

CHAPTER XVI. UMSLOPOGAAS VENTURES OUT TO WIN THE AXE

Now many moons had gone by since Umslopogaas became a king of the wolves, and he was a man full grown, a man fierce and tall and keen; a slayer of men, fleet of foot and of valour unequalled, seeing by night as well as by day. But he was not yet named the Slaughterer, and not yet did he hold that iron chieftainess, the axe Groan-Maker. Still, the desire to win the axe was foremost in his mind, for no woman had entered there, who when she enters drives out all other desire--ay, my father, even that of good weapons. At times, indeed, Umslopogaas would lurk in the reeds by the river looking at the kraal of Jikiza the Unconquered, and would watch the gates of his kraal, and once as he lurked he saw a man great, broad and hairy, who bore upon his shoulder a shining axe, hafted with the horn of a rhinoceros. After that his greed for this axe entered into Umslopogaas more and more, till at length he scarcely could sleep for thinking of it, and to Galazi he spoke of little else, wearying him much with his talk, for Galazi loved silence. But for all his longing he could find no means to win it.

Now it befell that as Umslopogaas hid one evening in the reeds, watching the kraal of Jikiza, he saw a maiden straight and fair, whose skin shone like the copper anklets on her limbs. She walked slowly towards the reeds where he lay hidden. Nor did she stop at the brink of the reeds; she entered them and sat herself down within a spear's length of where Umslopogaas was seated, and at once began to weep, speaking to herself as she wept.

"Would that the ghost-wolves might fall on him and all that is his," she sobbed, "ay, and on Masilo also! I would hound them on, even if I myself must next know their fangs. Better to die by the teeth of the wolves than to be sold to this fat pig of a Masilo. Oh! if I must wed him, I will give him a knife for the bride's kiss. Oh! that I were a lady of the ghost-wolves, there should be a picking of bones in the kraal of Jikiza before the moon grows young again."

Umslopogaas heard, and of a sudden reared himself up before the maid, and he was great and wild to look on, and the she-wolf's fangs shone upon his brow.

"The ghost-wolves are at hand, damsel," he said. "They are ever at hand for those who need them."

Now the maid saw him and screamed faintly, then grew silent, wondering at the greatness and the fierce eyes of the man who spoke to her.

"Who are you?" she asked. "I fear you not, whoever you are."

"There you are wrong, damsel, for all men fear me, and they have cause to fear. I am one of the Wolf-Brethren, whose names have been told of; I am a wizard of the Ghost Mountain. Take heed, now, lest I kill you. It will be of little avail to call upon your people, for my feet are fleeter than theirs."

"I have no wish to call upon my people, Wolf-Man," she answered. "And for the rest, I am too young to kill."

"That is so, maiden," answered Umslopogaas, looking at her beauty. "What were the words upon your lips as to Jikiza and a certain Masilo? Were they not fierce words, such as my heart likes well?"

"It seems that you heard them," answered the girl. "What need to waste breath in speaking them again?"

"No need, maiden. Now tell me your story; perhaps I may find a way to help you."

"There is little to tell," she answered. "It is a small tale and a common. My name is Zinita, and Jikiza the Unconquered is my step-father. He married my mother, who is dead, but none of his blood is in me. Now he would give me in marriage to a certain Masilo, a fat man and an old, whom I hate, because Masilo offers many cattle for me."

"Is there, then, another whom you would wed, maiden?" asked Umslopogaas.

"There is none," answered Zinita, looking him in the eyes.

"And is there no path by which you may escape from Masilo?"

"There is only one path, Wolf-Man--by death. If I die, I shall escape; if Masilo dies, I shall escape; but to little end, for I shall be given to another; but if Jikiza dies, then it will be well. What of that wolf-people of yours, are they not hungry, Wolf-Man?"

"I cannot bring them here," answered Umslopogaas. "Is there no other way?"

"There is another way," said Zinita, "if one can be found to try it." And again she looked at him strangely, causing the blood to beat within him. "Hearken! do you not know how our people are governed? They are governed by him who holds the axe Groan-Maker. He that can win the axe in war from the hand of him who holds it, shall be our chief. But if he who holds the axe dies unconquered, then his son takes his place and with it the axe. It has been thus, indeed, for four generations, since he who held Groan-Maker has always been unconquerable. But I have heard that the great-grandfather of Jikiza won the axe from him who held it in his day; he won it by fraud. For when the axe had fallen on him but lightly, he fell over, feigning death. Then the owner of the axe laughed, and turned to walk away. But the forefather of Jikiza sprang up behind him and pierced him through with a spear, and thus he became chief of the People of the Axe. Therefore, it is the custom of Jikiza to hew off the heads of those whom he kills with the axe."

"Does he, then, slay many?" asked Umslopogaas.

"Of late years, few indeed," she said, "for none dare stand against him--no, not with all to win. For, holding the axe Groan-Maker, he is unconquerable, and to fight with him is sure death. Fifty-and-one have tried in all, and before the hut of Jikiza there are piled fifty-and-one white skulls. And know this, the axe must be won in fight; if it is stolen or found, it has no virtue--nay, it brings shame and death to him who holds it."

"How, then, may a man give battle to Jikiza?" he asked again.

"Thus: Once in every year, on the first day of the new moon of the summer season, Jikiza holds a meeting of the headmen. Then he must rise and challenge all or any to come forward and do battle with him to win the axe and become chief in his place. Now if one comes forward, they go into the cattle kraal, and there the matter is ended. Afterwards, when the head is hewn from his foe, Jikiza goes back to the meeting of the headmen, and they talk as before. All are free to come to the meeting, and Jikiza must fight with them if they wish it, whoever they be."

"Perhaps I shall be there," said Umslopogaas.

"After this meeting at the new moon, I am to be given in marriage to Masilo," said the maid. "But should one conquer Jikiza, then he will be chief, and can give me in marriage to whom he will."

Now Umslopogaas understood her meaning, and knew that he had found

favour in her sight; and the thought moved him a little, for women were strange to him as yet.

"If perchance I should be there," he said, "and if perchance I should win the iron chieftainess, the axe Groan-Maker, and rule over the People of the Axe, you should not live far from the shadow of the axe thenceforward, maid Zinita."

"It is well, Wolf-Man, though some might not wish to dwell in that shadow; but first you must win the axe. Many have tried, and all have failed."

"Yet one must succeed at last," he said, "and so, farewell!" and he leaped into the torrent of the river, and swam it with great strokes.

Now the maid Zinita watched him till he was gone, and love of him entered into her heart--a love that was fierce and jealous and strong. But as he wended to the Ghost Mountain Umslopogaas thought rather of axe Groan-Maker than of Maid Zinita; for ever, at the bottom, Umslopogaas loved war more than women, though this has been his fate, that women have brought sorrow on his head.

Fifteen days must pass before the day of the new moon, and during this time Umslopogaas thought much and said little. Still, he told Galazi something of the tale, and that he was determined to do battle with Jikiza the Unconquered for the axe Groan-Maker. Galazi said that he

would do well to let it be, and that it was better to stay with the wolves than to go out seeking strange weapons. He said also that even if he won the axe, the matter might not stay there, for he must take the girl also, and his heart boded no good of women. It had been a girl who poisoned his father in the kraals of the Halakazi. To all of which Umslopogaas answered nothing, for his heart was set both on the axe and the girl, but more on the first than the last.

So the time wore on, and at length came the day of the new moon. At the dawn of that day Umslopogaas arose and clad himself in a moocha, binding the she-wolf's skin round his middle beneath the moocha. In his hand he took a stout fighting-shield, which he had made of buffalo hide, and that same light moon-shaped axe with which he had slain the captain of Chaka.

"A poor weapon with which to kill Jikiza the Unconquerable," said Galazi, eyeing it askance.

"It shall serve my turn," answered Umslopogaas.

Now Umslopogaas ate, and then they moved together slowly down the mountain and crossed the river by a ford, for he wished to save his strength. On the farther side of the river Galazi hid himself in the reeds, because his face was known, and there Umslopogaas bade him farewell, not knowing if he should look upon him again. Afterwards he walked up to the Great Place of Jikiza. Now when he reached the gates

of the kraal, he saw that many people were streaming through them, and mingled with the people. Presently they came to the open space in front of the huts of Jikiza, and there the headmen were gathered together. In the centre of them, and before a heap of the skulls of men which were piled up against his door-posts, sat Jikiza, a huge man, a hairy and a proud, who glared about him rolling his eyes. Fastened to his arm by a thong of leather was the great axe Groan-Maker, and each man as he came up saluted the axe, calling it "Inkosikaas," or chieftainess, but he did not salute Jikiza. Umslopogaas sat down with the people in front of the councillors, and few took any notice of him, except Zinita, who moved sullenly to and fro bearing gourds of beer to the councillors. Near to Jikiza, on his right hand, sat a fat man with small and twinkling eyes, who watched the maid Zinita greedily.

"Yon man," thought Umslopogaas, "is Masilo. The better for blood-letting will you be, Masilo."

Presently Jikiza spoke, rolling his eyes: "This is the matter before you, councillors. I have settled it in my mind to give my step-daughter Zinita in marriage to Masilo, but the marriage gift is not yet agreed on. I demand a hundred head of cattle from Masilo, for the maid is fair and straight, a proper maid, and, moreover, my daughter, though not of my blood. But Masilo offers fifty head only, therefore I ask you to settle it."

"We hear you, Lord of the Axe," answered one of the councillors, "but

first, O Unconquered, you must on this day of the year, according to ancient custom, give public challenge to any man to fight you for the Groan-Maker and for your place as chief of the People of the Axe."

"This is a wearisome thing," grumbled Jikiza. "Can I never have done in it? Fifty-and-three have I slain in my youth without a wound, and now for many years I have challenged, like a cock on a dunghill, and none crow in answer."

"Ho, now! Is there any man who will come forward and do battle with me, Jikiza, for the great axe Groan-Maker? To him who can win it, it shall be, and with it the chieftainship of the People of the Axe."

Thus he spoke very fast, as a man gabbles a prayer to a spirit in whom he has little faith, then turned once more to talk of the cattle of Masilo and of the maid Zinita. But suddenly Umslopogaas stood up, looking at him over the top of his war shield, and crying, "Here is one, O Jikiza, who will do battle with you for the axe Groan-Maker and for the chieftainship that is to him who holds the axe."

Now, all the people laughed, and Jikiza glared at him.

"Come forth from behind that big shield of yours," he said. "Come out and tell me your name and lineage--you who would do battle with the Unconquered for the ancient axe."

Then Umslopogaas came forward, and he looked so fierce, though he was but young, that the people laughed no more.

"What is my name and lineage to you, Jikiza?" he said. "Let it be, and hasten to do me battle, as you must by the custom, for I am eager to handle the Groan-Maker and to sit in your seat and settle this matter of the cattle of Masilo the Pig. When I have killed you I will take a name who now have none."

Now once more the people laughed, but Jikiza grew mad with wrath, and sprang up gasping.

"What!" he said, "you dare to speak thus to me, you babe unweaned, to me the Unconquered, the holder of the axe! Never did I think to live to hear such talk from a long-legged pup. On to the cattle kraal, to the cattle kraal, People of the Axe, that I may hew this braggart's head from his shoulders. He would stand in my place, would he?--the place that I and my fathers have held for four generations by virtue of the axe. I tell you all, that presently I will stand upon his head, and then we will settle the matter of Masilo."

"Babble not so fast, man," quoth Umslopogaas, "or if you must babble, speak those words which you would say ere you bid the sun farewell."

Now, Jikiza choked with rage, and foam came from his lips so that he could not speak, but the people found this sport--all except Masilo, who

looked askance at the stranger, tall and fierce, and Zinita, who looked at Masilo, and with no love. So they moved down to the cattle kraal, and Galazi, seeing it from afar, could keep away no longer, but drew near and mingled with the crowd.