

CHAPTER VIII. THE GREAT INGOMBOCO

After this there was quiet until the Feast of the First-fruits was ended. But few people were killed at this feast, though there was a great Ingomboco, or witch-hunt, and many were smelt out by the witch-doctors as working magic against the king. Now things had come to this pass in Zululand--that the whole people cowered before the witch-doctors. No man might sleep safe, for none knew but that on the morrow he would be touched by the wand of an Isanusi, as we name a finder of witches, and led away to his death. For awhile Chaka said nothing, and so long as the doctors smelt out those only whom he wished to get rid of--and they were many--he was well pleased. But when they began to work for their own ends, and to do those to death whom he did not desire to kill, he grew angry. Yet the custom of the land was that he whom the witch-doctor touched must die, he and all his house; therefore the king was in a cleft stick, for he scarcely dared to save even those whom he loved. One night I came to doctor him, for he was sick in his mind. On that very day there had been an Ingomboco, and five of the bravest captains of the army had been smelt out by the Abangoma, the witch-finders, together with many others. All had been destroyed, and men had been sent to kill the wives and children of the dead. Now Chaka was very angry at this slaying, and opened his heart to me.

"The witch-doctors rule in Zululand, and not I, Mopo, son of Makedama," he said to me. "Where, then, is it to end? Shall I myself be smelt out and slain? These Isanusic are too strong for me; they lie upon the land

like the shadow of night. Tell me, how may I be free of them?"

"Those who walk the Bridge of Spears, O king, fall off into Nowhere," I answered darkly; "even witch-doctors cannot keep a footing on that bridge. Has not a witch-doctor a heart that can cease to beat? Has he not blood that can be made to flow?"

Chaka looked at me strangely. "Thou art a bold man who darest to speak thus to me, Mopo," he said. "Dost thou not know that it is sacrilege to touch an Isanusi?"

"I speak that which is in the king's mind," I answered. "Hearken, O king! It is indeed sacrilege to touch a true Isanusi, but what if the Isanusi be a liar? What if he smell out falsely, bringing those to death who are innocent of evil? Is it then sacrilege to bring him to that end which he has given to many another? Say, O king!"

"Good words!" answered Chaka. "Now tell me, son of Makedama, how may this matter be put to proof?"

Then I leaned forward, whispering into the ear of the Black One, and he nodded heavily.

Thus I spoke then, because I, too, saw the evil of the Isanusi, I who knew their secrets. Also, I feared for my own life and for the lives of all those who were dear to me. For they hated me as one instructed in

their magic, one who had the seeing eye and the hearing ear.

One morning thereafter a new thing came to pass in the royal kraal, for the king himself ran out, crying aloud to all people to come and see the evil that had been worked upon him by a wizard. They came together and saw this. On the door-posts of the gateway of the Intunkulu, the house of the king, were great smears of blood. The knees of men strong in the battle trembled when they saw it; women wailed aloud as they wail over the dead; they wailed because of the horror of the omen.

"Who has done this thing?" cried Chaka in a terrible voice. "Who has dared to bewitch the king and to strike blood upon his house?"

There was no answer, and Chaka spoke again. "This is no little matter," he said, "to be washed away with the blood of one or two and be forgotten. The man who wrought it shall not die alone or travel with a few to the world of spirits. All his tribe shall go with him, down to the baby in his hut and cattle in his kraal! Let messengers go out east and west, and north and south, and summon the witch-doctors from every quarter! Let them summon the captains from every regiment and the headmen from every kraal! On the tenth day from now the circle of the Ingomboco must be set, and there shall be such a smelling out of wizards and of witches as has not been known in Zululand!"

So the messengers went out to do the bidding of the king, taking the names of those who should be summoned from the lips of the indunas,

and day by day people flocked up to the gates of the royal kraal, and, creeping on their knees before the majesty of the king, praised him aloud. But he vouchsafed an answer to none. One noble only he caused to be killed, because he carried in his hand a stick of the royal red wood, which Chaka himself had given him in bygone years. (1)

(1) This beautiful wood is known in Natal as "red ivory."--ED.

On the last night before the forming of the Ingomboco, the witch-doctors, male and female, entered the kraal. There were a hundred and a half of them, and they were made hideous and terrible with the white bones of men, with bladders of fish and of oxen, with fat of wizards, and with skins of snakes. They walked in silence till they came in front of the Intunkulu, the royal house; then they stopped and sang this song for the king to hear:--

We have come, O king, we have come from the caves and the rocks
and the swamps,

To wash in the blood of the slain;

We have gathered our host from the air as vultures are gathered in
war.

When they scent the blood of the slain.

We come not alone, O king: with each Wise One there passes a
ghost,

Who hisses the name of the doomed.

We come not alone, for we are the sons and Indunas of Death,
And he guides our feet to the doomed.

Red rises the moon o'er the plain, red sinks the sun in the west,
Look, wizards, and bid them farewell!

We count you by hundreds, you who cried for a curse on the king.
Ha! soon shall we bid YOU farewell!

Then they were silent, and went in silence to the place appointed for them, there to pass the night in mutterings and magic. But those who were gathered together shivered with fear when they heard their words, for they knew well that many a man would be switched with the gnu's tail before the sun sank once more. And I, too, trembled, for my heart was full of fear. Ah! my father, those were evil days to live in when Chaka ruled, and death met us at every turn! Then no man might call his life his own, or that of his wife or child, or anything. All were the king's, and what was spared that the witch-doctors took.

The morning dawned heavily, and before it was well light the heralds were out summoning all to the king's Ingomboco. Men came by hundreds, carrying short sticks only--for to be seen armed was death--and seated themselves in the great circle before the gates of the royal house.

Oh! their looks were sad, and they had little stomach for eating that morning, they who were food for death. They seated themselves; then round them on the outside of the circle gathered knots of warriors, chosen men, great and fierce, armed with kerries only. These were the

slayers.

When all was ready, the king came out, followed by his indunas and by me. As he appeared, wrapped in the kaross of tiger-skins and towering a head higher than any man there, all the multitude--and it was many as the game on the hills--cast themselves to earth, and from every lip sharp and sudden went up the royal salute of Bayete. But Chaka took no note; his brow was cloudy as a mountain-top. He cast one glance at the people and one at the slayers, and wherever his eye fell men turned grey with fear. Then he stalked on, and sat himself upon a stool to the north of the great ring looking toward the open space.

For awhile there was silence; then from the gates of the women's quarters came a band of maidens arrayed in their beaded dancing-dresses, and carrying green branches in their hands. As they came, they clapped their hands and sang softly:--

We are the heralds of the king's feast. Ai! Ai!

Vultures shall eat it. Ah! Ah!

It is good--it is good to die for the king!

They ceased, and ranged themselves in a body behind us. Then Chaka held up his hand, and there was a patter of running feet. Presently from behind the royal huts appeared the great company of the Abangoma, the witch-doctors--men to the right and women to the left. In the left hand of each was the tail of a vilderbeeste, in the right a bundle of

assegais and a little shield. They were awful to see, and the bones about them rattled as they ran, the bladders and the snake-skins floated in the air behind them, their faces shone with the fat of anointing, their eyes started like the eyes of fishes, and their lips twitched hungrily as they glared round the death-ring. Ha! ha! little did those evil children guess who should be the slayers and who should be the slain before that sun sank!

On they came, like a grey company of the dead. On they came in silence broken only by the patter of their feet and the dry rattling of their bony necklets, till they stood in long ranks before the Black One. Awhile they stood thus, then suddenly every one of them thrust forward the little shield in his hand, and with a single voice they cried, "Hail, Father!"

"Hail, my children!" answered Chaka.

"What seekest thou, Father?" they cried again. "Blood?"

"The blood of the guilty," he answered.

They turned and spoke each to each; the company of the men spoke to the company of the women.

"The Lion of the Zulu seeks blood."

"He shall be fed!" screamed the women.

"The Lion of the Zulu smells blood."

"He shall see it!" screamed the women.

"His eyes search out the wizards."

"He shall count their dead!" screamed the women.

"Peace!" cried Chaka. "Waste not the hours in talk, but to the work. Hearken! Wizards have bewitched me! Wizards have dared to smite blood upon the gateways of the king. Dig in the burrows of the earth and find them, ye rats! Fly through the paths of the air and find them, ye vultures! Smell at the gates of the people and name them, ye jackals! ye hunters in the night! Drag them from the caves if they be hidden, from the distance if they be fled, from the graves if they be dead. To the work! to the work! Show them to me truly, and your gifts shall be great; and for them, if they be a nation, they shall be slain. Now begin. Begin by companies of ten, for you are many, and all must be finished ere the sun sink."

"It shall be finished, Father," they answered.

Then ten of the women stood forward, and at their head was the most famous witch-doctress of that day--an aged woman named Nobela, a woman

to whose eyes the darkness was no evil, whose scent was keen as a dog's, who heard the voices of the dead as they cried in the night, and spoke truly of what she heard. All the other Isanasis, male and female, sat down in a half-moon facing the king, but this woman drew forward, and with her came nine of her sisterhood. They turned east and west, north and south, searching the heavens; they turned east and west, north and south, searching the earth; they turned east and west, north and south, searching the hearts of men. Then they crept round and round the great ring like cats; then they threw themselves upon the earth and smelt it. And all the time there was silence, silence deep as midnight, and in it men hearkened to the beating of their hearts; only now and again the vultures shrieked in the trees.

At length Nobela spoke:--

"Do you smell him, sisters?"

"We smell him," they answered.

"Does he sit in the east, sisters?"

"He sits in the east," they answered.

"Is he the son of a stranger, sisters?"

"He is the son of a stranger."

Then they crept nearer, crept on their hands and knees, till they were within ten paces of where I sat among the indunas near to the king. The indunas looked on each other and grew grey with fear; and for me, my father, my knees were loosened and my marrow turned to water in my bones. For I knew well who was that son of a stranger of whom they spoke. It was I, my father, I who was about to be smelt out; and if I was smelt out I should be killed with all my house, for the king's oath would scarcely avail me against the witch-doctors. I looked at the fierce faces of the Isanasis before me, as they crept, crept like snakes. I glanced behind and saw the slayers grasping their kerries for the deed of death, and I say I felt like one for whom the bitterness is overpast. Then I remembered the words which the king and I had whispered together of the cause for which this Ingomboco was set, and hope crept back to me like the first gleam of the dawn upon a stormy night. Still I did not hope overmuch, for it well might happen that the king had but set a trap to catch me.

Now they were quite near and halted.

"Have we dreamed falsely, sisters?" asked Nobela, the aged.

"What we dreamed in the night we see in the day," they answered.

"Shall I whisper his name in your ears, sisters?"

They lifted their heads from the ground like snakes and nodded, and as they nodded the necklets of bones rattled on their skinny necks. Then they drew their heads to a circle, and Nobela thrust hers into the centre of the circle and said a word.

"Ha! ha!" they laughed, "we hear you! His is the name. Let him be named by it in the face of Heaven, him and all his house; then let him hear no other name forever!"

And suddenly they sprang up and rushed towards me, Nobela, the aged Isanusi, at their head. They leaped at me, pointing to me with the tails of the vilderbeestes in their hands. Then Nobela switched me in the face with the tail of the beast, and cried aloud:--

"Greeting, Mopo, son of Makedama! Thou art the man who smotest blood on the door-posts of the king to bewitch the king. Let thy house be stamped flat!"

I saw her come, I felt the blow on my face as a man feels in a dream. I heard the feet of the slayers as they bounded forward to hale me to the dreadful death, but my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth--I could not say a word. I glanced at the king, and, as I did so, I thought that I heard him mutter: "Near the mark, not in it."

Then he held up his spear, and all was silence. The slayers stopped in their stride, the witch-doctors stood with outstretched arms, the world

of men was as though it had been frozen into sleep.

"Hold!" he said. "Stand aside, son of Makedama, who art named an evildoer! Stand aside, thou, Nobela, and those with thee who have named him evildoer! What? Shall I be satisfied with the life of one dog? Smell on, ye vultures, company by company, smell on! For the day the labour, at night the feast!"

So I rose, astonished, and stood on one side. The witch-doctrresses also stood on one side, wonderstruck, since no such smelling out as this had been seen in the land. For till this hour, when a man was swept with the gnu's tail of the Isanusi that was the instant of his death. Why, then, men asked in their hearts, was the death delayed? The witch-doctors asked it also, and looked to the king for light, as men look to a thunder-cloud for the flash. But from the Black One there came no word.

So we stood on one side, and a second party of the Isanusi women began their rites. As the others had done, so they did, and yet they worked otherwise, for this is the fashion of the Isanusi, that no two of them smell out in the same way. And this party swept the faces of certain of the king's councillors, naming them guilty of the witch-work.

"Stand ye on one side!" said the king to those who had been smelt out; "and ye who have hunted out their wickedness, stand ye with those who named Mopo, son of Makedama. It well may be that all are guilty."

So these stood on one side also, and a third party took up the tale. And they named certain of the great generals, and were in turn bidden to stand on one side together with those whom they had named.

So it went on through all the day. Company by company the women doomed their victims, till there were no more left in their number, and were commanded to stand aside together with those whom they had doomed. Then the male Isanusi began, and I could see well that by this time their hearts were fearful, for they smelt a snare. Yet the king's bidding must be done, and though their magic failed them here, victims must be found.

So they smelt out this man and that man till we were a great company of the doomed, who sat in silence on the ground looking at each other with sad eyes and watching the sun, which we deemed our last, climb slowly down the sky. And ever as the day waned those who were left untried of the witch-doctors grew madder and more fierce. They leaped into the air, they ground their teeth, and rolled upon the ground. They drew forth snakes and devoured them alive, they shrieked out to the spirits and called upon the names of ancient kings.

At length it drew on to evening, and the last company of the witch-doctors did their work, smelling out some of the keepers of the Emposeni, the house of the women. But there was one man of their company, a young man and a tall, who held back and took no share in the work, but stood by himself in the centre of the great circle, fixing his eyes on the heavens.

And when this company had been ordered to stand aside also together with those whom they had smelt out, the king called aloud to the last of the witch-doctors, asking him of his name and tribe, and why he alone did not do his office.

"My name is Indabazimbi, the son of Arpi, O king," he answered, "and I am of the tribe of the Maquilisini. Does the king bid me to smell out him of whom the spirits have spoken to me as the worker of this deed?"

"I bid thee," said the king.

Then the young man Indabazimbi stepped straight forward across the ring, making no cries or gestures, but as one who walks from his gate to the cattle kraal, and suddenly he struck the king in the face with the tail in his hand, saying, "I smell out the Heavens above me!" (2)

(2) A Zulu title for the king.--ED.

Now a great gasp of wonder went up from the multitude, and all looked to see this fool killed by torture. But Chaka rose and laughed aloud.

"Thou hast said it," he cried, "and thou alone! Listen, ye people! I did the deed! I smote blood upon the gateways of my kraal; with my own hand I smote it, that I might learn who were the true doctors and who were the false! Now it seems that in the land of the Zulu there is one true

doctor--this young man--and of the false, look at them and count them, they are like the leaves. See! there they stand, and by them stand those whom they have doomed--the innocent whom, with their wives and children, they have doomed to the death of the dog. Now I ask you, my people, what reward shall be given to them?"

Then a great roar went up from all the multitude, "Let them die, O king!"

"Ay!" he answered. "Let them die as liars should!"

Now the Isanasis, men and women, screamed aloud in fear, and cried for mercy, tearing themselves with their nails, for least of all things did they desire to taste of their own medicine of death. But the king only laughed the more.

"Hearken ye!" he said, pointing to the crowd of us who had been smelt out. "Ye were doomed to death by these false prophets. Now glut yourselves upon them. Slay them, my children! slay them all! wipe them away! stamp them out!--all! all, save this young man!"

Then we bounded from the ground, for our hearts were fierce with hate and with longing to avenge the terrors we had borne. The doomed slew the doomers, while from the circle of the Ingomboco a great roar of laughter went up, for men rejoiced because the burden of the witch-doctors had fallen from them.

At last it was done, and we drew back from the heap of the dead. Nothing was heard there now--no more cries or prayers or curses. The witch-finders travelled the path on which they had set the feet of many. The king drew near to look. He came alone, and all who had done his bidding bent their heads and crept past him, praising him as they went. Only I stood still, covered, as I was with mire and filth, for I did not fear to stand in the presence of the king. Chaka drew near, and looked at the piled-up heaps of the slain and the cloud of dust that yet hung over them.

"There they lie, Mopo," he said. "There lie those who dared to prophecy falsely to the king! That was a good word of thine, Mopo, which taught me to set the snare for them; yet methought I saw thee start when Nobela, queen of the witch-doctresses, switched death on thee. Well, they are dead, and the land breathes more freely; and for the evil which they have done, it is as yonder dust, that shall soon sink again to earth and there be lost."

Thus he spoke, then ceased--for lo! something moved beneath the cloud of dust, something broke a way through the heap of the dead. Slowly it forced its path, pushing the slain this way and that, till at length it stood upon its feet and tottered towards us--a thing dreadful to look on. The shape was the shape of an aged woman, and even through the blood and mire I knew her. It was Nobela, she who had doomed me, she whom but now I had smitten to earth, but who had come back from the dead to curse

me!

On she tottered, her apparel hanging round her in red rags, a hundred wounds upon her face and form. I saw that she was dying, but life still flickered in her, and the fire of hate burned in her snaky eyes.

"Hail, king!" she screamed.

"Peace, liar!" he answered; "thou art dead!"

"Not yet, king. I heard thy voice and the voice of yonder dog, whom I would have given to the jackals, and I will not die till I have spoken. I smelt him out this morning when I was alive; now that I am as one already dead, I smell him out again. He shall bewitch thee with blood indeed, Chaka--he and Unandi, thy mother, and Baleka, thy wife. Think of my words when the assegai reddens before thee for the last time, king! Farewell!" And she uttered a great cry and rolled upon the ground dead.

"The witch lies hard and dies hard," said the king carelessly, and turned upon his heel. But those words of dead Nobela remained fixed in his memory, or so much of them as had been spoken of Unandi and Baleka. There they remained like seeds in the earth, there they grew to bring forth fruit in their season.

And thus ended the great Ingomboco of Chaka, the greatest Ingomboco that ever was held in Zululand.