

CHAPTER XVIII. THE CURSE OF BALEKA

Now, my father, my story winds back again as the river bends towards its source, and I tell of those events which happened at the king's kraal of Gibamaxegu, which you white people name Gibbeclack, the kraal that is called "Pick-out-the-old-men," for it was there that Chaka murdered all the aged who were unfit for war.

After I, Mopo, had stood before the king, and he had given me new wives and fat cattle and a kraal to dwell in, the bones of Unandi, the Great Mother Elephant, Mother of the Heavens, were gathered together from the ashes of my huts, and because all could not be found, some of the bones of my wives were collected also to make up the number. But Chaka never knew this. When all were brought together, a great pit was dug and the bones were set out in order in the pit and buried; but not alone, for round them were placed twelve maidens of the servants of Unandi, and these maidens were covered over with the earth, and left to die in the pit by the bones of Unandi, their mistress. Moreover, all those who were present at the burial were made into a regiment and commanded that they should dwell by the grave for the space of a year. They were many, my father, but I was not one of them. Also Chaka gave orders that no crops should be sown that year, that the milk of the cows should be spilled upon the ground, and that no woman should give birth to a child for a full year, and that if any should dare to bear children, then that they should be slain and their husbands with them. And for a space of some months these things were done, my father, and great sorrow came upon the

land.

Then for a little while there was quiet, and Chaka went about heavily, and he wept often, and we who waited on him wept also as we walked, till at length it came about by use that we could weep without ceasing for many hours. No angry woman can weep as we wept in those days; it was an art, my father, for the teaching of which I received many cattle, for woe to him who had no tears in those days. Then it was also that Chaka sent out the captain and fifty soldiers to search for Umslopogaas, for, though he said nothing more to me of this matter, he did not believe all the tale that I had told him of the death of Umslopogaas in the jaws of a lion and the tale of those who were with me. How that company fared at the hands of Umslopogaas and of Galazi the Wolf, and at the fangs of the people black and grey, I have told you, my father. None of them ever came back again. In after days it was reported to the king that these soldiers were missing, never having returned, but he only laughed, saying that the lion which ate Umslopogaas, son of Mopo, was a fierce one, and had eaten them also.

At last came the night of the new moon, that dreadful night to be followed by a more dreadful morrow. I sat in the kraal of Chaka, and he put his arm about my neck and groaned and wept for his mother, whom he had murdered, and I groaned also, but I did not weep, because it was dark, and on the morrow I must weep much in the sight of king and men. Therefore, I spared my tears, lest they should fail me in my need.

All night long the people drew on from every side towards the kraal, and, as they came in thousands and tens of thousands, they filled the night with their cries, till it seemed as though the whole world were mourning, and loudly. None might cease their crying, and none dared to drink so much as a cup of water. The daylight came, and Chaka rose, saying, "Come, let us go forth, Mopo, and look on those who mourn with us." So we went out, and after us came men armed with clubs to do the bidding of the king.

Outside the kraal the people were gathered, and their number was countless as the leaves upon the trees. On every side the land was black with them, as at times the veldt is black with game. When they saw the king they ceased from their howling and sang the war-song, then once again they howled, and Chaka walked among them weeping. Now, my father, the sight became dreadful, for, as the sun rose higher the day grew hot, and utter weariness came upon the people, who were packed together like herds of cattle, and, though oxen slain in sacrifice lay around, they might neither eat nor drink. Some fell to the ground, and were trampled to death, others took too much snuff to make them weep, others stained their eyes with saliva, others walked to and fro, their tongues hanging from their jaws, while groans broke from their parched throats.

"Now, Mopo, we shall learn who are the wizards that have brought these ills upon us," said the king, "and who are the true-hearted men."

As we spoke we came upon a man, a chief of renown. He was named

Zwaumbana, chief of the Amabovus, and with him were his wives and followers. This man could weep no more; he gasped with thirst and heat. The king looked at him.

"See, Mopo," he said, "see that brute who has no tears for my mother who is dead! Oh, the monster without a heart! Shall such as he live to look upon the sun, while I and thou must weep, Mopo? Never! never! Take him away, and all those who are with him! Take them away, the people without hearts, who do not weep because my mother is dead by witchcraft!"

And Chaka walked on weeping, and I followed also weeping, but the chief Zwaumbana and those with him were all slain by those who do the bidding of the king, and the slayers also must weep as they slew. Presently we came upon another man, who, seeing the king, took snuff secretly to bring tears to his eyes. But the glance of Chaka was quick, and he noted it.

"Look at him, Mopo," he said, "look at the wizard who has no tears, though my mother is dead by witchcraft. See, he takes snuff to bring tears to his eyes that are dry with wickedness. Take him away, the heartless brute! Oh, take him away!"

So this one also was killed, and these were but the first of thousands, for presently Chaka grew mad with wickedness, with fury, and with the lust of blood. He walked to and fro, weeping, going now and again into his hut to drink beer, and I with him, for he said that we who sorrowed

must have food. And ever as he walked he would wave his arm or his assegai, saying, "Take them away, the heartless brutes, who do not weep because my mother is dead," and those who chanced to stand before his arm were killed, till at length the slayers could slay no more, and themselves were slain, because their strength had failed them, and they had no more tears. And I also, I must slay, lest if I slew not I should myself be slain.

And now, at length, the people also went mad with their thirst and the fury of their fear. They fell upon each other, killing each other; every man who had a foe sought him out and killed him. None were spared, the place was but a shambles; there on that day died full seven thousand men, and still Chaka walked weeping among them, saying, "Take them away, the heartless brutes, take them away!" Yet, my father, there was cunning in his cruelty, for though he destroyed many for sport alone, also he slew on this day all those whom he hated or whom he feared.

At length the night came down, the sun sank red that day, all the sky was like blood, and blood was all the earth beneath. Then the killing ceased, because none had now the strength to kill, and the people lay panting in heaps upon the ground, the living and the dead together. I looked at them, and saw that if they were not allowed to eat and drink, before day dawned again the most of them would be dead, and I spoke to the king, for I cared little in that hour if I lived or died; even my hope of vengeance was forgotten in the sickness of my heart.

"A mourning indeed, O King," I said, "a merry mourning for true-hearted men, but for wizards a mourning such as they do not love. I think that thy sorrows are avenged, O King, thy sorrows and mine also."

"Not so, Mopo," answered the king, "this is but the beginning; our mourning was merry to-day, it shall be merrier to-morrow."

"To-morrow, O King, few will be left to mourn; for the land will be swept of men."

"Why, Mopo, son of Makedama? But a few have perished of all the thousands who are gathered together. Number the people and they will not be missed."

"But a few have died beneath the assegai and the kerrie, O King. Yet hunger and thirst shall finish the spear's work. The people have neither eaten nor drunk for a day and a night, and for a day and a night they have wailed and moaned. Look without, Black One, there they lie in heaps with the dead. By to-morrow's light they also will be dead or dying."

Now, Chaka thought awhile, and he saw that the work would go too far, leaving him but a small people over whom to rule.

"It is hard, Mopo," he said, "that thou and I must mourn alone over our woes while these dogs feast and make merry. Yet, because of the gentleness of my heart, I will deal gently with them. Go out, son of

Makedama, and bid my children eat and drink if they have the heart, for this mourning is ended. Scarcely will Unandi, my mother, sleep well, seeing that so little blood has been shed on her grave--surely her spirit will haunt my dreams. Yet, because of the gentleness of my heart, I declare this mourning ended. Let my children eat and drink, if, indeed, they have the heart."

"Happy are the people over whom such a king is set," I said in answer. Then I went out and told the words of Chaka to the chiefs and captains, and those of them who had the voice left to them praised the goodness of the king. But the most gave over sucking the dew from their sticks, and rushed to the water like cattle that have wandered five days in the desert, and drank their fill. Some of them were trampled to death in the water.

Afterwards I slept as I might best; it was not well, my father, for I knew that Chaka was not yet gutted with slaughter.

On the morrow many of the people went back to their homes, having sought leave from the king, others drew away the dead to the place of bones, and yet others were sent out in impis to kill such as had not come to the mourning of the king. When midday was past, Chaka said that he would walk, and ordered me and other of his indunas and servants to walk with him. We went on in silence, the king leaning on my shoulder as on a stick. "What of thy people, Mopo," he said at length, "what of the Langeni tribe? Were they at my mourning? I did not see them."

Then I answered that I did not know, they had been summoned, but the way was long and the time short for so many to march so far.

"Dogs should run swiftly when their master calls, Mopo, my servant," said Chaka, and the dreadful light came into his eyes that never shone in the eyes of any other man. Then I grew sick at heart, my father--ay, though I loved my people little, and they had driven me away, I grew sick at heart. Now we had come to a spot where there is a great rift of black rock, and the name of that rift is U'Donga-lu-ka-Tatiyana. On either side of this donga the ground slopes steeply down towards its yawning lips, and from its end a man may see the open country. Here Chaka sat down at the end of the rift, pondering. Presently he looked up and saw a vast multitude of men, women, and children, who wound like a snake across the plain beneath towards the kraal Gibamaxegu.

"I think, Mopo," said the king, "that by the colour of their shields, yonder should be the Langeni tribe--thine own people, Mopo."

"It is my people, O King," I answered.

Then Chaka sent messengers, running swiftly, and bade them summon the Langeni people to him where he sat. Other messengers he sent also to the kraal, whispering in their ears, but what he said I did not know then.

Now, for a while, Chaka watched the long black snake of men winding

towards him across the plain till the messengers met them and the snake began to climb the slope of the hill.

"How many are these people of thine, Mopo?" asked the king.

"I know not, O Elephant," I answered, "who have not seen them for many years. Perhaps they number three full regiments."

"Nay, more," said the king; "what thinkest thou, Mopo, would this people of thine fill the rift behind us?" and he nodded at the gulf of stone.

Now, my father, I trembled in all my flesh, seeing the purpose of Chaka; but I could find no words to say, for my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth.

"The people are many," said Chaka, "yet, Mopo, I bet thee fifty head of cattle that they will not fill the donga."

"The king is pleased to jest," I said.

"Yea, Mopo, I jest; yet as a jest take thou the bet."

"As the king wills," I murmured--who could not refuse. Now the people of my tribe drew near: at their head was an old man, with white hair and beard, and, looking at him, I knew him for my father, Makedama. When he came within earshot of the king, he gave him the royal salute of Bayete,

and fell upon his hands and knees, crawling towards him, and konzaed to the king, praising him as he came. All the thousands of the people also fell on their hands and knees, and praised the king aloud, and the sound of their praising was like the sound of a great thunder.

At length Makedama, my father, writhing on his breast like a snake, lay before the majesty of the king. Chaka bade him rise, and greeted him kindly; but all the thousands of the people yet lay upon their breasts beating the dust with their heads.

"Rise, Makedama, my child, father of the people of the Langeni," said Chaka, "and tell me why art thou late in coming to my mourning?"

"The way was far, O King," answered Makedama, my father, who did not know me. "The way was far and the time short. Moreover, the women and the children grew weary and footsore, and they are weary in this hour."

"Speak not of it, Makedama, my child," said the king. "Surely thy heart mourned and that of thy people, and soon they shall rest from their weariness. Say, are they here every one?"

"Every one, O Elephant!--none are wanting. My kraals are desolate, the cattle wander untended on the hills, birds pick at the unguarded crops."

"It is well, Makedama, thou faithful servant! Yet thou wouldst mourn with me an hour--is it not so? Now, hearken! Bid thy people pass to the

right and to the left of me, and stand in all their numbers upon the slopes of the grass that run down to the lips of the rift."

So Makedama, my father, bade the people do the bidding of the king, for neither he nor the indunas saw his purpose, but I, who knew his wicked heart, I saw it. Then the people filed past to the right and to the left by hundreds and by thousands, and presently the grass of the slopes could be seen no more, because of their number. When all had passed, Chaka spoke again to Makedama, my father, bidding him climb down to the bottom of the donga, and thence lift up his voice in mourning. The old man obeyed the king. Slowly, and with much pain, he clambered to the bottom of the rift and stood there. It was so deep and narrow that the light scarcely seemed to reach to where he stood, for I could only see the white of his hair gleaming far down in the shadows.

Then, standing far beneath, he lifted up his voice, and it reached the thousands of those who clustered upon the slopes. It seemed still and small, yet it came to them faintly like the voice of one speaking from a mountain-top in a time of snow:--

"Mourn, children of Makedama!"

And all the thousands of the people--men, women, and children--echoed his words in a thunder of sound, crying:--

"Mourn, children of Makedama!"

Again he cried:--

"Mourn, people of the Langeni, mourn with the whole world!"

And the thousands answered:--

"Mourn, people of the Langeni, mourn with the whole world!"

A third time came his voice:--

"Mourn, children of Makedama, mourn, people of the Langeni, mourn with the whole world!

"Howl, ye warriors; weep, ye women; beat your breasts, ye maidens; sob, ye little children!

"Drink of the water of tears, cover yourselves with the dust of affliction.

"Mourn, O tribe of the Langeni, because the Mother of the Heavens is no more.

"Mourn, children of Makedama, because the Spirit of Fruitfulness is no more.

"Mourn, O ye people, because the Lion of the Zulu is left so desolate.

"Let your tears fall as the rain falls, let your cries be as the cries of women who bring forth.

"For sorrow is fallen like the rain, the world has conceived and brought forth death.

"Great darkness is upon us, darkness and the shadow of death.

"The Lion of the Zulu wanders and wanders in desolation, because the Mother of the Heavens is no more.

"Who shall bring him comfort? There is comfort in the crying of his children.

"Mourn, people of the Langeni; let the voice of your mourning beat against the skies and rend them.

"Ou-ai! Ou-ai! Ou-ai!"

Thus sang the old man, my father Makedama, far down in the deeps of the cleft. He sang it in a still, small voice, but, line after line, his song was caught up by the thousands who stood on the slopes above, and thundered to the heavens till the mountains shook with its sound. Moreover, the noise of their crying opened the bosom of a heavy

rain-cloud that had gathered as they mourned, and the rain fell in great slow drops, as though the sky also wept, and with the rain came lightning and the roll of thunder.

Chaka listened, and large tears coursed down his cheeks, whose heart was easily stirred by the sound of song. Now the rain hissed fiercely, making as it were a curtain about the thousands of the people; but still their cry went up through the rain, and the roll of the thunder was lost in it. Presently there came a hush, and I looked to the right. There, above the heads of the people, coming over the brow of the hill, were the plumes of warriors, and in their hands gleamed a hedge of spears. I looked to the left; there also I saw the plumes of warriors dimly through the falling rain, and in their hands a hedge of spears. I looked before me, towards the end of the cleft; there also loomed the plumes of warriors, and in their hands was a hedge of spears.

Then, from all the people there arose another cry, a cry of terror and of agony.

"Ah! now they mourn indeed, Mopo," said Chaka in my ear; "now thy people mourn from the heart and not with the lips alone."

As he spoke the multitude of the people on either side of the rift surged forward like a wave, surged back again, once more surged forward, then, with a dreadful crying, driven on by the merciless spears of the soldiers, they began to fall in a torrent of men, women, and children,

far into the black depths below.

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My father, forgive me the tears that fall from these blind eyes of mine;
I am very aged, I am but as a little child, and as a little child I
weep. I cannot tell it. At last it was done, and all grew still.

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Thus was Makedama buried beneath the bodies of his people; thus was
ended the tribe of the Langeni; as my mother had dreamed, so it came
about; and thus did Chaka take vengeance for that cup of milk which was
refused to him many a year before.

"Thou hast not won thy bet, Mopo," said the king presently. "See there
is a little space where one more may find room to sleep. Full to the
brim is this corn-chamber with the ears of death, in which no living
grain is left. Yet there is one little space, and is there not one to
fill it? Are all the tribe of the Langeni dead indeed?"

"There is one, O King!" I answered. "I am of the tribe of the Langeni,
let my carcass fill the place."

"Nay, Mopo, nay! Who then should take the bet? Moreover, I slay thee
not, for it is against my oath. Also, do we not mourn together, thou and

I?"

"There is no other left living of the tribe of the Langeni, O King! The bet is lost; it shall be paid."

"I think that there is another," said Chaka. "There is a sister to thee and me, Mopo. Ah, see, she comes!"

I looked up, my father, and I saw this: I saw Baleka, my sister, walking towards us, and on her shoulders was a kaross of wild-cat skins, and behind her were two soldiers. She walked proudly, holding her head high, and her step was like the step of a queen. Now she saw the sight of death, for the dead lay before her like black water in a sunless pool. A moment she stood shivering, having guessed all, then walked on and stood before Chaka.

"What is thy will with me, O King?" she said.

"Thou art come in a good hour, sister," said Chaka, turning his eyes from hers. "It is thus: Mopo, my servant and thy brother, made a bet with me, a bet of cattle. It was a little matter that we wagered on--as to whether the people of the Langeni tribe--thine own tribe, Baleka, my sister--would fill yonder place, U'Donga-lu-ka-Tatiana. When they heard of the bet, my sister, the people of the Langeni hurled themselves into the rift by thousands, being eager to put the matter to the proof. And now it seems that thy brother has lost the bet, for there is yet place

for one yonder ere the donga is full. Then, my sister, thy brother Mopo brought it to my mind that there was still one of the Langeni tribe left upon the earth, who, should she sleep in that place, would turn the bet in his favour, and prayed me to send for her. So, my sister, as I would not take that which I have not won, I have done so, and now do thou go apart and talk with Mopo, thy brother, alone upon this matter, as once before thou didst talk when a child was born to thee, my sister!"

Now Baleka took no heed of the words of Chaka which he spoke of me, for she knew his meaning well. Only she looked him in the eyes and said:--

"Ill shalt thou sleep from this night forth, Chaka, till thou comest to a land where no sleep is. I have spoken."

Chaka saw and heard, and of a sudden he quailed, growing afraid in his heart, and turned his head away.

"Mopo, my brother," said Baleka, "let us speak together for the last time; it is the king's word."

So I drew apart with Baleka, my sister, and a spear was in my hand. We stood together alone by the people of the dead and Baleka threw the corner of the kaross about her brows and spoke to me swiftly from beneath its shadow.

"What did I say to you a while ago, Mopo? It has come to pass. Swear to

me that you will live on and that this same hand of yours shall taken vengeance for me."

"I swear it, my sister."

"Swear to me that when the vengeance is done you will seek out my son Umslopogaas if he still lives, and bless him in my name."

"I swear it, my sister."

"Fare you well, Mopo! We have always loved each other much, and now all fades, and it seems to me that once more we are little children playing about the kraals of the Langeni. So may we play again in another land! Now, Mopo"--and she looked at me steadily, and with great eyes--"I am weary. I would join the spirits of my people. I hear them calling in my ears. It is finished."

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For the rest, I will not tell it to you, my father.