

CHAPTER IX

THE SWAMP

Neither Hans nor I carried rifles that we knew would be in the way on our business, which was just to scout. Moreover, one is always tempted to shoot if a gun is at hand, and this I did not want to do at present. So, although I had my revolver in case of urgent necessity, my only other weapon was a Zulu axe, that formerly had belonged to one of those two men who died defending Inez on the veranda at Strathmuir, while Hans had nothing but his long knife. Thus armed, or unarmed, we crept forward towards that spot whence, as we conjectured, we had seen the line of smoke rising some hours before.

For about a quarter of a mile we went on thus without seeing or hearing anything, and a difficult job it was in that gloom among the scattered trees with no light save such as the stars gave us. Indeed, I was about to suggest that we had better abandon the enterprise until daybreak when Hans nudged me, whispering,

"Look to the right between those twin thorns."

I obeyed and following the line of sight which he had indicated, perceived, at a distance of about two hundred yards a faint glow, so faint indeed that I think only Hans would have noticed it. Really it might have been nothing more than the phosphorescence rising from a heap

of fungus, or even from a decaying animal.

"The fire of which we saw the smoke that has burnt to ashes," whispered Hans again. "I think that they have gone, but let us look."

So we crawled forward very cautiously to avoid making the slightest noise; so cautiously, indeed, that it must have taken us nearly half an hour to cover those two hundred yards.

At length we were within about forty yards of that dying fire and, afraid to go further, came to a stand--or rather, a lie-still--behind some bushes until we knew more. Hans lifted his head and sniffed with his broad nostrils; then he whispered into my ear, but so low that I could scarcely hear him.

"Amahagger there all right, Baas, I smell them."

This of course was possible, since what wind there was blew from the direction of the fire, although I whose nose is fairly keen could smell nothing at all. So I determined to wait and watch a while, and indicated my decision to Hans, who, considering our purpose accomplished, showed signs of wishing to retreat.

Some minutes we lay thus, till of a sudden this happened. A branch of resinous wood of which the stem had been eaten through by the flames, fell upon the ashes of the fire and burnt up with a brilliant light. In

it we saw that the Amahagger were sleeping in a circle round the fire wrapped in their blankets.

Also we saw another thing, namely that nearer to us, not more than a dozen yards away, indeed, was a kind of little tent, also made of fur rugs or blankets, which doubtless sheltered Inez. Indeed, this was evident from the fact that at the mouth of it, wrapped up in something, lay none other than her maid, Janee, for her face being towards us, was recognised by us both in the flare of the flaming branch. One more thing we noted, namely, that two of the cannibals, evidently a guard, were sleeping between us and the little tent. Of course they ought to have been awake, but fatigue had overcome them and there they slumbered, seated on the ground, their heads hanging forward almost upon their knees.

An idea came to me. If we could kill those men without waking the others in that gloom, it might be possible to rescue Inez at once. Rapidly I weighed the pros and cons of such an attempt. Its advantages, if successful, were that the object of our pursuit would be carried through without further trouble and that it was most doubtful whether we should ever get such a chance again. If we returned to fetch the others and attacked in force, the probability was that those Amahagger, or one of them, would hear some sound made by the advance of a number of men, and fly into the darkness; or, rather than lose Inez, they might kill her. Or if they stood and fought, she might be slain in the scrimmage. Or, as after all we had only about a dozen effectives, for the Strathmuir

bearers could not be relied upon, they might defeat and kill us whom they outnumbered by two or three to one.

These were the arguments for the attempt. Those for not making it were equally obvious. To begin with it was one of extraordinary risk; the two guards or someone else behind them might wake up--for such people, like dogs, mostly sleep with one eye open, especially when they knew that they are being pursued. Or if they did not we might bungle the business so that they raised an outcry before they grew silent for ever, in which case both of us and perhaps Inez also would probably pay the penalty before we could get away.

Such was the horned dilemma upon one point or other of which we ran the risk of being impaled. For a full minute or more I considered the matter with an earnestness almost amounting to mental agony, and at last all but came to the conclusion that the danger was too enormous. It would be better, notwithstanding the many disadvantages of that plan, to go back and fetch the others.

But then it was that I made one of my many mistakes in life. Most of us do more foolish things than wise ones and sometimes I think that in spite of a certain reputation for caution and far-sightedness, I am exceptionally cursed in this respect. Indeed, when I look back upon my past, I can scarcely see the scanty flowers of wisdom that decorate its path because of the fat, ugly trees of error by which it is overshadowed.

On that occasion, forgetting past experiences where Hans was concerned, my natural tendency to blunder took the form of relying upon another's judgment instead of on my own. Although I had formed a certain view as to what should be done, the pros and cons seemed so evenly balanced that I determined to consult the little Hottentot and accept his verdict. This, after all, was but a form of gambling like pitch and toss, since, although it is true Hans was a clever, or at any rate a cunning man according to his lights, and experienced, it meant that I was placing my own judgment in abeyance, which no one considering a life-and-death enterprise should do, taking the chance of that of another, whatever it might be. However, not for the first time, I did so--to my grief.

In the tiniest of whispers with my lips right against his smelly head, I submitted the problem to Hans, asking him what we should do, go on or go back. He considered a while, then answered in a voice which he contrived to make like the drone of a night beetle.

"Those men are fast asleep, I know it by their breathing. Also the Baas has the Great Medicine. Therefore I say go on, kill them and rescue Sad-Eyes."

Now I saw that the Fates to which I had appealed had decided against me and that I must accept their decree. With a sick and sinking heart--for I did not at all like the business--I wondered for a moment what had

led Hans to take this view, which was directly opposite to any I had expected from him. Of course his superstition about the Great Medicine had something to do with it, but I felt convinced that this was not all.

Even then I guessed that two arguments appealed to him, of which the first was that he desired, if possible, to put an end to this intolerable and unceasing hunt which had worn us all out, no matter what that end might be. The second and more powerful, however, was, I believed, and rightly, that the idea of this stealthy, midnight blow appealed irresistibly to the craft of his half-wild nature in which the strains of the leopard and the snake seemed to mingle with that of the human being. For be it remembered that notwithstanding his veneer of civilisation, Hans was a savage whose forefathers for countless ages had preserved themselves alive by means of such attacks and stratagems.

The die having been cast, in the same infinitesimal whispers we made our arrangements, which were few and simple. They amounted to this--that we were to creep on to the men and each of us to kill that one who was opposite to him, I with the axe and Hans with his knife, remembering that it must be done with a single stroke--that is, if they did not wake up and kill us--after which we were to get Inez out of her shelter, dressed or undressed, and make off with her into the darkness where we were pretty sure of being able to baffle pursuit until we reached our own camp.

Provided that we could kill the two guards in the proper fashion--rather

a large proviso, I admit--the thing was simple as shelling peas which, notwithstanding the proverb, in my experience is not simple at all, since generally the shells crack the wrong way and at least one of the peas remained in the pod. So it happened in this case, for Janee, whom we had both forgotten, remained in the pod.

I am sure I don't know why we overlooked her; indeed, the error was inexcusable, especially as Hans had already experienced her foolishness and she was lying there before our eyes. I suppose that our minds were so concentrated upon the guard-killing and the tragic and impressive Inez that there was no room in them for the stolid and matter-of-fact Janee. At any rate she proved to be the pea that would not come out of the pod.

Often in my life I have felt terrified, not being by nature one of those who rejoices in dangers and wild adventures for their own sake, which only the stupid do, but who has, on the contrary, been forced to undertake them by the pressure of circumstances, a kind of hydraulic force that no one can resist, and who, having undertaken, has been carried through them, triumphing over the shrinkings of his flesh by some secret reserve of nerve power. Almost am I tempted to call it spirit-power, something that lives beyond and yet inspires our frail and fallible bodies.

Well, rarely have I been more frightened than I was at this moment. Actually I hung back until I saw that Hans slithering through the grass

like a thick yellow snake with the great knife in his right hand, was quite a foot ahead of me. Then my pride came to the rescue and I spurted, if one can spurt upon one's stomach, and drew level with him. After this we went at a pace so slow that any able-bodied snail would have left us standing still. Inch by inch we crept forward, lying motionless a while after each convulsive movement, once for quite a long time, since the left-hand cannibal seemed about to wake up, for he opened his mouth and yawned. If so, he changed his mind and rolling from a sitting posture on to his side, went to sleep much more soundly than before.

A minute or so later the right-hand ruffian, my man, also stirred, so sharply that I thought he had heard something. Apparently, however, he was only haunted by dreams resulting from an evil life, or perhaps by the prescience of its end, for after waving his arm and muttering something in a frightened voice, he too, wearied out, poor devil, sank back into sleep.

At last we were on them, but paused because we could not see exactly where to strike and knew, each of us, that our first blow must be the last and fatal. A cloud had come up and dimmed what light there was, and we must wait for it to pass. It was a long wait, or so it seemed.

At length that cloud did pass and in faint outline I saw the classical head of my Amahagger bowed in deep sleep. With a heart beating as it does only in the fierce extremities of love or war, I hissed like a

snake, which was our agreed signal. Then rising to my knees, I lifted the Zulu axe and struck with all my strength.

The blow was straight and true; Umslopogaas himself could not have dealt a better. The victim in front of me uttered no sound and made no movement; only sank gently on to his side, and there lay as dead as though he had never been born.

It appeared that Hans had done equally well, since the other man kicked out his long legs, which struck me on the knees. Then he also became strangely still. In short, both of them were stone dead and would tell no stories this side of Judgment Day.

Recovering my axe, which had been wrenched from my hand, I crept forward and opened the curtain-like rugs or blankets, I do not know which they were, that covered Inez. I heard her stir at once. The movement had wakened her, since captives sleep lightly.

"Make no noise, Inez," I whispered. "It is I, Allan Quatermain, come to rescue you. Slip out and follow me; do you understand?"

"Yes, quite," she whispered back and began to rise.

At this moment a blood-curdling yell seemed to fill earth and heaven, a yell at the memory of which even now I feel faint, although I am writing years after its echoes died away.

I may as well say at once that it came from Janee who, awaking suddenly, had perceived against the background of the sky, Hans standing over her, looking like a yellow devil with a long knife in his hand, which she thought was about to be used to murder her.

So, lacking self-restraint, she screamed in the most lusty fashion, for her lungs were excellent, and--the game was up.

Instantly every man sleeping round the fire leapt to his feet and rushed in the direction of the echoes of Janee's yell. It was impossible to get Inez free of her tent arrangement or to do anything, except whisper to her,

"Feign sleep and know nothing. We will follow you. Your father is with us."

Then I bolted back into the bushes, which Hans had reached already.

A minute or two later when we were clear of the hubbub and nearing our own camp, Hans remarked to me sententiously,

"The Great Medicine worked well, Baas, but not quite well enough, for what medicine can avail against a woman's folly?"

"It was our own folly we should blame," I answered. "We ought to have

known that fool-girl would shriek, and taken precautions."

"Yes, Baas, we ought to have killed her too, for nothing else would have kept her quiet," replied Hans in cheerful assent. "Now we shall have to pay for our mistake, for the hunt must go on."

At this moment we stumbled across Robertson and Umslopogaas who, with the others, and every living thing within a mile or two had also heard Janee's yell, and briefly told our story. When he learned how near we had been to rescuing his daughter, Robertson groaned, but Umslopogaas only said,

"Well, there are two less of the men-eaters left to deal with. Still, for once your wisdom failed you, Macumazahn. When you had found the camp you should have returned, so that we might all attack it together. Had we done so, before the dawn there would not have been one of them left."

"Yes," I answered, "I think that my wisdom did fail me, if I have any to fail. But come; perhaps we may catch them yet."

So we advanced, Hans and I showing the road. But when we reached the place it was too late, for all that remained of the Amahagger, or of Inez and Janee, were the two dead men whom we had killed, and in that darkness pursuit was impossible. So we went back to our own camp to rest and await the dawn before taking up the trail, only to find ourselves confronted with a new trouble. All the Strathmuir half-breeds whom we

had left behind as useless, had taken advantage of our absence and that of the Zulus, to desert. They had just bolted back upon our tracks and vanished into the sea of bush. What became of them I do not know, as we never saw them again, but my belief is that these cowardly fellows all perished, for certainly not one of them reached Strathmuir.

Fortunately for us, however, they departed in such a hurry that they left all their loads behind them, and even some of the guns they carried. Evidently Janee's yell was the last straw which broke the back of such nerve as remained to them. Doubtless they believed it to be the signal of attack by hordes of cannibals.

As there was nothing to said or done, since any pursuit of these curs was out of the question, we made the best of things as they were. It proved a simple business. From the loads we selected such articles as were essential, ammunition for the most part, to carry ourselves--and the rest we abandoned, hiding it under a pile of stones in case we should ever come that way again.

The guns they had thrown aside we distributed among the Zulus who had none, though the thought that they possessed them, so far as I was concerned, added another terror to life. The prospect of going into battle with those wild axemen letting off bullets in every direction was not pleasant, but fortunately when that crisis came, they cast them away and reverted to the weapons to which they were accustomed.

Now all this sounds much like a tale of disaster, or at any rate of failure. It is, however, wonderful by what strange ways good results are brought about, so much so that at times I think that these seeming accidents must be arranged by an Intelligence superior to our own, to fulfil through us purposes of which we know nothing, and frequently, be it admitted, of a nature sufficiently obscure. Of course this is a fatalistic doctrine, but then, as I have said before, within certain limits I am a fatalist.

To take the present case, for instance, the whole Inez episode at first sight might appear to be an excrescence on my narrative, of which the object is to describe how I met a certain very wonderful woman and what I heard and experienced in her company. Yet it is not really so, since had it not been for the Inez adventure, it is quite clear that I should never have reached the home of this woman, if woman she were, or have seen her at all. Before long this became very obvious to me, as shall be told.

From the night upon which Hans and I failed to rescue Inez we had no more difficulty in following the trail of the cannibals, who thenceforward were never more than a few hours ahead of us and had no time to be careful or to attempt to hide their spoor. Yet so fast did they travel that do what we would, burdened and wearied as we were, it proved impossible to overtake them.

For the first three days the track ran on through scattered, rolling

bush-veld of the character that I have described, but tending continually down hill. When we broke camp on the morning of the fourth day, eating a hasty meal at dawn (for now game had become astonishingly plentiful, so that we did not lack food) the rising sun showed beneath us an endless sea of billowy mist stretching in every direction far as the sight could carry.

To the north, however, it did come to an end, for there, as I judged fifty or sixty miles away, rose the grim outline of what looked like a huge fortress, which I knew must be one of those extraordinary mountain formations, probably owing their origin to volcanic action, that are to be met with here and there in the vast expanses of Central and Eastern Africa. Being so distant it was impossible to estimate its size, which I guessed must be enormous, but in looking at it I bethought me of that great mountain in which Zikali said the marvellous white Queen lived, and wondered whether it could be the same, as from my memory of his map upon the ashes, it well might be, that is, if such a place existed at all. If so the map had shown it as surrounded by swamps and--well, surely that mist hid the face of a mighty swamp?

It did indeed, since before nightfall, following the spoor of those Amahagger, we had plunged into a morass so vast that in all my experience I have never seen or heard of its like. It was a veritable ocean of papyrus and other reeds, some of them a dozen or more feet high, so that it was impossible to see a yard in any direction.

Here it was that the Amahagger ahead of us proved our salvation, since without them to guide us we must soon have perished. For through that gigantic swamp there ran a road, as I think an ancient road, since in one or two places I saw stone work which must have been laid by man. Yet it was not a road which it would have been possible to follow without a guide, seeing that it also was overgrown with reeds. Indeed, the only difference between it and the surrounding swamp was that on the road the soil was comparatively firm, that is to say, one seldom sank into it above the knee, whereas on either side of it quagmires were often apparently bottomless, and what is more, partook of the nature of quicksand.

This we found out soon after we entered the swamp, since Robertson, pushing forward with the fierce eagerness which seemed to consume him, neglected to keep his eye upon the spoor and stepped off the edge on to land that appeared to be exactly similar to its surface. Instantly he began to sink in greasy and tenacious mud. Umslopogaas and I were only twenty yards behind, yet by the time we reached him in answer to his shouts, already he was engulfed up to his middle and going down so rapidly that in another minute he would have vanished altogether. Well, we got him out but not with ease, for that mud clung to him like the tentacles of an octopus. After this we were more careful.

Nor did this road run straight; on the contrary, it curved about and sometimes turned at right angles, doubtless to avoid a piece of swamp over which it had proved impossible for the ancients to construct a

causeway, or to follow some out-crop of harder soil beneath.

The difficulties of that horrible place are beyond description, and indeed can scarcely be imagined. First there was that of a kind of grass which grew among the roots of the reeds and had edges like to those of knives. As Robertson and I wore gaiters we did not suffer so much from it, but the poor Zulus with their bare legs were terribly cut about and in some cases lame.

Then there were the mosquitoes which lived here by the million and all seemed anxious for a bite; also snakes of a peculiarly deadly kind were numerous. A Zulu was bitten by one of them of so poisonous a nature that he died within three minutes, for the venom seemed to go straight to his heart. We threw his body into the swamp, where it vanished at once.

Lastly there was the all-pervading stench and the intolerable heat of the place, since no breath of air could penetrate that forest of reeds, while a minor trouble was that of the multitude of leeches which fastened on to our bodies. By looking one could see the creatures sitting on the under side of leaves with their heads stretched out waiting to attack anything that went by. As wayfarers there could not have been numerous, I wondered what they had lived on for the last few thousand years. By the way, I found that paraffin, of which we had a small supply for our hand-lamps, rubbed over all exposed surfaces, was to some extent a protection against these blood-sucking worms and the gnats, although it did make one go about smelling like a dirty oil tin.

During the day, except for the occasional rush of some great iguana or other reptile, and the sound of the wings of the flocks of wildfowl passing over us from time to time, the march was deathly silent. But at night it was different, for then the bull-frogs boomed incessantly, as did the bitterns, while great swamp owls and other night-flying birds uttered their weird cries. Also there were mysterious sucking noises caused, no doubt, by the sinking of areas of swamp, with those of bursting bubbles of foul, up-rushing gas.

Strange lights, too, played about, will-o'-the-wisps or St. Elmo fires, as I believe they are called, that frightened the Zulus very much, since they believed them to be spirits of the dead. Perhaps this superstition had something to do with their native legend that mankind was "torn out of the reeds." If so, they may have imagined that the ghosts of men went back to the reeds, of which there were enough here to accommodate those of the entire Zulu nation. Any way they were much scared; even the bold witch-doctor, Goroko, was scared and went through incantations with the little bag of medicines he carried to secure protection for himself and his companions. Indeed, I think even the iron Umslopogaas himself was not as comfortable as he might have been, although he did inform me that he had come out to fight and did not care whether it were with man, or wizard, or spirit.

In short, of all the journeys that I have made, with the exception of the passage of the desert on our way to King Solomon's Mines, I think

that through this enormous swamp was the most miserable. Heartily did I curse myself for ever having undertaken such a quest in a wild attempt to allay that sickness, or rather to quench that thirst of the soul which, I imagine, at times assails most of those who have hearts and think or dream.

For this was at the bottom of the business: this it was which had delivered me into the hands of Zikali, Opener-of-Roads, who, as now I am sure, was merely making use of me for his private occult purposes. He desired to consult the distant Oracle, if such a person existed, as to great schemes of his own, and therefore, to attain his end, made use of my secret longings which I had been so foolish as to reveal to him, quite careless of what happened to me in the process. [A bit narrow and uncharitable, this view. It seems to me that Zikali is taking a big risk in giving him the Great Medicine.--JB]

Well, I was in for the business and must follow it to the finish whatever that might be. After all it was very interesting and if there were anything in what Zikali said (if there were not I could not conceive what object he had in sending me on such a wild-goose chase through this home of geese and ducks), it might become more interesting still. For being pretty well fever-proof I did not think I should die in that morass, as of course nine white men out of ten would have done, and, beyond it lay the huge mountain which day by day grew larger and clearer.

Nor did Hans, who, with a childlike trust, pinned his faith to the Great Medicine. This, he remarked, was the worst veld through which he had ever travelled, but as the Great Medicine would never consent to be buried in that stinking mud, he had no doubt that we should come safely through it some time. I replied that this wonderful medicine of his had not saved one of our companions who had now made a grave in the same mud.

"No, Baas," he said, "but those Zulus have nothing to do with the Medicine which was given to you, and to me who accompanied you when we saw the Opener-of-Roads. Therefore perhaps they will all die, except Umslopogaas, whom you were told to take with you. If so, what does it matter, since there are plenty of Zulus, although there be but one Macumazahn or one Hans? Also the Baas may remember that he began by offending a snake and therefore it is quite natural that this snake's brother should have bitten the Zulu."

"If you are right, he should have bitten me, Hans."

"Yes, Baas, and so no doubt he would have done had you not been protected by the Great Medicine, and me too had not my grandfather been a snake-charmer, to say nothing of the smell of the Medicine being on me as well. The snakes know those that they should bite, Baas."

"So do the mosquitoes," I answered, grabbing a handful of them. "The Great Medicine has no effect upon them."

"Oh! yes, Baas, it has, since though it pleases them to bite, the bites do us no harm, or at least not much, and all are made happy. Still, I wish we could get out of these reeds of which I never want to see another, and Baas, please keep your rifle ready for I think I hear a crocodile stirring there."

"No need, Hans," I remarked sarcastically. "Go and tell him that I have the Great Medicine."

"Yes, Baas, I will; also that if he is very hungry, there are some Zulus camped a few yards further down the road," and he went solemnly to the reeds a little way off and began to talk to them.

"You infernal donkey!" I murmured, and drew my blanket over my head in a vain attempt to keep out the mosquitoes and smoking furiously with the same object, tried to get to sleep.

At last the swamp bottom began to slope upwards a little, with the result that as the land dried through natural drainage, the reeds grew thinner by degrees, until finally they ceased and we found ourselves on firmer ground; indeed, upon the lowest slopes of the great mountain that I have mentioned, that now towered above us, forbidden and majestic.

I had made a little map in my pocket-book of the various twists and turns of the road through that vast Slough of Despond, marking them from hour to hour as we followed its devious wanderings. On studying this at the end of that part of our journey I realised afresh how utterly impossible it would have been for us to thread that misty maze where a few false steps would always have meant death by suffocation, had it not been for the spoor of those Amahagger travelling immediately ahead of us who were acquainted with its secrets. Had they been friendly guides they could not have done us a better turn.

What I wondered was why they had not tried to ambush us in the reeds, since our fires must have shown them that we were close upon their heels. That they did try to burn us out was clear from certain evidences that I found, but fortunately at this season of the year in the absence of a strong wind the rank reeds were too green to catch fire. For the rest I was soon to learn the reason of their neglect to attack us in that dense cover.

They were waiting for a better opportunity!