

CHAPTER IV. THE FLIGHT OF MOPO AND BALEKA

All the rest of that night we journeyed, till even the dog was tired. Then we hid in a mealie field for the day, as we were afraid of being seen. Towards the afternoon we heard voices, and, looking through the stems of the mealies, we saw a party of my father's men pass searching for us. They went on to a neighbouring kraal to ask if we had been seen, and after that we saw them no more for awhile. At night we travelled again; but, as fate would have it, we were met by an old woman, who looked oddly at us but said nothing. After that we pushed on day and night, for we knew that the old woman would tell the pursuers if she met them; and so indeed it came about. On the third evening we reached some mealie gardens, and saw that they had been trampled down. Among the broken mealies we found the body of a very old man, as full of assegai wounds as a porcupine with quills. We wondered at this, and went on a little way. Then we saw that the kraal to which the gardens belonged was burnt down. We crept up to it, and--ah! it was a sad sight for us to see! Afterwards we became used to such sights. All about us lay the bodies of dead people, scores of them--old men, young men, women, children, little babies at the breast--there they lay among the burnt huts, pierced with assegai wounds. Red was the earth with their blood, and red they looked in the red light of the setting sun. It was as though all the land had been smeared with the bloody hand of the Great Spirit, of the Umkulunkulu. Baleka saw it and began to cry; she was weary, poor girl, and we had found little to eat, only grass and green corn.

"An enemy has been here," I said, and as I spoke I thought that I heard a groan from the other side of a broken reed hedge. I went and looked. There lay a young woman: she was badly wounded, but still alive, my father. A little way from her lay a man dead, and before him several other men of another tribe: he had died fighting. In front of the woman were the bodies of three children; another, a little one, lay on her body. I looked at the woman, and, as I looked, she groaned again, opened her eyes and saw me, and that I had a spear in my hand.

"Kill me quickly!" she said. "Have you not tortured me enough?"

I said that I was a stranger and did not want to kill her.

"Then bring me water," she said; "there is a spring there behind the kraal."

I called to Baleka to come to the woman, and went with my gourd to the spring. There were bodies in it, but I dragged them out, and when the water had cleared a little I filled the gourd and brought it back to the woman. She drank deep, and her strength came back a little--the water gave her life.

"How did you come to this?" I asked.

"It was an impi of Chaka, Chief of the Zulus, that ate us up," she

answered. "They burst upon us at dawn this morning while we were asleep in our huts. Yes, I woke up to hear the sound of killing. I was sleeping by my husband, with him who lies there, and the children. We all ran out. My husband had a spear and shield. He was a brave man. See! he died bravely: he killed three of the Zulu devils before he himself was dead. Then they caught me, and killed my children, and stabbed me till they thought that I was dead. Afterwards, they went away. I don't know why they came, but I think it was because our chief would not send men to help Chaka against Zweete."

She stopped, gave a great cry, and died.

My sister wept at the sight, and I too was stirred by it. "Ah!" I thought to myself, "the Great Spirit must be evil. If he is not evil such things would not happen." That is how I thought then, my father; now I think differently. I know that we had not found out the path of the Great Spirit, that is all. I was a chicken in those days, my father; afterwards I got used to such sights. They did not stir me any more, not one whit. But then in the days of Chaka the rivers ran blood--yes, we had to look at the water to see if it was clean before we drank. People learned how to die then and not make a noise about it. What does it matter? They would have been dead now anyway. It does not matter; nothing matters, except being born. That is a mistake, my father.

We stopped at the kraal that night, but we could not sleep, for we heard the Itongo, the ghosts of the dead people, moving about and calling to

each other. It was natural that they should do so; men were looking for their wives, and mothers for their children. But we were afraid that they might be angry with us for being there, so we clung together and trembled in each other's arms. Koos also trembled, and from time to time he howled loudly. But they did not seem to see us, and towards morning their cries grew fainter.

When the first light came we rose and picked our way through the dead down to the plain. Now we had an easy road to follow to Chaka's kraal, for there was the spoor of the impi and of the cattle which they had stolen, and sometimes we came to the body of a warrior who had been killed because his wounds prevented him from marching farther. But now I was doubtful whether it was wise for us to go to Chaka, for after what we had seen I grew afraid lest he should kill us. Still, we had nowhere to turn, so I said that we would walk along till something happened. Now we grew faint with hunger and weariness, and Baleka said that we had better sit down and die, for then there would be no more trouble. So we sat down by a spring. But I did not wish to die yet, though Baleka was right, and it would have been well to do so. As we sat, the dog Koos went to a bush that was near, and presently I heard him spring at something and the sound of struggling. I ran to the bush--he had caught hold of a duiker buck, as big as himself, that was asleep in it. Then I drove my spear into the buck and shouted for joy, for here was food. When the buck was dead I skinned him, and we took bits of the flesh, washed them in the water, and ate them, for we had no fire to cook them with. It is not nice to eat uncooked flesh, but we were so hungry that

we did not mind, and the food refreshed us. When we had eaten what we could, we rose and washed ourselves at the spring; but, as we washed, Baleka looked up and gave a cry of fear. For there, on the crest of the hill, about ten spear-throws away, was a party of six armed men, people of my own tribe--children of my father Makedama--who still pursued us to take us or kill us. They saw us--they raised a shout, and began to run. We too sprang up and ran--ran like bucks, for fear had touched our feet.

Now the land lay thus. Before us the ground was open and sloped down to the banks of the White Umfolozi, which twisted through the plain like a great and shining snake. On the other side the ground rose again, and we did not know what was beyond, but we thought that in this direction lay the kraal of Chaka. We ran for the river--where else were we to run? And after us came the warriors. They gained on us; they were strong, and they were angry because they had come so far. Run as we would, still they gained. Now we neared the banks of the river; it was full and wide. Above us the waters ran angrily, breaking into swirls of white where they passed over sunken rocks; below was a rapid, in which none might live; between the two a deep pool, where the water was quiet but the stream strong.

"Ah! my brother, what shall we do?" gasped Baleka.

"There is this to choose," I answered; "perish on the spears of our people or try the river."

"Easier to die by water than on iron," she answered.

"Good!" I said. "Now may our snakes look towards us and the spirits of our fathers be with us! At the least we can swim." And I led her to the head of the pool. We threw away our blankets--everything except an assegai, which I held in my teeth--and we plunged in, wading as far as we could. Now we were up to our breasts; now we had lost the earth and were swimming towards the middle of the river, the dog Koos leading the way.

Then it was that the soldiers appeared upon the bank. "Ah! little people," one cried, "you swim, do you? Well, you will drown; and if you do not drown we know a ford, and we will catch you and kill you--yes! if we must run over the edge of the world after you we will catch you." And he hurled an assegai after us, which fell between us like a flash of light.

While he spoke we swam hard, and now we were in the current. It swept us downwards, but still we made way, for we could swim well. It was just this: if we could reach the bank before we were swept into the rapids we were safe; if not, then--good-night! Now we were near the other side, but, alas! we were also near the lip of the foaming water. We strained, we struggled. Baleka was a brave girl, and she swam bravely; but the water pushed her down below me, and I could do nothing to help her. I got my foot upon the rock and looked round. There she was, and eight paces from her the broken water boiled. I could not go back. I was too

weak, and it seemed that she must perish. But the dog Koos saw. He swam towards her, barking, then turned round, heading for the shore. She grasped him by the tail with her right hand. Then he put out his strength--he was very strong. She too struck out with her feet and left hand, and slowly--very slowly--drew near. Then I stretched out the handle of my assegai towards her. She caught it with her left hand. Already her feet were over the brink of the rapids, but I pulled and Koos pulled, and we brought her safe into the shallows, and from the shallows to the bank, and there she fell gasping.

Now when the soldiers on the other bank saw that we had crossed, they shouted threats at us, then ran away down the bank.

"Arise, Baleka!" I said: "they have gone to see a ford."

"Ah, let me die!" she answered.

But I forced her to rise, and after awhile she got her breath again, and we walked on as fast as we could up the long rise. For two hours we walked, or more, till at last we came to the crest of the rise, and there, far away, we saw a large kraal.

"Keep heart," I said. "See, there is the kraal of Chaka."

"Yes, brother," she answered, "but what waits us there? Death is behind us and before us--we are in the middle of death."

Presently we came to a path that ran to the kraal from the ford of the Umfolozi. It was by it that the Impi had travelled. We followed the path till at last we were but half an hour's journey from the kraal. Then we looked back, and lo! there behind us were the pursuers--five of them--one had drowned in crossing the river.

Again we ran, but now we were weak, and they gained upon us. Then once more I thought of the dog. He was fierce and would tear any one on whom I set him. I called him and told him what to do, though I knew that it would be his death. He understood, and flew towards the soldiers growling, his hair standing up on his spine. They tried to kill him with spears and kerries, but he jumped round them, biting at them, and kept them back. At last a man hit him, and he sprang up and seized the man by the throat. There he clung, man and dog rolling over and over together, till the end of it was that they both died. Ah! he was a dog! We do not see such dogs nowadays. His father was a Boer hound, the first that came into the country. That dog once killed a leopard all by himself. Well, this was the end of Koos!

Meanwhile, we had been running. Now we were but three hundred paces from the gate of the kraal, and there was something going on inside it; that we could see from the noise and the dust. The four soldiers, leaving the dead dog and the dying man, came after us swiftly. I saw that they must catch us before we reached the gate, for now Baleka could go but slowly.

Then a thought came into my head. I had brought her here, I would save her life if I could. Should she reach the kraal without me, Chaka would not kill a girl who was so young and fair.

"Run on, Baleka! run on!" I said, dropping behind. Now she was almost blind with weariness and terror, and, not seeing my purpose, staggered towards the gate of the kraal. But I sat down on the veldt to get my breath again, for I was about to fight four men till I was killed. My heart beat and the blood drummed in my ears, but when they drew near and I rose--the assegai in my hand--once more the red cloth seemed to go up and down before my eyes, and all fear left me.

The men were running, two and two, with the length of a spear throw between them. But of the first pair one was five or six paces in front of the other. This man shouted out loud and charged me, shield and spear up. Now I had no shield--nothing but the assegai; but I was crafty and he was overbold. On he came. I stood waiting for him till he drew back the spear to stab me. Then suddenly I dropped to my knees and thrust upward with all my strength, beneath the rim of his shield, and he also thrust, but over me, his spear only cutting the flesh of my shoulder--see! here is its scar; yes, to this day. And my assegai? Ah! it went home; it ran through and through his middle. He rolled over and over on the plain. The dust hid him; only I was now weaponless, for the haft of my spear--it was but a light throwing assegai--broke in two, leaving nothing but a little bit of stick in my hand. And the other one was upon me. Then in the darkness I saw a light. I fell on to my hands

and knees and flung myself over sideways. My body struck the legs of the man who was about to stab me, lifting his feet from beneath him. Down he came heavily. Before he had touched the ground I was off it. His spear had fallen from his hand. I stooped, seized it, and as he rose I stabbed him through the back. It was all done in the shake of a leaf, my father; in the shake of a leaf he also was dead. Then I ran, for I had no stomach for the other two; my valour was gone.

About a hundred paces from me Baleka was staggering along with her arms out like one who has drunk too much beer. By the time I caught her she was some forty paces from the gate of the kraal. But then her strength left her altogether. Yes! there she fell senseless, and I stood by her. And there, too, I should have been killed, had not this chanced, since the other two men, having stayed one instant by their dead fellows, came on against me mad with rage. For at that moment the gate of the kraal opened, and through it ran a party of soldiers dragging a prisoner by the arms. After them walked a great man, who wore a leopard skin on his shoulders, and was laughing, and with him were five or six ringed councillors, and after them again came a company of warriors.

The soldiers saw that killing was going on, and ran up just as the slayers reached us.

"Who are you?" they cried, "who dare to kill at the gate of the Elephant's kraal? Here the Elephant kills alone."

"We are of the children of Makedama," they answered, "and we follow these evildoers who have done wickedness and murder in our kraal. See! but now two of us are dead at their hands, and others lie dead along the road. Suffer that we slay them."

"Ask that of the Elephant," said the soldiers; "ask too that he suffer you should not be slain."

Just then the tall chief saw blood and heard words. He stalked up; and he was a great man to look at, though still quite young in years. For he was taller by a head than any round him, and his chest was big as the chests of two; his face was fierce and beautiful, and when he grew angry his eye flashed like a smitten brand.

"Who are these that dare to stir up dust at the gates of my kraal?" he asked, frowning.

"O Chaka, O Elephant!" answered the captain of the soldiers, bending himself double before him, "the men say that these are evildoers and that they pursue them to kill them."

"Good!" he answered. "Let them slay the evildoers."

"O great chief! thanks be to thee, great chief!" said those men of my people who sought to kill us.

"I hear you," he answered, then spoke once more to the captain. "And when they have slain the evildoers, let themselves be blinded and turned loose to seek their way home, because they have dared to lift a spear within the Zulu gates. Now praise on, my children!" And he laughed, while the soldiers murmured, "O! he is wise, he is great, his justice is bright and terrible like the sun!"

But the two men of my people cried out in fear, for they did not seek such justice as this.

"Cut out their tongues also," said Chaka. "What? shall the land of the Zulus suffer such a noise? Never! lest the cattle miscarry. To it, ye black ones! There lies the girl. She is asleep and helpless. Kill her! What? you hesitate? Nay, then, if you will have time for thought, I give it. Take these men, smear them with honey, and pin them over ant-heaps; by to-morrow's sun they will know their own minds. But first kill these two hunted jackals," and he pointed to Baleka and myself. "They seem tired and doubtless they long for sleep."

Then for the first time I spoke, for the soldiers drew near to slay us.

"O Chaka," I cried, "I am Mopo, and this is my sister Baleka."

I stopped, and a great shout of laughter went up from all who stood round.

"Very well, Mopo and thy sister Baleka," said Chaka, grimly.

"Good-morning to you, Mopo and Baleka--also, good-night!"

"O Chaka," I broke in, "I am Mopo, son of Makedama of the Langeni tribe. It was I who gave thee a gourd of water many years ago, when we were both little. Then thou badest me come to thee when thou hadst grown great, vowing that thou wouldst protect me and never do me harm. So I have come, bringing my sister with me; and now, I pray thee, do not eat up the words of long ago."

As I spoke, Chaka's face changed, and he listened earnestly, as a man who holds his hand behind his ear. "Those are no liars," he said. "Welcome, Mopo! Thou shalt be a dog in my hut, and feed from my hand. But of thy sister I said nothing. Why, then, should she not be slain when I swore vengeance against all thy tribe, save thee alone?"

"Because she is too fair to slay, O Chief!" I answered, boldly; "also because I love her, and ask her life as a boon!"

"Turn the girl over," said Chaka. And they did so, showing her face.

"Again thou speakest no lie, son of Makedama," said the chief. "I grant thee the boon. She also shall lie in my hut, and be of the number of my 'sisters.' Now tell me thy tale, speaking only the truth."

So I sat down and told him all. Nor did he grow weary of listening. But,

when I had done, he said but one thing--that he would that the dog Koos had not been killed; since, if he had still been alive, he would have set him on the hut of my father Makedama, and made him chief over the Langeni.

Then he spoke to the captain of the soldiers. "I take back my words," he said. "Let not these men of the Langeni be mutilated. One shall die and the other shall go free. Here," and he pointed to the man whom we had seen led out of the kraal-gate, "here, Mopo, we have a man who has proved himself a coward. Yesterday a kraal of wizards yonder was eaten up by my order--perhaps you two saw it as you travelled. This man and three others attacked a soldier of that kraal who defended his wife and children. The man fought well--he slew three of my people. Then this dog was afraid to meet him face to face. He killed him with a throwing assegai, and afterwards he stabbed the woman. That is nothing; but he should have fought the husband hand to hand. Now I will do him honour. He shall fight to the death with one of these pigs from thy sty," and he pointed with his spear to the men of my father's kraal, "and the one who survives shall be run down as they tried to run you down. I will send back the other pig to the sty with a message. Choose, children of Makedama, which of you will live."

Now the two men of my tribe were brothers, and loved one another, and each of them was willing to die that the other might go free. Therefore, both of them stepped forward, saying that they would fight the Zulu.

"What, is there honour among pigs?" said Chaka. "Then I will settle it. See this assegai? I throw it into the air; if the blade falls uppermost the tall man shall go free; if the shaft falls uppermost, then life is to the short one, so!" And he sent the little spear whirling round and round in the air. Every eye watched it as it wheeled and fell. The haft struck the ground first.

"Come hither, thou," said Chaka to the tall brother. "Hasten back to the kraal of Makedama, and say to him, Thus says Chaka, the Lion of the Zulu-ka-Malandela, 'Years ago thy tribe refused me milk. To-day the dog of thy son Mopo howls upon the roof of thy hut.' Begone!" (1)

(1) Among the Zulus it is a very bad omen for a dog to climb the roof of a hut. The saying conveyed a threat to be appreciated by every Zulu.--ED.

The man turned, shook his brother by the hand, and went, bearing the words of evil omen.

Then Chaka called to the Zulu and the last of those who had followed us to kill us, bidding them fight. So, when they had praised the prince they fought fiercely, and the end of it was that the man of my people conquered the Zulu. But as soon as he had found his breath again he was set to run for his life, and after him ran five chosen men.

Still, it came about that he outran them, doubling like a hare, and got

away safely. Nor was Chaka angry at this; for I think that he bade the men who hunted him to make speed slowly. There was only one good thing in the cruel heart of Chaka, that he would always save the life of a brave man if he could do so without making his word nothing. And for my part, I was glad to think that the man of my people had conquered him who murdered the children of the dying woman that we found at the kraal beyond the river.