

CHAPTER III

UMSLOPOGAAS OF THE AXE

Next morning at the dawn guides arrived from the Town of the Axe, bringing with them a yoke of spare oxen, which showed that its Chief was really anxious to see me. So, in due course we inspanned and started, the guides leading us by a rough but practicable road down the steep hillside to the saucer-like plain beneath, where I saw many cattle grazing. Travelling some miles across this plain, we came at last to a river of no great breadth that encircled a considerable Kaffir town on three sides, the fourth being protected by a little line of koppies which were joined together with walls. Also the place was strongly fortified with fences and in every other way known to the native mind.

With the help of the spare oxen we crossed the river safely at the ford, although it was very full, and on the further side were received by a guard of men, tall, soldierlike fellows, all of them armed with axes as the messengers had been. They led us up to the cattle enclosure in the centre of the town, which although it could be used to protect beasts in case of emergency, also served the practical purpose of a public square.

Here some ceremony was in progress, for soldiers stood round the kraal while heralds pranced and shouted. At the head of the place in front of the chief's big hut was a little group of people, among whom a big, gaunt man sat upon a stool clad in a warrior's dress with a great and

very long axe hafted with wire-lashed rhinoceros horn, laid across his knees.

Our guides led me, with Hans sneaking after me like a dejected and low-bred dog (for the waggon had stopped outside the gate), across the kraal to where the heralds shouted and the big man sat yawning. At once I noted that he was a very remarkable person, broad and tall and spare of frame, with long, tough-looking arms and a fierce face which reminded me of that of the late King Dingaan. Also he had a great hole in his head above the temple where the skull had been driven in by some blow, and keen, royal-looking eyes.

He looked up and seeing me, cried out,

"What! Has a white man come to fight me for the chieftainship of the People of the Axe? Well, he is a small one."

"No," I answered quietly, "but Macumazahn, Watcher-by-Night, has come to visit you in answer to your request, O Umslopogaas; Macumazahn whose name was known in this land before yours was told of, O Umslopogaas."

The Chief heard and rising from his seat, lifted the big axe in salute.

"I greet you, O Macumazahn," he said, "who although you are small in stature, are very great indeed in fame. Have I not heard how you conquered Bangu, although Saduko slew him, and of how you gave up the

six hundred head of cattle to Tshoza and the men of the Amangwane who fought with you, the cattle that were your own? Have I not heard how you led the Tulwana against the Usutu and stamped flat three of Cetywayo's regiments in the days of Panda, although, alas! because of an oath of mine I lifted no steel in that battle, I who will have nothing to do with those that spring from the blood of Senzangacona--perhaps because I smell too strongly of it, Macumazahn. Oh! yes, I have heard these and many other things concerning you, though until now it has never been my fortune to look upon your face, O Watcher-by-Night, and therefore I greet you well, Bold one, Cunning one, Upright one, Friend of us Black People."

"Thank you," I answered, "but you said something about fighting. If there is to be anything of the sort, let us get it over. If you want to fight, I am quite ready," and I tapped the rifle which I carried.

The grim Chief broke into a laugh and said,

"Listen. By an ancient law any man on this day in each year may fight me for this Chieftainship, as I fought and conquered him who held it before me, and take it from me with my life and the axe, though of late none seems to like the business. But that law was made before there were guns, or men like Macumazahn who, it is said, can hit a lizard on a wall at fifty paces. Therefore I tell you that if you wish to fight me with a rifle, O Macumazahn, I give in and you may have the chieftainship," and he laughed again in his fierce fashion.

"I think it is too hot for fighting either with guns or axes, and Chieftainships are honey that is full of stinging bees," I answered.

Then I took my seat on a stool that had been brought for me and placed by the side of Umslopogaas, after which the ceremony went on.

The heralds cried out the challenge to all and sundry to come and fight the Holder of the Axe for the chieftainship of the Axe without the slightest result, since nobody seemed to desire to do anything of the sort. Then, after a pause, Umslopogaas rose, swinging his formidable weapon round his head and declared that by right of conquest he was Chief of the Tribe for the ensuing year, an announcement that everybody accepted without surprise.

Again the heralds summoned all and sundry who had grievances, to come forward and to state them and receive redress.

After a little pause there appeared a very handsome woman with large eyes, particularly brilliant eyes that rolled as though they were in search of someone. She was finely dressed and I saw by the ornaments she wore that she held the rank of a chief's wife.

"I, Monazi, have a complaint to make," she said, "as it is the right of the humblest to do on this day. In succession to Zinita whom Dingaan slew with her children, I am your Inkosikaas, your head-wife, O

Umslopogaas."

"That I know well enough," said Umslopogaas, "what of it?"

"This, that you neglect me for other women, as you neglected Zinita for Nada the Beautiful, Nada the witch. I am childless, as are all your wives because of the curse that this Nada left behind her. I demand that this curse should be lifted from me. For your sake I abandoned Lousta the Chief, to whom I was betrothed, and this is the end of it, that I am neglected and childless."

"Am I the Heavens Above that I can cause you to bear children, woman?" asked Umslopogaas angrily. "Would that you had clung to Lousta, my blood-brother and my friend, whom you lament, and left me alone."

"That still may chance, if I am not better treated," answered Monazi with a flash of her eyes. "Will you dismiss yonder new wife of yours and give me back my place, and will you lift the curse of Nada off me, or will you not?"

"As to the first," answered Umslopogaas, "learn, Monazi, that I will not dismiss my new wife, who at least is gentler-tongued and truer-hearted than you are. As to the second, you ask that which it is not in my power to give, since children are the gift of Heaven, and barrenness is its bane. Moreover, you have done ill to bring into this matter the name of one who is dead, who of all women was the sweetest and most innocent.

Lastly, I warn you before the people to cease from your plottings or traffic with Lousta, lest ill come of them to you, or him, even though he be my blood-brother, or to both."

"Plottings!" cried Monazi in a shrill and furious voice. "Does Umslopogaas talk of plottings? Well, I have heard that Chaka the Lion left a son, and that this son has set a trap for the feet of him who sits on Chaka's throne. Perchance that king has heard it also; perchance the People of the Axe will soon have another Chief."

"Is it thus?" said Umslopogaas quietly. "And if so, will he be named Lousta?"

Then his smouldering wrath broke out and in a kind of roaring voice he went on,

"What have I done that the wives of my bosom should be my betrayers, those who would give me to death? Zinita betrayed me to Dingaan and in reward was slain, and my children with her. Now would you, Monazi, betray me to Cetywayo--though in truth there is naught to betray? Well, if so, bethink you and let Lousta bethink him of what chanced to Zinita, and of what chances to those who stand before the axe of Umslopogaas. What have I done, I say, that women should thus strive to work me ill?"

"This," answered Monazi with a mocking laugh, "that you have loved one of them too well. If he would live in peace, he who has wives should

favour all alike. Least of anything should he moan continually over one who is dead, a witch who has left a curse behind her and thus insulted and do wrong to the living. Also he would be wise to attend to the matters of his own tribe and household and to cease from ambitions that may bring him to the assegai, and them with him."

"I have heard your counsel, Wife, so now begone!" said Umslopogaas, looking at her very strangely, and it seemed to me not without fear.

"Have you wives, Macumazahn?" he asked of me in a low voice when she was out of hearing.

"Only among the spirits," I answered.

"Well for you then; moreover, it is a bond between us, for I too have but one true wife and she also is among the spirits. But go rest a while, and later we will talk."

So I went, leaving the Chief to his business, thinking as I walked away of a certain message with which I was charged for him and of how into that message came names that I had just heard, namely that of a man called Lousta and of a woman called Monazi. Also I thought of the hints which in her jealous anger and disappointment at her lack of children, this woman had dropped about a plot against him who sat on the throne of Chaka, which of course must mean King Cetywayo himself.

I came to the guest-hut, which proved to be a very good place and clean; also in it I found plenty of food made ready for me and for my servants. After eating I slept for a time as it is always my fashion to do when I have nothing else on hand, since who knows for how long he may be kept awake at night? Indeed, it was not until the sun had begun to sink that a messenger came, saying that the Chief desired to see me if I had rested. So I went to his big hut which stood alone with a strong fence set round it at a distance, so that none could come within hearing of what was said, even at the door of the hut. I observed also that a man armed with an axe kept guard at the gateway in this fence round which he walked from time to time.

The Chief Umslopogaas was seated on a stool by the door of his hut with his rhinoceros-horn-handled axe which was fastened to his right wrist by a thong, leaning against his thigh, and a wolfskin hanging from his broad shoulders. Very grim and fierce he looked thus, with the red light of the sunset playing on him. He greeted me and pointed to another stool on which I sat myself down. Apparently he had been watching my eyes, for he said,

"I see that like other creatures which move at night, such as leopards and hyenas, you take note of all, O Watcher-by-Night, even of the soldier who guards this place and of where the fence is set and of how its gate is fashioned."

"Had I not done so I should have been dead long ago, O Chief."

"Yes, and because it is not my nature to do so as I should, perchance I shall soon be dead. It is not enough to be fierce and foremost in the battle, Macumazahn. He who would sleep safe and of whom, when he dies, folk will say 'He has eaten' (i.e., he has lived out his life), must do more than this. He must guard his tongue and even his thoughts! he must listen to the stirring of rats in the thatch and look for snakes in the grass; he must trust few, and least of all those who sleep upon his bosom. But those who have the Lion's blood in them or who are prone to charge like a buffalo, often neglect these matters and therefore in the end they fall into a pit."

"Yes," I answered, "especially those who have the lion's blood in them, whether that lion be man or beast."

This I said because of the rumours I had heard that this Slaughterer was in truth the son of Chaka. Therefore not knowing whether or no he were playing on the word "lion," which was Chaka's title, I wished to draw him, especially as I saw in his face a great likeness to Chaka's brother Dingaan, whom, it was whispered, this same Umslopogaas had slain. As it happened I failed, for after a pause he said,

"Why do you come to visit me, Macumazahn, who have never done so before?"

"I do not come to visit you, Umslopogaas. That was not my intention. You

brought me, or rather the flooded rivers and you together brought me, for I was on my way to Natal and could not cross the drifts."

"Yet I think you have a message for me, White Man, for not long ago a certain wandering witch-doctor who came here told me to expect you and that you had words to say to me."

"Did he, Umslopogaas? Well, it is true that I have a message, though it is one that I did not mean to deliver."

"Yet being here, perchance you will deliver it, Macumazahn, for those who have messages and will not speak them, sometimes come to trouble."

"Yes, being here, I will deliver it, seeing that so it seems to be fated. Tell me, do you chance to know a certain Small One who is great, a certain Old One whose brain is young, a doctor who is called Opener-of-Roads?"

"I have heard of him, as have my forefathers for generations."

"Indeed, and if it pleases you to tell me, Umslopogaas, what might be the names of those forefathers of yours, who have heard of this doctor for generations? They must have been short-lived men and as such I should like to know of them."

"That you cannot," replied Umslopogaas shortly, "since they are

hlonipa (i.e. not to be spoken) in this land."

"Indeed," I said again. "I thought that rule applied only to the names of kings, but of course I am but an ignorant white man who may well be mistaken on such matters of your Zulu customs."

"Yes, O Macumazahn, you may be mistaken or--you may not. It matters nothing. But what of this message of yours?"

"It came at the end of a long story, O Bulalio. But since you seek to know, these were the words of it, so nearly as I can remember them."

Then sentence by sentence I repeated to him all that Zikali had said to me when he called me back after bidding me farewell, which doubtless he did because he wished to cut his message more deeply into the tablets of my mind.

Umslopogaas listened to every syllable with a curious intentness, and then asked me to repeat it all again, which I did.

"Lousta! Monazi!" he said slowly. "Well, you heard those names to-day, did you not, White Man? And you heard certain things from the lips of this Monazi who was angry, that give colour to that talk of the Opener-of-Roads. It seems to me," he added, glancing about him and speaking in a low voice, "that what I suspected is true and that without doubt I am betrayed."

"I do not understand," I replied indifferently. "All this talk is dark to me, as is the message of the Opener-of-Roads, or rather its meaning. By whom and about what are you betrayed?"

"Let that snake sleep. Do not kick it with your foot. Suffice it you to know that my head hangs upon this matter; that I am a rat in a forked stick, and if the stick is pressed on by a heavy hand, then where is the rat?"

"Where all rats go, I suppose, that is, unless they are wise rats that bite the hand which holds the stick before it is pressed down."

"What is the rest of this story of yours, Macumazahn, which was told before the Opener-of-Roads gave you that message? Does it please you to repeat it to me that I may judge of it with my ears?"

"Certainly," I answered, "on one condition, that what the ears hear, the heart shall keep to itself alone."

Umslopogaas stooped and laid his hand upon the broad blade of the weapon beside him, saying,

"By the Axe I swear it. If I break the oath be the Axe my doom."

Then I told him the tale, as I have set it down already, thinking

to myself that of it he would understand little, being but a wild warrior-man. As it chanced, however, I was mistaken, for he seemed to understand a great deal, perchance because such primitive natures are in closer touch with high and secret things than we imagine; perchance for other reasons with which I became acquainted later.

"It stands thus," he said when I had finished, "or so I think. You, Macumazahn, seek certain women who are dead to learn whether they still live, or are really dead, but so far have failed to find them. Still seeking, you asked the counsel of Zikali, Opener-of-Roads, he who among other titles is also called 'Home of Spirits.' He answered that he could not satisfy your heart because this tree was too tall for him to climb, but that far to the north there lives a certain white witch who has powers greater than his, being able to fly to the top of any tree, and to this white witch he bade you go. Have I the story right thus far?"

I answered that he had.

"Good! Then Zikali went on to choose you companions for your journey, but two, leaving out the guards or servants. I, Umhlopekazi, called Bulalio the Slaughterer, called the Woodpecker also, was one of these, and that little yellow monkey of a man whom I saw with you to-day, called Hansi, was the other. Then you made a mock of Zikali by determining not to visit me, Umhlopekazi, and not to go north to find the great white Queen of whom he had told you, but to return to Natal. Is that so?"

I said it was.

"Then the rain fell and the winds blew and the rivers rose in wrath so that you could not return to Natal, and after all by chance, or by fate, or by the will of Zikali, the wizard of wizards, you drifted here to the kraal of me, Umhlopekazi, and told me this story."

"Just so," I answered.

"Well, White Man, how am I to know that all this is not but a trap for my feet which already seem to feel cords between the toes of both of them? What token do you bring, O Watcher-by-Night? How am I to know that the Opener-of-Roads really sent me this message which has been delivered so strangely by one who wished to travel on another path? The wandering witch-doctor told me that he who came would bear some sign."

"I can't say," I answered, "at least in words. But," I added after reflection, "as you ask for a token, perhaps I might be able to show you something that would bring proof to your heart, if there were any secret place----"

Umslopogaas walked to the gateway of the fence and saw that the sentry was at his post. Then he walked round the hut casting an eye upon its roof, and muttered to me as he returned.

"Once I was caught thus. There lived a certain wife of mine who set her ear to the smoke-hole and so brought about the death of many, and among them of herself and of our children. Enter. All is safe. Yet if you talk, speak low."

So we went into the hut taking the stools with us, and seated ourselves by the fire that burned there on to which Umslopogaas threw chips of resinous wood.

"Now," he said.

I opened my shirt and by the clear light of the flame showed him the image of Zikali which hung about my neck. He stared at it, though touch it he would not. Then he stood up and lifting his great axe, he saluted the image with the word "Makosi!" the salute that is given to great wizards because they are supposed to be the home of many spirits.

"It is the big Medicine, the Medicine itself," he said, "that which has been known in the land since the time of Senzangacona, the father of the Zulu Royal House, and as it is said, before him."

"How can that be?" I asked, "seeing that this image represents Zikali, Opener-of-Roads, as an old man, and Senzangacona died many years ago?"

"I do not know," he answered, "but it is so. Listen. There was a certain Mopo, or as some called him, Umbopo, who was Chaka's body-servant and my

foster-father, and he told me that twice this Medicine," and he pointed to the image, "was sent to Chaka, and that each time the Lion obeyed the message that came with it. A third time it was sent, but he did not obey the message and then--where was Chaka?"

Here Umslopogaas passed his hand across his mouth, a significant gesture amongst the Zulus.

"Mopo," I said, "yes, I have heard the story of Mopo, also that Chaka's body became his servant in the end, since Mopo killed him with the help of the princes Dingaan and Umhlangana. Also I have heard that this Mopo still lives, though not in Zululand."

"Does he, Macumazahn?" said Umslopogaas, taking snuff from a spoon and looking at me keenly over the spoon. "You seem to know a great deal, Macumazahn; too much as some might think."

"Yes," I answered, "perhaps I do know too much, or at any rate more than I want to know. For instance, O fosterling of Mopo and son of--was the lady named Baleka?--I know a good deal about you."

Umslopogaas stared at me and laying his hand upon the great axe, half rose. Then he sat down again.

"I think that this," and I touched the image of Zikali upon my breast, "would turn even the blade of the axe named Groan-maker," I said and

paused. As nothing happened, I went on, "For instance, again I think I know--or have I dreamed it?--that a certain chief, whose mother's name I believe was Baleka--by the way, was she not one of Chaka's 'sisters'?--has been plotting against that son of Panda who sits upon the throne, and that his plots have been betrayed, so that he is in some danger of his life."

"Macumazahn," said Umslopogaas hoarsely, "I tell you that did you not wear the Great Medicine on your breast, I would kill you where you sit and bury you beneath the floor of the hut, as one who knows--too much."

"It would be a mistake, Umslopogaas, one of the many that you have made. But as I do wear the Medicine, the question does not arise, does it?"

Again he made no answer and I went on, "And now, what about this journey to the north? If indeed I must make it, would you wish to accompany me?"

Umslopogaas rose from the stool and crawled out of the hut, apparently to make some inspection. Presently he returned and remarked that the night was clear although there were heavy storm clouds on the horizon, by which I understood him to convey in Zulu metaphor that it was safe for us to talk, but that danger threatened from afar.

"Macumazahn," he said, "we speak under the blanket of the Opener-of-Roads who sits upon your heart, and whose sign you bring to me, as he sent me word that you would, do we not?"

"I suppose so," I answered. "At any rate we speak as man to man, and hitherto the honour of Macumazahn has not been doubted in Zululand. So if you have anything to say, Chief Bulalio, say it at once, for I am tired and should like to eat and rest."

"Good, Macumazahn. I have this to say. I who am the son of one who was greater than he, have plotted to seize the throne of Zululand from him who sits upon that throne. It is true, for I grew weary of my idleness as a petty chief. Moreover, I should have succeeded with the help of Zikali, who hates the House of Senzangacona, though me, who am of its blood, he does not hate, because ever I have striven against that House. But it seems from his message and those words spoken by an angry woman, that I have been betrayed, and that to-night or to-morrow night, or by the next moon, the slayers will be upon me, smiting me before I can smite, at which I cannot grumble."

"By whom have you been betrayed, Umslopogaas?"

"By that wife of mine, as I think, Macumazahn. Also by Lousta, my blood-brother, over whom she has cast her net and made false to me, so that he hopes to win her whom he has always loved and with her the Chieftainship of the Axe. Now what shall I do?--Tell me, you whose eyes can see in the dark."

I thought a moment and answered, "I think that if I were you, I would

leave this Lousta to sit in my place for a while as Chief of the People of the Axe, and take a journey north, Umslopogaas. Then if trouble comes from the Great House where a king sits, it will come to Lousta who can show that the People of the Axe are innocent and that you are far away."

"That is cunning, Macumazahn. There speaks the Great Medicine. If I go north, who can say that I have plotted, and if I leave my betrayer in my place, who can say that I was a traitor, who have set him where I used to sit and left the land upon a private matter? And now tell me of this journey of yours."

So I told him everything, although until that moment I had not made up my mind to go upon this journey, I who had come here to his kraal by accident, or so it seemed, and by accident had delivered to him a certain message.

"You wish to consult a white witch-doctress, Macumazahn, who according to Zikali lives far to the north, as to the dead. Now I too, though perchance you will not think it of a black man, desire to learn of the dead; yes, of a certain wife of my youth who was sister and friend as well as wife, whom too I loved better than all the world. Also I desire to learn of a brother of mine whose name I never speak, who ruled the wolves with me and who died at my side on yonder Witch-Mountain, having made him a mat of men to lie on in a great and glorious fight. For of him as of the woman I think all day and dream all night, and I would know if they still live anywhere and I may look to see them again when

I have died as a warrior should and as I hope to do. Do you understand, Watcher-by-Night?"

I answered that I understood very well, as his case seemed to be like my own.

"It may happen," went on Umslopogaas, "that all this talk of the dead who are supposed to live after they are dead, is but as the sound of wind whispering in the reeds at night, that comes from nowhere and goes nowhere and means nothing. But at least ours will be a great journey in which we shall find adventure and fighting, since it is well known in the land that wherever Macumazahn goes there is plenty of both. Also it seems well for reasons that have been spoken of between us, as Zikali says, that I should leave the country of the Zulus for a while, who desire to die a man's death at the last and not to be trapped like a jackal in a pit. Lastly I think that we shall agree well together though my temper is rough at times, and that neither of us will desert the other in trouble, though of that little yellow dog of yours I am not so sure."

"I answer for him," I replied. "Hans is a true man, cunning also when once he is away from drink."

Then we spoke of plans for our journey, and of when and where we should

meet to make it, talking till it was late, after which I went to sleep
in the guest-hut.