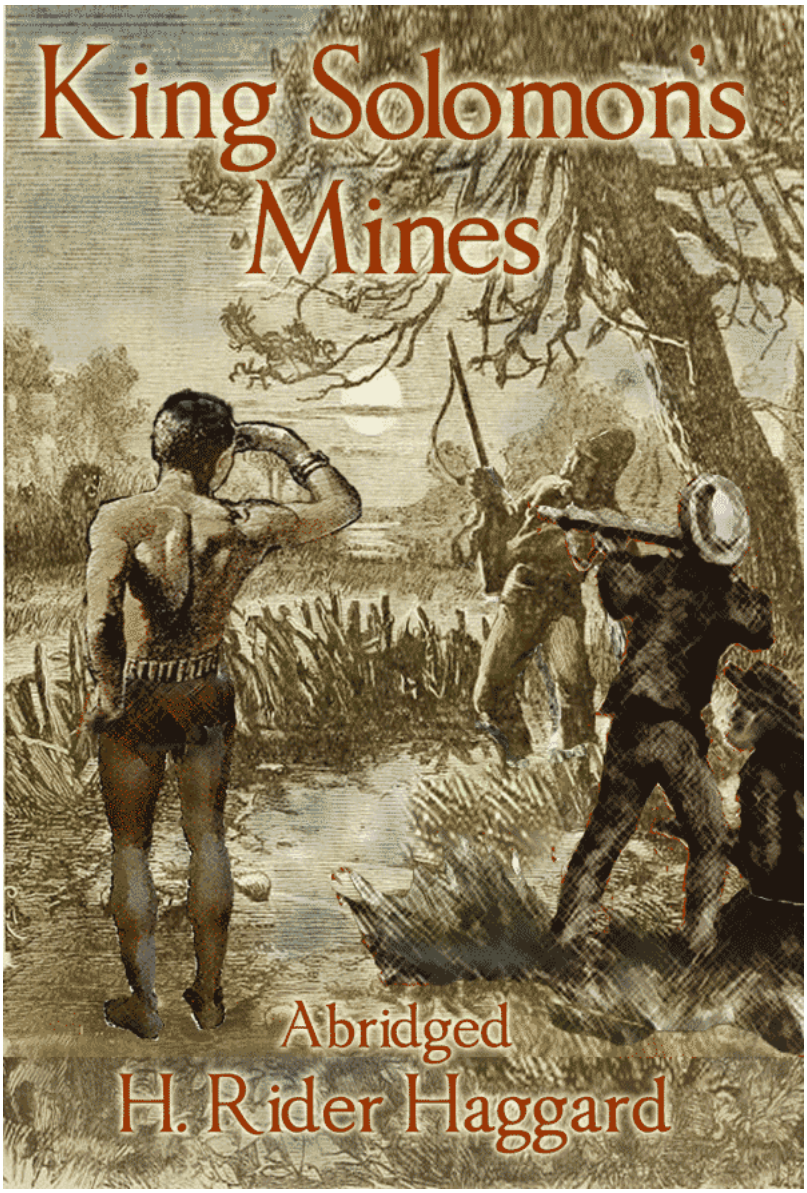

KING SOLOMON'S MINES

Henry Rider Haggard

Abridged by Emma Laybourn

King Solomon's Mines, Abridged

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INTRODUCTION

Now that this book is about to be published, a sense of its shortcomings weighs very heavily upon me. It does not pretend to be a full account of everything we did and saw. There are many things about our journey into Kukuanaland that I should have liked to dwell upon at length. Amongst these are the curious legends I heard about the chain armour that saved us from destruction in the great battle, and the "Silent Ones" or Colossi at the mouth of the stalactite cave.

If I had given way to my own impulses, I would also have described the differences between the Zulu and Kukuana dialects, and the flora and fauna of Kukuanaland. Then there remains the interesting subject of the magnificent system of military organisation in that country, which, in my opinion, is much superior to that set up by Chaka in Zululand.

Lastly, I have scarcely spoken of the domestic customs of the Kukuanas, or of their proficiency in smelting and welding metals. They have perfected this science: a good example is to be seen in their "tollas," or heavy throwing knives, which have edges of beautiful steel welded with great skill on to iron frames.

The fact is, I thought, with Sir Henry Curtis and Captain Good, that I had better tell our story in a plain, straightforward manner. I must apologise for my blunt way of writing. I am more accustomed to handle a rifle than a pen, and cannot make grand literary flourishes. Although I regret this, I cannot help thinking that books are easier to understand when they are written in plain language. "A sharp spear needs no polish," runs the Kukuana saying; and I hope that a true story, however strange, does not need to be decked out in fine words.

Allan Quatermain.

CHAPTER 1

I Meet Sir Henry Curtis

It is a curious thing that at the age of fifty-five I should find myself taking up a pen to try to write a history. I wonder what it will be like when I have finished it! I have done a good many things in my life, which seems a long one to me – perhaps because I began work so young. At an age when other boys were at school I was earning my living as a trader in South Africa; and I have been trading, hunting, fighting, or mining ever since.

And yet it is only eight months ago that I made my pile. It is a big pile – I don't yet know how big – but I wouldn't go through the last sixteen months again for it. But then I am a timid man, and dislike violence; moreover, I am almost sick of adventure. I wonder why I am going to write this book, for I am not a literary man. Let me try to set down my reasons.

First reason: Because Sir Henry Curtis and Captain John Good asked me.

Second reason: Because I am laid up here at Durban with the pain in my left leg. Ever since that confounded lion got hold of me I have been liable to this trouble, and just now it makes me limp more than ever. It is a hard thing when one has shot sixty-five lions, as I have in the course of my life, that the sixty-sixth should chew your leg like a quid of tobacco.

Third reason: Because I want my boy Harry, who is at a hospital in London studying to become a doctor, to have something to amuse him for a week or so. This story of our adventures will not be dull, whatever else it may be, and it will give Harry some diversion.

Fourth reason and last: Because I am going to tell the strangest story that I know. It may seem a curious thing to say, especially considering that there is no woman in it – except Foulata. Stop, though! there is Gagool, if she was a woman, and not a fiend. But she was at least hundred, so I don't count her. At any rate, I can safely say that there is not a petticoat in the whole story.

Well, I had better make a start.

I, Allan Quatermain, of Durban, Gentleman, make oath and say – That's how I headed my statement before the magistrate about poor Khiva's and Ventvögel's sad deaths; but somehow it doesn't seem the right way to begin a book.

And, besides, am I a gentleman? What is a gentleman? I don't quite know. I've known natives who are gentlemen, and I have known mean and wealthy whites who are not.

At any rate, I was born a gentleman, though I have been nothing but a poor travelling trader and hunter all my life. Whether I have remained a gentleman, I don't know; you must judge of that. Heaven knows I've tried. I have killed many men in my time, but only in self-defence. The Almighty gave us our lives, and I suppose He meant us to defend them. For a timid man I have been mixed up in a

great deal of fighting. At any rate I have never stolen, though once I cheated a Kafir out of a herd of cattle. But then he had done me a dirty turn, and it has troubled me ever since.

Well, it is eighteen months since I first met Sir Henry Curtis and Captain Good. It was like this. I had been elephant hunting up beyond Bamangwato, and everything had gone wrong that trip, and I got the fever badly. As soon as I was well enough I trekked down to the Diamond Fields, sold my wagon and oxen, and went to the Cape.

After spending a week in Cape Town, and having seen everything there was to see, including the botanical gardens, which seem likely to be a great benefit to the country, and the new Houses of Parliament, which I expect will be nothing of the sort, I decided to take a ship back to Natal. The *Dunkeld* was just then lying at the docks waiting for a ship due in from England; as soon as it arrived and its passengers transferred to our ship, we put out to sea.

Among these passengers were two who roused my curiosity. One, a gentleman of about thirty, was perhaps the biggest-chested and longest-armed man I ever saw. He had yellow hair, a thick yellow beard, clear-cut features, and large grey eyes set deep in his head. I never saw a finer-looking man, and somehow he reminded me of an ancient Dane – a Viking. Not that I know much of ancient Danes, but I remember seeing a picture of some of them, who, I take it, were a kind of white Zulus. They were drinking out of big horns, and their long hair hung down their backs.

As I looked at this man, I thought that if he only let his hair grow a little, put one of those chain shirts on to his great shoulders, and took hold of a battle-axe and a horn mug, he might have sat as a model for that picture. And it is a curious thing that I discovered afterwards that Sir Henry Curtis, (for that was his name), is of Danish blood. He also reminded me strongly of somebody else, but at the time I could not remember who.

The other man, who stood talking to him, was stout and dark, and of quite a different cut. I suspected at once that he was a naval officer; it is difficult to mistake a navy man. I have gone on shooting trips with several of them, and they have always proved themselves the best and bravest fellows I ever met, though sadly given to using bad language. I asked a page or two back, what is a gentleman? I'll answer now: A Royal Naval officer is, although there may be a black sheep among them here and there. I fancy the wide seas and the breath of God's winds wash their hearts and blow the bitterness out of their minds and make them what men ought to be.

Well, I was right again, for the dark man was a naval officer, a lieutenant of thirty-one, who, after seventeen years' service, had been turned out because he could not be promoted. This is what people who serve the Queen have to expect: to be shot out into the cold world to find a living just when they are beginning to really understand their work.

I found his name on the passenger list: Captain John Good. He was rather a curious man to look at. He was so very neat and clean-shaven, and he always wore an eye-glass – a monocle – in his right eye. It seemed to grow there, for it had no string, and he never took it out except to wipe it. At first I thought he used to sleep in

it, but afterwards I found that this was a mistake. He put it in his trousers pocket when he went to bed, together with his false teeth, of which he had two beautiful sets.

Soon after we had got under way a keen breeze sprung up, and a dense evening mist drove everybody from the deck. The *Dunkeld* rolled very heavily. It was quite impossible to walk about, so I stood near the engines where it was warm, and amused myself with watching the pendulum, which was fixed opposite me, swinging slowly backwards and forwards as the vessel rolled.

"That pendulum's wrong; it's not properly weighted," said a testy voice at my shoulder. Looking round I saw the naval officer.

"What makes you think so?" I asked.

"I don't think, I know. Look there" – as the boat righted herself after a roll – "if the ship had really rolled to that degree, she would never have rolled again. But these merchant skippers are so confoundedly careless."

Just then the dinner-bell rang, and Captain Good and I went down to dinner, where we found Sir Henry Curtis already seated. We all sat together. The captain and I soon fell into talk about shooting and what not; and presently he got on to elephants.

"Ah, sir," called out somebody who was sitting near me, "you've found the right man for that; Hunter Quatermain should be able to tell you about elephants if anybody can."

Sir Henry, who had been sitting quietly listening to our talk, looked startled.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, leaning across the table, and speaking in a low deep voice, "is your name Allan Quatermain?"

"Yes."

The big man made no further remark, but I heard him mutter "fortunate" into his beard.

Presently dinner came to an end, and as we were leaving Sir Henry asked me if I would come into his cabin to smoke a pipe. I accepted, and he led the way to the *Dunkeld* deck cabin, and a very good cabin it is, being two cabins knocked into one, with a sofa and a table. Sir Henry sent the steward for a bottle of whisky, and the three of us sat down and lit our pipes.

"Mr. Quatermain," said Sir Henry Curtis, "the year before last, you were, I believe, at a place called Bamangwato, to the north of the Transvaal."

"I was," I answered, rather surprised.

"You were trading there, were you not?" put in Captain Good, in his quick way.

"Yes. I took a wagon-load of goods, camped outside the settlement, and stayed till I had sold them."

Sir Henry was sitting in a chair opposite me, his arms leaning on the table. He now looked up, fixing his large grey eyes on my face with a curiously anxious expression.

"Did you happen to meet a man called Neville there?"

"Oh, yes; he camped alongside me for a fortnight to rest his oxen before going on to the interior. I had a letter from a lawyer a few months back, asking me if I knew what had happened to him, which I answered as well as I could."

"Yes," said Sir Henry, "your letter was forwarded to me. You said in it that Mr. Neville left Bamangwato at the beginning of May in a wagon with a driver, a guide, and a Kafir hunter called Jim. He intended to trek to Inyati, the furthest trading post in the Matabele country, where he would sell his wagon and proceed on foot. You also said that he did sell his wagon; for six months afterwards you saw it in the possession of a Portuguese trader, who told you that he had bought it at Inyati from a white man, and that he believed the white man with his servant had started off for the interior on a shooting trip."

"Yes."

There was a pause.

"Mr. Quatermain," said Sir Henry suddenly, "I suppose you know nothing more of the reasons of my – of Mr. Neville's journey north, or where he was aiming for?"

"I heard something," I answered, and stopped. The subject was one which I did not care to discuss.

Sir Henry and Captain Good looked at each other, and Captain Good nodded.

"Mr. Quatermain," went on Sir Henry, "I am going to tell you a story, and ask for your advice, and perhaps your help. The agent who forwarded me your letter told me that you were well known and universally respected in Natal, and noted for your discretion."

I bowed and drank some whisky to hide my confusion, for I am a modest man. Sir Henry went on.

"Mr. Neville was my brother."

"Oh!" Now I knew who Sir Henry had reminded me of. His brother was a smaller man with a dark beard, but he had eyes of the same shade of grey and with the same keen look.

"He was my only and younger brother, and till five years ago I do not suppose that we were ever a month away from each other. But five years ago we quarrelled bitterly, and I behaved unjustly to him in my anger."

The ship gave a big roll just then, so that the looking-glass fixed opposite us was for a moment nearly over our heads. I could see Captain Good in it, nodding like anything.

"Our father died without making any will," went on Sir Henry. "By law I inherited everything, and my brother was left without a penny. Of course it was my duty to provide for him, but we had recently quarrelled so bitterly that, to my shame, I did not offer to do anything. It was not that I grudged him the money, but I waited for him to make advances, and he made none. I am sorry to trouble you with all this, Mr. Quatermain, but I must make things clear, eh, Good?"

"Quite so," said the captain. "Mr. Quatermain will, I am sure, keep this to himself."

"Of course," said I.

"Well," went on Sir Henry, "my brother had a few hundred pounds. Without saying anything to me he took the name of Neville and used his money to go to South Africa in the wild hope of making a fortune. I only learned this after he had gone. Three years passed, and I heard nothing of my brother, though I wrote several times. Doubtless the letters never reached him. But as time went on I grew more and more troubled about him. I realised that I would have given half my fortune to know that my brother George was safe and well, and that I should see him again."

"But you never did, Curtis," jerked out Captain Good.

"I became more and more anxious to find out if my brother was alive or dead. I made enquiries, and your letter was one of the results. It showed that at least George had been alive till lately, but it did not go far enough. So, to cut a long story short, I decided to come and look for him myself, and Captain Good was so kind as to come with me."

"Yes," said the captain; "nothing else to do, you see. Turned out by my Lords of the Admiralty to starve on half pay. And now perhaps, sir, you will tell us what you know of Mr. Neville."

CHAPTER 2

The Legend of King Solomon's Mines

"What did you hear about my brother's journey?" asked Sir Henry.

"I heard this," I answered, "and I have never mentioned it to a soul till today. I heard that he was starting for Solomon's Mines."

"Solomon's Mines?" exclaimed both men at once. "Where are they?"

"I don't know. I know where they are said to be. Once I saw the peaks of the mountains that border them, but there were a hundred and thirty miles of desert between me and them, and I am not aware that any white man ever got across it except one. Perhaps the best thing I can do is to tell you the legend of Solomon's Mines, so long as you do not reveal anything I say without my permission. Do you agree to that?"

Sir Henry nodded, and Captain Good replied, "Certainly."

"Well," I began, "as you may guess, elephant hunters are a rough set of men, who do not take notice of much beyond hunting. But here and there you meet a man who takes the trouble to learn traditions from the natives, and tries to make out the history of this land. Just such a man first told me the legend of Solomon's Mines, nearly thirty years ago. His name was Evans, and he was killed the following year, poor fellow, by a wounded buffalo. I was telling Evans one night of some wonderful mine workings I had found whilst hunting koodoo and eland in the Lydenburg district of the Transvaal. There is a great wagon road there cut out of the solid rock, leading to the mouth of the workings. Inside this mine are stacks of gold quartz piled up, which shows that the workers, whoever they were, must have left in a hurry."

"'Ay,' said Evans, 'but I will spin you a stranger tale than that. Lad, did you ever hear of the Suliman Mountains up to the north-west of the Mushakulumbwe country?' I told him I never had. 'Ah, well,' he said, 'that is where King Solomon had his mines, his diamond mines, I mean.'

"'How do you know that?' I asked.

"'Why, what is "Suliman" but a corruption of Solomon? Besides, an old Isanusi or witch doctoress up in the Manica country told me all about it. She said that the people who lived across those mountains were a branch of the Zulus, speaking a dialect of Zulu, but finer and bigger men even than them; that there lived among them great wizards, who had learnt their art from white men and who had the secret of a wonderful mine of "bright stones."'

"Well, I laughed at this story at the time, though it interested me; but poor Evans went off and was killed, and for twenty years I never thought any more of the matter. However, just twenty years afterwards – and that is a long time, gentlemen; an elephant hunter does not often live for twenty years at his business – I heard something more definite about Suliman's Mountains and the country beyond.

"I was up beyond the Manica country, at a place called Sitanda's Kraal, and a miserable place it was. I had an attack of fever, and was in a bad way, when one day a Portuguese arrived with a half-native companion. This Portuguese gentleman was tall and thin, with large dark eyes and curling grey mustachios. He could speak broken English, and I understood a little Portugee, and he told me that his name was José Silvestre, and that he had a place near Delagoa Bay. When he left next day with his companion, he said, 'Good-bye, senor; if ever we meet again I shall be the richest man in the world, and I will remember you.' I laughed a little, and watched him strike out for the great desert to the west, wondering if he was mad, or what he thought he was going to find there.

"A week passed, and I recovered from my fever. One evening I was sitting on the ground in front of my little tent, staring at the hot red sun sinking over the desert, when suddenly I saw a figure about three hundred yards away. The figure crept along on its hands and knees, then it got up and staggered forward a few yards only to fall and crawl again. When we went to help him, who do you suppose it turned out to be?"

"José Silvestre, of course," said Captain Good.

"Yes, José Silvestre, or rather his skeleton and a little skin. His face was bright yellow with fever, and his large dark eyes stood nearly out of his head, for all the flesh had gone. There was nothing but yellow parchment-like skin, white hair, and the gaunt bones sticking up beneath.

"'Water! for the sake of Christ, water!' he moaned, and I saw that his lips were cracked, and his tongue was swollen and blackish.

"I gave him water with a little milk in it, and he drank it in great gulps, two quarts or so, without stopping. I would not let him have any more. Then the fever took him again, and he fell down and began to rave about Suliman's Mountains, and the diamonds, and the desert. I carried him into the tent and did what I could for him, which was little enough; but I saw how it must end. About eleven o'clock he grew quieter, and I went to sleep. At dawn I woke, and in the half light saw Silvestre sitting up, a strange, gaunt form, gazing out towards the desert. Presently the first ray of the sun shot right across the wide plain before us till it reached the faraway crest of one of the tallest of the Suliman Mountains, more than a hundred miles away.

"'There it is!' cried the dying man in Portuguese, pointing with his long, thin arm, 'but I shall never reach it. No one will ever reach it!'

"Suddenly, he paused. 'Friend,' he said, 'are you there? My eyes grow dark.'

"'Yes,' I said; 'lie down now, and rest.'

"'Ay,' he answered, 'I shall rest soon, I shall have eternity to rest. Listen, I am dying! You have been good to me. I will give you the writing. Perhaps you will get there if you can pass the desert, which has killed my poor servant and me.'

"Then he groped in his shirt and brought out a pouch made of antelope skin. It was fastened with a little strip of leather, which he tried to loosen, but could not. He handed it to me.

"'Untie it,' he said. I did so, and extracted a bit of torn yellow linen on which something was written in rusty letters. Inside this rag was a paper.

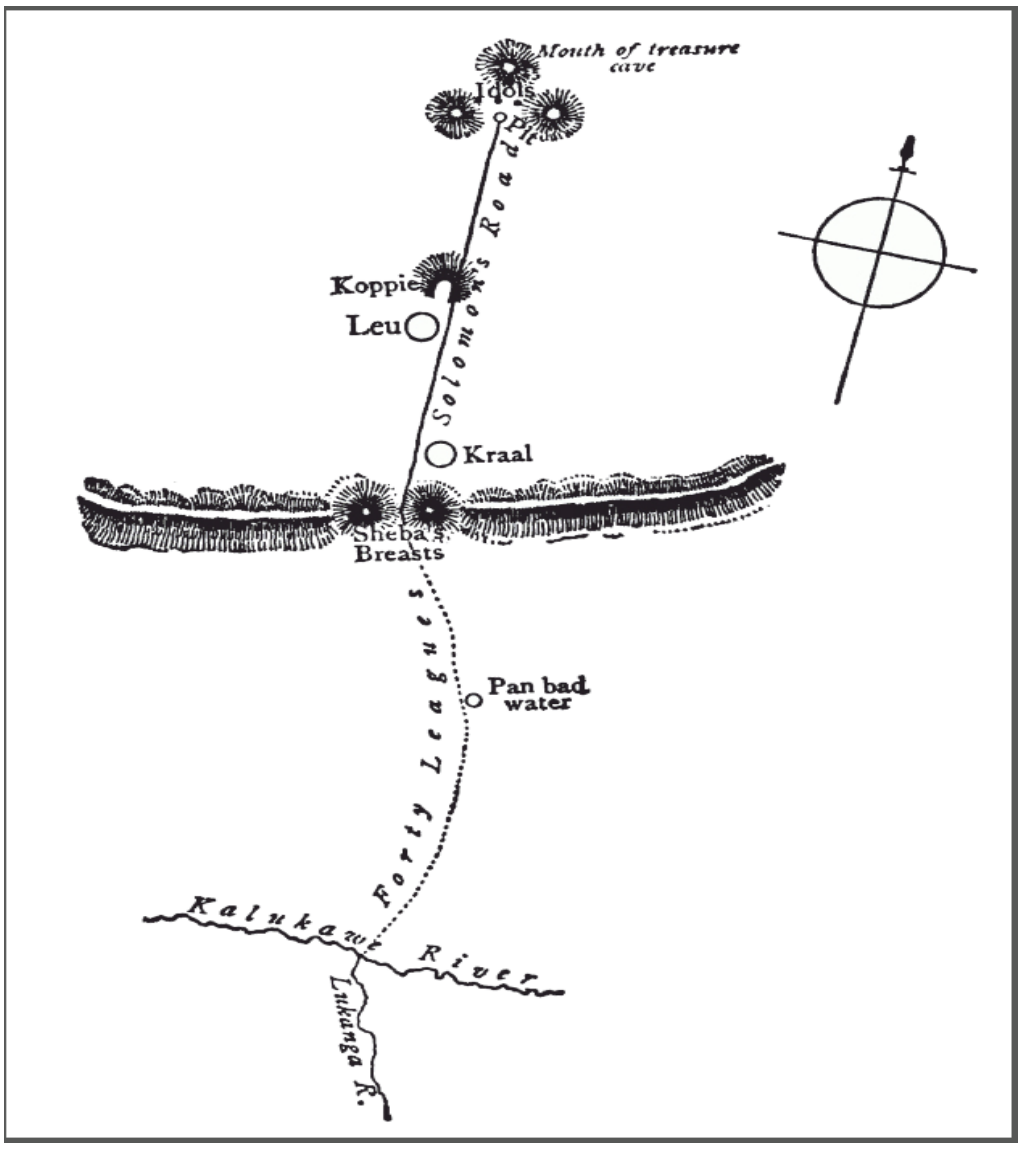
"Then he went on feebly, 'The paper contains all that is written on the linen. It took me years to read. Listen: my ancestor, a refugee from Lisbon, wrote that note when he was dying on those mountains which no white foot ever climbed before or since. His name was José da Silvestra, and he lived three hundred years ago. His slave, who waited for him on this side of the mountains, found him dead, and brought the writing home. It has been in the family ever since, but none have cared to read it, till at last I did. And I have lost my life over it, but another may succeed, and become the richest man in the world. Only give it to no one, senor; go yourself!'

"Then he began to wander again, and in an hour it was all over. God rest him! he died very quietly, and I buried him deep, so that the jackals could not dig him up."

"But the document?" said Sir Henry, in a tone of deep interest.

"Yes, what was in it?" added the captain.

"Well, gentlemen, I will tell you. I have never showed it to anybody except to a drunken old Portuguese trader who translated it for me, and had forgotten all about it by the next morning. The original rag is at my home in Durban, together with poor Dom José's transcription, but I have the English translation in my pocket-book, and a copy of the map, if it can be called a map. Here it is."



"I, José da Silvestra, who am now dying of hunger in the little cave where no snow is, on the north side of the nipple of the southernmost of the two mountains I have named Sheba's Breasts, write this in the year 1590 with a cleft bone upon a remnant of my clothing, my blood being the ink. If my slave should find it when he comes, and should bring it to Delagoa, let the king be informed, so that he may send an army which, if they live through the desert and the mountains, and can overcome the brave Kukuanes and their devilish arts, will make him the richest king since Solomon. With my own eyes I have seen the countless diamonds stored in Solomon's treasure chamber behind the white Death; but through the treachery of Gagool the witch-finder I could bring nought away, scarcely my life. Let him who comes follow the map, and climb the snow of Sheba's left breast till he reaches the nipple, on the north side of which is the great road Solomon made, from whence three days' journey to the King's Palace. Let him kill Gagool. Pray for my soul. Farewell.

José da Silvestra."

When I had finished reading the above, and shown the copy of the map, drawn by a dying hand in blood, there followed an astonished silence.

"Well," said Captain Good, "I have been round the world twice, but I have never heard a story like that."

"It's a queer tale, Mr. Quatermain," said Sir Henry. "I suppose you are not hoaxing us?"

"If you think that, Sir Henry," I said, much put out, and pocketing my paper – for I do not like to be thought one of those silly fellows who consider it witty to tell lies, and who are for ever boasting of extraordinary hunting adventures which never happened – "if you think that, why, there is an end to the matter," and I rose to go.

Sir Henry laid his large hand upon my shoulder.

"Sit down, Mr. Quatermain," he said. "I beg your pardon; but the story sounded so strange that I could hardly believe it."

"You shall see the original map and writing when we reach Durban," I answered. "But I have not told you about your brother. I knew the man Jim who was with him. He was a Bechuana by birth, a good hunter, and a clever man. That morning on which Mr. Neville was starting, Jim was standing by my wagon and cutting up tobacco on its shaft.

"'Jim,' said I, 'where are you off to this trip? It is elephants?'

"'No, Baas,' he answered, 'we are after something worth much more than ivory.'

"'And what might that be?' I said, curious. 'Is it gold?'

"'No, Baas, something worth more than gold,' and he grinned.

"I asked no more questions, but I was puzzled. Presently Jim finished cutting his tobacco.

"'Baas,' said he. 'Baas, we are going after diamonds.'

"'Diamonds! why, then, you are steering in the wrong direction; you should head for the Fields.'

"'Baas, have you ever heard of Suliman's Berg? Have you ever heard of the diamonds there?'

"'I have heard a foolish story, Jim.'

"'It is no story, Baas. Once I knew a woman who came from there, and reached Natal with her child, she told me – she is dead now.'

"'Your master will feed the vultures, Jim, if he tries to reach Suliman's country, and so will you if they can get any pickings off your worthless old carcass,' said I.

"He grinned again. 'Maybe. Man must die; I'd rather like to try a new country myself.'

"Half an hour after that I saw Neville's wagon move off. Presently Jim came running back. 'I didn't like to start without bidding you good-bye,' he said, 'for I daresay you are right, and that we shall never trek south again.'

"'Is your master really going to Suliman's Berg, Jim?'

"'He is going. He told me he had to try to make his fortune somehow; so he might as well have a fling for the diamonds.'

"'Oh!' I said; 'wait a bit, Jim; will you take a note to your master, and promise not to give it to him till you reach Inyati?' which was some hundred miles off.

"'Yes, Baas.'

"So I took a scrap of paper, and wrote on it, 'Let him who comes . . . climb the snow of Sheba's left breast, till he reaches the nipple, on the north side of which is Solomon's great road.'

"'Now, Jim,' I said, 'when you give this to your master, tell him to follow the advice on it. You are not to give it to him yet, because I don't want him back asking me questions which I won't answer. Now be off, the wagon is nearly out of sight.'

"Jim took the note and went, and that is all I know about your brother, Sir Henry; but I am much afraid—"

"Mr. Quatermain," said Sir Henry, "I am going to look for my brother; I am going to trace him to Suliman's Mountains, and over them if necessary, till I find him, or until I know that he is dead. Will you come with me?"

I am, as I think I have said, a cautious man, and this suggestion frightened me. It seemed to me that such a journey would lead to certain death, and as I had a son to support, I could not afford to die just then.

"No, thank you, Sir Henry, I think I had rather not," I answered. "I am too old for wild-goose chases. I have a son dependent on me, so I cannot afford to risk my life foolishly."

Both Sir Henry and Captain Good looked very disappointed.

"Mr. Quatermain," said the former, "I am well off, and I am determined to make this journey. You may put your fee at whatever figure you like within reason, and it shall be paid to you before we start. Moreover, I will arrange, in the event of anything untoward happening to us, that your son shall be provided for. Also if by chance we should reach this place, and find diamonds – or anything else – they shall belong to you and Good equally. I do not want them. You may pretty well make your own terms with me, Mr. Quatermain; and of course I shall pay all expenses."

"Sir Henry," said I, "this is the most generous proposal I ever had, and not to be sneezed at by a poor hunter. But I must take time to think it over. I will give you my answer before we get to Durban."

"Very good," answered Sir Henry.

Then I said good-night and went to bed, and dreamt about poor long-dead Silvestre and the diamonds.

CHAPTER 3

Umbopa Enters our Service

It takes four or five days for a ship to get from the Cape to Durban. All the time that we were steaming up to Natal I was thinking over Sir Henry Curtis's offer. We did not speak any more on the subject for a day or two, though I told them many hunting yarns.

At last, one beautiful evening in January, our hottest month, we steamed past the coast of Natal, expecting to reach Durban Point by sunset. It is a lovely coast, with its red sandhills and wide sweeps of vivid green, dotted here and there with Kafir kraals – fenced villages – and bordered by a ribbon of white surf. Just before you come to Durban there is a peculiar richness about the landscape, with the deepest green of the bush, marked now and again with a white house smiling out at the placid sea.

The sun was well down before we dropped anchor off the Point. It was too late to think of getting off the boat that night, so we went down to dinner.

When we came up to deck again the moon was out and shining brightly. From the shore floated sweet spicy odours, and in the windows sparkled a hundred lights. From a large brig lying near also came the music of the sailors as they worked at getting the anchor up.

Altogether it was a perfect night. We three – Sir Henry Curtis, Captain Good, and myself – went and sat by the wheel, and were quiet for a while.

"Well, Mr. Quatermain," said Sir Henry presently, "have you been thinking about my proposals?"

"Ay," echoed Captain Good, "will you give us the pleasure of your company to Solomon's Mines?"

I rose and knocked out my pipe before I answered. I had not made up my mind; but before the burning tobacco had fallen into the sea I had decided.

"Yes, gentlemen," I said, sitting down again. "I will go, and I will tell you why. First, these are my terms.

"1. You are to pay all expenses, and any ivory or other valuables we may get are to be divided between Captain Good and myself.

"2. You give me £500 for my services on the trip before we start, while I undertake to serve you faithfully till you choose to abandon the enterprise, or till we succeed, or disaster overtakes us.

"3. Before we leave you agree, in the event of my death, to pay my boy Harry, who is studying medicine at Guy's Hospital, a sum of £200 a year for five years, by which time he ought to be able to earn a living for himself if he is worth his salt. That is all, I think, and I daresay you will say quite enough too."

"No," answered Sir Henry, "I accept your terms gladly. I would pay more than that for your help."

"It's a pity I didn't ask for more, then; but I won't go back on my word. And now I will tell you my reasons for deciding to go. First of all, gentlemen, I have been observing you both, and hope you do not think me impertinent when I say that I like you, and believe that we shall work well together. That is important, let me tell you, on a long journey.

"As to the journey itself, I tell you flatly that I do not think it likely that we can come out of it alive, if we attempt to cross the Suliman Mountains. What was the fate of the old Dom da Silvestra three hundred years ago? What was the fate of his descendant twenty years ago? What has been your brother's fate? Frankly, gentlemen, I believe our fates will be the same as theirs."

I paused to watch the effect of my words. Captain Good looked a little uncomfortable, but Sir Henry's face did not change.

"We must take our chance," he said.

"You may perhaps wonder," I went on, "why, if I think this, I should undertake such a journey. It is for two reasons. Firstly I am a fatalist, and believe I will die when my time is come, regardless of where I go. Secondly, I am a poor man. For nearly forty years I have hunted and traded, but I have never made more than a living. Well, gentlemen, I don't know if you are aware that the average life of an elephant hunter from the time he starts his work is between four and five years. So you see I have lived through about seven generations of my class, and I should think that my time cannot be far off. If anything were to happen to me in the ordinary course of business, there would be little left to support my son Harry, whereas now he will be set up for five years. There is the whole affair in a nutshell."

"Mr. Quatermain," said Sir Henry, "whether you are right or wrong in predicting disaster for our enterprise, I am going through with it to the end."

"Yes, yes," put in the captain. "We are all three of us used to face danger, so it is no good turning back now."

Next day we went ashore, and I put up Sir Henry and Captain Good at the little shanty I have built on the Berea, and which I call my home. It has only three rooms and a kitchen, and a galvanised iron roof, but there is a good garden with loquot trees and some nice young mangoes. It is looked after by an old hunter of mine named Jack, whose thigh was so badly broken by a buffalo in Sikukunis country that he will never hunt again. But he can potter about and garden, being a Griqua by birth. You will never persuade a Zulu to take much interest in gardening. It is a peaceful art, and peaceful arts are not in his line.

Sir Henry and Good slept in a tent pitched in my little grove of orange trees at the end of the garden, for there was no room for them in the house.

Well, to get on – for if I do not, Harry, you will be tired of my story before we ever reach Suliman's Mountains – we arranged the document from Sir Henry, providing for you, my boy, in case of accidents. A lawyer charged him £20 for the job – an outrageous price. Then I got my cheque for £500.

Next I purchased a wagon and a team of oxen on Sir Henry's behalf, and beauties they were. It was a twenty-two-foot wagon with iron axles, very strong, and very light; not quite new, having been to the Diamond Fields and back, but all the better

for that, for I could see that the wood was well seasoned. If anything is going to give in a wagon, it will show up on the first trip. This vehicle was "half-tented", that is to say, only the back twelve feet were covered, leaving all the front part open for our gear. I gave £125 for it, and think that it was cheap at the price.

Then I bought a beautiful team of twenty Zulu oxen, which I had kept my eye on for a year or two. Sixteen oxen is the usual number for a team, but I took four extra to allow for casualties. These Zulu cattle are small and light, only half the size of the Africander oxen; but they will live where the Africanders would starve, and can travel an extra five miles a day. What is more, this lot had worked all over South Africa, and so had become fairly immune to red water, which so frequently destroys whole teams of oxen when they get on to strange country. As for "lung sick," which is a dreadful form of pneumonia, they had all been inoculated against it. This is done by cutting a slit in the tail of an ox, and binding in a piece of the diseased lung of an animal which has died of the sickness. The result is that the ox takes the disease in a mild form, which causes its tail to drop off, and is then immune. It seems cruel to rob the animal of his tail, especially in a country where there are so many flies, but it is better to sacrifice the tail and keep the ox than to lose both tail and ox. Still it does look odd to trek along behind twenty stumps, where there ought to be tails.

Next came the question of provisions and medicines. We had to avoid over-loading the wagon, and yet take everything absolutely necessary. Fortunately, it turned out that Good is a bit of a doctor, having at some point in his previous career taken a medical course. He is not, of course, qualified, but he knows more about it than many a man who can write M.D. after his name, and he had a splendid travelling medicine chest and a set of instruments. Whilst we were at Durban he cut off a Kafir's big toe in a way which it was a pleasure to see. But he was quite nonplussed when the Kafir, who had sat stolidly watching the operation, asked him to put on another, saying that a "white one" would do at a pinch.

There remained two further important points for consideration, namely, weapons and servants. As to the arms, I cannot do better than write a list of the guns we chose from the ample store that Sir Henry had brought from England, and from those which I owned. Here it is.

"Three heavy breech-loading double-eight elephant guns, weighing about fifteen pounds each, to carry a charge of eleven drachms of black powder." Two of these were by a well-known London firm. I do not know by whom my own was made, but it has always proved a most reliable weapon.

"Three double-500 Expresses, made to stand a charge of six drachms," sweet weapons, and admirable for medium-sized game, such as eland or sable antelope, or for men, especially in an open country and with the semi-hollow bullet.

"One double No. 12 central-fire Keeper's shot-gun, full choke both barrels." This gun proved of the greatest service to us in shooting game for the pot.

"Three Winchester repeating rifles as spare guns.

"Three single-action Colt's revolvers."

This was our total armament. Now as to the men who were to go with us. After much consultation we decided that we needed five, namely, a driver, a leader, and three servants.

The driver and leader I found without much difficulty, two Zulus, named Goza and Tom; but the servants proved a more difficult matter. We needed thoroughly trustworthy and brave men, as our lives might depend upon them.

At last I secured two, one a Hottentot named Ventvögel, or "windbird," and the other a little Zulu named Khiva, who spoke English perfectly. Ventvögel I had known before; he was one of the best trackers I ever met, and tough as whipcord. He never seemed to tire. But he had one failing – drink. However, as we were going beyond the region of grog-shops, this little weakness of his did not matter.

Having secured these two men I looked in vain for a third to suit my purpose. We decided to start without one, trusting to luck to find a suitable man on our way up country. But, as it happened, on the evening before our departure Khiva informed me that a Kafir was waiting to see me. We were just finishing dinner, and I told Khiva to bring him in.

Presently a tall, handsome-looking man, about thirty years of age, and light-coloured for a Zulu, entered, and lifting his knob-stick by way of salute, squatted in the corner on his haunches, and sat silent. I did not take any notice of him for a while, for if you rush into conversation at once, a Zulu is apt to think you a person of little consequence.

I observed, however, that he was a "Keshla" or ringed man; that is, he wore on his head the black ring of a type of gum worked up in the hair, which is usually assumed by Zulus on attaining a certain age or dignity. Also it struck me that his face was familiar.

"Well," I said at last, in Zulu, "What is your name?"

"Umbopa," answered the man in a slow, deep voice.

"I have seen your face before."

"Yes; I saw you at the place of the Little Hand" – that is, Isandhlwana – "on the day before the battle."

Then I remembered. I was one of Lord Chelmsford's guides in that unlucky Zulu War, and this man, who held some small command among the native auxiliaries, had spoken to me expressing his doubts about the safety of the camp. At the time I told him to hold his tongue; but afterwards I thought of his words.

"I remember," I said; "what is it you want?"

"It is this, Macumazahn." *Macumazahn* is my Kafir name, and means the man who gets up in the middle of the night, or he who keeps his eyes open. "I hear that you go on a great expedition far into the North with the white chiefs from over the water. Is it true?"

"It is."

"I hear that you go even to the Lukanga River, a month's journey beyond the Manica country. Is this so also, Macumazahn?"

"Why do you ask? What is it to you?" I answered suspiciously, for the object of our journey had been kept secret.

"It is this, O white men, that if indeed you travel so far I would travel with you."

There was a certain dignity in the man's mode of speech, and especially in his use of the words "O white men," instead of "O Inkosis," or chiefs, which struck me.

"You forget yourself a little," I said. "That is not the way to speak. What is your name, and where is your home?"

"My name is Umbopa. I am of the Zulu people, yet not of them. The house of my tribe is in the far North; it was left behind when the Zulus came down here a thousand years ago, long before Chaka reigned in Zululand. I have no home. I have wandered for many years. I came from the North as a child to Zululand. I was Cetewayo's man in the Nkomabakosi Regiment, serving there under the great Captain, Umslopogaasi of the Axe, who taught me to fight. Afterwards I came to Natal because I wanted to see the white man's ways. Next I fought against Cetewayo in the war. Since then I have been working in Natal. Now I am tired, and would go North again. Here is not my place. I want no money, but I am a brave man, and am worth my keep. I have spoken."

I was rather puzzled by this man and his way of speech. It was evident from his manner that he was telling the truth, but somehow he seemed different from the ordinary run of Zulus, and I rather mistrusted his offer to come without pay. I translated his words to Sir Henry and Good, and asked them their opinion.

Sir Henry told me to ask him to stand up. Umbopa did so, at the same time slipping off the long military great coat which he wore, and revealing himself naked except for the moocha round his centre and a necklace of lions' claws. Certainly he was a magnificent-looking man. Standing about six foot three high, he was broad in proportion, and very well-formed. Here and there deep black scars marked old assegai wounds. Sir Henry walked up to him and looked into his proud, handsome face.

"They make a good pair, don't they?" said Good; "one as big as the other."

"I like your looks, Mr. Umbopa, and I will take you as my servant," said Sir Henry in English.

Umbopa evidently understood him, for he answered in Zulu, "It is well"; and then added, with a glance at the white man's breadth and stature, "We are men, thou and I."

CHAPTER 4

An Elephant Hunt

Now I do not propose to tell at full length all the incidents of our travel up to Sitanda's Kraal. It was a journey of more than a thousand miles from Durban, the last three hundred of which we had to make on foot, owing to the frequent presence of the dreadful tsetse fly, whose bite is fatal to all animals except donkeys and men.

We left Durban at the end of January, and it was in the second week of May that we camped near Sitanda's Kraal. Our adventures on the way were many and various, but as they are of the sort which befall every African hunter – with one exception to be told later – I shall not set them down here.

At Inyati, the outlying trading station in the Matabele country, we parted with many regrets from our comfortable wagon. Only twelve oxen remained to us out of the beautiful team of twenty. One we lost from the bite of a cobra, three had perished from the lack of water, one strayed, and the other three died from eating the poisonous herb called tulip. Five more sickened from this cause, but we managed to cure them with doses of an infusion made by boiling down the tulip leaves, which acts as an antidote.

We left the wagon and oxen in the charge of Goza and Tom, our driver and leader, both trustworthy men. Then, accompanied by Umbopa, Khiva, Ventvögel, and half a dozen bearers whom we hired on the spot, we started off on foot upon our wild quest. I remember we were all a little silent, and I think that each of us was wondering if we should ever see our wagon again; for my part I never expected to do so.

For a while we tramped on in silence, till Umbopa, who was marching in front, broke into a Zulu chant about how some brave men, tired of a tame life, set off into a vast wilderness to find new things or die, and how, lo and behold! they found that it was not a wilderness at all, but a beautiful place full of young wives and fat cattle, game to hunt and enemies to kill.

We all laughed and took it for a good omen. Umbopa was cheerful, in a dignified sort of way, when he was not suffering from one of his fits of brooding, and he had a wonderful knack of keeping up our spirits. We grew very fond of him.

And now for the one adventure to which I am going to treat myself, for I dearly love a hunting story.

About a fortnight's march from Inyati we came across a beautiful bit of woodland country. The hills were covered with dense bush, with great quantities of the lovely machabell tree, laden with refreshing yellow fruit. This tree is the elephant's favourite food, and there were signs that the animals were around, for in many places the trees were broken down and even uprooted. The elephant is a destructive feeder.

One evening, after a long day's march, we came to a lovely spot. At the foot of a bush-clad hill lay a dry river-bed, in which pools of water were trodden round with hoof-prints. All around stretched the sea of pathless, silent bush.

As we emerged into this river-bed we startled a troop of tall giraffes, who galloped, or rather sailed off, in their strange gait, their hoofs rattling like castanets. They were about three hundred yards from us, and therefore almost out of range, but Good, who was walking ahead, and who had a loaded express in his hand, could not resist temptation. Lifting his gun, he shot at the last giraffe. By some extraordinary chance the ball struck it full on the back of the neck, and the giraffe went rolling head over heels just like a rabbit. I never saw a stranger thing.

"Curse it!" said Good, "I've killed him."

"Ou, Bougwan," exclaimed the Kafirs; "ou! ou!"

They called Good *Bougwan*, or Glass Eye, because of his monocle.

"Oh, 'Bougwan!'"echoed Sir Henry and I, and from that day Good's reputation as a marvellous shot was established, among the Kafirs at least. Really he was a bad shot, but whenever he missed we overlooked it for the sake of that giraffe.

Having set some of the men to cut off the best of the giraffe's meat, we went to work to build a *scherm* or shelter near one of the pools. This is done by cutting a quantity of thorn bushes and piling them in the shape of a circular hedge. Then the space enclosed is smoothed, and dry grass is made into a bed in the centre.

By the time the scherm was finished the moon peeped up, and our dinners of giraffe steaks and roasted marrow-bones were ready. I know of no greater luxury than giraffe marrow, unless it is elephant's heart, and we had that the next day. We ate our simple meal by the light of the moon; then we began to smoke and talk.

A curious picture we must have made squatting there round the fire. I, with my short grizzled hair sticking up, and Sir Henry with his long yellow locks made quite a contrast, especially as I am thin, short, and dark, and Sir Henry is tall, broad, and fair, and weighs fifteen stone. But perhaps the most curious-looking of the three was Captain John Good. There he sat, absolutely clean and tidy, and well dressed in a brown tweed shooting suit, with a hat to match. As usual, he was beautifully shaved, his eye-glass and his false teeth sparkling, and altogether he looked the neatest man I ever had to do with in the wilderness.

Ah! if he could have foreseen the future and the clothing he was to wear.

Well, there we sat talking in the moonlight, and watching the Kafirs a few yards away sucking their intoxicating *daccha* from a pipe made of an eland's horn, till one by one they rolled themselves up in their blankets and went to sleep by the fire – all except Umbopa, who sat a little apart, thinking deeply. He never mixed much with the other Kafirs.

Presently, from the depths of the bush behind us, came a loud "woof, woof!"

"That's a lion," said I, and we all started up to listen. Hardly had we done so, when from the pool a hundred yards off we heard the strident trumpeting of an elephant.

"*Unkungunklovo! Indlovu!*" "Elephant! Elephant!" whispered the Kafirs, and a few minutes afterwards we saw a succession of vast shadowy forms moving slowly from the water towards the bush.

Up jumped Good, thinking, perhaps, that it was as easy to kill elephant as he had found it to shoot giraffe, but I caught him by the arm and pulled him down.

"It's no good," I whispered, "let them go."

"It seems that we are in a paradise of game. I vote we stop here a day or two, and have a go at them," said Sir Henry presently.

I was rather surprised, for Sir Henry had been pushing forward as fast as possible, especially since we learnt at Inyati that about two years ago an Englishman called Neville had sold his wagon there, and gone on up country. But I suppose his hunter instincts got the better of him.

Good jumped at the idea of having a shot at those elephants; and so, to speak the truth, did I.

"All right, my hearties," said I. "But now let's turn in, for we ought to be up by dawn, and perhaps we may catch them feeding before they move on."

The others agreed, and we got ready for bed. Good took off his clothes, shook them, put his eye-glass and his false teeth into his trousers pocket, and folding each article neatly, placed it under a corner of his mackintosh sheet. Sir Henry and I made rougher arrangements, and soon were curled up in our blankets, and dropping off to sleep.

Going, going, go– What was that?

Suddenly, from the direction of the water came sounds of violent scuffling, and next instant a succession of the most awful roars. Only a lion could make such a noise as that. We all jumped up and looked towards the water, where we saw a confused mass staggering and struggling towards us. We seized our rifles, and slipping on our *veldtschoons*, that is, our shoes of untanned hide, ran out of the scherm. By this time the mass was rolling over and over on the ground, and when we reached the spot it struggled no longer, but lay quite still.

Now we saw what it was. On the grass there lay a sable antelope bull – the most beautiful of all the African antelopes – quite dead. Transfixed by its great curved horns was a magnificent lion, also dead. Evidently the antelope had come down to drink at the pool where the lion was lying in wait. The lion had sprung on him, only to be caught upon the sharp curved horns.

We called the Kafirs, and between us managed to drag their carcasses up to the scherm. After that we lay down, to wake no more till dawn.

With the first light we were up. We took with us the three eight-bore rifles, a good supply of ammunition, and our large water-bottles, filled with cold weak tea. After swallowing a little breakfast we started, Umbopa, Khiva and Ventvögel accompanying us.

We had no difficulty in finding the broad elephant trail, which Ventvögel pronounced to have been made by between twenty and thirty elephants, most of them full-grown bulls. But the herd had moved on during the night. It was some time before we drew close to them.

Presently we caught sight of the herd standing in a hollow, flapping their great ears. It was a splendid sight, for they were only about two hundred yards from us. Taking a handful of dry grass, I threw it into the air to see how the wind was; for if they smelt us they would be off before we could get a shot. Finding that it was blowing from the elephants towards us, we crept on stealthily, and managed to get within forty yards of them.

Just in front of us, side on, stood three splendid bulls, one of them with enormous tusks. I whispered to the others that I would take the middle one; Sir Henry would aim at the elephant to the left, and Good at the bull with the big tusks.

"Now," I whispered.

Boom! boom! boom! went the three heavy rifles, and down came Sir Henry's elephant dead as a hammer, shot right through the heart. Mine fell on to its knees, but in another moment he was up and off, tearing along straight past me. As he went I gave him the second barrel in the ribs, and this brought him down in good earnest. Hastily slipping in two fresh cartridges I ran close up to him, and a ball through the brain put an end to the poor brute's struggles.

Then I turned to see how Good had fared with the big bull, which I had heard screaming with rage and pain. The captain was in a great state of excitement. The wounded bull had turned and come straight for Good, who had barely time to get out of his way, and then charged on blindly past him, towards our camp. Meanwhile the herd had crashed off in wild alarm in the other direction.

For a while we debated whether to go after the wounded bull or to follow the herd, and finally decided on the latter. It was easy work to follow the elephants, for they had left a trail like a road behind them, crushing down the thick bush in their furious flight as though it were grass.

But to catch up with them was another matter. We struggled on under the broiling sun for over two hours before we found them standing together. A solitary bull stood fifty yards or so to this side of the herd, over which he was evidently keeping sentry, and about sixty yards from us. We all aimed at this bull, and at my whispered word, we fired. The three shots took effect, and down he went dead.

Again the herd started, but unfortunately for them about a hundred yards further on was a dried-out stream bed with steep banks. Into this the elephants plunged, and when we reached the edge we found them struggling in wild confusion to get up the other bank, trumpeting in panic. Firing away as quickly as we could load, we had killed five of the poor beasts, when they suddenly gave up their attempts to climb the bank and rushed headlong down the stream. We were too tired to follow them, and perhaps also a little sick of slaughter.

So after we had rested, and had eaten two of the elephant hearts for supper, we started homewards, very well pleased with our day's work, intending to send the bearers the next day to chop away the tusks.

Shortly after we re-passed the spot where Good had wounded the bull elephant we came across a herd of eland, but did not shoot at them, as we had plenty of meat. They trotted past us, and then wheeled round to look at us. As Good had never seen

an eland up close, he handed his rifle to Umbopa, and, followed by Khiva, strolled up to them. We sat down and waited for him.

The sun was just going down in its reddest glory, when suddenly we heard an elephant scream, and saw its huge and rushing form with uplifted trunk silhouetted against the fiery globe of the sun

Next second we saw Good and Khiva tearing back towards us with the wounded bull charging after them. We did not dare to fire in case we hit one of them; and then a dreadful thing happened. Good fell a victim to his passion for civilised dress. His trousers encumbered him in that desperate race, and when he was about sixty yards from us, his boot slipped, and down he went on his face right in front of the elephant.

We gave a gasp, for we knew that he must die, and ran as hard as we could towards him. In three seconds it had ended, but not as we thought.

Khiva saw his master fall, and brave lad as he was, turned and flung his assegai straight into the elephant's face. It stuck in his trunk.

With a scream of pain, the brute seized the poor Zulu, hurled him to the earth, and placing one huge foot on his body, twined its trunk round his upper part and tore him in two.

We rushed up mad with horror, and fired again and again, till presently the elephant fell upon the fragments of the Zulu.

As for Good, he rose and wrung his hands over the brave man who had given his life to save him. I felt a lump grow in my throat. Umbopa stood contemplating the huge dead elephant and the mangled remains of poor Khiva.

"Ah, well," he said presently, "he is dead, but he died like a man!"

CHAPTER 5

Our March into the Desert

We had killed nine elephants, and it took us two days to cut out the tusks and bury them carefully in the sand under a large tree, which would act as a marker.

As for Khiva, we buried what remained of him with an assegai to protect himself with on his journey to a better world. On the third day we marched again, and in due course, after a long and wearisome tramp, and many adventures which I will not describe, we reached Sitanda's Kraal, near the Lukanga River.

This was the real starting-point of our expedition. To the right was a scattered native settlement with a few stone cattle kraals and some cultivated land down by the water. Beyond it stretched great tracts of waving veldt covered with tall grass, over which herds of small game were wandering. To the left lay the vast desert.

Just below our encampment flowed a little stream. Its far slope was the same down which, twenty years before, I had seen poor Silvestre creeping back after his attempt to reach Solomon's Mines. Beyond that slope began the waterless desert, covered with a species of karoo shrub.

It was evening when we pitched our camp, and the great ball of the sun was sinking into the desert. Leaving Good to arrange our little camp, I took Sir Henry with me to the top of the slope, where we gazed across the desert. The air was very clear, and far, far away I could distinguish the faint blue outlines, here and there capped with white, of the Suliman Berg.

"There," I said, "there is the wall round Solomon's Mines, but God knows if we shall ever climb it."

"My brother should be there, and if he is, I shall reach him somehow," said Sir Henry, with quiet confidence.

"I hope so," I answered. I turned to go back to the camp, and saw that we were not alone. Behind us, also gazing earnestly towards the far-off mountains, stood Umbopa.

He spoke in Zulu to Sir Henry, to whom he had attached himself.

"Is it to that land that thou wouldst journey, Incubu?" (a word meaning elephant, and the name given to Sir Henry by the Kafirs).

I asked him sharply what he meant by addressing his master in that familiar way. The Zulu laughed a quiet little laugh which angered me.

"How dost thou know that I am not the equal of the Inkosi whom I serve?" he said. "He is of a royal house, no doubt; so, maybe, am I. At least, I am as great a man. Be my mouth, O Macumazahn, and say my words to the Incubu, my master, for I would speak to him and to thee."

Although I was angry with the man, somehow he impressed me, and I was curious to know what he had to say. So I translated, expressing my opinion at the same time that he was an impudent fellow.

"Yes, Umbopa," answered Sir Henry, "I would journey there."

"The desert is wide and there is no water, the mountains are high and covered with snow, and man cannot say what lies beyond them to the west; how shalt thou go thither, Incubu, and why?"

I translated again.

"Tell him," answered Sir Henry, "that I go because I believe my brother has gone there before me, and I journey to seek him."

"That is so, Incubu; a Hottentot I met on the road told me that a white man went out into the desert two years ago towards those mountains with one servant, a hunter. They never came back."

"How do you know it was my brother?" asked Sir Henry.

"Nay, I know not. But the Hottentot said that he had thine eyes and a black beard. He said that the name of the hunter with him was Jim; that he was a Bechuana hunter."

"There is no doubt about it," said I; "I knew Jim well."

Sir Henry nodded. "I was sure of it," he said. "If George set his mind upon a thing he generally did it. If he meant to cross the Suliman Berg, he has crossed it, unless some accident overtook him, and we must look for him on the other side."

Umbopa understood English, though he rarely spoke it.

"It is a far journey, Incubu," he put in, and I translated his remark.

"Yes," answered Sir Henry, "it is far. But there is nothing, Umbopa, that a man cannot do, there are no mountains he may not climb, there are no deserts he cannot cross, if love leads him and he holds his life in his hands counting it as nothing, ready to keep or lose it as Heaven above may order."

I translated.

"Great words, my father," answered the Zulu – I call him a Zulu, though he was not really one. "Thou art right, my father Incubu. Listen! what is life? It is a feather, it is the seed of the grass, blown hither and thither, sometimes multiplying itself, sometimes carried away into the heavens. But if that seed be good and heavy it may travel a little way on the road it wills. It is well to try and follow one's road. Man must die: at the worst he can but die a little sooner. I will go with thee across the desert and over the mountains, unless I fall on the way, my father."

He paused awhile, and then went on with one of those strange bursts of eloquence that Zulus sometimes display.

"What is life? Tell me, O white men, who are wise, who know the secrets of the world; who flash your words from afar without a voice; tell me, white men, the secret of our life – where it goes and from whence it comes!

"You cannot answer me; you know not. Listen, I will answer. Out of the dark we came, into the dark we go. Like a storm-driven bird at night we fly out of the Nowhere; for a moment our wings are seen in the light of the fire, and, lo! we are gone again into the Nowhere. Life is nothing. Life is all. It is the Hand with which we hold off Death. It is the shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself at sunset."

"You are a strange man," said Sir Henry.

Umbopa laughed. “It seems to me that we are much alike, Incubu. Perhaps I seek a brother over the mountains.”

I looked at him suspiciously. “What dost thou mean?” I asked; “what dost thou know of those mountains?”

“A very little. There is a strange land yonder, a land of witchcraft and brave people, and of trees, and snowy peaks, and of a great white road. I have heard of it. But what is the good of talking? It grows dark. Those who live to see will see.”

I gazed at him doubtfully. The man knew too much.

“You need not fear me, Macumazahn,” he said, interpreting my look. “I dig no holes for you to fall in. I make no plots. If ever we cross those mountains I will tell what I know. But Death sits upon them. Be wise and turn back. Go and hunt elephants, my masters. I have spoken.”

And without another word he lifted his spear in salutation, and returned towards the camp.

“That is an odd man,” said Sir Henry.

“Yes,” answered I, “too odd by half. I don’t like it. He knows something, and will not speak out. But it is no use quarrelling with him. We are in for a curious trip, and a mysterious Zulu won’t make much difference one way or another.”

Next day we made ready to start. It was impossible to drag our heavy elephant rifles and other kit with us across the desert, so, dismissing our bearers, we made an arrangement with an old native who lived close by to take care of them till we returned. He was an old thief; I could see him gloating over them with greedy eyes. But I took some precautions.

First of all I loaded all the rifles, placing them at full cock, and informed him that if he touched them they would go off. He tried the experiment instantly with my eight-bore, and it did go off, and blew a hole right through one of his oxen. He was considerably startled, and had the impudence to ask me to pay for the ox. But nothing would induce him to touch the guns again.

I told him that, when we came back, if one of those things was missing I would kill him and his people by witchcraft; and if we died and he tried to steal the rifles I would come and haunt him and turn his cattle mad and his milk sour. After that he promised to look after them as though they were his father’s spirit. He was a very superstitious old man and a great villain.

Having thus disposed of our superfluous gear we arranged the kit we five – Sir Henry, Good, myself, Umbopa, and the Hottentot Ventvögel – were to take with us on our journey. We could not get its weight below about forty pounds a man. This is what it consisted of:

The three express rifles and two hundred rounds of ammunition.

The two Winchester repeating rifles (for Umbopa and Ventvögel), with two hundred rounds of cartridge.

Five Cochrane’s water-bottles, each holding four pints.

Five blankets.

Twenty-five pounds’ weight of biltong – dried meat.

Ten pounds’ weight of best mixed beads for gifts.

A selection of medicine, including an ounce of quinine, and one or two small surgical instruments.

Our knives, a few sundries, such as a compass, matches, a pocket filter, tobacco, a trowel, a bottle of brandy, and the clothes we stood in.

This was all our gear, not much, but we dared not try to carry more. Indeed, each load was a heavy one with which to travel across the burning desert, for in such places every ounce tells. But we could not reduce the weight any further. There was nothing taken but what was absolutely necessary.

With great difficulty, and by the promise of a present of a good hunting-knife each, I succeeded in persuading three natives from the village to come with us for the first stage of twenty miles, and to each carry a large gourd holding a gallon of water apiece. My object was to enable us to refill our water-bottles after the first night's march, for we would start in the cool of the evening. I told these natives that we were going to shoot ostriches, at which they shrugged their shoulders, saying that we were mad and should perish of thirst, which I must say seemed probable; but they agreed to come, probably reflecting that our fate was no business of theirs.

All next day we rested and slept, and at sunset ate a hearty meal of fresh beef washed down with tea, the last, as Good remarked sadly, we were likely to drink for many a long day. Then we waited for the moon to rise. At last, about nine o'clock, up she came in all her glory, flooding the wild country with light, and throwing a silver sheen on the rolling desert before us, which looked as solemn and quiet and as alien to man as the star-studded sky.

We hesitated a little, as human nature is prone to hesitate on the threshold of an irrevocable step. Umbopa, assegai in hand and a rifle across his shoulders, stared fixedly across the desert a few paces ahead of us; while the hired natives, with the gourds of water, and Ventvögel, were gathered behind.

"Gentlemen," said Sir Henry presently, in his deep voice, "we are going on about as strange a journey as men can make in this world. It is very doubtful if we can succeed. But we will stand together for good or for evil to the last. Now before we start let us for a moment pray to the Power who shapes the destinies of men, that He may direct our steps in accordance with His will."

Taking off his hat he covered his face with his hands for a moment, and Good and I did likewise.

I am not a first-rate praying man; few hunters are, and as for Sir Henry, I never heard him speak like that before, and only once since. Anyhow I do not remember, except on one single occasion, ever praying better in my life than I did during that minute, and somehow I felt the happier for it. Our future was so completely unknown, and I think that the unknown always brings a man nearer to his Maker.

"And now," said Sir Henry, "trek!"

So we started.

We had nothing to guide ourselves by except the distant mountains and old José da Silvestre's chart, which, considering that it was drawn by a dying man on a fragment of linen three centuries ago, was not a very satisfactory sort of map. Still, our hope of success depended upon it. If we failed in finding the pool of bad water

which the old Dom marked in the middle of the desert, about sixty miles from our starting-point, and as far from the mountains, in all probability we must perish miserably of thirst.

But to my mind the chances of our finding it in that great sea of sand seemed almost infinitesimal. Even supposing that da Silvestra had marked the pool correctly, what was there to prevent its having been dried up by the sun generations ago, or filled with the drifting sand?

On we tramped silently through the night. The karoo bushes caught at our feet, and the sand worked into our veldtschoons and Good's shooting-boots, so that every few miles we had to stop and empty them; but still the night kept fairly cool, and we made fair progress. It was very silent in the desert, oppressively so indeed. Good felt this, and once began to whistle "The girl I left behind me," but the notes sounded mournful in that vast place, and he soon gave up.

Shortly afterwards a startling little incident occurred. Good was leading, as the holder of the compass, and we were toiling along in single file behind him, when suddenly we heard an exclamation – and he vanished.

Next second there arose all around us a most extraordinary hubbub: snorts, groans, and wild sounds of rushing feet. In the faint light we could see dim galloping forms. The natives threw down their loads and prepared to bolt, but remembering that there was nowhere to run to, they threw themselves upon the ground and howled out that it was ghosts.

Sir Henry and I stood amazed; nor was our amazement lessened when we saw Good careering off in the direction of the mountains, apparently mounted on the back of a horse and halloaing wildly. In another second he threw up his arms, and fell to the earth with a thud.

Then I saw what had happened; we had stumbled upon a herd of sleeping quagga, on to the back of one of which Good had actually fallen, and it got up and made off with him. I ran towards Good, afraid he should be hurt, but to my great relief I found him sitting in the sand, his eye-glass still fixed firmly in his eye, rather shaken, but not injured.

After this we travelled on without any further mishap till about one o'clock, when we called a halt. Having drunk a little water, and rested for half an hour, we started again.

On, on we went, till at last the east began to blush. Faint rays of primrose light changed to golden bars, through which the dawn glided out across the desert. The stars grew pale and vanished; the golden moon grew sickly. Then light came flashing through the veils of mist, till the desert was draped in a tremulous golden glow, and it was day.

Still we did not halt, though by this time we would have been glad to, for we knew that once the sun was fully up it would be almost impossible for us to walk. About an hour later, we spied a little pile of boulders, and found an overhanging slab of rock which gave a useful shelter from the heat. Underneath this we crept, and each of us having drunk some water and eaten a bit of biltong, we were soon sound asleep.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon before we woke, to find our bearers preparing to return. They had seen enough of the desert already. So we took a hearty drink, and filled our water-bottles up again from the gourds that they had brought, and then watched them depart on their twenty miles' tramp home.

At half-past four we also started. It was lonely work, for apart from a few ostriches there was not a single living creature to be seen. It was too dry for game, and with the exception of a deadly-looking cobra or two we saw no reptiles.

One insect, however, we found abundant, and that was the common fly. He is an extraordinary insect, is the house fly. You will find him everywhere. I have seen him enclosed in amber half a million years old, looking exactly like his descendant of today, and I have little doubt that when the last man lies dying on the earth he will be buzzing round, watching for an opportunity to settle on his nose.

At sunset we halted, waiting for the moon to rise. At last she came up, beautiful and serene, and we trudged on wearily through the night, till at last the welcome sun put a pause to our labours. We drank a little and flung ourselves down on the sand, thoroughly tired out, and soon were all asleep.

There was no need to set a watch, for we had nothing to fear from anything in that vast empty plain. Our only enemies were heat, thirst, and flies. This time we were not so lucky as to find a sheltering rock to guard us from the glare of the sun, with the result that at about seven o'clock we woke up feeling that we were literally being baked through and through. The burning sun seemed to be sucking our very blood out of us. We sat up and gasped.

"Phew," said I, grabbing at the halo of flies which buzzed cheerfully round my head.

"My word!" said Sir Henry.

"It is hot!" echoed Good.

It was hot, indeed, and there was not a bit of shelter – no rock or tree, nothing but an unending, dazzling glare.

"What is to be done?" asked Sir Henry; "we can't stand this for long."

We looked at each other blankly.

"I have it," said Good, "we must dig a hole, get in it, and cover ourselves with the karoo bushes."

It did not seem a very promising suggestion, but it was better than nothing, so we set to work with the trowel and our hands, and in about an hour had dug out a patch of ground some two feet deep. Then we cut bushes with our hunting-knives, and creeping into the hole, pulled them over us all except Ventvögel, on whom, as a Hottentot, the heat had no particular effect.

This gave us some slight shelter from the burning rays of the sun, but the atmosphere in that amateur grave can be better imagined than described. There we lay panting, and every now and again moistening our lips from our scanty supply of water. We could easily have drunk it all in the first two hours, but we were forced to ration it.

Somehow that miserable day wore on towards evening. About three o'clock in the afternoon we decided that it would be better to die walking than to be killed

slowly by heat and thirst in that dreadful hole. So each taking a little drink from our fast diminishing supply of water, we staggered on.

We had then covered some fifty miles of wilderness. Da Silvestra had marked the desert as measuring forty leagues across, with the "pan bad water" about in the middle of it. Now forty leagues is one hundred and twenty miles, so we ought to be within twelve or fifteen miles of the water if any should really exist.

Through the afternoon we crept slowly and painfully along, scarcely doing more than a mile and a half in an hour. At sunset we rested again, waiting for the moon, and after drinking a little managed to get some sleep.

Before we lay down, Umbopa pointed out to us a slight and indistinct hillock on the flat surface of the plain about eight miles away. At that distance it looked like an ant-hill, and as I was dropping off to sleep I wondered what it could be.

With the moon we marched again, feeling exhausted, and suffering tortures from thirst and prickly heat. Nobody who has not felt it can know what we went through. We walked no longer, we staggered, now and again falling from exhaustion, and being obliged to call a halt every hour or so. We had scarcely energy to speak. Previously Good had chatted and joked, but now he had not a joke in him.

At last, about two o'clock, utterly worn out in body and mind, we came to the foot of the sand hill, which at first sight resembled a gigantic ant-heap about a hundred feet high, and covering nearly two acres of ground.

Here we halted, and in our desperate thirst sucked down our last drops of water. We had only half a pint each, and each of us could have drunk a gallon.

Then we lay down. Just as I was dropping off to sleep I heard Umbopa remark to himself in Zulu, "If we cannot find water we shall all be dead before the moon rises tomorrow."

I shuddered. Yet even that prospect could not keep me from sleeping.

CHAPTER 6

Water Water!

Two hours later, at about four o'clock, I woke up, for thirst tortured me so much that I could sleep no more. I had been dreaming that I was bathing in a running stream, with green banks and trees, and I awoke to find myself in this arid wilderness, and to remember, as Umbopa had said, that if we did not find water that day we must perish miserably.

I sat up and rubbed my grimy face with my dry hands, as my lips and eyelids were stuck together, and it was only with an effort that I was able to open them. It was almost dawn, but there was none of the bright feel of dawn in the air, which was thick with a hot murkiness. The others were still sleeping.

As it grew light enough to read, I drew out a little pocket copy of the "Ingoldsby Legends" which I had brought with me, and read "The Jackdaw of Rheims." When I got to where

"A nice little boy held a golden ewer,
Embossed, and filled with water as pure
As any that flows between Rheims and Namur,"

I tried to smack my cracking lips. The mere thought of that pure water made me mad. I could have whipped into that poem and drunk the lot. I must have been a little light-headed; for I started thinking how astonished the Cardinal and his nice little boy and the jackdaw would have been to see a burnt up, grizzly-haired little elephant hunter suddenly bound between them, put his dirty face into the basin, and swallow every drop of the precious water. The idea amused me so much that I cackled aloud, which woke the others.

Once we were all fully awake we began to discuss the situation. We had not a drop of water: our bottles were dry as a bone. Good, who had charge of the flask of brandy, got it out and looked at it longingly; but Sir Henry promptly took it away from him, for to drink spirit would only have been to hasten the end.

"If we do not find water we shall die," he said.

"If we trust the old Dom's map, there should be some about," I said; but nobody seemed reassured. Now it was gradually growing light, and as we sat staring blankly at each other, the Hottentot Ventvögel rose and begin to walk about with his eyes on the ground. Presently he stopped short, and with an exclamation, pointed to the earth.

"What is it?" we exclaimed; and rising we went to where he was standing staring at the sand.

"It is fresh Springbok spoor," I said; "what of it?"

"Springboks do not go far from water," he answered in Dutch.

"No," I answered, "I forgot; thank God."

This little discovery put new life into us; for when a man is in a desperate position, even the slightest hope can make him almost happy.

Meanwhile Ventvögel was sniffing the hot air like an old Impala ram who scents danger. Presently he spoke again.

"I smell water," he said. At that we felt quite jubilant, for we knew what a wonderful instinct the Hottentots possess.

Just then the sun came up, and revealed so grand a sight to our astonished eyes that for a moment or two we forgot our thirst.

There, not more than forty or fifty miles from us, glittering like silver in the early rays of the morning sun, soared Sheba's Breasts; and stretching away for hundreds of miles on either side of them ran the great Suliman Berg. When I try to describe the extraordinary grandeur and beauty of that sight, language seems to fail me. Straight before us rose two enormous mountains, each of them at least fifteen thousand feet high, standing a dozen miles apart, linked together by a steep cliff of rock, and towering in awful white solemnity straight into the sky. These mountains are shaped after the fashion of a woman's breasts, and at times the mists and shadows beneath them take the form of a recumbent woman, veiled mysteriously in sleep.

Upon the top of each is a vast hillock covered with snow, exactly corresponding to the nipple on a breast. The stretch of cliff that connects them appears to be some thousands of feet in height, and perfectly vertical, and on either side of them, so far as the eye can reach, extend similar lines of cliff, broken only here and there by flat table-topped mountains; a formation that is very common in Africa.

There was something so solemn and overpowering about those huge volcanoes – for doubtless they are extinct volcanoes – that it quite awed us. For a while the morning light played upon the snow and slopes beneath, and then, as though to veil the majestic sight from our eyes, strange mists gathered around the mountains, till we could only trace their gigantic ghostlike outlines. Indeed, as we afterwards discovered, they were usually wrapped in mist, which accounted for our not having seen them clearly before.

Sheba's Breasts had scarcely vanished into cloud-clad privacy, before our thirst reasserted itself.

It was all very well for Ventvögel to say that he smelt water, but we could see no signs of it. Wherever we looked, there was nothing but arid sand and karoo scrub. We walked round the hillock and gazed about anxiously, but there was no sign of a pool or spring.

"You are a fool," I said angrily to Ventvögel; "there is no water."

But still he sniffed. "I smell it, Baas," he answered; "it is somewhere in the air."

"Yes," I said, "no doubt it is in the clouds, and in about two months it will fall and wash our bones."

Sir Henry stroked his yellow beard thoughtfully. "Perhaps it is on the top of the hill," he suggested.

"Nonsense," said Good; "whoever heard of water being found at the top of a hill!"

"Let us go and look," I put in, and hopelessly enough we scrambled up the sandy sides of the hillock, Umbopa leading. Presently he stopped as though he was petrified.

"*Nanzia manzie*!" "Here is water!" he cried.

We rushed up to him, and there, sure enough, in a deep indentation on the very top of the sandhill, was a pool of water. How it came to be in such a strange place we did not stop to inquire, nor did we hesitate at its black and unpleasant appearance. It was water, and that was enough for us. In another second we were all down on our stomachs sucking up the uninviting fluid as though it were nectar fit for the gods. Heavens, how we did drink!

Then when we had done drinking we tore off our clothes and sat down in the pool, absorbing the moisture through our parched skins. You, Harry, my boy, who have only to turn on a couple of taps to bathe, can have little idea of the luxury of that muddy wallow in brackish water.

After a while we rose from it, refreshed indeed, and ate our fill of biltong, which we had scarcely been able to touch for twenty-four hours. Then we smoked a pipe, and lay down beside that blessed pool, under the overhanging shadow of its bank, and slept till noon.

All that day we rested there by the water, thanking our stars that we had been lucky enough to find it, and not forgetting to give a due share of gratitude to the long-dead da Silvestra, who had set its position down so accurately. It was amazing that it had lasted so long; I can only suppose that it was fed by some spring deep down in the sand.

Having filled both ourselves and our water-bottles as full as possible, we set off again in far better spirits. That night we covered nearly five-and-twenty miles; but, needless to say, found no more water, though we were lucky enough the following day to get a little shade behind some ant-hills.

When the sun rose, for a while it cleared away the mysterious mists. Suliman's Berg with the two majestic Breasts, now only about twenty miles off, seemed to be tower right above us. At the approach of evening we marched again. To cut a long story short, by daylight next morning we found ourselves upon the lowest slopes of Sheba's left breast. By this time our water was exhausted once more, and we were suffering severely from thirst, with no chance of relieving it till we reached the snow line far above us.

After resting an hour or two, driven by our torturing thirst, we went on, toiling painfully in the burning heat up the lava slopes; for the huge base of the mountain was composed entirely of ancient lava beds.

By eleven o'clock we were utterly exhausted, and in a very bad state indeed. The lava clinker, over which we had to drag ourselves, made our feet very sore. A few hundred yards above us were some large lumps of lava, and we headed towards these with the intention of lying down beneath their shade.

When we reached them, to our surprise we saw that on a little ridge close by, the clinker was covered with dense green growth. Evidently seeds had landed there, and

grass had grown. But we did not take much further interest in the green growth, for one cannot live on grass.

So we sat down under the rocks and groaned, and I for one wished heartily that we had never started on this fool's errand. Then Umbopa got up and hobbled towards the patch of green. A few minutes afterwards, to my great astonishment, I saw that usually very dignified individual dancing and shouting like a maniac, and waving something green. We all scrambled towards him as fast as our weary limbs would carry us, hoping that he had found water.

"What is it, Umbopa, son of a fool?" I shouted in Zulu.

"It is food and water, Macumazahn," and again he waved the green thing.

Then I saw what he had found. It was a melon. We had hit upon a patch of wild melons, thousands of them, and ripe.

"Melons!" I yelled. I think we ate about six each before we had done, and poor fruit as they were, I doubt if I ever thought anything nicer.

But melons are not very nutritious, and when we had satisfied our thirst with them, we began to feel exceedingly hungry. We had still some biltong left, but our stomachs turned from biltong, and besides, we needed to conserve it, for we did not know when we should find more food. Just at this moment I saw a flock of about ten large birds flying straight towards us.

"*Skit, Baas, skit!*" "Shoot, master, shoot!" whispered the Hottentot, throwing himself on his face, an example which we all followed.

I saw that the birds were a flock of bustards, and that they would pass within fifty yards of my head. Taking one of the Winchesters, I waited till they were nearly over us, and then jumped to my feet. On seeing me the birds bunched up together, as I expected that they would, and I fired two shots straight into the thick of them, and, as luck would have it, brought down a fine fellow that weighed about twenty pounds.

In half an hour we had a fire made of dry melon stalks, and he was toasting over it, and we had a feast. Nothing was left of that bird but his leg-bones and his beak, and we felt a good deal better afterwards.

That night we went on again with the moon, carrying as many melons as we could. As we ascended we found the air grew cooler, which was a great relief. At dawn we were only about a dozen miles from the snow line. Here we discovered more melons, so we no longer had any anxiety about water, for we knew that we should soon get plenty of snow.

But the ascent had now become very steep. We made slow progress; not more than a mile an hour. That night we ate our last morsel of biltong.

Now we began to grow very anxious about food. We had escaped death by thirst, but possibly only to die of hunger. The events of the next three miserable days are best described by copying the entries made at the time in my note-book.

"21st May.—Started 11 a.m., finding it cool enough to travel by day, and carrying some water-melons. Struggled on all day, but found no more melons. Saw no game

of any sort. Halted at sundown, having had no food for many hours. Suffered much during the night from cold.

"22nd.—Started at sunrise again, feeling very faint and weak. Only made about five miles all day; found some patches of snow, which we ate, but nothing else. Camped at night under the edge of a great plateau. Cold bitter. Drank a little brandy each, and huddled together in our blankets, to keep ourselves alive. Suffering frightfully from hunger and weariness. Thought that Ventvögel would have died during the night.

"23rd.—Struggled forward once more as soon as the sun was well up. We are now in a dreadful plight, and I fear that unless we get food this will be our last day's journey. Little brandy left. Ventvögel is in a very bad way. Like most Hottentots, he cannot stand cold. Pangs of hunger not so bad, but have a sort of numb feeling about my stomach. Others say the same. We are now on a level with the wall of lava linking the two Breasts, and the view is glorious. Behind us the glowing desert rolls away to the horizon, and before us lie mile upon mile of smooth hard snow, out of the centre of which the nipple of the mountain rises about four thousand feet into the sky. Not a living thing is to be seen. God help us; I fear our time has come."

Now I will drop the journal, partly because it is not very interesting reading; also because what follows needs to be told more fully.

All that day – the 23rd May – we struggled slowly up the snowy slope, lying down from time to time to rest. A strange, gaunt crew we must have looked, as we dragged our weary feet over the dazzling plain. We did not cover more than seven miles that day. Just before sunset we found ourselves exactly under the nipple of Sheba's left Breast, which towered thousands of feet into the air. Weak as we were, we could not but appreciate the wonderful scene, made even more splendid by the flying rays of light from the setting sun, which here and there stained the snow blood-red.

"I say," gasped Good, "we ought to be somewhere near that cave the old gentleman wrote about."

"Yes," said I, "if there is a cave."

"Come, Quatermain," groaned Sir Henry, "don't say that; I have every faith in the Dom; remember the water! We shall find the place soon."

For the next ten minutes we trudged in silence. Umbopa was marching alongside me, wrapped in his blanket, and with a leather belt strapped tightly round his stomach, to "make his hunger small," as he said. Suddenly he caught me by the arm.

"Look!" he said, pointing up the slope.

Two hundred yards from us I perceived what appeared to be a hole in the snow.

"It is the cave," said Umbopa.

We made our way to the spot, and found sure enough that the hole was the mouth of a cavern, no doubt that of which da Silvestra wrote. We were not a moment

too soon. Just as we reached it, the sun went down with startling rapidity, leaving the world nearly dark, for in these latitudes there is little twilight.

So we crept into the cave, which did not appear to be very big, and huddling together for warmth, swallowed what remained of our brandy – a mouthful each – and tried to sleep. But the cold was too intense to allow us to do so, for it must have fourteen or fifteen degrees below freezing point. We sat hour after hour through the still and bitter night, feeling the frost nip us now in the finger, now in the foot, now in the face. In vain did we huddle up closer; there was no warmth in our miserable starved bodies. Sometimes one of us would drop into an uneasy slumber for a few minutes, but we could not sleep much.

Not long before dawn I heard Ventvögel, whose teeth had been chattering all night like castanets, give a deep sigh. Then his teeth stopped chattering. I did not think anything of it at the time, concluding that he had gone to sleep. His back was resting against mine, and it seemed to grow colder and colder, till at last it felt like ice.

At length the air began to grow grey with light, and at last the glorious sun peeped above the lava wall and looked in upon our half-frozen forms. Also it looked upon Ventvögel, sitting there amongst us, stone dead. Poor fellow; he had died when I heard him sigh, and was now frozen almost stiff. Shocked beyond measure, we dragged ourselves away from the corpse and left it sitting there, its arms clasped about its knees.

By this time the sunlight was pouring its cold rays straight into the mouth of the cave. Suddenly I heard an exclamation of fear, and turned my head.

Sitting at the end of the cavern, twenty feet in, was another form, its head resting on its chest and the long arms hanging down. I stared, and saw that this too was a dead man, and, what was more, a white man.

The sight proved too much for our shattered nerves. We all scrambled out of the cave as fast as our half-frozen limbs would carry us.

CHAPTER 7

Solomon's Road

Outside the cavern we halted, feeling rather foolish.

"I am going back," said Sir Henry.

"Why?" asked Good.

"Because it has struck me that – what we saw – may be my brother."

This was a new idea, and we re-entered the cave and advanced towards the dead man. Sir Henry knelt down and peered into his face.

"Thank God," he said, with a sigh of relief, "it is not my brother."

The body was that of a tall man in middle life with aquiline features, grizzled hair, and a long black moustache. The skin was perfectly yellow, and stretched tightly over the bones. He wore no clothes except woollen breeches. Round the neck of the corpse, which was frozen perfectly stiff, hung a yellow ivory crucifix.

"Who on earth can it be?" said I.

"Can't you guess?" asked Good. "Why, the old Dom, José da Silvestra, of course."

"Impossible," I gasped; "he died three hundred years ago."

"And what is there to prevent him from lasting for three thousand years in this frozen atmosphere?" asked Good. "Heaven knows it is cold enough here. The sun never gets in; no animal comes here. No doubt his slave, of whom he speaks in the writing, took his clothes and left him. Look!" he went on, stooping down to pick up a bone scraped at the end into a sharp point. "Here is the 'cleft bone' that Silvestra used to draw the map with."

We gazed at it astonished.

"And this is where he got his ink from," said Sir Henry, pointing to a small wound on the Dom's left arm.

There was no longer any doubt about the matter, which I confess perfectly appalled me. There sat the dead man, whose directions, written some ten generations ago, had led us to this spot. Gazing at him, I imagined the traveller dying of cold and starvation, yet striving to convey to the world the great secret which he had discovered. It even seemed to me that I could trace in his features a likeness to those of my poor friend Silvestre his descendant, who had died twenty years before in my arms. There doubtless he would sit in the dread majesty of death, for centuries yet unborn.

"Let us go," said Sir Henry in a low voice; "stay, we will give him a companion," and lifting up the dead body of Ventvögel, he placed it near to that of the old Dom. Then with a jerk he broke the rotten string of the crucifix which hung round da Silvestra's neck, for his fingers were too cold to unfasten it. I believe that he has it still. I took the bone pen, and it is before me as I write – sometimes I use it to sign my name.

Then leaving these two, the proud white man of a past age, and the poor Hottentot, to keep their eternal vigil in the midst of the eternal snows, we crept out of the cave into the welcome sunshine and resumed our path, wondering in our hearts how soon we would be dead men too.

When we had walked about half a mile we came to the edge of the plateau. The landscape below us was wreathed in billows of morning fog. Presently, however, the higher layers of mist cleared and revealed a patch of green grass, some five hundred yards beneath us, through which a stream was running. Nor was this all. By the stream, basking in the sun, was a group of a dozen large antelopes – at that distance we could not see of what species.

The sight filled us with joy. There was food in plenty – if we could reach it. But the animals were six hundred yards off, a very long shot when our lives hung on the result.

Rapidly we discussed whether we could stalk the antelope; but the wind was not favourable, and we would be conspicuous against the blinding background of snow which we should have to cross.

"Well, we must try from here," said Sir Henry. "Which shall it be, Quatermain, the repeating rifles or the expresses?"

Here was a question. The Winchester repeaters – of which we had two, Umbopa carrying poor Ventvögel's as well as his own – were sighted up to a thousand yards, whereas the expresses were only sighted to three hundred and fifty. Beyond that distance, shooting with them was more or less guess-work. On the other hand, if they did hit, their expanding bullets were much more likely to bring the game down. I decided that we must risk it and use the expresses.

"Let each of us take the buck opposite to him. Aim at the point of the shoulder and high up," said I. "Umbopa, give the word, so that we may all fire together."

Then came a pause, each of us aiming his level best.

"Fire," said Umbopa in Zulu, and at almost the same instant the three rifles rang out loudly; three clouds of smoke hung for a moment before us, and a hundred echoes went flying over the silent snow.

Presently the smoke cleared, and revealed – oh, joy! – a great buck lying on its back and kicking furiously in its death agony. We gave a yell of triumph – we would not starve. Weak as we were, we rushed over, and ten minutes later the animal's heart and liver were lying before us.

But now a new difficulty arose: we had no fuel, and could make no fire to cook. We gazed at each other in dismay.

"Starving men should not be fanciful," said Good; "we must eat raw meat."

There was no other way out of the dilemma, and our gnawing hunger made the idea less distasteful than it would otherwise have been. So we took the heart and liver, cooled them in the snow, washed them in the ice-cold water of the stream, and ate them greedily. It sounds horrible enough, but honestly, I never tasted anything so good. In a quarter of an hour our life and vigour came back to us, and our feeble pulses grew strong again. But we were careful not to eat too much, stopping whilst we were still hungry.

"Thank Heaven!" said Sir Henry; "that brute has saved our lives. What is it, Quatermain?"

I went to look at the antelope, for I was not certain. It was about the size of a donkey, with large curved horns. I had never seen one like it before. It was brown, with faint red stripes, and a thick coat. I afterwards discovered that these bucks are called "inco," and are only found at a great altitude where no other game will live. We could not tell whose bullet brought it down; although I believe that Good, after his marvellous shot at the giraffe, secretly set it down to his own prowess, and we did not contradict him.

We had been so busy eating that we had not found time to look about us. But now, having set Umbopa to cut off as much of the best meat as we could carry, we began to inspect our surroundings. The mist had cleared away, so we were able to take in all the country before us at a glance. I have never seen such a glorious panorama.

Behind and over us towered Sheba's snowy Breasts, and below, some five thousand feet beneath where we stood, lay the most lovely country. Here were dense patches of lofty forest, there a great river wound its silvery way. To the left stretched a vast expanse of rich, undulating veldt or grassland, where we could just make out countless herds of game or cattle – at that distance we could not tell which. This expanse appeared to be ringed in by a wall of distant mountains. To the right we could see groups of dome-shaped huts. The landscape lay before us like a map, wherein rivers flashed like silver snakes, whilst over all was the glad sunlight.

Two curious things struck us. First, that the country before us must lie at least three thousand feet higher than the desert we had crossed; and secondly, that all the rivers flowed from south to north. As we had painful reason to know, there was no water upon the southern side of the vast range on which we stood, but on the northern face were many streams flowing into the great river.

We sat down for a while and gazed in silence at this wonderful view. Presently Sir Henry spoke.

"Isn't there something on the map about Solomon's Great Road?" he said.

I nodded.

"Well, look; there it is!" and he pointed to our right.

There, winding away towards the plain, was what appeared to be a wide road. Somehow it did not seem particularly unnatural that we should find a sort of Roman road in this strange land.

"Well," said Good, "it must be quite near us if we go to the right."

So we set off again. For a mile or more we made our way over boulders, till suddenly we found the road at our feet. It was a splendid road cut out of the solid rock, at least fifty feet wide, and apparently well kept; though the odd thing was that it seemed to begin there. We walked down and stood on it: one hundred paces behind us, in the direction of Sheba's Breasts, it vanished, the entire surface of the mountain being strewn with boulders and patches of snow.

"What do you make of this, Quatermain?" asked Sir Henry.

I shook my head.

"I have it!" said Good; "the road no doubt ran right over the range and across the desert on the other side, but the sand there has covered it up, and above us it has been obliterated by some volcanic eruption."

This seemed a good explanation; at any rate, we accepted it, and proceeded down the mountain. Travelling downhill, with full stomachs, we would have felt quite cheerful had it not been for melancholy recollections of poor Ventvögel's sad fate, and of that grim cave where he kept company with the old Dom. With every mile we walked, the air grew softer and warmer, and the country ahead shone with a luminous beauty.

As for the road itself, I never saw such an engineering work. At one place we came to a ravine three hundred feet broad and at least a hundred feet deep. This vast gulf was actually filled in with huge blocks of dressed stone, with arches pierced through them at the bottom for a waterway, over which the road went on. At another place it was cut in zigzags out of the side of a precipice five hundred feet deep, and in a third it tunnelled through the base of an intervening ridge for thirty yards or more.

Here we noticed that the sides of the tunnel were covered with sculptures, mostly of mailed figures driving in chariots. One showed a whole battle scene with a convoy of captives being marched off.

"Well," said Sir Henry, after inspecting this ancient work of art, "it may be called Solomon's Road, but my humble opinion is that the Egyptians were here before Solomon's people ever set foot on it."

By midday we were passing through scattered bushes which grew more frequent, till at last we found the road winding through a vast grove of silver trees.

"Ah!" said Good, surveying these with enthusiasm, "here is lots of wood. Let us stop and cook some dinner."

Nobody objected, so leaving the road we made our way to a stream not far off, and soon had a good fire blazing. Cutting off some substantial hunks from the flesh of the inco, we toasted them on the end of sharp sticks, and ate them with relish. Then we filled our pipes and gave ourselves up to enjoyment.

The brook's banks were clothed with dense masses of maidenhair fern; the soft air murmured through the leaves of the silver trees, doves cooed, and bright-winged birds flashed like living gems from bough to bough. It was a Paradise.

Sir Henry and Umbopa sat earnestly conversing in a mixture of broken English and Kitchen Zulu in low voices, and I lay upon that fragrant bed of fern and watched them.

After a while I missed Good. Soon I observed him sitting by the bank of the stream, in which he had been bathing. He had nothing on but his flannel shirt. He had washed his stiff white collar, had shaken out his trousers, coat and waistcoat, and was now folding them up neatly till he was ready to put them on, shaking his head sadly at the numerous tears in them. Then he took his boots, scrubbed them with a handful of fern, and rubbed them with a piece of fat, which he had carefully saved from the inco meat, till they looked almost respectable.

He put the boots on and began a fresh operation. From a little bag he produced a pocket-comb in which was fixed a tiny looking-glass, and in this he surveyed himself,

before proceeding to do his hair with great care. Then he felt his chin, on which a ten days' beard was flourishing.

"Surely," thought I, "he is not going to try to shave." But so it was. Taking the piece of fat with which he had greased his boots, Good washed it thoroughly in the stream. Then diving into the bag he brought out a little pocket razor. He rubbed his face and chin vigorously with the fat and began to shave. Evidently it proved a painful process, for he groaned, and I was convulsed with silent laughter as I watched him struggling with that stubbly beard. At last he succeeded in getting the hair off the right side of his face and chin, when suddenly I saw a flash of light pass just by his head.

Good sprang up with an oath, and so did I. Standing twenty paces away was a group of men. They were very tall and copper-coloured, and some of them wore great plumes of black feathers and short cloaks of leopard skins. In front of them stood a youth of about seventeen, his hand still raised and his body bent forward like a Grecian statue of a spear-thrower. Evidently the flash of light had been caused by a weapon which he had hurled.

As I looked, an old soldier-like man stepped out of the group, and catching the youth by the arm said something to him. Then they advanced upon us.

Sir Henry, Good, and Umbopa by this time had seized their rifles and lifted them threateningly. The party of natives still came on. It struck me that they did not know what rifles were.

"Put down your guns!" I called to the others. They obeyed, and walking to the front I addressed the elderly man.

"Greeting," I said in Zulu, not knowing what language to use. To my surprise I was understood.

"Greeting," answered the old man, not, indeed, in the same tongue, but in a dialect so closely allied to it that neither Umbopa nor myself had any difficulty in understanding him. Indeed, as we afterwards found out, it was an old-fashioned form of the Zulu tongue.

"Whence come you?" he went on, "who are you? and why are the faces of three of you white, and the face of the fourth like us?" and he pointed to Umbopa. When I looked at Umbopa I realised that he was right. Both Umbopa's face and his stature were like those of the men before me.

"We are strangers, and come in peace," I answered, speaking slowly, so that he might understand me, "and this man is our servant."

"You lie," he answered; "no strangers can cross the mountains where all things perish. But what do your lies matter? If ye are strangers then ye must die, for no strangers may live in the land of the Kukuanas. It is the king's law. Prepare to die, O strangers!"

I was slightly staggered at this, especially as I saw the hands of some of the men steal down to their sides, where hung large and heavy knives.

"What does that beggar say?" asked Good.

"He says we are going to be killed," I answered grimly.

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Good; and, as was his way when perplexed, he put his hand to his false teeth, dragging the top set down and allowing them to fly back to his jaw with a snap. The dignified crowd of Kukuanas uttered a simultaneous yell of horror, and bolted back several yards.

"What's up?" said I.

"It's his teeth," whispered Sir Henry excitedly. "Take them out, Good, take them out!"

He obeyed, slipping the set into the sleeve of his flannel shirt.

In another second curiosity had overcome fear, and the men advanced slowly.

"How is it, O strangers," asked the old man solemnly, "that this fat man (pointing to Good, who was clad in nothing but boots and a flannel shirt, and had only half finished shaving), whose body is clothed, and whose legs are bare, who grows hair on one side of his face and not on the other, and who wears one shining and transparent eye – how is it, I ask, that he has teeth which move by themselves?"

"Open your mouth," I said to Good, who promptly curled up his lips and grinned at the old gentleman, revealing to his astonished gaze two thin red lines of gum with no teeth at all. The audience gasped.

"Where are his teeth?" they shouted.

Turning his head slowly, Good swept his hand across his mouth. Then he grinned again, and lo, there were two rows of lovely teeth. The young man had thrown himself down on the grass with a howl of terror.

"I see that ye are spirits," said the old man falteringly. "Pardon us, O my lords."

Here was luck indeed.

"It is granted," I said with an imperial smile. "Nay, ye shall know the truth. We come from another world, though we are men such as ye; we come," I went on, "from the biggest star that shines at night."

"Oh! oh!" groaned the chorus.

"Yes," I went on, "we come to stay with you a little while, and to bless you by our presence. Ye will see, O friends, that I have prepared myself for this visit by learning your language."

"It is so," said the chorus.

"Only, my lord," put in the old gentleman, "thou hast learnt it very badly."

I cast an indignant glance at him, and he quailed.

"Now friends," I continued, "ye might think that after so long a journey we should wish to avenge such a reception, maybe to strike dead the imperious hand that – that – threw a knife at the head of him whose teeth come and go."

"Spare him, my lords," pleaded the old man; "he is the king's son, and I am his uncle."

"Ye may perhaps doubt our power to avenge," I went on. "Stay, I will show you. Here, thou dog and slave (addressing Umbopa in a savage tone), give me the magic tube that speaks"; and I tipped a wink towards my express rifle.

Umbopa rose to the occasion, and with something as nearly resembling a grin as I have ever seen on his dignified face he handed me the gun.

"It is here, O Lord of Lords," he said with a deep bow.

Now just before I had asked for the rifle I had perceived a little klipspringer antelope standing on a mass of rock about seventy yards away, and determined to risk the shot.

"Ye see that buck," I said, pointing the animal out to the party before me. "Tell me, is it possible for a man to kill it from here with a noise?"

"It is not possible, my lord," answered the old man.

"Yet shall I kill it," I said quietly.

The old man smiled. "That my lord cannot do," he answered.

I raised the rifle. The buck was small, and a man might well be excused for missing it, but I knew that it would not do to miss.

I drew a deep breath, and slowly pressed on the trigger. The buck stood still as a stone.

Bang! *Thud!* The antelope sprang into the air and fell on the rock dead as a door nail.

A groan of terror burst from the group.

"If you want meat," I remarked coolly, "go and fetch it."

The old man made a sign, and one of his followers departed, to return bearing the klipspringer. I noticed with satisfaction that I had hit it fairly behind the shoulder. They gathered round the poor creature's body, gazing at the bullet-hole in consternation.

"If ye yet doubt our power," I said, "let one of you go stand upon that rock so that I may make him as this buck."

None of them seemed at all inclined to try, till at last the king's son spoke.

"It is well said. Do thou, my uncle, go stand upon the rock. It is but a buck that the magic has killed. Surely it cannot kill a man."

"No, no!" the old man said hastily. "I have seen enough. These are wizards, indeed. Let us bring them to the king. Listen, children of the Stars, children of the shining Eye and the movable Teeth, who roar in thunder, and slay from afar. I am Infadoos, son of Kafa, once king of the Kukuana people. This youth is Scragga."

"He nearly scragged me," murmured Good.

"Scragga, son of Twala, the great king – Twala, husband of a thousand wives, chief of the Kukuanas, keeper of the great Road, terror of his enemies, student of the Black Arts, leader of a hundred thousand warriors, Twala the One-eyed, the Terrible."

"So," said I superciliously, "lead us then to Twala. We do not talk with underlings."

"It is well, my lords, we will lead you; but the way is long. We are hunting, three days' journey from the place of the king."

"So be it," I said carelessly; "all time is before us, for we do not die. We are ready; lead on. But Infadoos, and thou Scragga, beware! Play us no tricks, set for us no snares, for before your brains of mud have thought of them we shall know and avenge. The light of the transparent eye of him with the bare legs and the half-haired face shall destroy you; his vanishing teeth shall affix themselves in you and eat you up; the magic tubes shall make you as sieves. Beware!"

This magnificent address did not fail to impress them. The old man made a deep bow, and murmured the words, "*Koom, Koom*," which I afterwards discovered was their royal salute. He ordered his men to pick up our goods and carry them, except for the guns, which they would not touch. They even seized Good's clothes, neatly folded up beside him. He saw and made a dive for them.

"Let not my lord of the Melting Teeth touch them," said the old man. "Surely his slave shall carry the things."

"But I want to put 'em on!" roared Good, in nervous English.

Umbopa translated.

"Nay, my lord," answered Infadoos, "would my lord cover up his beautiful white legs from the eyes of his servants? Have we offended my lord that he should do such a thing?"

Here I nearly exploded with laughing.

"Look here, Good," said Sir Henry; "you have appeared in this country in a certain character, and you must live up to it. You can never put on trousers again. Henceforth you must exist in a flannel shirt, a pair of boots, and an eye-glass."

"Yes," I said, "and with whiskers on one side of your face and not on the other. If you change any of these things the people will think that we are impostors. I am very sorry, but seriously, you must. If they begin to suspect us our lives will not be worth a brass farthing."

"Do you really think so?" said Good gloomily.

"I do, indeed. Just be thankful that you have got your boots on, and that the air is warm."

Good sighed, and said no more; but it took him a fortnight to become accustomed to his new and scant attire.

CHAPTER 8

We Enter Kukuanaland

All that afternoon we travelled north-west along the magnificent road. Infadoos and Scragga walked with us, but their men marched about one hundred paces ahead.

"Infadoos," I said at length, "who made this road?"

"It was made, my lord, long ago, none know how or when, not even the wise woman Gagool, who has lived for generations. None can make such roads now, but the king allows no grass to grow upon it."

"And whose are the writings in the caves through which we have passed?" I asked, referring to the Egyptian-like sculptures that we had seen.

"My lord, the hands that made the road wrote the wonderful writings. We know not who."

"When did the Kukuana people come into this country?"

"Ten thousand thousand moons ago, from the great lands beyond," and he pointed to the north. "They could travel no further because of the high mountains which encircle the land; so say our fathers, and so says Gagool, the wise woman, the smeller out of witches. The country was good, so they settled here and grew strong, and now our numbers are like the sand, and when Twala the king calls up his regiments their plumes cover the plain so far as the eye can reach."

"But if the land is walled in with mountains, who is there for the regiments to fight against?"

"The country is open towards the north, and now and again warriors sweep down upon us from a land we know not, and we slay them. It is thirty years since there was a war."

"Your warriors must grow weary of resting on their spears, Infadoos."

"My lord, there was one war after that, but it was a civil war; dog ate dog."

"How was that?"

"My lord the king, my half-brother, had a brother born at the same birth. It is not our custom, my lord, to allow twins to live; the weaker must always die. But the mother of the king hid away the feebler child, which was born second, for her heart yearned over it, and that child is Twala the king. I am his younger brother, born of another wife."

"Well?"

"My lord, Kafa, our father, died when we came to manhood, and my brother Imotu was made king in his place, and for a space reigned and had a son by his favourite wife. When the babe was three years old, just after the great war, during which no man could farm, a famine came upon the land, and the people murmured, and looked round like a starved lion for something to rend. Then it was that Gagool, the wise and terrible woman, who does not die, told the people, 'The king Imotu is

no king.' And at the time Imotu was sick with a wound, and lay in his kraal not able to move.

"Then Gagool went into a hut and led out Twala, my half-brother, and twin brother to the king, whom she had hidden among the caves and rocks since he was born. Stripping off his loin-cloth, she showed the people the tattoo of the sacred snake coiled round his middle, with which the eldest son of the king is marked at birth, and cried out loud, 'Behold your king whom I have saved for you even to this day!'

"Now the people being mad with hunger, and altogether bereft of reason and the knowledge of truth, cried out 'The king! The king!' but I knew that it was not so, for Imotu my brother was the elder of the twins, and our lawful king. Then in the tumult Imotu the king, though he was very sick, crawled from his hut holding his wife by the hand, and followed by his little son Ignosi – that means the Lightning.

"'What is this noise?' he asked. 'Why cry ye *The king! The king!?*'

"Then Twala, his twin brother, born in the same hour, ran to him, and taking him by the hair, stabbed him through the heart with his knife. And the people being fickle, clapped their hands and cried, 'Twala is king!'"

"And what became of Imotu's wife and her son Ignosi? Did Twala kill them too?"

"Nay, my lord. When she saw that her lord was dead the queen seized the child with a cry, and ran away. Two days afterward she came to a kraal very hungry, and none would give her milk or food, now that her lord the king was dead. But at nightfall a little child, a girl, crept out and brought her corn to eat, and she blessed the child, and went on towards the mountains with her boy before the sun rose again. There she must have perished, for none have seen her since, nor the child Ignosi."

"Then if this child Ignosi had lived he would be the true king of the Kukuana people?"

"That is so, my lord; the sacred snake is round his middle. If he lives he is king; but, alas! he is long dead. See, my lord," and Infadoos pointed to a vast collection of huts surrounded by a fence and a great ditch, on the plain beneath us. "That is the kraal where the wife of Imotu was last seen with the child Ignosi. It is there that we shall sleep tonight, if indeed," he added doubtfully, "my lords do sleep."

"When we are among the Kukuanas, my good friend Infadoos, we do as the Kukuanas do," I said majestically, and turned round to address Good, who was tramping along sullenly behind, trying to prevent his flannel shirt from flapping in the evening breeze. To my astonishment I butted into Umbopa, who was walking immediately behind me, and had been listening with great interest to my conversation with Infadoos. The expression on his face was most curious, like that of a man struggling to bring something long ago forgotten back into his mind.

All this while we had been moving on at a good rate towards the plain beneath us. The mountains behind us now loomed high above our heads. As we went on the country grew more and more lovely. The sun was bright and warm, but not burning; and a gracious breeze blew softly along the fragrant slopes of the mountains. Indeed,

this new land was little less than an earthly paradise. The Transvaal is a fine country, but it is nothing to Kukuanaland.

Infadoos had despatched a runner to warn the people of the kraal of our arrival. This man had departed at an extraordinary speed, which Infadoos informed me he would keep up all the way.

As a result, when we were within two miles of the kraal we could see that company after company of men were issuing from its gates and marching towards us.

Sir Henry laid his hand upon my arm, and remarked that it looked as though we were going to meet with a warm reception. Something in his tone attracted Infadoos' attention.

"Let not my lords be afraid," he said hastily. "This regiment is under my command, and comes out by my orders to greet you."

I nodded easily, though I was not quite easy in my mind.

About half a mile from the gates was a long stretch of rising ground, and here the companies formed. It was a splendid sight; each company of about three hundred strong was charging swiftly up the rise with flashing spears and waving plumes, to take its appointed place. By the time we reached the slope twelve such companies, or three thousand six hundred men, had taken up their positions along the road.

Presently we came to the first company, and were able to gaze in astonishment on the most magnificent set of warriors that I have ever seen. They were all men of mature age, mostly veterans of about forty, and not one of them was under six feet in height, whilst many stood six feet three or four. They wore upon their heads heavy black plumes of Sakaboola feathers. About their waists and beneath their right knees were bound circlets of white ox tails, while in their left hands they carried curious round shields, made of white ox-hide stretched over beaten iron plates.

Their weapons were simple, but effective: each man had a short and very heavy two-edged spear, the blade being about six inches across at the widest part. These spears are not used for throwing, but are for close quarters only, when the wound inflicted by them is terrible. In addition, every man carried three large and heavy knives, one knife fixed in the ox-tail girdle, and the other two at the back of the round shield. These knives, which are called "tollas" by the Kukuanas, are like the throwing assegai of the Zulus. The Kukuana warriors can cast them with great accuracy to a distance of fifty yards, and it is their custom to hurl a volley of them at the enemy as they come to close quarters.

Each company remained as still as a collection of bronze statues till we were opposite to it. Then at a signal given by its commanding officer, who wore a leopard skin cloak, every spear was raised into the air, and from three hundred throats roared forth the royal salute of "*Koom.*" As soon as we had passed, the company formed up behind us and followed us towards the kraal, till at last the whole regiment of the "Greys", the crack corps of the Kukuana people, was marching in our rear with a tread that shook the ground.

At length, branching off from Solomon's Great Road, we came to the wide trench surrounding the kraal, which was at least a mile round, and fenced with a strong

palisade. At the gateway the trench was spanned by a primitive drawbridge, which was let down by the guard for us.

The kraal was exceedingly well laid out. Through the centre ran a wide pathway intersected at right angles by other pathways so as to arrange the huts into square blocks, each block being the quarters of a company. The huts were dome-shaped, and built, like those of the Zulus, of a framework of wattle, beautifully thatched with grass; but, unlike the Zulu huts, they had high doorways, and they were much larger, and surrounded by a verandah about six feet wide.

Along each side of this wide pathway through the kraal were ranged hundreds of women, come to look at us. These women were exceedingly handsome; tall and graceful, with wonderfully fine figures. But what struck us most was their quiet and dignified air. Although curious to see us, they allowed no rude expressions of astonishment or criticism to pass their lips as we trudged wearily in front of them. Not even when old Infadoos pointed out the crowning wonder of poor Good's "beautiful white legs," did their obvious admiration find expression. They fixed their dark eyes upon his snowy loveliness, and that was all.

When we reached the centre of the kraal, Infadoos halted at the door of a large hut, which was surrounded at a distance by a circle of smaller ones.

"Enter, Sons of the Stars," he said, "and rest awhile. A little food shall be brought to you; some honey and some milk, and an ox or two, and a few sheep; not much, my lords, but a little food."

"It is good, Infadoos," said I. "We are weary with travelling through realms of air; now let us rest."

Accordingly we entered the hut. We found couches of tanned skins were spread for us to lie on, and water was placed for us to wash.

Presently we heard shouting outside, and stepping to the door, saw a line of girls bearing milk and roasted mealies, and honey in a pot. Behind these were some youths driving a fat young ox. One of them drew the knife from his girdle and dexterously cut the ox's throat. In ten minutes it was dead, skinned, and jointed. The best of the meat was then cut off for us; I presented the rest to the warriors round us, who took it and distributed the "white lords' gift."

Umbopa set to work, with the assistance of an extremely attractive young woman, cooking our portion in a large earthenware pot over a fire outside the hut. When it was nearly ready we sent a message to Infadoos, and asked him and Scragga, the king's son, to join us.

Presently they came, and sitting down upon little stools, they helped us to get through our dinner. The old gentleman was most affable and polite, but it struck me that the young one regarded us with doubt. It seemed to me that, on discovering that we ate, drank, and slept like other mortals, his awe was beginning to wear off, and to be replaced by a sullen suspicion – which made me feel rather uncomfortable.

During our meal Sir Henry asked me to try to discover if our hosts knew anything of his brother's fate; but I thought it would be wiser to say nothing of the matter at this time. It was difficult to explain a relative lost from "the Stars."

After supper we produced our pipes and lit them; a proceeding which filled Infadoos and Scragga with astonishment. Although the Kukuanas grow tobacco, they use it for snuff only, like the Zulus, and quite failed to identify it in its new form.

Infadoos told us that we would leave the following morning. Messengers had already departed to inform Twala the king of our coming.

It appeared that Twala was making ready for the great annual feast which was held in the first week of June. At this gathering, all the regiments were brought up and paraded before the king; and the great annual witch-hunt was to be held.

We were to start at dawn. Infadoos, who was to accompany us, expected that we should reach Loo on the night of the second day.

With this our visitors bade us good-night; and, having arranged to watch turn and turn about, three of us flung ourselves down and slept, whilst the fourth sat up to guard against any possible treachery.

CHAPTER 9

Twala the King

It is not necessary for me to detail at length our journey to Loo. It took two full days' travelling along Solomon's Great Road, which led right into the heart of Kukuanaland. As we went the country seemed to grow richer and richer, and the kraals or villages more and more numerous. They were all guarded by garrisons of troops. Indeed, in Kukuanaland, as among the Zulus and the Masai, every able-bodied man is a soldier, so that the whole force of the nation is available for its wars. As we travelled we were overtaken by thousands of warriors hurrying up to Loo to be present at the great annual review and festival; and more splendid troops I never saw.

At sunset on the second day, we stopped to rest on a rise in the road: there on a beautiful and fertile plain before us lay Loo. It is about five miles round, I should say, with outlying kraals, and two miles to the north is a curious horseshoe-shaped hill – with which we were destined to become better acquainted. The settlement is divided in two by a river, bridged in several places. Sixty or seventy miles away three great snow-capped mountains, placed at the points of a triangle, rise sheer and steep out of the level plain. These mountains are known among the Kukuanas as the "Three Witches."

Infadoos saw us looking at them. "The road ends there," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Who knows?" he answered with a shrug; "the mountains are full of caves, and there is a great pit between them. Our kings are buried in the Place of Death. It is there that the wise men of old time used to go, to get whatever it was they came for to this country."

"What did they come for?" I asked eagerly.

"Nay, I know not. My lords who have dropped from the Stars should know," he answered with a quick look.

"Yes," I went on, "you are right, in the Stars we learn many things. I have heard that the wise men of old came to these mountains to find bright stones, pretty playthings, and yellow iron."

"My lord is wise," he answered coldly; "I am but a child and cannot talk with my lord on such matters. My lord must speak with Gagool the old, at the king's place," and he went away.

I turned to the others, and pointed out the mountains. "There are Solomon's diamond mines."

Umbopa caught my words.

"Yes, Macumazahn," he put in, in Zulu, "the diamonds are surely there, and you shall have them, since you white men are so fond of toys and money."

"How dost thou know that, Umbopa?" I asked sharply.

He laughed. “I dreamed it in the night, white men.” Then he too turned on his heel and went.

“Now what,” said Sir Henry, “is our black friend driving at? He knows more than he chooses to say, that is clear. By the way, Quatermain, has he heard anything of – of my brother?”

“Nothing; he has asked around, but everyone declares that no white man has ever been seen in the country before.”

“Do you suppose that your brother got here at all?” suggested Good. “We have only reached the place by a miracle.”

“I don’t know,” said Sir Henry gloomily, “but somehow I think that I shall find him.”

Slowly the sun sank, and then sudden darkness rushed down on the land. There was no breathing-space between the day and night, for in these latitudes twilight does not exist. The world was quickly wreathed in shadows. But not for long; for in the west there was a glow, and then the full and glorious moon lit up the plain.

We stood and watched the lovely sight, and felt our hearts lifted up. Mine has been a rough life, but there are a few things I am thankful to have lived for, and one of them is to have seen that moon shine over Kukuanaland.

After a while Infadoos invited us to rest in a hut that had been made ready for us.

We agreed, and in an hour’s time were at the outskirts of the town. Its extent, mapped out by thousands of camp fires, appeared endless. Soon we came to a moat with a drawbridge, where we were met by the challenge of a sentry. Infadoos gave some password that I could not catch, and we walked on through the central street. After nearly half an hour’s tramp, past endless lines of huts, Infadoos halted by a little group of huts which surrounded a small courtyard of powdered limestone, and informed us that these were to be our “poor” quarters.

A hut had been assigned to each of us. These huts were superior to any that we had yet seen, and in each was a most comfortable bed of skins, spread upon mattresses of aromatic grass. As soon as we had washed ourselves with water, which stood ready in earthenware jars, some handsome young women brought us roasted meats and mealie cobs daintily served on wooden platters.

We ate and drank, and then, the beds having been all moved into one hut by our request, we flung ourselves down to sleep, thoroughly wearied with our long journey.

When we woke the sun was high in the heavens, and the female attendants were already standing inside the hut, having been ordered to attend and help us to “make ready.”

“Make ready, indeed,” growled Good; “when one has only a shirt and a pair of boots, that doesn’t take long. I wish you would ask them for my trousers, Quatermain.”

I asked, but was told that these sacred relics had been taken to the king, who would see us that morning.

Somewhat to their astonishment and disappointment, we requested the young ladies to step outside before we washed and dressed. Good even went the length of again shaving the right side of his face; a very fair crop of whiskers now appeared on his left. Sir Henry's yellow locks were almost upon his shoulders, and he looked more like an ancient Dane than ever, while my grizzled scrub was fully an inch long, instead of half an inch, which I generally considered my maximum length.

After breakfast, a message was brought to us by Infadoos himself that Twala the king was ready to see us.

We replied that we should prefer to wait till the sun was a little higher; we were still weary with our journey, and so on. We did not wish to appear to be in too great a hurry, in case our hosts mistook politeness for awe or servility. So we sat down and waited for an hour, meanwhile preparing such presents as we could offer – namely, the Winchester rifle which had been used by poor Ventvögel, and some beads. The rifle and ammunition we decided to present to his royal highness, and the beads were for his wives and courtiers. We had already given a few to Infadoos and Scragga, and found that they were delighted with them.

At length we declared that we were ready, and guided by Infadoos, set off, Umbopa carrying the rifle and beads.

After walking a few hundred yards we came to an enclosure that must have covered six or seven acres of ground. All round the outside fence stood a row of huts, where the king's wives lived. On the far side of the open space was a very large hut, in which his majesty resided. The ground between was filled by company after company of warriors – in total seven or eight thousand. These men stood still as statues as we advanced through them, making a spectacle of grandeur with their waving plumes, their spears, and iron-backed ox-hide shields.

The space in front of the large hut was empty, but before it were placed several stools. On three of these, at a sign from Infadoos, we seated ourselves, Umbopa standing behind us. Infadoos stood by the door of the hut.

So we waited for ten minutes or more in the midst of a dead silence, but conscious that we were the object of the concentrated gaze of some eight thousand pairs of eyes. It was a somewhat trying ordeal, but we carried it off as best we could.

At length the door opened, and a gigantic figure, with a splendid tiger-skin karross flung over its shoulders, stepped out, followed by Scragga, and what appeared to be a withered-up monkey, wrapped in a fur cloak. The huge figure seated itself upon a stool, Scragga stood behind it, and the withered-up monkey crept on all fours into the shade of the hut and squatted down.

Still there was silence.

Then the gigantic figure slipped off the karross and stood up before us, a truly alarming spectacle. It was an enormous man with the most entirely repulsive face we had ever beheld. This man had only one gleaming black eye, for the other was represented by a hollow in the face; and his whole expression was cruel and sensual to a degree. From the large head rose a magnificent plume of white ostrich feathers; he wore a shirt of shining chain armour, whilst round the waist and right knee were the usual garnishes of white ox-tail. In his right hand was a huge spear, about his

neck a thick torque of gold, and bound on his forehead shone dully an enormous uncut diamond.

Presently he raised the great javelin in his hand. Instantly eight thousand spears were lifted in answer, and from eight thousand throats rang out the royal salute of "*Koom*." Three times this was repeated, and each time the earth shook with the noise.

"Be humble, O people," piped out a thin voice which seemed to come from the monkey in the shade, "it is the king."

"It is the king," boomed out the eight thousand throats in answer.

Then there was silence again. Presently, however, it was broken. A soldier on our left dropped his shield with a clatter on to the limestone flooring.

Twala turned his one eye in the direction of the noise.

"Come hither, thou," he said, in a cold voice.

A fine young man stepped out of the ranks, and stood before him.

"It was thy shield that fell, thou awkward dog. Wilt thou shame me in the eyes of these strangers from the Stars? What hast thou to say?"

We saw the poor fellow turn pale under his dusky skin.

"It was by chance, O Calf of the Black Cow," he murmured.

"Then it is a chance for which thou must pay. Thou hast made me foolish; prepare for death."

"I am the king's ox," was the low answer.

"Scragga," roared the king, "let me see how thou canst use thy spear. Kill me this blundering fool."

Scragga stepped forward with an ill-natured grin, and lifted his spear. The poor victim covered his eyes with his hand and stood still. As for us, we were petrified with horror.

Once, twice he waved the spear, and then struck, ah! right home – the spear stood out a foot behind the soldier's back. He flung up his hands and dropped dead. From the multitude about us something like a murmur rolled and died away. The tragedy was finished before we realised it. Sir Henry sprang up and swore a great oath, then, overpowered by the sense of silence, sat down again.

"The thrust was a good one," said the king; "take him away."

Four men stepped out of the ranks, and lifting the body of the murdered man, carried it thence.

"Cover up the blood-stains," piped out the thin voice from the monkey-like figure; "the king's word is spoken, the king's doom is done!"

A girl came forward from behind the hut, bearing a jar filled with powdered lime, which she scattered over the red mark, blotting it from sight.

Sir Henry meanwhile was boiling with rage at what had happened; indeed, it was with difficulty that we could keep him still.

"Sit down, for heaven's sake," I whispered; "our lives depend on it."

Twala sat silent until the traces of the tragedy had been removed. Then he addressed us.

"White people," he said, "who come from whence I know not, and why I know not, greeting."

"Greeting, Twala, King of the Kukuanas," I answered.

"White people, whence come ye, and what seek ye?"

"We come from the Stars, ask us not how. We come to see this land."

"Ye journey from far to see a little thing. And that man with you," pointing to Umbopa, "does he also come from the Stars?"

"Even so; there are people of thy colour in the heavens above; but ask not of matters too high for thee, Twala the king."

"Ye speak with a loud voice, people of the Stars," Twala answered in a tone which I did not like. "Remember that the Stars are far off, and ye are here. How if I make you as him whom they bore away?"

I laughed out loud, though there was little laughter in my heart.

"O king," I said, "be careful. Touch but one hair of our heads, and destruction shall come upon thee. What, have not these" – pointing to Infadoos and Scragga – "told thee what manner of men we are? Hast thou seen the like of us?" and I pointed to Good.

"It is true, I have not," said the king, surveying Good with interest.

"Have they not told thee how we strike with death from afar?" I went on.

"They have told me, but I believe them not. Let me see you kill. Kill me a man among those who stand yonder, and I will believe."

"Nay," I answered; "we shed no blood of men except in just punishment; but bid thy servants drive in an ox through the gates, and before he has run twenty paces I will strike him dead."

"Nay," laughed the king, "kill me a man and I will believe."

"Good, O king, so be it," I answered coolly. "Do thou walk across the open space, and before thy feet reach the gate thou shalt be dead; or if thou wilt not, send thy son Scragga" (whom at that moment it would have given me much pleasure to shoot).

On hearing this suggestion Scragga uttered a howl, and bolted into the hut.

Twala frowned majestically. "Let a young ox be driven in," he said.

Two men at once departed, running swiftly.

"Now, Sir Henry," said I, "do you shoot. I want to show this ruffian that I am not the only magician of the party."

Sir Henry accordingly took his express. "I hope I shall make a good shot," he groaned.

"You must," I answered. "If you miss with the first barrel, let him have the second. Sight for 150 yards, and wait till the beast turns broadside on."

Then came a pause, until presently we caught sight of an ox running towards us. It came through the gate, then, catching sight of the vast crowd, stopped stupidly, turned round, and bellowed.

"Now's your time," I whispered.

Up went the rifle.

Bang! thud! and the ox was kicking on his back, shot in the ribs. The semi-hollow bullet had done its work well, and a sigh of astonishment went up.

I turned round coolly. "Have I lied, O king?"

"Nay, white man, it is the truth," was the somewhat awed answer.

"Listen, Twala," I went on. "Thou hast seen. Now know we come in peace, not in war. See," and I held up the Winchester repeater; "here is a hollow staff that shall enable thee to kill even as we kill, only I lay this charm upon it, thou shalt kill no man with it. If thou liftest it against a man, it shall kill thee. I will show thee. Bid a soldier step forty paces and place the shaft of a spear in the ground so that the flat blade looks towards us."

In a few seconds it was done.

"Now, see, I will break yonder spear."

Taking a careful sight I fired. The bullet struck the flat of the spear, and shattered the blade into fragments.

Again the sigh of astonishment went up.

"Now, Twala, we give this magic tube to thee, and by-and-by I will show thee how to use it; but beware how thou turnest the magic of the Stars against a man of earth." I handed him the rifle.

The king took it very gingerly, and laid it down at his feet. As he did so I observed the wizened monkey-like figure creeping from the shadow of the hut. It crept on all fours, but when it reached the king it rose upon its feet, and threw the furry covering from its face to reveal a most extraordinary countenance.

It seemed to be the face of a woman of great age, so shrunken that it was no larger than the face of a year-old child, although made up of a number of deep wrinkles. Set in these wrinkles was a sunken slit, that represented the mouth. There was no nose to speak of; indeed, the face might have been taken for that of a sun-dried corpse had it not been for a pair of large black eyes, still full of fire and intelligence, under the snow-white eyebrows. As for the head, it was perfectly bare, and yellow in hue, while its wrinkled scalp moved and contracted like the hood of a cobra.

A shiver of fear passed through us as we gazed on this figure, which stood still for a moment. Then suddenly it projected a skinny claw armed with nails nearly an inch long, and laying it on the king's shoulder, began to speak in a thin and piercing voice.

"Listen, O king! Listen, O warriors! Listen, O skies and sun, O rain and storm and mist! Listen! Listen, all things that live and must die! Listen, the spirit of life is in me and I prophesy. I prophesy!"

The words died away in a faint wail, and dread seemed to seize the hearts of all who heard them, including our own.

"Blood! blood! rivers of blood; I see it, I smell it: it runs red upon the ground, it rains down from the skies.

"Footsteps! footsteps! the tread of the white man coming from afar. It shakes the earth.

"The red blood is bright; there is no smell like the smell of new-shed blood. The lions shall lap it and roar, the vultures shall wash their wings in it and shriek with joy.

"I am old! I am old! I have seen much blood; ha, ha! but I shall see more ere I die. Your fathers knew me, and their fathers knew me, and their fathers' fathers' fathers. I

have seen the white man and know his desires. Who made the great road, tell me? Who wrote the pictures on the rocks, tell me? Who reared up the three Silent Ones yonder, that gaze across the pit, tell me?" and she pointed towards the three mountains which we had noticed the previous night.

"Ye know not, but I know. It was a white people who were before ye are, who shall be when ye are not, who shall eat you up and destroy you. And what did they come for, the White Ones, the Terrible Ones? What is that bright stone upon thy forehead, O king? Whose hands made thy iron garments? Ye know not, but I know. I the Old One, I the Wise One, I the Isanusi, the witch doctress!"

Then she turned her bald vulture-head towards us.

"What seek ye, white men of the Stars? Do ye seek a lost one? Ye shall not find him here. He is not here. Never for ages upon ages has a white foot pressed this land; never except once, and I remember that he left it but to die. Ye come for bright stones; I know it; ye shall find them when the blood is dry; but shall ye return whence ye came, or shall ye stay with me? Ha! ha! ha!

"And thou, thou with the dark skin and the proud bearing," and she pointed her skinny finger at Umbopa, "who art thou, and what seekest thou? Not stones, nor yellow metal; these thou leavest to 'white men from the Stars.' Methinks I know thee; methinks I can smell the blood in thy heart. Strip off thy girdle—"

Here the features of this extraordinary creature became convulsed, and she fell to the ground in a fit, and was carried into the hut.

The king rose up trembling, and waved his hand. Instantly the regiments began to file off, and in ten minutes, save for ourselves, the king, and a few attendants, the great space was left empty.

"White people," he said, "it passes in my mind to kill you. Gagool has spoken strange words."

I laughed. "Be careful, O king, we are not easy to slay. Thou hast seen the fate of the ox; wouldst thou be as the ox is?"

The king frowned. "It is not well to threaten a king."

"We threaten not, we speak what is true. Try to kill us, O king, and learn."

He thought. "Go in peace," he said at last. "Tonight is the great dance. Fear not that I shall set a snare for you. Tomorrow I will think."

"It is well, O king," I answered unconcernedly. We rose and went back to our kraal.

CHAPTER 10

The Witch-Hunt

On reaching our hut I said to Infadoos, "Enter; we would speak with thee."

"Speak on."

"It seems, Infadoos, that Twala the king is a cruel man."

"It is so, my lords. Alas! the land cries out because of his cruelties. Tonight ye shall see. It is the great witch-hunt, and many will be smelt out as wizards and slain. No man's life is safe. If the king covets a man's cattle, or a man's wife, or if he fears a man should rebel against him, then Gagool, whom ye saw, or some of the witch-finding women whom she has taught, will smell that man out as a wizard, and he will be killed. Many must die tonight. It is ever so. Perhaps I too shall be killed. As yet I have been spared because I am skilled in war, and am beloved by the soldiers; but I know not how long I have to live. The land groans at the cruelties of Twala the king."

"Then why do the people not cast him down?"

"My lords, he is the king, and if he were killed Scragga would reign in his place, and the heart of Scragga is blacker than the heart of Twala his father. If Imotu had never been slain, or if Ignosi his son had lived, it might have been otherwise; but they are both dead."

"How knowest thou that Ignosi is dead?" said a voice behind us. We looked round, astonished to see that it was Umbopa who spoke.

"What meanest thou, boy?" asked Infadoos; "who told thee to speak?"

"Listen, Infadoos," was the answer, "and I will tell thee a story. Years ago the king Imotu was killed in this country and his wife fled with the boy Ignosi. Is it not so?"

"It is so."

"It was said that the woman and her son died upon the mountains. Is it not so?"

"Yes."

"Well, the mother and the boy Ignosi did not die. They crossed the mountains and were led by a tribe of wandering desert men across the sands, till at last they came to water and grass and trees again."

"How knowest thou this?"

"Listen. They travelled on and on, many months' journey, till they reached a land where a people called the Amazulu, who also are of the Kukuana stock, live by war, and with them they tarried many years, till at length the mother died. Then the son Ignosi became a wanderer again, and journeyed into a land of wonders, where white people live, and for many more years he learned the wisdom of the white people."

"It is a pretty story," said Infadoos incredulously.

"For years he lived there working as a servant and a soldier, but holding in his heart all that his mother had told him of his own place, and wondering how he might

journey thither to see his people before he died. For long years he lived and waited, and at last the time came, and he met some white men who were seeking this unknown land, and joined them. The white men travelled on, seeking for one who is lost. They crossed the burning desert, they crossed the snow-clad mountains, and at last reached the land of the Kukuanas, and there they found thee, O Infadoos."

"Surely thou art mad to talk thus," said the astonished old soldier.

"Thou thinkest so; see, I will show thee, O my uncle. I am Ignosi, rightful king of the Kukuanas!"

Then with a single movement Umbopa slipped off his "moocha" or loincloth, and stood naked before us.

"Look," he said; "what is this?" and he pointed to the picture of a great snake tattooed in blue round his middle, its tail disappearing into its open mouth just above where the thighs are set into the body.

Infadoos looked, his eyes starting nearly out of his head. Then he fell upon his knees.

"*Koom! Koom!*" he exclaimed; "it is my brother's son; it is the king."

"Did I not tell thee so, my uncle? Rise; I am not yet the king, but with thy help, and with the help of these brave white men, who are my friends, I shall be. Yet the old witch Gagool was right, the land shall run with blood first, and hers shall run with it, if she has any; for she killed my father with her words, and drove my mother forth. And now, Infadoos, choose thou. Wilt thou be my man? Wilt thou help me to overthrow this tyrant and murderer, or not? Choose."

The old man put his hand to his head and thought. Then he rose, and advancing to where Umbopa, or rather Ignosi, stood, he knelt before him, and took his hand.

"Ignosi, rightful king, I put my hand between thy hands, and am thy man till death. When thou wast a babe I dandled thee upon my knees, now shall my old arm strike for thee and freedom."

"It is well, Infadoos; if I conquer, thou shalt be the greatest man in the kingdom after its king. If I fail, thou canst only die, and death is not far off from thee. Rise, my uncle.

"And ye, white men," Ignosi went on, "will ye help me? I offer you the white stones! If I conquer and can find them, ye shall have as many as ye can carry hence. Will that suffice you?"

I translated this remark.

"Tell him," answered Sir Henry, "that he mistakes us. If wealth comes in our way we will take it; but a gentleman does not sell himself for wealth. Still, I say this. I have always liked Umbopa, and I will stand by him in this business. It will be very pleasant to try to square matters with that cruel devil Twala. What do you say, Good, and Quatermain?"

"Well," said Good, "so far as I am concerned I'm his boy. My only stipulation is that he allows me to wear trousers."

I translated the substance of these answers.

"It is well, my friends," said Ignosi; "and what sayest thou, Macumazahn, art thou also with me, old hunter, cleverer than a wounded buffalo?"

I scratched my head.

"Umbopa, or Ignosi," I said, "I don't like revolutions. I am a man of peace and a bit of a coward" – here Umbopa smiled – "but I stick up for my friends. You have stuck by us like a man, and I will stick by you. But I am a trader, and have to make my living, so I accept your offer about those diamonds if we should ever be in a position to avail ourselves of it. Another thing: we came, as you know, to look for Incubu's (Sir Henry's) lost brother. You must help us to find him."

"I will," answered Ignosi. "Infadoos, tell me the truth. Has any white man to thy knowledge set his foot within the land?"

"None, O Ignosi."

"If any white man had been seen or heard of, wouldst thou have known?"

"I should certainly have known."

"Thou hearest, Incubu," said Ignosi to Sir Henry; "he has not been here."

"Well, well," said Sir Henry, with a sigh; "there it is; I suppose that he never got this far. Poor fellow! So it has all been for nothing. God's will be done."

"Now for business," I put in, anxious to escape from a painful subject. "It is all very well to be a king by divine right, Ignosi, but how dost thou propose to become a king in fact?"

"I know not. Infadoos, hast thou a plan?"

"Ignosi, Son of the Lightning," answered his uncle, "tonight is the great dance and witch-hunt. Many shall be smelt out and perish, and in the hearts of many others there will be grief and anguish and fury against the king Twala. When the dance is over, then I will speak to some of the great chiefs. If I can win them over, they will talk to their regiments. I shall bring the chiefs to see that thou art indeed the king, and by tomorrow I think thou shalt have twenty thousand spears at thy command. And now I must go and make ready. After the dance is done, if I am yet alive, I will meet thee here, and we can talk. At the best there must be war."

At this moment messengers arrived from the king. We ordered them to come in, and three men entered, each bearing a shining shirt of chain armour, and a magnificent battle-axe.

"The gifts of my lord the king to the white men from the Stars!" said one.

"We thank the king," I answered.

The men left, and we examined the armour with great interest. It was the most wonderful, closely-knit chain work that we had ever seen.

"Do you make these things in this country, Infadoos?" I asked; "they are very beautiful."

"Nay, my lord, they came down to us from our forefathers. We know not who made them, and there are few left. Only those of royal blood may wear them. They are magic coats through which no spear can pass. The king is well pleased or much afraid, or he would not have sent them. Wear them tonight, my lords."

The remainder of that day we spent quietly, resting and talking. At last the sun went down, and the thousand watch fires glowed out. Through the darkness we heard the tramp of many feet and the clashing of hundreds of spears, as the regiments marched to their places ready for the great dance.

Then the full moon shone out in splendour, and Infadoos arrived, clad in his war dress, and accompanied by a guard of twenty men to escort us. We had already donned the shirts of chain armour, putting them on under our ordinary clothing, and finding to our surprise that they were neither very heavy nor uncomfortable. These large steel shirts hung somewhat loosely upon Good and myself, but Sir Henry's fitted his magnificent frame like a glove. Strapping our revolvers round our waists, and taking in our hands the battle-axes which the king had sent, we started.

On arriving at the great kraal, we found that it was closely packed with twenty thousand men arranged round it in regiments. These regiments were in turn divided into companies, and between each company ran a little path to allow space for the witch-finders to pass up and down. They made an imposing sight. They stood perfectly silent, and the moon poured her light upon the forest of their raised spears, upon their majestic forms, waving plumes, and coloured shields. Wherever we looked were line upon line of dim faces surmounted by range upon range of shimmering spears.

"Surely," I said to Infadoos, "the whole army is here?"

"Nay, Macumazahn," he answered, "only a third of it. One third is present at this dance each year, another third is mustered outside in case there should be trouble when the killing begins, ten thousand more garrison the outposts, and the rest watch at the kraals in the country."

"They are very silent," said Good; and indeed the intense stillness among such a vast gathering was almost overpowering.

"What says Bougwan?" asked Infadoos.

I translated.

"Those over whom the shadow of Death is hovering are silent," he answered grimly.

"Will many be killed?"

"Very many."

"It seems," I said to the others, "that we are going to see a gladiatorial show."

Sir Henry shivered, and Good said he wished that we could get out of it.

"Tell me," I asked Infadoos, "are we in danger?"

"I know not, my lords, I trust not; but do not seem afraid. If ye live through the night all may go well with you. The soldiers murmur against the king."

All this while we had been advancing steadily towards the centre of the open space, in the midst of which were placed some stools. As we proceeded we saw another small party coming from the direction of the royal hut.

"It is the king Twala, Scragga his son, and Gagool the old; and see, with them are those who slay," said Infadoos, pointing to a little group of about a dozen gigantic and savage-looking men, armed with spears in one hand and heavy knives in the other.

The king seated himself upon the centre stool, Gagool crouched at his feet, and the others stood behind him.

"Greeting, white lords," Twala cried. "Be seated, waste not precious time – the night is all too short for the deeds that must be done. Ye shall see a glorious show.

Look round, white lords; look round," and he rolled his one wicked eye from regiment to regiment. "Can the Stars show you such a sight as this? See how they shake in their wickedness, all those who have evil in their hearts and fear the judgment of Heaven above."

"Begin! begin!" piped Gagool, in her thin piercing voice; "the hyenas are hungry, they howl for food. Begin! begin!"

For a moment there was intense and dreadful stillness.

The king lifted his spear, and suddenly twenty thousand feet were raised, as though they belonged to one man, and were brought down with a stamp upon the earth. This was repeated three times, causing the ground to shake and tremble. Then a solitary voice began a wailing song, which ran something as follows:—

"What is the lot of man born of woman?"

Back came the answer rolling out from every throat in that vast company:

"Death!"

Gradually the song was taken up by company after company, till the whole armed multitude were singing it, and I could no longer follow the words, except in so far as they appeared to represent various human passions, fears, and joys. Now it seemed to be a love song, now a majestic swelling war chant, and last of all a death dirge ending suddenly in one heart-breaking wail that went echoing away.

Again silence, and again it was broken by the king lifting his hand. Instantly we heard a pattering of feet, and from out of the masses of warriors strange and awful figures appeared running towards us. As they drew near we saw that these were women, most of them old, for their white hair streamed out behind them. Their faces were painted in stripes of white and yellow; down their backs hung snake-skins, and round their waists rattled circlets of human bones, while each held a small forked wand in her shrivelled hand. There were ten of them.

When they arrived in front of us they halted, and one of them, pointing with her wand towards the crouching figure of Gagool, cried out,

"Mother, old mother, we are here."

"Good! good! Are your eyes keen, Isanusis [witch doctresses], ye seers in dark places?"

"Mother, they are keen."

"Good! good! Are your ears open, Isanusis, ye who hear words that come not from the tongue?"

"Mother, they are open."

"Good! good! Are your senses awake, Isanusis? Can ye smell blood, can ye purge the land of the wicked ones who mean evil to the king? Are ye ready to do the justice of Heaven, ye whom I have taught?"

"Mother, we are."

"Then go! See, the slayers make sharp their spears; the white men from afar are hungry to see. Go!"

With a wild yell Gagool's horrid ministers broke away in every direction, the dry bones round their waists rattling as they ran, and headed for various points of the

dense human circle. We could not watch them all, so we fixed our eyes upon the Isanusi nearest to us.

When she came to within a few paces of the warriors she halted and began to dance wildly, turning round and round rapidly, and shrieking out sentences such as "I smell him, the evil-doer!" "He is near, he who poisoned his mother!" "I hear the thoughts of him who thought evil of the king!"

Quicker and quicker she danced, lashing herself into a frenzy of excitement. Suddenly she stopped dead and stiffened all over, like a pointer dog when he scents game, and then with outstretched wand she began to creep stealthily towards the soldiers. It seemed to us that they shrank from her. As for ourselves, we followed her movements with a horrible fascination. Creeping and crouching like a dog, the Isanusi halted and pointed, and again crept on a pace or two.

Suddenly the end came. With a shriek she sprang in and touched a tall warrior with her forked wand. Instantly two of his comrades, those standing immediately next to him, seized the doomed man, each by one arm, and advanced with him towards the king.

He did not resist, but we saw that he dragged his limbs as though they were paralysed, and that his spear fell from his limp fingers.

As he came, two of the villainous executioners stepped forward to meet him. The executioners turned round, looking towards the king as though for orders.

"Kill!" said the king.

"Kill!" squeaked Gagool.

"Kill!" re-echoed Scragga, with a hollow chuckle.

Almost before the words were uttered the horrible dead was done. One man had driven his spear into the victim's heart, and to make assurance double sure, the other had dashed out his brains with a great club.

"One," counted Twala the king; and the body was dragged a few paces away and stretched out.

Hardly was the thing done before another poor wretch was brought up, like an ox to the slaughter. This time we could see, from his leopard-skin cloak, that the man was a person of rank. Again the awful words were spoken, and the victim fell dead.

"Two," counted the king.

And so the deadly game went on, till about a hundred bodies were stretched in rows behind us. I have heard of the gladiatorial shows of the Roman emperors, but I doubt if they were half so horrible as this Kukuana witch-hunt.

Once we rose and tried to remonstrate, but were sternly repressed by Twala.

"Let the law take its course, white men. These dogs are magicians and evil-doers; it is well that they should die," he said.

About half-past ten there was a pause. The witch-finders gathered themselves together, apparently exhausted with their bloody work, and we thought that the performance was done with. But it was not so, for to our surprise, the ancient woman, Gagool, rose from her crouching position, and supporting herself with a stick, staggered into the open space. It was an extraordinary sight to see this frightful

vulture-headed old creature, bent nearly double with extreme age, gather strength by degrees, until at last she rushed about almost as actively as her ill-omened pupils.

To and fro she ran, chanting to herself, till suddenly she made a dash at a tall man standing in front of one of the regiments, and touched him. As she did this a sort of groan went up from the regiment which evidently he commanded. But two of its officers seized him all the same, and brought him up for execution. We learned afterwards that he was a man of great wealth and importance, being indeed a cousin of the king.

He was slain, and Twala counted one hundred and three. Then Gagool again sprang to and fro, gradually drawing nearer and nearer to ourselves.

"Hang me if I don't believe she is going to try her games on us," exclaimed Good in horror.

"Nonsense!" said Sir Henry.

As for myself, when I saw that old fiend dancing nearer and nearer, my heart positively sank into my boots. I glanced at the long rows of corpses, and shivered.

Nearer and nearer waltzed Gagool, looking for all the world like an animated crooked stick or comma, her horrid eyes gleaming.

Nearer she came, and yet nearer, every man in that vast assembly watching her movements with intense anxiety. At last she stood still and pointed.

"Which is it to be?" asked Sir Henry to himself.

In a moment the old hag rushed in and touched Umbopa, alias Ignosi, on the shoulder.

"I smell him out," she shrieked. "Kill him, kill him, he is full of evil; kill him, the stranger, before blood flows from him. Slay him, O king."

There was a pause, of which I instantly took advantage.

"O king," I called out, rising, "this man is the servant of thy guests, he is their dog; whosoever sheds the blood of our dog sheds our blood. By the sacred law of hospitality I claim protection for him."

"Gagool, mother of the witch-finders, has smelt him out; he must die, white men," was the sullen answer.

"Nay, he shall not die," I replied; "he who tries to touch him shall die indeed."

"Seize him!" roared Twala to the executioners who stood by, red to the eyes with their victims' blood.

They advanced towards us, and then hesitated. As for Ignosi, he clutched his spear, and raised it as though determined to sell his life dearly.

"Stand back, ye dogs!" I shouted. "Touch one hair of his head and your king dies," and I covered Twala with my revolver. Sir Henry and Good also drew their pistols, Sir Henry pointing his at the leading executioner, who was advancing to carry out the sentence, and Good taking a deliberate aim at Gagool.

Twala winced perceptibly as my barrel came in a line with his broad chest.

"Well," I said, "what is it to be, Twala?"

"Put away your magic tubes," he said; "I spare him in the name of hospitality, not from fear. Go in peace."

"It is well," I answered unconcernedly; "we are weary of slaughter, and would sleep. Is the dance ended?"

"It is ended," Twala answered sulkily. "Let these dead dogs," pointing to the long rows of corpses, "be flung out to the hyenas and the vultures."

Instantly the regiments began to file through the kraal gateway in perfect silence, leaving a group to drag away the corpses of those who had been sacrificed.

Then we rose also, and making a salute to his majesty, which he hardly deigned to acknowledge, we departed to our huts.

"Well," said Sir Henry, as we sat down, "I feel uncommonly inclined to be sick."

"If I had any doubts about helping Umbopa to rebel against that infernal blackguard," put in Good, "they are gone now. It was as much as I could do to sit still while that slaughter was going on. I wonder where Infadoos is. Umbopa, my friend, you ought to be grateful to us; your skin came near to having an air-hole made in it."

"I am grateful, Bougwan," was Umbopa's answer, when I had translated, "and I shall not forget. Infadoos will be here by-and-by. We must wait."

So we lit our pipes and waited.

CHAPTER 11

We Give a Sign

For about two hours, we sat there in silence, too overwhelmed by the horrors we had seen to talk. At last, as dawn approached, we heard a sound of steps. Then came the challenge of a sentry posted at the kraal gate, which was quietly answered; and in another second Infadoos had entered the hut, followed by half-a-dozen stately-looking chiefs.

"I have come according to my word," he said. "My lords and Ignosi, rightful king of the Kukuanas, I have brought these men, who are great men among us, each one of them having the command of three thousand soldiers. I have told them what I have seen, and what my ears have heard. Now let them also behold the sacred snake around thee, and hear thy story, Ignosi, that they may say whether or no they will make cause with thee against Twala the king."

By way of answer Ignosi again stripped off his girdle, and exhibited the snake tattooed about him. Each chief in turn drew near and examined the sign by the dim light of the lamp, and without saying a word passed on to the other side.

Then Ignosi reclothed himself, and addressing them, repeated his history.

"Now ye have heard, chiefs," said Infadoos, when he had done, "what say ye? Will ye stand by this man and help him to his father's throne, or no? The land cries out against Twala, and the blood of the people flows like the waters in spring. Ye have seen tonight. Two other chiefs there were with whom I had it in my mind to speak, and now the hyenas howl over their corpses. Soon shall ye be as they are, if ye strike not. Choose then, my brothers."

The eldest of the six men, a short, thick-set warrior with white hair, stepped forward a pace and answered:

"Thy words are true, Infadoos; the land cries out. My own brother died tonight; but this is a great matter, and the thing is hard to believe. How do we know that if we lift our spears it may not be for a thief and a liar? It is a great matter, for blood will flow in rivers before the deed is done; many will still cleave to the king. These white men from the Stars, their magic is great, and Ignosi is under the cover of their wing. If he be indeed the rightful king, let them give us a sign, and let the people have a sign, that all may see. Then men will know truly that the white man's magic is with them."

"Ye have the sign of the snake," I answered.

"My lord, it is not enough. The snake may have been placed there since the man's childhood. Show us a sign, and it will suffice. But we will not move without a sign."

The others gave a decided assent. I turned in perplexity to Sir Henry and Good, and explained the situation.

"I think that I have it," said Good exultingly; "ask them to give us a moment to think."

I did so, and the chiefs withdrew. So soon as they had gone Good went to the little box where he kept his medicines, unlocked it, and took out an almanack. "Isn't to-morrow the 4th of June?" he said.

We had kept a careful note of the days, so were able to answer that it was.

"Very good; then here we have it. 4 June, total eclipse of the moon commences at 8.15 Greenwich time, visible in Tenerife, South Africa, et cetera.' There's a sign for you. Tell them we will darken the moon tomorrow night."

The idea was a splendid one – so long as Good's almanack was correct. If we made a false prophecy on such a subject, our prestige would be gone for ever, and so would Ignosi's chance of the throne.

"Suppose that the almanack is wrong," suggested Sir Henry to Good, who was busily working out something on a blank page of the book.

"I see no reason to suppose anything of the sort," was his answer. "And it especially states that this one will be visible in South Africa. I have worked out the reckonings as well as I can, without knowing our exact position; and I make out that the eclipse should begin here about ten o'clock tomorrow night, and last till half-past twelve. For an hour and a half or so there should be almost total darkness."

"Well," said Sir Henry, "I suppose we had better risk it."

I agreed, though doubtfully – for it might be a cloudy night, or our dates might be wrong – and Umbopa summoned the chiefs back. When they came, I addressed them thus:

"Great men of the Kukuanas, and Infadoos, listen. We love not to show our powers, for to do so is to interfere with the course of nature, and to plunge the world into fear and confusion. But since this matter is a great one, and as we are angered against the king because of the slaughter we have seen, and because Gagool would have put our friend Ignosi to death, we have determined to break a rule, and to give such a sign as all men may see. Come hither." I led them to the door of the hut and pointed to the red ball of the moon. "What see ye there?"

"We see the sinking moon," answered their spokesman.

"It is so. Now, can any mortal man put out that moon before her hour of setting, and bring the curtain of black night down upon the land?"

The chief laughed. "No, my lord, that no man can do."

"Ye say so. Yet I tell you that tomorrow night, about two hours before midnight, we will cause the moon to be eaten up for a space of an hour and a half. Yes, deep darkness shall cover the earth, and it shall be a sign that Ignosi is indeed king of the Kukuanas. If we do this thing, will ye be satisfied?"

"Yea, my lords," answered the old chief with a smile; "if ye do this thing, we will be satisfied indeed."

"It shall be done. Dost thou hear, Infadoos?"

"I hear, my lord, but it is a wonderful thing that ye promise, to put out the moon, the mother of the world."

"Yet we shall do it, Infadoos."

"It is well, my lords. Two hours after sunset, Twala will send for my lords to witness the girls dance, and after the dance begins the girl whom Twala thinks the fairest shall be killed by Scragga, the king's son, as a sacrifice to the Silent Ones, who keep watch by the mountains yonder," and he pointed towards the three strange-looking peaks where Solomon's road was supposed to end. "Then let my lords darken the moon, and save the maiden's life, and the people will believe indeed."

"Ay," said the old chief, still smiling a little, "the people will believe indeed."

"Two miles from Loo," went on Infadoos, "there is a hill curved like a new moon, a stronghold, where my regiment, and three other regiments which these chiefs command, are stationed. This morning we will plan to move two or three other regiments there also. If in truth my lords can darken the moon, in the darkness I will take my lords and lead them to this place, where they shall be safe, and from there we can make war upon Twala the king."

"It is good," said I. "Leave us to sleep awhile and to make ready our magic."

Infadoos rose, saluted us, and departed with the chiefs.

"My friends," said Ignosi once they were gone, "can ye do this wonderful thing, or were ye speaking empty words?"

"We believe that we can do it, Umbopa – Ignosi, I mean."

"It is strange," he answered, "but I have learned that English 'gentlemen' tell no lies. If we live through the matter, be sure that I will repay you."

"Ignosi," said Sir Henry, "promise me one thing."

"I will promise, Incubu, my friend, even before I hear it," answered the big man with a smile. "What is it?"

"This: that if ever you come to be king of this people you will do away with the smelling out of wizards such as we saw last night; and that the killing of men without trial shall no longer take place in the land."

After I had translated this request, Ignosi answered.

"The ways of black people are not as the ways of white men, Incubu. Yet I will promise. If it be in my power to hold them back, the witch-finders shall hunt no more, nor shall any man die without trial or judgment."

"That's a bargain, then," said Sir Henry; "and now let us get a little rest."

In our weariness we slept soundly till about eleven o'clock. Then we rose, washed, and ate a hearty breakfast. After that we went outside and walked about.

"I hope that eclipse will happen," said Sir Henry.

"If it doesn't it will be all up with us," I answered mournfully.

We passed the rest of the day in receiving visits of ceremony and curiosity. At length the sun set, and we enjoyed a couple of hours of such quiet as our melancholy forebodings would allow.

Finally, about half-past eight, a messenger came from Twala to bid us to the great annual "dance of girls". We put on the chain shirts, and took our rifles and ammunition with us, so as to have them handy in case we had to fly. We set out boldly enough, though with inward fear and trembling.

The great space in front of the king's kraal bore a very different appearance to that of the previous evening. In place of the grim ranks of warriors were company

after company of Kukuana girls, not over-dressed, but each crowned with a wreath of flowers, and holding a palm leaf in one hand and a white arum lily in the other.

In the centre of the open moonlit space sat Twala the king, with old Gagool at his feet, attended by Infadoos, the boy Scragga, and twelve guards. There were also present about a score of chiefs, amongst whom I recognised most of our friends of the night before.

Twala greeted us with much apparent cordiality, though I saw him fix his one eye viciously on Umbopa.

"Welcome, white men from the Stars," he said; "this is not so good a sight as last night's. Girls are pleasant; but men are better. Kisses and the tender words of women are sweet, but the sound of clashing spears, and the smell of men's blood, are sweeter far! Would ye have wives from among our people, white men? If so, choose the fairest here, and ye shall have them, as many as ye will," and he paused for an answer.

As the prospect seemed to appeal to Good, and as I could foresee endless complications that anything of the sort would involve, I put in a hasty answer.

"Thanks, O king, but we white men wed only with white women. Your maidens are fair, but they are not for us!"

The king laughed. "It is well. So be it, white men! Welcome again; and welcome, too, thou black one; if Gagool here had won her way, thou wouldst have been stiff and cold by now. It is lucky for thee that thou too camest from the Stars; ha! ha!"

"I can kill thee before thou killest me, O king," was Ignosi's calm answer, "and thou shalt be stiff before my limbs cease to bend."

Twala started. "Thou speakest boldly, boy," he replied angrily; "presume not too far."

"He may well be bold who speaks truth. The truth is a sharp spear which flies home and misses not. It is a message from the Stars, O king."

Twala scowled, and his one eye gleamed fiercely.

"Let the dance begin," he cried, and then the flower-crowned girls sprang forward, singing a sweet song and waving the delicate palms and lilies. On they danced, now whirling round and round, swaying, eddying here and there, coming forward, falling back in an ordered confusion delightful to witness. At last they paused, and a beautiful young woman sprang out of the ranks and began to pirouette in front of us with a grace and vigour which would have put most ballerinas to shame. At length she retired exhausted, and another took her place, then another and another, but none of them were as graceful, skilful, or beautiful as the first.

When the girls had all danced, the king lifted his hand.

"Which deem ye the fairest, white men?" he asked.

"The first," said I unthinkingly. Next second I regretted it, for I remembered that Infadoos had told us that the fairest woman must be offered up as a sacrifice.

"Then your mind is as my mind. She is the fairest! and she must die!"

"Ay, must die!" piped out Gagool, casting a glance in the direction of the poor girl, who, still ignorant of her awful fate, was standing some ten yards off with a

company of maidens, engaged in nervously picking a flower from her wreath to pieces, petal by petal.

"Why, O king?" said I, restraining my indignation with difficulty; "the girl has danced well, and pleased us; it would be cruel to reward her with death."

Twala laughed. "It is our custom, and the figures who sit in stone yonder," and he pointed towards the three distant peaks, "must have their due. If I failed to put the fairest girl to death today, misfortune would fall upon me and my house. Thus runs the prophecy of my people. She must die!" Then turning to the guards, he said. "Bring her hither; Scragga, make sharp thy spear."

Two of the men stepped forward, and as they advanced, the girl, for the first time realising her fate, screamed aloud and turned to fly. But the strong hands caught her fast, and brought her, struggling and weeping, before us.

"What is thy name, girl?" piped Gagool. "What! wilt thou not answer? Shall the king's son do his work at once?"

At this hint, Scragga, looking more evil than ever, advanced a step and lifted his great spear, and I saw Good's hand creep to his revolver. The poor girl ceased struggling, and clasping her hands convulsively, stood shuddering from head to foot.

"See," cried Scragga in high glee, "she shrinks from the sight of my little plaything even before she has tasted it!"

"If ever I get the chance you shall pay for that, you young hound!" I heard Good mutter beneath his breath.

"Now give us thy name, my dear. Come, speak out," said Gagool mockingly.

"Oh, mother," answered the girl, in a trembling voice, "my name is Foulata, of the house of Suko. Oh, mother, why must I die? I have done no wrong!"

"Be comforted," went on the old woman in her hateful tone. "Thou must die, indeed, as a sacrifice to the Old Ones who sit yonder; but it is better to die than to live, and thou shalt die by the royal hand of the king's own son."

The girl Foulata wrung her hands in anguish, and cried out aloud, "Oh, cruel! What have I done that I should never again see the sun rise, or the stars in the evening, that I may no more gather the flowers when the dew is heavy, or listen to the laughing of the waters? I shall never see my father's hut again, nor feel my mother's kiss! No lover shall put his arm around me and look into my eyes, nor shall children be born of me! Oh, cruel, cruel!"

And again she wrung her hands and turned her tear-stained face to Heaven, looking so lovely in her despair that the sight would have melted the hearts of anyone kinder than the three fiends before us.

But it did not move Gagool or Gagool's master, though I saw signs of pity among the guards behind, and on the faces of the chiefs. As for Good, he gave a fierce snort, and moved as though to go to her assistance. The doomed girl suddenly flung herself before him, and clasped his "beautiful white legs" with her hands.

"Oh, white father from the Stars!" she cried, "throw over me the cloak of thy protection; let me creep into the shadow of thy strength, that I may be saved. Oh, keep me from these cruel men and from Gagool!"

"All right, my hearty, I'll look after you," sang out Good in nervous English. "Come, get up, there's a good girl," and he took her hand.

Twala turned and motioned to his son, who advanced with his spear lifted.

"Now's your time," whispered Sir Henry to me; "what are you waiting for?"

"I am waiting for that eclipse," I answered. "I have had my eye on the moon for the last half-hour, and I never saw it look healthier."

"Well, you must risk it now, or the girl will be killed. Twala is losing patience."

Recognising the truth of this, and having cast one more despairing look at the bright face of the moon, I stepped forward with all the dignity that I could command to stand between the girl and Scragga.

"King," I said, "we will not endure this thing; it shall not be. Let the girl go in safety."

Twala rose from his seat in wrath and astonishment, and from the chiefs and ranks of maidens came a murmur of amazement.

"Shall not be! thou white dog, that yappest at the lion in his cave; shall not be! art thou mad? Who art thou that thou settest thyself between me and my will? Back, I say. Scragga, kill her! Guards! seize these men."

At his cry armed men ran swiftly out from behind the hut.

Sir Henry, Good, and Umbopa ranged themselves alongside me, and lifted their rifles.

"Stop!" I shouted boldly, though my heart was in my boots. "Stop! we say that it shall not be. Come one pace nearer, and we will put out the moon like a wind-blown lamp, and plunge the land in darkness. Dare to disobey, and ye shall taste our magic."

The men halted, and Scragga stood still before us, his spear lifted.

"Hear him! hear him!" piped Gagool; "hear the liar who says that he will put out the moon like a lamp. Let him do it, or die with the girl."

I glanced up at the moon despairingly, and now to my intense joy and relief saw that the almanack had made no mistake. On the edge of the great orb lay a faint rim of shadow, while a smoky hue grew and gathered upon its bright surface. Never shall I forget that supreme, that superb moment of relief.

Then I lifted my hand solemnly towards the sky, an example which Sir Henry and Good followed, and quoted a line or two from the "Ingoldsby Legends" at it in the most impressive tones that I could command. Sir Henry followed suit with a Bible verse, and something about Balbus building a wall, in Latin, whilst Good addressed the Queen of Night in a volume of the most classical bad language which he could think of.

Slowly the penumbra, the shadow of a shadow, crept over the bright surface, and as it crept I heard deep gasps of fear rising from the multitude.

"Look, O king!" I cried; "look, Gagool! Look, chiefs and people and women, and see if the white men from the Stars be empty liars! The moon grows black before your eyes; soon there will be darkness. Ye have asked for a sign; it is given to you. Grow dark, O Moon! withdraw thy light, thou pure and holy One; bring the proud heart of usurping murderers to the dust, and eat up the world with shadows."

A groan of terror burst from the onlookers. Some stood petrified with dread, others threw themselves upon their knees and cried aloud. Only Gagool kept her courage.

"It will pass," she cried; "I have often seen the like before; no man can put out the moon; lose not heart; sit still – the shadow will pass."

"Wait, and ye shall see," I replied. "O Moon! Moon! Moon! wherefore art thou so cold and fickle?" Then I added: "Keep it up, Good, I can't remember any more poetry. Curse away, there's a good fellow."

Good responded nobly. Never before had I the faintest conception of the breadth of a naval officer's powers of swearing. For ten minutes he went on in several languages, and he scarcely ever repeated himself.

Meanwhile the dark ring crept on, while all that great assembly stared and stared in fascinated silence. Strange and unholy shadows deepened, and an ominous quiet filled the place. Everything grew still as death. The full moon passed deeper and deeper into the shadow of the earth, as the inky segment of its circle slid in awful majesty across the lunar craters. The great pale orb turned a coppery hue, then that portion of her surface which was still unobscured grew grey and ashen; and at length, as totality approached, her mountains and her plains were to be seen glowing luridly through a crimson gloom.

On crept the ring of darkness; it was now more than half across the blood-red orb. The air grew thick. On, yet on, till we could scarcely see the fierce faces of the group before us. No sound rose now from the spectators, and at last Good stopped swearing.

"The moon is dying – the white wizards have killed the moon," yelled Scragga at last. "We shall all perish in the dark," and animated by fear or fury, or by both, he lifted his spear and drove it with all his force at Sir Henry's breast.

But he forgot the mail shirts that the king had given us, and which we wore beneath our clothing. The steel rebounded harmlessly. Before he could repeat the blow Curtis had snatched the spear from his hand and sent it straight through him.

Scragga dropped dead.

At the sight, and driven mad with fear of the gathering darkness, the companies of girls broke up in wild confusion, and ran screeching for the gateways. Nor did the panic stop there. The king himself, followed by his guards, some of the chiefs, and Gagool, fled for the huts, so that in another minute we ourselves, the girl Foulata, Infadoos, and most of the chiefs who had interviewed us on the previous night, were left alone upon the scene.

"Chiefs," I said, "we have given you the sign. If ye are satisfied, let us fly swiftly to the place of which ye spoke. The charm cannot now be stopped. It will work for an hour and a half. Let us cover ourselves in the darkness."

"Come," said Infadoos. Good took Foulata by the arm.

Before we reached the gate of the kraal the moon went out utterly, and from every quarter of the firmament the stars rushed forth into the inky sky. We stumbled on through the darkness.

CHAPTER 12

Before the Battle

Infadoos and the chiefs knew all the minor paths of the great town perfectly, and so we passed along them unmolested, in darkness.

For an hour or more we journeyed, till the eclipse began to pass, and the edge of the moon which had disappeared first again became visible. Suddenly there burst from it a silver streak of light, accompanied by a wondrous ruddy glow, which hung upon the black sky like a celestial lamp, and a wild and lovely sight it was. In another five minutes the stars began to fade, and there was sufficient light to see our whereabouts.

We then discovered that we were clear of the town, and approaching a large flat-topped hill. It was scarcely more than 200 feet high, but shaped like a horseshoe, and its steep sides were strewn with boulders. On the grass table-land at its summit was an ample camping-ground for a military force. As we toiled up it in the returning moonlight we perceived that there were several regiments encamped there.

We passed through crowds of men roused from their sleep, shivering with fear at the eclipse. Walking through these without a word, we reached a hut in the centre, where we were astonished to find two men waiting with our few goods and equipment, which of course we had been obliged to leave behind.

"I sent for them," explained Infadoos; "and also for these," and he lifted up Good's long-lost trousers.

With an exclamation of rapturous delight Good sprang at them, and instantly proceeded to put them on.

"Surely my lord will not hide his beautiful white legs!" exclaimed Infadoos regretfully.

But Good persisted, and once only did the Kukuana people get the chance of seeing his beautiful legs again. Good is a very modest man. Henceforward they had to be satisfied with his one whisker, his transparent eye, and his movable teeth.

Infadoos now informed us that he had commanded the regiments to muster at daybreak, when he would explain matters to them fully and introduce to them the rightful heir to the throne, Ignosi.

Accordingly, when the sun was up, the troops – in all some twenty thousand men, the flower of the Kukuana army – were mustered on a large open space. They were drawn up in three sides of a dense square: we stood on the fourth side, surrounded by the principal chiefs and officers.

Infadoos addressed the assembly in vigorous and graceful language – for, like most Kukuanas of high rank, he was a born orator. He told the history of Ignosi's father, and of how he had been basely murdered by Twala the king, and his wife and child driven out to starve. Then he pointed out that the people suffered and groaned under Twala's cruel rule, so that on the previous night, many of the noblest in the

land had been dragged forth and wickedly done to death. He went on to say that the white lords from the Stars, looking down upon their country, had perceived its trouble, and decided to assist: they had accordingly taken the real king of the Kukuanas, Ignosi, who was languishing in exile, by the hand, and led him over the mountains. They had seen the wickedness of Twala's doings, and by the use of their high magic, had put out the moon and slain the young fiend Scragga; and they were prepared to help overthrow Twala, and set up the rightful king, Ignosi, in his place.

He finished amidst an approving murmur. Then Ignosi stepped forward and began to speak. Having confirmed all that Infadoos his uncle had said, he concluded a powerful speech in these words:

"O chiefs, captains, soldiers, and people, ye have heard my words. Now must ye make choice between me and him who sits upon my throne, the uncle who killed his brother, and hunted his brother's child forth to die in the cold and the night. That I am indeed the king, these" – pointing to the chiefs – "can tell you, for they have seen the snake about my middle. If I were not the king, would these white men be on my side with all their magic? Tremble, chiefs and soldiers! Is not the darkness they have brought upon the land to confound Twala, darkness even in the hour of the full moon, yet before your eyes?"

"It is," answered the soldiers.

"I say to you, I am the king," went on Ignosi, drawing up to his full great stature, and lifting his broad-bladed battle-axe above his head. "If there be any man among you who says that it is not so, let him stand forth and I will fight him now. Let him stand forth, I say;" and he shook the great axe till it flashed in the sunlight.

As nobody responded, he went on.

"I am indeed the king, and if we stand together, and we win the battle, ye shall go with me to victory and honour. I will give you oxen and wives; and if ye fall, I will fall with you.

"And behold, I give you this promise, that when I sit upon the seat of my fathers, bloodshed shall cease in the land. No longer shall ye cry for justice, no longer shall the witch-finder hunt you out so that ye may be slain without a cause. No man shall die save he who offends against the laws. Each one of you shall sleep secure in his own hut and fear naught. Have ye chosen, chiefs, captains, soldiers, and people?"

"We have chosen, O king," came the answer.

"It is well. Twala's messengers go forth from the great town, east and west, and north and south, to gather a mighty army to slay us. Tomorrow, or the next day, he will come against us. Then I shall see the man who is indeed my man, the man who fears not to die for his cause; and I tell you that he shall not be forgotten in the time of spoil. I have spoken, O chiefs, captains, soldiers, and people. Now go to your huts and make you ready for war."

After a pause, one of the chiefs lifted his hand, and out rolled the royal salute, "*Koom*." It was a sign that the soldiers accepted Ignosi as their king. Then they marched off in battalions.

Half an hour later we held a council of war, at which all the commanders of the regiments were present. It was clear that before very long we should be attacked in

overwhelming force. Indeed, from the hill we could see troops mustering, and runners going forth from Loo in every direction, doubtless to summon soldiers to the king's assistance. We had on our side about twenty thousand men, while Twala, so Infadoos calculated, had at least thirty to thirty-five thousand on whom he could rely already assembled in Loo, and they thought that by midday on the morrow he would be able to gather another five thousand or more.

It was, of course, possible that some of his troops would desert and come over to us, but we could not rely on that. Armed bodies of men were already patrolling round and round the foot of the hill, and there were other signs of coming assault.

Infadoos and the chiefs, however, thought that no attack would take place that day, which would be devoted to preparation. The onslaught would be on the morrow, they said, and they proved to be right.

Meanwhile, we set to work to strengthen our position in all ways possible. The paths up the hill – which was generally used as a military hospital rather than a fortress – were carefully blocked with masses of stones, and every approach was made as impregnable as time would allow. Piles of boulders were collected at various spots to be rolled down upon an advancing enemy, and stations were appointed to the different regiments.

Just before sundown, as we rested after our toil, we perceived a small company of men advancing towards us from Loo, one of whom bore a palm leaf for a sign that he came as a herald.

As he drew near, Ignosi, Infadoos, one or two chiefs and ourselves, went down the hill to meet him. He was a gallant-looking fellow, wearing the regulation leopard-skin cloak.

"Greeting!" he cried; "the king's greeting to those who make unholy war against him; the lion's greeting to the jackals that snarl around his heels."

"Speak," I said.

"These are the king's words. Surrender to the king's mercy ere a worse thing befall you. Already the shoulder has been torn from the black bull, and the king drives him bleeding about the camp."

"What are Twala's terms?" I asked from curiosity.

"His terms are merciful, worthy of a great king. These are the words of Twala, the one-eyed, the mighty, the Calf of the Black Cow, Elephant whose tread shakes the earth, Terror of the evil-doer, king from generation to generation! these are the words of Twala: 'I will have mercy and be satisfied with a little blood. One in every ten shall die, the rest shall go free; but the white man Incubu, who slew Scragga my son, and the black man his servant, who pretends to my throne, and Infadoos my brother, who brews rebellion against me, these shall die by torture as an offering to the Silent Ones.' Such are the merciful words of Twala."

After consulting with the others a little, I answered him loudly, so that the soldiers might hear:

"Go back, thou dog, to Twala, and say that we, Ignosi, true king of the Kukuanas, Incubu, Bougwan, and Macumazahn, the wise ones from the Stars who make dark the moon, Infadoos, and the chiefs here gathered make answer that we will not

surrender; that before the sun has gone down twice, Twala's corpse shall stiffen, and Ignosi, whose father Twala slew, shall reign in his stead. Now go, before we whip thee away."

The herald laughed loudly. "Show yourselves as bold tomorrow," he cried. "Be bold, fight, and be merry, before the crows pick your bones." With that he retired, and almost immediately the sun sank.

That night was a busy one, for weary as we were, we still needed to prepare for the morrow's fight, and messengers were constantly coming and going. At last, about an hour after midnight, everything that could be done was done, and the camp sank into silence. Sir Henry and I, accompanied by Ignosi and one of the chiefs, descended the hill and made a tour of the pickets. As we went round, sudden spears gleamed out in the moonlight from all sorts of unexpected places, only to vanish again when we uttered the password. It was clear that none were sleeping at their posts.

Then we returned, picking our way warily through thousands of sleeping warriors, many of whom were taking their last earthly rest. The moonlight played upon their features and made them ghastly; the chilly night wind tossed their tall and hearse-like plumes. There their stern and stalwart forms lay in wild confusion, with arms outstretched and twisted limbs.

"How many of these do you suppose will be alive at this time tomorrow?" asked Sir Henry.

I shook my head and looked again at the sleeping men, and to my tired and yet excited imagination it seemed as though Death had already touched them. My mind's eye singled out those who were sealed to slaughter, and there rushed in upon my heart a great sense of the mystery of human life, and an overwhelming sorrow at its futility and sadness. Tomorrow many of these men, ourselves perhaps among them, would be stiffening in the cold; their wives would be widows, their children fatherless. Only the old moon would shine on serenely, the night wind would stir the grasses, and the wide earth would take its rest, even as it will do eons after we have been forgotten.

Yet man dies not whilst the world remains. His name is lost, indeed, but the breath he breathed still stirs the pine-tops on the mountains, the sound of the words he spoke yet echoes on through space; we inherit his thoughts and passions; the joys and sorrows that he knew are our familiar friends – and his end will surely overtake us also!

All sorts of reflections of this nature passed through my mind – for as I grow older I regret to say that a detestable habit of thinking seems to be getting hold of me.

"Curtis," I said, "I am in a condition of pitiable fear."

Sir Henry stroked his yellow beard and laughed.

"I have heard you make that sort of remark before, Quatermain."

"Well, I mean it now. Do you know, I very much doubt if one of us will be alive tomorrow night. We shall be attacked in overwhelming force."

"We'll give a good account of ourselves, at any rate. Look here, Quatermain, this business is nasty, and one with which, properly speaking, we ought not to be mixed up, but we are in for it, so we must make the best of our job. Speaking personally, I

had rather be killed fighting than any other way, and now that there seems little chance of finding my poor brother, it makes the idea easier. But fortune favours the brave, and we may succeed. Anyway, the battle will be awful, and having a reputation to keep up, we shall need to be in the thick of it."

He made this last remark in a mournful voice, but there was a gleam in his eye which belied its melancholy. I have an idea Sir Henry Curtis actually likes fighting.

After this we went to sleep for a couple of hours or so.

Just about dawn we were awakened by Infadoos, who came to say that great activity was to be observed in Loo, and that groups of the king's skirmishers were driving into our outposts.

We rose and dressed ourselves for the fray, each putting on his chain armour shirt, for which we felt exceedingly thankful. Sir Henry went the whole length, and clad himself like a native warrior.

"When you are in Kukuanaland, do as the Kukuanas do," he remarked, as he drew the shining steel over his broad breast, which it fitted like a glove. Infadoos had provided him with a complete set of native war uniform: round his throat he fastened the leopard-skin cloak of a commanding officer, on his brows he bound the plume of black ostrich feathers worn only by generals of high rank, and about his middle a magnificent moocha of white ox-tails. A pair of sandals, a heavy battle-axe, a round iron shield covered with white ox-hide, and the regulation number of tollas, or throwing-knives, made up his equipment – to which, however, he added his revolver.

I seldom saw a finer sight than Sir Henry Curtis in this guise. It showed off his magnificent physique to great advantage, and when Ignosi arrived presently, arrayed in a similar costume, I thought that I had never before seen two such splendid men.

As for Good and myself, the armour did not suit us nearly so well. To begin with, Good insisted upon keeping on his new-found trousers, and a stout, short gentleman with an eye-glass, and one half of his face shaved, arrayed in a mail shirt carefully tucked into a very seedy pair of corduroys, looks more remarkable than imposing.

In my case, the chain shirt being too big for me, I put it on over all my clothes. I discarded my trousers, however, retaining only my veldtschoons. I was determined to go into battle with bare legs, in order to be the lighter for running if necessary. As well as the mail coat, I had a spear, a shield that I did not know how to use, a couple of tollas, a revolver, and a huge plume, which I pinned into the top of my shooting hat, to give a bloodthirsty finish to my appearance. Of course we had our rifles, but as ammunition was scarce, and as they would be useless in a charge, we arranged that they should be carried behind us by bearers.

We swallowed some food hastily, and then started out to see how things were going on. At one point in the table-land, there was a *koppie*, little hillock of brown stone, which served both as head-quarters and a lookout tower. Here we found Infadoos surrounded by his own regiment, the Greys, which was undoubtedly the finest in the Kukuana army, and the same that we had first seen at the outlying kraal. This regiment, three thousand five hundred strong, was being held in reserve, and the men were lying down on the grass in companies, and watching the king's forces

creep out of Loo in long ant-like columns. There seemed to be no end to the length of these columns – three in all, and each numbering at least eleven or twelve thousand men.

As soon as they were clear of the town the regiments formed up. Then one body marched off to the right, one to the left, and the third came on slowly towards us.

"Ah," said Infadoos, "they are going to attack us on three sides at once."

This seemed rather serious news. We were extended around the top of the mountain, which measured a mile and a half in circumference, and needed to concentrate our comparatively small defending force as much as possible. But since it was impossible for us to dictate in what way we should be attacked, we had to make the best of it. Accordingly we sent orders to the various regiments to prepare to receive the onslaught.

CHAPTER 13

The Attack

Slowly, without any sign of haste, the three columns crept on. When within about five hundred yards of us, the centre column halted at the base of a slope which ran up into the hill, while the other divisions moved around it to face us on three sides.

"Oh, for a Gatling gun!" groaned Good, as he contemplated the troops beneath us. "I would clear that plain in twenty minutes."

"We haven't got one; but suppose you try a shot, Quatermain," said Sir Henry. "See how near you can get to that tall fellow who appears to be in command. Two to one you miss him, and an even pound that you don't drop the bullet within five yards."

This piqued me, so, loading the express, I waited till the man walked some ten yards out from his force, in order to get a better view of our position, accompanied only by an orderly. Then, lying down and resting the express on a rock, I covered him. To allow for the drop in trajectory I aimed for half-way down the neck, which ought, I calculated, to hit him in the chest. He stood quite still; but whether it was the excitement or the wind, or the long shot, I don't know, but this was what happened. I pressed the trigger, and when the puff of smoke had cleared away, to my disgust I saw my man standing there unharmed, whilst his orderly, who was at least three paces to the left, was stretched upon the ground. Turning swiftly, the officer I had aimed at began to run towards his men in alarm.

"Bravo, Quatermain!" sang out Good; "you've frightened him."

This made me very angry, for I hate to miss in public. When a man is master of only one art he likes to keep up his reputation in that art. So, rapidly covering the general as he ran, I let drive with the second barrel. Instantly the poor man threw up his arms, and fell forward on to his face. This time I had made no mistake; and to show how little we think of others when our own pride or reputation is at stake, I was brute enough to feel delighted at the sight.

Our regiments cheered wildly at this exhibition of the white man's magic, which they took as an omen of success; while the force below fell back in confusion. Sir Henry and Good now took up their rifles and began to fire, and I also had another shot or two. Together we took out some six or eight men before they got out of range.

Just as we stopped firing there came an ominous roar from our far right, then a similar roar on our left. The two other divisions were attacking.

The mass of men before us opened out a little, and advanced towards the hill and up the slope at a slow trot, singing a deep-throated song as they ran. We kept up a steady fire from our rifles, Ignosi joining in occasionally. We hit several men, but of course we produced no more effect upon that mighty rush of armed humanity than throwing pebbles does on the breaking wave.

On they came, with a shout and clashing of spears; though as they climbed the hill, they slowed. Our first line of defence was about half-way down the side of the slope, our second fifty yards further back, while our third was on the edge of the plateau.

On they stormed, shouting their war-cry, "Twala! Twala! *Chiele! Chiele!*" (Twala! Twala! Smite! Smite!) "Ignosi! Ignosi! *Chiele! Chiele!*" answered our people. They were quite close now, and the throwing-knives began to flash. And now with an awful yell the battle closed in.

To and fro swayed the mass of struggling warriors, men falling as fast as leaves in an autumn wind; but before long the superior weight of the attacking force began to tell. Our first line of defence was slowly pressed back till it merged into the second. Here the struggle was very fierce, but again our people were driven back, until at length, twenty minutes after the battle started, our third line came into action.

But by this time the assailants were much exhausted, and had lost many men. To break through that third impenetrable hedge of spears proved beyond their powers. For a while the seething lines swung backwards and forwards in the fierce ebb and flow of battle. Sir Henry watched the desperate struggle with a kindling eye, and then without a word he rushed off, followed by Good, and flung himself into the hottest of the fray. As for me, I stayed where I was.

The soldiers caught sight of his tall form as he plunged into battle, and there rose a cry of "Nanzia Incubu! Nanzia Unkungunklovo!" (Here is the Elephant!) "Chiele! Chiele!"

From that moment the end was in no doubt. Inch by inch, fighting with splendid gallantry, the attacking force was pressed back down the hillside, till at last it retreated in something like confusion. At that instant, too, a messenger arrived to say that the left attack had been repulsed; and I was just beginning to congratulate myself, when, to our horror, we saw that our men who had been engaged in the right defence were being driven back towards us across the plain, followed by swarms of the enemy.

Ignosi, who was standing by me, took in the situation at a glance, and issued a rapid order. Instantly the reserve regiment around us, the Greys, extended itself.

Again Ignosi gave a word of command, which was taken up and repeated by the captains, and in another second, to my intense disgust, I found myself involved in a furious onslaught upon the advancing foe. Getting as much as I could behind Ignosi's huge frame, I made the best of a bad job, and toddled along to be killed as though I liked it.

In a minute or two we were plunging through the flying groups of our men, who at once began to re-form behind us, and then I am sure I do not know what happened. All I can remember is a dreadful rolling noise of the meeting of shields, and the sudden appearance of a huge ruffian, whose eyes seemed to be starting out of his head, making straight at me with a bloody spear.

But – I say it with pride – I rose, or rather sank, to the occasion. Seeing that if I stood still I must be killed, as he came I flung myself down in front of him so that,

unable to stop himself, he took a header right over my prostrate form. Before he could rise again, I had settled the matter with my revolver.

Shortly after this somebody knocked me down, and I remember no more of that charge.

When I came to, I found myself back at the hillock, with Good bending over me.

"How do you feel, old fellow?" he asked anxiously.

I got up and shook myself before replying. "Pretty well, thank you."

"Thank Heaven! When I saw them carry you in, I felt quite sick; I thought you were done for."

"Not this time, my boy. I think I only got a rap on the head, which knocked me stupid. How has it ended?"

"They are repulsed at every point for now. The losses are dreadfully heavy; we have two thousand killed and wounded, and they must have lost three. Look, there's a sight!"

He pointed to long lines of men advancing by fours. In the centre of every group of four, and being carried by it, was a kind of hide stretcher, with a loop for a handle at each corner. On these stretchers – and their number seemed endless – lay wounded men, who as they arrived were hastily examined by the medicine men, of whom ten were attached to a regiment.

If the wound was not fatal the sufferer was taken away and attended to carefully. But if the injured man's condition proved hopeless, what followed was very dreadful, though doubtless it may have been merciful. One of the doctors, while pretending to examine him, swiftly opened an artery with a sharp knife, and in a minute or two the sufferer died painlessly.

There were many cases that day in which this was done. In fact, it was done in the majority of cases when the wound was in the body, for the gash made by the entry of the enormously broad Kukuana spears generally rendered recovery impossible. Most of the poor sufferers were already unconscious, and in others the fatal "nick" of the artery was inflicted so swiftly that they did not seem to notice it. Still it was a ghastly sight, and one from which we were glad to escape.

Hurrying from this dreadful scene to the further side of the hillock, we found Sir Henry, who still held a battle-axe in his hand, Ignosi, Infadoos, and one or two of the chiefs in deep consultation.

"Thank Heaven, here you are, Quatermain! I can't quite make out what Ignosi wants to do. It seems that although we have beaten off the attack, Twala is now receiving large reinforcements, and is showing a disposition to starve us out."

"That's awkward."

"Yes; especially as Infadoos says that the water supply has given out."

"My lord, that is so," said Infadoos; "the spring cannot supply the wants of so great a multitude. Before night we shall all be thirsty. Listen, Macumazahn. Thou art wise, and hast doubtless seen many wars – if indeed they make wars in the Stars. Now tell us, what shall we do? Twala has brought many fresh men to take the place of those who have fallen. Yet Twala has learnt his lesson; he fears to strike at us again.

We too are wounded, and he will wait for us to die; he will wind himself round us like a snake round a buck, and fight the fight sitting down."

"I hear thee," I said.

"So, Macumazahn, thou seest we have no water here, and only a little food, and we must choose between these three things: to languish like a starving lion in his den, or to strive to break away towards the north, or" – and here he rose and pointed towards the dense mass of our foes – "to launch ourselves straight at Twala's throat. Incubu fought like a buffalo in a net, and Twala's soldiers went down before his axe – now Incubu says 'Charge'; but the Elephant is ever prone to charge. What says Macumazahn, the wily old fox, who has seen much, and loves to bite his enemy from behind? The last word is in Ignosi the king; but let us hear thy voice, O Macumazahn, who watchest by night, and the voice too of him of the transparent eye."

"What sayest thou, Ignosi?" I asked.

"Nay, my father," answered our former servant, who now looked every inch a warrior king, "do thou speak, and let me, who am but a child in wisdom beside thee, hearken to thy words."

So, after taking hasty counsel with Good and Sir Henry, I gave my opinion: that being trapped, our best chance, especially in view of the failure of our water supply, was to attack Twala's forces. I recommended that the attack should be delivered at once, "before our wounds grew stiff," and also before the sight of Twala's overpowering force caused the hearts of our soldiers to tremble. Otherwise, I pointed out, some of the captains might change their minds, and desert to Twala.

This opinion seemed, on the whole, to be favourably received. Indeed, among the Kukuanas my utterances met with a respect which has never been given to them before or since. But the real decision lay with Ignosi, and it was to him that all eyes were now turned.

At length, after a pause, during which he appeared to be thinking deeply, he spoke.

"Incubu, Macumazahn, and Bougwan, brave white men, and my friends; Infadoos, my uncle, and chiefs; my heart is fixed. I will strike at Twala this day, and set my fortunes on the blow, ay, and my life and your lives also. Listen; thus will I strike. Ye see how the hill curves round like the half-moon, and how the plain runs like a green tongue towards us within the curve?"

"We see," I answered.

"Good; it is now mid-day, and the men eat and rest after the toil of battle. When the sun has turned and travelled a little way towards the darkness, let thy regiment, my uncle, advance with one other down to the green tongue. When Twala sees it he will hurl his force at it to crush it. But the spot is narrow, and the regiments can come against thee one at a time only; so may they be destroyed one by one, and the eyes of all Twala's army shall be fixed upon a struggle the like of which has not been seen by living man. And with thee, my uncle, shall go Incubu my friend, so that when Twala sees his battle-axe flashing in the first rank of the Greys his heart may grow faint. And I will come with the second regiment, that which follows thee, so that if ye are

destroyed, there may yet be a king left to fight for; and with me shall come Macumazahn the wise."

"It is well, O king," said Infadoos, apparently contemplating the certainty of the complete annihilation of his regiment with perfect calmness. Truly, these Kukuanas were a wonderful people. Death in the course of duty had no terrors for them.

"And whilst the eyes of Twala's soldiers are thus fixed upon the fight," went on Ignosi, "one-third of the men who are left alive to us (i.e. about 6,000) shall creep along the right horn of the hill and fall upon the left flank of Twala's force, and one-third shall creep along the left horn and fall upon Twala's right flank. And when I see that the horns are ready, then will I, with the men remaining, charge in Twala's face, and if fortune goes with us the day will be ours. And now let us eat and make ready; and, Infadoos, do thou prepare, that the plan may be carried out without fail; and let my white father Bougwan go with the right horn, that his shining eye may give courage to the captains."

These arrangements for attack were set in motion with a rapid efficiency. Within little more than an hour rations had been served out and eaten, the divisions were formed, the scheme of onslaught was explained to the leaders, and the whole force, numbering about 18,000 men, was ready to move, with the exception of a guard left in charge of the wounded.

Presently Good came up to Sir Henry and myself.

"Good-bye, you fellows," he said; "I am off with the right wing; and so I have come to shake hands, in case we should not meet again, you know."

We shook hands in silence.

"It is a queer business," said Sir Henry, his deep voice shaking a little, "and I confess I don't expect to see tomorrow's sun. So far as I can make out, the Greys, with whom I am to go, are to fight until they are wiped out in order to enable the wings to slip round Twala unawares. Well, so be it; at any rate, it will be a man's death. Good-bye, old fellow. God bless you! I hope you will live to collar the diamonds; but if you do, take my advice and don't have anything more to do with royalty!"

Good wrung us both by the hand and departed; and then Infadoos came up and led off Sir Henry to his place in the forefront of the Greys. With many misgivings, I went with Ignosi to the second attacking regiment.

CHAPTER 14

The Last Stand of the Greys

In a few more minutes the regiments destined to carry out the flanking movements had tramped off in silence, keeping carefully behind the rising ground in order to hide their advance from the keen eyes of Twala's scouts.

Half an hour was allowed for them before any movement was made by the Greys and their supporting regiment, known as the Buffaloes, who would bear the brunt of the battle.

Both of these regiments were almost perfectly fresh, and of full strength, the Greys having been in reserve in the morning, and having lost only a small number of men in the charge in which I was involved. As for the Buffaloes, they had formed the third line of defence on the left, and had scarcely come into action at all.

Infadoos, who was a wary old general, and knew the absolute importance of keeping up the spirits of his men before such a desperate encounter, addressed his own regiment, the Greys, in poetical language: explaining to them the honour of being put thus in the forefront of the battle, and in having the great white warrior from the Stars to fight in their ranks; and promising large rewards of cattle and promotion to all who survived if the battle was won.

I looked down the long lines of waving black plumes and stern faces beneath them, and sighed to think that within one short hour most of those magnificent veteran warriors, not a man of whom was under forty, would be dead or dying in the dust. It could not be otherwise; they were being condemned, with that wise recklessness of human life which marks the great general, to certain slaughter, in order to give their cause a chance of success. They were foredoomed to die, and they knew the truth. It was to be their task to engage regiment after regiment of Twala's army till they were exterminated or till the wings found a favourable opportunity for their onslaught.

And yet they never hesitated, nor could I detect fear upon the face of a single warrior. They were going to certain death, and yet were able to contemplate their doom without a tremor. I could not help contrasting their state of mind with my own, which was far from comfortable, and I breathed a sigh of envy and admiration. Never before had I seen such an absolute devotion to the idea of duty.

"Behold your king!" ended old Infadoos, pointing to Ignosi; "fight and fall for him, as is the duty of brave men, and shamed for ever be the name of him who shrinks from death for his king, or who turns his back to the foe. Behold your king! Now do your homage to the sacred Snake, and then follow, so that Incubu and I may show you a road to the heart of Twala's army."

There was a moment's pause, then a murmur arose from the ranks before us, a sound like the distant whisper of the sea, caused by the gentle tapping of the handles of six thousand spears against their holders' shields. Slowly it swelled, till its growing volume deepened and widened into a roar of rolling noise, that echoed like

thunder against the mountains, and filled the air with heavy waves of sound. Then it gradually died away into nothing, before suddenly out crashed the royal salute.

Ignosi, I thought, might well be a proud man that day. No Roman emperor ever had such a salutation. He acknowledged this magnificent act of homage by lifting his battle-axe, and then the Greys filed off. When the last companies had advanced some five hundred yards, Ignosi put himself at the head of the Buffaloes, and gave the word to march, and off we went, I uttering heartfelt prayers that I might emerge with a whole skin. I had never been in a position where my chance of survival was smaller.

By the time that we reached the edge of the plateau the Greys were already half-way down the slope of the tongue of land. The excitement in Twala's camp on the plain beyond was very great. Regiment after regiment was starting forward in order to reach the root of the tongue of land before the attacking force could emerge into the plain.

This tongue, which was some four hundred yards in depth, even at its widest part was not more than six hundred and fifty paces across, while at its tip it scarcely measured ninety. The Greys, on reaching the spot where it broadened out again, took up a triple-line formation, and halted.

Then we – that is, the Buffaloes – moved down the tip of the tongue and took our stand in reserve, about one hundred yards behind the Greys. We could observe Twala's entire force, which evidently had been reinforced since the morning attack, and could not now number less than forty thousand. But as they drew near the root of the tongue Twala's men hesitated, having discovered that only one regiment could advance into the gorge at a time, and that some seventy yards from the mouth of it – unassailable except in front, because of the high walls on each side – stood the famous regiment of Greys, the pride and glory of the Kukuana army.

They hesitated, and stopped their advance; there was no eagerness to cross spears with those three grim ranks of warriors who stood so firm and ready. Presently, however, a tall general appeared, being, I thought, none other than Twala himself. He gave an order, and the first regiment, raising a shout, charged up towards the Greys, who remained perfectly still and silent till the attacking troops were within forty yards, and a volley of throwing-knives came rattling among their ranks.

Then suddenly with a roar, they sprang forward with uplifted spears, and the regiment met in deadly strife. The sound of the meeting shields came to our ears like thunder, and the plain seemed to be alive with flashes of light reflected from the spears. To and fro swung the surging mass, but not for long. Suddenly the attacking lines began to grow thinner, and then with a slow, long heave the Greys passed over them, just as a great wave heaves up its bulk and passes over a sunken ridge. It was done; that regiment was completely destroyed, but the Greys had only two lines left now; a third of their number were dead.

Closing up shoulder to shoulder, once more they halted in silence and awaited attack; and I rejoiced to catch sight of Sir Henry's yellow beard as he moved to and fro arranging the ranks. So he was still alive!

Meanwhile we moved on to the ground of the encounter, which was covered with human beings, dead, dying, and wounded, and literally stained red with blood. Ignosi issued an order that none of the enemy's wounded were to be killed, and so far as we could see this command was scrupulously carried out.

Now a second regiment, with white plumes and shields, was moving to the attack of the two thousand remaining Greys, who stood waiting in the same ominous silence as before, till the foe was within forty yards or so, when they hurled themselves with irresistible force upon them. Again there came the awful roll of the meeting shields, and as we watched the tragedy repeated itself.

But this time the issue was left longer in doubt; indeed, it seemed for a while almost impossible that the Greys should again prevail. The attacking regiment of younger men fought with the utmost fury, and at first seemed by sheer weight to be driving the veterans back. The slaughter was truly awful; and from among the shouts of the warriors and the groans of the dying, came a continuous hissing undertone of "S'gee, s'gee," the note of triumph of each victor as he passed his assegai through the body of his fallen foe.

But perfect discipline and steady courage can do wonders, and one veteran soldier is worth two young ones. Just when we thought that it was all over with the Greys, and were preparing to take their place, I heard Sir Henry's deep voice ringing out through the din, and caught a glimpse of his circling battle-axe as he waved it high above his plumes. Then came a change; the Greys stood still as a rock, against which the furious waves of spearmen broke again and again, only to recoil. Presently they began to move once more – forward this time.

"Ah, these are men, indeed; they will conquer again," called out Ignosi at my side. "See, it is done!"

Suddenly, like puffs of smoke from the mouth of a cannon, the attacking regiment broke away in flying groups, their white head-dresses streaming behind them in the wind, and left their opponents victors, indeed, but, alas! no more a regiment. Of the gallant triple line, which had gone into action three thousand strong, there remained at most some six hundred blood-spattered men. And yet they cheered and waved their spears in triumph, and then, instead of falling back towards us as we expected, they ran forward a hundred yards or so, after the flying foemen, took possession of a rising knoll of ground, and formed a threefold ring around its base.

And there, thanks be to Heaven, standing on the top of the mound for a minute, I saw Sir Henry, apparently unharmed, and with him our old friend Infadoos. Then Twala's regiments rolled down upon the doomed band, and once more the battle closed in.

As those who read this history will long ago have gathered, I am a bit of a coward, and certainly in no way given to fighting, though I have sometimes been obliged to shed a man's blood. But I have always hated it, and have kept my own blood as unshed as possible. At this moment, however, for the first time in my life, I felt my heart burn with martial ardour, and there came upon me a savage desire to kill and spare not. I glanced round at the ranks of warriors behind us, and wondered

if my face looked like theirs. There they stood, the hands twitching, the lips apart, and in the eyes a look like the glare of a bloodhound when he sights his quarry.

Only Ignosi's heart, to judge from his self-possession, seemed to beat as calmly as ever beneath his leopard-skin cloak, though even he ground his teeth. I could bear it no longer.

"Are we to stand here till we put out roots, Ignosi, while Twala swallows our brothers yonder?" I asked.

"Nay, Macumazahn," was the answer; "see, now is the moment."

As he spoke a fresh regiment rushed past the ring upon the little mound, and attacked it from the other side.

Then, lifting his battle-axe, Ignosi gave the signal to advance, and, screaming the wild Kukuana war-cry, the Buffaloes charged with a rush like the oncoming sea.

All I can remember is an irregular yet ordered advance, that seemed to shake the ground; a sudden change of formation by the enemy's regiment; then an awful shock, a dull roar of voices, and a continuous flashing of spears, seen through a red mist of blood.

When my mind cleared I found myself standing inside the remnant of the Greys near the top of the mound, and just behind Sir Henry himself. How I got there I had at the time no idea, but Sir Henry afterwards told me that I was carried up there by the first furious charge of the Buffaloes. As they fell back, he had dragged me into shelter.

As for the fight that followed, who can describe it? Again and again the multitudes surged against our lessening circle, and again and again we beat them back.

It was a splendid thing to see those brave battalions come on time after time over the barriers of their dead, sometimes lifting corpses before them to receive our spear-thrusts, only to leave their own corpses to swell the rising piles. It was a gallant sight to see that old warrior, Infadoos, coolly shouting orders, and even jests, to keep up the spirit of his few remaining men, and then, as each charge rolled on, stepping forward to wherever the fighting was thickest.

As for Sir Henry, his long yellow hair streaming out behind him, he was a Viking, his hands, his axe, and his armour all red with blood, and none could live before his stroke. Time after time I saw it sweeping down on some great warrior, and as he struck he shouted "O-hoy! O-hoy!" and the blow went crashing through shield and spear, through head-dress, skull and all, till none would of their own will come near him.

But suddenly there rose a cry of "Twala, y' Twala!" Out of the press sprang none other than the gigantic one-eyed king himself, also armed with battle-axe and shield, and clad in chain armour.

"Where art thou, Incubu, thou white man, who slewest Scragga my son? See if thou canst slay me!" he shouted, and hurled a knife straight at Sir Henry, who fortunately saw it coming, and caught it on his shield, which it remained wedged.

Then, with a cry, Twala sprang straight at him, and with his battle-axe struck him such a blow upon the shield that the force and shock of it brought Sir Henry, strong man as he is, down upon his knees.

But just then there rose from the regiments pressing round us a shout of dismay. Looking up, I saw the cause.

To right and left the plain was alive with the plumes of charging warriors. The outflanking squadrons had come to our relief. All Twala's army, as Ignosi had predicted, had fixed their attention on the bloody struggle raging round the Greys and Buffaloes. It was not until our horns were about to close upon them that they had dreamed of their approach, for they believed these forces to be hidden in reserve upon the hill. Now they had no time to re-form for the defence: the soldiers leapt, like greyhounds, on their flanks.

In five minutes the fate of the battle was decided. Attacked on both flanks, and dismayed at the awful slaughter inflicted upon them by the Greys and Buffaloes, Twala's regiments broke into flight, and soon the whole plain between us and Loo was scattered with groups of running soldiers. The hosts that had so recently surrounded us melted away as though by magic, and presently we were left standing there like a rock from which the sea has retreated.

But what a sight it was! Around us the dead and dying lay in heaped-up masses, and of the gallant Greys there remained only ninety-five men upon their feet. More than three thousand four hundred had fallen in this one regiment, most of them never to rise again.

"Men," said Infadoos calmly, after binding a wound on his arm, "ye have kept up the reputation of your regiment, and this day's fighting will be well spoken of by your children's children." Then he turned round and shook Sir Henry Curtis by the hand. "Thou art a great captain, Incubu," he said simply; "I have lived a long life among warriors, yet have I never seen a man like unto thee."

At this moment the Buffaloes began to march past us on the road to Loo, and a message was brought to us from Ignosi requesting Infadoos, Sir Henry, and myself to join them. Accordingly, while the remaining Greys collected the wounded, we joined Ignosi, who informed us that he was pressing on to Loo to complete the victory by capturing Twala, if possible.

Before we had gone far, we suddenly discovered the figure of Good sitting on an ant-heap about a hundred paces from us. Close beside him was the body of a Kukuana.

"He must be wounded," said Sir Henry anxiously.

As he spoke, the dead body of the Kukuana soldier, or rather what had appeared to be his dead body, suddenly sprang up, knocked Good head over heels off the ant-heap, and began to spear him. We rushed forward in terror, seeing the warrior making dig after dig at the prostrate Good, who at each prod jerked all his limbs into the air.

On seeing us coming, the Kukuana gave one final vicious dig, and with a shout of "Take that, wizard!" bolted away. Good did not move, and we thought he was

done for. Sadly we approached, and were astonished to find him pale indeed, but with a serene smile, and his eyeglass still fixed in his eye.

"Capital armour this," he murmured, on catching sight of us, and then he fainted. We discovered that he had been seriously wounded in the leg by a knife, but that the chain armour had prevented his assailant's spear from doing anything more than bruise him badly. It was a merciful escape. He was placed on one of the wicker shields used for the wounded, and carried along with us.

On arriving before the nearest gate of Loo we found one of our regiments guarding it, at Ignosi's command; the other regiments were guarding the different exits to the town. The officer saluted Ignosi, and informed him that Twala's army had taken refuge in the town, along with Twala himself; but he thought that they were thoroughly demoralised, and would surrender. Ignosi sent forward heralds to each gate ordering the defenders to open them, and promising on his royal word life and forgiveness to every soldier who laid down his arms, but saying that if they did not do so before nightfall he would certainly burn the town and all within its gates.

This message had its effect. Half an hour later, amid the shouts and cheers of the Buffaloes, the bridge was dropped across the trench, and the gates upon the farther side were flung open.

We marched into the town. All along the roadways stood thousands of dejected warriors, their heads drooping, and their shields and spears at their feet, who, headed by their officers, saluted Ignosi as king as he passed.

On we marched, straight to Twala's kraal. When we reached the great space where a day or two previously we had seen the witch hunt, we found it deserted. No, not quite deserted, for there, on the far side, in front of his hut, sat Twala himself, with only one attendant – Gagool.

It was a melancholy sight to see him seated, his battle-axe and shield by his side, his chin upon his mailed breast, with only one old crone for companion. Despite his crimes, a pang of compassion shot through me as I looked upon Twala. Not a soldier of all his armies, not a courtier out of the hundreds who had cringed round him, not even a solitary wife, remained with him to share his fate.

Filing through the kraal gate, we marched across the open space to where the ex-king sat. Within about fifty yards of him the regiment was halted, and accompanied only by a small guard we advanced towards him, Gagool reviling us bitterly as we came.

As we drew near, Twala for the first time lifted his plumed head, and fixed his one eye, which seemed to flash with suppressed fury almost as brightly as the great diamond bound round his forehead, upon his successful rival – Ignosi.

"Hail, O king!" he said, with bitter mockery; "thou who hast eaten my bread, and now by the aid of the white man's magic hast seduced my regiments and defeated mine army, hail! What fate hast thou in store for me, O king?"

"The fate thou gavest to my father, whose throne thou hast sat on these many years!" was the stern answer.

"It is good. I will show thee how to die. See, the sun sinks in blood," and he pointed with his battle-axe towards the setting orb; "it is well that my sun should go

down in its company. And now, O king! I am ready to die, but I crave the boon of the Kukuana royal House to die fighting. Thou canst not refuse it."

"It is granted. Choose – with whom wilt thou fight? Myself I cannot fight with thee, for the king fights not except in war."

Twala's sombre eye ran up and down our ranks, and when for a moment it rested on me, the position took on a new horror. What if he chose me? What chance should I have against him?

Presently Twala spoke.

"Incubu, what sayest thou, shall we end what we began today, or shall I call thee coward?"

"Nay," interposed Ignosi hastily; "thou shalt not fight with Incubu."

"Not if he is afraid," said Twala.

Unfortunately Sir Henry understood this remark, and the blood flamed up into his cheeks.

"I will fight him," he said; "he shall see if I am afraid."

"For Heaven's sake," I begged, "don't risk your life against that of a desperate man. Anybody who saw you today will know that you are brave enough."

"I will fight him," was the sullen answer. "No living man shall call me a coward. I am ready now!" and he stepped forward and lifted his axe.

"Fight not, my white brother," said Ignosi, laying his hand affectionately on Sir Henry's arm; "thou hast fought enough, and if aught befell thee it would cut my heart in twain."

"I will fight, Ignosi," was Sir Henry's answer.

"Very well, Incubu; thou art a brave man. Behold, Twala, the Elephant is ready for thee."

The ex-king laughed savagely, and stepping forward faced Curtis. For a moment they stood thus, and the light of the sinking sun caught their stalwart frames and clothed them both in fire. They were a well-matched pair.

Then they began to circle round each other, their battle-axes raised.

Suddenly Sir Henry sprang forward and struck a fearful blow at Twala, who stepped to one side. So heavy was the stroke that the striker half overbalanced himself, and Twala took a prompt advantage of this. Circling his massive battle-axe round his head, he brought it down with tremendous force.

My heart jumped into my mouth; I thought that the affair was already finished. But no; with a quick movement of the left arm Sir Henry put his shield between himself and the axe, with the result that its outer edge was shorn away, the axe falling on his left shoulder, but not heavily enough to do any serious damage. In another moment Sir Henry got in a second blow, which was also received by Twala upon his shield.

Then followed blow upon blow, that were, in turn, either received upon the shields or avoided. The excitement grew intense; the regiment forgot its discipline, and shouted and groaned at every stroke. Just at this time, too, Good, who had been laid upon the ground next to me, perceived what was going on. In an instant he was

up, and hopped about from place to place on one leg, yelling encouragements to Sir Henry: "Go it, old fellow! That was a good one!"

Presently Sir Henry, having caught a fresh stroke upon his shield, hit out with all his force. The blow cut through Twala's shield and through the tough chain armour behind it, gashing him in the shoulder. With a yell of pain and fury Twala returned the blow. Such was his strength, he shore right through the horn handle of his antagonist's battle-axe, wounding Curtis in the face.

A cry of dismay rose from the Buffaloes as our hero's broad axe-head fell to the ground; and Twala, again raising his weapon, flew at him with a shout. I shut my eyes. When I opened them again it was to see Sir Henry's shield lying on the ground, and Sir Henry himself with his great arms twined round Twala's middle. To and fro they swung, hugging each other like bears, straining with all their mighty muscles for dear life.

With a supreme effort Twala swung the Englishman clean off his feet, and down they came together, rolling over and over on the lime paving, Twala striking out at Curtis' head with the battle-axe, and Sir Henry trying to drive the tolla he had drawn from his belt through Twala's armour. It was a mighty struggle, and an awful thing to see.

"Get his axe!" yelled Good.

Perhaps Curtis heard him. Dropping the tolla, he snatched at the axe, which was fastened to Twala's wrist by a strip of buffalo hide, and still rolling over and over, they fought for it like wild cats, drawing their breath in heavy gasps. Suddenly the hide string burst, and then, with a great effort, Sir Henry freed himself, with the weapon in his hand. Another second and he was upon his feet, blood streaming from the wound in his face, and so was Twala.

Drawing the heavy tolla from his belt, he reeled straight at Curtis and struck him in the breast. The stab came home true and strong, but the chain armour withstood the steel. Again Twala struck out with a savage yell, and again the sharp knife rebounded, while Sir Henry went staggering back. Once more Twala came on, and as he came the great Englishman gathered himself together, and swinging the big axe round his head with both hands, hit at him with all his force.

There was a shriek of excitement from a thousand throats, and, behold! Twala's head seemed to spring from his shoulders. Then it fell and rolled and bounded along the ground towards Ignosi, stopping just at his feet. For a second the corpse stood upright; then with a dull crash it came to the earth, and the gold torque from its neck rolled away across the pavement. As it did so Sir Henry, overpowered by faintness and loss of blood, fell heavily across the body of the dead king.

In a second he was lifted up, and eager hands were pouring water on his face. Another minute, and the grey eyes opened wide.

Then, just as the sun sank, I stepped to where Twala's head lay in the dust, unloosed the diamond from the dead brows, and handed it to Ignosi.

"Take it," I said, "lawful king of the Kukuanas – king by birth and victory."

Ignosi bound the gem upon his brows. Then, advancing, he placed his foot upon the broad chest of his headless foe and broke out into a chant of triumph so beautiful,

and yet so utterly savage that I despair of being able to give an adequate version of his words. Once I heard a scholar read aloud from the Greek poet Homer, and I remember that the sound of the rolling lines seemed to make my blood stand still. Ignosi's chant, uttered in a language as beautiful and sonorous as the old Greek, produced exactly the same effect on me.

"Now," he began, "now our rebellion is swallowed up in victory, and our evil-doing is justified by strength.

"In the morning the oppressors arose and stretched themselves; they bound on their harness and made ready to war.

"They rose up and tossed their spears: the soldiers called to the captains, 'Come, lead us'; and the captains cried to the king, 'Direct thou the battle.'

"They laughed in their pride. Their plumes covered the valleys as the plumes of a bird cover her nest; they shook their shields in the sunlight; they lusted for battle and were glad.

"They came up against me; their strong ones ran swiftly to slay me; they cried, 'Ha! ha! he is as one already dead.'

"Then breathed I on them, and my breath was as the breath of a wind, and lo! they were not.

"My lightnings pierced them; I licked up their strength with the lightning of my spears; I shook them to the ground with the thunder of my shoutings.

"They broke – they scattered – they were gone as the mists of the morning.

"They are food for the kites and the foxes, and the battlefield is fat with their blood.

"Where are the mighty ones who rose up in the morning? Where are the proud ones who tossed their spears and cried, 'He is as a man already dead'?

"They bow their heads, but not in sleep; they are stretched out, but not in sleep.

"They have gone into the blackness; they dwell in the dead moons; yea, others shall lead away their wives, and their children shall remember them no more.

"And I! the king – like an eagle I have found my eyrie.

"Behold! far have I flown in the night, yet have I returned to my young at the daybreak.

"Shelter ye under the shadow of my wings, O people, and I will comfort you, and ye shall not be dismayed.

"Now is the good time, the time of spoil. Mine are the cattle on the mountains, mine are the virgins in the kraals.

"The winter is passed with storms, the summer is come with flowers.

"Now Evil shall cover up her face, now Mercy and Gladness shall dwell in the land.

"Rejoice, rejoice, my people! Let all the stars rejoice that this tyranny is trodden down, and that I am the king."

Ignosi ceased, and out of the gathering gloom came back the deep reply:

"Thou art the king!"

Thus was my prophecy to the herald fulfilled, and within forty-eight hours Twala's headless corpse was stiffening at Twala's gate.

CHAPTER 15

Good Falls Sick

After the fight was ended, Sir Henry and Good were carried into Twala's hut, where I joined them. They were both utterly exhausted by exertion and loss of blood, and, indeed, my own condition was little better. I am very wiry, and can stand more fatigue than most men; but that night I was quite done up, and the old wound which the lion gave me began to be painful. Also my head was aching violently from the blow I had received when I was knocked senseless. Altogether, we were a miserable trio; and our only comfort lay in reflecting that we were exceedingly fortunate to be there to feel miserable, instead of being stretched dead upon the plain, as so many thousands of brave men were that night.

Somehow, with the assistance of the beautiful Foulata, who had made herself our handmaiden since we had saved her life, we managed to get off the chain shirts. As I expected, we found that the flesh underneath was terribly bruised. Both Sir Henry and Good were a mass of bruises, and I was by no means free. As a remedy Foulata brought us some aromatic pounded green leaves, which, when applied as a plaster, gave us considerable relief.

But though the bruises were painful, they did not give us such anxiety as Sir Henry's and Good's wounds. Good had a hole right through the fleshy part of his "beautiful white leg," from which he had lost a great deal of blood; and Sir Henry, amongst other wounds, had a deep cut over the jaw, inflicted by Twala's battle-axe. Luckily Good is a very decent surgeon, and as soon as his small box of medicines was found, he cleaned the wounds, and managed to stitch up first Sir Henry's and then his own pretty satisfactorily. Afterwards he plentifully smeared them with antiseptic ointment, and we covered them with the remains of a pocket-handkerchief.

Meanwhile Foulata had prepared us some strong broth, for we were too weary to eat. This we swallowed, and then threw ourselves down on the piles of fur rugs which were scattered about the dead king's great hut. By a strange irony, it was on Twala's own couch, and wrapped in Twala's own fur karross, that Sir Henry, his slayer, slept that night.

I say slept; but after that day's work, sleep was indeed difficult. To begin with, the air was full of the sound of the wailing of women whose husbands, sons, and brothers had perished in the battle. No wonder that they wailed, for over twelve thousand men had been destroyed. It was heart-rending to lie and listen to their cries. Towards midnight, however, the crying grew less frequent, till at length the silence was only broken at intervals by a long piercing howl that came from a hut behind us, which, as I afterwards discovered, proceeded from Gagool "keening" over the dead king Twala.

After that I got a little fitful sleep, only to wake from time to time with a start, reliving the terrible events of the last twenty-four hours. At last, somehow or other,

the night passed away; but when dawn broke I found that my companions had slept no better than myself. Good, indeed, was in a high fever, and began to grow light-headed, and also, to my alarm, to spit blood – the result, no doubt, of some internal injury inflicted by the Kukuana warrior who had tried so desperately to force his spear through the chain armour. Sir Henry, however, seemed pretty fresh, despite his wound on the face, which made eating difficult and laughter impossible.

At about eight o'clock we had a visit from Infadoos, who appeared little the worse for his exertions, tough old warrior that he was; although he informed us that he had been up all night. He was delighted to see us, but much grieved at Good's condition. I noticed that he addressed Sir Henry with a kind of reverence, as though he were something more than a man; and, indeed, as we afterwards found out, Sir Henry was looked on throughout Kukuanaland as a supernatural being. No man, the soldiers said, could have fought as he fought, or, at the end of a day of such toil, could have slain Twala in single combat, shearing through his bull-neck at a stroke. Indeed, that stroke became proverbial in Kukuanaland, and any extraordinary blow or feat of strength was henceforth known as "Incubu's blow."

Infadoos told us also that all Twala's regiments had submitted to Ignosi, and that similar submissions were beginning to arrive from chiefs in the outlying country. Since Scragga had been Twala's only legitimate son, there was no rival claimant to the throne left alive.

I remarked that Ignosi had swum to power through blood. The old chief shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes," he answered; "but the Kukuana people can only be kept cool by letting their blood flow sometimes. Many are killed, indeed, but others must soon grow up to take the places of the fallen. After this the land will be quiet for a while."

During that morning, we had a short visit from Ignosi, on whose brows the royal diadem was now bound. As I watched him advancing with kingly dignity, I could not help recalling the tall Zulu who had presented himself to us at Durban some months back, and reflecting on the strange revolutions of the wheel of fortune.

"Hail, O king!" I said, rising.

"Yes, Macumazahn. King at last, by the might of your three right hands."

All was going well, he said; and he hoped to arrange a great feast in two weeks' time in order to show himself to the people.

I asked him what he had decided to do with Gagool.

"She is the evil spirit of the land," he answered, "and I shall kill her, and all the witch doctors with her! She has lived so long that none can remember when she was not very old, and it is she who has always trained the witch-hunters, and made the land wicked in the sight of the heavens."

"Yet she knows much," I replied. "It is easier to destroy knowledge, Ignosi, than to gather it."

"That is so," he said thoughtfully. "She, and she only, knows the secret of the 'Three Witches' yonder, whither the great road runs, where the kings are buried, and the Silent Ones sit."

"Yes, and where the diamonds are. Forget not thy promise, Ignosi; lead us to the mines, even if thou hast to spare Gagool to show the way."

"I will not forget, Macumazahn."

After Ignosi's visit I went to see Good, and found him quite delirious. The fever caused by his wound seemed to have taken a firm hold of his system, and to be complicated with an internal injury. For four or five days his condition was critical; indeed, I believe firmly that had it not been for Foulata's tireless nursing, he must have died.

Day and night she bent over the fevered man's couch, performing all the errands of a sick-room swiftly, gently, and with as fine an instinct as a trained hospital nurse. For the first night or two I tried to help her, and so did Sir Henry as soon as his stiffness allowed him to move, but Foulata was impatient with our interference, and finally insisted upon our leaving Good to her. She watched and tended him, giving him as medicine a cooling drink made of milk infused with juice from the bulb of a species of tulip, and keeping the flies away. I can see the whole picture now; Good tossing to and fro, his features emaciated, and jabbering nonsense by the yard; and seated on the ground beside him, the soft-eyed, shapely Kukuana beauty, her face, weary as it was with her long vigil, animated by a look of infinite compassion – or was it something more?

For two days we thought that he must die, and crept about with heavy hearts. Only Foulata would not believe it.

"He will live," she said.

For three hundred yards around Twala's hut, where the sufferer lay, there was silence; for by the king's order all who lived in the huts behind it, except Sir Henry and myself, had been removed. One night, the fifth of Good's illness, as was my habit, I went across to see how he was doing before turning in for a few hours.

I entered the hut carefully. The lamp upon the floor showed the figure of Good tossing no more, but lying quite still.

So it had come at last! I gave something like a sob.

"Hush!" came from the shadow behind Good's head.

Then, creeping closer, I saw that he was not dead, but sleeping soundly, with Foulata's slender fingers clasped tightly in his hand. The crisis had passed, and he would live. He slept like that for eighteen hours; and during the entire period this devoted girl sat by him, fearing that if she moved and drew away her hand it would wake him. What she must have suffered from cramp and weariness, to say nothing of hunger, nobody will ever know; but when at last he woke, she had to be carried away – her limbs were so stiff that she could not move them.

After that, Good's recovery was rapid and complete. It was not till he was nearly well that Sir Henry told him of all he owed to Foulata; and when he came to the story of how she sat by his side for eighteen hours, the honest sailor's eyes filled with tears. He went straight to the hut where Foulata was preparing the mid-day meal, for we were back in our old quarters now. He took me with him to interpret in case he could not make his meaning clear to her, though I am bound to say that she understood him marvellously as a rule.

"Tell her," said Good, "that I owe her my life, and that I will never forget her kindness to my dying day."

I interpreted, and under her dark skin she seemed to blush. Turning to him with one of those swift and graceful motions that always reminded me of the flight of a wild bird, Foulata answered softly, glancing at him with her large brown eyes:

"Nay; my lord forgets! Did he not save my life, and am I not my lord's handmaiden?"

She appeared entirely to have forgotten the share which Sir Henry and myself had taken in her preservation from Twala's clutches. But that is the way of women! Foulata's soft glances made me a little sad, for I knew the fatal amorous tendencies of sailors in general, and of Good in particular. You cannot keep a sailor from falling in love upon the slightest provocation.

A few days after this, Ignosi held his great council, and was formally recognised as king by the "indunas," or head men, of Kukuanaland. The spectacle was a most imposing one, including as it did a grand review of troops. On this day the remaining fragments of the Greys were formally paraded, and were publicly thanked for their splendid conduct in the battle. To each man the king made a large present of cattle, promoting them all to the rank of officers in the new corps of Greys which was being formed.

An order was also issued that we three were to be greeted with the royal salute, and to be treated with the same ceremony and respect that was accorded to the king. Also the power of life and death was publicly conferred upon us. Ignosi, in the presence of his people, reaffirmed his promises that no man's blood should be shed without trial, and that witch-hunting should cease in the land.

When the ceremony was over we waited upon Ignosi, and informed him that we were now anxious to investigate the mystery of the mines to which Solomon's Road ran. We asked if he had discovered anything about them.

"My friends," he answered, "I have discovered this it is there that the three great figures sit, who are called the 'Silent Ones,' to whom Twala would have offered the girl Foulata as a sacrifice. It is there, too, in a great cave deep in the mountain, that the kings of the land are buried; there ye shall find Twala's body, sitting with those who went before him. There, also, is a deep pit, which, at some time, long-dead men dug out, maybe for the stones ye speak of. There, too, in the Place of Death is a secret chamber, known to none but the king and Gagool. But Twala, who knew it, is dead, and I know it not, nor know what is in it.

"Yet there is a legend that once, many generations ago, a white man crossed the mountains, and was led by a woman to the secret chamber and shown the wealth hidden in it. But before he could take it she betrayed him, and he was driven by the king of that day back to the mountains; and since then no man has entered the place."

"The story is surely true, Ignosi, for on the mountains we found the white man," I said.

"Yes, we found him. And now I have promised you that if ye can come to that chamber, and the stones are there—"

"The gem upon thy forehead proves that they are there," I put in, pointing to the great diamond.

"Mayhap; if they are there," he said, "ye shall have as many as ye can take hence – if indeed ye wish to leave me, my brothers."

"First we must find the chamber," said I.

"There is but one who can show it to thee – Gagool."

"And if she will not?"

"Then she must die," said Ignosi sternly. "I have saved her alive only for this. Stay, she shall choose." Calling to a messenger, he ordered Gagool to be brought.

In a few minutes she came, hurried along by two guards, whom she was cursing.

"Leave her," said the king to the guards. As soon as their support was withdrawn, the withered old bundle – for she looked more like a bundle than anything else, out of which her two bright and wicked eyes gleamed like a snake's – sank in a heap on to the floor.

"What will ye with me, Ignosi?" she piped. "Ye dare not touch me, or I will slay ye. Beware of my magic."

"Thy magic could not save Twala, old she-wolf, and it cannot hurt me," was the answer. "Listen; I wish you to reveal to us the chamber where are the shining stones."

"Ha! ha!" she piped, "I will never tell thee. The white devils shall go hence empty-handed."

"Thou shalt tell me. I will make thee tell me."

"How, O king?"

"Thus; if thou tellest not thou shalt slowly die."

"Die!" she shrieked in terror and fury; "ye dare not touch me – ye know not who I am. How old think ye am I? I knew your fathers, and your fathers' fathers' fathers. When the country was young I was here; when the country grows old I shall still be here. I cannot die unless I be killed by chance, for none dare slay me."

"Yet will I slay thee. See, Gagool, mother of evil, thou art so old that thou canst no longer love thy life. What can life be to such a hag as thou, who hast no shape, nor form, nor hair, nor teeth – naught, save wickedness and evil eyes? It will be mercy to make an end of thee, Gagool."

"Thou fool," shrieked the old fiend, "thinkest thou that life is sweet only to the young? It is not so. The old feel not, they love not, and, ha! ha! they laugh to see another go out into the dark; ha! ha! they laugh to see the evil that is done under the stars. All they love is life, the warm, warm sun, and the sweet, sweet air. They are afraid of the cold and the dark, ha! ha! ha!" and the old hag writhed in ghastly merriment on the ground.

"Cease thine evil talk and answer me," said Ignosi angrily. "Wilt thou show the place where the stones are, or not? If thou wilt not, thou diest," and he seized a spear and held it over her.

"I will not; thou darest not kill me! He who slays me will be accursed for ever."

Slowly Ignosi brought down the spear till it pricked the prostrate heap of rags.

With a wild yell Gagool sprang to her feet, then fell again and rolled upon the floor.

"Nay, I will show thee. Only let me live, let me sit in the sun and have a bit of meat to suck, and I will show thee."

"It is well. I thought that I should find a way to reason with thee. Tomorrow shalt thou go with Infadoos and my white brothers to the place, and beware how thou failest, for if thou showest it not, then thou shalt slowly die. I have spoken."

"I will not fail, Ignosi. I always keep my word – ha! ha! ha! Once before a woman showed the chamber to a white man, and evil befell him," and here her wicked eyes glinted. "Her name was Gagool also. Perhaps I was that woman."

"Thou liest," I said, "that was ten generations ago."

"Maybe, maybe; when one lives long one forgets. Perhaps it was my mother's mother who told me; surely her name was Gagool also. But ye will find in the place where the bright things are a leather bag full of stones. The man filled that bag, but he never took it away. Evil befell him! Perhaps it was my mother's mother who told me. It will be a merry journey – we can see the bodies of those who died in the battle as we go. Their eyes will be gone by now, and their ribs will be hollow. Ha! ha! ha!"

CHAPTER 16

The Place of Death

Three days later, as it grew dark, we camped in some huts at the foot of the "Three Witches" – the peaks to which Solomon's Great Road runs. Our group consisted of ourselves, Foulata, who attended especially to Good, Infadoos, Gagool, who was carried in a litter inside which she could be heard muttering and cursing all day, and various guards and attendants.

The mountains – or rather, the three peaks of one great mountain – were in the form of a triangle, with one peak being on our right, one on our left, and one straight in front of us. Never shall I forget the sight of those three towering summits in the early morning sunlight. High, high above us, up into the blue air, soared their twisted snow-wreaths. Beneath the snow-line, they were purple with heather, and so were the wild moors that ran up the slopes towards them. Straight before us the white ribbon of Solomon's Great Road stretched away to the foot of the centre peak, about five miles from us, and there stopped.

We set out on our march that morning with intense excitement. At last we were drawing near to the mines that had caused the miserable death of the old Portuguese Dom three centuries ago, of my poor friend, his descendant, and also, as we feared, of Sir Henry's brother. Were we destined to fare any better? Evil befell them, as that old fiend Gagool said; would evil befall us? As we were marching up that last stretch of beautiful road, I could not help feeling a little superstitious.

For an hour and a half we tramped along the heather-fringed way, going so fast in our excitement that the bearers of Gagool's litter could scarcely keep pace with us, and she piped out to us to stop.

"Walk more slowly, white men," she said, putting her hideous shrivelled face between the grass curtains, and fixing her gleaming eyes upon us. "Why run to meet the evil that shall befall you?" and she laughed that horrible laugh which always sent a cold shiver down my back.

However, on we went, till we saw before us a vast circular hole with sloping sides, three hundred feet or more in depth, and quite half a mile round.

"Can't you guess what this is?" I said to Sir Henry and Good, who were staring in astonishment at the awful pit.

They shook their heads.

"Then it is clear that you have never seen the diamond diggings at Kimberley. You may depend on it that this is Solomon's Diamond Mine. Look there," I said, pointing to the strata of stiff blue clay in the sides of the pit, "the formation is the same. Look, too," and I pointed to a series of worn flat slabs of stone placed below a watercourse cut out of the solid rock. "If those are not tables once used to wash the stuff, I'm a Dutchman."

At the edge of this vast hole, which was marked on the old Dom's map, the Great Road branched into two and went round it. In many places this surrounding road was built out of blocks of stone, apparently with the aim of supporting the edges of the pit. Along this path we went, curious to see three towering objects which we could discern from the far side of the gulf.

As we drew near we perceived that they were Colossi – giant statues; and rightly guessed that before us sat the three "Silent Ones" that are held in such awe by the Kukuana people. But it was not until we were quite close to them that we recognised their full majesty.

There, upon huge pedestals of dark rock, forty paces apart, and looking down the road, were three colossal seated forms – two male and one female – each about thirty feet high.

The female form, which was nude, was of great though severe beauty, but unfortunately the features had been injured by centuries of exposure to the weather. Rising from either side of her head were the points of a crescent. The two male Colossi, on the contrary, were draped, and had terrifying features, especially the one to our right, which had the face of a devil. That to our left was serene, but with the dreadful calm of inhuman cruelty. These three statues formed an awe-inspiring trinity, as they sat there in their solitude, and gazed out across the plain.

Whilst I was looking and wondering who had made these "Silent Ones", suddenly it occurred to me that Solomon, in the Old Testament, went astray after strange gods. I remembered the names of three of them: Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Zidonians, Chemosh, the god of the Moabites, and Milcom, the god of the children of Ammon; and I suggested to my companions that the figures before us might represent these false divinities.

"Hum," said Sir Henry, who is a scholar in classics, "there may be something in that; Ashtoreth of the Hebrews was the Astarte of the Phoenicians, who were the great traders of Solomon's time. Astarte, who afterwards became the Aphrodite of the Greeks, was represented with horns like the half-moon. Perhaps these Colossi were designed by some Phoenician official who managed the mines. Who can say?"

At that moment Infadoos came up, and having saluted the "Silent Ones" by lifting his spear, asked us if we intended entering the "Place of Death" at once, or if we would wait till after eating. If we were ready to go at once, Gagool had announced her willingness to guide us.

As it was only eleven o'clock – and we were driven by a burning curiosity – we announced our intention of proceeding instantly, and taking some food with us. Accordingly Gagool's litter was brought up, and she was assisted out of it. Meanwhile Foulata packed some biltong, or dried meat, together with a couple of gourds of water, in a reed basket.

Straight in front of us, fifty paces behind the Colossi, rose a sheer wall of rock. It was eighty feet or more in height, and gradually sloped upwards till it formed the base of the lofty peak which soared into the air above us. Gagool cast one evil grin upon us, and then, leaning on a stick, hobbled off towards the face of this wall. We

followed her till we came to a narrow arched portal that looked like the opening to a mine.

Here Gagool waited for us, still grinning evilly.

"Now, white men from the Stars," she piped; "great warriors, are ye ready? Behold, I am here to do the bidding of the king, and to show you the store of bright stones. Ha! ha! ha!"

"We are ready," I said.

"Good, good! Make strong your hearts to bear what ye shall see. Comest thou too, Infadoos, thou who didst betray thy master?"

Infadoos frowned as he answered. "Nay; it is not for me to enter there. But thou, Gagool, curb thy tongue, and beware how thou dealest with my lords. If a hair of them be hurt, Gagool, thou shalt die. Hearest thou?"

"I hear, Infadoos; thou didst ever love big words; when thou wast a babe I remember thou didst threaten thine own mother. That was but the other day. But, fear not, I live only to do the bidding of the king. I have done the bidding of many kings, Infadoos, till in the end they did mine. Ha! ha! I go to look upon their faces once more, and Twala's also! Come on, come on, here is the lamp," and she drew a large gourd full of oil, fitted with a rush wick, from under her fur cloak.

"Art thou coming, Foulata?" asked Good in his appalling Kitchen Kukuana, which he had been learning under that young lady's tuition.

"I fear, my lord," the girl answered timidly. "Yet whither thou goest there I go also."

Gagool then plunged into the passage, which was wide enough to allow two to walk abreast, and quite dark. We followed the sound of her piping voice, in some fear and trembling, which was not helped by a sudden flutter and rush of wings.

"Hullo! what's that?" cried Good; "somebody hit me in the face."

"Bats," said I; "on you go."

After some fifty paces, we perceived that the passage was growing faintly light. In another minute, we were in perhaps the most extraordinary place that the eyes of living man have beheld.

Let the reader imagine the vastest cathedral he ever stood in, windowless, but dimly lit from above, by shafts driven through the roof, which arched away a hundred feet above our heads, and he will get some idea of the size of the enormous cave in which we found ourselves. But this cathedral, designed by nature, was loftier and wider than any built by man.

Its stupendous size was the least of its wonders. Running in rows down its length were gigantic pillars of what looked like ice, but were, in reality, huge stalagmites. It is impossible for me to convey the overpowering beauty and grandeur of those white pillars, some no less than twenty feet across the base, which sprang up in lofty and yet delicate beauty sheer to the distant roof. Others again were in process of formation: on the rock floor there would be what looked like a broken column, whilst high above it, hanging from the roof, the point of a huge stalactite could be dimly seen.

Even as we gazed we could hear the process going on, for with a tiny splash a drop of water would fall on to the column below. On some columns the drops only fell once in two or three minutes; so the formation of a pillar was incalculably slow. For example, cut on one of these pillars we discovered the crude likeness of a mummy and an Egyptian god, doubtless the handiwork of some labourer in the mine. This work of art was at eye-level, about five feet from the ground. Yet when we saw it, perhaps three thousand years after it was carved, the column was only eight feet high – so might have grown a foot in every thousand years.

Sometimes the stalagmites took strange forms. One huge mass, which must have weighed a hundred tons or so, was in the shape of a pulpit, beautifully fretted with a design that looked like lace. Others resembled strange beasts, and on the sides of the cave were fanlike ivory tracings, like frost upon a pane.

Out of the vast main aisle there opened here and there smaller caves, just as chapels open out of great cathedrals. Some were large, but one or two were tiny. One little nook, for instance, was no larger than a big doll's house, and yet it might have been a model for the whole place: for the water dropped, tiny icicles hung, and columns were forming in just the same way.

We had not time to examine this beautiful cavern so thoroughly as we should have liked to do, since Gagool seemed to be indifferent to stalactites, and only anxious to get her business over. This annoyed me, as I particularly wanted to know how the light was admitted into the cave, and whether it was by the hand of man or by that of nature. However, we consoled ourselves with the idea that we would investigate it thoroughly on our way back, and followed our uncanny guide.

On she led us, straight to the end of the vast and silent cave, where we found another doorway, not arched like the first, but square at the top, something like the doorways of Egyptian temples.

"Are ye prepared to enter the Place of Death, white men?" asked Gagool.

"Lead on, Macduff," said Good solemnly, trying to look as though he was not at all alarmed, as indeed we all did except Foulata, who caught Good by the arm for protection.

"This is getting rather ghastly," said Sir Henry, peeping into the dark passageway. "Come on, Quatermain – elders first. We mustn't keep the old lady waiting!" and he politely made way for me to lead them in.

Tap, tap, went old Gagool's stick down the passage, as she trotted along, chuckling hideously; but overcome by some unaccountable foreboding of evil, I hung back.

"Get on, old fellow," said Good, "or we shall lose our fair guide."

So I started down the passage, and after about twenty paces found myself in a gloomy chamber about forty feet long and thirty high, which in some past age had evidently been hollowed by hand-labour out of the mountain. This apartment was as well lit as the vast cave, and at first glance all I could see was a massive stone table running down its length, with a colossal white figure at its head, and life-sized white figures all round it.

Next I discovered a brown thing, seated on the table in the centre, and in another moment my eyes grew accustomed to the light, and I saw what all these things were, and was running out of the place as hard as my legs could carry me.

I am not a nervous man, nor a superstitious one; but I admit that this sight so upset me that if Sir Henry had not caught me by the collar, in another five minutes I should have been outside the cave, and a promise of all the diamonds in Kimberley would not have induced me to enter it again. But he held me tight, so I stopped. Next second, his eyes became accustomed to the light, and he let go of me, and began to mop the perspiration off his forehead. As for Good, he swore feebly, while Foulata threw her arms round his neck and shrieked.

Only Gagool chuckled loud and long.

It was a ghastly sight. There at the end of the long stone table, holding in his skeleton fingers a great white spear, sat Death himself, shaped in the form of a colossal human skeleton, fifteen feet or more in height. High above his head he held the spear, as though in the act of striking; one bony hand rested on the stone table before him. He was in the position a man assumes on rising from his seat, his frame bent forward so that the grinning, gleaming skull projected towards us, and fixed its hollow eye-places upon us, the jaws a little open, as though it were about to speak.

"Great heavens!" said I faintly, at last, "what can it be?"

"And what are those things?" asked Good, pointing to the white company round the table.

"And what on earth is that thing?" said Sir Henry, pointing to the brown creature seated on the table.

"Hee! hee! hee!" laughed Gagool. "To those who enter the Hall of the Dead, evil comes! Incubu, brave in battle, come and see him thou slewest." She clutched Curtis's coat in her skinny fingers, and led him towards the table. We followed.

She pointed at the brown object seated on the table. Sir Henry started back with an exclamation; and no wonder, for there, quite naked, the head which Curtis's battle-axe had shorn from the body resting on its knees, was the gaunt corpse of Twala. Yes, there it sat, the head perched upon the knees, the vertebræ projecting a full inch above the level of the shrunken flesh of the neck. Over the surface of the corpse there was a thin glassy film, which we did not understand, until we saw that from the roof of the chamber the water fell steadily, drip! drop! drip! on to the neck of the corpse. Then it ran down over the entire surface, and finally escaped into the rock through a hole in the table. Twala's body was being transformed into a stalagmite.

A look at the white forms seated on the stone bench which ran round that ghastly board confirmed this view. They were human bodies indeed, or rather they had been human; now they were stalagmites. This was the way in which the Kukuana people had from time immemorial preserved their royal dead. They petrified them. There they sat, iced over and preserved for ever.

There were twenty-seven of these departed kings, the last being Ignosi's father, each of them wrapped in a shroud of ice-like spar, through which the features could

be dimly seen. Allowing for an average reign of fifteen years, this practice would have begun four and a quarter centuries back.

But the colossal Death, who sat at the head of the board, was far older than that, for I believe it was carved by the same artist who designed the three Colossi. Death was hewn out of a single stalagmite, and Good declared it was anatomically perfect down to the smallest bones.

Perhaps it was set there to frighten away any marauders who might have designs upon the treasure chamber beyond. I cannot say. Such, at any rate, was the White Death, and such were the White Dead!

CHAPTER 17

Solomon's Treasure Chamber

While we were examining the grisly wonders of the Place of Death, Gagool had been differently occupied. Somehow or other – for she was marvellously active when she chose – she had scrambled on to the great table, and made her way to where Twala was placed, under the drip. After bending down to kiss his icy lips as though in affectionate greeting, she hobbled back, stopping now and again to address a remark to one or other of the shrouded forms, just as you or I might welcome an old acquaintance.

Having gone through this horrible ceremony, she squatted down on the table immediately under the White Death, and began, so far as I could make out, to offer up prayers.

"Now, Gagool," said I, in a low voice – somehow one did not dare to speak above a whisper in that place – "lead us to the chamber."

The old witch promptly scrambled down from the table.

"My lords are not afraid?" she said, leering up into my face.

"Lead on."

"Good, my lords;" and she hobbled round to the back of the great Death. "Here is the chamber; light the lamp, and enter." She placed the gourd full of oil upon the floor, and leaned against the side of the cave. I took out a match, of which we had still a few in a box, and lit the wick. Then I looked for the doorway, but there was nothing before us except the solid rock.

Gagool grinned. "The way is there, my lords. Ha! ha! ha! See!" and she pointed at the rock.

As she did so, we perceived that a mass of stone was rising slowly from the floor and vanishing into the rock above, where doubtless there was a cavity prepared to receive it. It was the width of a good-sized door, about ten feet high and not less than five feet thick. It must have weighed at least twenty or thirty tons, and must have been moved by counter-weights. How it was set in motion, of course none of us saw; Gagool was careful to avoid this; but I have little doubt that there was some simple lever, which was moved by a little pressure at a secret spot, thereby throwing additional weight on to the hidden counter-balances, and causing the monolith to be lifted from the ground.

Very slowly and gently the great stone raised itself, till at last it had vanished altogether, leaving a dark hole where it had been.

Our excitement was so intense that I for one began to tremble and shake. Was old Da Silvestra right? Were there vast hoards of wealth hidden in that dark place, hoards which would make us the richest men in the world? We should know in a minute or two.

"Enter, white men from the Stars," said Gagool, advancing into the doorway; "but first hear your servant, Gagool the old. The bright stones that ye will see were dug out of the pit over which the Silent Ones are set, and stored here longer ago than even I remember. Only once has this place been entered since the stones were hidden here. The report of the treasure went down indeed, from age to age, among the people who lived in the country, but none knew where the chamber was, nor the secret of the door.

"But it happened that a white man reached this country from over the mountains – perhaps he too came 'from the Stars' – and was well received by the king of that day, he who sits yonder," and she pointed to the fifth king at the table of the Dead. "And he and a woman of the country who was with him journeyed to this place, and by chance the woman learnt the secret of the door – a thousand years might ye search, but never find that secret. Then the white man entered with the woman, and found the stones, and filled a goat-skin bag with them. And as he was going from the chamber he took up one more stone, a large one, and held it in his hand."

Here she paused.

"Well," I asked, breathless with interest, "what happened to Da Silvestra?"

The old hag started. "How knowest thou his name?" she asked sharply; and then, without waiting for an answer, she went on:

"None can tell what happened; but the white man was frightened, for he flung down the goat-skin, with the stones, and fled out with only the one stone in his hand, and that the king took, and it is the stone which thou, Macumazahn, didst take from Twala's brow."

"Have none entered here since?" I asked, peering again down the dark passage.

"None, my lords. Only the secret of the door has been kept, and every king has opened it, though he has not entered. There is a saying, that those who enter there will die within a moon, even as the white man died in the cave upon the mountain, where ye found him, Macumazahn, and therefore the kings do not enter. Ha! ha! mine are true words."

Our eyes met as she said it, and I turned sick and cold. How did the old hag know all these things?

"Enter, my lords. If I speak truth, the goat-skin with the stones will lie upon the floor; and if it is truly death to enter, that ye will learn afterwards. Ha! ha! ha!" She hobbled through the doorway, bearing the lamp; but I confess that once more I hesitated.

"Oh, confound it all!" said Good; "here goes. I am not going to be frightened by that old devil." Followed by Foulata, even though she was shivering with fear, he plunged into the passage after Gagool. We quickly followed.

A few yards down the passage, in the narrow way hewn out of the rock, Gagool had paused, and was waiting for us.

"See, my lords," she said, holding the light before her, "those who stored the treasure here fled in haste, and thought to guard against any who should find the secret of the door, but they had not the time." She pointed to large square blocks of stone, which had been placed across the passage with a view to walling it up. Along

the side of the passage were similar blocks, and, most curious of all, a heap of mortar and a couple of trowels, of a similar shape to those used by workmen to this day.

Here Foulata, who was in a state of great fear and agitation, said that she felt faint and could go no farther, but would wait there. So we set her down on the unfinished wall, with the basket of provisions by her side, and left her to recover.

Following the passage for about fifteen paces farther, we came suddenly to an elaborately painted wooden door. It was standing wide open.

Across the threshold of this door lay a bag made of a goat-skin, that appeared to be full of pebbles.

"Hee! hee! white men," sniggered Gagool, as the lamp-light fell upon it. "What did I tell you! The white man who came here fled in haste, and dropped the bag – behold it! Look within also and ye will find a water-gourd amongst the stones."

Good stooped down and lifted it. It was heavy and jingled.

"By Jove! I believe it's full of diamonds," he said, in an awed whisper.

"Here, old lady, give me the lamp," said Sir Henry; and taking it from Gagool's hand, he stepped through the doorway and held it high above his head.

We pressed in after him and found ourselves in King Solomon's treasure chamber.

At first, all that we could see in the faint light was a room hewn out of the rock, about ten feet square. Next there came into sight, stored in a pile to the roof, a vast collection of elephant-tusks. There must have been hundreds of them. There, alone, was enough ivory to make a man wealthy for life. Perhaps, I thought, it was from this very store that Solomon had made his "great throne of ivory" in the Bible.

On the opposite side of the chamber were about twenty wooden boxes, painted red.

"There are the diamonds," cried I; "bring the light."

Sir Henry did so. The lid of the top box, rendered rotten by time even in that dry place, appeared to have been smashed in, probably by Da Silvestra himself.

Pushing my hand through the hole in the lid I drew it out full – not of diamonds, but of gold pieces, of a shape that none of us had seen before, with what looked like Hebrew characters stamped upon them.

"Ah!" I said, replacing them, "we shan't go back empty-handed, anyhow. I suppose this was the money to pay the workmen and merchants."

"Well," put in Good, "I think that is the lot; I don't see any diamonds, unless the old Portuguese put them all into his bag."

"Let my lords look yonder where it is darkest, if they would find the stones," said Gagool. "There my lords will find a nook, and three stone chests in the nook, two sealed and one open."

Before translating this to Sir Henry, I could not resist asking how she knew these things, if no one had entered the place since the white man, generations ago.

"Ah, Macumazahn, the watcher by night," was the mocking answer, "do ye not know that some live long, and that some have eyes which can see through rock? Ha! ha! ha!"

"Look in that corner, Curtis," I said, indicating the spot Gagool had pointed out.

"Hullo," he cried, "here's a recess. Great heavens! See here."

We hurried up to where he was standing in a nook shaped something like a small bow window. Against the wall of this recess were placed three stone chests, each about two feet square. Two were fitted with stone lids, while the lid of the third was open.

"See!" he repeated hoarsely, holding the lamp over the open chest. For a moment we could make nothing out, on account of a dazzling silvery sheen. When our eyes grew used to it we saw that the chest was three-parts full of uncut diamonds, most of considerable size. I picked some up. Yes, there was no doubt of it; there was the unmistakable soapy feel about them.

I fairly gasped as I dropped them.

"We are the richest men in the whole world," I said.

"We shall flood the market with diamonds," said Good.

"Got to get them there first," suggested Sir Henry.

We stood still with pale faces and stared at each other, the lantern in the middle and the glimmering gems below, as though we were conspirators about to commit a crime, instead of being the most fortunate men on earth.

"Hee! hee! hee!" cackled old Gagool behind us. "There are the bright stones ye love, white men; take them, run them through your fingers, eat of them, hee! hee! drink of them, ha! ha!"

At that moment there seemed something so ridiculous in the idea of eating and drinking diamonds, that I began to laugh outrageously, an example which the others followed, without knowing why. There we stood and shrieked with laughter over the gems that had been found for us thousands of years ago, and stored for us by Solomon's long-dead overseer. Solomon never got them, nor Da Silvestra, nor anybody else. We had got them: there before us were millions of pounds' worth of diamonds, gold and ivory, only waiting to be taken away.

Suddenly the fit passed off, and we stopped laughing.

"Open the other chests, white men," croaked Gagool, "there are surely more therein. Take your fill, white lords! Ha! ha! take your fill."

We set to work to pull up the stone lids on the other two, first – with a feeling of sacrilege – breaking the seals that fastened them.

Hoorah! they were full too; at least, the second one was. As for the third chest, it was only about a quarter full, but the stones were all picked ones; none less than twenty carats, and some of them as large as pigeon-eggs. A good many of these bigger ones, however, we could see by holding them up to the light, were a little yellow, "off coloured," as they call it at Kimberley.

What we did not see was the look of fearful malevolence that old Gagool gave us as she crept like a snake out of the treasure chamber and down the passage towards the door of solid rock.

Hark! A cry comes ringing. It is Foulata's voice!

"Oh, Bougwan! help! help! the stone falls!"

"Leave go, girl!"

"Help! help! she has stabbed me!"

By now we are running down the passage, and this is what the lamp-light shows us. The door of the rock is closing down slowly; it is not three feet from the floor. Near it struggle Foulata and Gagool. Foulata's blood runs to her knee, but still the brave girl holds the old witch, who fights like a wild cat.

Ah! she is free! Foulata falls, and Gagool throws herself on the ground, to twist like a snake through the crack of the closing stone. She is under – ah! God! too late! too late! The stone nips her, and she yells in agony. Down, down it comes, all the thirty tons of it, slowly pressing her old body against the rock below. Shriek upon shriek, such as we have never heard, then a long sickening crunch, and the door was shut, just as, rushing down the passage, we hurled ourselves against it.

It was all done in four seconds.

We turned to Foulata. The poor girl was stabbed, and I saw that she could not live long.

"Ah! Bougwan, I die!" she gasped. "Gagool crept out; I was faint and did not see her, but she went out and came back in again, and then the door began to fall; she was looking up the path – and I caught her and held her, and she stabbed me, and I die, Bougwan!"

"Poor girl! poor girl!" Good cried in his distress; and then he fell to kissing her.

"Bougwan," she said, after a pause, "is Macumazahn there? It grows so dark, I cannot see."

"Here I am, Foulata."

"Macumazahn, be my tongue for a moment, I pray thee, for Bougwan cannot understand me, and before I go into the darkness I would speak to him a word."

"Speak on, Foulata."

"Say to my lord, Bougwan, that – I love him, and that I am glad to die because I know that he cannot cumber his life with such as I am, for the sun may not mate with the darkness.

"Say that, since I saw him, I have felt as though there were a bird in my bosom, which would one day fly hence and sing elsewhere. Even now, though I cannot lift my hand, I do not feel as though my heart were dying; it is so full of love that it could live ten thousand years, and yet be young. Say that mayhap I shall see him in the Stars, and that – I will search them all, though perchance there I should still be black and he would – still be white. Say – nay, Macumazahn, say no more, save that I love – Oh, hold me closer, Bougwan, I cannot feel thine arms – oh!"

"She is dead!" muttered Good, the tears running down his face.

"And we will soon join her, old fellow," said Sir Henry. "Man, don't you see that we are *buried alive*?"

Until he uttered these words I do not think that the full horror of our situation had come home to us, preoccupied as we were with poor Foulata. But now we understood. The ponderous mass of rock had closed, probably for ever, for the only brain which knew its secret was crushed beneath its weight. This was a door that could not be opened without large quantities of dynamite. And we were on the wrong side.

For a few minutes we stood horrified over the corpse of Foulata. All the manhood seemed to have gone out of us. We saw it all now; that fiend Gagool had planned this snare from the first.

Her evil mind would have rejoiced in the idea of the three white men, whom she had always hated, slowly perishing of thirst and hunger in the company of the treasure they had coveted. Probably somebody had tried to serve the poor old Dom the same trick, when he abandoned the skin full of jewels.

"This will never do," said Sir Henry hoarsely; "the lamp will soon go out. Let us see if we can't find the spring that works the rock."

We sprang forward with desperate energy, and, standing in a bloody ooze, began to feel up and down the door and the sides of the passage. But no knob or spring could we discover.

"Depend on it," I said, "it does not work from the inside; if it did Gagool would not have risked trying to crawl underneath the stone."

"At all events," said Sir Henry, with a hard little laugh, "hers was almost as awful an end as ours is likely to be. We can do nothing with the door; let us go back to the treasure room."

We turned, and as we passed it I noticed by the unfinished wall the basket of food which poor Foulata had carried. I took it up, and brought it into the accursed treasure chamber that was to be our grave. Then we returned and reverently bore in Foulata's corpse, laying it on the floor by the boxes of coins.

Next we sat down, leaning our backs against the three stone chests which contained the priceless treasure.

"Let us divide the food," said Sir Henry, "so as to make it last as long as possible." We did so. It would, we reckoned, make four tiny meals for each of us, enough to support life for a couple of days. Besides the dried meat, there were two gourds of water, each of which held no more than a quart.

"Now," said Sir Henry grimly, "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

We each ate a small portion of biltong, and drank a sip of water. Needless to say, we had little appetite, though we felt better after eating.

Then we got up and made a systematic examination of the walls and floor of our prison-house, in the faint hope of finding some means of exit.

There was none. The lamp began to burn dim. The fat was nearly exhausted.

"Quatermain," said Sir Henry, "what is the time?"

I drew out my watch, and looked at it. It was six o'clock; we had entered the cave at eleven.

"Infadoos will miss us," I suggested. "If we do not return tonight he will search for us in the morning, Curtis."

"He may search in vain. He does not know the secret of the door, nor even where it is. No living person knew it yesterday, except Gagool. Today no one knows it. Even if he found the door he could not break it down. All the Kukuana army could not break through five feet of rock. My friends, I see nothing for it but to bow ourselves to the will of the Almighty. The search for treasure has brought many to a bad end; we shall swell their number."

The lamp grew dimmer yet.

Presently it flared up and showed the whole scene in strong relief, the great mass of white tusks, the boxes of gold, the corpse of poor Foulata stretched before them, the goat-skin full of treasure, the dim glimmer of the diamonds, and the wild, wan faces of us three men seated there awaiting death by starvation.

Then the flame sank and went out.

CHAPTER 18

We Abandon Hope

I cannot easily describe the horrors of the night which followed. I, for one, found it impossible to sleep much. Putting aside the terrifying thought of our impending doom, the silence itself was too great to allow sleep. Reader, you may have lain awake at night and thought the quiet was oppressive, but I say with confidence that you can have no idea what a vivid, tangible thing is perfect stillness. On the surface of the earth there is always some sound or motion. But here there was none. We were buried in the bowels of a huge snow-clad peak. Thousands of feet above us, the fresh air rushed over the white snow, but no sound of it reached us. We were separated by a long tunnel and five feet of rock even from the awful chamber of the Dead; and the dead make no noise. We were cut off from every echo of the world – we were as men already in the grave.

The irony of the situation forced itself upon me. There around us lay treasures enough to pay off a moderate national debt, and yet we would have bartered them all gladly for the faintest chance of escape. Soon, doubtless, we should be rejoiced to exchange them for a bit of food or a cup of water, and, after that, even for the privilege of a speedy end to our sufferings. Truly wealth is a valueless thing at the last.

And so the night wore on.

"Good," said Sir Henry's voice eventually, and it sounded awful in the intense stillness, "how many matches have you in the box?"

"Eight, Curtis."

"Strike one and let us see the time."

He did so, and the flame nearly blinded us. It was five o'clock by my watch. The beautiful dawn was now blushing on the snow far over our heads, and the breeze would be stirring the night mists in the hollows.

"We had better eat something and keep up our strength," I suggested.

"What is the good of eating?" answered Good; "the sooner we die and get it over the better."

"While there is life there is hope," said Sir Henry.

So we ate and sipped some water, and more time passed. Then Sir Henry suggested that we might as well get as near the door as possible and call, on the faint chance of somebody catching a sound outside. Accordingly Good, who has a fine piercing voice, groped his way down the passage and set to work. I must say that he made a most diabolical noise. I never heard such yells; but they had no effect.

After a while he gave up and came back very thirsty, and had to drink. We stopped yelling, as it encroached on the supply of water.

So we sat down once more against the chests of useless diamonds, unable to do anything more; and I admit that I gave way in despair. Laying my head against Sir

Henry's broad shoulder I burst into tears; and I think that I heard Good gulping away on the other side, and swearing hoarsely at himself for doing so.

Ah, how good and brave that great man was! Had we been two frightened children, and he our nurse, he could not have treated us more tenderly. He did all he could to soothe our broken nerves, telling stories of men who had been in dreadful circumstances, and miraculously escaped; and when these failed to cheer us, pointing out that an end must come to us all, that it would soon be over, and that death from exhaustion was a merciful one (which is not true). Then he diffidently suggested that we should throw ourselves on the mercy of a higher Power and pray, which for my part I did with great vigour.

And so somehow the day went as the night had gone, if, indeed, one can use these terms where all was densest night. When I lit a match to see the time it was seven o'clock.

Once more we ate and drank, and as we did so an idea occurred to me.

"How is it," said I, "that the air in this place keeps fresh? It is thick and heavy, but it is perfectly fresh."

"Great heavens!" said Good, starting up, "I never thought of that. It can't come through the stone door, for it's air-tight, if ever a door was. But if there were no current of air in the place we should have been stifled or poisoned when we first came in. Let us have a look."

It was wonderful what a change this mere spark of hope made in us. In a moment we were all three groping on our hands and knees, feeling for the slightest indication of a draught. Presently my ardour received a check, when I put my hand on something cold: it was dead Foulata's face.

For an hour or more we went on feeling about, till at last Sir Henry and I gave it up in despair. But Good still persevered, saying that it was better than doing nothing.

"I say, you fellows," he said presently, in a constrained sort of voice, "come here."

Needless to say we scrambled towards him quickly enough.

"Quatermain, put your hand here where mine is. Now, do you feel anything?"

"I think I feel air coming up."

"Now listen." He rose and stamped upon the place, and a flame of hope shot up in our hearts. It rang hollow.

With trembling hands I lit a match. I had only three left, and we saw that we were in the angle of the far corner of the chamber. As the match burnt we scrutinised the spot. There was a join in the solid rock floor, and, great heavens! there, let in level with the rock, was a stone ring.

We said no word; our hearts beat too wildly with hope to allow us to speak. Good had a knife, at the back of which was one of those hooks that are made to extract stones from horses' hoofs. He opened it, and scratched round the ring with it. Finally he worked it under, and levered it away gently. The ring began to move. Being of stone it had not rusted fast in all the centuries it had lain there, as would have been the case with iron. Presently it was upright. Then he thrust his hands into it and tugged with all his force, but nothing budged.

"Let me try," I said impatiently, for the situation of the stone, right in the angle of the corner, made it impossible for two to pull at once. I took hold and strained away, but to no result.

Then Sir Henry tried and failed.

Taking the hook again, Good scratched all round the crack where we felt the air coming up.

"Now, Curtis," he said, "try again, and put your back into it; you are as strong as two. Stop," and he took off a stout black silk handkerchief which he still wore, and ran it through the ring. "Quatermain, get Curtis round the middle and pull for dear life when I give the word. *Now*."

Sir Henry put out all his enormous strength, and Good and I did the same.

"Heave! heave! it's giving," gasped Sir Henry; and I heard the muscles of his great back cracking. Suddenly there was a grating sound, then a rush of air, and we were all on our backs on the floor with a heavy flag-stone on top of us. Sir Henry's strength had done it.

"Light a match, Quatermain," he said, so soon as we had picked ourselves up; "carefully, now."

I did so, and there before us, Heaven be praised! was the first step of a stone stair.

"Now what is to be done?" asked Good.

"Follow the stair, of course, and trust to Providence."

"Stop!" said Sir Henry; "Quatermain, get the bit of biltong and the water that are left; we may want them."

I went, creeping past the chests, and as I was returning an idea struck me. We had not thought much of the diamonds for the last twenty-four hours or so; indeed, the very idea of diamonds was nauseous; but I reflected that I might as well pocket some in case we ever should get out of this ghastly hole. So I just put my fist into the first chest and filled all the available pockets of my old shooting-coat and trousers, topping up with a few handfuls of big ones from the third chest. Foulata's basket was empty but for one water-gourd and a little biltong, so I filled it with great quantities of the stones.

"I say, you fellows," I sang out, "won't you take some diamonds with you? I've filled my pockets and the basket."

"Oh, come on, Quatermain! hang the diamonds!" said Sir Henry. "I hope that I may never see another."

As for Good, he made no answer. He was, I think, taking his last farewell of the poor girl who had loved him. If it had not become my habit never to leave behind anything worth having, I am sure that I should not have bothered to fill my pockets and that basket.

"Come on, Quatermain," repeated Sir Henry, who was already standing on the first step of the stone stair. "Steady, I will go first."

"Mind where you put your feet – there may be some awful hole underneath," I answered.

"Much more likely to be another room," said Sir Henry, while he descended slowly, counting the steps as he went.

When he got to "Fifteen" he stopped. "Here's the bottom," he said. "Thank goodness! I think it's a passage. Follow me down."

Good went next, and I came last, carrying the basket. On reaching the bottom I lit one of the two remaining matches. By its light we could just see that we were standing in a narrow tunnel, which ran right and left at right angles to the staircase we had descended. Before we could make out any more, the match burnt my fingers and went out.

Then arose the question of which way to go. Of course, it was impossible to know where the tunnel led to, and yet to turn one way might lead us to safety, and the other to destruction. We were utterly perplexed, till suddenly it struck Good that when I had lit the match the draught of the passage blew the flame to the left.

"Let us go against the draught," he said; "air draws inwards, not outwards."

So we went right, and feeling along the wall with our hands, whilst trying the ground before us at every step, we departed from that accursed treasure chamber. If ever it should be entered again by living man, which I do not think probable, he will find tokens of our visit in the open chests of jewels, the empty lamp, and the white bones of poor Foulata.

When we had groped our way for about a quarter of an hour along the passage, suddenly it took a sharp turn, or else was bisected by another, which we followed, a little later to be led into a third. And so it went on for some hours. We seemed to be in a stone labyrinth that led nowhere. We thought that these must be the ancient workings of a mine; it was the only way we could account for such a multitude of galleries.

At length we halted, thoroughly worn out with fatigue and with draining hope, and ate our poor remaining piece of biltong and drank our last sup of water. It seemed to us that we had escaped Death in the darkness of the treasure chamber only to meet him in the darkness of the tunnels.

As we stood, once more utterly depressed, I thought that I caught a sound. It was very faint and very far off, but it was a sound, faint and murmuring. The others heard it too, and no words can describe the blessedness of it after all those hours of utter, awful stillness.

"By heaven! it's running water," said Good.

Off we started again in the direction of the faint murmur, groping our way as before along the rocky walls. I remember that I laid down the basket full of diamonds, wishing to be rid of its weight, but on second thoughts took it up again, thinking one might as well die rich as poor. As we went the sound became more and more audible; now we could distinctly make out the unmistakable swirl of rushing water. And yet how could there be running water in the bowels of the earth? Now we were quite near it, and Good, who was leading, swore that he could smell it.

"Go gently, Good," said Sir Henry, "we must be close." *Splash!* and a cry from Good.

He had fallen in.

"Good! Good! where are you?" we shouted, in terrified distress. To our intense relief an answer came back in a choky voice.

"All right; I've got hold of a rock. Strike a light to show me where you are."

Hastily I lit the last remaining match. Its faint gleam showed a dark mass of water running at our feet. How wide it was we could not see, but there, some way out, was the dark form of our companion hanging on to a projecting rock.

"Stand clear to catch me," sung out Good. "I must swim for it."

Then we heard a splash, and a great struggle. Another minute and he had grabbed at and caught Sir Henry's outstretched hand, and we had pulled him up high and dry into the tunnel.

"My word!" he said, between his gasps, "that was touch and go. If I hadn't managed to catch that rock, I should have been done for. It runs like a mill-race, and I could feel no bottom."

We dared not follow the banks of the subterranean river lest we should fall into it again in the darkness. So after Good had rested a while, and we had drunk our fill of the water, which was sweet and fresh, we left its bank, and began to retrace our steps along the tunnel. At length we came to another gallery leading to our right.

"We may as well take it," said Sir Henry wearily; "all roads are alike here; we can only go on till we drop."

Slowly, for a long, long while, we stumbled, utterly exhausted, along this new tunnel, Sir Henry now leading the way. Again I thought of abandoning that basket, but did not.

Suddenly he stopped, and we bumped up against him.

"Look!" he whispered, "is my brain going, or is that light?"

We stared. Yes, there, far ahead of us, was a faint, glimmering spot. It was so faint that I doubt if any eyes except those which, like ours, had for days seen nothing but blackness, could have perceived it at all.

With a gasp of hope we pushed on. In five minutes there was no longer any doubt; it was a patch of faint light. A minute more and a breath of real live air was fanning us. On we struggled.

All at once the tunnel narrowed. Sir Henry went on his knees. Smaller yet it grew, till it was only the size of a large fox's earth – it was earth now, mind you; the rock had ceased.

A squeeze, a struggle, and Sir Henry was out, and so was Good, and so was I, dragging Foulata's basket after me; and there above us were the blessed stars, and in our nostrils was the sweet air. Then suddenly something gave, and we were all rolling over and over and over through grass and bushes and soft, wet soil.

The basket caught in something and I stopped. Sitting up I halloed lustily. An answering shout came from below, where Sir Henry had halted on some level ground. I scrambled to him, and found him unhurt, though breathless. Then we looked for Good, and found him stuck in a forked root.

We sat down together, there on the grass, and I think we cried with joy. We had escaped from that awful dungeon, which had so nearly become our grave. Surely some merciful Power guided our footsteps to the jackal hole – for that is what it must have been. And see, yonder on the mountains the dawn we had never thought to look upon again was blushing rosy red.

Presently the grey light stole down the slopes, and we saw that we were near the bottom of the vast pit in front of the entrance to the cave. We could make out the dim forms of the three Colossi who sat upon its edge. Those awful passages along which we had wandered all night were in some way connected to the great diamond mine.

Lighter it grew, and lighter yet. We could see each other now: gaunt-cheeked, hollow-eyed wretches, smeared all over with dust and mud, bruised and bleeding, fear still written on our faces. And yet it is a solemn fact that Good's eye-glass was still fixed in his eye. Not even the plunge in the subterranean river had been able to separate Good and his eye-glass.

Presently we rose, and began with slow and painful steps to struggle up the sloping sides of the great pit. For an hour or more we toiled steadfastly up the blue clay, dragging ourselves on by the help of the roots and grasses with which it was clothed. But now I had no more thoughts of leaving the basket.

At last it was done, and we stood by the great road, opposite the Colossi.

A hundred yards off, a fire was burning in front of some huts, and round the fire were figures. We staggered towards them, supporting one another, and halting every few paces. Presently one of the figures rose, saw us and cried out in fear.

"Infadoos, Infadoos! it is we, thy friends."

He ran to us, staring wildly, and still shaking with fear.

"Oh, my lords, my lords, it is indeed you – come back from the dead!"

And the old warrior flung himself down before us, and clasping Sir Henry's knees, he wept aloud for joy.

CHAPTER 19

Ignosi's Farewell

Ten days later we were once more in our old quarters at Loo. Strange to say, we were little the worse for our terrible experience, except that my stubbly hair came out of the treasure cave about three shades greyer than it went in, and that Good was never quite the same after Foulata's death, which moved him very greatly.

I need hardly state that we never again penetrated into Solomon's treasure chamber. After we had recovered from our fatigue, a process which took two days, we descended into the great pit in the hope of finding the hole by which we had crept out of the mountain; but with no success. To begin with, rain had fallen, and obliterated our tracks; and the sides of the vast pit were full of ant-bear and other holes. It was impossible to say which of these we had emerged from.

On the day before we started back to Loo, we made a further examination of the wonders of the stalactite cave, and even entered once more into the Chamber of the Dead. We gazed at the mass of rock that had shut us off from escape, thinking of the priceless treasures beyond, of the mysterious old hag who lay crushed beneath it, and of the fair girl whose tomb it enclosed. I say gazed at the "rock," for we could find no traces of the join of the sliding door; nor, indeed, could we hit upon the secret of how it worked, though we tried for an hour or more. It is certainly a marvellous mechanism.

At last we gave up; though, if the mass had suddenly risen before our eyes, I doubt if we should have screwed up the courage to step over Gagool's mangled remains, and once more enter the treasure chamber, even in the knowledge of unlimited diamonds.

So we left it. Perhaps, in some remote unborn century, a more fortunate explorer may hit upon the "Open Sesame," and flood the world with gems. But, myself, I doubt it. The immense wealth of jewels which lie in the three stone coffers will never shine around the neck of any earthly beauty. They and Foulata's bones will keep cold company till the end of all things.

With disappointment we made our way back, and next day started for Loo. And yet it was very ungrateful of us to be disappointed; for, as the reader will remember, I had filled my pockets and Foulata's basket with gems. A good many of these had fallen out during our roll down the side of the pit, including several of the big ones. But an enormous quantity still remained, including ninety-three large stones up to two hundred carats in weight. It was enough treasure to make us all, if not millionaires, at least exceedingly wealthy men. So we had not done so badly.

On arriving at Loo we were cordially received by Ignosi, whom we found busily consolidating his power, and reorganising the regiments which had suffered most in the great struggle with Twala.

He listened with intense interest to our story; but when we told him of old Gagool's frightful end he grew thoughtful.

"Come hither," he called to a very old councillor, who was sitting with others out of ear-shot. The ancient man rose, approached, saluted, and sat down.

"Thou art aged," said Ignosi.

"Ay, my lord the king! Thy father's father and I were born on the same day."

"Tell me, when thou wast little, didst thou know Gagaoola the witch doctress?"

"Ay, my lord the king!"

"How was she then – young, like thee?"

"Not so, my lord the king! She was even as she is now and as she was in the days of my great grandfather; old and dried, very ugly, and full of wickedness."

"She is no more; she is dead."

"So, O king! then is an ancient curse taken from the land. *Koom!*"

"Ye see, my brothers," said Ignosi, after the counsellor departed, "this was a strange woman, and I rejoice that she is dead. She would have let you die, and maybe afterwards would have found a way to slay me, as she found a way to slay my father. Now go on with the tale; surely there never was its like!"

After I had narrated all the story of our escape, I asked Ignosi about our departure from Kukuanaland.

"Now, Ignosi," I said, "the time has come for us to bid thee farewell. Behold, Ignosi, thou camest with us a servant, and now we leave thee a mighty king. If thou art grateful, do as thou didst promise: rule justly, respect the law, and put none to death without a cause. So shalt thou prosper. Tomorrow, at dawn, thou wilt give us an escort to lead us across the mountains. Is it not so, O king?"

Ignosi covered his face with his hands for a while before answering.

"My heart is sore," he said at last. "What have I done to you, Incubu, Macumazahn, and Bougwan, that ye should leave me desolate? Ye who stood by me in rebellion and in battle, will ye leave me in the day of peace and victory? Wish we for wives? Choose from among the maidens! A place to live in? Behold, the land is yours. Cattle for beef and milk? Every married man shall bring you an ox or a cow. Wild game to hunt? Does not the elephant walk through my forests, and the river-horse sleep in the reeds? If there is anything more which I can give, that will I give you."

"Nay, Ignosi, we want none of these things," I answered; "we would seek our own place."

"Now I learn," said Ignosi bitterly, and with flashing eyes, "that ye love the bright stones more than me, your friend. Ye have the stones; now ye would go to Natal and sell them, and be rich, as it is the desire of a white man's heart to be. Cursed for your sake be the white stones, and cursed he who seeks them. Death shall it be to him who sets foot in the place of Death to find them. I have spoken. White men, ye can go."

I laid my hand upon his arm. "Ignosi," I said, "tell us, when thou didst wander in Zululand, and among the white people of Natal, did not thine heart turn to the land

thy mother told thee of, thy native place, where thou didst play when thou wast little?"

"It was so, Macumazahn."

"In the same way, Ignosi, our hearts turn to our land and to our own place."

Then came a silence. When Ignosi broke it, it was in a different voice.

"I do perceive that thy words are wise and full of reason, Macumazahn. Well, ye must go, and leave my heart sore, because ye will be as dead to me, since from where ye are no tidings can come to me.

"But listen, and let all your brothers know my words. No other white man shall cross the mountains. I will see no traders with their guns and gin. My people shall fight with the spear, and drink water, like their forefathers before them. I will have no praying-men to put a fear of death into men's hearts, to stir them up against the law of the king, and make a path for the white folk who follow to run on. If a white man comes to my gates I will send him back; if a hundred come I will push them back; if armies come, I will make war on them with all my strength, and they shall not prevail against me. None shall ever seek for the shining stones, for if they come I will send a regiment and fill up the pit, and break down the white columns in the caves and choke them with rocks, so that none can reach them. But for you three, Incubu, Macumazahn, and Bougwan, the path is always open; for, behold, ye are dearer to me than aught that breathes.

"And ye would go. Infadoos, my uncle, shall guide you with a regiment. There is, as I have learned, another way across the mountains that he shall show you. Farewell, my brothers, brave white men. See me no more, for I have no heart to bear it. Behold! I make a decree, and it shall be published from the mountains to the mountains; your names, Incubu, Macumazahn, and Bougwan, shall be even as the names of dead kings. So shall your memory be preserved in the land for ever.

"Go now, ere my eyes rain tears like a woman's. At times as ye look back down the path of life, think of how we stood shoulder to shoulder, in that great battle; ay, and of how we did break that wild bull Twala's strength, and bring his pride to dust. Fare ye well for ever, Incubu, Macumazahn, and Bougwan, my lords and my friends."

Ignosi rose and looked earnestly at us for a few seconds. Then he threw the corner of his karross over his head, so as to cover his face from us.

We went in silence.

Next day at dawn we left Loo, escorted by our old friend Infadoos, who was heart-broken at our departure, and by the regiment of Buffaloes. The main street of the town was lined with multitudes of people, who gave us the royal salute as we passed, while the women threw flowers before our feet. It was really very affecting.

One incident occurred, however, which I rather welcomed, as it gave us something to laugh at.

Just before we reached the edge of the town, a pretty young girl, with some lovely lilies in her hand, ran forward and presented them to Good – somehow they all seemed to like Good – and then said that she had a boon to ask.

"Speak on," he answered.

"Let my lord show his servant his beautiful white legs, that his servant may look upon them, and remember them all her days, and tell of them to her children; his servant has travelled four days' journey to see them, for the fame of them has gone throughout the land."

"I'll be hanged if I do!" exclaimed Good.

"Come, come, my dear fellow," said Sir Henry, "you can't refuse a lady."

"I won't," replied Good obstinately; "it is positively indecent."

However, in the end he consented to draw up his trousers to the knee, amidst notes of rapturous admiration from all the women present, especially the gratified young lady. He had to walk like this till we got clear of the town.

As we travelled, Infadoos told us that there was another pass over the mountains to the north of the one followed by Solomon's Great Road, or rather that there was a place where it was possible to climb down the wall of cliff which separates Kukuanaland from the desert. Two years previously a party of Kukuana hunters had descended this path into the desert in search of ostriches, which they valued for their plumes; and in the course of their hunt they had been led far from the mountains and were much troubled by thirst. Seeing trees on the horizon, they walked towards them, and discovered a large and fertile oasis. It was by way of this oasis that Infadoos suggested we should return, and the idea seemed to us a good one. Some of the hunters were there to guide us to the oasis, from which, they stated, they could perceive other fertile spots far away in the desert.

So, travelling easily, on the night of the fourth day's journey we found ourselves once more on the crest of the mountains that separate Kukuanaland from the desert, which rolled away in sandy billows at our feet, and about twenty-five miles to the north of Sheba's Breasts.

At dawn on the following day, we were led to the edge of a chasm, by which we were to descend the precipice, and gain the plain two thousand and more feet below.

Here we bade farewell to that true friend and sturdy old warrior, Infadoos, who solemnly wished all good upon us, and nearly wept with grief.

"Never, my lords," he said, "shall mine old eyes see the like of you again. Ah! the way that Incubu cut his men down in the battle! I never hope to see such another sight, except perchance in happy dreams."

We were very sorry to part from him; indeed, Good was so moved that he gave him as a souvenir – what do you think? – his spare eye-glass. Infadoos was delighted, foreseeing that it would increase his prestige enormously, and after several attempts he succeeded in screwing it into his own eye. Anything more incongruous than the old warrior with leopard-skin cloak, black ostrich plumes, and eye-glass, I never saw.

Then, once our guides were laden with water and provisions, and having received a thundering farewell salute from the Buffaloes, we shook Infadoos by the hand, and began our downward climb. It was difficult, but that evening we found ourselves at the bottom without accident.

"Do you know," said Sir Henry that night, as we sat by our fire and gazed up at the cliffs, "I think that there are worse places than Kukuanaland in the world, and I

have known unhappier times than the last month or two, though I have never spent such strange ones."

"I almost wish I were back," said Good, with a sigh.

As for myself, I reflected that I never had such close shaves as those which I had recently experienced. The thought of that battle made me feel cold all over, and as for our experience in the treasure chamber—!

Next morning we started on a trudge across the desert, and camped that night in the open, marching again at dawn on the morrow.

By noon of the third day's journey we could see the trees of the oasis, and within an hour of sundown we were walking once more upon grass and listening to the sound of running water.

CHAPTER 20

Found

And now I come to perhaps the strangest adventure that happened to us in all this strange business.

I was walking along quietly, some way in front of the other two, down the banks of the stream which runs from the oasis, when suddenly I stopped and rubbed my eyes. There, not twenty yards away, placed in a charming situation facing the stream, under the shade of a fig-tree, was a cosy hut, built of grass and withies, but with a full-length door.

"What the dickens," said I to myself, "can a hut be doing here?"

Even as I said it the door of the hut opened, and there limped out of it a white man clothed in skins, and with an enormous black beard. I stared at him, and he stared at me, and just then Sir Henry and Good walked up.

"Look here, you fellows," I said, "is that a white man, or am I mad?"

Sir Henry looked, and Good looked, and then all of a sudden the lame white man with a black beard uttered a great cry, and began hobbling towards us. When he was close he fell down in a sort of faint.

In an instant Sir Henry was by his side.

"Great Powers!" he cried, "it is my brother George!"

At this, another figure, also clad in skins, emerged from the hut, a gun in his hand, and ran towards us. On seeing me he too gave a cry.

"Macumazahn! don't you know me? I'm Jim the hunter. I lost the note you gave me to give the Baas, and we have been here nearly two years." And he fell at my feet, weeping for joy.

"You careless scoundrel!" I said, smiling.

Meanwhile the man with the black beard had risen, and he and Sir Henry were shaking hands, apparently without a word to say.

"My dear old fellow," burst out Sir Henry at last, "I thought you were dead. I have been over Solomon's Mountains to find you. I had given up all hope of ever seeing you again, and now I come across you perched in the desert, like an old vulture."

"I tried to cross Solomon's Mountains nearly two years ago," was the answer, "but when I reached here a boulder fell on my leg and crushed it, and I have been able to go neither forward nor back. Why, isn't that Hunter Quatermain, and Good too? Hold on a minute, you fellows, I am getting dizzy again. It is all so very strange and happy!"

That evening, over the camp fire, George Curtis told us his story. A little less than two years before, he had started from Sitanda's Kraal, to try to reach Suliman's Berg. He had never heard about the note I had given Jim for him. But, acting upon information he had received from the natives, he headed not for Sheba's Breasts, but

for the descent of the mountains down which we had just come, which is clearly a better route than that in old Dom Silvestra's plan.

In the desert he and Jim had suffered great hardships, but finally they reached this oasis, where a terrible accident befell George Curtis. On the day of their arrival he was sitting by the stream, and Jim was extracting the honey from a bee's nest, on the top of a bank immediately above him. In so doing he loosened a great boulder of rock, which fell upon George Curtis's right leg, crushing it. From that day he had been so lame that he found it impossible to go either forward or back, and had preferred to take the chances of dying in the oasis to the certainty of perishing in the desert.

As for food, however, they got on pretty well, for they had a good supply of ammunition, and the oasis was frequented, especially at night, by large quantities of game. These they shot, or trapped in pitfalls.

"And so," George Curtis ended, "we have lived for nearly two years, like a second Robinson Crusoe and his man Friday, hoping against hope that someone might come here to help us get away, but none have come. Only last night we decided that Jim should leave, and try to reach Sitanda's Kraal to get assistance. He was to go tomorrow, but I had little hope of ever seeing him again. And now you, of all people in the world, turn up and find me where you least expected!"

Then Sir Henry told him the main facts of our adventures, sitting up till late into the night to do it.

"By Jove!" said George Curtis, when I showed him some of the diamonds: "well, at least you have got something for your pains, besides my worthless self."

Sir Henry laughed. "They belong to Quatermain and Good. It was a part of the bargain that they should divide any spoils."

This remark set me thinking, and having spoken to Good, I told Sir Henry that we wanted him to take a third portion of the diamonds; or, if he would not, that his share should be handed to his brother. We finally got him to agree to this, but George Curtis did not know of it until some time afterwards.

Here I think that I shall end my history. Our journey across the desert back to Sitanda's Kraal was most arduous, especially as we had to support George Curtis. But we did manage it somehow.

On our re-arrival at Sitanda's, we found our guns and other goods quite safe, though the old rascal in charge of them was much disgusted at our surviving to claim them. Six months later saw us all once more safe and sound at my little place near Durban, where I am now writing. There I said farewell to those who had accompanied me through the strangest trip I ever made.

P.S.—Just as I had written the last word, a messenger came carrying a letter from the post. It turned out to be from Sir Henry. Here it is.

"October 1, 1884.
Brayley Hall, Yorkshire.

"My Dear Quatermain,

"I send you a line to say that the three of us, George, Good, and myself, reached England all right. We got off the boat at Southampton, and went up to London. You should have seen what a swell Good turned out the very next day, beautifully shaved, frock coat, brand new eye-glass, etc., etc. I went and walked in the park with him, where I met some people I know, and at once told them the story of his "beautiful white legs." He is furious, especially as some ill-natured person has printed it in a Society paper.

"To come to business, Good and I took the diamonds to Streeter's to be valued, and really I am afraid to tell you what amount they put them at, it seems so enormous. They say that it is more or less guess-work, as such stones have never to their knowledge been put on the market in anything like such quantities. I asked them if they would buy them, but they said that it was beyond their power to do so, and recommended us to sell them gradually, over several years, lest we should flood the market. They offer, however, a hundred and eighty thousand for a very small portion of them.

"You must come home, Quatermain, and see about these things. Good is too busy shaving, and adorning of the body. But I think he is still down about Foulata. He told me that since he had been home he hadn't seen a woman to touch her.

"I want you to come home, my dear old comrade, and to buy a house near here. You have done your day's work, and have lots of money now, and there is a place for sale quite close which would suit you admirably. Do come; the sooner the better; you can finish writing the story of our adventures on board ship. You could be here by Christmas, and I book you to stay with me. Good is coming, and George; and so, by the way, is your boy Harry (there's a bribe for you). I have had him down for a week's shooting, and I like him. He is a cool young hand; he shot me in the leg, cut out the pellets, and then remarked upon the advantages of having a medical student with every shooting party!

"Good-bye, old boy; I know that you will come, if it is only to oblige

"Your sincere friend,

"Henry Curtis.

"P.S. The tusks of the great bull that killed poor Khiva have now been put up in the hall here, and look magnificent; and the axe with which I chopped off Twala's head is fixed above my writing-table. I wish that we could have managed to bring away the coats of chain armour. Don't lose poor Foulata's basket in which you brought away the diamonds."

Today is Tuesday. There is a steamer going on Friday, and I really think that I must take Curtis at his word, and sail for England, if only to see you, Harry, my boy, and to look after the printing of this history; which is a task that I do not like to trust to anybody else.

ALLAN QUATERMAIN.

The End