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By H. RIDER HAGGARD.

AUTHOR OF "KING SOLOMON'S MINES," "SHE," "JESS," "THE WITCH'S HEAD," ETC.

CHAPTER XIX—CONTINUED.

"What!" he said, "dress up that little wretch to represent me? Why, I shall have to get out of the country! My reputation will be ruined forever."

I consoled him as well as I could, but it is not pleasant to be personated all over a strange country by an arrant little coward, and I can quite sympathize with his vexation.

Well, that night Good and I messed, as I have said, in solitary grandeur, feeling very much as though we had just returned from burying a friend instead of marrying one, and next morning the work began in good earnest. The messages and orders which had been dispatched by Nyleptha two days before now began to take effect, and multitudes of armed men came pouring into the city. We saw, as may be imagined, but very little of Nyleptha and not too much of Curtis during those next few days, but Good and I sat daily with the council of generals and loyal lords, drawing up plans of action, arranging commissariat matters, the distribution of commands, and a hundred and one other things. Men came in freely, and all the day long the great roads leading to Milosis were spotted with the banners of lords arriving from their places to rally round Nyleptha.

After the first two days it became clear that we should be able to take the field with about forty thousand infantry and twenty thousand cavalry—a very respectable force, considering how short was the time we had to collect it, and that about half of the regular army had elected to follow Sorais.

But if our force was large, Sorais' was, according to the reports brought in day by day by our spies, much larger. She had taken up her headquarters at a very strong town called M'Arstuna, situated, as I have said, to the north of Milosis, and all the country side was flocking to her standard. Nasta had poured down from his highlands, and was on his way to join her with no less than twenty-five thousand of his mountaineers the most terrible soldiers to face in all Zu-Vendis. Another mighty lord, named Belusha, who lived in the great horse breeding district, had come in with twelve thousand cavalry, and so on. Indeed, what between one thing and another, it seemed certain that she would gather a fully armed host of nearly one hundred thousand men.

And then came the news that she was proposing to break up her camp and march on the Frowning City itself, desolating the country as she came. Thereon arose the question whether it would be best to meet her at Milosis or to go out and give her battle. When our opinion was asked upon the subject, Good and I unhesitatingly gave it in favor of an advance. If we were to shut ourselves up in the city and wait to be attacked, it seemed to us that our inaction would be set down to fear. It is so very important, especially on an occasion of this sort, when a very little will suffice to turn men's opinions one way or the other, to be up and doing something. Ardor for a cause will soon evaporate if the cause does not move, but sits down to conquer. Therefore we cast our vote for moving out and giving battle in the open, instead of waiting till we were drawn from our walls like a badger from a hole.

Sir Henry's opinion coincided with ours, and so, needless to say, did that of Nyleptha, who, like a flint, was always ready to flash out fire. A great map of the country was brought and spread out before her. About thirty miles this side of M'Arstuna, where Sorais was, and ninety odd miles from Milosis, the road ran over a neck of land some two and a half miles in width, and flanked on either side by forest clad hills which, without being lofty, would be quite impracticable for a great baggage laden army to cross. She looked earnestly at the map, and then, with a quickness of perception that in some women amounts almost to an instinct, she laid her finger upon this neck of rising ground, and turning to her husband, said, with a proud air of confidence and a toss of the golden head,

"Here shalt thou meet Sorais' armies. I know the spot; here shalt thou meet them, and drive them before thee like the dust before the storm."

But Curtis looked grave and said nothing.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BATTLE OF THE PASS.

It was on the third morning after this incident of the map that Sir Henry and I started. With the exception of a small guard, all the great host had moved on the night before, leaving the Frowning City very silent and empty. Indeed, it was found impossible to leave any garrison, with the exception of a personal guard for Nyleptha and about 1,000 men who from sickness or one cause or another were unable to proceed with the army; but as the place was practically impregnable, and as our enemy was in front and not behind us, this did not so much matter.

Good and Umslopogaas had gone on with the army, but Nyleptha accompanied Sir Henry and myself to the city gates, riding a magnificent white horse called Daylight, which was supposed to be the fleetest and most enduring animal in Zu-Vendis. Her face bore traces of recent weeping, but there were no tears in her eyes now, indeed she was bearing up bravely against what must have been a bitter trial to her. At the gate she reined in her horse and bade us farewell. On the previous day she had reviewed and addressed the officers of the great army, speaking to them such high, eloquent words and expressing so complete a confidence in their valor and in their ultimate victory that she quite carried their hearts away, and as she rode from rank to rank they cheered her till the ground shook. And now today the same mood seemed to be on her.

"Fare thee well, Macumazahn!" she said. "Remember, I trust to thy wits, which are as a needle to a spear handle compared to those of my people, to save us from Sorais. I know that thou wilt do thy duty."

I bowed and explained to her my horror of fighting, and my fear lest I should lose my head, at which she laughed gently and turned to Curtis.

"Fare thee well, my lord!" she said. "Come back with victory, and as a king, or on thy soldiers' spears."

Sir Henry said nothing, but turned his horse to go; perhaps he had a bit of a lump in his throat. One gets over it afterwards, but these sort of partings are trying when one has only been married a week.

"Here," added Nyleptha, "will I greet ye when ye return in triumph. And now, my lords, once more farewell!"

Then we rode on, but when we had gone 150 yards or so, we turned and perceived her still sitting on her horse at the same spot, and looking cut after us beneath her hand, and that was the last we saw of her. About a mile farther on, however, we heard galloping behind us, and looking round, saw a mounted soldier coming toward us, leading Nyleptha's matchless steed, Daylight.

Then we rode on.

"The queen sends the white stallion as a farewell gift to her Lord Incubu, and bids me tell my lord that he is the fleetest and the most enduring horse in all the land," said the soldier, bending to his saddle bow before us.

At first Sir Henry did not want to take the horse, saying that he was too good for such rough work, but I persuaded him to do so, thinking that Nyleptha would be hurt if he did not. Little did I guess at the time what service that noble horse would render in our sorest need. It is curious to look back and realize upon what trivial and apparently accidental circumstances great events frequently turn, as easily and as naturally as a door on its hinges.

Well, we took the horse, and a beauty he was; it was a perfect pleasure to see him move; and Curtis having sent back his greetings and thanks, we proceeded on our journey.

By midday we overtook the rear guard of the great army, of which Sir Henry formally took over the command. It was a heavy responsibility, and it oppressed him very much, but the queen's injunctions on the point were such as did not admit of being trifled with. He was beginning to find out that greatness has its responsibilities as well as its glories.

Then we marched on without meeting with any opposition, almost indeed without seeing anybody, for the populations of the towns and villages along our route had for the most part fled, fearing lest they should be caught between the two rival armies and ground to powder like grain between the upper and the nether stones.

On the evening of the fourth day—for the progress of so great a multitude was necessarily slow—we camped two miles this side of the neck or ridge I have spoken of, and our outposts brought us word that Sorais, with all her power, was rolling down upon us, and had camped that night ten miles the further side of the neck.

Accordingly, before dawn we sent forward 1,500 cavalry to seize the position. Scarcely had they occupied it, however, before they were attacked by about as many of Sorais' horsemen, and a very smart little cavalry fight ensued, with a loss to us of about thirty men killed. On the advance of our supports, however, Sorais' force drew off, carrying their dead and wounded with them.

The main body of the army reached the neck about dinner time, and I must say that Nyleptha's judgment had not failed her; it was an admirable place to give battle in, especially to a superior force.

The road ran down a mile or more, through ground too broken to admit of the handling of any considerable force, till it reached the crest of a great green wave of land that rolled down a gentle slope to the banks of a little stream, and then rolled away again up a still gentler slope to the plain beyond, the distance from the crest of the land wave down to the stream being a little over half a mile, and from the stream up to the plain beyond a trifle less. The length of this wave of land at its highest point, which corresponded exactly with the width of the neck of land between the wooded hills, was about two miles and a quarter, and it was protected on either side by dense, rocky, bush clad ground that afforded a most valuable cover to the flanks of the army, and rendered it almost impossible for them to be turned.

It was on the higher slope of this neck of land that Curtis encamped his army in the same formation that he had, after consultation with the various generals, Good and myself, determined that they should occupy in the great pitched battle which now appeared to be imminent.

Our force of 60,000 men was, roughly speaking, divided as follows: In the center was a dense body of 20,000 foot soldiers, armed with spears, swords and hippopotamus hide shields, breast and back plates. These formed the chest of the army, and were supported by 5,000 foot and 3,000 horse in reserve. On either side of this chest were stationed 7,000 horse, arranged in deep, majestic squadrons; and beyond, and on either side, but slightly in front of them, again were two bodies, numbering about 7,500 spearmen each, forming the right and left wings of the army, and each supported by a contingent of some 1,500 cavalry. This makes in all 60,000 men.

Curtis commanded in chief, I was in command of the 7,000 horse between the chest and right wing, which was commanded by Good, and the other battalions and squadrons were intrusted to Zu-Vendi generals.

Scarcely had we taken up our positions before Sorais' vast army began to swarm on the opposite slope about a mile in front of us, till the whole place seemed alive with the multitude of her spear points, and the ground shook with the tramp of her battalions. It was evident that the spies had not exaggerated; we were outnumbered by at least a third. At first we expected that Sorais was going to attack us at once, as the clouds of cavalry which hung upon her flanks executed some threatening demonstrations, but she thought better of it, and there was no fight that day. As for the formation of her great forces I cannot now describe it with accuracy, and it would only serve to bewilder if I did, but I may say, generally, that in its leading features it resembled our own, only her reserve was much greater.

Opposite to our right wing, and forming Sorais' left wing, was a great army of dark, wild looking men, armed with sword and shield only, which, I was informed, was composed of Nasta's 25,000 savage hillsmen.

"My word, Good," said I, when I saw them, "you will catch it to-morrow when those gentlemen charge!" whereat Good not unnaturally looked rather anxious.

All day we watched and waited, but nothing happened, and at last night fell, and a thousand watch fires twinkled brightly on the slopes, to wane and die one by one like the stars they resembled, as the hours wore on and the silence gradually gathered more deeply over the opposing hosts.

It was a very wearying night, for in addition to the endless things that had been seen to, there was our gnawing suspense to reckon with. The fray which to-morrow would witness would be so vast, and the slaughter so awful, that stout, indeed, must the heart have been that was not overwhelmed at the prospect.

The time wore away till everything was ready for the coming slaughter; and I lay down and thought, and tried to get a little rest.

And at last up came the red sun, and the huge camps awoke with a clash and a roar, and gathered themselves together for battle. It was a beautiful and awe inspiring scene, and old Umslopogaas, leaning on his ax, contemplated it with grim delight.

"Never have I seen the like, Macumazahn, never," he said. "The battles of my people are as the play of children to what this will be. Thinkest thou that they will fight it out?"

"Ay," I answered sadly, "to the death. Content thyself, 'Woodpecker,' for once shalt thou find thy fill."

Time went on, and still there was no sign of an attack. A force of cavalry crossed the brook, indeed, and rode slowly along our front, evidently taking stock of our position and numbers. With this we did not attempt to interfere, as our decision was to stand strictly on the defensive, and not to waste a single man. The men breakfasted and stood to their arms, and the hours wore on. About midday, when the men were eating their dinner, for we thought they would fight better on full stomachs, a shout of "Sorais, Sorais," arose like thunder from the enemy's extreme right, and taking the glass, I was able to clearly distinguish the Lady of the Night herself, surrounded by a glittering staff, and riding slowly down the lines of her battalions. And as she went, that mighty, thundering shout rolled along before her like the rolling of 10,000 chariots, or the roaring of the ocean when the gale turns suddenly and carries the noise of it to the listeners' ears, till the earth shook, and the air was full of the majesty of sound.

Guessing that this was a prelude to the beginning of the battle, we remained still and made ready,

We had not long to wait. Suddenly, like flame from a cannon's mouth, out shot two great tongue like forces of cavalry, and came charging down the slope towards the little stream, slowly at first, but gathering speed as they came. Before they got to the stream, orders reached me from Sir Henry, who evidently feared that the shock of such a charge, if allowed to fall unbroken upon our infantry, would be too much for them, to send five thousand sabers to meet the force opposite to me, at the moment when it began to mount the stiffest of the rise about four hundred yards from our lines. This I did, remaining behind myself with the rest of my men.

Off went the 5,000 horsemen, drawn up in a wedgelike form, and I must say that the general in command handled them very ably. Starting at a hand gallop for the first 300 yards, he rode straight at the tip of the tongue shaped mass of cavalry which, numbering, so far as I could judge, about eight thousand sabers, was advancing to meet us. Then he suddenly swerved to the right and put on the pace, and I saw the great wedge curl round, and before the foe could check himself and turn to meet it, strike him about half way down his length with a crashing, rending sound, like the breaking up of vast sheets of ice. In sank the great wedge into his heart, and as it cut its way hundreds of horsemen were thrown up on either side of it, just as the earth is thrown up by a plowshare, or, more like still, as the foaming water curls over beneath the bows of a rushing ship. In, yet in, vainly does the tongue twist its ends round in agony, like an injured snake, and strive to protect its center; still farther in, by Heaven! right through, and so, amid cheer after cheer from our watching thousands, back again upon the severed ends, beating them down, driving them as a gale drives spray, till at last, amid the rushing of hundreds of riderless horses, the flashing of swords, and the victorious clamor of their pursuers, the great force crumples up like an empty glove, then turns and gallops pell mell for safety back to its own lines.

I do not think it reached them more than two-thirds as strong as it went out ten minutes before. The lines which were now advancing to the attack opened and swallowed them up, and my force returned, having suffered a loss of only about five hundred men—not much, I thought, considering the fierceness of the struggle. I could also see that the opposing bodies of cavalry on our left wing were drawing back, but how the fight went with them I do not quite know. It is as much as I can do to describe what took place immediately around me.

By this time the immense masses of the enemy's left, composed almost entirely of Nasta's swordsmen, were across the little stream, and with alternate yells of "Nasta" and "Sorais," with dancing banners and gleaming swords were swarming up toward us like ants.

Again I received orders to try and check this movement, and also the main advance against the chest of our army, by means of cavalry charges, and this I did to the best of my ability by continually sending squadrons of about a thousand sabers out against them. These squadrons did the enemy much damage, and it was a glorious sight to see them flash down the hillside and bury themselves like a living knife in the heart of the foe. But, also, we lost many men, for after the experience of a couple of these charges, which had drawn a sort of bloody St. Andrew's cross of dead and dying through the center of Nasta's hosts, our foes no longer attempted to offer an unyielding front to their irresistible weight, but opened out to let the rush go through, throwing themselves on the ground, and hamstringing hundreds of horses as they passed.

And so, notwithstanding all that we could do, the enemy drew nearer, till at last he hurled himself upon Good's force of 7,500 regulars, who were drawn up to receive them in three strong squares. About the same time, too, an awful and heart shaking roar told me that the main battle had closed in on the center and extreme left. I raised myself in my stirrups and looked down to my left; so far as the eye could see there was a long dazzling shimmer of steel as the sun glanced upon falling and thrusting spear.

To and fro swung the contending lines in that dread struggle, now giving way, now gaining a little in the mad yet ordered confusion of attack and defense. But it was as much as I could do to keep count of what was happening to our own wing; and at the same moment the cavalry had fallen back under cover of Good's three squares, I had a fair view of this.

Nasta's wild swordsmen were now breaking in red waves against the sullen rock like squares. Time after time did they yell out their war cries, and hurl themselves furiously against the long triple ridges of spear points, only to be rolled back as billows are when they meet the cliff.

And so for four long hours the battle raged almost without a pause, and at the end of that time, if we had gained nothing we had lost nothing. Two attempts to turn our left flank, by forcing a way through the wood by which it was protected, had been defeated; and as yet Nasta's swordsmen had, notwithstanding their desperate efforts, entirely failed to break Good's three squares, though they had thinned their numbers by quite a third.

As for the chest of the army, where Sir Henry was with his staff and Umslopogaas, it had suffered dreadfully, but it had held its own with honor, and the same may be said of our left battle.

At last the attacks slackened and Sorais' army drew back, having, I began to think, had enough of it. On this point, however, I was soon undeceived, for, splitting up her cavalry into comparatively small squadrons, she charged us furiously with them all along the line and then once more rolled her tens of thousands of sword and spear men down upon our weakened squares and squadrons—Sorais herself directing the movement and, fearless as a lioness, heading the main attack. On they came like an avalanche—I saw her golden helm gleaming in the van—our counter charges of cavalry entirely failing to check their forward sweep. Now they had struck us, and our center bent in like a bow beneath the weight of their rush—it parted, and had not the 10,000 men in reserve charged down to its support it must have been destroyed. As for Good's three squares, they were swept backward like boats upon an incoming tide and the foremost one was burst into and lost half its remaining men. But the effort was too fierce and terrible to last. Suddenly the battle came, as it were, to a turning point and for a minute or two stood still.

Then it began to move toward Sorais' camp. Just then, too, Nasta's fierce and almost invincible highlanders, either because they were disheartened by their losses or by way of a ruse, fell back and the remains of Good's gallant squares, leaving the positions they had held for so many hours, cheered wildly and rashly followed them down the slope, whereon the swarms of swordsmen turned to envelop them and once more flung themselves upon them with a yell. Taken thus on every side, what remained of the first square was quickly destroyed, and I perceived that the second, in which I could see Good himself on a large horse, was on the point of annihilation. A few minutes more and it was broken, its streaming colors sank, and I lost sight of Good in the confused and hideous slaughter that ensued.

Presently, however, a cream colored horse with a snow white mane and tail burst from the ruins of the square and came rushing past me riderless and with wide streaming reins, and in it I recognized the charger that Good had been riding. Then I hesitated no longer, but taking with me half my effective cavalry force, which now amounted to between 4,000 and 5,000 men, I commended myself to God, and without waiting for orders, I charged straight down upon Nasta's swordsmen. Seeing me coming and being warned by the thunder of my horses' hoofs, the majority of them faced round and gave us a right warm welcome. Not an inch would they yield; in vain did we hack and trample them down as we plowed a broad red furrow through their thousands; they seemed to rearise by hundreds, driving their terrible sharp swords into our horses or severing their hamstrings and then hacking the troopers who came to the ground with them almost into pieces. My horse

"The queen is to be murdered to-morrow."

"What!" I said, horror struck, "what do you mean?"

"What I say, monsieur; that devil of a Nasta, he went last night to settle the affair with the archbishop" (Agon). "The guard will leave open the gate leading from the great stair and go away, and Nasta and Agon's priests will come in and kill her. Themselves they would not kill her."

"Come with me," I said, and shouting to the staff officer next me to take over the command, I snatched his bridle and galloped as hard as I could for the spot, between a quarter and half a mile off, where I saw the royal pennon flying, and where I knew that I should find Curtis if he were still alive. On we tore, our horses clearing heaps of dead and dying men, and splashing through pools of blood; on past the long broken lines of spearmen to where, mounted on the white stallion Nyleptha had sent to him as a parting gift, I saw Sir Henry's form towering above the generals who surrounded him.

Just as we reached him the advance began again. A bloody cloth was bound around his head, but I saw that his eye was as bright and keen as ever. Beside him was old Umslopogaas, his ax red with blood, but looking quite fresh and uninjured.

"What's wrong, Quatermain?" he shouted.

"Everything. There is a plot to murder the queen to-morrow at dawn. Alphonse here, who has just escaped from Sorais, has overheard it all," and I rapidly repeated to him what the Frenchman had told me.

Curtis' face turned deadly pale and his jaw dropped.

"At dawn!" he gasped, "and it is now sunset. It dawns before 4, and we are nearly 100 miles off—nine hours at the outside. What is to be done?"

An idea entered into my head. "Is that horse of yours fresh?" I said.

"Yes, I have only just got on to him—when my last was killed; and he has been fed."

"So is mine. Get off him, and let Umslopogaas mount; he can ride well. We will be at Milosis before dawn, or if we are not—well, we cannot help it. No, no; it is impossible for you to leave now. You would be seen, and it would turn the fate of the battle. It is not won yet. The soldiers would think you were making a bolt of it. Quick now."

In a moment he was down, and at my bidding Umslopogaas sprang into the empty saddle.

"Now farewell," I said. "Send 1,000 horsemen with remounts after us in an hour if possible. Stay; dispatch a general to the left wing to take over the command and explain my absence."

"You will do your best to save her, Quatermain?" he said, in a broken voice.

"Ay, that I will. Go on; you are being left behind."

He cast one glance at us, and accompanied by his staff galloped off to join the advance, which by this time was fording the little brook that now ran red with the blood of the fallen.

As for Umslopogaas and myself, we left that dreadful field as arrows leave a bow, and in a few minutes had passed right out of the sight of slaughter, the smell of blood, and the turmoil and shouting, which only came to our ears as a faint, far off roaring, like the sound of distant breakers.

CHAPTER XXI.

AWAY! AWAY!

At the top of the rise we halted for a second to breathe our horses, and turning, glanced at the battle beneath us, which, illumined as it was by the fierce rays of the sinking sun staining the whole scene red, looked from where we were more like some wild titanic picture than an actual hand to hand combat.

"We win the day, Macumazahn," said old Umslopogaas, taking in the whole situation with a glance of his practiced eye. "Look, the Lady of the Night's forces give on every side; there is no stiffness left in them, they bend like hot iron, they are fighting with but half a heart. But alas! the battle will in a manner be drawn, for the darkness gathers and the regiments will not be able to follow and slay!"—and he shook his head sadly. "But," he added, "I do not think that they will fight again; we have fed them with too strong a meat. Ah! it is well to have lived! At last I have seen a fight worth seeing."

By this time we were on our way again, and as we went side by side I told him what our mission was, and how that, if it failed, all the lives that had been lost that day would have been lost in vain.

"Ah!" he said, "nigh on a hundred miles and no horses but these, and be there before dawn! Well—away! away! man can but try, Macumazahn; and maybap we shall be there in time to split that old 'witch finder's'" (Agon's) "skull for him. Once he wanted to burn us, the old 'rain maker,' did he? And now he would set a snare for my mother" (Nyleptha), "would he? Good! So sure as my name is the name of the Woodpecker, so surely, be my mother alive or dead, will I split him to the beard. Ay, by T'Chaka's head I swear it!" and he shook Inkosi-kaas as he galloped. By now the darkness was closing in, but fortunately there would be a moon later, and the road was good.

On we sped through the twilight; the two splendid horses we bestrode had got their wind by this, and were sweeping along with a wide, steady stride that neither failed nor varied for mile upon mile. Down the sides of slopes we galloped, across wide vales that stretched to the foot of far off hills. Nearer and nearer grew the blue hills; now we were traveling up their steeps, and now we were over and passing toward others that sprang up like visions in the far, faint distance beyond.

We spake not, but bent us forward on the necks of those two glorious horses, and listened to their deep, long drawn breaths as they filled their great lungs, and to the regular, unfaltering ring of their round hoofs. Grim and black, indeed, did old Umslopogaas look beside me, mounted upon the great white horse, like death in the revelation of St. John, as now and again lifting his fierce set face he gazed out along the road, and pointed with his ax toward some distant rise or house.

And so on, still on, without break or pause, for hour after hour.

At last I began to feel that even the splendid animal that I rode was beginning to give out. I looked at my watch; it was nearly midnight, and we were considerably more than half way. On the top of a rise was a little spring, which I remembered because I had slept by it a few nights before, and here I motioned to Umslopogaas to pull up, having determined to give the horses and ourselves ten minutes to breathe in. He did so, and we dismounted—that is to say, Umslopogaas did, and then helped me off, for what with fatigue, stiffness, and the pain of my wound, I could not do so for myself; and the gallant horses stood panting there, resting first one leg and then another, while the sweat fell drip, drip, from them, and the steam rose and hung in pale clouds in the still night air.

Leaving Umslopogaas to hold the horses, I hobbled to the spring and drank deep of its sweet waters. I had had nothing but a single mouthful of wine since midday, when the battle began, and I was parched up, though my fatigue was too great to allow me to feel hungry. Then, having laved my fevered head and hands, I returned, and the Zulu went and drank. Next we allowed the horses to take a couple of mouthfuls each—no more; and oh, what a struggle we had to get the poor beasts away from the water! There were yet two minutes, and I employed it in hobbling up and down to try and relieve my stiffness, and in inspecting the condition of the horses. My mare, gallant animal though she was, was evidently much distressed; she hung her head, and her eye looked sick and dull; but Daylight, Nyleptha's glorious horse—who, if he is served aright, should, like the steeds who saved the great Rameses in his need, feed for the rest of his days out of a golden manger—was still, comparatively speaking, perfectly fresh, notwithstanding that he had had by far the heavier weight to carry. He was "tucked up," indeed, and his legs were weary, but his eye was bright and clear, and he held his shapely head up and gazed out into the darkness round him in a way that seemed to say that, whoever failed, he was good for those five and forty miles that yet lay between us and Milosis. Then Umslopogaas helped me into the saddle and—vigorous old savage that he was!—vaulted into his own without touching a stirrup, and we were off once more, slowly at first, till the horses got into their stride, and then more swiftly. So we passed over another ten miles, and then came a long, weary rise of some six or seven miles, and three times did my poor black mare nearly come to the ground with me. But on the top she seemed to gather herself together, and rattled down the slope with long, convulsive strides, breathing in gasps. We did that three or four miles more swiftly than any since we had started on our wild ride, but I felt it to be a last effort, and I was right. Suddenly my poor horse took the bit between her teeth and bolted curiously along a stretch of level ground for some 500 or 400 yards, and then, with two or three jerky strides, pulled herself up and fell with a crash right on to her head. I rolling myself free as she did so. As I struggled on to my feet the brave beast raised her head and looked at me with piteous bloodshot eyes, and then her head dropped with a groan and she was dead. Her heart was broken.

Umslopogaas pulled up beside the carcass, and I looked at him in dismay. There were still more than twenty miles to do by dawn, and how were we to do it with one horse? It seemed hopeless, but I had forgotten the old Zulu's extraordinary running powers.

Without a single word he sprang from the saddle and began to hoist me into it.

"What wilt thou do?" I asked.

"Run," he answered, seizing my stirrup leather.

Then off we went again, almost as fast as before; and, oh, the relief it was to me to get that change of horses! Anybody who has ever ridden against time will know what it meant.

Daylight sped along at a long stretching hand gallop, giving the gaunt Zulu a lift at every stride. It was a wonderful thing to see old Umslopogaas run mile after mile, his lips slightly parted and his nostrils agape like the horse's. Every five miles or so we stopped for a few minutes to let him get his breath, and then flew on again.

"Canst thou go farther," I said at the third of these stoppages, "or shall I leave thee to follow me?"

He pointed with his ax to a dim mass before us. It was the Temple of the Sun, now not more than five miles away.

"I reach it or I die," he gasped.

Oh, that last five miles! The skin was rubbed from the inside of my legs, and every movement of my horse gave me anguish. Nor was that all. I was exhausted with toil, want of food and sleep, and also suffering very much from the blow I had received on my left side; it seemed as though a piece of bone or something was slowly piercing into my lung. Poor Daylight, too, was pretty nearly finished, and no wonder. But there was a smell of dawn in the air, and we might not stay; better that all three of us should die upon the road than that we should linger while there was life in us. The air was thick and heavy, as it sometimes is before the dawn breaks, and—another infallible sign in certain parts of Zu-Vendis that sunrise is at hand—hundreds of little spiders pendent on the end of long tough webs were floating about in it. These early rising creatures, or rather their webs, caught upon the horse's and our own forms by scores, and as we had neither the time nor the energy to brush them off, we rushed along covered with hundreds of long gray threads that streamed out a yard or more behind us—and a very strange appearance they must have given us.

And now before us are the huge brazen gates of the outer wall of the Frowning City, and a new and horrible doubt strikes me: What if they will not let us in?

"Open! open!" I shout imperiously, at the same time giving the royal password. "Open! open! a messenger, a messenger with tidings of the war!"

"What news?" cried the guard. "And who art thou that ridest so madly? and who is that whose tongue lolls out"—and it actually did—"and who runs by thee like a dog by a chariot?"

"It is the Lord Macumazahn, and with him is his dog, his black dog. Open! open! I bring tidings."

The great gates ran back on their rollers, and the drawbridge fell with a rattling crash, and we dashed on through the one and over the other.

"What news, my lord? what news?" cried the guard.

"Incubu rolls Sorais back, as the wind a cloud," I answered, and was gone.

One more effort, gallant horse, and yet more gallant man!

So, fall not now, Daylight; and hold thy life in thee for fifteen short minutes more, old Zulu war dog, and ye shall both live forever in the annals of the land.

On, clattering through the sleeping streets. We are passing the Flower Temple now—one mile more, only one little mile—hold on, keep your life in ye, see the houses run past of themselves. Up, good horse, up, there—but fifty yards now. Ah! you see your stables, and stagger on gallantly.

"Thank God, the palace at last!" and see, the first arrows of the dawn are striking on the temple's golden dome. But shall I get in here, or is the deed done and the way barred? Once more I give the password and shout "Open! open!"

No answer, and my heart grows very faint.

Again I call, and this time a single voice replies, and to my joy I recognize it as belonging to Kara, a fellow officer of Nyleptha's guards, a man I know to be as honest as the light—indeed, the same whom Nyleptha had sent to arrest Sorais on the day she fled to the temple.

"Is it thou, Kara?" I cry; "I am Macumazahn. Bid the guard let down the bridge and throw wide the gate. Quick, quick!"

Then followed a space that seemed to me endless; but at length the bridge fell and one half of the gate opened, and we got into the courtyard, where at last poor Daylight fell down beneath me, as I thought, dead. I struggled free, and leaning against a post looked around. Except Kara, there was nobody to be seen, and his look was wild, and his garments were all torn. He had opened the gate and let down the bridge alone, and was now getting them up and shut again (as, owing to a very ingenious arrangement of cranks and levers, one man could easily do, and indeed generally did do).

"Where are the guard?" I gasped, fearing his answer as I never feared anything before.

"I know not," he answered; "two hours ago, as I slept, was I seized and bound by the watch under me, and but now, this very moment, have I freed myself with my teeth. I fear, I greatly fear, that we are betrayed."

His words gave me fresh energy. Catching him by the arm, I staggered, followed by Umslopogaas, who reeled after us like a drunken man, through the courtyards, up the great hall, which was silent as the grave, towards the queen's sleeping place.

We reached the first anteroom—no guards; the second, still no guards. Oh, surely the thing was done! we were too late after all, too late! The silence and solitude of those great chambers was dreadful and weighed me down like an evil dream. On, right into Nyleptha's chamber we rushed and staggered, sick at heart, fearing the very worst; we saw there was a light in it, aye, and a figure bearing the light. Oh, thank God, it is the White Queen herself, the queen unharmed! There she stands in her night gear, roused by the clatter of our coming from her bed, the heaviness of sleep yet in her eyes and a red blush of fear and shame mantling her lovely breast and cheek.

"Who is it?" she cries. "What means this? Oh, Macumazahn, is it thou? Why lookest thou so wildly? Thou comest as one bearing evil tidings—and my lord—oh, tell me not my lord is dead—not dead!" she wailed, wringing her white hands.

"I left Incubu wounded, but leading the advance against Sorais last night at sundown; therefore let thy heart have rest. Sorais is beaten back all along her lines and thy arms prevail."

"I knew it," she cried in triumph. "I knew that he would win; and they called him an outlander and shook their wise heads when I gave him the command! Last night at sundown, sayest thou, and it is not yet dawn? Surely"——

"Throw a cloak around thee, Nyleptha," I broke in, "and give us wine to drink; ay, and call thy maidens quick if thou wouldst save thyself alive. Nay, stay not."

Thus adjured, she ran and called through the curtains towards some room beyond, and then hastily put on her sandals and a thick cloak, by which time a dozen or so of half dressed women were pouring into the room.

"Follow us and be silent," I said to them as they gazed with wondering eyes, clinging one to another. So we went into the first anteroom.

"Now," I said, "give us wine to drink and food, if ye have it, for we are near to death."

The room was used as a mess room for officers of the guards, and from a cupboard some flagons of wine and some cold flesh were brought forth, and Umslopogaas