

CHAPTER XI

ZIKALI

Ten days had gone by when once more I found myself drawing near to the mouth of the Black Kloof where dwelt Zikali the Wizard. Our journey in Zululand had been tedious and uneventful. It seemed to me that we met extraordinarily few people; it was as though the place had suddenly become depopulated, and I even passed great kraals where there was no one to be seen. I asked Nombe what was the meaning of this, for she and three silent men she had with her were acting as our guides. Once she answered that the people had moved because of lack of food, as the season had been one of great scarcity owing to drought, and once that they had been summoned to a gathering at the king's kraal near Ulundi. At any rate they were not there, and the few who did appear stared at us strangely.

Moreover, I noticed that they were not allowed to speak to us.

Also Heda was kept in the cart and Nombe insisted that the rear canvas curtain should be closed and a blanket fastened behind Anscombe who drove, evidently with the object that she should not be seen. Further, on the plea of weariness, from the time that we entered Zulu territory Nombe asked to be allowed to ride in the cart with Kaatje and Heda, her real reason, as I was sure, being that she might keep a watch on them. Lastly we travelled by little-frequented tracks, halting at night in out-of-the-way places, where, however, we always found food awaiting us, doubtless by arrangement.

With one man whom I had known in past days and who recognized me, I did manage to have a short talk. He asked me what I was doing in Zululand at that time. I replied that I was on a visit to Zikali, whereon he said I should be safer with him than with any one else.

Our conversation went no further, for just then one of Nombe's servants appeared and made some remark to the man of which I could not catch the meaning, whereon he promptly turned and departed, leaving me wondering and uneasy.

Evidently we were being isolated, but when I remonstrated with Nombe she only answered with her most unfathomable smile--

"O Macumazahn, you must ask Zikali of all these things. I am no

one and know nothing, who only do what the Master tells me is for your good."

"I am minded to turn and depart from Zululand," I said angrily, "for in this low veld whither you have led us there is fever and the horses will catch sickness or be bitten by the tsetse fly and perish."

"I cannot say, Macumazahn, who only travel by the road the Master pointed out. Yet if you will be guided by me, you will not try to leave Zululand."

"You mean that I am in a trap, Nombe."

"I mean that the country is full of soldiers and that all white men have fled from it. Therefore, even if you were allowed to pass because the Zulus love you, Macumazahn, it might well happen that those with you would stay behind, sound asleep, Macumazahn, for which, like you, I should be sorry."

After this I said no more, for I knew that she meant to warn me. We had entered on this business and must see it through to its end, sweet or bitter.

As for Anscombe and Heda their happiness seemed to be complete. The novelty of the life charmed them, and of its dangers they

took no thought, being content to leave me, in whom they had a blind faith, to manage everything. Moreover, Heda, who in the joy of her love was beginning to forget the sorrow of her father's death and the other tragic events through which she had just passed, took a great fancy to the young witch-doctress who conversed with her in Zulu, a language of which, having lived so long in Natal, Heda knew much already. Indeed, when I suggested to her that to be over-trusting was not wise, she fired up and replied that she had been accustomed to natives all her life and could judge them, adding that she had every confidence in Nombe.

After this I held my tongue and said no more of my doubts. What was the use since Heda would not listen to them, and at that time Anscombe was nothing but her echo?

So this, for me, very dull journey continued, till at length, after being held up for a couple of days by a flooded river where there was nothing to do but sit and smoke, as Nombe requested me not to make a noise by shooting at the big game that abounded, we began to emerge from the bush-veld on to the lovely uplands in the neighbourhood of Nongoma. Leaving these on our right we headed for a place called Ceza, a natural stronghold consisting of a flat plain on the top of a mountain, which plain is surrounded by bush. It is at the foot of this stronghold that the Black Kloof lies, being one of the ravines that run up into the mountain.

So thither we came at last. It was drawing towards sunset, a tremendous and stormy sunset, as we approached the place, and lo! it looked exactly as it had done when first I saw it more than a score of years before, forbidding as the mouth of hell, vast and lonesome. There stood the columns of boulders fantastically piled one upon another; there grew the sparse trees upon its steep sides, mingled with aloes that looked like the shapes of men; there was the granite bottom swept almost clean by floods in some dim age, and the little stream that flowed along it. There, too, was the spot where once I had outspanned my wagons on the night when my servants swore that they saw the Imikovu, or wizard-raised spectres, floating past them on the air in the shapes of the Princes and others who were soon to fall at the battle of the Tugela. Up it we went, I riding and Nombe, who had descended from the cart that followed, walking by my side and watching me.

"You seem sad, Macumazahn," she said at length.

"Yes, Nombe, I am sad. This place makes me so."

"Is it the place, Macumazahn, or is it the thought of one whom once you met in the place, one who is dead?"

I looked at her, pretending not to understand, and she went on--

"I have the gift of vision, Macumazahn, which comes at times to those of my trade, and now and again, amongst others, I have seemed to see the spirit of a certain woman haunting this kloof as though she were waiting for some one."

"Indeed, and what may that woman be like?" I inquired carelessly.

"As it chances I can see her now gliding backwards in front of you just there, and therefore am able to answer your question, Macumazahn. She is tall and slender, beautifully made, and light-coloured for one of us black people. She has large eyes like a buck, and those eyes are full of fire that does not come from the sun but from within. Her face is tender yet proud, oh! so proud that she makes me afraid. She wears a cloak of grey fur, and about her neck there is a circlet of big blue beads with which her fingers play. A thought comes from her to me. These are the words of the thought: 'I have waited long in this dark place, watching by day and night till you, the Watcher-by-Night, return to meet me here. At length you have come, and in this enchanted place my hungry spirit can feed upon your spirit for a while. I thank you for coming, who now am no more lonely. Fear nothing, Macumazahn, for by a certain kiss I swear to you that till the appointed hour when you become as I am, I will be a shield upon your arm and a spear in your hand.' Such are the words of her thought, Macumazahn, but she has gone away and I

hear no more. It was as though your horse rode over her and she passed through you."

Then, like one who wished to answer no questions, Nombe turned and went back to the cart, where she began to talk indifferently with Heda, for as soon as we entered the kloof her servants had drawn back the curtains and let fall the blanket. As for me, I groaned, for of course I knew that Zikali, who was well acquainted with the appearance of Mameena, had instructed Nombe to say all this to me in order to impress my mind for some reason of his own. Yet he had done it cleverly, for such words as those Mameena might well have uttered could her great spirit have need to walk the earth again. Was such a thing possible, I wondered? No, it was not possible, yet it was true that her atmosphere seemed to cling about this place and that my imagination, excited by memory and Nombe's suggestions, seemed to apprehend her presence.

As I reflected the horse advanced round the little bend in the ever-narrowing cliffs, and there in front of me, under the gigantic mass of overhanging rock, appeared the kraal of Zikali surrounded by its reed fence. The gate of the fence was open, and beyond it, on his stool in front of the large hut, sat Zikali. Even at that distance it was impossible to mistake his figure, which was like no other that I had known in the world. A broad-shouldered dwarf with a huge head, deep, sunken eyes and

snowy hair that hung upon his shoulders; the whole frame and face pervaded with an air of great antiquity, and yet owing to the plumpness of the flesh and that freshness of skin which is sometimes seen in the aged, comparatively young-looking.

Such was the great wizard Zikali, known throughout the land for longer than any living man could remember as "Opener of Roads," a title that referred to his powers of spiritual vision, also as the "Thing-that-should-never-have-been-born," a name given to him by Chaka, the first and greatest of the Zulu kings, because of his deformity.

There he sat silent, impassive, staring open-eyed at the red ball of the setting sun, looking more like some unshapely statue than a man. His silent, fierce-faced servants appeared. To me they looked like the same men whom I had seen here three and twenty years before, only grown older. Indeed, I think they were, for they greeted me by name and saluted by raising their broad spears. I dismounted and waited while Anscombe, whose foot was now quite well again, helped Heda from the cart which was led away by the servants. Anscombe, who seemed a little oppressed, remarked that this was a strange place.

"Yes," said Heda, "but it is magnificent. I like it."

Then her eye fell upon Zikali seated before the hut and she

turned pale.

"Oh! what a terrible-looking man," she murmured, "if he is a man."

The maid Kaatje saw him also and uttered a little cry.

"Don't be frightened, dear," said Anscombe, "he is only an old dwarf."

"I suppose so," she exclaimed doubtfully, "but to me he is like the devil."

Nombe slid past us. She threw off the kaross she wore and for the first time appeared naked except for the mucha about her middle and her ornaments. Down she went on her hands and knees and in this humble posture crept towards Zikali. Arriving in front of him she touched the ground with her forehead, then lifting her right arm, gave the salute of Makosi, to which as a great wizard he was entitled, being supposed to be the home of many spirits. So far as I could see he took no notice of her. Presently she moved and squatted herself down on his right hand, while two of his attendants appeared from behind the hut and took their stand between him and its doorway, holding their spears raised. About a minute later Nombe beckoned to us to approach, and we went forward across the courtyard, I a little ahead of the

others. As we drew near Zikali opened his mouth and uttered a loud and terrifying laugh. How well I remembered that laugh which I had first heard at Dingaan's kraal as a boy after the murder of Retief and the Boers.*

[*--See the book called Marie, by H. Rider Haggard.]

"I begin to think that you are right and that this old gentleman must be the devil," said Anscombe to Heda, then lapsed into silence.

As I was determined not to speak first I took the opportunity to fill my pipe. Zikali, who was watching me, although all the while he seemed to be staring at the setting sun, made a sign. One of the servants dashed away and immediately returned, bearing a flaming brand which he proffered to me as a pipe-lighter. Then he departed again to bring three carved stools of red wood which he placed for us. I looked at mine and knew it again by the carvings. It was the same on which I had sat when first I met Zikali. At length he spoke in his deep, slow voice.

"Many years have gone by, Macumazahn, since you made use of that stool. They are cut in notches upon the leg you hold and you may count them if you will."

I examined the leg. There were the notches, twenty-two or three

of them. On the other legs were more notches too numerous to reckon.

"Do not look at those, Macumazahn, for they have nothing to do with you. They tell the years since the first of the House of Senzangaona sat upon that stool, since Chaka sat upon it, since Dingaana and others sat upon it, one Mameena among them. Well, much has happened since it served you for a rest. You have wandered far and seen strange things and lived where others would have died because it was your lot to live, of all of which we will talk afterwards. And now when you are grey you have come back here, as the Opener of Roads told you you would do, bringing with you new companions, you who have the art of making friends even when you are old, which is one given to few men. Where are those with whom you used to company, Macumazahn? Where are Saduko and Mameena and the rest? All gone except the Thing-who-should-never-have-been-born," and again he laughed loudly.

"And who it seems has never learned when to die," I remarked, speaking for the first time.

"Just so, Macumazahn, because I cannot die until my work is finished. But thanks be to the spirits of my fathers and to my own that I live on to glut with vengeance, the end draws near at last, and as I promised you in the dead days, you shall have your

share in it, Macumazahn."

He paused, then continued, still staring at the sinking sun, which made his remarks about us, whom he did not seem to see, uncanny--

"That white man with you is brave and well-born, one who loves fighting, I think, and the maiden is fair and sweet, with a high spirit. She is thinking to herself that I am an old wizard whom, if she were not afraid of me, she would ask to tell her her fortune. See, she understands and starts. Well, perhaps I will one day. Meanwhile, here is a little bit of it. She will have five children, of whom two will die and one will give her so much trouble that she will wish it had died also. But who their father will be I do not say. Nombe my child, lead away this White One and her woman to the hut that has been made ready for her, for she is weary and would rest. See, too, that she lacks for nothing which we can give her who is our guest. Let the white lord, Mauriti, accompany her to the hut and be shown that next to it in which he and Macumazahn will sleep, so that he may be sure that she is safe, and attend to the horses if he wills. There is a place to tether them behind the huts, and the men who travelled with you will help him. Afterwards, when I have spoken with him, Macumazahn can join them that they may eat before they sleep."

These directions I translated to Anscombe, who went gladly enough with Heda, for I think they were both afraid of the terrible old dwarf and did not desire his company in the gathering gloom.

"The sun sinks once more, Macumazahn," he said when they were gone, "and the air grows chill. Come with me now into my hut where the fire burns, for I am aged and the cold strikes through me. Also there we can be alone."

So speaking he turned and crawled into the hut, looking like a gigantic white-headed beetle as he did so, a creature, I remembered, to which I had once compared him in the past. I followed, carrying the historic stool, and when he had seated himself on his kaross on the further side of the fire, took up my position opposite to him. This fire was fed with some kind of root or wood that gave a thin clear flame with little or no smoke. Over it he crouched, so closely that his great head seemed to be almost in the flame at which he stared with unblinking eyes as he had done at the sun, circumstances which added to his terrifying appearance and made me think of a certain region and its inhabitants.

"Why do you come here, Macumazahn?" he asked after studying me for a while through that window of fire.

"Because you brought me, Zikali, partly through your messenger,

Nombe, and partly by means of a dream which she says you sent."

"Did I, Macumazahn? If so, I have forgotten it. Dreams are as many as gnats by the water; they bite us while we sleep, but when we wake up we forget them. Also it is foolishness to say that one man can send a dream to another."

"Then your messenger lied, Zikali, especially as she added that she brought it."

"Of course she lied, Macumazahn. Is she not my pupil whom I have trained from a child? Moreover, she lied well, it would seem, who guessed what sort of a dream you would have when you thought of turning your steps to Zululand."

"Why do you play at sticks (i.e., fence) with me, Zikali, seeing that neither of us are children?"

"O Macumazahn, that is where you are mistaken, seeing that both of us, old though we be and cunning though we think ourselves, are nothing but babes in the arms of Fate. Well, well, I will tell you the truth, since it would be foolish to try to throw dust into such eyes as yours. I knew that you were down in Sekukuni's country and I was watching you--through my spies. You have been nowhere during all these years that I was not watching you--through my spies. For instance, that Arab-looking man named

Harut, whom first you met at a big kraal in a far country, was a spy of mine. He has visited me lately and told me much of your doings. No, don't ask me of him now who would talk to you of other matters--"

"Does Harut still live then, and has he found a new god in place of the Ivory Child?" I interrupted.

"Macumazahn, if he did not live, how could he visit and speak with me? Well, I watched you there by the Oliphant's River where you fought Sekukuni's people, and afterwards in the marble hut where you found the old white man dead in his chair and got the writings that you have in your pocket which concern the maiden Heddana; also afterwards when the white man, your friend, killed the doctor who fell into a mud hole and the Basutos stole his cattle and wagon."

"How do you know all these things, Zikali?"

"Have I not told you--through my spies. Was there not a half-breed driver called Fotsack, and do not the Basutos come and go between the Black Kloof and Sekukuni's town, bearing me tidings?"

"Yes, Zikali, and so does the wind and so do the birds."

"True! O Macumazahn, I see that you are one who has watched Nature and its ways as closely as my spies watch you. So I learned these matters and knew that you were in trouble over the death of these white men, and your friends likewise, and as you were always dear to me, I sent that child Nombe to bring you to me, thinking from what I knew of you that you would be more likely to follow a woman who is both wise and good to look at, than a man who might be neither. I told her to say to you that you and the others would be safer here than in Natal at present. It seems that you hearkened and came. That is all."

"Yes, I hearkened and came. But, Zikali, that is not all, for you know well that you sent for me for your own sake, not for mine."

"O Macumazahn, who can prevent a needle from piercing cloth when it is pushed by a finger like yours? Your wits are too sharp for me, Macumazahn; your eyes read through the blanket of cunning with which I would hide my thought. You speak truly. I did send for you for my own sake as well as for yours. I sent for you because I wanted your counsel, Macumazahn, and because Cetewayo the king also wants your counsel, and I wished to see you before you saw Cetewayo. Now you have the whole truth."

"What do you want my counsel about, Zikali?"

He leaned forward till his white locks almost seemed to mingle with the thin flame, through which he glared at me with eyes that were fiercer than the fire.

"Macumazahn, you remember the story that I told you long ago, do you not?"

"Very well, Zikali. It was that you hate the House of Senzangaona which has given all its kings to Zululand. First, because you are one of the Dwandwe tribe whom the Zulus crushed and mocked at. Secondly, because Chaka the Lion named you the 'Thing-that-should-never-have-been-born' and killed your wives, for which crime you brought about the death of Chaka. Thirdly, because you have matched your single wit for many years against all the power of the royal House and yet kept your life in you, notably when Panda threatened you in my presence at the trial of one who has 'gone down,' and you told him to kill you if he dared. Now you would prove that you were right by causing your cunning to triumph over the royal House."

"True, quite true, O Macumazahn. You have a good memory, Macumazahn, especially for anything that has to do with that woman who has 'gone down.' I sent her down, but how was she named, Macumazahn? I forget, I forget, whose mind being old, falls suddenly into black pits of darkness--like her who went down."

He paused and we stared at each other through the veil of fire.

Then as I made no answer, he went on--

"Oh! I remember now, she was called Mameena, was she not, a name taken from the wailing of the wind? Hark! It is wailing now."

I listened; it was, and I shivered to hear it, since but a minute before the night had been quite still. Yes, the wind moaned and wailed about the rocks of the Black Kloof.

"Well, enough of her. Why trouble about the dead when there are so many to be sent to join them? Macumazahn, the hour is at hand. The fool Cetewayo has quarrelled with your people, the English, and on my counsel. He has sent and killed women, or allowed others to do so, across the river in Natal. His messengers came to me asking what he should do. I answered, 'Shall a king of the blood of Chaka fear to allow his own wicked ones to be slain because they have stepped across a strip of water, and still call himself king of the Zulus?' So those women were dragged back across the water and killed; and now the Queen's man from the Cape asks many things, great fines of cattle, the giving up of the slayers, and that an end should be made of the Zulu army, which is to lay down its spears and set to hoeing like the old women in the kraals."

"And if the king refuses, what then, Zikali?"

"Then, Macumazahn, the Queen's man will declare war on the Zulus; already he gathers his soldiers for the war."

"Will Cetewayo refuse, Zikali?"

"I do not know. His mind swings this way and that, like a pole balanced on a rock. The ends of the pole are weighted with much counsel, and it hangs so even that if a grasshopper lit on one end or the other, it would turn the scale."

"And do you wish me to be that grasshopper, Zikali?"

"Who else? That is why I brought you to Zululand."

"So you wish me to counsel Cetewayo to lie down in the bed that the English have made for him. If he seeks my advice I will do so gladly, for so I am sure he will sleep well."

"Why do you mock me, Macumazahn? I wish you to counsel Cetewayo to throw back his word into the teeth of the Queen's man and to fight the English."

"And thus bring destruction on the Zulus and death to thousands of them and of my own people, and in return gain nothing but

remorse. Do you think me mad or wicked, or both, that I should do this thing?"

"Nay, Macumazahn, you would gain much. I could show you where the king's cattle are hidden. The English will never find them, and after the war you might take as many as you chose. But it would be useless, for knowing you well, I am sure that you would only hand them over to the British Government, as once you handed over the cattle of Bangu, being fashioned that way by the Great-Great, Macumazahn."

"Perhaps I might, but then what should I gain, Zikali?"

"This: you would so bring things about that, being broken by war, the Zulu power could never again menace the white men, which would be a great and good deed, Macumazahn."

"Mayhap--I am not sure. But of this I am sure, that I will not thrust my face into your nest of wasps, that the English hornets may steal the honey when they are disturbed. I leave such matters to the Queen and those who rule under her. So have done with such talk, for you do but waste your breath, Zikali."

"It is as I guessed it would be," he answered, shaking his great head. "You are too honest to prosper in the world, Macumazahn. Well, I must find other means to bring the House of Cetewayo to

the end that he deserves, who has been an evil and a cruel king."

All this he said, showing neither surprise nor resentment, which convinced me of what I had suspected throughout, that never for an instant did he believe that I should fall in with his suggestions and try to influence the Zulus to declare war. No, this talk of his was but a blind; there was some deeper scheme at work in his cunning old brain which he was hiding from me. Why exactly had he beguiled me to Zululand? I could not divine, and to ask him would be worse than useless, but then and there I made up my mind that I would get away from the Black Kloof early on the following morning, if that were possible.

He began to speak of other matters in a low, droning voice, like a man who converses with himself. Sad, all of them, such as the haunted death of Saduko who had betrayed his lord, the Prince Umbelazi, because of a woman, every circumstance of which seemed to be familiar to him.

I made no answer, who was waiting for an opportunity to leave the hut, and did not care to dwell on these events. He ceased and brooded for a while, then said suddenly--

"You are hungry and would eat, Macumazahn, and I who eat little would sleep, for in sleep the multitudes of Spirits visit me, bringing tidings from afar. Well, we have spoken together and of

that I am glad, for who knows when the chance will come again, though I think that soon we shall meet at Ulundi, Ulundi where Fate spreads its net. What was it I had to say to you? Ah! I remember. There is one who is always in your thoughts and whom you wish to see, one too who wishes to see you. You shall, you shall in payment for the trouble you have taken in coming so far to visit a poor old Zulu doctor whom, as you told me long ago, you know to be nothing but a cheat."

He paused and, why I could not tell, I grew weak with fear of I knew not what, and bethought me of flight.

"It is cold in this hut, is it not?" he went on. "Burn up, fire, burn up!" and plunging his hand into a catskin bag of medicines which he wore, he drew out some powder which he threw upon the embers that instantly burst into bright flame.

"Look now, Macumazahn," he said, "look to your right."

I looked and oh Heaven! there before me with outstretched arms and infinite yearning on her face, stood Mameena, Mameena as I had last seen her after I gave her the promised kiss that she used to cover her taking of the poison. For five seconds, mayhap, she stood thus, living, wonderful, but still as death, the fierce light showing all. Then the flame died down again and she was gone.

I turned and next instant was out of the hut, pursued by the terrible laughter of Zikali.