

## CHAPTER XXIX

### THIRST

When Sihamba finished her talk with the captains of Dingaan the sun was already sinking. Still the Umpondwana thought that the Zulus would attack at once, but these shouted to the defenders that they might rest easily till the dawn, since they wished to have daylight by which to divide the spoil. And at daylight the attack came. Driving the men of Bull-Head in front of them much against their will, for they knew these to be cowards, and wished to make mock of them, company by company the Zulus rushed at the stone wall, though many of them were killed and often they were driven back. But always they came on laughing and shouting their war-cry till the arms of the Umpondwana grew weary with stabbing at them as their plumed heads appeared above the level of the wall. Still, fighting under the eye of Sihamba, whose bitter tongue they feared, her people held their own, for indeed the place was almost impregnable to the attacks of men armed only with spears however brave they might be, and had it been defended by warriors of true Zulu blood it could never have been taken.

When the fight had raged for an hour or more the Zulu captains withdrew their men, and went apart to consult with Van Vooren, for their loss was heavy, and they saw that if they were to capture the head waters of the river they must seek some other plan. Very soon they found it. The river issued from the side of the mountain not as a little stream but as a broad fierce water. So deep and rapid was it that the triple line of

defence works of the Umpondwana were built only to its edge, for the water ran through a rocky gorge, although thorn trees fastened by their trunks were thrust out for ten or twelve feet over the banks of the gorge from either side of the stream. Now, in the centre of this river, which may have been thirty paces wide, was a long ridge or saddle of rock over which the water boiled furiously, although here it was not more than three feet deep. This ridge began at a point within the last line of walls and ran down to some five-and-twenty paces below the first wall. Swart Piet had noted the ridge.

"There is a saddle on which you may ride to victory," he said.

"How so, Bull-Head?" asked the captain.

"Thus. Yonder stand trees with tall stems and green tops; cut them down and make a bridge from the bank to the saddle; then wade up the saddle where the water is not more than waist deep, till you are past the third wall and reach the bank inside it as best you can."

Now although he was a brave man, as were all the Zulus in those days, the captain looked long and doubtfully at the white water which foamed upon the ridge.

"There is death in that water," he said.

"Death for some and victory for others," answered Van Vooren, "but if you fear it, go back to Dingaan and tell him so, for in no other way can

this mountain be taken, seeing that it is impregnable, and that thirst alone can conquer it."

"I fear nothing, white man," answered the Zulu, "but if you are so brave, why, show us black people the way along yonder ridge!"

Piet shrugged his shoulders. "I wish to keep alive for reasons of my own; besides, I am not a soldier of Dingaan," he answered.

Then the captain turned and commanded such men as had battle axes to cut down three of the longest trees, which they did, although the task was difficult, for the wood was hard and their axes were light. When at length the trees were down they rolled them uphill to a spot where the ridge of rock ended, which was not more than thirty paces from the face of the outer wall. Now it was that Sihamba guessed their purpose for the first time, for until then she had believed that they were cutting the trees to use them as battering rams against the walls.

"They are coming on us by the path of the river," she said, and called for men to sally out and prevent them making the bridge from the bank to the saddle. But none answered her, for they dared not face the Zulus in the open.

"The water will sweep them away," they said; "moreover, when they try to land we can spear them."

"Cowards," she moaned, "on your own heads be your doom."

So the Umpondwana contented themselves with standing behind the first wall and casting volleys of spears at those who thrust out the trees within thirty paces of them, while Zinti shot at them with his gun, killing several. But coming between, the Zulus made a shield hedge to protect their comrades, so that the light throwing assegais did little hurt, and of the few that the gun killed they thought nothing.

Presently the ends of the trees lay beneath the water on the ridge of rock, and the captain commanded a certain induna to lead his men across. Now all natives fear a wet death, and though he was a brave man who would gladly have rushed the fortifications alone had he been so commanded, this soldier to whom the captain spoke looked askance at the furious torrent and hesitated. But that captain had served under Chaka, and knew how to deal with those who showed doubt or fear. Lifting his heavy assegai, he drove it through the man, so that he fell dead, and as he smote cried, "Coward, take this gift from the king!"

Then, calling to the soldiers, he himself ran out upon the bridge of tree-trunks and leaped into the water that rose to his middle. In an instant he would have been swept away, for the current was very fierce, had not those who followed sprang down at his side and behind him. For a moment they managed to keep their feet till others came, giving them support and being themselves protected by a breakwater built of the men who had gone first. Then, forming in a double line, each man linked his arms round the middle of his comrade in front, as Kaffir girls link themselves in a dance, and very slowly this human chain began to

struggle forward along the back of the ridge. At times, indeed, the weight of the stream was almost too much for them, and swept some of them off into the deep water which ran on either side, but the strong rope of human muscles held, and they were dragged back again. Now they were between the lip of the first walls, and the Umpondwana soldiers hurled spears at them from the banks, killing many. But if a man was slain, or even badly wounded, his companions who held him let go, and, if needful, thrust him into the water, who could no longer serve the king. Then he gripped the soldier who stood in front of the lost one, and the chain dragged on.

"Oh! men of the Umpondwana," cried Sihamba, "had you but half the heart of these, who are brave, we need fear nothing from Dingaan," and the Zulus in the stream who heard her called in answer:--

"You are right, little chieftainess, we are brave."

Slowly the black snake-like line pressed forward through the white foam, never heeding the storm of spears that slew continually, till the point of it was well within the third line of walls. Then the captain, who by some chance had escaped, called an order to those behind him, and the head of the double line leapt off the ridge of rock into deep water, and swimming with their feet, but still gripping with their hands, suffered themselves to be swung round by the current towards the bank, twenty yards away. Here some rocks jutted out, and these, after a great struggle, they were able to grasp and hold.

Then followed what Suzanne, who was watching from above, afterwards declared to be the strangest sight she had ever seen, for these men, who swung to and fro in the current, anchored, as it were, to the ridge and the bank, made of their living bodies a bridge for their fellows. Yes, their companions ran and crawled over them, springing from shoulder to shoulder, and driving their heads beneath the water with the push of their clinging feet. Half-drowned and almost torn in two as they were, still they held on till enough men were safe on shore to finish the fray. For when the Umpondwana saw that the Zulus had won the bank they did not stay to kill them while they landed, as might easily have been done; no, dragging Sihamba with them, they ran into the gorge leading to the flat top of the mountain, and blocked it with great stones that were ready. And so it came about that the Zulus won this fight, though with great loss to themselves, and cut off the Umpondwana from their main supply of water.

But though they had won the fight they had not won the mountain. After resting a while they began the work of storming the narrow gorge that led upwards to the tableland, for this gorge was its only gate, and at first were suffered to pull down or climb over the walls which were built across it with but little resistance. Soon, however, they found out the reason of this, for when a number of them were in the gorge stones began to roll upon them from the edges of the cliffs above, crushing the life out of many, so that presently they were driven back to the head of the river. Afterwards they searched long and earnestly but could find no other path by which to attack, for there was none.

"Well," said the Zulu captain, "it seems that we must fight the fight of 'sit-down,' and since these rock-rabbits will not let us come to them we must wait till they come to us to ask for water."

So they waited for seven whole days, setting guards about the mountain in case there should be secret ways of egress of which they knew nothing.

When they reached the tableland Sihamba spoke words so bitter to her councillors and captains that some of them stopped their ears that they might hear no more, while others answered that they could do nothing against men who walked upon the boiling waters.

"Now, indeed, you can do nothing against them," Sihamba cried, "for Thirst will fight for them, and he is the best of friends. Because of your cowardice we must perish, everyone of us, and for my part I should be glad of it were it not that you have given the Lady Swallow to death also."

Then she buried her face in the ground and would say no more, even when they told her that the Zulus had been beaten back by the rocks that were rolled down upon them.

For some days the little spring gave enough water for the thousands of people who were crowded upon the mountain top, though there was none

to spare for the cattle. But on the third night the poor beasts being maddened by thirst, broke out of the kraal and rushing to the spring, so trampled it with their hoofs that its waters were sealed up, and only very little could be obtained even by digging, for here the rock came near to the surface of the soil, and it would seem as though the course of the spring was turned or choked beneath it.

Then all those upon that mountain began to suffer the horrors of thirst. Soon the cattle were altogether mad and rushing to and fro in herds, bellowing furiously and goring everyone they met, or trampling them to the earth. Now the Umpondwana strove to be rid of them by driving them down the gorge, but the Zulus, guessing the trouble that the presence of these beasts was bringing upon the besieged would not suffer them to pass. Next they attempted to force them over the edge of the precipice, but when they were driven to it the oxen turned and charged through them, killing several men. After this they contented themselves with stabbing the most dangerous of the animals, and leaving the rest to rush to and fro as they would, for they did not care to kill them all lest their carcasses should breed a pestilence.

The sixth day came, and, oh! the great kraal of the Umpondwana was but as a hell wherein lost souls wandered in torment, for the sun beat down upon it fiercely and everywhere roamed or lay men, women and children overcome with the torture of thirst; indeed, of the last, some were already dead, especially those who were at the breast, for their mothers' milk was dry. Here three men had dragged an old wife from her hut, and were beating her to make her reveal the store of water which



she was believed to have hidden; there others were cutting the throat of an ox that they might drink its blood, and yonder a little girl was turning stones to lick the damp side of them with her poor parched tongue.

In the midst of these scenes which passed outside her hut, sat Sihamba brooding. As chieftainess she still had about a pint of water stored in a jar, but though she had made Suzanne drink, herself she drank but little, for she would not consent to suffer less than those about her.

Now Sihamba's eyes fell upon the child who was licking stones, and her heart was wrung with pity. Going into the hut she fetched most of the water in a gourd, and calling to the child, who staggered towards her, for she could scarcely walk, she gave it to her, bidding her drink slowly.

In a moment it was gone, every drop of it, and, behold! the dim eyes brightened, and the shrunken limbs seemed to grow round again, while the young voice, no longer high and cracked, praised and blessed her name. Sihamba motioned the child away, then she went into the hut to weep, only weep she could not, since her eyes were too dry for tears.

"Three more days," she thought to herself, "and they will all be dead unless rain should fall. Yes, the cowards, and those whom their cowardice has betrayed will all be dead together."

As she thought thus, Suzanne entered the hut, and there was tidings in

her eyes.

"What is it, sister," asked Sihamba, "and whence do you come?"

"I come from the high seat upon the edge of the cliff," she answered, "where I have sat all day, for I can no longer bear these sights, and I have this to tell, that the Zulus are marching across the plain, but not towards Zululand, since they head for the Quathlamba Mountains."