

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### THE COMING OF THE IMPI

Sihamba had not very long to wait, for on the evening of the fifth day from the starting of the messengers they came back at great speed, having run so fast that they could scarcely speak for want of breath, and telling her that a Zulu impi, numbering more than three thousand spears, was advancing upon the Umpondwana to destroy them. It seemed that long before the king's oxen had been found mixed with her herd it had been reported to Dingaan that Sihamba had stolen them, which was not altogether strange, seeing that Swart Piet travelled with the impi. As she suspected, he had caused the oxen to be stolen, and now he had fixed the deed upon her, knowing well that Dingaan only sought a pretext to destroy her tribe, with which the Zulus had an ancient quarrel.

Now there was but one thing to be done--to make ready their defence, so, without more ado, Sihamba summoned her council and told them that a Zulu impi was at hand to eat them up because of the white cattle that had been placed among the herds. Then the councillors wrung their hands, and some of them shed tears even, although they were aged men, for the name of the Zulus struck terror to their hearts, and they expected nothing less than death for themselves, their wives, and their children.

"It is best that we should fly while there is yet time," said the captain of the council.

"There is no time," answered Sihamba; "the impi will be here by dawn and will cut you up upon the plain."

"What then shall we do?" they asked; "we who are already dead."

"Do?" she cried. "You shall fight as your fathers fought before you, and beat back these dogs of Dingaan. If you will but be brave, what have you to fear from them? You have water, you have food, you have spears, and even the Zulus have not wings like eagles with which to fly over your walls of cliff. Let them come, and if you will but obey me, I promise you that they shall return again to make report to the 'Elephant' many fewer than they left his kraal."

So the Umpondwana made ready to fight, not because they loved it, but because they must, for they knew that no humbleness would help them in face of the spears of Dingaan. The cattle were driven into the centre kraal, and great supplies of grass and green corn were cut to feed them. Except for one manhole the pass leading to the top of the mountain was closed, and the schanzes, or walls, which protected the mouth of the river that welled from the hillside between the eastern ridges were strengthened and garrisoned. Here, as Sihamba knew, was their weak place, for this river flowed out beneath the impregnable precipices of rock, and to it they must look for their main supply of water, since, although the spring upon the tableland, if husbanded, would suffice for a supply to the tribe, it was not sufficient for the cattle. It was for this reason that Sihamba wished to turn the kine loose and let the Zulus capture them if they would, for she knew that then they could never take

the mountain or harm a hair of the head of one of its inhabitants. But the Umpondwana were greedy, and would not consent to the loss of their cattle, forgetting that cattle are of no value to dead men. They said that they could very well defend the schanzes which surrounded the source of the river, and that from it sufficient water could be carried to keep the beasts alive, even if the siege were long.

"As you will," answered Sihamba shortly, "but see that you do defend them when the Zulu warriors leap upon the walls, for if you fail then you will lose cattle and life together."

All this time, according to her daily custom, Suzanne had been seated in her chair of rock upon the highest point of the precipice looking for that help which never came. Presently, as she watched with sad eyes, far away upon the plain she saw a cloud of dust in which moved and shone the sheen of spears. Now she climbed down from her seat, and ran to seek Sihamba, whom she found surrounded by her councillors.

"What is it, Swallow?" asked the little chieftainess looking up, though already she had guessed the answer.

Suzanne told her, adding, "Who can it be that travels towards the mountain with so great a force?"

"Lady Swallow," said Sihamba gravely, "it is an army of the Zulus sent by Dingaan to destroy us, and with them marches Bull-Head." And she told her of the trick of the cattle and of what the messengers had seen.

Suzanne heard, and her face grew white as the goatskin cloak she wore.

"Then at last the long story is at an end," she faltered, for she knew the terrible prowess of the Zulus, and how none could stand before their onslaught.

"Yes, of that impi there is an end," answered Sihamba proudly, "if these children of mine will but take heart and fight as their fathers fought. Fear not, Lady Swallow, nothing that has not wings can storm the mountain of Umpondwana."

But for all that she could say Suzanne still felt much afraid, which was not strange, for she knew that the heart was out of these soldiers of Sihamba, and knew, moreover, that a Zulu army did not dare to be defeated, for which reason it must either take the mountain or fight till it was destroyed.

Now all was confusion; the horns blew and women wailed, while the captains of the Umpondwana issued their commands, and the men piled up stones upon the brink of the precipice to roll down upon the foe, and drove the herds of cattle into the great kraal upon the tableland.

Marching quickly, the impi drew near and the defenders could see that it numbered about four thousand spears and was composed of two separate regiments. At a distance of a mile it halted and throwing out horns or wings surrounded the mountain, up the slopes of which it advanced in a

thin circle, much as beaters do who are driving game to a certain point. As the circle drew nearer to the cliffs, it thickened, having less ground to cover, though still there was a gap here and there.

Presently those who were watching saw a man dart through one of these gaps and run up hill at great speed, followed by Zulu soldiers, who tried to kill him. But he was the swifter of foot, moreover he knew the path, so that before they could come up with him he reached the great stone walls which were built about the source of the river, and was dragged over them by the defenders.

A while later this man appeared upon the top of the mountain and proved to be none other than Zinti, who had returned from his errand, and, having news to tell, risked his life to pass through the impi before the stronghold was altogether surrounded. Sihamba received him at once, Suzanne standing at her side, and bade him be brief for she had little time to listen to long stories.

"I will be brief," Zinti answered. "Lady, as you bade me I crossed the mountains by the road of which you told me. It is a good road for men on foot or horseback, but waggons could not travel it. Having reached the plain on the further side I followed the bank of the river, till suddenly I came in sight of thirty waggons drawn up in a laager upon a knoll of ground, and among the waggons I saw Boers with their wives and children. I tried to go up to speak to them, but a young Boer, seeing me, shot at me with his gun, so I thought it safer to lie hid. At nightfall, however, I met the driver of one of the waggons, a Kaffir

man, at some distance from the laager, where he was watching by a pit made to catch bucks, and fell into talk with him. He told me that this was a party of the Boers who had trekked from Cape Colony, and were taking possession of Natal, and that there were other such parties scattered about the country. He said that in this party there were five-and-twenty men with women and children, but he did not know the names of any of them. Also he told me that he meant to run away, as he heard that Dingaan was going to attack the white people, and was sure that if he did so they would be eaten up, for these Boers, thinking themselves quite safe, had grown very careless, and neither made their laager as strong as it should be nor set any watch at night. Having learned this I returned at once to make report to you, nor did I come too quickly, for the Zulus nearly caught me as I passed their ranks. I saw Bull-Head as I ran; he is riding a brown horse, and seems quite recovered from his wound."

"How far is the Boer laager from this place?" asked Sihamba before Suzanne could speak.

"Lady, a man on a good horse could reach it in seven hours, nor is it possible to mistake the way. After crossing the plain you enter the gorge by the saw-edged rock yonder, and follow its windings across the mountains till you come out the other side, where the river runs down to the flat country. Then you can keep along the bank of the river as I did when I went, or if you wish to go more quickly you must head for a large white-topped hill, or koppie, which can be seen from the mountains, and when you come to it you will find the Boer laager upon the knoll at its

foot, but near to the banks of the river, which winds round it."

"Oh! let us go; let us go quickly," said Suzanne springing to her feet, for the thought even of seeing a white man again made her drunk with hope.

"Alas! sister," answered Sihamba sadly, "an hour ago we might have gone, or rather you might have gone, mounted on the great schimmel, but now--look," and she pointed to where the Zulus clustered like bees along the banks of the river by which the path ran. "See," she added, "there is but one road out of this stronghold, for nowhere else can the surest-footed climber in the world descend its cliffs, no, not with a rope to help him, and that road is thick with Zulu spears; moreover, a certain man whom you do not wish to see waits for you upon it."

Suzanne looked. "Too late," she moaned. "Oh! surely my God has forsaken me! Within six hours of safety and doomed to perish here; oh! surely my God has forsaken me!" and she burst out weeping in the bitterness of her disappointed hope.

"Say not so," answered Sihamba gently, "for I think that the Great one whom you worship will save you yet."

As she spoke a messenger arrived saying that the Zulus had sent forward heralds who desired to speak with her, and that these heralds waited within earshot of the first wall.

"I will come," said Sihamba, and she passed down the cleft and through the man hole into the fortifications which were built about the source of the river. But she would not allow Suzanne to accompany her.

When she reached the outer wall she climbed it and stood upon it, for Sihamba was a woman who knew no fear, and there, about forty paces away, she saw three great Zulus standing, and with them him whom she dreaded more than all the Zulus on the earth--Piet Van Vooren himself. When the Zulu captains caught sight of her upon the wall, they jeered aloud and asked whether this was indeed Sihamba Ngenyanga, or if a she-monkey had been sent to talk with them.

"I am Sihamba," she answered quietly, "or I am a monkey, as it may please you, though the white man with you can tell you what I am."

"I can," said Piet with a laugh. "You are a witch and a thief, and the fate that I promised you long ago is with you at last."

"Murderer," mocked Sihamba in answer, "I see Death standing behind you, and with him shadows of the Fear to come. But I would speak with these chiefs and not with an outcast half-breed. Tell me, chiefs, why do you come up against my stronghold with so great a force?"

"Because that 'Elephant whose tread shakes the earth,' our master, Dingaan the king, has sent us," answered the spokesman of the captains.

"Say, now, on what errand, chief?"



"On this errand; to take your stronghold and cattle, to burn your kraal, and to kill your people, all of them save the marriageable girls and such children as are old enough to travel, who must be brought with the cattle to Dingaan. But you yourself and the white woman who is called Swallow who rules with you are to be handed over to Bull-Head here to do with as he will, for that is the bargain between him and the king."

"And why are these things to come upon us who have done no wrong?" asked Sihamba.

"Why, little woman!" answered the chief, "because you have dared to steal cattle from the king's herd, even the royal white cattle; yes, and they have been traced to your mountain and seen among your oxen."

"It is true that the cattle are here," said Sihamba, "but it is not true that we have stolen them, seeing that they were lifted by the white man, Bull-Head, and mixed up with our herds to bring us into trouble with the king."

"A fit tale for the king's ears," replied the captain, laughing. "Why it was Bull-Head who told the king of the theft; but let that pass. Dingaan the king is merciful, and he makes you this offer through my mouth: If you will return the cattle together with all your own by way of fine, and hand over your councillors and head men to be killed, then he will grant the rest their lives. But all the young men and the girls must come with me to pass into the service of the king, the married women

and the children going where they will. Perhaps Bull-Head here will take them with yourself and White Swallow. What is your word, little chieftainess?"

"My word is that we will have none of such mercy. It is better that we should die together, but I tell you, men of Dingaan, that these rocks will be white with your bones before ever you drive our cattle and maidens back to Dingaan."

"As you will, little chieftainess. We captains of the Zulus have heard many such proud words in our time, but ah! where are those who spoke them? Ask the jackals and the vultures, little chieftainess."