

CHAPTER VI. THE BIRTH OF UMSLOPOGAAS

This was the rule of the life of Chaka, that he would have no children, though he had many wives. Every child born to him by his "sisters" was put away at once.

"What, Mopo," he said to me, "shall I rear up children to put me to the assegai when they grow great? They call me tyrant. Say, how do those chiefs die whom men name tyrants? They die at the hands of those whom they have bred. Nay, Mopo, I will rule for my life, and when I join the spirits of my fathers let the strongest take my power and my place!"

Now it chanced that shortly after Chaka had spoken thus, my sister Baleka, the king's wife, fell in labour; and on that same day my wife Macrophia was brought to bed of twins, and this but eight days after my second wife, Anadi, had given birth to a son. You ask, my father, how I came to be married, seeing that Chaka forbade marriage to all his soldiers till they were in middle life and had put the man's ring upon their heads. It was a boon he granted me as inyanga of medicine, saying it was well that a doctor should know the sicknesses of women and learn how to cure their evil tempers. As though, my father, that were possible!

When the king heard that Baleka was sick he did not kill her outright, because he loved her a little, but he sent for me, commanding me to attend her, and when the child was born to cause its body to be brought

to him, according to custom, so that he might be sure that it was dead. I bent to the earth before him, and went to do his bidding with a heavy heart, for was not Baleka my sister? and would not her child be of my own blood? Still, it must be so, for Chaka's whisper was as the shout of other kings, and, if we dared to disobey, then our lives and the lives of all in our kraals would answer for it. Better that an infant should die than that we should become food for jackals. Presently I came to the Emposeni, the place of the king's wives, and declared the king's word to the soldiers on guard. They lowered their assegais and let me pass, and I entered the hut of Baleka. In it were others of the king's wives, but when they saw me they rose and went away, for it was not lawful that they should stay where I was. Thus I was left alone with my sister.

For awhile she lay silent, and I did not speak, though I saw by the heaving of her breast that she was weeping.

"Hush, little one!" I said at length; "your sorrow will soon be done."

"Nay," she answered, lifting her head, "it will be but begun. Oh, cruel man! I know the reason of your coming. You come to murder the babe that shall be born of me."

"It is the king's word, woman."

"It is the king's word, and what is the king's word? Have I, then, naught to say in this matter?"

"It is the king's child, woman."

"It is the king's child, and it is not also my child? Must my babe be dragged from my breast and be strangled, and by you, Mopo? Have I not loved you, Mopo? Did I not flee with you from our people and the vengeance of our father? Do you know that not two moons gone the king was wroth with you because he fell sick, and would have caused you to be slain had I not pleaded for you and called his oath to mind? And thus you pay me: you come to kill my child, my first-born child!"

"It is the king's word, woman," I answered sternly; but my heart was split in two within me.

Then Baleka said no more, but, turning her face to the wall of the hut, she wept and groaned bitterly.

Now, as she wept I heard a stir without the hut, and the light in the doorway was darkened. A woman entered alone. I looked round to see who it was, then fell upon the ground in salutation, for before me was Unandi, mother of the king, who was named "Mother of the Heavens," that same lady to whom my mother had refused the milk.

"Hail, Mother of the Heavens!" I said.

"Greeting, Mopo," she answered. "Say, why does Baleka weep? Is it

because the sorrow of women is upon her?"

"Ask of her, great chieftainess," I said.

Then Baleka spoke: "I weep, mother of a king, because this man, who is my brother, has come from him who is my lord and thy son, to murder that which shall be born of me. O thou whose breasts have given suck, plead for me! Thy son was not slain at birth."

"Perhaps it were well if he had been so slain, Baleka," said Unandi;
"then had many another man lived to look upon the sun who is now dead."

"At the least, as an infant he was good and gentle, and thou mightest love him, Mother of the Zulu."

"Never, Baleka! As a babe he bit my breast and tore my hair; as the man is so was the babe."

"Yet may his child be otherwise, Mother of the Heavens! Think, thou hast no grandson to comfort thee in thy age. Wilt thou, then, see all thy stock wither? The king, our lord, lives in war. He too may die, and what then?"

"Then the root of Senzangaona is still green. Has the king no brothers?"

"They are not of they flesh, mother. What? thou dost not hearken! Then as a woman to woman I plead with thee. Save my child or slay me with my child!"

Now the heart of Unandi grew gentle, and she was moved to tears.

"How may this be done, Mopo?" she said. "The king must see the dead infant, and if he suspect, and even reeds have ears, you know the heart of Chaka and where we shall lie to-morrow."

"Are there then no other new-born babes in Zululand?" said Baleka, sitting up and speaking in a whisper like the hiss of a snake. "Listen, Mopo! Is not your wife also in labour? Now hear me, Mother of the Heavens, and, my brother, hear me also. Do not think to play with me in this matter. I will save my child or you twain will perish with it. For I will tell the king that you came to me, the two of you, and whispered plots into my ear--plots to save the child and kill the king. Now choose, and swiftly!"

She sank bank, there was silence, and we looked one upon another. Then Unandi spoke.

"Give me your hand, Mopo, and swear that you will be faithful to me in this secret, as I swear to you. A day may come when this child who has not seen the light rules as king in Zululand, and then in reward you shall be the greatest of the people, the king's voice, whisperer in the

king's ear. But if you break your oath, then beware, for I shall not die alone!"

"I swear, Mother of the Heavens," I answered.

"It is well, son of Makedama."

"It is well, my brother," said Baleka. "Now go and do that which must be done swiftly, for my sorrow is upon me. Go, knowing that if you fail I will be pitiless, for I will bring you to your death, yes, even if my own death is the price!"

So I went. "Whither to you go?" asked the guard at the gate.

"I go to bring my medicines, men of the king," I answered.

So I said; but, oh! my heart was heavy, and this was my plan--to fly far from Zululand. I could not, and I dared not do this thing. What? should I kill my own child that its life might be given for the life of the babe of Baleka? And should I lift up my will against the will of the king, saving the child to look upon the sun which he had doomed to darkness? Nay, I would fly, leaving all, and seek out some far tribe where I might begin to live again. Here I could not live; here in the shadow of Chaka was nothing but death.

I reached my own huts, there to find that my wife Macropha was delivered

of twins. I sent away all in the hut except my other wife, Anadi, she who eight days gone had born me a son. The second of the twins was born; it was a boy, born dead. The first was a girl, she who lived to be Nada the Beautiful, Nada the Lily. Then a thought came into my heart. Here was a path to run on.

"Give me the boy," I said to Anadi. "He is not dead. Give him to me that I may take him outside the kraal and wake him to life by my medicine."

"It is of no use--the child is dead," said Anadi.

"Give him to me, woman!" I said fiercely. And she gave me the body.

Then I took him and wrapped him up in my bundle of medicines, and outside of all I rolled a mat of plaited grass.

"Suffer none to enter the hut till I return," I said; "and speak no word of the child that seems to be dead. If you allow any to enter, or if you speak a word, then my medicine will not work and the babe will be dead indeed."

So I went, leaving the women wondering, for it is not our custom to save both when twins are born; but I ran swiftly to the gates of the Emposeni.

"I bring the medicines, men of the king!" I said to the guards.

"Pass in," they answered.

I passed through the gates and into the hut of Baleka. Unandi was alone in the hut with my sister.

"The child is born," said the mother of the king. "Look at him, Mopo, son of Makedama!"

I looked. He was a great child with large black eyes like the eyes of Chaka the king; and Unandi, too, looked at me. "Where is it?" she whispered.

I loosed the mat and drew the dead child from the medicines, glancing round fearfully as I did so.

"Give me the living babe," I whispered back.

They gave it to me and I took of a drug that I knew and rubbed it on the tongue of the child. Now this drug has the power to make the tongue it touches dumb for awhile. Then I wrapped up the child in my medicines and again bound the mat about the bundle. But round the throat of the still-born babe I tied a string of fibre as though I had strangled it, and wrapped it loosely in a piece of matting.

Now for the first time I spoke to Baleka: "Woman," I said, "and thou

also, Mother of the Heavens, I have done your wish, but know that before all is finished this deed shall bring about the death of many. Be secret as the grave, for the grave yawns for you both."

I went again, bearing the mat containing the dead child in my right hand. But the bundle of medicines that held the living one I fastened across my shoulders. I passed out of the Emposeni, and, as I went, I held up the bundle in my right hand to the guards, showing them that which was in it, but saying nothing.

"It is good," they said, nodding.

But now ill-fortune found me, for just outside the Emposeni I met three of the king's messengers.

"Greeting, son of Makedama!" they said. "The king summons you to the Intunkulu"--that is the royal house, my father.

"Good!" I answered. "I will come now; but first I would run to my own place to see how it goes with Macrophia, my wife. Here is that which the king seeks," and I showed them the dead child. "Take it to him if you will."

"That is not the king's command, Mopo," they answered. "His word is that you should stand before him at once."

Now my heart turned to water in my breast. Kings have many ears. Could he have heard? And how dared I go before the Lion bearing his living child hidden on my back? Yet to waver was to be lost, to show fear was to be lost, to disobey was to be lost.

"Good! I come," I answered. And we walked to the gate of the Intunkulu.

It was sundown. Chaka was sitting in the little courtyard in front of his hut. I went down on my knees before him and gave the royal salute, Bayete, and so I stayed.

"Rise, son of Makedama!" he said.

"I cannot rise, Lion of the Zulu," I answered, "I cannot rise, having royal blood on my hands, till the king has pardoned me."

"Where is it?" he asked.

I pointed to the mat in my hand.

"Let me look at it."

Then I undid the mat, and he looked on the child, and laughed aloud.

"He might have been a king," he said, as he bade a councillor take it away. "Mopo, thou hast slain one who might have been a king. Art thou

not afraid?"

"No, Black One," I answered, "the child is killed by order of one who is a king."

"Sit down, and let us talk," said Chaka, for his mood was idle.

"To-morrow thou shalt have five oxen for this deed; thou shalt choose them from the royal herd."

"The king is good; he sees that my belt is drawn tight; he satisfies my hunger. Will the king suffer that I go? My wife is in labour and I would visit her."

"Nay, stay awhile; say how it is with Baleka, my sister and thine?"

"It is well."

"Did she weep when you took the babe from her?"

"Nay, she wept not. She said, 'My lord's will is my will.'"

"Good! Had she wept she had been slain also. Who was with her?"

"The Mother of the Heavens."

The brow of Chaka darkened. "Unandi, my mother, what did she there? By

myself I swear, though she is my mother--if I thought"--and he ceased.

There was a silence, then he spoke again. "Say, what is in that mat?" and he pointed with his little assegai at the bundle on my shoulders.

"Medicine, king."

"Thou dost carry enough to doctor an impi. Undo the mat and let me look at it."

"Now, my father, I tell you that the marrow melted in my bones with terror, for if I undid the mat I feared he must see the child and then--"

"It is tagati, it is bewitched, O king. It is not wise to look on medicine."

"Open!" he answered angrily. "What? may I not look at that which I am forced to swallow--I, who am the first of doctors?"

"Death is the king's medicine," I answered, lifting the bundle, and laying it as far from him in the shadow of the fence as I dared. Then I bent over it, slowly undoing the rimpis with which it was tied, while the sweat of terror ran down by face blinding me like tears. What would I do if he saw the child? What if the child awoke and cried? I would snatch the assegai from his hand and stab him! Yes, I would kill the

king and then kill myself! Now the mat was unrolled. Inside were the brown leaves and roots of medicine; beneath them was the senseless babe wrapped in dead moss.

"Ugly stuff," said the king, taking snuff. "Now see, Mopo, what a good aim I have! This for thy medicine!" And he lifted his assegai to throw it through the bundle. But as he threw, my snake put it into the king's heart to sneeze, and thus it came to pass that the assegai only pierced the outer leaves of the medicine, and did not touch the child.

"May the heavens bless the king!" I said, according to custom.

"Thanks to thee, Mopo, it is a good omen," he answered. "And now, begone! Take my advice: kill thy children, as I kill mine, lest they live to worry thee. The whelps of lions are best drowned."

I did up the bundle fast--fast, though my hands trembled. Oh! what if the child should wake and cry. It was done; I rose and saluted the king. Then I doubled myself up and passed from before him. Scarcely was I outside the gates of the Intunkulu when the infant began to squeak in the bundle. If it had been one minute before!

"What," said a soldier, as I passed, "have you got a puppy hidden under your moocha, (1) Mopo?"

(1) Girdle composed of skin and tails of oxen.-ED.

I made no answer, but hurried on till I came to my huts. I entered; there were my two wives alone.

"I have recovered the child, women," I said, as I undid the bundle.

Anadi took him and looked at him.

"The boy seems bigger than he was," she said.

"The breath of life has come into him and puffed him out," I answered.

"His eyes are not as his eyes were," she said again. "Now they are big and black, like the eyes of the king."

"My spirit looked upon his eyes and made them beautiful," I answered.

"This child has a birth-mark on his thigh," she said a third time. "That which I gave you had no mark."

"I laid my medicine there," I answered.

"It is not the same child," she said sullenly. "It is a changeling who will lay ill-luck at our doors."

Then I rose up in my rage and cursed her heavily, for I saw that if she

was not stopped this woman's tongue would bring us all to ruin.

"Peace, witch!" I cried. "How dare you to speak thus from a lying heart? Do you wish to draw down a curse upon our roof? Would you make us all food for the king's spear? Say such words again, and you shall sit within the circle--the Ingomboco shall know you for a witch!"

So I stormed on, threatening to bring her to death, till at length she grew fearful, and fell at my feet praying for mercy and forgiveness. But I was much afraid because of this woman's tongue, and not without reason.