

CHAPTER XI

THROUGH THE MOUNTAIN WALL

"These do not seem to be friends of yours," I said, pointing to the fallen. "And yet," I added, nodding towards the spearmen who were now emerging from the gully, "they are very like your friends."

"Puppies from the same litter are often alike, yet when they grow up sometimes they fight each other," replied Father Christmas blandly. "At least these come to save and not to kill you. Look! they kill the others!" and he pointed to them making an end of some of the wounded men. "But who are these?" and he glanced with evident astonishment, first at the fearsome-looking Umslopogaas and then at the grotesque Hans. "Nay, answer not, you must be weary and need rest. Afterwards we can talk."

"Well, as a matter of fact we have not yet breakfasted," I replied. "Also I have business to attend to here," and I glanced at our wounded.

The old fellow nodded and went to speak to the captains of his force, doubtless as to the pursuit of the enemy, for presently I saw a company spring forward on their tracks. Then, assisted by Hans and the remaining Zulus, of whom one was Goroko, I turned to attend to our own people. The task proved lighter than I expected, since the badly injured man was dead or dying and the hurts of the two others were in their legs

and comparatively slight, such as Goroko could doctor in his own native fashion.

After this, taking Hans to guard my back, I went down to the stream and washed myself. Then I returned and ate, wondering the while that I could do so with appetite after the terrible dangers which we had passed.

Still, we had passed them, and Robertson, Umslopogaas with three of his men, I and Hans were quite unharmed, a fact for which I returned thanks in silence but sincerely enough to Providence.

Hans also returned thanks in his own fashion, after he had filled himself, not before, and lit his corn-cob pipe. But Robertson made no remark; indeed, when he had satisfied his natural cravings, he rose and walking a few paces forward, stood staring at the cleft in the mountain cliff into which he had seen the litter vanish that bore his daughter to some fate unknown.

Even the great fight that we had fought and the victory we had won against overpowering odds did not appear to impress him. He only glared at the mountain into the heart of which Inez had been raped away, and shook his fist. Since she was gone all else went for nothing, so much so that he did not offer to assist with the wounded Zulus or show curiosity about the strange old man by whom we had been rescued.

"The Great Medicine, Baas," said Hans in a bewildered way, "is even more powerful than I thought. Not only has it brought us safely through the

fighting and without a scratch, for those Zulus there do not matter and there will be less cooking for me to do now that they are gone; it has also brought down your reverend father the Predikant from the Place of Fires in Heaven, somewhat changed from what I remember him, it is true, but still without doubt the same. When I make my report to him presently, if he can understand my talk, I shall----"

"Stop your infernal nonsense, you son of a donkey," I broke in, for at this moment old Father Christmas, smiling more benignly than before, re-appeared from the kloof into which he had vanished and advanced towards us bowing with much politeness.

Having seated himself upon the little wall that we had built up, he contemplated us, stroking his beautiful white beard, then said, addressing me,

"Of a certainty you should be proud who with a few have defeated so many. Still, had I not been ordered to come at speed, I think that by now you would have been as those are," and he looked towards the dead Zulus who were laid out at a distance like men asleep, while their companions sought for a place to bury them.

"Ordered by whom?" I asked.

"There is only one who can order," he answered with mild astonishment.

"She-who-commands, She-who-is-everlasting!"

It occurred to me that this must be some Arabic idiom for the Eternal Feminine, but I only looked vague and said,

"It would appear that there are some whom this exalted everlasting She cannot command; those who attacked us; also those who have fled away yonder," and I waved my hand towards the mountain.

"No command is absolute; in every country there are rebels, even, as I have heard, in Heaven above us. But, Wanderer, what is your name?"

"Watcher-by-Night," I answered.

"Ah! a good name for one who must have watched well by night, and by day too, to reach this country living where She-who-commands says that no man of your colour has set foot for many generations. Indeed, I think she told me once that two thousand years had gone by since she spoke to a white man in the City of Kôr."

"Did she indeed?" I exclaimed, stifling a cough.

"You do not believe me," he went on, smiling. "Well, She-who-commands can explain matters for herself better than I who was not alive two thousand years ago, so far as I remember. But what must I call him with the Axe?"

"Warrior is his name."

"Again a good name, as to judge by the wounds on them, certain of those rebels I think are now telling each other in Hell. And this man, if indeed he be a man----" he added, looking doubtfully at Hans.

"Light-in-Darkness is his name."

"I see, doubtless because his colour is that of the winter sun in thick fog, or a bad egg broken into milk. And the other white man who mutters and whose brow is like a storm?"

"He is called Avenger; you will learn why later on," I answered impatiently, for I grew tired of this catechism, adding, "And what are you called and, if you are pleased to tell it to us, upon what errand do you visit us in so fortunate an hour?"

"I am named Billali," he answered, "the servant and messenger of She-who-commands, and I was sent to save you and to bring you safely to her."

"How can this be, Billali, seeing that none knew of our coming?"

"Yet She-who-commands knew," he said with his benignant smile. "Indeed, I think that she learned of it some moons ago through a message that was sent to her and so arranged all things that you should be guided safely

to her secret home; since otherwise how would you have passed a great pathless swamp with the loss, I think she said, of but one man whom a snake bit?"

Now I stared at the old fellow, for how could he know of the death of this man, but thought it useless to pursue the conversation further.

"When you are rested and ready," he went on, "we will start. Meanwhile I leave you that I may prepare litters to carry those wounded men, and you also, Watcher-by-Night, if you wish." Then with a dignified bow, for everything about this old fellow was stately, he turned and vanished into the kloof.

The next hour or so was occupied in the burial of the dead Zulus, a ceremony in which I took no part beyond standing up and raising my hat as they were borne away, for as I have said somewhere, it is best to leave natives alone on these occasions. Indeed, I lay down, reflecting that strangely enough there seemed to be something in old Zikali's tale of a wonderful white Queen who lived in a mountain fastness, since there was the mountain as he had drawn it on the ashes, and the servants of that Queen who, apparently, had knowledge of our coming, appeared in the nick of time to rescue us from one of the tightest fixes in which ever I found myself.

Moreover, the antique and courteous individual called Billali, spoke of her as "She-who-is-everlasting." What the deuce could he mean by that,

I wondered? Probably that she was very old and therefore disagreeable to look on, which I confessed to myself would be a disappointment.

And how did she know that we were coming? I could not guess and when I asked Robertson, he merely shrugged his shoulders and intimated that he took no interest in the matter. The truth is that nothing moved the man, whose whole soul was wrapped in one desire, namely to rescue, or avenge, the daughter against whom he knew he had so sorely sinned.

In fact, this loose-living but reformed seaman was becoming a monomaniac, and what is more, one of the religious type. He had a Bible with him that had been given to him by his mother when he was a boy, and in this he read constantly; also he was always on his knees and at night I could hear him groaning and praying aloud. Doubtless now that the chains of drink had fallen off him, the instincts and the blood of the dour old Covenanters from whom he was descended, were asserting themselves. In a way this was a good thing though for some time past I had feared lest it should end in his going mad, and certainly as a companion he was more cheerful in his unregenerate days.

Abandoning speculation as useless and taking my chance of being murdered where I lay, for after all Billali's followers were singularly like the men with whom we had been fighting and for aught I knew might be animated by identical objects--I just went to sleep, as I can do at any time, to wake up an hour or so later feeling wonderfully refreshed. Hans, who when I closed my eyes was already asleep slumbering at my feet

curled up like a dog on a spot where the sun struck hotly, roused me by saying:

"Awake, Baas, they are here!"

I sprang up, snatching at my rifle, for I thought that he meant that we were being attacked again, to see Billali advancing at the head of a train of four litters made of bamboo with grass mats for curtains and coverings, each of which was carried by stalwart Amahagger, as I supposed that they must be. Two of these, the finest, Billali indicated were for Robertson and myself, and the two others for the wounded. Umslopogaas and the remaining Zulus evidently were expected to walk, as was Hans.

"How did you make these so quickly," I asked, surveying their elegant and indeed artistic workmanship.

"We did not make them, Watcher-by-Night, we brought them with us folded up. She-who-commands looked in her glass and said that four would be needed, besides my own which is yonder, two for white lords and two for wounded black men, which you see is the number required."

"Yes," I answered vaguely, marvelling what kind of a glass it was that gave the lady this information.

Before I could inquire upon the point Billali added,

"You will be glad to learn that my men caught some of those rebels who dared to attack you, eight or ten of them who had been hurt by your missiles or axe-cuts, and put them to death in the proper fashion--yes, quite the proper fashion," and he smiled a little. "The rest had gone too far where it would have been dangerous to follow them among the rocks. Enter now, my lord Watcher-by-Night, for the road is steep and we must travel fast if we would reach the place where She-who-commands is camped in the ancient holy city, before the moon sinks behind the cliffs to-night."

So having explained matters to Robertson and Umslopogaas, who announced that nothing would induce him to be carried like an old woman, or a corpse upon a shield, and seen that the hurt Zulus were comfortably accommodated, Robertson and I got into our litters, which proved to be delightfully easy and restful.

Then when our gear was collected by the hook-nosed bearers to whom we were obliged to trust, though we kept with us our rifles and a certain amount of ammunition, we started. First went a number of Billali's spearmen, then came the litters with the wounded alongside of which Umslopogaas and his three uninjured Zulus talked or trotted, then another litter containing Billali, then my own by which ran Hans, and Robertson's, and lastly the rest of the Amahagger and the relief bearers.

"I see now, Baas," said Hans, thrusting his head between my curtains, "that yonder Whitebeard cannot be your reverend father, the Predikant, after all."

"Why not?" I asked, though the fact was fairly obvious.

"Because, Baas, if he were, he would not have left Hans, of whom he always thought so well, to run in the sun like a dog, while he and others travel in carriages like great white ladies."

"You had better save your breath instead of talking nonsense, Hans," I said, "since I believe that you have a long way to go."

In fact, it proved to be a very long way indeed, especially as after we began to breast the mountain, we must travel slowly. We started about ten o'clock in the morning, for the night which after all did not take long--had, it will be remembered, begun shortly after dawn, and it was three in the afternoon before we reached the base of the towering cliff which I have mentioned.

Here, at the foot of a remarkable, isolated column of rock, on which I was destined to see a strange sight in the after days, we halted and ate of the remaining food which we had brought with us, while the Amahagger consumed their own, that seemed to consist largely of curdled milk, such as the Zulus call maas, and lumps of a kind of bread.

I noted that they were a very curious people who fed in silence and on whose handsome, solemn faces one never saw a smile. Somehow it gave me the creeps to look at them. Robertson was affected in the same way, for in one of the rare intervals of his abstraction he remarked that they were "no canny." Then he added,

"Ask yon old wizard who might be one of the Bible prophets come to life--what those man-eating devils have done with my daughter."

I did so, and Billali answered,

"Say that they have taken her away to make a queen of her, since having rebelled against their own queen, they must have another who is white. Say too that She-who-commands will wage war on them and perhaps win her back, unless they kill her first."

"Ah!" Robertson repeated when I had translated, "unless they kill her first--or worse." Then he relapsed into his usual silence.

Presently we started on again, heading straight for what looked like a sheer wall of black rock a thousand feet or more in height, up a path so steep that Robertson and I got out and walked, or rather scrambled, in order to ease the bearers. Billali, I noticed, remained in his litter.

The convenience of the bearers did not trouble him; he only ordered an extra gang to the poles. I could not imagine how we were to negotiate this precipice. Nor could Umslopogaas, who looked at it and said,

"If we are to climb that, Macumazahn, I think that the only one who will live to get to the top will be that little yellow monkey of yours," and he pointed with his axe at Hans.

"If I do," replied that worthy, much nettled, for he hated to be called a "yellow monkey" by the Zulus, "be sure that I will roll down stones upon any black butcher whom I see sprawling upon the cliff below."

Umslopogaas smiled grimly, for he had a sense of humour and could appreciate a repartee even when it hit him hard. Then we stopped talking for the climb took all our breath.

At length we came to the cliff face where, to all appearance, our journey must end. Suddenly, however, out of the blind black wall in front of us started the apparition of a tall man armed with a great spear and wearing a white robe, who challenged us hoarsely.

Suddenly he stood before us, as a ghost might do, though whence he came we could not see. Presently the mystery was explained. Here in the cliff face there was a cleft, though one invisible even from a few paces away, since its outer edge projected over the inner wall of rock. Moreover, this opening was not above four feet in width, a mere split in the huge mountain mass caused by some titanic convulsion in past ages. For it was a definite split since, once entered, far, far above could be traced a faint line of light coming from the sky, although the gloom of the

passage was such that torches, which were stored at hand, must be used by those who threaded it. One man could have held the place against a hundred--until he was killed. Still, it was guarded, not only at the mouth where the warrior had appeared, but further along at every turn in the jagged chasm, and these were many.

Into this grim place we went. The Zulus did not like it at all, for they are a light-loving people and I noted that even Umslopogaas seemed scared and hung back a little. Nor did Hans, who with his usual suspicion, feared some trap; nor, for the matter of that, did I, though I thought it well to appear much interested. Only Robertson seemed quite indifferent and trudged along stolidly after a man carrying a torch.

Old Billali put his head out of the litter and shouted back to me to fear nothing, since there were no pitfalls in the path, his voice echoing strangely between those narrow walls of measureless height.

For half an hour or more we pursued this dreary, winding path round the corners of which the draught tore in gusts so fierce that more than once the litters with the wounded men and those who bore them were nearly blown over. It was safe enough, however, since on either side of us, smooth and without break, rose the sheer walls of rock over which lay the tiny ribbon of blue sky. At length the cleft widened somewhat and the light grew stronger, making the torches unnecessary.

Then of a sudden we came to its end and found ourselves upon a little

plateau in the mountainside. Behind us for a thousand feet or so rose the sheer rock wall as it did upon the outer face, while in front and beneath, far beneath, was a beautiful plain circular in shape and of great extent, which plain was everywhere surrounded, so far as I could see, by the same wall of rock. In short, notwithstanding its enormous size, without doubt it was neither more nor less than the crater of a vast extinct volcano. Lastly, not far from the centre of this plain was what appeared to be a city, since through my glasses I could see great walls built of stone, and what I thought were houses, all of them of a character more substantial than any that I had discovered in the wilds of Africa.

I went to Billali's litter and asked him who lived in the city.

"No one," he answered, "it has been dead for thousands of years, but She-who-commands is camped there at present with an army, and thither we go at once. Forward, bearers."

So, Robertson and I having re-entered our litters, we started on down hill at a rapid pace, for the road, though steep, was safe and kept in good order. All the rest of that afternoon we travelled and by sunset reached the edge of the plain, where we halted a while to rest and eat, till the light of the growing moon grew strong enough to enable us to proceed. Umslopogaas came up and spoke to me.

"Here is a fortress indeed, Macumazahn," he said, "since none can climb

that fence of rock in which the holes seem to be few and small."

"Yes," I answered, "but it is one out of which those who are in, would find it difficult to get out. We are buffaloes in a pit, Umslopogaas."

"That is so," he answered, "I have thought it already. But if any would meddle with us we still have our horns and can toss for a while."

Then he went back to his men.

The sunset in that great solemn place was a wonderful thing to see. First of all the measureless crater was filled with light like a bowl with fire. Then as the great orb sank behind the western cliff, half of the plain became quite dark while shadows seemed to rush forward over the eastern part of its surface, till that too was swallowed up in gloom and for a little while there remained only a glow reflected from the cliff face and from the sky above, while on the crest of the parapet of rock played strange and glorious fires. Presently these too vanished and the world was dark.

Then the half moon broke from behind a bank of clouds and by its silver, uncertain light we struggled forward across the flat plain, rather slowly now, for even the iron muscles of those bearers grew tired. I could not see much of it, but I gathered that we were passing through crops, very fine crops to judge by their height, as doubtless they would be upon this lava soil; also once or twice we splashed through streams.

At length, being tired and lulled by the swaying of the litter and by the sound of a weird, low chant that the bearers had set up now that they neared home and were afraid of no attack, I sank into a doze. When I awoke again it was to find that the litter had halted and to hear the voice of Billali say,

"Descend, White Lords, and come with your companions, the black Warrior and the yellow man who is named Light-in-Darkness. She-who-commands desires to see you at once before you eat and sleep, and must not be kept waiting. Fear not for the others, they will be cared for till you return."