delagoa, still stood the huts and wagons of the Reverend Mr. Owen. I asked Kambula whether he and his people were also dead.

"No, Inkoos," he answered; "they are of the Children of George, as you are, and therefore the king has spared them, although he is going to send them out of the country."

This was good news, so far as it went, and I asked again if Thomas Halstead had also been spared, since he, too, was an Englishman.

"No," said Kambula. "The king wished to save him, but he killed two of our people and was dragged off with the rest. When the slayers got to

their work it was too late to stay their hands."

Again I asked whether I might not join Mr. Owen and trek with him, to which Kambula answered briefly:

"No, Macumazahn; the king's orders are that you must go by yourself."

So I went; nor did I ever again meet Mr. Owen or any of his people. I believe, however, that they reached Durban safely and sailed away in a ship called the Comet.

In a little while we came to the two milk trees by the main gate of the kraal, where much of our saddlery still lay scattered about, though the guns had gone. Here Kambula asked me if I could recognise my own saddle.

"There it is," I answered, pointing to it; "but what is the use of a saddle without a horse?"

"The horse you rode has been kept for you, Macumazahn," he replied.

Then he ordered one of the men with us to bring the saddle and bridle, also some other articles which I selected, such as a couple of blankets, a water-bottle, two tins containing coffee and sugar, a little case of medicines, and so forth.

About a mile further on I found one of my horses tethered by an outlying

guard hut, and noted that it had been well fed and cared for. By Kambula's leave I saddled it and mounted. As I did so, he warned me that if I tried to ride away from the escort I should certainly be killed, since even if I escaped them, orders had been given throughout the land to put an end to me should I be seen alone.

I replied that, unarmed as I was, I had no idea of making any such attempt. So we went forward, Kambula and his soldiers walking or trotting at my side.

For four full days we journeyed thus, keeping, so far as I could judge, about twenty or thirty miles to the east of that road by which I had left Zululand before and re-entered it with Retief and his commission. Evidently I was an object of great interest to the Zulus of the country through which we passed, perhaps because they knew me to be the sole survivor of all the white men who had gone up to visit the king. They would come down in crowds from the kraals and stare at me almost with awe, as though I were a spirit and not a man. Only, not one of them would say anything to me, probably because they had been forbidden to do so. Indeed, if I spoke to any of them, invariably they turned and walked or ran out of hearing.

It was on the evening of the fourth day that Kambula and his soldiers received some news which seemed to excite them a great deal. A messenger in a state of exhaustion, who had an injury to the fleshy part of his left arm, which looked to me as though it had been caused by a bullet,

appeared out of the bush and said something of which, by straining my ears, I caught two words--"Great slaughter." Then Kambula laid his fingers on his lips as a signal for silence and led the man away, nor did I see or hear any more of him. Afterwards I asked Kambula who had suffered this great slaughter, whereon he stared at me innocently and replied that he did not know of what I was speaking.

"What is the use of lying to me, Kambula, seeing that I shall find out the truth before long?"

"Then, Macumazahn, wait till you do find it out, and may it please you," he replied, and went off to speak with his people at a distance.

All that night I heard them talking off and on--I, who lay awake plunged into new miseries. I was sure that some other dreadful thing had happened. Probably Dingaan's armies had destroyed all the Boers, and, if so, oh! what had become of Marie? Was she dead, or had she perhaps been taken prisoner, as Dingaan had told me would be done for his own vile purposes? For aught I knew she might now be travelling under escort to Umgungundhlovu, as I was travelling to Natal.

The morning came at last, and that day, about noon, we reached a ford of the Tugela which luckily was quite passable. Here Kambula bade me farewell, saying that his mission was finished. Also he delivered to me a message that I was to give from Dingaan to the English in Natal. It was to this effect: That he, Dingaan, had killed the Boers who came to

visit him because he found out that they were traitors to their chief, and therefore not worthy to live. But that he loved the Sons of George, who were true-hearted people, and therefore had nothing to fear from him. Indeed, he begged them to come and see him at his Great Place, where he would talk matters over with them.

I said that I would deliver the message if I met any English people, but, of course, I could not say whether they would accept Dingaan's invitation to Umgungundhlovu. Indeed, I feared lest that town might have acquired such a bad name that they would prefer not to come there without an army.

Then, before Kambula had time to take any offence, I shook his outstretched hand and urged my horse into the stream. I never met Kambula again living, though after the battle of Blood River I saw him dead.

Once over the Tugela I rode forward for half a mile or so till I was clear of the bush and reeds that grew down to the water, fearing lest the Zulus should follow and take me back to Dingaan to explain my rather imprudent message. Seeing no signs of them, I halted, a desolate creature in a desolate country which I did not know, wondering what I should do and whither I should ride. Then it was that there happened one of the strangest experiences of all my adventurous life.

As I sat dejectedly upon my horse, which was also dejected, amidst some

tumbled rocks that at a distant period in the world's history had formed the bank of the great river, I heard a voice which seemed familiar to me say:

"Baas, is that you, baas?"

I looked round and could see no one, so, thinking that I had been deceived by my imagination, I held my peace.

"Baas," said the voice again, "are you dead or are you alive? Because, if you are dead, I don't want to have anything to do with spooks until I am obliged."

Now I answered, "Who is it that speaks, and whence?" though, really, as I could see no one, I thought that I must be demented.

The next moment my horse snorted and shied violently, and no wonder, for out of a great ant-bear hole not five paces away appeared a yellow face crowned with black wool, in which was set a broken feather. I looked at the face and the face looked at me.

"Hans," I said, "is it you? I thought that you were killed with the others."

"And I thought that you were killed with the others, baas. Are you sure that you are alive?"

"What are you doing there, you old fool?" I asked.

"Hiding from the Zulus, baas. I heard them on the other bank, and then saw a man on a horse crossing the river, and went to ground like a jackal. I have had enough of Zulus."

"Come out," I said, "and tell me your story."

He emerged, a thin and bedraggled creature, with nothing left on him but the upper part of a pair of old trousers, but still Hans, undoubtedly Hans. He ran to me, and seizing my foot, kissed it again and again, weeping tears of joy and stuttering:

"Oh, baas, to think that I should find you who were dead, alive, and find myself alive, too. Oh! baas, never again will I doubt about the Big Man in the sky of whom your reverend father is so fond. For after I had tried all our own spirits, and even those of my ancestors, and met with nothing but trouble, I said the prayer that the reverend taught us, asking for my daily bread because I am so very hungry. Then I looked out of the hole and there you were. Have you anything to eat about you, baas?"

As it chanced, in my saddle-bags I had some biltong that I had saved against emergencies. I gave it to him, and he devoured it as a famished hyena might do, tearing off the tough meat in lumps and bolting them

whole. When it was all gone he licked his fingers and his lips and stood still staring at me.

"Tell me your story," I repeated.

"Baas, I went to fetch the horses with the others, and ours had strayed. I got up a tree to look for them. Then I heard a noise, and saw that the Zulus were killing the Boers; so knowing that presently they would kill us, too, I stopped in that tree, hiding myself as well as I could in a stork's nest. Well, they came and assegaied all the other Totties, and stood under my tree cleaning their spears and getting their breath, for one of my brothers had given them a good run. But they never saw me, although I was nearly sick from fear on the top of them. Indeed, I was sick, but into the nest.

"Well, I sat in that nest all day, though the sun cooked me like beef on a stick; and when night came I got down and ran, for I knew it was no good to stop to look for you, and 'every man for himself when a black devil is behind you,' as your reverend father says. All night I ran, and in the morning hid up in a hole. Then when night came again I went on running. Oh! they nearly caught me once or twice, but never quite, for I know how to hide, and I kept where men do not go. Only I was hungry, hungry; yes, I lived on snails and worms, and grass like an ox, till my middle ached. Still, at last I got across the river and near to the camp.

"Then just before the day broke and I was saying, 'Now, Hans, although your heart is sad, your stomach will rejoice and sing,' what did I see but those Zulu devils, thousands of them, rush down on the camp and kill all the poor Boers. Men and women and the little children, they killed them by the hundred, till at last other Boers came and drove them away, although they took all the cattle with them. Well, as I was sure that they would come back, I did not stop there. I ran down to the side of the river, and have been crawling about in the reeds for days, living on the eggs of water-birds and a few small fish that I caught in the pools, till this morning, when I heard the Zulus again and slipped up here into this hole. Then you came and stood over the hole, and for a long while I thought you were a ghost.

"But now we are together once more and all is right, just as what your reverend father always said it would be with those who go to church on Sunday, like me when there was nothing else to do." And again he fell to kissing my foot.

"Hans," I said, "you saw the camp. Was the Missie Marie there?"

"Baas, how can I tell, who never went into it? But the wagon she slept in was not there; no, nor that of the Vrouw Prinsloo or of the Heer Meyer."

"Thank God!" I gasped, then added: "Where were you trying to get to, Hans, when you ran away from the camp?"

"Baas, I thought perhaps that the Missie and the Prinsloos and the Meyers had gone to that fine farm which you pegged out, and that I would go and see if they were there. Because if so, I was sure that they would be glad to know that you were really dead, and give me some food in payment for my news. But I was afraid to walk across the open veld for fear lest the Zulus should see me and kill me. Therefore I came round through the thick bush along the river, where one can only travel slowly, especially if hollow," and he patted his wasted stomach.

"But, Hans," I asked, "are we near my farm where I set the men to build the houses on the hill above the river?"

"Of course, baas. Has your brain gone soft that you cannot find your way about the veld? Four, or at most five, hours on horseback, riding slow, and you are there."

"Come on, Hans," I said, "and be quick, for I think that the Zulus are not far behind."

So we started, Hans hanging to my stirrup and guiding me, for I knew well enough that although he had never travelled this road, his instinct for locality would not betray a coloured man, who can find his way across the pathless veld as surely as a buck or a bird of the air.

On we went over the rolling plain, and as we travelled I told him my

story, briefly enough, for my mind was too torn with fears to allow me to talk much. He, too, told me more of his escape and adventures. Now I understood what was that news which had so excited Kambula and his soldiers. It was evident that the Zulu impis had destroyed a great number of the Boers whom they found unprepared for attack, and then had been driven off by reinforcements that arrived from other camps.

That was why I had been kept prisoner for all those days. Dingaan feared lest I should reach Natal in time to warn his victims!