

## CHAPTER VI

### THE SEA-COW HUNT

Now it had been my intention to push forward across the river at once, but here luck, or our old friend, Fate, was against me. To begin with several of Umslopogaas' men fell sick with a kind of stomach trouble, arising no doubt from something they had eaten. This, however, was not their view, or that of Umslopogaas himself. It happened that one of these men, Goroko by name, who practised as a witch-doctor in his lighter moments, naturally suspected that a spell had been cast upon them, for such people see magic in everything.

Therefore he organised a "smelling-out" at which Umslopogaas, who was as superstitious as the rest, assisted. So did Hans, although he called himself a Christian, partly out of curiosity, for he was as curious as a magpie, and partly from fear lest some implication should be brought against him in his absence. I saw the business going on from a little distance, and, unseen myself, thought it well to keep an eye upon the proceedings in case anything untoward should occur. This I did with Miss Inez, who had never witnessed anything of the sort, as a companion.

The circle, a small one, was formed in the usual fashion; Goroko rigged up in the best witch-doctor's costume that he could improvise, duly came under the influence of his "Spirit" and skipped about, waving a wildebeeste's tail, and so forth.

Finally to my horror he broke out of the ring, and running to a group of spectators from the village, switched Thomaso, who was standing among them with a lordly and contemptuous air, across the face with the gnu's tail, shouting out that he was the wizard who had poisoned the bowels of the sick men. Thereon Thomaso, who although he could be insolent, like most crossbreeds was not remarkable for courage, seeing the stir that this announcement created amongst the fierce-faced Zulus and fearing developments, promptly bolted, none attempting to follow him.

After this, just as I thought that everything was over and that the time had come for me to speak a few earnest words to Umslopogaas, pointing out that matters must go no further as regards Thomaso, whom I knew that he and his people hated, Goroko went back to the circle and was seized with a new burst of inspiration.

Throwing down his whisk, he lifted his arms above his head and stared at the heavens. Then he began to shout out something in a loud voice which I was too far off to catch. Whatever it may have been, evidently it frightened his hearers, as I could see from the expressions on their faces. Even Umslopogaas was alarmed, for he let his axe fall for a moment, rose as though to speak, then sat down again and covered his eyes with his hands.

In a minute it was over; Goroko seemed to become normal, took some snuff and as I guessed, after the usual fashion of these doctors, began to

ask what he had been saying while the "Spirit" possessed him, which he either had, or affected to have, forgotten. The circle, too, broke up and its members began to talk to each other in a subdued way, while Umslopogaas remained seated on the ground, brooding, and Hans slipped away in his snake-like fashion, doubtless in search of me.

"What was it all about, Mr. Quatermain?" asked Inez.

"Oh! a lot of nonsense," I said. "I fancy that witch-doctor declared that your friend Thomaso put something into those men's food to make them sick."

"I daresay that he did; it would be just like him, Mr. Quatermain, as I know that he hates them, especially Umslopogaas, of whom I am very fond. He brought me some beautiful flowers this morning which he had found somewhere, and made a long speech which I could not understand."

The idea of Umslopogaas, that man of blood and iron, bringing flowers to a young lady, was so absurd that I broke out laughing and even the sad-faced Inez smiled. Then she left me to see about something and I went to speak to Hans and asked him what had happened.

"Something rather queer, I think, Baas," he answered vacuously, "though I did not quite understand the last part. The doctor, Goroko, smelt out Thomaso as the man who had made them sick, and though they will not kill him because we are guests here, those Zulus are very angry with Thomaso

and I think will beat him if they get a chance. But that is only the small half of the stick," and he paused.

"What is the big half, then?" I asked with irritation.

"Baas, the Spirit in Goroko----"

"The jackass in Goroko, you mean," I interrupted. "How can you, who are a Christian, talk such rubbish about spirits? I only wish that my father could hear you."

"Oh! Baas, your reverend father, the Predikant, is now wise enough to know all about Spirits and that there are some who come into black witch-doctors though they turn up their noses at white men and leave them alone. However, whatever it is that makes Goroko speak, got hold of him so that his lips said, though he remembered nothing of it afterwards, that soon this place would be red with blood--that there would be a great killing here, Baas. That is all."

"Red with blood! Whose blood? What did the fool mean?"

"I don't know, Baas, but what you call the jackass in Goroko, declared that those who are 'with the Great Medicine'--meaning what you wear, Baas--will be quite safe. So I hope that it will not be our blood; also that you will get out of this place as soon as you can."

Well, I scolded Hans because he believed in what this doctor said, for I could see that he did believe it, then went to question Umslopogaas, whom I found looking quite pleased, which annoyed me still more.

"What is it that Goroko has been saying and why do you smile, Bulalio?" I asked.

"Nothing much, Macumazahn, except that the man who looks like tallow that has gone bad, put something in our food which made us sick, for which I would kill him were he not Red-beard's servant and that it would frighten the lady his daughter. Also he said that soon there will be fighting, which is why I smiled, who grow weary of peace. We came out to fight, did we not?"

"Certainly not," I answered. "We came out to make a quiet journey in strange lands, which is what I mean to do."

"Ah! well, Macumazahn, in strange lands one meets strange men with whom one does not always agree, and then Inkosikaas begins to talk," and he whirled the great axe round his head, making the air whistle as it was forced through the gouge at its back.

I could get no more out of him, so having extracted a promise from him that nothing should happen to Thomaso who, I pointed out, was probably quite unjustly accused, I went away.

Still, the whole incident left a disagreeable impression on my mind, and I began to wish that we were safe across the Zambesi without more trouble. But we could not start at once because two of the Zulus were still not well enough to travel and there were many preparations to be made about the loads, and so forth, since the waggon must be left behind. Also, and this was another complication--Hans had a sore upon his foot, resulting from the prick of a poisonous thorn, and it was desirable that this should be quite healed before we marched.

So it came about that I was really glad when Captain Robertson suggested that we should go down to a certain swamp formed, I gathered, by some small tributary of the Zambesi to take part in a kind of hippopotamus battue. It seemed that at this season of the year these great animals always frequented the place in numbers, also that by barring a neck of deep water through which they gained it, they, or a proportion of them, could be cut off and killed.

This had been done once or twice in the past, though not of late, perhaps because Captain Robertson had lacked the energy to organise such a hunt. Now he wished to do so again, taking advantage of my presence, both because of the value of the hides of the sea-cows which were cut up to be sent to the coast and sold as sjamboks or whips, and because of the sport of the thing. Also I think he desired to show me that he was not altogether sunk in sloth and drink.

I fell in with the idea readily enough, since in all my hunting life I

had never seen anything of the sort, especially as I was told that the expedition would not take more than a week and I reckoned that the sick men and Hans would not be fit to travel sooner. So great preparations were made. The riverside natives, whose share of the spoil was to be the carcasses of the slain sea-cows, were summoned by hundreds and sent off to their appointed stations to beat the swamps at a signal given by the firing of a great pile of reeds. Also many other things were done upon which I need not enter.

Then came the time for us to depart to the appointed spot over twenty miles away, most of which distance it seemed we could trek in the waggon. Captain Robertson, who for the time had cut off his gin, was as active about the affair as though he were once more in command of a mail-steamer. Nothing escaped his attention; indeed, in the care which he gave to details he reminded me of the captain of a great ship that is leaving port, and from it I learned how able a man he must once have been.

"Does your daughter accompany us?" I asked on the night before we started.

"Oh! no," he answered, "she would only be in the way. She will be quite safe here, especially as Thomaso, who is no hunter, remains in charge of the place with some of the older natives to look after the women and children."

Later I saw Inez herself, who said that she would have liked to come, although she hated to see great beasts killed, but that her father was against it because he thought she might catch fever. So she supposed that she had better remain where she was.

I agreed, though in my heart I was doubtful, and said that I would leave Hans, whose foot was not as yet quite well, and with whom she had made friends as she had done with Umslopogaas, to look after her. Also there would be with him the two great Zulus who were now recovering from their attack of stomach sickness, so that she would have nothing to fear. She answered with her slow smile that she feared nothing, still, she would have liked to come with us. Then we parted, as it proved for a long time.

It was quite a ceremony. Umslopogaas, "in the name of the Axe" solemnly gave over Inez to the charge of his two followers, bidding them guard her with so much earnestness that I began to suspect he feared something which he did not choose to mention. My mind went back indeed to the prophecy of the witch-doctor Goroko, of which it was possible that he might be thinking, but as while he spoke he kept his fierce eyes fixed upon the fat and pompous quarter-breed, Thomaso, I concluded that here was the object of his doubts.

It might have occurred to him that this Thomaso would take the opportunity of her father's absence to annoy Inez. If so I was sure that he was mistaken for various reasons, of which I need only quote one,



namely, that even if such an idea had ever entered his head, Thomaso was far too great a coward to translate it into action. Still, suspecting something, I also gave Hans instructions to keep a sharp eye on Inez and generally to watch the place, and if he saw anything suspicious, to communicate with us at once.

"Yes, Baas," said Hans, "I will look after 'Sad-Eyes'"--for so with their usual quickness of observation our Zulus had named Inez--"as though she were my grandmother, though what there is to fear for her, I do not know. But, Baas, I would much rather come and look after you, as your reverend father, the Predikant, told me to do always, which is my duty, not girl-herding, Baas. Also my foot is now quite well and--I want to shoot sea-cows, and----" Here he paused.

"And what, Hans?"

"And Goroko said that there was going to be much fighting and if there should be fighting and you should come to harm because I was not there to protect you, what would your reverend father think of me then?"

All of which meant two things: that Hans never liked being separated from me if he could help it, and that he much preferred a shooting trip to stopping alone in this strange place with nothing to do except eat and sleep. So I concluded, though indeed I did not get quite to the bottom of the business. In reality Hans was putting up a most gallant struggle against temptation.

As I found out afterwards, Captain Robertson had been giving him strong drink on the sly, moved thereto by sympathy with a fellow toper. Also he had shown him where, if he wanted it, he could get more, and Hans always wanted gin very badly indeed. To leave it within his reach was like leaving a handful of diamonds lying about in the room of a thief. This he knew, but was ashamed to tell me the truth, and thence came much trouble.

"You will stop here, Hans, look after the young lady and nurse your foot," I said sternly, whereon he collapsed with a sigh and asked for some tobacco.

Meanwhile Captain Robertson, who I think had been taking a stirrup cup to cheer him on the road, was making his farewells down in what was known as "the village," for I saw him there kissing a collection of half-breed children, and giving Thomaso instructions to look after them and their mothers. Returning at length, he called to Inez, who remained upon the veranda, for she always seemed to shrink from her father after his visits to the village, to "keep a stiff upper lip" and not feel lonely, and commanded the cavalcade to start.

So off we went, about twenty of the village natives, a motley crew armed with every kind of gun, marching ahead and singing songs. Then came the waggon with Captain Robertson and myself seated on the driving-box, and lastly Umslopogaas and his Zulus, except the two who had been left

behind.

We trekked along a kind of native road over fine veld of the same character as that on which Strathmuir stood, having the lower-lying bush-veld which ran down to the Zambesi on our right. Before nightfall we came to a ridge whereon this bush-veld turned south, fringing that tributary of the great river in the swamps of which we were to hunt for sea-cows. Here we camped and next morning, leaving the waggon in charge of my voorlooper and a couple of the Strathmuir natives, for the driver was to act as my gun-bearer--we marched down into the sea of bush-veld. It proved to be full of game, but at this we dared not fire for fearing of disturbing the hippopotami in the swamps beneath, whence in that event they might escape us back to the river.

About midday we passed out of the bush-veld and reached the place where the drive was to be. Here, bordered by steep banks covered with bush, was swampy ground not more than two hundred yards wide, down the centre of which ran a narrow channel of rather deep water, draining a vast expanse of morass above. It was up this channel that the sea-cows travelled to the feeding ground where they loved to collect at that season of the year.

There with the assistance of some of the riverside natives we made our preparations under the direction of Captain Robertson. The rest of these men, to the number of several hundreds, had made a wide détour to the head of the swamps, miles away, whence they were to advance at a certain

signal. These preparations were simple. A quantity of thorn trees were cut down and by means of heavy stones fastened to their trunks, anchored in the narrow channel of deep water. To their tops, which floated on the placid surface, were tied a variety of rags which we had brought with us, such as old red flannel shirts, gay-coloured but worn-out blankets, and I know not what besides. Some of these fragments also were attached to the anchored ropes under water.

Also we selected places for the guns upon the steep banks that I have mentioned, between which this channel ran. Foreseeing what would happen, I chose one for myself behind a particularly stout rock and what is more, built a stone wall to the height of several feet on the landward side of it, as I guessed that the natives posted near to me would prove wild in their shooting.

These labours occupied the rest of that day, and at night we retired to higher ground to sleep. Before dawn on the following morning we returned and took up our stations, some on one side of the channel and some on the other which we had to reach in a canoe brought for the purpose by the river natives.

Then, before the sun rose, Captain Robertson fired a huge pile of dried reeds and bushes, which was to give the signal to the river natives far away to begin their beat. This done, we sat down and waited, after making sure that every gun had plenty of ammunition ready.

As the dawn broke, by climbing a tree near my schanze or shelter, I saw a good many miles away to the south a wide circle of little fires, and guessed that the natives were beginning to burn the dry reeds of the swamp. Presently these fires drew together into a thin wall of flame. Then I knew that it was time to return to the schanze and prepare. It was full daylight, however, before anything happened.

Watching the still channel of water, I saw ripples on it and bubbles of air rising. Suddenly there appeared the head of a great bull-hippopotamus which, having caught sight of our rag barricade, either above or below water, had risen to the surface to see what it might be. I put a bullet from an eight-bore rifle through its brain, whereon it sank, as I guessed, stone dead to the bottom of the channel, thus helping to increase the barricade by the bulk of its great body. Also it had another effect. I have observed that sea-cows cannot bear the smell and taint of blood, which frightens them horribly, so that they will expose themselves to almost any risk, rather than get it into their nostrils.

Now, in this still water where there was no perceptible current, the blood from the dead bull soon spread all about so that when the herd, following their leader, began to arrive they were much alarmed. Indeed, the first of them on winding or tasting it, turned and tried to get back up the channel where, however, they met others following, and there ensued a tremendous confusion. They rose to the surface, blowing, snorting, bellowing and scrambling over each other in the water, while

continually more and more arrived behind them, till there was a perfect pandemonium in that narrow place.

All our guns opened fire wildly upon the mass; it was like a battle and through the smoke I caught sight of the riverside natives who were acting as beaters, advancing far away, fantastically dressed, screaming with excitement and waving spears, or sometimes torches of flaming reeds. Most of these were scrambling along the banks, but some of the bolder spirits advanced over the lagoon in canoes, driving the hippopotami towards the mouth of the channel by which alone they could escape into the great swamps below and so on to the river. In all my hunting experience I do not think I ever saw a more remarkable scene. Still, in a way, to me it was unpleasant, for I flatter myself that I am a sportsman and a battle of this sort is not sport as I understand the term.

At length it came to this; the channel for quite a long way was literally full of hippopotami--I should think there must have been a hundred of them or more of all sorts and sizes, from great bulls down to little calves. Some of these were killed, not many, for the shooting of our gallant company was execrable and almost at hazard. Also for every sea-cow that died, of which number I think that Captain Robertson and myself accounted for most--many were only wounded.

Still, the unhappy beasts, crazed with noise and fire and blood, did not

seem to dare to face our frail barricade, probably for the reason that I have given. For a while they remained massed together in the water, or under it, making a most horrible noise. Then of a sudden they seemed to take a resolution. A few of them broke back towards the burning reeds, the screaming beaters and the advancing canoes. One of these, indeed, a wounded bull, charged a canoe, crushed it in its huge jaws and killed the rower, how exactly I do not know, for his body was never found. The majority of them, however, took another counsel, for emerging from the water on either side, they began to scramble towards us along the steep banks, or even to climb up them with surprising agility. It was at this point in the proceedings that I congratulated myself earnestly upon the solid character of the water-worn rock which I had selected as a shelter.

Behind this rock together with my gun-bearer and Umslopogaas, who, as he did not shoot, had elected to be my companion, I crouched and banged away at the unwieldy creatures as they advanced. But fire fast as I might with two rifles, I could not stop the half of them--they were drawing unpleasantly near. I glanced at Umslopogaas and even then was amused to see that probably for the first time in his life that redoubtable warrior was in a genuine fright.

"This is madness, Macumazahn," he shouted above the din. "Are we to stop here and be stamped flat by a horde of water-pigs?"

"It seems so," I answered, "unless you prefer to be stamped flat

outside--or eaten," I added, pointing to a great crocodile that had also emerged from the channel and was coming along towards us with open jaws.

"By the Axe!" shouted Umslopogaas again, "I--a warrior--will not die thus, trodden on like a slug by an ox."

Now I have mentioned a tree which I climbed. In his extremity Umslopogaas rushed for that tree and went up it like a lamplighter, just as the crocodile wriggled past its trunk, snapping at his retreating legs.

After this I took no more note of him, partly because of the advancing sea-cows, and more for the reason that one of the village natives posted above me, firing wildly, put a large round bullet through the sleeve of my coat. Indeed, had it not been for the wall which I built that protected us, I am certain that both my bearer and I would have been killed, for afterwards I found it splashed over with lead from bullets which had struck the stones.

Well, thanks to the strength of my rock and to the wall, or as Hans said afterwards, to Zikali's Great Medicine, we escaped unhurt. The rush went by me; indeed, I killed one sea-cow so close that the powder from the rifle actually burned its hide. But it did go by, leaving us untouched. All, however, were not so fortunate, since of the village natives two were trampled to death, while a third had his leg broken.



Also, and this was really amusing--a bewildered bull charging at full speed, crashed into the trunk of Umslopogaas' tree, and as it was not very thick, snapped it in two. Down came the top in which the dignified chief was ensconced like a bird in a nest, though at that moment there was precious little dignity about him. However, except for scratches he was not hurt, as the hippopotamus had other business in urgent need of attention and did not stop to settle with him.

"Such are the things which happen to a man who mixes himself up with matters of which he knows nothing," said Umslopogaas sententiously to me afterwards. But all the same he could never bear any allusion to this tree-climbing episode in his martial career, which, as it happened, had taken place in full view of his retainers, among whom it remained the greatest of jokes. Indeed, he wanted to kill a man, the wag of the party, who gave him a slang name which, being translated, means "He-who-is-so-brave-that-he-dares-to-ride-a-water-horse-up-a-tree."

It was all over at last, for which I thanked Providence devoutly. A good many of the sea-cows were dead, I think twenty-one was out exact bag, but the majority of them had escaped in one way or another, many as I fear, wounded. I imagine that at the last the bulk of the herd overcame its fears and swimming through our screen, passed away down the channel. At any rate they were gone, and having ascertained that there was nothing to be done for the man who had been trampled on my side of the channel, I crossed it in the canoe with the object of returning quietly to our camp to rest.

But as yet there was to be no quiet for me, for there I found Captain Robertson, who I think had been refreshing himself out of a bottle and was in a great state of excitement about a native who had been killed near him who was a favourite of his, and another whose leg was broken. He declared vehemently that the hippopotamus which had done this had been wounded and rushed into some bushes a few hundred yards away, and that he meant to take vengeance upon it. Indeed, he was just setting off to do so.

Seeing his agitated state I thought it wisest to follow him. What happened need not be set out in detail. It is sufficient to say that he found that hippopotamus and blazed both barrels at it in the bushes, hitting it, but not seriously. Out lumbered the creature with its mouth open, wishing to escape. Robertson turned to fly as he was in its path, but from one cause or another, tripped and fell down. Certainly he would have been crushed beneath its huge feet had I not stepped in front of him and sent two solid eight-bore bullets down that yawning throat, killing it dead within three feet of where Robertson was trying to rise, and I may add, of myself.

This narrow escape sobered him, and I am bound to say that his gratitude was profuse.

"You are a brave man," he said, "and had it not been for you by now I should be wherever bad people go. I'll not forget it, Mr. Quatermain,

and if ever you want anything that John Robertson can give, why, it's yours."

"Very well," I answered, being seized by an inspiration, "I do want something that you can give easily enough."

"Give it a name and it's yours, half my place, if you like."

"I want," I went on as I slipped new cartridges into the rifle, "I want you to promise to give up drink for your daughter's sake. That's what nearly did for you just now, you know."

"Man, you ask a hard thing," he said slowly. "But by God I'll try for her sake and for yours too."

Then I went to help to set the leg of the injured man, which was all the rest I got that morning.