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"If any white man has been here or heard of, wouldst thou have known it?"

"I should certainly have known it."

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

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

"Now for business," I put it, anxious to escape from a painful subject. "It is all very well to be a king by right divine. Igoozi, but how do you propose to be a king indeed?"

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

"Ignozi, son of the lightning," answered his uncle, "to-night is the great dance and witch-hunt. Many will be smelted out and perish, and in the hearts of many others there will be grief and anguish and anger against the king Twala. When the dance is over, then I will speak to some of the great chiefs, who in turn, if I can win them over, shall speak to their regiments. I shall speak to the chiefs softly at first and bring them to see that thou art indeed the king, and I think that by to-morrow's light thou shalt have twenty thousand spears at thy command. And now must I go and think, and make ready. After the dance is done I will if I am yet alive, meet thee here, and we will talk. At the best there will be war."

At this moment our conference was interrupted by the cry that messengers had come from the king. Advancing to the door of the hut we ordered that they should be admitted, and presently three men entered, each bearing a shining shirt of chain armor and a magnificent battle-axe.

"The gifts of my lord the king to the white men from the stars!" exclaimed a herald who came with them.

"We thank the king," I answered, "withdrawing."

The men went, and we examined the armor with great interest. It was the most beautiful chain-work we had ever seen. A white coat felt together so closely that it formed a mass of links scarcely too big to be covered with both hands.

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

"Nay, my lord, they come down to us from our forefathers. We know not who made them, and there are but few left. None but those of royal blood may wear them. They are magic-coats through which no spear can pass. He who wears them is well-nigh safe in the battle. The king is well pleased or much afraid, or he would not have sent them. Wear them to-night, my lords."

The rest of the day we spent quietly resting and talking over the situation, which was sufficiently exciting. At last the sun went down, the thousand watch-fires glowed out, and through the darkness we heard the tramp of many feet and the clashing of hundreds of spears as the regiments passed to their appointed places to be ready for the great dance.

About ten the full moon came up in splendor, and as we stood watching her ascent Infadoos arrived, clad in full war toggery, and accompanied by a guard of twenty men to escort us to the dance. We had already, as recommended, donned the shirts of chain armor which the king had sent us, putting them under our ordinary clothing, and finding to our surprise that they were neither very heavy nor uncomfortable. These steel shirts, which had evidently been made for men of a very large stature, hung somewhat loosely upon Good and myself. Then strapping our revolvers round our waists, and taking the battle-axes which the king had sent with the armor in our hands, we started.

On arriving at the great kraal, where we had been met by the king, we found that it was closely packed with some twenty thousand men arranged in regiments around it. The regiments were in turn divided into companies, and between each company was a little path to allow free passage to the witch-finders to pass up and down. Anything more imposing than the sight that was presented by this vast and orderly concourse of armed men it was impossible to conceive. They stood stolidly and silently, and the bright moonlight poured its light upon the forest of their raised spears, upon their majestic forms, waving plumes, and the harmonious shading of their various colored shields. Wherever we looked was line upon line of set faces surmounted by range upon range of glittering spears.

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

"Nay, Macumazahn" he answered, "but a third part of it. One-third is present at this dance each year, another third part is mustered outside in case there should be trouble when killing begins, ten thousand more garrison the outposts round Loo, and the rest watch at the kraals in the country. Thou seest it is a very great people."

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

"What says Boungwan?" 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 assist at a gladiatorial show arranged in regardless of expense."

Sir Henry shivered, and Good said that he wished 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 be afraid. If ye live through the night all may go well. The soldiers murmur against the king."

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

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

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

"Greeting, white lords," he cried, as we came up; "be seated, waste not the precious time—the night is all too short for the deeds that must be done. Ye come in a good hour, and shall see a glorious show. Look round white lords, look round," and he rolled his eyes wickedly from regiment to regiment.

"Can the stars show ye 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!" cried out Gagool in her thin, piercing voice; "the hyenas are hungry, they howl for food. Begin! begin!"

Then for a moment there was intense stillness, made horrible by a prelude of what was to come.

The king lifted his spear, and suddenly twenty thousand feet were raised as though they belonged to one man, and brought down with a stamp upon the earth. This

ground to shake and tremble. Then from a far point of the circle a solitary voice began a wailing song, of which the refrain rang something as follows:

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

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

"Death!"

Gradually, however, the song was taken up by company after company, till the whole armed multitude was singing it, and I could no longer follow the words, except in so far as they appeared to represent various phases of 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 and rolling away in a volume of blood-curdling sound. Again the silence fell upon the place, and again it was broken by the king lifting up his hand. Instantly there was a pattering of feet, and from out of the masses of the warriors strange and awful figures came running toward us. As they drew near we saw that they were those of women, most of them aged, for their white hair, ornamented with small bladders taken from fish, 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 cincts of human bones, while each held in her shriveled hand a small forked wand. In all there were ten of them. When they arrived in front of us they halted, and one of them pointing with her wand toward the crouching figure of Gagool, cried out:

"Mother, old mother we are here."

"Good! good! good!" piped out that aged iniquity. "Are your eyes keen, isanusis? (with doctresses), "ye seers in dark places."

"Mother, they are keen."

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

"Mother, they are open."

"Good! good! good! Are your senses awake, isanusis—can ye smell blood, can ye purge the land of the wicked ones who compass evil against the king and their neighbors? Are ye ready to do justice of Heaven above, ye whom I have taught, who have eaten of the bread of my wisdom and drank of the water of my magic?"

"Mother, we can."

"Then go! Tarry not, ye vultures; see the slayers," pointing to the ominous group of executioners behind; "make sharp their spears; the white men from afar are hungry to see. Go."

With a wild yell the weird party broke away in every direction, like fragments from a shell, and the dry bones round their waists rattling as they ran, made direct for various points of the dense human circle. We could not watch them all, so fixed our eyes upon the isanusis nearest us. When she came within a few paces of the warriors, she halted and began to dance wildly, turning round and round with an almost incredible rapidity, 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, till she lashed herself into such a frenzy of excitement that the foam flew in flecks from her gnashing jaws, her eyes seemed to start from her head, and her flesh to quiver visibly. Suddenly she stopped dead, and stiffened all over, like a pointer dog when he scents game, and then with outstretched wand began to creep stealthily toward the soldier before her. It seemed to us that as she came their stolidism gave way, and that they shrank from her. As for ourselves, we followed her movements with a horrible fascination. Presently, still creeping and crouching like a dog, she was before them. Then she stopped and pointed, and then again crept on a pace or two.

Suddenly the end came. With a shriek she sprang in and touched a tall warrior with the 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 toward the king.

He did not resist, but we saw that he dragged his limbs as though they were paralyzed, and his fingers, from which the spear had fallen, were limp as those of a man newly dead.

As he came, two of the villainous executioners stepped forward to meet him. Presently they met, and the executioners turned round toward 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 deed was done. One man had driven his spear into the victim's heart, and to make assurance doubly sure, the other had dashed out his brains with his great club.

"One," counted Twala, the king, like a black Madame Defarge, as Good said, and the body was dragged a few paces away and stretched out.

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

"Two," counted the king.

And so the deadly game went on, till some hundred bodies were stretched in rows behind us. I have heard of the gladiatorial shows of the Caesars, and of Spanish bull-fights, but I take the liberty of doubting if they were either of them half as horrible as this Kukuma and his party. Gladiatorial shows and Spanish bull-fights, at any rate, contributed to the public amusement, which certainly was not the case here. The most confirmed sensation-monger would fight shy of sensation if he knew that it was well on the cards that he would, in his own proper person, be the subject of the next "event."

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," was the only answer vouchsafed to us.

About midnight there was a pause. The witch-finders gathered themselves together, apparently exhausted with their bloody work, and we thought that the whole performance was done with. But it was not so, for presently, to our surprise, the old woman, Gagool, rose from her crouching position, supporting herself with a stick, staggered off into the open space. It was an extraordinary sight to see this vulture-headed old creature, bent nearly double with extreme age, gather strength by degrees till at last she rushed about almost as actively as her ill-omened pupils. To and fro she ran, chanting to herself, still suddenly she made a dash at a tall man, standing in front of one of the regiments, and lunched him. As she did so a groan went up from the regiment, which he evidently commanded. But, all the same, two of the members seized him and brought him up for execution. We afterward learned that he was a man of great wealth, and importance, being, indeed, a cousin of the king.

He was slain, and the king counted one hundred and three. Then Gagool again

stepped to ask us, gradually growing nearer and nearer to our lives.

"If I don't believe she is going to try her games on us," ejaculated Good, in horror.

"Nonsense!" said Sir Henry.

As for myself, as I saw that old fiend dancing nearer and nearer, my heart positively sunk in my boots. I glanced behind us at the long rows of corpses and shivered.

Nearer and nearer waltzed Gagool, looking for all the world like an animated crooked stick, her horrid eyes glowering and glowing with a most diabolical insinuation.

Nearer she came, nearer yet, every pair of eyes in that vast assemblage 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 all doubts were set at rest, for the old woman had rushed in and touched Umbopa, alias Ignozi, 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 for him. Slay him, O king!"

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

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

The old woman rushed in and touched Umbopa.

"Gagool, mother of the witch doctors, has smelted 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 around ready to the eyes with the blood of their victims.

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

"Stand back, ye dogs," I shouted, "if ye would see to-morrow's light. 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?"

Then he spoke.

"Put up your magic tubes," he said; "ye have adjured me in the name of hospitality, and for that reason, but not from fear of what ye can do, I dare not shoot. Sir Henry, 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 dogs," pointing to the long rows of corpses, "be flung out to the hyenas and the vultures;" he lifted his spear.

Instantly the regiments began in perfect silence to dottle off through the kraal gate, way by way, till only one remaining behind to drag away the corpses of those who had been sacrificed.

Then we too rose, and making our salaam to his majesty, which he hardly deigned to acknowledge, departed to our kraal.

"Well," said Sir Henry, as we sat down, having first lit a lamp of the sort used by the Kukuanas, of which the wick is made of the fiber of a species of palm leaf, and the oil of clarified hippopotamus fat, "well, I feel uncommonly inclined to be sick."

"If I had any doubts about helping Umbopa to rebel against that infernal black-guard," 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 tried to keep my eyes shut, but they would open just at the wrong time. I wonder where Infadoos is. Umbopa, my friend, you ought to be grateful to us; your skin came near having an air-hole made in it."

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

So we lit our pipes and waited.

CHAPTER XI.  
WE GIVE A SIGN.

For a long while—two hours, I should think—we sat there in silence, for we were too overwhelmed by the recollection of the horrors we had seen to talk. At last, just as we were thinking of turning in—for already there were faint streaks of light in the eastern sky—we heard the sound of steps. Then came the challenge of the sentry, which was posted at the kraal gate, which was apparently answered, though not in an audible tone, for the steps came on; and in another second Infadoos had entered the hut, followed by some half dozen stately-looking chiefs.

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