

CHAPTER XXVII. THE STAMPING OF THE FIRE

On the morrow the impi awoke refreshed with sleep, and, after they had eaten, Umslopogaas mustered them. Alas! nearly half of those who had seen the sun of yesterday would wake no more forever. The Slaughterer mustered them and thanked them for that which they had done, winning fame and cattle. They were merry, recking little of those who were dead, and sang his praises and the praises of Galazi in a loud song. When the song was ended Umslopogaas spoke to them again, saying that the victory was great, and the cattle they had won were countless. Yet something was lacking--she was lacking whom he came to seek to be a gift to Dingaan the king, and for whose sake this war was made. Where now was the Lily? Yesterday she had been here, clad in a moocha like a man and bearing a shield; this he knew from the captives. Where, then, was she now?

Then all the soldiers said that they had seen nothing of her. When they had done, Galazi spoke a word, as was agreed between him and Umslopogaas. He said that when they stormed the cave he had seen a man run at a warrior in the cave to kill him. Then as he came, he who was about to be slain threw down the shield and cried for mercy, and Galazi knew that this was no warrior of the Halakazi, but a very beautiful girl. So he called to the man to let her alone and not to touch her, for the order was that no women should be killed. But the soldier, being mad with the lust of fight, shouted that maid or man she should die, and slew her. Thereon, he--Galazi--in his wrath ran up and smote the man with the Watcher and killed him also, and he prayed that he had done no

wrong.

"You have done well, my brother," said Umslopogaas. "Come now, some of you, and let us look at this dead girl. Perhaps it is the Lily, and if so that is unlucky for us, for I do not know what tale we shall tell to Dingaan of the matter."

So the captains went with Umslopogaas and Galazi, and came to the spot where the girl had been laid, and by her the man of the People of the Axe.

"All is as the Wolf, my brother, has told," said Umslopogaas, waving the torch in his hand over the two who lay dead. "Here, without a doubt, lies she who was named the Lily, whom we came to win, and by her that fool who slew her, slain himself by the blow of the Watcher. An ill sight to see, and an ill tale for me to tell at the kraal of Dingaan. Still, what is is, and cannot be altered; and this maid who was the fairest of the fair is now none too lovely to look on. Let us away!" And he turned swiftly, then spoke again, saying:--

"Bind up this dead girl in ox hides, cover her with salt, and let her be brought with us." And they did so.

Then the captains said: "Surely it is so, my father; now it cannot be altered, and Dingaan must miss his bride." So said they all except that man who had been captain of the guard when Umslopogaas and Galazi and

another passed through the archway. This man, indeed, said nothing, yet he was not without his thoughts. For it seemed to him that he had seen three pass through the archway, and not two. It seemed to him, moreover, that the kaross which the third wore had slipped aside as she pressed past him, and that beneath it he had seen the shape of a beautiful woman, and above it had caught the glint of a woman's eye--an eye full and dark, like a buck's.

Also, this captain noted that Bulalio called none of the captives to swear to the body of the Lily maid, and that he shook the torch to and fro as he held it over her--he whose hand was of the steadiest. All of this he kept in his mind, forgetting nothing.

Now it chanced afterwards, on the homeward march, my father, that Umslopogaas had cause to speak angrily to this man, because he tried to rob another of his share of the spoil of the Halakazi. He spoke sharply to him, degrading him from his rank, and setting another over him. Also he took cattle from the man, and gave them to him whom he would have robbed.

And thereafter, though he was justly served, this man thought more and more of the third who had passed through the arch of the cave and had not returned, and who seemed to him to have a fair woman's shape, and eyes which gleamed like those of a woman.

On that day, then, Umslopogaas began his march to the kraal

Umgugundhlovu, where Dingaan sat. But before he set his face homewards, in the presence of the soldiers, he asked Galazi the Wolf if he would come back with him, or if he desired to stay to be chief of the Halakazi, as he was by right of birth and war. Then the Wolf laughed, and answered that he had come out to seek for vengeance, and not for the place of a chief, also that there were few of the Halakazi people left over whom he might rule if he wished. Moreover, he added this: that, like twin trees, they two blood-brethren had grown up side by side till their roots were matted together, and that, were one of them dug up and planted in Swazi soil, he feared lest both should wither, or, at the last, that he, Galazi, would wither, who loved but one man and certain wolves.

So Umslopogaas said no more of the chieftainship, but began his journey. With him he brought a great number of cattle, to be a gift for Dingaan, and a multitude of captives, young women and children, for he would appease the heart of Dingaan, because he did not bring her whom he sought--the Lily, flower of flowers. Yet, because he was cautious and put little faith in the kindness of kings, Umslopogaas, so soon as he reached the borders of Zululand, sent the best of the cattle and the fairest of the maids and children on to the kraal of the People of the Axe by the Ghost Mountain. And he who had been captain of the guard but now was a common soldier noticed this also.

Now it chanced that on a certain morning I, Mopo, sat in the kraal Umgugundhlovu in attendance on Dingaan. For still I waited on the king,

though he had spoken no word to me, good or bad, since the yesterday, when I foretold to him that in the blood of the white men whom he had betrayed grew the flower of his own death. For, my father, it was on the morrow of the slaying of the Amaboona that Umslopogaas came to the kraal Umgugundhlovu.

Now the mind of Dingaan was heavy, and he sought something to lighten it. Presently he bethought himself of the white praying man, who had come to the kraal seeking to teach us people of the Zulu to worship other gods than the assegai and the king. Now this was a good man, but no luck went with his teaching, which was hard to understand; and, moreover, the indunas did not like it, because it seemed to set a master over the master, and a king over the king, and to preach of peace to those whose trade was war. Still, Dingaan sent for the white man that he might dispute with him, for Dingaan thought that he himself was the cleverest of all men.

Now the white man came, but his face was pale, because of that which he had seen befall the Boers, for he was gentle and hated such sights. The king bade him be seated and spoke to him saying:--

"The other day, O White Man, thou toldest me of a place of fire whither those go after death who have done wickedly in life. Tell me now of thy wisdom, do my fathers lie in that place?"

"How can I know, King," answered the prayer-doctor, "who may not judge

of the deeds of men? This I say only: that those who murder and rob and oppress the innocent and bear false witness shall lie in that place of fire."

"It seems that my fathers have done all these things, and if they are in this place I would go there also, for I am minded to be with my fathers at the last. Yet I think that I should find a way to escape if ever I came there."

"How, King?"

Now Dingaan had set this trap for the prayer-doctor. In the centre of that open space where he had caused the Boers to be fallen upon he had built up a great pyre of wood--brushwood beneath, and on top of the brushwood logs, and even whole trees. Perhaps, my father, there were sixty full wagonloads of dry wood piled together there in the centre of the place.

"Thou shalt see with thine eyes, White Man," he answered, and bidding attendants set fire to the pile all round, he summoned that regiment of young men which was left in the kraal. Maybe there were a thousand and half a thousand of them--not more--the same that had slain the Boers.

Now the fire began to burn fiercely, and the regiment filed in and took its place in ranks. By the time that all had come, the pyre was everywhere a sheet of raging flame, and, though we sat a hundred paces

from it, its heat was great when the wind turned our way.

"Now, Doctor of Prayers, is thy hot place hotter than yonder fire?" said the king.

He answered that he did not know, but the fire was certainly hot.

"Then I will show thee how I will come out of it if ever I go to lie in such a fire--ay, though it be ten times as big and fierce. Ho! my children!" he cried to the soldiers, and, springing up, "You see yonder fire. Run swiftly and stamp it flat with your feet. Where there was fire let there be blackness and ashes."

Now the White Man lifted his hands and prayed Dingaan not to do this thing that should be the death of many, but the king bade him be silent. Then he turned his eyes upward and prayed to his gods. For a moment also the soldiers looked on each other in doubt, for the fire raged furiously, and spouts of flame shot high toward the heaven, and above it and about it the hot air danced. But their captain called to them loudly: "Great is the king! Hear the words of the king, who honours you! Yesterday we ate up the Amaboona--it was nothing, they were unarmed. There is a foe more worthy of our valour. Come, my children, let us wash in the fire--we who are fiercer than the fire! Great is the king who honours us!"

Thus he spoke and ran forward, and, with a roar, after him sprang the

soldiers, rank by rank. They were brave men indeed; moreover, they knew that if death lay before them death also awaited him who lagged behind, and it is far better to die with honour than ashamed. On they went, as to the joy of battle, their captain leading them, and as they went they sang the Ingomo, the war-chant of the Zulu. Now the captain neared the raging fire; we saw him lift his shield to keep off its heat. Then he was gone--he had sprung into the heart of the furnace, and but little of him was ever found again. After him went the first company. In they went, beating at the flames with their ox-hide shields, stamping them out with their naked feet, tearing down the burning logs and casting them aside. Not one man of that company lived, my father; they fell down like moths which flutter through a candle, and where they fell they perished. But after them came other companies, and it was well for those in this fight who were last to grapple with the foe. Now a great smoke was mixed with the flame, now the flame grew less and less, and the smoke more and more; and now blackened men, hairless, naked, and blistered, white with the scorching of the fire, staggered out on the farther side of the flames, falling to earth here and there. After them came others; now there was no flame, only a great smoke in which men moved dimly; and presently, my father, it was done: they had conquered the fire, and that with but very little hurt to the last seven companies, though every man had trodden it. How many perished?--nay, I know not, they were never counted; but what between the dead and the injured that regiment was at half strength till the king drafted more men into it.

"See, Doctor of Prayers," said Dingaan, with a laugh, "thus shall I escape the fires of that land of which thou tellest, if such there be indeed: I will bid my impi stamp them out."

Then the praying man went from the kraal saying that he would teach no more among the Zulus, and afterwards he left the land. When he had gone the burnt wood and the dead were cleared away, the injured were doctored or killed according to their hurts, and those who had little harm came before the king and praised him.

"New shields and headresses must be found for you, my children," said Dingaan, for the shields were black and shrivelled, and of heads of hair and plumes there were but few left among that regiment.

"Wow!" said Dingaan again, looking at the soldiers who still lived: "shaving will be easy and cheap in that place of fire of which the white man speaks."

Then he ordered beer to be brought to the men, for the heat had made them thirsty.

Now though you may not guess it, my father, I have told you this tale because it has something to do with my story; for scarcely had the matter been ended when messengers came, saying that Bulalio, chief of the People of the Axe, and his impi were without, having returned with much spoil from the slaying of the Halakazi in Swaziland. Now when I

heard this my heart leapt for joy, seeing that I had feared greatly for the fate of Umslopogaas, my fosterling. Dingaan also was very glad, and, springing up, danced to and fro like a child.

"Now at last we have good tidings," he said, at once forgetting the stamping of the fire, "and now shall my eyes behold that Lily whom my hand has longed to pluck. Let Bulalio and his people enter swiftly."

For awhile there was silence; then from far away, without the high fence of the great place, there came a sound of singing, and through the gates of the kraal rushed two great men, wearing black plumes upon their heads, having black shields in their left hands, and in their right, one an axe and one a club; while about their shoulders were bound wolf-skins. They ran low, neck and neck, with outstretched shields and heads held forward, as a buck runs when he is hard pressed by dogs, and no such running had been seen in the kraal Umgugundhlovu as the running of the Wolf-Brethren. Half across the space they ran, and halted suddenly, and, as they halted, the dead ashes of the fire flew up before their feet in a little cloud.

"By my head! look, these come armed before me!" said Dingaan, frowning, "and to do this is death. Now say who is that man, great and fierce, who bears an axe aloft? Did I not know him dead I should say it was the Black One, my brother, as he was in the days of the smiting of Zwide: so was his head set on his shoulders and so he was wont to look round, like a lion."

"I think that is Bulalio the Slaughterer, chief of the People of the Axe, O King," I answered.

"And who is the other with him? He is a great man also. Never have I seen such a pair!"

"I think that is Galazi the Wolf, he who is blood-brother to the Slaughterer, and his general," I said again.

Now after these two came the soldiers of the People of the Axe, armed with short sticks alone. Four by four they came, all holding their heads low, and with black shields outstretched, and formed themselves into companies behind the Wolf-Brethren, till all were there. Then, after them, the crowd of the Halakazi slaves were driven in,--women, boys, and maids, a great number--and they stood behind the ranks huddled together like frightened calves.

"A gallant sight, truly!" said Dingaan, as he looked upon the companies of black-plumed and shielded warriors. "I have no better soldiers in my impis, and yet my eyes behold these for the first time," and again he frowned.

Now suddenly Umslopogaas lifted his axe and started forward at full speed, and after him thundered the companies. On they rushed, and their plumes lay back upon the wind, till it seemed as though they must stamp

us flat. But when he was within ten paces of the king Umslopogaas lifted Groan-Maker again, and Galazi held the Watcher on high, and every man halted where he was, while once more the dust flew up in clouds. They halted in long, unbroken lines, with outstretched shields and heads held low; no man's head rose more than the length of a dance kerrie from the earth. So they stood one minute, then, for the third time, Umslopogaas lifted Groan-Maker, and in an instant every man straightened himself, each shield was tossed on high, and from every throat was roared the royal salute, "Bayete!"

"A pretty sight forsooth," quoth Dingaan; "but these soldiers are too well drilled who have never done me service nor the Black One who was before me, and this Slaughterer is too good a captain, I say. Come hither, ye twain!" he cried aloud.

Then the Wolf-Brethren strode forward and stood before the king, and for awhile they looked upon each other.