

CHAPTER XVII

THE MIDNIGHT BATTLE

That hour went by very slowly. Again and again I consulted my watch by the light of the moon, which was now rising high in the heavens, and thought that it would never come to an end. Listen as I would, there was nothing to be heard, and as the mist still prevailed the only thing I could see except the heavens, was the twinkling of the fires lit by Goroko and his party.

At length it was done and there was no sign of Hans. Another half hour passed and still no sign of Hans.

"I think that Light-in-Darkness is dead or taken prisoner," said Umslopogaas.

I answered that I feared so, but that I would give him another fifteen minutes and then, if he did not appear, I proposed to order an advance, hoping to find the enemy where we had last seen them from the top of the mountain.

The fifteen minutes went by also, and as I could see that the Amahagger captains who sat at a little distance were getting very nervous, I picked up my double-barrelled rifle and turned round so that I faced up hill with a view of firing it as had been agreed with Goroko, but in

such a fashion that the flashes perhaps would not be seen from the plain below. For this purpose I moved a few yards to the left to get behind the trunk of a tree that grew there, and was already lifting the rifle to my shoulder, when a yellow hand clasped the barrel and a husky voice said,

"Don't fire yet, Baas, as I want to tell you my story first."

I looked down and there was the ugly face of Hans wearing a grin that might have frightened the man in the moon.

"Well," I said with cold indifference, assumed I admit to hide my excessive joy at his safe return, "tell on, and be quick about it. I suppose you lost your way and never found them."

"Yes, Baas, I lost my way for the fog was very thick down there. But in the end I found them all right, by my nose, Baas, for those man-eating people smell strong and I got the wind of one of their sentries. It was easy to pass him in the mist, Baas, so easy that I was tempted to cut his throat as I went, but I didn't for fear lest he should make a noise. No, I walked on right into the middle of them, which was easy too, for they were all asleep, wrapped up in blankets. They hadn't any fires perhaps because they didn't want them to be seen, or perhaps because it is so hot down in that low land, I don't know which.

"So I crept on taking note of all I saw, till at last I came to a little

hill of which the top rose above the level of the mist, so that I could see on it a long hut built of green boughs with the leaves still fresh upon them. Now I thought that I would crawl up to the hut since it came into my mind that Rezu himself must be sleeping there and that I might kill him. But while I stood hesitating I heard a noise like to that made by an old woman whose husband had thrown a blanket over her head to keep her quiet, or to that of a bee in a bottle, a sort of droning noise that reminded me of something.

"I thought a while and remembered that when Red Beard was on his knees praying to Heaven, as is his habit when he has nothing else to do, Baas, he makes a noise just like that. I crept towards the sound and presently there I found Red Beard himself tied upon a stone and looking as mad as a buffalo bull stuck in a swamp, for he shook his head and rolled his eyes about, just as though he had had two bottles of bad gin, Baas, and all the while he kept saying prayers. Now I thought that I would cut him loose, and bent over him to do so, when by ill-luck he saw my face and began to shout, saying,

"Go away, you yellow devil. I know you have come to take me to hell, but you are too soon, and if my hands were loose I would twist your head off your shoulders.'

"He said this in English, Baas, which as you know I can understand quite well, after which I was sure that I had better leave him alone. Whilst I was thinking, there came out of the hut above two old men dressed in

night-shirts, such as you white people wear, with yellow things upon their heads that had a metal picture of the sun in front of them."

"Medicine-men," I suggested.

"Yes, Baas, or Predikants of some sort, for they were rather like your reverend father when he dressed himself up and went into a box to preach. Seeing them I slipped back a little way to where the mist began, lay down and listened. They looked at Red Beard, for his shouts at me had brought them out, but he took no notice of them, only went on making a noise like a beetle in a tin can.

"'It is nothing,' said one of the Predikants to the other in the same tongue that these Amahagger use. 'But when is he to be sacrificed? Soon, I hope, for I cannot sleep because of the noise he makes.'

"'When the edge of the sun appears, not before,' answered the other Predikant. 'Then the new queen will be brought out of the hut and this white man will be sacrificed to her.'

"'I think it is a pity to wait so long,' said the first Predikant, 'for never shall we sleep in peace until the red-hot pot is on his head.'

"'First the victory, then the feast,' answered the second Predikant, 'though he will not be so good to eat as that fat young woman who was with the new queen.'

"Then, Baas, they both smacked their lips and one of them went back towards the hut. But the other did not go back. No, he sat down on the ground and glowered at Baas Red-Beard upon the stone. More, he struck him on the face to make him quiet.

"Now, Baas, when I saw this and remembered that they had said that they had eaten Janee whom I liked although she was such a fool, the spirit in me grew so very angry and I thought that I would give this old skellum (i.e. rascal) of a Predikant a taste of sacrifice himself, after which I purposed to creep to the hut and see if I could get speech with the Lady Sad-Eyes, if she was there.

"So I wriggled up behind the Predikant as he sat glowering over Red-Beard, and stuck my knife into his back where I thought it would kill him at once. But it didn't, Baas, for he fell on to his face and began to make a noise like a wounded hyena before I could finish him. Then I heard a sound of shouts, and to save my life was obliged to run away into the mist, without loosing Red-Beard or seeing Lady Sad-Eyes. I ran very hard, Baas, making a wide circle to the left, and so at last got back here. That's all, Baas."

"And quite enough, too," I answered, "though if they did not see you, the death of the Medicine-man may frighten them. Poor Janee! Well, I hope to come even with those devils before they are three hours older."

Then I called up Umslopogaas and the Amahagger captains and told them the substance of the story, also that Hans had located the army, or part of it.

The end of it was that we made up our minds to attack at once; indeed I insisted on this, as I was determined if I could to save that unfortunate man, Robertson, who, from Hans' account, evidently was now quite mad and raving. So I fired the two shots as had been arranged and presently heard the sound of distant shoutings on the slope of the opposing ridge. A few minutes later we started, Umslopogaas and I leading the vanguard and the Amahagger captains following with the three remaining companies.

Now the reader, presuming the existence of such a person, will think that everything is sure to go right; that this cunning old fellow, Allan Quatermain, is going to surprise and wipe the floor with those Rezuites, who were already beguiled by the trick he had instructed Goroko to play. That after this he will rescue Robertson who doubtless shortly recovers his mind, also Inez with the greatest ease, in fact that everything will happen as it ought to do if this were a romance instead of a mere record of remarkable facts. But being the latter, as it happened, matters did not work out quite in this convenient way.

To begin with, when those Amahagger told me that the Rezuites never fought in the dark or before the sun was well up, either they lied or they were much mistaken, for at any rate on this occasion they did the

exact contrary. All the while that we thought we were stalking them, they were stalking us. The Goroko manoeuvre had not deceived them in the least, since from their spies they knew its exact significance.

Here, I may add that those spies were in our own ranks, traitors, in short, who were really in the pay of Rezu and possibly belonged to his abominable faith, some of whom slipped away from time to time to the enemy to report our progress and plans, so far as they knew them.

Further, what Hans had stumbled on was a mere rear guard left around the place of sacrifice and the hut where Inez was confined. The real army he never found at all. That was divided into two bodies and hidden in bush to the right and left of the ridge which we were descending just at the spot where it joined the plain beneath, and into the jaws of these two armies we marched gaily.

Now that hypothetical reader will say, "Why didn't that silly old fool, Allan, think of all these things? Why didn't he remember that he was commanding a pack of savages with whom he had no real acquaintance, among whom there were sure to be traitors, especially as they were of the same blood as the Rezuites, and take precautions?"

Ah! my dear reader, I will only answer that I wish you had handled the job yourself, and enjoyed the opportunity of seeing what you could do in the circumstances. Do you suppose I didn't think of all these points? Of course I did. But have you ever heard of the difficulty of making

silk purses out of sows' ears, or of turning a lot of gloomy and disagreeable barbarians whom you had never even drilled, into trustworthy and efficient soldiers ready to fight three times their own number and beat them?

Also I beg to observe that I did get through somehow, as you shall learn, which is more than you might have done, Mr. Wisdom, though I admit, not without help from another quarter. It is all very well for you to sit in your armchair and be sapient and turn up your learned nose, like the gentlemen who criticise plays and poems, an easy job compared to the writing of them. From all of which, however, you will understand that I am, to tell the truth, rather ashamed of what followed, since *qui s'excuse, s'accuse*.

As we slunk down that hill in the moonlight, a queer-looking crowd, I admit also that I felt very uncomfortable. To begin with I did not like that remark of the Medicine-man which Hans reported, to the effect that the feast must come after the victory, especially as he had said just before that Robertson was to be sacrificed as the sun rose, which would seem to suggest that the "victory" was planned to take place before that event.

While I was ruminating upon this subject, I looked round for Hans to cross-examine him as to the priest's exact words, only to find that he had slunk off somewhere. A few minutes later he reappeared running back towards us swiftly and, I noticed, taking shelter behind tree trunks and

rocks as he came.

"Baas," he gasped, for he was out of breath, "be careful, those Rezu men are on either side ahead. I went forward and ran into them. They threw many spears at me. Look!" and he showed a slight cut on his arm from which blood was flowing.

Instantly I understood that we were ambushed and began to think very hard indeed. As it chanced we were passing across a large flat space upon the ridge, say seven or eight acres in extent, where the bush grew lightly, though owing to the soil being better, the trees were tall.

On the steep slope below this little plain it seemed to be denser and there it was, according to Hans, that the ambush was set. I halted my regiment and sent back messengers to the others that they were to halt also as they came up, on the pretext of giving them a rest before they were marshalled and we advanced to the battle.

Then I told Umslopogaas what Hans said and asked him to send out his Zulu soldier whom he could trust, to see if he could obtain confirmation of the report. This he did at once. Also I asked him what he thought should be done, supposing that it was true.

"Form the Amahagger into a ring or a square and await attack," he answered.

I nodded, for that was my own opinion, but replied,

"If they were Zulus, the plan would be good. But how do we know that these men will stand?"

"We know nothing, Macumazahn, and therefore can only try. If they run it must be up-hill."

Then I called the captains and told them what was toward, which seemed to alarm them very much. Indeed one or two of them wanted to retreat at once, but I said I would shoot the first man who tried to do so. In the end they agreed to my plan and said that they would post their best soldiers above, at the top of the square, with the orders to stop any attempt at a flight up the mountain.

After this we formed up the square as best we could, arranging it in a rather rough, four-fold line. While we were doing this we heard some shouts below and presently the Zulu returned, who reported that all was as Hans had said and that Rezu's men were moving round us, having discovered, as he thought, that we had halted and escaped their ambush.

Still the attack did not develop at once, for the reason that the Rezu army was crawling up the steep flanks of the spur on either side of the level piece of ground, with a view of encircling us altogether, so as to make a clean sweep of our force. As a matter of fact, considered from our point of view, this was a most fortunate move, since thereby they

stopped any attempt at a retreat on the part of our Amahagger, whose bolt-hole was now blocked.

When we had done all we could, we sat down, or at least I did, and waited. The night, I remember, was strangely still, only from the slopes on either side of our plateau came a kind of rustling sound which in fact was caused by the feet of Rezu's people, as they marched to surround us.

It ceased at last and the silence grew complete, so much so that I could hear the teeth of some of our tall Amahagger chattering with fear, a sound that gave me little confidence and caused Umslopogaas to remark that the hearts of these big men had never grown; they remained "as those of babies." I told the captains to pass the word down the ranks that those who stood might live, but those who fled would certainly die. Therefore if they wished to see their homes again they had better stand and fight like men. Otherwise most of them would be killed and the rest eaten by Rezu. This was done, and I observed that the message seemed to produce a steadying effect upon our ranks.

Suddenly all around us, from below, from above and on either side there broke a most awful roar which seemed to shape itself into the word, Rezu, and next minute also from above, below and either side, some ten thousand men poured forth upon our square.

In the moonlight they looked very terrible with their flowing white

robes and great gleaming spears. Hans and I fired some shots, though for all the effect they produced, we might as well have pelted a breaker with pebbles. Then, as I thought that I should be more useful alive than dead, I retreated within the square, Umslopogaas, his Zulu, and Hans coming with me.

On the whole our Amahagger stood the attack better than I expected. They beat back the first rush with considerable loss to the enemy, also the second after a longer struggle. Then there was a pause during which we re-formed our ranks, dragging the wounded men into the square.

Scarcely had we done this when with another mighty shout of "Rezu!" the enemy attacked again--that was about an hour after the battle had begun. But now they had changed their tactics, for instead of trying to rush all sides of the square at once, they concentrated their efforts on the western front, that which faced towards the plain below.

On they came, and among them in the forefront of the battle, now and again I caught sight of a gigantic man, a huge creature who seemed to me to be seven feet high and big in proportion. I could not see him clearly because of the uncertain moonlight, but I noted his fierce aspect, also that he had an enormous beard, black streaked with grey, that flowed down to his middle, and that his hair hung in masses upon his shoulders.

"Rezu himself!" I shouted to Umslopogaas.

"Aye, Macumazahn, Rezu himself without doubt, and I rejoice to see him for he will be a worthy foe to fight. Look! he carries an axe as I do. Now I must save my strength for when we come face to face I shall need it all."

I thought that I would spare Umslopogaas this exertion and watched my opportunity to put a bullet through this giant. But I could never get one. Once when I had covered him an Amahagger rushed in front of my gun so that I could not shoot, and when a second chance came a little cloud floated over the face of the moon and made him invisible. After that I had other things to which to attend, since, as I expected would happen, the western face of our square gave, and yelling like devils, the enemy began to pour in through the gap.

A cold thrill went through me for I saw that the game was up. To re-form these undisciplined Amahagger was impossible; nothing was to be expected except panic, rout and slaughter. I cursed my folly for ever having had anything to do with the business, while Hans screamed to me in a thin voice that the only chance was for us three and the Zulu to bolt and hide in the bush.

I did not answer him because, apart from any nasty pride, the thing was impossible, for how could we get through those struggling masses of men which surrounded us on every side? No, my clock had struck, so I went on making a kind of mental sandwich of prayers and curses; prayers for my soul and forgiveness for my sins, and curses on the Amahagger and

everything to do with them, especially Zikali and the woman called Ayesha, who, between them, had led me into this affair.

"Perhaps the Great Medicine of Zikali," piped Hans again as he fired a rifle at the advancing foe.

"Hang the Great Medicine," I shouted back, "and Ayesha with it. No wonder she declined to take a hand in this business."

As I spoke the words I saw old Billali, who not being a man of war was keeping as close to us as he could, go flat onto his venerable face, and reflected that he must have got a thrown spear through him. Casting a hurried glance at him to see if he were done for or only wounded, out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of something diaphanous which gleamed in the moonlight and reminded me of I knew not what at the moment.

I looked round quickly to see what it might be and lo! there, almost at my side was the veiled Ayesha herself, holding in her hand a little rod made of black wood inlaid with ivory not unlike a field marshal's baton, or a sceptre.

I never saw her come and to this day I do not know how she did so; she was just there and what is more she must have put luminous paint or something else on her robes, for they gleamed with a sort of faint, phosphorescent fire, which in the moonlight made her conspicuous all

over the field of battle. Nor did she speak a single word, she only waved the rod, pointed with it towards the fierce hordes who were drawing near to us, killing as they came, and began to move forward with a gliding motion.

Now from every side there went up a roar of "She-who-commands! She-who-commands!" while the people of Rezu in front shouted "Lulala! Lulala! Fly, Lulala is upon us with the witchcrafts of the moon!"

She moved forward and by some strange impulse, for no order was given, we all began to move after her. Yes, the ranks that a minute before were beginning to give way to wild panic, became filled with a marvellous courage and moved after her.

The men of Rezu also, and I suppose with them Rezu himself, for I saw no more of him at that time, began to move uncommonly fast over the edge of the plateau towards the plain beneath. In fact they broke into flight and leaping over dead and dying, we rushed after them, always following the gleaming robe of Ayesha, who must have been an extremely agile person, since without any apparent exertion she held her place a few steps ahead of us.

There was another curious circumstance about this affair, namely, that terrified though they were, those Rezuites, after the first break, soon seemed to find it impossible to depart with speed. They kept turning round to look behind them at that following vision, as though they were

so many of Lot's wives. Moreover, the same fate overtook many of them which fell upon that scriptural lady, since they appeared to become petrified and stood there quite still, like rabbits fascinated by a snake, until our people came up and killed them.

This slaying went on all down the last steep slope of the ridge, on which I suppose at least two-thirds of the army of Rezu must have perished, since our Amahagger showed themselves very handy men when it came to exterminating foes who were too terror-struck to fight, and, exhilarated by the occupation, gained courage every moment.