

CHAPTER IX. THE LOSS OF UMSLOPOGAAS

Now, after the smelling out of the witch-doctors, Chaka caused a watch to be kept upon his mother Unandi, and his wife Baleka, my sister, and report was brought to him by those who watched, that the two women came to my huts by stealth, and there kissed and nursed a boy--one of my children. Then Chaka remembered the prophecy of Nobela, the dead Isanusi, and his heart grew dark with doubt. But to me he said nothing of the matter, for then, as always, his eyes looked over my head. He did not fear me or believe that I plotted against him, I who was his dog. Still, he did this, though whether by chance or design I do not know: he bade me go on a journey to a distant tribe that lived near the borders of the Amaswazi, there to take count of certain of the king's cattle which were in the charge of that tribe, and to bring him account of the tale of their increase. So I bowed before the king, and said that I would run like a dog to do his bidding, and he gave me men to go with me.

Then I returned to my huts to bid farewell to my wives and children, and there I found that my wife, Anadi, the mother of Moosa, my son, had fallen sick with a wandering sickness, for strange things came into her mind, and what came into her mind that she said, being, as I did not doubt, bewitched by some enemy of my house.

Still, I must go upon the king's business, and I told this to my wife Macropha, the mother of Nada, and, as it was thought, of Umslopogaas,

the son of Chaka. But when I spoke to Macrophia of the matter she burst into tears and clung to me. I asked her why she wept thus, and she answered that the shadow of evil lay upon her heart, for she was sure that if I left her at the king's kraal, when I returned again I should find neither her nor Nada, my child, nor Umslopogaas, who was named my son, and whom I loved as a son, still in the land of life. Then I tried to calm her; but the more I strove the more she wept, saying that she knew well that these things would be so.

Now I asked her what could be done, for I was stirred by her tears, and the dread of evil crept from her to me as shadows creep from the valley to the mountain.

She answered, "Take me with you, my husband, that I may leave this evil land, where the very skies rain blood, and let me rest awhile in the place of my own people till the terror of Chaka has gone by."

"How can I do this?" I said. "None may leave the king's kraal without the king's pass."

"A man may put away his wife," she replied. "The king does not stand between a man and his wife. Say, my husband, that you love me no longer, that I bear you no more children, and that therefore you send me back whence I came. By-and-bye we will come together again if we are left among the living."

"So be it," I answered. "Leave the kraal with Nada and Umslopogaas this night, and to-morrow morning meet me at the river bank, and we shall go on together, and for the rest may the spirits of our fathers hold us safe."

So we kissed each other, and Macropha went on secretly with the children.

Now at the dawning on the morrow I summoned the men whom the king had given me, and we started upon our journey. When the sun was well up we came to the banks of the river, and there I found my wife Macropha, and with her the two children. They rose as I came, but I frowned at my wife and she gave me no greeting. Those with me looked at her askance.

"I have divorced this woman," I said to them. "She is a withered tree, a worn out old hag, and now I take her with me to send her to the country of the Swazis, whence she came. Cease weeping," I added to Macropha, "it is my last word."

"What says the king?" asked the men.

"I will answer to the king," I said. And we went on.

Now I must tell how we lost Umslopogaas, the son of Chaka, who was then a great lad drawing on to manhood, fierce in temper, well grown and broad for his years.

We had journeyed seven days, for the way was long, and on the night of the seventh day we came to a mountainous country in which there were few kraals, for Chaka had eaten them all up years before. Perhaps you know the place, my father. In it is a great and strange mountain. It is haunted also, and named the Ghost Mountain, and on the top of it is a grey peak rudely shaped like the head of an aged woman. Here in this wild place we must sleep, for darkness drew on. Now we soon learned that there were many lions in the rocks around, for we heard their roaring and were much afraid, all except Umslopogaas, who feared nothing. So we made a circle of thorn-bushes and sat in it, holding our assegais ready. Presently the moon came up--it was a full-grown moon and very bright, so bright that we could see everything for a long way round. Now some six spear-throws from where we sat was a cliff, and at the top of the cliff was a cave, and in this cave lived two lions and their young. When the moon grew bright we saw the lions come out and stand upon the edge of the cliff, and with them were two little ones that played about like kittens, so that had we not been frightened it would have been beautiful to see them.

"Oh! Umslopogaas," said Nada, "I wish that I had one of the little lions for a dog."

The boy laughed, saying, "Then, shall I fetch you one, sister?"

"Peace, boy," I said. "No man may take young lions from their lair and

live."

"Such things have been done, my father," he answered, laughing. And no more was said of the matter.

Now when the cubs had played awhile, we saw the lioness take up the cubs in her mouth and carry them into the cave. Then she came out again, and went away with her mate to seek food, and soon we heard them roaring in the distance. Now we stacked up the fire and went to sleep in our enclosure of thorns without fear, for we knew that the lions were far away eating game. But Umslopogaas did not sleep, for he had determined that he would fetch the cub which Nada had desired, and, being young and foolhardy, he did not think of the danger which he would bring upon himself and all of us. He knew no fear, and now, as ever, if Nada spoke a word, nay, even if she thought of a thing to desire it, he would not rest till it was won for her. So while we slept Umslopogaas crept like a snake from the fence of thorns, and, taking an assegai in his hand, he slipped away to the foot of the cliff where the lions had their den. Then he climbed the cliff, and, coming to the cave, entered there and groped his way into it. The cubs heard him, and, thinking that it was their mother who returned, began to whine and purr for food. Guided by the light of their yellow eyes, he crept over the bones, of which there were many in the cave, and came to where they lay. Then he put out his hands and seized one of the cubs, killing the other with his assegai, because he could not carry both of them. Now he made haste thence before the lions returned, and came back to the thorn fence where we lay just

as dawn as breaking.

I awoke at the coming of the dawn, and, standing up, I looked out. Lo! there, on the farther side of the thorn fence, looking large in the grey mist, stood the lad Umslopogaas, laughing. In his teeth he held the assegai, yet dripping with blood, and in his hands the lion cub that, despite its whines and struggles, he grasped by the skin of the neck and the hind legs.

"Awake, my sister!" he cried; "here is the dog you seek. Ah! he bites now, but he will soon grow tame."

Nada awoke, and rising, cried out with joy at the sight of the cub, but for a moment I stood astonished.

"Fool!" I cried at last, "let the cub go before the lions come to rend us!"

"I will not let it go, my father," he answered sullenly. "Are there not five of us with spears, and can we not fight two cats? I was not afraid to go alone into their den. Are you all afraid to meet them in the open?"

"You are mad," I said; "let the cub go!" And I ran towards Umslopogaas to take it from him. But he sprang aside and avoided me.

"I will never let that go of which I have got hold," he said, "at least not living!" And suddenly he seized the head of the cub and twisted its neck; then threw it on to the ground, and added, "See, now I have done your bidding, my father!"

As he spoke we heard a great sound of roaring from the cave in the cliff. The lions had returned and found one cub dead and the other gone.

"Into the fence!--back into the fence!" I cried, and we sprang over the thorn-bushes where those with us were making ready their spears, trembling as they handled them with fear and the cold of the morning. We looked up. There, down the side of the cliff, came the lions, bounding on the scent of him who had robbed them of their young. The lion ran first, and as he came he roared; then followed the lioness, but she did not roar, for in her mouth was the cub that Umslopogaas had assegaied in the cave. Now they drew near, mad with fury, their manes bristling, and lashing their flanks with their long tails.

"Curse you for a fool, son of Mopo," said one of the men with me to Umslopogaas; "presently I will beat you till the blood comes for this trick."

"First beat the lions, then beat me if you can," answered the lad, "and wait to curse till you have done both."

Now the lions were close to us; they came to the body of the second cub,

that lay outside the fence of thorns. The lion stopped and sniffed it. Then he roared--ah! he roared till the earth shook. As for the lioness, she dropped the dead cub which she was carrying, and took the other into her mouth, for she could not carry both.

"Get behind me, Nada," cried Umslopogaas, brandishing his spear, "the lion is about to spring."

As the words left his mouth the great brute crouched to the ground. Then suddenly he sprang from it like a bird, and like a bird he travelled through the air towards us.

"Catch him on the spears!" cried Umslopogaas, and by nature, as it were, we did the boy's bidding; for huddling ourselves together, we held out the assegais so that the lion fell upon them as he sprang, and their blades sank far into him. But the weight of his charge carried us to the ground, and he fell on to us, striking at us and at the spears, and roaring with pain and fury as he struck. Presently he was on his legs biting at the spears in his breast. Then Umslopogaas, who alone did not wait his onslaught, but had stepped aside for his own ends, uttered a loud cry and drove his assegai into the lion behind the shoulder, so that with a groan the brute rolled over dead.

Meanwhile, the lioness stood without the fence, the second dead cub in her mouth, for she could not bring herself to leave either of them. But when she heard her mate's last groan she dropped the cub and gathered

herself together to spring. Umslopogaas alone stood up to face her, for he only had withdrawn his assegai from the carcass of the lion. She swept on towards the lad, who stood like a stone to meet her. Now she met his spear, it sunk in, it snapped, and down fell Umslopogaas dead or senseless beneath the mass of the lioness. She sprang up, the broken spear standing in her breast, sniffed at Umslopogaas, then, as though she knew that it was he who had robbed her, she seized him by the loins and moocha, and sprang with him over the fence.

"Oh, save him!" cried the girl Nada in bitter woe. And we rushed after the lioness shouting.

For a moment she stood over her dead cubs, Umslopogaas hanging from her mouth, and looked at them as though she wondered; and we hoped that she might let him fall. Then, hearing our cries, she turned and bounded away towards the bush, bearing Umslopogaas in her mouth. We seized our spears and followed; but the ground grew stony, and, search as we would, we could find no trace of Umslopogaas or of the lioness. They had vanished like a cloud. So we came back, and, ah! my heart was sore, for I loved the lad as though he had indeed been my son. But I knew that he was dead, and there was an end.

"Where is my brother?" cried Nada when we came back.

"Lost," I answered. "Lost, never to be found again."

Then the girl gave a great and bitter cry, and fell to the earth saying,
"I would that I were dead with my brother!"

"Let us be going," said Macropha, my wife.

"Have you no tears to weep for your son?" asked a man of our company.

"What is the use of weeping over the dead? Does it, then, bring them back?" she answered. "Let us be going!"

The man thought these words strange, but he did not know that Umslopogaas was not born of Macropha.

Still, we waited in that place a day, thinking that, perhaps, the lioness would return to her den and that, at least, we might kill her. But she came back no more. So on the next morning we rolled up our blankets and started forward on our journey, sad at heart. In truth, Nada was so weak from grief that she could hardly travel, but I never heard the name of Umslopogaas pass her lips again during that journey. She buried him in her heart and said nothing. And I too said nothing, but I wondered why it had been brought about that I should save the life of Umslopogaas from the jaws of the Lion of Zulu, that the lioness of the rocks might devour him.

And so the time went on till we reached the kraal where the king's business must be done, and where I and my wife should part.

On the morning after we came to the kraal, having kissed in secret, though in public we looked sullenly on one another, we parted as those part who meet no more, for it was in our thoughts, that we should never see each other's face again, nor, indeed, did we do so. And I drew Nada aside and spoke to her thus: "We part, my daughter; nor do I know when we shall meet again, for the times are troubled and it is for your safety and that of your mother that I rob my eyes of the sight of you. Nada, you will soon be a woman, and you will be fairer than any woman among our people, and it may come about that many great men will seek you in marriage, and, perhaps, that I, your father, shall not be there to choose for you whom you shall wed, according to the custom of our land. But I charge you, as far as may be possible for you to do so, take only a man whom you can love, and be faithful to him alone, for thus shall a woman find happiness."

Here I stopped, for the girl took hold of my hand and looked into my face. "Peace, my father," she said, "do not speak to me of marriage, for I will wed no man, now that Umslopogaas is dead because of my foolishness. I will live and die alone, and, oh! may I die quickly, that I may go to seek him whom I love only!"

"Nay, Nada," I said, "Umslopogaas was your brother, and it is not fitting that you should speak of him thus, even though he is dead."

"I know nothing of such matters, my father," she said. "I speak what my

heart tells me, and it tells me that I loved Umslopogaas living, and, though he is dead, I shall love him alone to the end. Ah! you think me but a child, yet my heart is large, and it does not lie to me."

Now I upbraided the girl no more, because I knew that Umslopogaas was not her brother, but one whom she might have married. Only I marvelled that the voice of nature should speak so truly in her, telling her that which was lawful, even when it seemed to be most unlawful.

"Speak no more of Umslopogaas," I said, "for surely he is dead, and though you cannot forget him, yet speak of him no more, and I pray of you, my daughter, that if we do not meet again, yet you should keep me in your memory, and the love I bear you, and the words which from time to time I have said to you. The world is a thorny wilderness, my daughter, and its thorns are watered with a rain of blood, and we wander in our wretchedness like lost travellers in a mist; nor do I know why our feet are set on this wandering. But at last there comes an end, and we die and go hence, none know where, but perhaps where we go the evil may change to the good, and those who were dear to each other on the earth may become yet dearer in the heavens; for I believe that man is not born to perish altogether, but is rather gathered again to the Umkulunkulu who sent him on his journeyings. Therefore keep hope, my daughter, for if these things are not so, at least sleep remains, and sleep is soft, and so farewell."

Then we kissed and parted, and I watched Macropha, my wife, and Nada,

my daughter, till they melted into the sky, as they walked upon their journey to Swaziland, and was very sad, because, having lost Umslopogaas, he who in after days was named the Slaughterer and the Woodpecker, I must lose them also.