

## CHAPTER XXV

### ALLAN DELIVERS THE MESSAGE

Once more I sat in the Black Kloof face to face with old Zikali.

"So you have got back safely, Macumazahn," he said. "Well, I told you you would, did I not? As for what happened to you upon the journey, let it be, for now that I am old long stories tire me and I daresay that there is nothing wonderful about this one. Where is the charm I lent you? Give it back now that it has served its turn."

"I have not got it, Zikali. I passed it on to Umslopogaas of the Axe to save his life from the King's men."

"Oh! yes, so you did. I had forgotten. Here it is," and opening his robe of fur, he showed me the hideous little talisman hanging about his neck, then added, "Would you like a copy of it, Macumazahn, to keep as a memory? If so, I will carve one for you."

"No," I answered, "I should not. Has Umslopogaas been here?"

"Yes, he has been and gone again, which is one of the reasons why I do not wish to hear your tale a second time."

"Where to? The Town of the People of the Axe?"

"No, Macumazahn, he came thence, or so I understood, but thither he will return no more."

"Why not, Zikali?"

"Because after his fashion he made trouble there and left some dead behind him; one Lousta, I believe, whom he had appointed to sit on his stool as chief while he was away, and a woman called Monazi, who was his wife, or Lousta's wife, or the wife of both of them, I forget which. It is said that having heard stories of her--and the ears of jealousy are long, Macumazahn--he cut off this woman's head with a sweep of the axe and made Lousta fight him till he fell, which the fool did almost before he had lifted his shield. It served him right who should have made sure that Umslopogaas was dead before he wrapped himself in his blanket and took the woman to cook his porridge."

"Where has the Axe-bearer gone?" I asked without surprise, for this news did not astonish me.

"I neither know nor care, Macumazahn. To become a wanderer, I suppose. He will tell you the tale when you meet again in the after-days, as I understand he thinks that you will do.[\*] Hearken! I have done with this lion's whelp, who is Chaka over again, but without Chaka's wit. Yes, he is just a fighting man with a long reach, a sure eye and the trick of handling an axe, and such are of little use to me who know too many of

them. Thrice have I tried to make him till my garden, but each time he has broken the hoe, although the wage I promised him was a royal kaross and nothing less. So enough of Umslopogaas, the Woodpecker. Almost I wish that you had not lent him the charm, for then the King's men would have made an end of him, who knows too much and like some silly boaster, may shout out the truth when his axe is aloft and he is full of the beer of battle. For in battle he will live and in battle he will die, Macumazahn, as perhaps you may see one day."

[\*] For the tale of this meeting see the book called "Allan Quatermain."--Editor.

"The fate of your friends does not trouble you over much, Opener-of-Roads," I said with sarcasm.

"Not at all, Macumazahn, because I have none. The only friends of the old are those whom they can turn to their own ends, and if these fail them they find others."

"I understand, Zikali, and know now what to expect from you."

He laughed in his strange way and answered,

"Aye, and it is good that you must expect, good in the future as in the past, for you, Macumazahn, who are brave in your own fashion, without being a fool like Umslopogaas, and, although you know it not, like some

master-smith, forge my assegais out of the red ore I give you, tempering them in the blood of men, and yet keep your mind innocent and your hands clean. Friends like you are useful to such as I, Macumazahn, and must be well paid in those wares that please them."

The old wizard brooded for a space, while I reflected upon his amazing cynicism, which interested me in a way, for the extreme of unmorality is as fascinating to study as the extreme of virtue and often more so. Then jerking up his great head, he asked suddenly,

"What message had the White Queen for me?"

"She said that you troubled her too much at night in dreams, Zikali."

"Aye, but if I cease to do so, ever she desires to know the reason why, for I hear her asking me in the voices of the wind, or in the twittering of bats. After all, she is a woman, Macumazahn, and it must be dull sitting alone from year to year with naught to stay her appetite save the ashes of the past and dreams of the future, so dull that I wonder, having once meshed you in her web, how she found the heart to let you go before she had sucked out your life and spirit. I suppose that having made a mock of you and drained you dry, she was content to throw you aside like an empty gourd. Perchance, had she kept you at her side, you would have been a stone in her path in days to come. Perchance, Macumazahn, she waits for other travellers and would welcome them, or one of them alone, saying nothing of a certain Watcher-by-Night who has

served her turn and vanished into the night.

"But what other message had the White Queen for the poor old savage witch-doctor whose talk wearies her so much in her haunted sleep?"

Then I told him of the picture that Ayesha had shown me in the water; the picture of a king dying in a hut and of two who watched his end.

Zikali listened intently to every word, then broke into a peal of his unholy laughter.

"Oho-ho!" he laughed, "so all goes well, though the road be long, since whatever this White One may have shown you in the fire of the heavens above, she could show you nothing but truth in the water of the earth below, for that is the law of our company of seers. You have worked well for me, Macumazahn, and you have had your fee, the fee of the vision of the dead which you desired above all mortal things."

"Aye," I answered indignantly, "a fee of bitter fruits whereof the juice burns and twists the mouth and the stones still stick fast within the gizzard. I tell you, Zikali, that she stuffed my heart with lies."

"I daresay, Macumazahn, I daresay, but they were very pretty lies, were they not? And after all I am sure that there was wisdom in them, as you will discover when you have thought them over for a score of years.

"Lies, lies, all is lies! But beyond the lie stands Truth, as the White Witch stands behind her veil. You drew the veil, Macumazahn, and saw that beneath which brought you to your knees. Why, it is a parable. Wander on through the Valley of Lies till at last it takes a turn, and, glittering in the sunshine, glittering like gold, you perceive the Mountain of everlasting Truth, sought of all men but found by few.

"Lies, lies, all is lies! Yet beyond I tell you, beautiful and eternal stands the Truth, Macumazahn. Oho-ho! Oho-ho! Fare you well, Watcher-by-Night, fare you well, Seeker after Truth. After the Night comes Dawn and after Death comes what--Macumazahn? Well, you will learn one day, for always the veil is lifted, at last, as the White Witch shewed you yonder, Macumazahn."