

## CHAPTER VIII

### PURSUIT

After all we did not get away much before noon, because first there was a great deal to be done. To begin with the loads had to be arranged. These consisted largely of ammunition, everything else being cut down to an irreducible minimum. To carry them we took two donkeys there were on the place, also half a dozen pack oxen, all of which animals were supposed to be "salted"--that is, to have suffered and recovered from every kind of sickness, including the bite of the deadly tsetse fly. I suspected, it is true, that they would not be proof against further attacks, still, I hoped that they would last for some time, as indeed proved to be the case.

In the event of the beasts failing us, we took also ten of the best of those Strathmuir men who had accompanied us on the sea-cow trip, to serve as bearers when it became necessary. It cannot be said that these snuff-and-butter fellows--for most, if not all of them had some dash of white blood in their veins--were exactly willing volunteers. Indeed, if a choice had been left to them, they would, I think, have declined this adventure.

But there was no choice. Their master, Robertson, ordered them to come and after a glance at the Zulus they concluded that the command was one which would be enforced and that if they stopped behind, it would not

be as living men. Also some of them had lost wives or children in the slaughter, which, if they were not very brave, filled them with a desire for revenge. Lastly, they could all shoot after a fashion and had good rifles; moreover if I may say so, I think that they put confidence in my leadership. So they made the best of a bad business and got themselves ready.

Then arrangements must be made about the carrying on of the farm and store during our absence. These, together with my waggon and oxen, were put in the charge of Thomaso, since there was no one else who could be trusted at all--a very battered and crestfallen Thomaso, by the way.

When he heard of it he was much relieved, since I think he feared lest he also should be expected to take part in the hunt of the Amahagger man-eaters. Also it may have occurred to him that in all probability none of us would ever come back at all, in which case by a process of natural devolution, he might find himself the owner of the business and much valuable property. However, he swore by sundry saints--for Thomaso was nominally a Catholic--that he would look after everything as though it were his own, as no doubt he hoped it might become.

"Hearken, fat pig," said Umslopogaas, Hans obligingly translating so that there might be no mistake, "if I come back, and come back I shall who travel with the Great Medicine--and find even one of the cattle of the white lord, Macumazahn, Watcher-by-Night, missing, or one article stolen from his waggon, or the fields of your master not cultivated or his goods wasted, I swear by the Axe that I will hew you into pieces

with the axe; yes, if to do it I have to hunt you from where the sun rises to where it sets and down the length of the night between. Do you understand, fat pig, deserter of women and children, who to save yourself could run faster than a buck?"

Thomaso replied that he understood very clearly indeed, and that, Heaven helping him, all should be kept safe and sound. Still, I was sure that in his manly heart he was promising great gifts to the saints if they would so arrange matters that Umslopogaas and his axe were never seen at Strathmuir again, and reflecting that after all the Amahagger had their uses. However, as I did not trust him in the least, much against their will, I left my driver and voorlooper to guard my belongings.

At last we did get off, pursued by the fervent blessings of Thomaso and the prayers of the others that we would avenge their murdered relatives. We were a curious and motley procession. First went Hans, because at following a spoor he was, I believe, almost unequalled in Africa, and with him, Umslopogaas, and three of his Zulus to guard against surprise. These were followed by Captain Robertson, who seemed to prefer to walk alone and whom I thought it best to leave undisturbed. Then I came and after me straggled the Strathmuir boys with the pack animals, the cavalcade being closed by the remaining Zulus under the command of Goroko. These walked last in case any of the mixed-bloods should attempt to desert, as we thought it quite probable that they would.

Less than an hour's tramp brought us to the bush-veld where I feared

that our troubles might begin, since if the Amahagger were cunning, they would take advantage of it to confuse or hide their spoor. As it chanced, however, they had done nothing of the sort and a child could have followed their march. Just before nightfall we came to their first halting-place where they had made a fire and eaten one of the herd of farm goats which they had driven away with them, although they left the cattle, I suppose, because goats are docile and travel well.

Hans showed us everything that had happened; where the chair in which Inez was carried was set down, where she and Janee had been allowed to walk that she might stretch her stiff limbs, the dregs of some coffee that evidently Janee had made in a saucepan, and so forth.

He even told us the exact number of the Amahagger, which he said totalled forty-one, including the man whom Inez had wounded. His spoor he distinguished from that of the others both by an occasional drop of blood and because he walked lightly on his right foot, doubtless for the reason that he wished to avoid jarring his wound, which was on that side.

At this spot we were obliged to stay till daybreak, since it was impossible to follow the spoor by night, a circumstance that gave the cannibals a great advantage over us.

The next two days were repetitions of the first, but on the fourth we passed out of the bush-veld into the swamp country that bordered the

great river. Here our task was still easy since the Amahagger had followed one of the paths made by the river-dwellers who had their habitations on mounds, though whether these were natural or artificial I am not sure, and sometimes on floating islands.

On our second day in the reeds we came upon a sad sight. To our left stood one of these mound villages, if a village it could be called, since it consisted only of four or five huts inhabited perhaps by twenty people. We went up to it to obtain information and stumbled across the body of an old man lying in the pathway. A few yards further on we found the ashes of a big fire and by it such remains as we had seen at Strathmuir. Here there had been another cannibal feast. The miserable huts were empty, but as at Strathmuir, had not been burnt.

We were going away when the acute ears of Hans caught the sound of groans. We searched about and in a clump of reeds near the foot of the mound, found an old woman with a great spear wound just above her skinny thigh piercing deep into the vitals, but of a nature which is not immediately mortal. One of Robertson's people who understood the language of these swamp-dwellers well, spoke to her. She told him that she wanted water. It was brought and she drank copiously. Then in answer to his questions she began to talk.

She said that the Amahagger had attacked the village and killed all who could not escape. They had eaten a young woman and three children. She had been wounded by a spear and fled away into the place where we found

her, where none of them took the trouble to follow her as she "was not worth eating."

By my direction the man asked her whether she knew anything of these Amahagger. She replied that her grandfathers had, though she had heard nothing of them since she was a child, which must have been seventy years before. They were a fierce people who lived far up north across the Great River, the remnants of a race that had once "ruled the world."

Her grandfathers used to say that they were not always cannibals, but had become so long before because of a lack of food and now had acquired the taste. It was for this purpose that they still raided to get other people to eat, since their ruler would not allow them to eat one another. The flesh of cattle they did not care for, although they had plenty of them, but sometimes they ate goats and pigs because they said they tasted like man. According to her grandfathers they were a very evil people and full of magic.

All of this the old woman told us quite briskly after she had drunk the water, I think because her wound had mortified and she felt no pain. Her information, however, as is common with the aged, dealt entirely with the far past; of the history of the Amahagger since the days of her forebears she knew nothing, nor had she seen anything of Inez. All she could tell us was that some of them had attacked her village at dawn and that when she ran out of the hut she was speared.

While Robertson and I were wondering what we should do with the poor old creature whom it seemed cruel to leave here to perish, she cleared up the question by suddenly expiring before our eyes. Uttering the name of someone with whom, doubtless, she had been familiar in her youth, three or four times over, she just sank down and seemed to go to sleep and on examination we found that she was dead. So we left her and went on.

Next day we came to the edge of the Great River, here a sheet of placid running water about a mile across, for at this time of the year it was low. Perceiving quite a big village on our left, we went to it and made enquiries, to find that it had not been attacked by the cannibals, probably because it was too powerful, but that three nights before some of their canoes had been stolen, in which no doubt these had crossed the river.

As the people of this village had traded with Robertson at Strathmuir, we had no difficulty in obtaining other canoes from them in which to cross the Zambesi in return for one of our oxen that I could see was already sickening from tsetse bite. These canoes were large enough to take the donkeys that were patient creatures and stood still, but the cattle we could not get into them for fear of an upset. So we killed the two driven beasts that were left to us and took them with us as dead meat for food, while the three remaining pack oxen we tried to swim across, dragging them after the canoes with hide reims round their horns. As a result two were drowned, but one, a bold-hearted and enterprising animal, gained the other bank.

Here again we struck a sea of reeds in which, after casting about, Hans once more found the spoor of the Amahagger. That it was theirs beyond doubt was proved by the circumstance that on a thorny kind of weed we found a fragment of a cotton dress which, because of the pattern stamped on it, we all recognised as one that Inez had been wearing. At first I thought that this had been torn off by the thorns, but on examination we became certain that it had been placed there purposely, probably by Janee, to give us a clue. This conclusion was confirmed when at subsequent periods of the hunt we found other fragments of the same garment.

Now it would be useless for me to set out the details of this prolonged and arduous chase which in all endured for something over three weeks. Again and again we lost the trail and were only able to recover it by long and elaborate search, which occupied much time. Then, after we escaped from the reeds and swamps, we found ourselves upon stony uplands where the spoor was almost impossible to follow, indeed, we only rediscovered it by stumbling across the dead body of that cannibal whom Inez had wounded. Evidently he had perished from his hurt, which I could see had mortified. From the state of his remains we gathered that the raiders must be about two days' march ahead of us.

Striking their spoor again on softer ground where the impress of their feet remained--at any rate to the cunning sight of Hans--we followed them down across great valleys wherein trees grew sparsely, which



valleys were separated from each other by ridges of high and barren land. On these belts of rocky soil our difficulties were great, but here twice we were put on the right track by more fragments torn from the dress of Inez.

At length we lost the spoor altogether; not a sign of it was to be found. We had no idea which way to go. All about us appeared these valleys covered with scattered bush running this way and that, so that we could not tell which of them to follow or to cross. The thing seemed hopeless, for how could we expect to find a little body of men in that immensity? Hans shook his head and even the fierce and steadfast Robertson was discouraged.

"I fear my poor lassie is gone," he said, and relapsed into brooding as had become his wont.

"Never say die! It's dogged as does it!" I replied cheerfully in the words of Nelson, who also had learned what it meant to hunt an enemy over trackless wastes, although his were of water.

I walked to the top of the rise where we were encamped, and sat down alone to think matters over. Our condition was somewhat parlous; all our beasts were now dead, even the second donkey, which was the last of them, having perished that morning, and been eaten, for food was scanty since of late we had met with little game. The Strathmuir men, who now must carry the loads, were almost worn out and doubtless would have

deserted, except for the fact that there was no place to which they could go. Even the Zulus were discouraged, and said they had come away from home across the Great River to fight, not to run about in wildernesses and starve, though Umslopogaas made no complaint, being buoyed up by the promise of his soothsayer, Goroko, that battle was ahead of him in which he would win great glory.

Hans, however, remained cheerful, for the reason, as he remarked vacuously, that the Great Medicine was with us and that therefore, however bad things seemed to be, all in fact was well; an argument that carried no conviction to my soul.

It was on a certain evening towards sunset that I went away thus alone. I looked about me, east and west and north. Everywhere appeared the same bush-clad valleys and barren rises, miles upon miles of them. I bethought me of the map that old Zikali had drawn in the ashes, and remembered that it showed these valleys and rises and that beyond them there should be a great swamp, and beyond the swamp a mountain. So it seemed that we were on the right road to the home of his white Queen, if such a person existed, or at any rate we were passing over country similar to that which he had pictured or imagined.

But at this time I was not troubling my head about white queens. I was thinking of poor Inez. That she was alive a few days before we knew from the fragments of her dress. But where was she now? The spoor was utterly lost on that stony ground, or if any traces of it remained a heavy

deluge of rain had washed them away. Even Hans had confessed himself beaten.

I stared about me helplessly, and as I did so a flying ray of light from the setting sun reflected downwards from a storm-cloud, fell upon a white patch on the crest of one of the distant land-waves. It struck me that probably limestone outcropped at this spot, as indeed proved to be the case; also that such a patch of white would be a convenient guide for any who were travelling across that sea of bush. Further, some instinct within seemed to impel me to steer for it, although I had all but made up my mind to go in a totally different direction many more points to the east. It was almost as though a voice were calling to me to take this path and no other. Doubtless this was an effect produced by weariness and mental overstrain. Still, there it was, very real and tangible, one that I did not attempt to combat.

So next morning at the dawn I headed north by west, laying my course for that white patch and for the first time breaking the straight line of our advance. Captain Robertson, whose temper had not been bettered by prolonged and frightful anxiety, or I may add, by his unaccustomed abstinence, asked me rather roughly why I was altering the course.

"Look here, Captain," I answered, "if we were at sea and you did something of the sort, I should not put such a question to you, and if by any chance I did, I should not expect you to answer. Well, by your own wish I am in command here and I think that the same argument holds."

"Yes," he replied. "I suppose you have studied your chart, if there is any of this God-forsaken country, and at any rate discipline is discipline. So steam ahead and don't mind me."

The others accepted my decision without comment; most of them were so miserable that they did not care which way we went, also they were good enough to repose confidence in my judgment.

"Doubtless the Baas has reasons," said Hans dubiously, "although the spoor, when last we saw it, headed towards the rising sun and as the country is all the same, I do not see why those man-eaters should have returned."

"Yes," I said, "I have reasons," although in fact I had none at all.

Hans surveyed me with a watery eye as though waiting for me to explain them, but I looked haughty and declined to oblige.

"The Baas has reasons," continued Hans, "for taking us on what I think to be the wrong side of that great ridge, there to hunt for the spoor of the men-eaters, and they are so deep down in his mind that he cannot dig them up for poor old Hans to look at. Well, the Baas wears the Great Medicine and perhaps it is there that the reasons sit. Those Strathmuir fellows say that they can go no further and wish to die. Umslopogaas has just gone to them with his axe to tell them that he is ready to help

them to their wish. Look, he has got there, for they are coming quickly, who after all prefer to live."

Well, we started for my white patch of stones which no one else had noticed and of which I said nothing to anyone, and reached it by the following evening, to find, as I expected, that it was a lime outcrop.

By now we were in a poor way, for we had practically nothing left to eat, which did not tend to raise the spirits of the party. Also that lime outcrop proved to be an uninteresting spot overlooking a wide valley which seemed to suggest that there were other valleys of a similar sort beyond it, and nothing more.

Captain Robertson sat stern-faced and despondent at a distance muttering into his beard, as had become a habit with him. Umslopogaas leaned upon his axe and contemplated the heavens, also occasionally the Strathmuir men who cowered beneath his eye. The Zulus squatted about sharing such snuff as remained to them in economic pinches. Goroko, the witch-doctor, engaged himself in consulting his "Spirit," by means of bone-throwing, upon the humble subject of whether or no we should succeed in killing any game for food to-morrow, a point on which I gathered that his "Spirit" was quite uncertain. In short, the gloom was deep and universal and the sky looked as though it were going to rain.

Hans became sarcastic. Sneaking up to me in his most aggravating way, like a dog that means to steal something and cover up the theft with

simulated affection, he pointed out one by one all the disadvantages of our present position. He indicated per contra, that if his advice had been followed, his conviction was that even if we had not found the man-eaters and rescued the lady called Sad-Eyes, our state would have been quite different. He was sure, he added, that the valley which he had suggested we should follow, was one full of game, inasmuch as he had seen their spoor at its entrance.

"Then why did you not say so?" I asked.

Hans sucked at his empty corn-cob pipe, which was his way of indicating that he would like me to give him some tobacco, much as a dog groans heavily under the table when he wants a bit to eat, and answered that it was not for him to point out things to one who knew everything, like the great Macumazahn, Watcher-by-Night, his honoured master. Still, the luck did seem to have gone a bit wrong. The privations could have been put up with (here he sucked very loudly at the empty pipe and looked at mine, which was alright), everything could have been put up with, if only there had been a chance of coming even with those men-eaters and rescuing the Lady Sad-Eyes, whose face haunted his sleep. As it was, however, he was convinced that by following the course I had mapped out we had lost their spoor finally and that probably they were now three days' march away in another direction. Still, the Baas had said that he had his reasons, and that of course was enough for him, Hans, only if the Baas would condescend to tell him, he would as a matter of curiosity like to know what the reasons were.

At that moment I confess that, much as I was attached to him, I should have liked to murder Hans, who, I felt, believing that he had me "on toast," to use a vulgar phrase, was taking advantage of my position to make a mock of me in his sly, Hottentot way.

I tried to continue to look grand, but felt that the attitude did not impress. Then I stared about me as though taking counsel with the Heavens, devoutly hoping that the Heavens would respond to my mute appeal. As a matter of fact they did.

"There is my reason, Hans," I said in my most icy voice, and I pointed to a faint line of smoke rising against the twilight sky on the further side of the intervening valley.

"You will perceive, Hans," I added, "that those Amahagger cannibals have forgotten their caution and lit a fire yonder, which they have not done for a long time. Perhaps you would like to know why this has happened. If so I will tell you. It is because for some days past I have purposely lost their spoor, which they knew we were following, and lit fires to puzzle them. Now, thinking that they have done with us, they have become incautious and shown us where they are. That is my reason, Hans."

He heard and, although of course he did not believe that I had lost the spoor on purpose, stared at me till I thought his little eyes were going to drop out of his head. But even in his admiration he contrived to

convey an insult as only a native can.

"How wonderful is the Great Medicine of the Opener-of-Roads, that it should have been able thus to instruct the Baas," he said. "Without doubt the Great Medicine is right and yonder those men-eaters are encamped, who might just as well as have been anywhere else within a hundred miles."

"Drat the Great Medicine," I replied, but beneath my breath, then added aloud,

"Be so good, Hans, as to go to Umslopogaas and to tell him that Macumazahn, or the Great Medicine, proposes to march at once to attack the camp of the Amahagger, and--here is some tobacco."

"Yes, Baas," answered Hans humbly, as he snatched the tobacco and wriggled away like a worm.

Then I went to talk with Robertson.

The end of it was that within an hour we were creeping across that valley towards the spot where I had seen the line of smoke rising against the twilight sky.

Somewhere about midnight we reached the neighbourhood of this place. How near or how far we were from it, we could not tell since the moon was



invisible, as of course the smoke was in the dark. Now the question was, what should we do?

Obviously there would be enormous advantages in a night attack, or at least in locating the enemy, so that it might be carried out at dawn before he marched. Especially was this so, since we were scarcely in a condition even if we could come face to face with them, to fight these savages when they were prepared and in the light of day. Only we two white men, with Hans, Umslopogaas and his Zulus, could be relied upon in such a case, since the Strathmuir mixed-bloods had become entirely demoralised and were not to be trusted at a pinch. Indeed, tired and half starving as we were, none of us was at his best. Therefore a surprise seemed our only chance. But first we must find those whom we wished to surprise.

Ultimately, after a hurried consultation, it was agreed that Hans and I should go forward and see if we could locate the Amahagger. Robertson wished to come too, but I pointed out that he must remain to look after his people, who, if he left them, might take the opportunity to melt away in the darkness, especially as they knew that heavy fighting was at hand. Also if anything happened to me it was desirable that one white man should remain to lead the party. Umslopogaas, too, volunteered, but knowing his character, I declined his help. To tell the truth, I was almost certain that if we came upon the men-eaters, he would charge the whole lot of them and accomplish a fine but futile end after hacking down a number of cannibal barbarians, whose extinction or escape

remained absolutely immaterial to our purpose, namely, the rescue of Inez.

So it came about that Hans and I started alone, I not at all enjoying the job. I suppose that there lurks in my nature some of that primeval terror of the dark, which must continually have haunted our remote forefathers of a hundred or a thousand generations gone and still lingers in the blood of most of us. At any rate even if I am named the Watcher-by-Night, greatly do I prefer to fight or to face peril in the sunlight, though it is true that I would rather avoid both at any time.

In fact, I wished heartily that the Amahagger were at the other side of Africa, or in heaven, and that I, completely ignorant of the person called Inez Robertson, were seated smoking the pipe of peace on my own stoep in Durban. I think that Hans guessed my state of mind, since he suggested that he should go alone, adding with his usual unveiled rudeness, that he was quite certain that he would do much better without me, since white men always made a noise.

"Yes," I replied, determined to give him a Roland for his Oliver, "I have no doubt you would--under the first bush you came across, where you would sleep till dawn, and then return and say that you could not find the Amahagger."

Hans chuckled, quite appreciating the joke, and having thus mutually affronted each other, we started on our quest.