CHAPTER X

NOMBE

The Swazis, shivering, for all these people hate cold, and shaking themselves like a dog when he comes to shore, gathered round, examining me.

"Why!" said one of them, an elderly man who seemed to be their leader, "this is none other than Macumazahn, Watcher-by-Night, the old friend of all us black people. Surely the spirits of our fathers have been with us who might have risked our lives to save a Boer or a half-breed." (The Swazis, I may explain, did not like the Boers for reasons they considered sound.)

"Yes," I said, sitting up, "it is I, Macumazahn."

"Then why," asked the man, "did you, whom all know to be wise, show yourself to have suddenly become a fool?" and he pointed to

the raging river.

"And why," I asked, "do you show yourself a fool by supposing that I, whom you know to be none, am a fool? Look across the water for your answer."

He looked and saw the Basutos, fifty or more of them, arriving, just too late.

"Who are these?" he asked.

"They are the people of Sekukuni whom you should know well enough. They have hunted us all night, yes, and before, seeking to murder us; also they have stolen our oxen, thirty-two fine oxen which I give to your king if he can take them back. Now perhaps you understand why we dared the Crocodile River in its rage."

At the name of Sekukuni the man, who it seemed was the captain of some border guards, stiffened all over like a terrier which perceives a rat. "What!" he exclaimed, "do these dirty Basuto dogs dare to carry spears so near our country? Have they not yet learned their lesson?"

Then he rushed into the water, shaking an assegai he had snatched up, and shouted,

"Bide a while, you fleas from the kaross of Sekukuni, till I can come across and crack you between my thumb and finger. Or at the least wait until Macumazahn has time to get his rifle. No, put down those guns of yours; for every shot you fire I swear that I will cut ten Basuto throats when we come to storm your koppies, as we shall do ere long."

"Be silent," I said, "and let me speak."

Then I, too, called across the river, asking where was that fat captain of theirs, as I would talk with him. One of the men shouted back that he had stopped behind, very sick, because of a ghost that he had seen.

"Ah!" I answered, "a ghost who pricked him in the throat. Well, I was that ghost, and such are the things that happen to those who would harm Macumazahn and his friends. Did you not say last night that he is a leopard who leaps out in the dark, bites and is gone again?"

"Yes," the man shouted back, "and it is true, though had we known, O Macumazahn, that you were the ghost hiding in those stones, you should never have leapt again. Oh! that white medicine-man who is dead has sent us on a mad errand."

"So you will think when I come to visit you among your koppies. Go home and take a message from Macumazahn to Sekukuni, who believes that the English have run away from him. Tell him that they will return again and these Swazis with them, and that then he will cease to live and his town will be burnt and his tribe will no more be a tribe. Away now, more swiftly than you came, since the water by which you thought to trap us is falling, and a Swazi impi gathers to make an end of every one of you."

The man attempted no answer, nor did his people so much as fire on us. They turned tail and crept off like a pack of frightened jackals--pursued by the mocking of the Swazis.

Still in a way they had the laugh of us, seeing that they gave us a terrible fright and stole our wagon and thirty-two oxen. Well, a year or two later I helped to pay them back for that fright and even recovered some of the oxen.

When they had gone the Swazis led us to a kraal about two miles from the river, sending on a runner with orders to make huts and food ready for us. It was just as much as we could do to reach it, for we were all utterly worn out, as were the horses. Still we did get there at last, the hot sun warming us as we went. Arrived at the kraal I helped Heda and Kaatje from the cart--the former could scarcely walk, poor dear--and into the guest hut which seemed clean, where food of a sort and fur karosses were

brought to them in which to wrap themselves while their clothes dried.

Leaving them in charge of two old women, I went to see to Anscombe, who as yet could not do much for himself, also to the outspanning of the horses which were put into a cattle kraal, where they lay down at once without attempting to eat the green forage which was given to them. After this I gave our goods into the charge of the kraal-head, a nice old fellow whom I had never met before, and he led Anscombe to another hut close to that where the women were. Here we drank some maas, that is curdled milk, ate a little mutton, though we were too fatigued to be very hungry, and stripping off our wet clothes, threw them out into the sun to dry.

"That was a close shave," said Anscombe as he wrapped up in the kaross.

"Very," I answered. "So close that I think you must have been started in life with an extra strong guardian angel well accustomed to native ways."

"Yes," he replied, "and, old fellow, I believe that on earth he goes by the name of Allan Quatermain."

After this I remember no more, for I went to sleep, and so

remained for about twenty-four hours. This was not wonderful, seeing that for two days and nights practically I had not rested, during which time I went through much fatigue and many emotions.

When at length I did wake up, the first thing I saw was Anscombe already dressed, engaged in cleaning my clothes with a brush from his toilet case. I remember thinking how smart and incongruous that dressing-bag, made appropriately enough of crocodile hide, looked in this Kaffir hut with its silver-topped bottles and its ivory-handled razors.

"Time to get up, Sir. Bath ready, Sir," he said in his jolly, drawling voice, pointing to a calabash full of hot water. "Hope you slept as well as I did, Sir."

"You appear to have recovered your spirits," I remarked as I rose and began to wash myself.

"Yes, Sir, and why not? Heda is quite well, for I have seen her. These Swazis are very good people, and as Kaatje understands their language, bring us all we want. Our troubles seem to be done with. Old Marnham is dead, and doubtless cremated; Rodd is dead and, let us hope, in heaven; the Basutos have melted away, the morning is fine and warm and a whole kid is cooking for breakfast."

"I wish there were two, for I am ravenous," I remarked.

"The horses are getting rested and feeding well, though some of their legs have filled, and the trap is little the worse, for I have walked to look at them, or rather hopped, leaning on the shoulder of a very sniffy Swazi boy. Do you know, old fellow, I believe there never were any Basutos; also that the venerable Marnham and the lurid Rodd had no real existence, that they were but illusions, a prolonged nightmare--no more. Here is your shirt. I am sorry that I have not had time to wash it, but it has cooked well in the sun, which, being flannel, is almost as good."

"At any rate Heda remains," I remarked, cutting his nonsense short, "and I suppose she is not a nightmare or a delusion."

"Yes, thank God! she remains," he replied with earnestness. "Oh! Allan, I thought she must drown in that river, and if I had lost her, I think I should have gone mad. Indeed, at the moment I felt myself going mad while I dragged and flogged at those horses."

"Well, you didn't lose her, and if she had drowned, you would have drowned also. So don't talk any more about it. She is safe, and now we have got to keep her so, for you are not married yet, my boy, and there are generally more trees in a wood than

one can see. Still we are alive and well, which is more than we had any right to expect, and, as you say, let us thank God for that."

Then I put on my coat and my boots which Anscombe had greased as he had no blacking, and crept from the hut.

There, only a few yards away, engaged in setting the breakfast in the shadow of another hut on a tanned hide that served for a tablecloth while Kaatje saw to the cooking close by, I found Heda, still a little pale and sorrowful but otherwise quite well and rested. Moreover, she had managed to dress herself very nicely, I suppose by help of spare clothes in the cart, and therefore looked as charming as she always did. I think that her perfect manners were one of her greatest attractions. Thus on this morning her first thought was to thank me very sweetly for all she was good enough to say I had done for her and Anscombe, thereby, as she put it, saving their lives several times over.

"My dear young lady," I answered as roughly as I could, "don't flatter yourself on that point; it was my own life of which I was thinking."

But she only smiled and, shaking her head in a fascinating way that was peculiar to her, remarked that I could not deceive her as I did the Kaffirs. After this the solid Kaatje brought the

food and we breakfasted very heartily, or at least I did.

Now I am not going to set out all the details of our journey through Swazi-Land, for though in some ways it was interesting enough, also as comfortable as a stay among savages can be, for everywhere we were kindly received, to do so would be too long, and I must get on with my story. At the king's kraal, which we did not reach for some days as the absence of roads and the flooded state of the rivers, also the need of sparing our horses, caused us to travel very slowly, I met a Boer who I think was concession hunting.

He told me that things were really serious in Zululand, so serious that he thought there was a probability of immediate war between the English and the Zulus. He said also that Cetewayo, the Zulu king, had sent messengers to stir up the Basutos and other tribes against the white men, with the result that Sekukuni had already made a raid towards Pilgrim's Rest and Lydenburg.

I expressed surprise and asked innocently if he had done any harm. The Boer replied he understood that they had stolen some cattle, killed two white men, if not more, and burnt their house. He added, however, that he was not sure whether the white men had been killed by the Kaffirs or by other white men with whom they had quarrelled. There was a rumour to this effect, and he understood that the magistrate of Barberton had gone with some

mounted police and armed natives to investigate the matter.

Then we parted, as, having got his concession to which the king Umbandine had put his mark when he was drunk on brandy that the Boer himself had brought with him as a present, he was anxious to be gone before he grew sober and revoked it. Indeed, he was in so great a hurry that he never stopped to inquire what I was doing in Swazi-Land, nor do I think he realized that I was not alone. Certainly he was quite unaware that I had been mixed up in these Basuto troubles. Still his story as to the investigation concerning the deaths of Marnham and Rodd made me uneasy, since I feared lest he should hear something on his journey and put two and two together, though as a matter of fact I don't think he ever did either of these things.

The Swazis told me much the same story as to the brewing Zulu storm. In fact an old Induna or councillor, whom I knew, informed me that Cetewayo had sent messengers to them, asking for their help if it should come to fighting with the white men, but that the king and councillors answered that they had always been the Queen's children (which was not strictly true, as they were never under English rule) and did not wish to "bite her feet if she should have to fight with her hands." I replied that I hoped they would always act up to these fine words, and changed the subject.

Now once more the question arose as to whether we should make for Natal or press on to Zululand. The rumour of coming war suggested that the first would be our better course, while the Boer's story as to the investigation of Rodd's death pointed the other way. Really I did not know which to do, and as usual Anscombe and Heda seemed inclined to leave the decision to me. I think that after all Natal would have gained the day had it not been for a singular circumstance, not a flash of lightning this time. Indeed, I had almost made up my mind to risk trouble and inquiry as to Rodd's death, remembering that in Natal these two young people could get married, which, being in loco parentis, I thought it desirable they should do as soon as possible, if only to ease me of my responsibilities. Also thence I could attend to the matter of Heda's inheritance and rid myself of her father's will that already had been somewhat damaged in the Crocodile River, though not as much as it might have been since I had taken the precaution to enclose it in Anscombe's sponge bag before we left the house.

The circumstance was this: On emerging from the cart one morning, where I slept to keep an eye upon the valuables, for it will be remembered that we had a considerable sum in gold with us, also Heda's jewels, a Swazi informed me that a messenger wished to see me. I asked what messenger and whence did he come. He replied that the messenger was a witch-doctoress named Nombe, and that she came from Zululand and said that I knew her father.

I bade the man bring her to me, wondering who on earth she could be, for it is not usual for the Zulus to send women as messengers, and from whom she came. However, I knew exactly what she would be like, some hideous old hag smelling horribly of grease and other abominations, with a worn snake skin and some human bones tied about her.

Presently she came, escorted by the Swazi who was grinning, for I think he guessed what I expected to see. I stared and rubbed my eyes, thinking that I must still be asleep, for instead of a fat old Isanusi there appeared a tall and graceful young woman, rather light-coloured, with deep and quiet eyes and a by no means ill-favoured face, remarkable for a fixed and somewhat mysterious smile. She was a witch-doctoress sure enough, for she wore in her hair the regulation bladders and about her neck the circlet of baboon's teeth, also round her middle a girdle from which hung little bags of medicines.

She contemplated me gravely and I contemplated her, waiting till she should choose to speak. At length, having examined me inch by inch, she saluted by raising her rounded arm and tapering hand, and remarked in a soft, full voice--

"All is as the picture told. I perceive before me the lord Macumazahn."

I thought this a strange saying, seeing that I could not recollect having given my photograph to any one in Zululand.

"You need no magic to tell you that, doctoress," I remarked, "but where did you see my picture?"

"In the dust far away," she replied.

"And who showed it to you?"

"One who knew you, O Macumazahn, in the years before I came out of the Darkness, one named Opener of Roads, and with him another who also knew you in those years, one who has gone down to the Darkness."

Now for some occult reason I shrank from asking the name of this "one who had gone down to the Darkness," although I was sure that she was waiting for the question. So I merely remarked, without showing surprise--

"So Zikali still lives, does he? He should have been dead long ago."

"You know well that he lives, Macumazahn, for how could he die till his work was accomplished? Moreover, you will remember that

he spoke to you when last moon was but just past her full--in a dream, Macumazahn. I brought that dream, although you did not see me."

"Pish!" I exclaimed. "Have done with your talk of dreams. Who thinks anything of dreams?"

"You do," she replied even more placidly than before, "you whom that dream has brought hither--with others."

"You lie," I said rudely. "The Basutos brought me here."

"The Watcher-by-Night is pleased to say that I lie, so doubtless I do lie," she answered, her fixed smile deepening a little. Then she folded her arms across her breast and remained silent.

"You are a messenger, O seer of pictures in the dust and bearer of the cup of dreams," I said with sarcasm. "Who sends a message by your lips for me, and what are the words of the message?"

"My Lords the Spirits spoke the message by the mouth of the master Zikali. He sends it on to you by the lips of your servant, the doctoress Nombe."

"Are you indeed a doctoress, being so young?" I asked, for somehow I wished to postpone the hearing of that message.

"O Macumazahn, I have heard the call, I have felt the pain in my back, I have drunk of the black medicine and of the white medicine, yes, for a whole year. I have been visited by the multitude of Spirits and seen the shades of those who live and of those who are dead. I have dived into the river and drawn my snake from its mud; see, its skin is about me now," and opening the mantle she wore she showed what looked like the skin of a black mamba, fastened round her slender body. "I have dwelt in the wilderness alone and listened to its voices. I have sat at the feet of my master, the Opener of Roads, and looked down the road and drunk of his wisdom. Yes, I am in truth a doctoress."

"Well, after all this, you should be as wise as you are pretty."

"Once before, Macumazahn, you told a maid of my people that she was pretty and she came to no good end; though to one that was great. Therefore do not say to me that I am pretty, though I am glad that you should think so who can compare me with so many whom you have known," and she dropped her eyes, looking a little shy.

It was the first human touch I had seen about her, and I was glad to have found a weak spot in her armour. Moreover, from that moment she was always my friend.

"As you will, Nombe. Now for your message."

"My Lords the Spirits, speaking through Zikali as one who makes music speak through a pipe of reeds, say--"

"Never mind what the spirits say. Tell me what Zikali says," I interrupted.

"So be it, Macumazahn. These are the words of Zikali: 'O Watcher-by-Night, the time draws on when the Thing-who-should-never-have-been-born will be as though he never had been born, whereat he rejoices. But first there is much for him to do, and as he told you nearly three hundred moons ago, in what must be done you will have your part. Of that he will speak to you afterwards. Macumazahn, you dreamed a dream, did you not, lying asleep in the house that was built of white stone which now is black with fire? I, Zikali, sent you that dream through the arts of a child of mine who is named Nombe, she to whom I have given a Spirit to guide her feet. You did well to follow it, Macumazahn, for had you tried the other path, which would have led you back to the towns of the white men, you and those with you must have been killed, how it does not matter. Now by the mouth of Nombe I say to you, do not follow the thought that is in your mind as she speaks to you and go to Natal, since if you do so, you and those with you will come to much shame and trouble that to you would be worse than death, over the matter of the

killing of a certain white doctor in a swamp where grow yellow-wood trees. For there in Natal you will be taken, all of you, and sent back to the Transvaal to be tried before a man who wears upon his head horse's hair stained white. But if you come to Zululand this shadow shall pass away from you, since great things are about to happen which will cause so small a matter to be forgot. Moreover, I Zikali, who do not lie, promise this:
That however great may be their dangers here in Zululand, those half-fledged ones whom you, the old night-hawk, cover with your wings, shall in the end suffer no harm; those of whom I spoke to you in your dream, the white lord, Mauriti, and the white lady, Heddana, who stretch out their arms one to another. I wait to welcome you, here at the Black Kloof, whither my daughter Nombe will guide you. Cetewayo, the king, also will welcome you, and so will another whose name I do not utter. Now choose. I have spoken.'"

Having delivered her message Nombe stood quite still, smiling as before, and apparently indifferent as to its effect.

"How do I know that you come from Zikali?" I asked. "You may be but the bait set upon a trap."

From somewhere within her robe she produced a knife and handed it to me, remarking--

"The Master says you will remember this, and by it know that the message comes from him. He bade me add that with it was carved a certain image that once he gave to you at Panda's kraal, wrapped round with a woman's hair, which image you still have."

I looked at the knife and did remember it, for it was one of those of Swedish make with a wooden handle, the first that I had ever seen in Africa. I had made a present of it to Zikali when I returned to Zululand before the war between the Princes. The image, too, I still possessed. It was that of the woman called Mameena who brought about the war, and the wrapping which covered it was of the hair that once grew upon her head.

"The words are Zikali's," I said, returning her the knife, "but why do you call yourself the child of one who is too old to be a father?"

"The Master says that my great-grandmother was his daughter and that therefore I am his child. Now, Macumazahn, I go to eat with my people, for I have servants with me. Then I must speak with the Swazi king, for whom I also have a message, which I cannot do at present because he is still drunk with the white man's liquor. After that I shall be ready to return with you to Zululand."

"I never said that I was going to Zululand, Nombe."

"Yet your heart has gone there already, Macumazahn, and you must follow your heart. Does not the image which was carved with the knife you gave, hold a white heart in its hand, and although it seems to be but a bit of Umzimbeete wood, is it not alive and bewitched, which perhaps is why you could never make up your mind to burn it, Macumazahn?"

"I wish I had," I replied angrily; but having thrown this last spear, with a flash of her unholy eyes Nombe had turned and gone.

A clever woman and thoroughly coached, thought I. Well, Zikali was never one to suffer fools, and doubtless she is another of the pawns whom he uses on his board of policy. Oh! she, or rather he was right; my heart was in Zululand, though not in the way he thought, and I longed to see the end of that great game played by a wizard against a despot and his hosts.

So we went to Zululand because after talking it over we all came to the conclusion that this was the best thing to do, especially as there we seemed to be sure of a welcome. For later in the day Nombe repeated to Anscombe and Heda the invitation which she had delivered to me, assuring them also that in Zululand they would come to no harm.

It was curious to watch the meeting between Heda and Nombe. The doctoress appeared just as we had risen from breakfast, and Heda,

turning round, came face to face with her.

"Is this your witch, Mr. Quatermain?" she asked me in her vivacious way. "Why, she is different from what I expected, quite good-looking and, yes, impressive. I am not sure that she does not frighten me a little."

"What does the Inkosikaasi (i.e., the chieftainess) say concerning me, Macumazahn?" asked Nombe.

"Only what I said, that you are young who she thought would be old, and pretty who she thought would be ugly."

"To grow old we must first be young, Macumazahn, and in due season all of us will become ugly, even the Inkosikaasi. But I thought she said also that she feared me."

"Do you know English, Nombe?"

"Nay, but I know how to read eyes, and the Inkosikaasi has eyes that talk. Tell her that she has no reason to fear me who would be her friend, though I think that she will bring me little luck."

It was scarcely necessary, so far as Heda was concerned, but I translated, leaving out the last sentence.

"Say to her that I am grateful who have few friends, and that I will fear her no more," said Heda.

Again I translated, whereon Nombe stretched out her hand, saying--

"Let her not scorn to take it, it is clean. It has brought no man to his death--" Here she looked at Heda meaningly. "Moreover, though she is white and I am black, I like herself am of high blood and come of a race of warriors who did nothing small, and lastly, we are of an age, and if she is beautiful, I am wise and have gifts great as her own."

Once more I interpreted for the benefit of Anscombe, for Heda understood Zulu well enough, although she had pretended not to do so, after which the two shook hands, to Anscombe's amusement and my wonder. For I felt this scene to be strained and one that hid, or presaged, something I did not comprehend.

"This is the Chief she loves?" said Nombe to me, studying Anscombe with her steady eyes after Heda had gone. "Well, he is no common man and brave, if idle; one, too, who may grow tall in the world, should he live, when he has learned to think. But, Macumazahn, if she met you both at the same time why did she not choose you?"

"Just now you said you were wise, Nombe," I replied laughing, "but now I see that, like most of your trade, you are but a vain boaster. Is there a hat upon my head that you cannot see the colour of my hair, and is it natural that youth should turn to age?"

"Sometimes if the mind is old, Macumazahn, which is why I love the Spirits only who are more ancient than the mountains, and with them Zikali their servant, who was young before the Zulus were a people, or so he says, and still year by year gathers wisdom as the bee gathers honey. Inspan your horses, Macumazahn, for I have done my business and am ready to start."