

CHAPTER XXVI

HOW GAASHA BROUGHT GOOD LUCK

When Ralph returned from pursuing the Zulus, as he drew near to the laager he lingered a little behind the others, for he was very weary of all this work of killing, also the flesh-wound that he had got from the Kaffir's spear having stiffened pained him when his horse cantered. There was no more danger now, for the savages were gone, leaving their path marked by the corpses of those who had been shot down by the Boers, or of men who had limped away wounded either to die upon the road or to be killed by their comrades because their case was hopeless. Following this black trail of death backwards Ralph rode on, and when he was within a hundred yards of the waggons halted his horse to study the scene. He thought that he would never see such another, although, in fact, that at the Blood River when we conquered the Zulu king, Dingaan, was even more strange and terrible.

The last crimson rays of the setting sun were flooding the plain with light. Blood-red they shone upon the spear-torn canvas of the waggons and upon the stained and trampled veldt. Even the bodies of the Kaffirs looked red as they lay in every shape and attitude; some as though they slept; some with outstretched arms and spears gripped tight; some with open mouths as they had died shouting their way-cry. Ralph looked at them and was thankful that it was not we white people who lay thus, as it might well have been. Then, just as he was turning towards the laager, he thought that he saw something move in a tussock of thick

grass, and rode towards it. Behind the tussock lay the body of a young Kaffir, not an uncommon sight just there, but Ralph was so sure that he had seen it move that, stirred by an idle curiosity, he dismounted from his horse to examine it. This he did carefully, but the only hurt that he could see was a flesh wound caused by a slug upon the foot, not serious in any way, but such as might very well prevent a man from running.

"This fellow is shamming dead," he thought to himself, and lifted his gun, for in those times we could not afford to nurse sick Kaffirs.

Then of a sudden the young man who had seemed to be a corpse rose to his knees, and, clasping his hands, began to beg for mercy. Instead of shooting him at once, as most Boers would have done, Ralph, who was tender-hearted, hesitated and listened while the Kaffir, a pleasant-faced lad and young, besought him for his life.

"Why should I spare you," asked Ralph, who understood his talk well, "seeing that, like all the rest of these, you set upon my people to murder them?"

"Nay, chief," answered the young man, "it is not so. I am no Zulu. I belong to another tribe, and was but a slave and a carrier in the army of Kalipi, for I was taken prisoner and forced to carry mats and food and water," and he pointed to a bundle and some gourds that lay beside him.

"It may be so," answered Ralph, "but the dog shares his master's fate."

"Chief," pleaded the man, "spare me. Although it prevented me from running away with the others, my wound is very slight and will be healed in a day or two, and then I will serve you as your slave and be faithful to you all my life. Spare me and I shall bring you good luck."

"I need that enough," said Ralph, "and I am sure that you are no Zulu, for a Zulu would not stoop to beg for his life thus," and he stood thinking.

While he thought, Jan, who had seen him from the laager, came up behind.

"What are you doing, son," he asked in an angry voice, "talking to this black devil here alone among the dead? Stand aside and let me settle him if you have not the heart," and he lifted his gun.

"No, father," said Ralph, pushing it aside, "this man is not a Zulu; he is but a slave-carrier and he has prayed me to spare his life, swearing that he will serve me faithfully. Also he says that he brings good luck."

"Certainly he brought good luck to these," answered Jan, pointing to the scattered dead with his hand, and laughing grimly. "Allemachter! son, you must be mad to play the fool thus, for doubtless the sneaking villain will murder you the first time your back is turned. Come, stand aside and I will finish it."

Now the young man, whose name was Gaasha, seeing that he was about to be shot, threw himself upon the ground, and clasping Ralph round the knees, implored for mercy.

"Save me, Baas," he prayed, "save me, and you will always be glad of it, for I tell you I bring you good luck, I tell you I bring you good luck."

"Father," said Ralph, setting his mouth, "if you kill this Kaffir it will be a cause of quarrel between us, and we never quarrelled yet."

"Quarrel or no quarrel, he shall die," said Jan in a rage, for he thought it the strangest folly that Ralph should wish to spare a black man.

At that moment, however, something seemed to strike his mind, for his face grew puzzled, and he looked about him almost anxiously.

"Where have I seen it before?" he said, as though he were speaking to himself. "The veldt all red with blood and sunset, the laager behind and the Kaffir with the wounded foot holding Ralph by the knees. Allemachter! I know. It was that day in the sit-kammer[*] at the stead yonder, when the little doctress, Sihamba, made me look into her eyes; yes, yes, I have seen it all in the eyes of Sihamba. Well, let the lad live, for without a doubt Sihamba did not show me this picture that should be for nothing. Moreover, although I am stupid, as your mother says, I have learned that there are many things in the world which we

cannot understand but which play a part in our lives nevertheless."

[*] Sitting room.

So the lad Gaasha was brought to the laager, and upon the prayer of Jan and Ralph, the commandant gave him his life, ordering, however, that he should sleep outside the waggons.

"Well," I said when I heard the tale, "one thing is, that you will never see him again, for he will be off during the night back to his friends the Zulus." But I was wrong, for next morning there was Gaasha, and there he remained even after his foot was quite well, making the best Kaffir servant that ever I had to do with.

After that day we saw no more of the Zulus at Vetchkop, although later with the help of other Boers we attacked them twice, killing more than four thousand of them, and capturing six thousand head of cattle, so that they fled north for good and all, and founded the nation of the Matabele far away.

But oh! our fate was hard there at Vetchkop; never have I known worse days. The Zulus had taken away all our cattle, so that we could not even shift the waggons from the scene of the fight, but must camp there amidst the vultures and the mouldering skeletons, for the dead were so many that it was impossible to bury them all. We sent messengers to other parties of Boers for help, and while they were gone we starved, for there was no food to eat, and game was very scarce. Yes, it was

a piteous sight to see the children cry for food and gnaw old bits of leather or strips of hide cut from Kaffir shields to stay the craving of their stomachs. Some of them died of that hunger, and I grew so thin that when I chanced to see myself in a pool of water where I went to wash I started back frightened.

At length, when we were all nearly dead, some oxen came and with them we dragged a few of the waggons to Moroko, where an English clergyman and his wife, taking pity on us, gave us corn, for which reason I have always held that among the British the clergymen must be a great deal better than the rest of that proud and worthless race, for it is true that we judge of people as they deal by us. Yes, and I will go so far as to say that I do not believe that the Reverend Mr. Owen, the English missionary at the kraal of the Zulu King Dingaan, did in truth advise him to massacre Retief and his seventy Boers, as was generally reported among my countrymen.

Well, after Moselikatse's Zulus were finally defeated the question arose whether we should proceed to Zoutpansberg and settle there, or follow our brethren who in large numbers had already crossed the Quathlamba Mountains into Natal under the leadership of Retief. In the end we decided for Natal because it was nearer the sea, for in those days we never dreamed that the treacherous British Government would steal that land also; so trekking slowly, we headed for Van Reenen's Pass, our party then numbering thirty waggons and about sixty white people.

It was when we were about four days trek, or sixty miles, from the

pass that one evening, as we sat eating our food, Jan, Ralph, and I--I remember it was the fried steaks of an eland that Ralph had shot--the lad Gaasha, who had now served us for some six months, came up to the fire, and having saluted Ralph, squatted down before him Kaffir fashion, saying that he had a favour to ask.

"Speak on," said Ralph. "What is it?"

"Baas," replied Gaasha, "it is this; I want a week or ten days leave of absence to visit my people."

"You mean that you want to desert," I put in.

"No, lady," answered Gaasha; "you know that I love the Baas who saved my life far too well ever to wish to leave him. I desire only to see my parents and to tell them that I am happy, for doubtless they think me dead. The Baas proposes to cross into Natal by Van Reenen's Pass, does he not? Well, not so very far from my home, although none would guess it unless he knew the way, is another pass called Oliver's Hook, and by that pass, after I have spoken with my father and my mother if they still live, I would cross the Quathlamba, finding the Baas again on the further side of the mountains, as I can easily do."

"I think that I will let you go as I can trust you, Gaasha," said Ralph, "but tell me the name of your home, that I may know where to send to seek you if you should not come back as you promise."

"Have I not said that I will come back, Baas, unless the lions or the Zulus should eat me on the way? But the name of the house of my tribe is Umpondwana. It is only a little tribe, for the Zulus killed many of us in the time of Chaka, but their house is a very fine house."

"What does Umpondwana mean?" asked Ralph idly as he lit his pipe.

"It means the Mountain of the Man's Hand, Baas."

Ralph let his pipe fall to the ground, and I saw his face turn white beneath the sunburn, while of a sudden his grey eyes looked as though they were about to leap from their sockets.

"Why is it called the Mountain of the Man's Hand?" he asked in a hollow voice. "Speak quick now, and do not lie to me."

Gaasha looked up at him astonished. "How should I know, Baas, when the place was named so before I was born, and none have told me? But I think that it may be because upon one of the slopes of the mountain, which has great cliffs of red rock, are five ridges, which, seen from the plain below, look like the four fingers and thumb of a man. Also the place has another name, which means 'where the water springs out of the rock,' because from between two of the ridges, those that are like the thumb and first finger, flows a stream which comes from the heart of the mountain."

"On which side of the mountain are the ridges and the stream?" asked

Ralph in the same unnatural voice.

"Baas, when the sun rises it strikes on them."

Now Ralph swung to and fro like a drunken man, and had I not put my arm about him I believe that he would have fallen.

"It is the mountain of my vision," he gasped.

"Be not foolish," I answered, for I feared lest when he found that all this strange resemblance was a chance, the bitterness of his disappointment might overwhelm him. "Be not foolish, son; are there not many hills in this great land with ridges on their flanks, and streams of water running down them?"

Then, as Ralph seemed unable to answer me, I asked of Gaasha:

"Who is the chief of this tribe of yours?"

"He is named Koraanu," he answered, "if he still lives, but a man I met some months ago told me that he has been dead these two years, and that she who used to rule us when I was a little child had come back from the lands whither she had wandered, and is now Inkoosikaas of the Umpondwana."

"What is the name of this chieftainness?" I asked in the midst of a great silence.

Gaasha answered at once; that is, after he had taken a pinch of snuff, but to us it seemed a year before the words crossed his lips.

"Her name, lady," and he sneezed, "is"--and he sneezed again, rocking himself to and fro. Then slowly wiping away the tears which the snuff had brought to his eyes with the back of his hand he said, "Ow! this is the best of snuff, and I thank the Baas for giving it to me."

"Answer," roared Jan, speaking for the first time, and in such a fierce voice that Gaasha sprang to his feet and began to run away.

"Come back, Gaasha, come back," I called, and he came doubtfully, for Gaasha was not very brave, and ever since he had wished to shoot him he trembled even at the sight of Jan. "Be silent, you fool," I whispered to the latter as the lad drew near, then said aloud, "Now, Gaasha."

"Lady," he answered, "it is indeed as I have told you; the Baas gave me the snuff a long time ago; he took it out of the ear-boxes of the dead men at Vetchkop. He gave it to me. I did not steal it. He will say so himself."

"Never mind the snuff, Gaasha," I said in a voice half-choked with doubt and anxiety, for the sight of Ralph's piteous face and the strangeness of it all were fast overwhelming me, "but tell us what is the name of this chieftainess whom you have heard is now the ruler of your tribe?"

"Her name, lady," he answered, much relieved, "why it is well known, for though she is small, it is said that she is the best of doctresses and rain-makers."

Now Jan could no longer be restrained, for stretching out his great hand he gripped Gaasha by the throat, saying:

"Accursed swartzel, if you do not tell us the name at once I will kill you."

"Madman," I exclaimed, "how can the lad speak while you are choking him?"

Then Jan shifted his grip and Gaasha began to cry for pity.

"The name, the name," said Jan.

"Why should I hide it? Have I not told it? Baas, it is Sihamba Ngenyanga."

As the words passed his lips Jan let go of him so suddenly that Gaasha fell to the ground and sat there staring at us, for without doubt he thought that we had all gone mad.

Jan looked up to the skies and said, "Almighty, I thank Thee, Who canst make dreams to fly to the heart of a man as a night-bird to its nest through the darkness, and Who, because of what I saw in the eyes of

Sihamba, didst turn aside my gun when it was pointed at the breast of this Kaffir."

Then he looked at Ralph, and was quiet, for Ralph had swooned away.