

CHAPTER XVII. UMSLOPOGAAS BECOMES CHIEF OF THE PEOPLE OF THE AXE

Now, when Umslopogaas and Jikiza the Unconquered had come to the cattle kraal, they were set in its centre and there were ten paces between them. Umslopogaas was armed with the great shield and the light moon-shaped axe, Jikiza carried the Groan-Maker and a small dancing shield, and, looking at the weapons of the two, people thought that the stranger would furnish no sport to the holder of the axe.

"He is ill-armed," said an old man, "it should be otherwise--large axe, small shield. Jikiza is unconquerable, and the big shield will not help this long-legged stranger when Groan-Maker rattles on the buffalo hide." The old man spoke thus in the hearing of Galazi the Wolf, and Galazi thought that he spoke wisely, and sorrowed for the fate of his brother.

Now, the word was given, and Jikiza rushed on Umslopogaas, roaring, for his rage was great. But Umslopogaas did not stir till his foe was about to strike, then suddenly he leaped aside, and as Jikiza passed he smote him hard upon the back with the flat of his axe, making a great sound, for it was not his plan to try and kill Jikiza with this axe. Now, a shout of laughter went up from the hundreds of the people, and the heart of Jikiza nearly burst with rage because of the shame of that blow. Round he came like a bull that is mad, and once more rushed at Umslopogaas, who lifted his shield to meet him. Then, of a sudden, just when the great axe leapt on high, Umslopogaas uttered a cry as of fear, and,

turning, fled before the face of Jikiza. Now once more the shout of laughter went up, while Umslopogaas fled swiftly, and after him rushed Jikiza, blind with fury. Round and about the kraal sped Umslopogaas, scarcely a spear's length ahead of Jikiza, and he ran keeping his back to the sun as much as might be, that he might watch the shadow of Jikiza. A second time he sped round, while the people cheered the chase as hunters cheer a dog which pursues a buck. So cunningly did Umslopogaas run, that, though he seemed to reel with weakness in such fashion that men thought his breath was gone, yet he went ever faster and faster, drawing Jikiza after him.

Now, when Umslopogaas knew by the breathing of his foe and by the staggering of his shadow that his strength was spent, suddenly he made as though he were about to fall himself, and stumbled out of the path far to the right, and as he stumbled he let drop his great shield full in the way of Jikiza's feet. Then it came about that Jikiza, rushing on blindly, caught his feet in the shield and fell headlong to earth. Umslopogaas saw, and swooped on him like an eagle to a dove. Before men could so much as think, he had seized the axe Groan-Maker, and with a blow of the steel he held had severed the thong of leather which bound it to the wrist of Jikiza, and sprung back, holding the great axe aloft, and casting down his own weapon upon the ground. Now, the watchers saw all the cunning of his fight, and those of them who hated Jikiza shouted aloud. But others were silent.

Slowly Jikiza gathered himself from the ground, wondering if he were

still alive, and as he rose he grasped the little axe of Umslopogaas, and, looking at it, he wept. But Umslopogaas held up the great Groan-Maker, the iron chieftainess, and examined its curved points of blue steel, the gouge that stands behind it, and the beauty of its haft, bound about with wire of brass, and ending in a knob like the knob of a stick, as a lover looks upon the beauty of his bride. Then before all men he kissed the broad blade and cried aloud:--

"Greeting to thee, my Chieftainess, greeting to thee, Wife of my youth, whom I have won in war. Never shall we part, thou and I, and together will we die, thou and I, for I am not minded that others should handle thee when I am gone."

Thus he cried in the hearing of men, then turned to Jikiza, who stood weeping, because he had lost all.

"Where now is your pride, O Unconquered?" laughed Umslopogaas. "Fight on. You are as well armed as I was a while ago, when I did not fear to stand before you."

Jikiza looked at him for a moment, then with a curse he hurled the little axe at him, and, turning, fled swiftly towards the gates of the cattle kraal.

Umslopogaas stooped, and the little axe sped over him. Then he stood for a while watching, and the people thought that he meant to let Jikiza go.

But that was not his desire; he waited, indeed, until Jikiza had covered nearly half the space between him and the gate, then with a roar he leaped forward, as light leaps from a cloud, and so fast did his feet fly that the watchers could scarce see them move. Jikiza fled fast also, yet he seemed but as one who stands still. Now he reached the gate of the kraal, now there was rush, a light of downward falling steel, and something swept past him. Then, behold! Jikiza fell in the gateway of the cattle kraal, and all saw that he was dead, smitten to death by that mighty axe Groan-Maker, which he and his fathers had held for many years.

A great shout went up from the crowd of watchers when they knew that Jikiza the Unconquered was killed at last, and there were many who hailed Umslopogaas, naming him Chief and Lord of the People of the Axe. But the sons of Jikiza to the number of ten, great men and brave, rushed on Umslopogaas to kill him. Umslopogaas ran backwards, lifting up the Groan-Maker, when certain councillors of the people flung themselves in between them, crying, "Hold!"

"Is not this your law, ye councillors," said Umslopogaas, "that, having conquered the chief of the People of the Axe, I myself am chief?"

"That is our law indeed, stranger," answered an aged councillor, "but this also is our law: that now you must do battle, one by one, with all who come against you. So it was in my father's time, when the grandfather of him who now lies dead won the axe, and so it must be

again to-day."

"I have nothing to say against the rule," said Umslopogaas. "Now who is there who will come up against me to do battle for the axe Groan-Maker and the chieftainship of the People of the Axe?"

Then all the ten sons of Jikiza stepped forward as one man, for their hearts were made with wrath because of the death of their father and because the chieftainship had gone from their race, so that in truth they cared little if they lived or died. But there were none besides these, for all men feared to stand before Umslopogaas and the Groan-Maker.

Umslopogaas counted them. "There are ten, by the head of Chaka!" he cried. "Now if I must fight all these one by one, no time will be left to me this day to talk of the matter of Masilo and of the maid Zinita. Hearken! What say you, sons of Jikiza the Conquered? If I find one other to stand beside me in the fray, and all of you come on at once against us twain, ten against two, to slay us or be slain, will that be to your minds?"

The brethren consulted together, and held that so they should be in better case than if they went up one by one.

"So be it," they said, and the councillors assented.

Now, as he fled round and round, Umslopogaas had seen the face of Galazi, his brother, in the throng, and knew that he hungered to share the fight. So he called aloud that he whom he should choose, and who would stand back to back with him in the fray, if victory were theirs, should be the first after him among the People of the Axe, and as he called, he walked slowly down the line scanning the faces of all, till he came to where Galazi stood leaning on the Watcher.

"Here is a great fellow who bears a great club," said Umslopogaas. "How are you named, fellow?"

"I am named Wolf," answered Galazi.

"Say, now, Wolf, are you willing to stand back to back with me in this fray of two against ten? If victory is ours, you shall be next to me amongst this people."

"Better I love the wild woods and the mountain's breast than the kraals of men and the kiss of wives, Axebearer," answered Galazi. "Yet, because you have shown yourself a warrior of might, and to taste again of the joy of battle, I will stand back to back with you, Axebearer, and see this matter ended."

"A bargain, Wolf!" cried Umslopogaas. And they walked side by side--a mighty pair!--till they came to the centre of the cattle kraal. All there looked on them wondering, and it came into the thoughts of some

of them that these were none other than the Wolf-Brethren who dwelt upon the Ghost Mountain.

"Now axe Groan-maker and club Watcher are come together, Galazi," said Umslopogaas as they walked, "and I think that few can stand before them."

"Some shall find it so," answered Galazi. "At the least, the fray will be merry, and what matter how frays end?"

"Ah," said Umslopogaas, "victory is good, but death ends all and is best of all."

Then they spoke of the fashion in which they would fight, and Umslopogaas looked curiously at the axe he carried, and at the point on its hammer, balancing it in his hand. When he had looked long, the pair took their stand back to back in the centre of the kraal, and people saw that Umslopogaas held the axe in a new fashion, its curved blade being inwards towards his breast, and the hollow point turned towards the foe. The ten brethren gathered themselves together, shaking their assegais; five of them stood before Umslopogaas and five before Galazi the Wolf. They were all great men, made fierce with rage and shame.

"Now nothing except witchcraft can save these two," said a councillor to one who stood by him.

"Yet there is virtue in the axe," answered the other, "and for the club, it seems that I know it: I think it is named Watcher of the Fords, and woe to those who stand before the Watcher. I myself have seen him aloft when I was young; moreover, these are no cravens who hold the axe and the club. They are but lads, indeed, yet they have drunk wolf's milk."

Meanwhile, an aged man drew near to speak the word of onset; it was that same man who had set out the law to Umslopogaas. He must give the signal by throwing up a spear, and when it struck the ground, then the fight would begin. The old man took the spear and threw it, but his hand was weak, and he cast so clumsily that it fell among the sons of Jikiza, who stood before Umslopogaas, causing them to open up to let it pass between them, and drawing the eyes of all ten of them to it, but Umslopogaas watched for the touching of the spear only, being careless where it touched. As the point of it kissed the earth, he said a word, and lo! Umslopogaas and Galazi, not waiting for the onslaught of the ten, as men had thought they must, sprang forward, each at the line of foes who were before him. While the ten still stood confused, for it had been their plan to attack, the Wolf-Brethren were upon them. Groan-Maker was up, but as for no great stroke. He did but peck, as a bird pecks with his bill, and yet a man dropped dead. The Watcher also was up, but he fell like a falling tree, and was the death of one. Through the lines of the ten passed the Wolf-Brethren in the gaps that each had made. Then they turned swiftly and charged towards each other again; again Groan-Maker pecked, again the Watcher thundered, and lo! once more Umslopogaas stood back to back unhurt, but before them lay four men dead.

The onslaught and the return were so swift, that men scarcely understood what had been done; even those of the sons of Jikiza who were left stared at each other wondering. Then they knew that they were but six, for four of them were dead. With a shout of rage they rushed upon the pair from both sides, but in either case one was the most eager, and outstepped the other two, and thus it came about that time was given the Wolf-Brethren to strike at him alone, before his fellows were at his side. He who came at Umslopogaas drove at him with his spear, but he was not to be caught thus, for he bent his middle sideways, so that the spear only cut his skin, and as he bent tapped with the point of the axe at the head of the smiter, dealing death on him.

"Yonder Woodpecker has a bill of steel, and he can use it well," said the councillor to him who stood by him.

"This is a Slaughterer indeed," the man answered, and the people heard the names. Thenceforth they knew Umslopogaas as the Woodpecker, and as Bulalio, or the Slaughterer, and by no other names. Now, he who came at Galazi the Wolf rushed on wildly, holding his spear short. But Galazi was cunning in war. He took one step forward to meet him, then, swinging the Watcher backward, he let him fall at the full length of arms and club. The child of Jikiza lifted his shield to catch the blow, but the shield was to the Watcher what a leaf is to the wind. Full on its hide the huge club fell, making a loud sound; the war-shield doubled up like a raw skin, and he who bore it fell crushed to the earth.

Now for a moment, the four who were left of the sons of Jikiza hovered round the pair, feinting at them from afar, but never coming within reach of axe or club. One threw a spear indeed, and though Umslopogaas leaped aside, and as it sped towards him smote the haft in two with the blade of Groan-Maker, yet its head flew on, wounding Galazi in the flank. Then he who had thrown the spear turned to fly, for his hands were empty, and the others followed swiftly, for the heart was out of them, and they dared to do battle with these two no more.

Thus the fight was ended, and from its beginning till the finish was not longer than the time in which men might count a hundred slowly.

"It seems that none are left for us to kill, Galazi," said Umslopogaas, laughing aloud. "Ah, that was a cunning fight! Ho! you sons of the Unconquered, who run so fast, stay your feet. I give you peace; you shall live to sweep my huts and to plough my fields with the other women of my kraal. Now, councillors, the fighting is done, so let us to the chief's hut, where Masilo waits us," and he turned and went with Galazi, and after him followed all the people, wondering and in silence.

When he reached the hut Umslopogaas sat himself down in the place where Jikiza had sat that morning, and the maid Zinita came to him with a wet cloth and washed the wound that the spear had made. He thanked her; then she would have washed Galazi's wound also, and this was deeper, but Galazi bade her to let him be roughly, as he would have no woman

meddling with his wounds. For neither then nor at any other time did Galazi turn to women, but he hated Zinita most of them all.

Then Umslopogaas spoke to Masilo the Pig, who sat before him with a frightened face, saying, "It seems, O Masilo, that you have sought this maid Zinita in marriage, and against her will, persecuting her. Now I had intended to kill you as an offering to her anger, but there has been enough blood-letting to-day. Yet you shall have a marriage gift to this girl, whom I myself will take in marriage: you shall give a hundred head of cattle. Then get you gone from among the People of the Axe, lest a worse thing befall you, Masilo the Pig."

So Masilo rose up and went, and his face was green with fear, but he paid the hundred head of cattle and fled towards the kraal of Chaka. Zinita watched him go, and she was glad of it, and because the Slaughterer had named her for his wife.

"I am well rid of Masilo," she said aloud, in the hearing of Galazi, "but I had been better pleased to see him dead before me."

"This woman has a fierce heart," thought Galazi, "and she will bring no good to Umslopogaas, my brother."

Now the councillors and the captains of the People of the Axe konzaed to him whom they named the Slaughterer, doing homage to him as chief and holder of the axe, and also they did homage to the axe itself. So

Umslopogaas became chief over this people, and their number was many, and he grew great and fat in cattle and wives, and none dared to gainsay him. From time to time, indeed, a man ventured to stand up before him in fight, but none could conquer him, and in a little while no one sought to face Groan-Maker when he lifted himself to peck.

Galazi also was great among the people, but dwelt with them little, for best he loved the wild woods and the mountain's breast, and often, as of old, he swept at night across the forest and the plains, and the howling of the ghost-wolves went with him.

But henceforth Umslopogaas the Slaughterer hunted very rarely with the wolves at night; he slept at the side of Zinita, and she loved him much and bore him children.