

CHAPTER X

THE ATTACK

We won out of the reeds at last, for which I fervently thanked God, since to have crossed that endless marsh unguided, with the loss of only one man, seemed little less than miraculous. We emerged from them late in the afternoon and being wearied out, stopped for a while to rest and eat of the flesh of a buck that I had been fortunate enough to shoot upon their fringe. Then we pushed forward up the slope, proposing to camp for the night on the crest of it a mile or so away where I thought we should escape from the deadly mist in which we had been enveloped for so long, and obtain a clear view of the country ahead.

Following the bank of a stream which here ran down into the marsh, we came at length to this crest just as the sun was sinking. Below us lay a deep valley, a fold, as it were, in the skin of the mountain, well but not densely bushed. The woods of this valley climbed up the mountain flank for some distance above it and then gave way to grassy slopes that ended in steep sides of rock, which were crowned by a black and frowning precipice of unknown height.

There was, I remember, something very impressive about this towering natural wall, which seemed to shut off whatever lay beyond the gaze of man, as though it veiled an ancient mystery. Indeed, the aspect of it thrilled me, I knew not why. I observed, however, that at one point in

the mighty cliff there seemed to be a narrow cleft down which, no doubt, lava had flowed in a remote age, and it occurred to me that up this cleft ran a roadway, probably a continuation of that by which we had threaded the swamp. The fact that through my glasses I could see herds of cattle grazing on the slopes of the mountain went to confirm this view, since cattle imply owners and herdsmen, and search as I would, I could find no native villages on the slopes. The inference seemed to be that those owners dwelt beyond or within the mountain.

All of these things I saw and pointed out to Robertson in the light of the setting sun.

Meanwhile Umslopogaas had been engaged in selecting the spot where we were to camp for the night. Some soldierlike instinct, or perchance some prescience of danger, caused him to choose a place particularly suitable to defence. It was on a steep-sided mound that more or less resembled a gigantic ant-heap. Upon one side this mound was protected by the stream which because of a pool was here rather deep, while at the back of it stood a collection of those curious and piled-up water-worn rocks that are often to be found in Africa. These rocks, lying one upon another like the stones of a Cyclopean wall, curved round the western side of the mound, so that practically it was only open for a narrow space, say thirty or forty feet, upon that face of it which looked on to the mountain.

"Umslopogaas expects battle," remarked Hans to me with a grin,

"otherwise with all this nice plain round us he would not have chosen to camp in a place which a few men could hold against many. Yes, Baas, he thinks that those cannibals are going to attack us."

"Stranger things have happened," I answered indifferently, and having seen to the rifles, went to lie down, observing as I did so that the tired Zulus seemed already to be asleep. Only Umslopogaas did not sleep. On the contrary, he stood leaning on his axe staring at the dim outlines of the opposing precipice.

"A strange mountain, Macumazahn," he said, "compared to it that of the Witch, beneath which my kraal lies, is but a little baby. I wonder what we shall find within it. I have always loved mountains, Macumazahn, ever since a dead brother of mine and I lived with the wolves in the Witch's lap, for on them I have had the best of my fighting."

"Perhaps it is not done with yet," I answered wearily.

"I hope not, Macumazahn, since some is due for us, after all these days of mud and stench. Sleep a while now, Macumazahn, for that head of yours which you use so much, must need rest. Fear not, I and the little yellow man who do not think as much as you do, will keep watch and wake you if there is need, as mayhap there will be before the dawn. Here none can come at us except in front, and the place is narrow."

So I lay down and slept as soundly as ever I had done in my life, for a

space of four or five hours I suppose. Then, by some instinct perhaps, I awoke suddenly, feeling much refreshed in that sweet mountain air, a new man indeed, and in the moonlight saw Umslopogaas striding towards me.

"Arise, Macumazahn," he said, "I hear men stirring below us."

At this moment Hans slipped past him, whispering,

"The cannibals are coming, Baas, a good number of them. I think they mean to attack before dawn."

Then he passed behind me to warn the Zulus. As he went by, I said to him,

"If so, Hans, now is the time for your Great Medicine to show what it can do."

"The Great Medicine will look after you and me all right, Baas," he replied, pausing and speaking in Dutch, which Umslopogaas did not understand, "but I expect there will be fewer of those Zulus to cook for before the sun grows hot. Their spirits will be turned into snakes and go back into the reeds from which they say they were 'torn out,'" he added over his shoulder.

I should explain that Hans acted as cook to our party and it was a grievance with him that the Zulus ate so much of the meat which he was

called upon to prepare. Indeed, there is never much sympathy between Hottentots and Zulus.

"What is the little yellow man saying about us?" asked Umslopogaas suspiciously.

"He is saying that if it comes to battle, you and your men will make a great fight," I replied diplomatically.

"Yes, we will do that, Macumazahn, but I thought he said that we should be killed and that this pleased him."

"Oh dear no!" I answered hastily. "How could he be pleased if that happened, since then he would be left defenceless, if he were not killed too. Now, Umslopogaas, let us make a plan for this fight."

So, together with Robertson, rapidly we discussed the thing. As a result, with the help of the Zulus, we dragged together some loose stones and the tops of three small thorn trees which we had cut down, and with them made a low breastwork, sufficient to give us some protection if we lay down to shoot. It was the work of a few minutes since we had prepared the material when we camped in case an emergency should arise.

Behind this breastwork we gathered and waited, Robertson and I being careful to get a little to the rear of the Zulus, who it will be

remembered had the rifles which the Strathmuir bastards had left behind them when they bolted, in addition to their axes and throwing assegais. The question was how these cannibals would fight. I knew that they were armed with long spears and knives but I did not know if they used those spears for thrusting or for throwing. In the former case it would be difficult to get at them with the axes because they must have the longer reach. Fortunately as it turned out, they did both.

At length all was ready and there came that long and trying wait, the most disagreeable part of a fight in which one grows nervous and begins to reflect earnestly upon one's sins. Clearly the Amahagger, if they really intended business, did not mean to attack till just before dawn, after the common native fashion, thinking to rush us in the low and puzzling light. What perplexed me was that they should wish to attack us at all after having let so many opportunities of doing so go by. Apparently these men were now in sight of their own home, where no doubt they had many friends, and by pushing on could reach its shelter before us, especially as they knew the roads and we did not.

They had come out for a secret purpose that seemed to have to do with the abduction of a certain young white woman for reasons connected with their tribal statecraft or ritual, which is the kind of thing that happens not infrequently among obscure and ancient African tribes. Well, they had abducted their young woman and were in sight of safety and success in their objects, whatever these might be. For what possible reason, then, could they desire to risk a fight with the outraged

friends and relatives of that young woman?

It was true that they outnumbered us and therefore had a good chance of victory, but on the other hand, they must know that it would be very dearly won, and if it were not won, that we should retake their captive, so that all their trouble would have been for nothing. Further they must be as exhausted and travel-worn as we were ourselves and in no condition to face a desperate battle.

The problem was beyond me and I gave it up with the reflection that either this threatened attack was a mere feint to delay us, or that behind it was something mysterious, such as a determination to prevent us at all hazards from discovering the secrets of that mountain stronghold.

When I put the riddle to Hans, who was lying next to me, he was ready with another solution.

"They are men-eaters, Baas," he said, "and being hungry, wish to eat us before they get to their own land where doubtless they are not allowed to eat each other."

"Do you think so," I answered, "when we are so thin?" and I surveyed Hans' scraggy form in the moonlight.

"Oh! yes, Baas, we should be quite good boiled--like old hens, Baas.

Also it is the nature of cannibals to prefer thin man to fat beef. The devil that is in them gives them that taste, Baas, just as he makes me like gin, or you turn your head to look at pretty women, as those Zulus say you always did in their country, especially at a certain witch who was named Mameena and whom you kissed before everybody----"

Here I turned my head to look at Hans, proposing to smite him with words, or physically, since to have this Mameena myth, of which I have detailed the origin in the book called Child of Storm, re-arise out of his hideous little mouth was too much. But before I could get out a syllable he held up his finger and whispered,

"Hush! the dawn breaks and they come. I hear them."

I listened intently but could distinguish nothing. Only straining my eyes, presently I thought that about a hundred yards down the slope beneath us in the dim light I caught sight of ghostlike figures flitting from tree to tree; also that these figures were drawing nearer.

"Look out!" I said to Robertson on my right, "I believe they are coming."

"Man," he answered sternly, "I hope so, for whom else have I wanted to meet all these days?"

Now the figures vanished into a little fold of the ground. A minute or

so later they re-appeared upon its hither side where such light as there was from the fading stars and the gathering dawn fell full upon them, for here were no trees. I looked and a thrill of horror went through me, for with one glance I recognised that these were not the men whom we had been following. To begin with, there were many more of them, quite a hundred, I should think, also they had painted shields, wore feathers in their hair, and generally so far as I could judge, seemed to be fat and fresh.

"We have been led into an ambush," I said first in Zulu to Umslopogaas immediately in front, and then in English to Robertson.

"If so, man, we must just do the best we can," answered the latter, "but God help my poor daughter, for those other devils will have taken her away, leaving their brethren to make an end of us."

"It is so, Macumazahn," broke in Umslopogaas. "Well, whatever the end of it, we shall have a better fight. Now do you give the word and we will obey."

The savages, for so I call them, although I admit that cannibals or not, they looked more like high-class Arabs than savages, came on in perfect silence, hoping, I suppose, to catch us asleep. When they were about fifty yards away, running in a treble line with spears advanced, I called out "Fire!" in Zulu, and set the example by loosing off both barrels of my express rifle at men whom I had picked out as leaders,

with results that must have been more satisfactory to me than to the two Amahagger whose troubles in this world came to an end.

There followed a tremendous fusillade, the Zulus banging off their guns wildly, but even at that distance managing for the most part to shoot over the enemy's heads. Captain Robertson and Hans, however, did better and the general result was that the Amahagger, who appeared to be unaccustomed to firearms, retreated in a hurry to a fold of the ground whence they had emerged. Before the last of them got there I loaded again, so that two more stopped behind. Altogether we had put nine or ten of them out of action.

Now I hoped that they would give the business up. But this was not so, for being brave fellows, after a pause of perhaps five minutes, once more they charged in a body, hoping to overwhelm us. Again we greeted them with bullets and knocked out several, whereon the rest threw a volley of their long spears at us. I was glad to see them do this although one of the Zulus got his death from it, while two more were wounded. I myself had a very narrow escape, for a spear passed between my neck and shoulder. Each of them carried but one of these weapons and I knew that if they used them up in throwing, only their big knives would remain to them with which to attack us.

After this discharge of spears which was kept up for some time, they rushed at us and there followed a great fight. The Zulus, throwing down their guns, rose to their feet and holding their little fighting shields

which had been carried in their mats, in the left hand, wielded their axes with the right. Umslopogaas, who stood in the centre of them, however, had no shield and swung his great axe with both arms. This was the first time that I had seen him fight and the spectacle was in a way magnificent. Again and again the axe crashed down and every time it fell it left one dead beneath the stroke, till at length those Amahagger shrank back out of his reach.

Meanwhile Robertson, Hans and I, standing on some stones at the back, kept up a continual fire upon them, shooting over the heads of the Zulus, who were playing their part like men. Yes, they shrank back, leaving many dead behind them. Then a captain tried to gather them for another rush, and once more they moved forward. I killed that captain with a revolver shot, for my rifle had become too hot to hold, and at the sight of his fall, they broke and ran back into the little hollow where our bullets could not reach them.

So far we had held our own, but at a price, for three of the Zulus were now dead and three more wounded, one of them severely, the other two but enough to cripple them. In fact, now there were left of them but three untouched men, and Umslopogaas, so that in all for fighting purposes we were but seven. What availed it that we had killed a great number of these Amahagger, when we were but seven? How could seven men withstand such another onslaught?

There in the pale light of the dawn we looked at each other dismayed.

"Now," said Umslopogaas, leaning on his red axe, "there remains but one thing to do, make a good end, though I would that it were in a greater cause. At least we must either fight or fly," and he looked down at the wounded.

"Think not of us, Father," murmured one of them, the man who had a mortal hurt. "If it is best, kill us and begone that you may live to bear the Axe in years to come."

"Well spoken!" said Umslopogaas, and again stood still a while, then added, "The word is with you, Macumazahn, who are our captain."

I set out the situation to Robertson and Hans as briefly as I could, showing that there was a chance of life if we ran, but so far as I could see, none if we stayed.

"Go if you like, Quatermain," answered the Captain, "but I shall stop and die here, for since my girl is gone I think I'm better dead."

I motioned to Hans to speak.

"Baas," he answered, "the Great Medicine is here with us upon the earth and your reverend father, the Predikant, is with us in the sky, so I think we had better stop here and do what we can, especially as I do not want to see those reeds any more at present."

"So do I," I said briefly, giving no reasons.

So we made ready for the next attack which we knew would be the last, strengthening our little wall and dragging the dead Amahagger up against it as an added protection. As we were thus engaged the sun rose and in its first beams, some miles away on the opposing slopes of the mountain looking tiny against the black background of the precipice, we saw a party of men creeping forward. Lifting my glasses I studied it and perceived that in its midst was a litter.

"There goes your daughter," I said, and handed the glasses to Robertson.

"Oh! my God," he answered, "those villains have outwitted us after all."

Another minute and the litter, or rather the chair with its escort, had vanished into the shadow of the great cliffs, probably up some pass which we could not see.

Next moment our thoughts were otherwise engaged, since from various symptoms we gathered that the attack was about to be renewed. Spears upon which shone the light of the rising sun, appeared above the edge of the ground-fold that I have mentioned, which to the east increased to a deep, bush-clad ravine. Also there were voices as of leaders encouraging their men to a desperate effort.

"They are coming," I said to Robertson.

"Yes," he answered, "they are coming and we are going. It's a queer end to the thing we call life, isn't it, Quatermain, and hang it all! I wonder what's beyond? Not much for me, I expect, but whatever it is could scarcely be worse than what I've gone through here below in one way and another."

"There's hope for all of us," I replied as cheerfully as I could, for the man's deep depression disturbed me.

"Mayhap, Quatermain, for who knows the infinite mercy of whatever made us as we are? My old mother used to preach of it and I remember her words now. But in my case I expect it will stop at hope, or sleep, and if it wasn't for Inez, I'd not mind so much, for I tell you I've had enough of the world and life. Look, there's one of them. Take that, you black devil!" and lifting his rifle he aimed and fired at an Amahagger who appeared upon the edge of the fold of ground. What is more he hit him, for I saw the man double up and fall backwards.

Then the game began afresh, for the cannibals (I suppose they were cannibals like their brethren) crept out of shelter, advancing on their stomachs or their hands and knees, so as to offer a smaller mark, and dragging between them a long and slender tree-trunk with which clearly they intended to batter down our wall.

Of course I blazed away at them, pretty carefully too, for I was determined that what I believed to be the last exercise of the gift of shooting that has been given to me, should prove a record. Therefore I selected my men and even where I would hit them, and as subsequent examination showed, I made no mistakes in the seven or eight shots that I fired. But all the while, like poor Captain Robertson, I was thinking of other things; namely, where I was bound for presently and if I should meet certain folk there and what was the meaning of this show called Life, which unless it leads somewhere, according to my judgment has none at all. Until these questions were solved, however, my duty was to kill as many of those ruffians as I could, and this I did with finish and despatch.

Robertson and Hans were firing also, with more or less success, but there were too many to be stopped by our three rifles. Still they came on till at length their fierce faces were within a few yards of our little parapet and Umslopogaas had lifted his great axe to give them greeting. They paused a moment before making their final rush, and so did we to slip in fresh cartridges.

"Die well, Hans," I said, "and if you get there first, wait for me on the other side."

"Yes, Baas, I always meant to do that, though not yet. We are not going to die this time, Baas. Those who have the Great Medicine don't die; it is the others who die, like that fellow," and he pointed to an Amahagger

who went reeling round and round with a bullet from his Winchester through the middle, for he had fired in the midst of his remarks.

"Curse--I mean bless--the Great Medicine," I said as I lifted my rifle to my shoulder.

At that moment all those Amahagger--there were about sixty of them left--became seized with a certain perturbation. They stood still, they stared towards the fold of ground out of which they had emerged; they called to each other words which I did not catch, and then--they turned to run.

Umslopogaas saw, and with a leader's instinct, acted. Springing over the parapet, followed by his remaining Zulus of the Axe, he leapt upon them with a roar. Down they went before Inkosikaas, like corn before a sickle. The thing was marvellous to see, it was like the charge of a leopard, so swift was the rush and so lightning-like were the strokes or rather the pecks of that flashing axe, for now he was tapping at their heads or spines with the gouge-like point upon its back. Nor were these the only victims, for those brave followers of his also did their part. In a minute all who remained upon their feet of the Amahagger were in full flight, vanishing this way and that among the trees. Hans fired a parting shot after the last of them, then sat down upon a stone and finding his corn-cob pipe, proceeded to fill it.

"The Great Medicine, Baas," he began sententiously, "or perhaps

your reverend father, the Predikant----" Here he paused and pointed doubtfully with the bowl of the pipe towards the fold in the ground, adding, "Here it is, but I think it must be your reverend father, not the Great Medicine, yes, the Predikant himself, returned from Heaven, the Place of Fires!"

Looking vaguely in the direction indicated, for I could not conceive what he meant and thought that the excitement must have made him mad, I perceived a venerable old man with a long white beard and clothed in a flowing garment, also white, who reminded me of Father Christmas at a child's party, walking towards us and radiating benignancy. Also behind him I perceived a whole forest of spear points emerging from the gully. He seemed to take it for granted that we should not shoot at him, for he came on quite unconcerned, carefully picking his way among the corpses. When he was near enough he stopped and said in a kind of Arabic which I could understand,

"I greet you, Strangers, in the name of her I serve. I see that I am just in time, but this does not surprise me, since she said that it would be so. You seem to have done very well with these dogs," and he prodded a dead Amahagger with his sandalled foot. "Yes, very well indeed. You must be great warriors."

Then he paused and we stared at each other.