

Mitford Bertram

The King's Assegai: A Matabili Story



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Prologue

“You were astonished when I refused your piece of gold, *Nkose*. But were you to offer me your waggon loaded up with just such shining gold pieces, even that would not coax this broad spear out of my possession.”

(*Nkose*: literally “chief” – a title of civility which the innate courtesy of the Zulu moves him to bestow upon the stranger. In this connection it corresponds to “sir.”)

“I should be sorry to make the offer, Untúswa, for I fear that, whatever its merit, I should be the owner of a weapon for which I had paid too long a price.”

But the old Zulu only shook his head, contemptuously, it seemed, and the faint, satirical smile which turned down the corners of his mouth seemed to say, “This poor fool! Does he know what he is talking about?”

“Let me look at it again, Untúswa,” I said, reaching out for the weapon for which a few minutes before I had ended by offering a golden sovereign – having begun with a few worthless items of truck, such as beads, pocket-knives, etc. It was a splendid assegai of the short – handled, close-quarter type. The blade, double-edged, keen and shining, was three fingers broad and at least twenty inches in length, and was secured in its socket by raw-hide bindings, firm as iron, and most neatly and tastefully plaited. The haft, expanding at the butt into a truncated knob, was of a curious dark wood, something like ebony, almost black, and highly polished.

“*Au!* You are a good man, *Nkose*. You will not do anything to it?” was the somewhat reluctant reply, as the weapon was handed over.

“Bewitch it, I suppose you mean, Untúswa? Have no fear. There is no *tagati* about me – not a grain.”

Handling this splendid specimen of an assegai, poising it, noting its perfect and graceful make, its strength and temper, I was inclined to quadruple my original offer, but that I felt confident that the old man was in dead earnest as to his statement that untold gold would not induce him to part with this weapon. But here, I thought, is the direct antithesis of the Needy Knife-Grinder. This man *has* a story to tell, if only he can be induced to tell it.

The hour was propitious – the still, deliciously lazy time of the mid-day outspan. From our position on the Entonjaneni heights we commanded a fair expanse of the crag-crowned hills and rolling plains of Central Zululand. Beneath lay the wide bush-clad valley of the White Umfolosi – the river winding in a snaky band. Beyond, the Mahlabatini Plain – now silent and deserted – and there six great wizard-circles in the grass alone showed where had stood, a year or so back, just that number of huge kraals, the principal of which was Ulundi.

The unwilling dealer in prize assegais was a tall, thin old man, whose age it would have been impossible to guess were it not that by his own showing he must have been at least as old as the century – which would have given him fourscore. Though lean and shrunken, he showed evidences of the former possession of great muscular power, and even now was as straight as a telegraph-pole, and carried his ringed head slightly thrown back, as became a man who was somebody. He had come to the waggon, in company with other Zulus, to exchange civilities according to custom, but had lingered on after the departure of the rest. Then I fed him, and gave him much snuff, and strove to tempt him to sell the weapon which had taken my fancy.

“It is a fine spear,” I said, returning it to its owner; “but there are many such in Zululand, and of gold pieces there are not many. Why do you value it so?”

“*Au!* Value it?” Then, with a glance at my native boys who were snoring under the waggon, he said, in a lowered voice, and stretching forth his hand in emphasis:

“It was the spear of the King.”

“Of the King? Of Cetywayo?”

“*Qa-bo!* Not so!” he answered with a shake of the head. Then, after a few moments spent in snuff-taking and silence, he went on:

“Listen, *Nkose*; I have fought for another king than him whom you English have taken from us, and for whom our hearts are crying. Though in my old age I fought for Cetywayo as an ordinary warrior, yet I was, while yet young, a great *induna* at the right hand of another king, and the second in command of his armies. For my youth, and, indeed, most of my life, was passed among a kindred people who dwell to the north. I am from the Amandebili.”

(Amandebili: commonly known as Matabili.)

Chapter One. Tshaka's Impi

Now I saw I was going to get at a wonderful story. The incidents and recollections which would cluster round that beautifully-made dark-handled spear could not fail to be copious as well as passing strange. Then, in his pleasant and flowing Zulu voice —*the voice par excellence* for narrative purposes – the old man began:

“I am Untúswa, the son of Ntelani, a Zulu of the tribe of Umtetwa. I was a boy in the days when Tshaka, the great King, ruled this land, and trampled his enemies flatter than the elephant tramples the grass-blades. But I was full of the fighting blood which has made our people what they are – what they wore, rather” – he parenthesised sadly, recollecting that we were looking down upon the relics of fallen greatness, as represented by the silent desolation of the razed capital – “ah, yes! But instead of fighting for Tshaka I fought under a very different sort of king.

(Tshaka: The name of the celebrated Zulu King should, in strict accuracy, be written Tyaka. The above spelling, however, has been adopted throughout this narrative in consideration for the British ear. To spell the name with a C is quite erroneous.)

“When there are two bulls of nearly equal size in one kraal, they will not look long at each other before locking their horns. There were two such bulls in those days in the land of Zulu, and they were Tshaka, the son of Senzangakona, who was the King, and Umzilikazi, the son of Matyobane. I was but a boy, I repeat, in those days, but they tell me that Umzilikazi loved not the house of Senzangakona. But he was wiser than the serpent if braver than the bull-buffalo in full charge. He thought it better to be a live king than a dead *induna*.

(Umzilikazi: More commonly, but quite erroneously, known as Mosilekatse.)

“It befell that he dropped out of favour with the great King; for being, though young, one of the first fighting chiefs among the Amazulu, he soon gathered to himself an immense following. To him, too, came my father, Ntelani, and many others who loved not the House which had deposed the tribe of Umtetwa, the royal House of Dingiswayo, which was our own. Then Tshaka grew jealous, as he ever did when he saw one of his chiefs increase in power and influence. He sent Umzilikazi upon war expeditions, in the hope of procuring his death, and when this failed, and our chief returned covered with greater glory than ever, the King tried another plan. He declared we had hidden the best of the spoil, had sent the best of the cattle and captives away into the mountains, and an *impi* was ordered out, to take us unawares and destroy us.

“But not thus were we to be taken. Such a move had been expected, and for some time previously Umzilikazi had been sending men to explore the passes of the mountains – the great Kwahlamba range – which shut us in behind as with great rocky walls; hither, too, our cattle and women were sent. The while our chief had been talking to the heads of the different clans which made up his following, and his talking had fallen upon ready ears. There were fair lands away beyond the mountains – lands of waving grass and flowing streams and countless herds of game, lands where dwelt tribes whose only destiny was to serve the all-powerful Amazulu. They had only to cross the mountains and conquer those lands.

“The old men took snuff and listened, and saw that the words were wise. To remain was certain death; to fly would mean possible safety and wealth. The young men listened and gripped their weapons. The prospect of conquering out a new kingdom, of the enemies we should meet and slay – this it was that fired our blood. Besides, we would have gone through flame at the bidding of our chief, who had led us so often to victory. Moreover, it was darkly whispered that the iron yoke of Tshaka, in the matter of earlier marriage being permitted, and such-like, would be relaxed. So day by day, in batches, our women and cattle were moved higher and higher up the mountain-passes, preparing

for flight; and we lay under arms, and ready to give our destroyers a great deal of trouble when they should arrive. And in order that we should be found thoroughly prepared, some of us younger men, fleet of foot and strong of vision, were posted upon the lower heights of the Kwahlamba, whence we could see for an enormous distance. At last the day came.

“The sun had just risen, and was flooding the land with gold. It was a clear morning, and entirely free from mist; and, seated there on my lofty watch – pinnacle, I beheld a movement far away towards the rising sun. I sprang to my feet and gazed eagerly forth. A curtain of cloud was rising over the land-spreading higher and higher, rolling nearer and nearer with great rapidity. Cloud? No. It was a curtain of dust.

“So immense was the space spread out beneath me that it seemed as though I could see over the whole world. On swept this great dust-cloud, still at an enormous distance, but nearing rapidly every moment. And then I knew what caused it. That dust-cloud was stirred up by countless herds of game fleeing in panic and terror. Then I called to my brother, who sprang upon the rock beside me.

“Look, Sekweni! Yonder the game is in full flight. Yonder are the Zulu spears. The King’s *impi* is coming!”

“We stood for a little while longer, watching the dust-cloud till we could see among it rolling, tumbling forms.

“Go now, Sekweni, and cry aloud the news from post to post,” I said. “I go to warn Umzilikazi, our father.”

“And as I sprang down the mountain-side, leaping from stone to stone, from crag to crag, with the surefootedness and fleetness of a buck, long before I reached the level I could see the flash and glitter of sparks of flame through the towering dust-cloud, extending in a great line over the plain. It was the glitter of innumerable spears. The host advancing behind those flying game herds – advancing to destroy us – was as the whole of Tshaka’s army.

“How I ran! There was none who could run against me in those days, *Nkose*. With head down, and panting for breath, yet far from being exhausted, I rushed into the presence of Umzilikazi.

“Greeting, father!” I cried. “They are at hand!”

“Ha!” And the battle-light we who had followed him knew so well came into the face of our chief.

“How many regiments do they number, son of Ntelani?” he said, taking snuff.

“I know not, O my father. But it seems to me that half (this would mean about 20,000 men) of the army of the Great King is advancing upon us.”

“And we number but half that. Well, Untúswa, get you back to your watching-place with six others being young and swiftfooted, and send them as messengers as there shall be aught to report. Go now!”

“I saluted the chief and bounded away like a buck. But when I had regained the mountain height with the youths whom I had chosen as runners, lo! the army of Tshaka spread out black on all hands, covering the ground as it were a swarm of young locusts – sweeping on now in a huge half-circle as it were of the black waves of the sea.

“But our leader had mustered his fighting strength, and was rapidly moving up to the place he had fixed upon as his battle-ground. This was to be the entrance of the pass by which our flight should continue, for there, the lay of the ground being high and steep, a few determined fighters could repel the attacks of many; and besides this, another species of defence had been organised by the strategy and forethought of our chief.

“I saw the huge *impi* surround and burst upon our principal kraals, and I laughed aloud, for in them none remained save the very old. These were put to the assegai in a moment, and then our intending destroyers held on their way to where our warriors awaited them, on the steep sides of the pass I have described, concealed by thick bush. But they could not believe that we meant fighting.

All they had to do was to overtake us and slaughter us as we fled. How mistaken they were – ah, yes, how mistaken!

“For as the foremost of their host streamed carelessly forward, not waiting for its supports, our chief gave the word, and immediately from the bush which flanked the way on either side there poured two large bodies of our younger and most fiery warriors, to the number of about two thousand. The advance guard of the King’s *impi*, taken thus by surprise and also in flank, was thrown into utter confusion. But ah! while it lasted, it was as though two seas had met – the shock and the surging, the crash of shields and the splintering of spears, the roars and the hissing of the war-whistles! Ha! they fought – ah, yes, they fought; but we rolled them back, crushed and scattered, upon the main body, and before it could charge forward we were in position again, this time higher up the pass. But the ground was covered with the dead.

“My children are young lions indeed! The first blow struck for a new kingdom is a hard one.’

“Such was the word which our chief caused to be passed round for our encouragement.

“Still the King’s *impi* could not understand that we intended seriously to give battle; and indeed, as we gazed forth upon this immense sea of tossing spears and tufted shields rolling up towards us, it was little to be wondered at. For we were as a mouthful to it. Yet every man of us was fighting for his life, and under such circumstances the meanest of animals will show bravery. But yet we were fighting for something more – for freedom, for the pride of setting up a new nation.

“On they came, those waves of a living sea, and the earth shook beneath the rumble of their tread; the air rustled with the hissing of their plumes. And as they advanced they raised the great battle-song of Tshaka, its echoes tossing like thunder from cliff to cliff: —

“Waqeda – qeda izizwe!

Uyauhlasela pi-na?”

“Thou hast made an end – made an end of the nations.

Whither now wilt thou maraud?”

“Above was the narrow opening of the pass, and between, for a little distance, a well-nigh open space. Here we met them hand to hand; here we held them back, while those behind pressed them onward by sheer force of weight. Foot by foot we met them, forced slowly back, but ever with our faces toward them. The ground was wet with blood, alive with falling, writhing bodies. The heights rang back our screams of rage, our defiant war-cries, and the clangour of our blows. Foot by foot we gave way; but they never got above us, never got around us. Thus shone forth the generalship of our chief in choosing this for our fighting-ground.

“Above us the pass narrowed to a steep rock-gateway overhung by lofty slopes. Suddenly, at the signal of a loud, sharp whistle, our men ceased the fight as though slain, and, turning, sprang into retreat, pouring through this great natural door. With a roar the king’s *impi* dashed forward in pursuit, then paused in obedience to the mandate of its leaders, who suspected a snare.

“But only for a moment did it thus halt. The mighty mass of our would-be destroyers surged up the pass and began to stream through the narrow defile. On they came, shouting ever the battle-cry; and then — *Whau, Nkose!* you should have soon what happened! It was as though the mountains were falling in upon us. For from either side great masses of rock came crashing down the slopes – enormous blocks of stone – some splitting into fragments as they bounded and rolled, others crashing, in their stupendous size, upon the warriors of Tshaka. These in dismay tried to draw back, but could not, for the weight of those behind pressed them on; failing in this, they bounded forward, and our assegais were there to receive them, while all the time the rolling rocks were crashing down upon their rear, filling up the entire mouth of the gap. We had shut back the army of Tshaka as it were by a

gate. The great pile of rocks which filled the gap was far too high for men to leap over, too loose to be pulled down, lest the entire mass should fall upon and crush them. Such was the strategy of our chief.

“And now upon those of our enemies who were thus walled in with us there bore down the whole of our force, led by Umzilikazi in person. Those of us who were in flight turned, re-formed, and sprang like lightning to the charge; while others of us, who had been lying concealed, leaped from our ambush, and, forming a dense half-circle, we rushed upon the warriors of Tshaka. These were about two thousand, we being four times their number. But, encouraged by the roars of their brethren on the other side, they stood their ground. *Whau!* it was like a contest of lions! When we whirled down upon them they met us in full shock; about them there was no giving way. But by the time a man might have counted a hundred, nigh half their number had fallen; but we, too, had lost fearfully. In the same time again there would not have been one left, when Umzilikazi, waving his great shield, cried, in tones of thunder, to give them a truce.

“Yield, Gungana!’ he cried to the *induna* in command. ‘Yield, men of Tshaka! To fight on is death; to return to the king is death. We go to find a new kingdom. Join us – for it is better to live than to die.’

“Thou sayest truly, son of Matyobane,’ replied Gungana, after a moment of hesitation. Many, too, were there in that body who in their hearts favoured Umzilikazi, and were tired of the hard rule of Tshaka. If they went back to the King with their task unperformed, or badly performed, certain death awaited, and from the stout resistance we had made they deemed our force to be greater than it was. So the warriors agreed to accept their lives and come under our chief.

“This settled, we resumed our flight. And with this new accession to our fighting strength, we moved up the pass, singing back at those who would have followed, in derision, the war-song of Tshaka, but altered to, ‘We go to find new nations to conquer.’ Then it grew dark, but still we pressed on to where our women and cattle were awaiting us higher up, and, marching through the night, the next morning we gained the other side of the mountains.

“Then it was as the word of our chief had promised us. Fair and rolling plains lay beneath us, stretching as far as the eye could behold, dotted with kraals and cattle, and away in the distance coursed herds of game – elands and springboks and gnus and many other kinds. Then our eyes and our hearts were glad, and great and mighty was the acclamation with which we greeted him who had thus led us forth, and with one voice we all cried the royal ‘Bayéte!’ A new nation hailed Umzilikazi as King.”

Chapter Two. The King's Promise

“We saw no more of Tshaka’s *impi*. Perhaps it was that a great cloud came upon the mountains after our passage and rested there for days, and they attempted to follow, and failed because of the darkness and the mist, or refrained from following at all. Anyhow, this cloud came, as I have said, and all men hailed it as a good omen and that Umzilikazi’s *múti* (Medicine, mystery, magic. In this sense, the latter) had caused it to gather thus, in order that we might evade further pursuit.

“But as we swept down upon this new land like a swarm of devastating locusts – ah, the terror of its people! The report was cried from kraal to kraal that the great Zulu sea had overflowed the mountains, and was sweeping on to engulf all within the black fury of its wrath. Wherefore soon we found nothing but empty kraals, whose people had fled, but we took their cattle and their grain, and laughed and went on. Then, as our march progressed further and further, we began to find kraals which were not empty, and whose people had neglected to remove out of our destroying path. *Au!* it was something to see the faces of these as we sprang upon them with our fierce, roaring war-shout, which was as the thunders of heaven. Their faces were those of men already dead, and dead they soon were, for our spears devoured them as they stood, or as they lay, screaming for mercy. But mercy was no part of our plan in those days – not that Umzilikazi loved bloodshed for its own sake, or was wantonly cruel, as some of the white men say, but it was necessary to stamp out all the people in our path, to leave none behind who should say to Tshaka’s *impis* pursuing us: ‘This way has Umzilikazi gone.’ So a broad trail of fire and blood marked our course, which, indeed, a man might trace by watching the clouds of vultures aloft in the heavens. But time went on, and we moved further and further from Zululand, and still no pursuit.

“Now, of all this killing I and many others of the younger warriors soon grew tired. It was too much like cattle-slaying, falling upon these unresisting people, who had no fight in them. What we desired was to meet an enemy in arms, and some, fired with all this blood-shedding, even whispered of turning back to meet the *impis* of Tshaka in fair fight. However, when we came near the country of the Basutu we got fighting enough, for these people were brave, and though they would not meet us in the open, would retire to their cliff dwellings and hill forts and resist us fiercely, studding the approaches to their strongholds with assegai points to cut our feet and legs to pieces as we drew near, or rolling down showers of rocks upon us, so that we must flee or be crushed. This sort of fighting was not to our tastes, and we would taunt them and call them cowards for skulking behind rocks instead of coming forth to meet us in the open, man to man; and yet they were not cowards, for every race has its own method of fighting – besides, had not we ourselves adopted that very plan? – and the Basutu were brave enough in their own way.

“At that time I had found great favour with the King, who had created my father, Ntelani, one of his *indunas*. Boy as I was, I was tall and straight and active, and afraid of nothing. I could outstrip the fastest runner among us, and, indeed, all the younger ones were ordered to compete in foot-racing, both short and long distances. I was first in all these, and the King appointed me his chief messenger. I was incorporated into his bodyguard, and was never far from the King’s person. Indeed, he would often talk with me alone, as though I were his son; and being young and unthinking in those days, I soon began to fancy myself a much bigger man than my own father. So one day I went boldly to the King, and asked leave to *tunga* (Literally ‘sew’ the head-ring; i.e., to marry), for by this time we had many women-captives among us, over and above those we had been able to bring with us from Zululand.

“Umzilikazi burst out laughing.

“What!’ he said. ‘You, a boy – a mere child yesterday – thinking to *tunga*! Go, go! You are fleet of foot, Untúswa, but I have never heard that you had done anything especially brave – braver than your fellows, that is. What claim, then, have you to sue for the privilege which is granted to tried warriors alone?’

“Give me but the chance, O King; give me but the chance!’ I cried. ‘I will surpass everyone for valour, for I know not what fear is.’

“Umzilikazi had abandoned his good-humoured laugh. He now looked grave, even severe. In truth, I knew I was doing a bold thing in daring so much as to reply upon ‘the word’ of the King. It was an act which might have cost many a man his life. Yet there I stood, about ten paces from him, in a slightly bent attitude of humility, but meeting his gaze full and fearlessly.

“Do you presume upon the favour I have ever shown you, Untúswa?’ he said sternly. ‘Do you perchance forget that the slayers are ever within hail?’

“I lie beneath the foot of the King – the Great Elephant whose tread shaketh the world,’ I replied, launching into the most extravagant of *bonga* (Acclamatory praise, as applied to the King), but still meeting his threatening gaze unquaveringly.

“I believe you speak truly, boy, and that you do not know fear,’ he answered, ‘eke you had not dared to stand before me thus. Well now, this is my “word”: Go and distinguish yourself; perform some act bolder than any I have ever heard tell of. Then, child as you are, you shall wear the head-ring – because are you not, after all, my chief runner?’

“Who am I, to keep on filling the King’s ears with words?’ I said. ‘But give me the chance to distinguish myself. Give me the chance, Father!’

“You must make the chance, Untúswa; you must make it for yourself. But I say again, because you are my chief runner and my faithful servant, I will do more for you than I would for many, O son of Ntelani. Perform some act bolder than any act I have ever heard tell of, and you shall be allowed to *tunga*. Not only that, but I will give you this *umkonto* (The broad-bladed, short-handled assegai) which I hold in my hand, and with it you shall lead my armies to battle. Now go.’

“I bent low to the earth, then straightened myself up, and with hand, uplifted shouted: —

“*Bayéte!* I walk on air, O Elephant! for have I not the King’s promise?’ Then I went out from the presence.

“You must know, *Nkose*, that in those days Umzilikazi was in the prime of his youth and strength, being tall and active, and with the stamp of a chief among chiefs. His countenance was noble and stately as that of a lion, and in his unbending moments he had a way with him that bound us to him in such wise that we, his younger warriors, would have died all deaths at his word. For his rule was lighter than that of Tshaka. He, like Tshaka, knew not fear, and was as daring and skilful a leader as the great Zulu King; indeed, this it was that aroused the jealousy of Tshaka, as I have told you, and led to the building up of a new nation. And although, for necessity’s sake, as regards other tribes, Umzilikazi was ruthless and unsparing, among us, his followers, he was merciful, if strict, and rarely spilt blood. Yet, while we loved him, we feared him – oh yes, we feared him.

“Now, although I had the King’s promise, I felt sorely perplexed; for how was I to fulfil its conditions? For days and nights I thought and dreamed of nought else; saying nothing, however, to my father, Ntelani, who was already jealous of the great; favour Umzilikazi had shown me, and might have devised some means of thwarting me.

“It happened that on the evening after I had obtained the King’s promise I was returning alone from a hunt. I was empty-handed; for although my fleetness of foot enabled me to traverse long distances, yet game was scarce in our neighbourhood, owing to the passage of such an immense body of people, which had scared it. Tired and dispirited, I threw down my assegais and small shield, and sank down against a rock to rest. Suddenly my tawny, black-muzzled hound leaped up and dashed round the rock with a growl. But this was soon changed to a whine of pleasure.

“Clearly the intruder was known to him. Raising my eyes, I beheld a girl.

“I am an old man now, *Nkose*, and have lived to learn that women, like assegais, are all made very much on the same lines – like assegais, are keen and sharp to cut and destroy. But, old man as I am, I cannot even now quite forget that evening after I had talked with the King.

“Of what are your thoughts that they are so heavy, O son of Ntelani?” she said, with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

“I gazed upon her for a moment without replying; for I knew who she was, though we had never before spoken. Picture to yourself, *Nkose*, a tall fine girl – indeed, nearly as tall as myself – as straight as a spear-shaft and as strong and firm as a yellow-wood tree, with large and rounded limbs, and a face all sparkling with intelligence and mirth. She was rather light-coloured, though, and we Zulus, *Nkose*, prefer our women very black.

“Perhaps it was of you I was thinking, Nangeza,” I answered. ‘Is not that enough to produce heavy thoughts?’

“*Yau!*” she cried. ‘It may be that there are those who think the reverse. *They* do not feel heavy when their thoughts are of me.’

“But they are *amakehla* (Head-ringed men, and privileged to marry). Any one of them has only to send in enough cattle and you are his. Now look at me. I am young. It may be half a lifetime before the King allows me to *tunga*. Wherefore, when I think of you I feel heavy, Nangeza, for this is not the first time I have looked upon you.’

“I know that, son of Ntelani,” she answered, looking shy. Then all of a sudden she came and sat down beside me. ‘Listen, Untúswa,’ she said, throwing an arm round my neck. ‘You are but an *umfane*, but I have loved you for some time unknown to you, for you are so strong and brave. And are you not the King’s chief runner? Now, put your ear to my lips while I whisper. Well, then, it is breathed among the old men that Umzilikazi intends to relax the severe laws of the Great Great One whose land we have left (Tshaka), and to allow his warriors to *tunga* while young – when we gain the land wherein we are to dwell. Now, Untúswa, if any man can win this privilege, it is yourself, for you are as brave as any, and, for the rest, you are the King’s chief runner, and have very much the ear of the King.’

“This struck me as a good omen, coming as it did so close upon the King’s promise. I looked upon Nangeza’s splendid form, for, of course, she wore nothing but the girl’s *mútya*, or little apron of beads, and thought that to make her mine but for a little while, I would pay the sure and certain penalty – viz., death; but then the penalty would be suffered by her, too. Should I tell her of the King’s promise? Wisdom said ‘No’; but then my brain was reeling with love for her, and my evil spirit whispered that a woman’s brain and wit are subtle, and might devise a plan where I failed to see one. So I told her of the King’s promise; and having done so, my good spirit cried out upon me for a fool, for a secret which is shared by a woman – might it not as well be cried aloud from kraal to kraal from sunrise to sunset?

“My news, however, caused Nangeza to clap her hands delightedly.

“You are indeed a man, Untúswa!” she cried. ‘Keep well within the favour of the King. One day you will be an *induna*. Who knows? One day you may command the whole army in battle.’

“Why not propose that one day I may reign as King?” I said banteringly. ‘The one is as likely as the other.’

“Well, what then? Even that may be,” was her cool reply. ‘A man who is brave and cautious may climb to any height; and did not the King promise you his dark-handled assegai? What is the history of Umzilikazi himself?’

“Speak low, girl, or speak not of these things at all,” I whispered warningly. ‘One word of such talk falling upon other ears would certainly cost both of us our lives.’

“But, in truth, I was amazed, bewildered, the while more in love with her than ever, on account of this bold and scheming talk.

“What, then?” she answered. ‘The King may have us killed, but he cannot prevent us from loving each other. Come now, Untúswa, and let us love each other while we may.’

“*Au, Nkose*, who shall put grey hair upon – a cool brain into – a young head? The place was lonely, and my good dog would keep watch. And so Nangeza and I loved each other, and not until darkness had fallen did we separate from each other’s arms and wend by different ways back to the camp.

“But we had both incurred the death penalty. For the stern and rigorous law of Tshaka had as yet undergone no relaxation, and even Umzilikazi himself would hardly have dared to pardon a breach thereof. Yet, such is the hot-blooded rashness of youth, this, though the first, was destined to be by no means the last time we should incur that awful penalty.”

Chapter Three.

The Basutu Kraals

“Shortly after this an *impi* was sent out against some strong Basutu kraals which lay in our path, and whose inhabitants, our scouts had reported, were arming for resistance. Little they knew that they had to contend against a whole nation. They imagined, doubtless, that they only had to deal with a small *impi* of Tshaka’s which had crossed the Ewahlamba range.

“Go now, Untúswa,’ said the King. ‘Here, it may be, you may win your head-ring.’

“And this, *Nkose*, was in my mind. So we set forth, about fifteen hundred strong, for the King would not send too large a force, in order to keep us in practice for real hand-to-hand fighting on something like even terms. Masipele was our head *induna*, and under him was Gungana, a man of whom I was not over-fond, nor did he like me, whom he deemed was ever too near the ear of the King.

“We started at dawn, and after marching about a quarter of a day, came in sight of the Basutu kraals, standing upon an open plain, beneath a low, round-topped range of hills. There were three of these kraals, but it was in the largest that all the fighting men had gathered. This was surrounded by a very high and very broad stockade, composed of dry thorn boughs beaten together and interlaced. We made no attempt at concealment, but advanced singing our great battle-song of victory or death. Their Masipele gave orders to form in crescent formation, and to charge forward to surround the kraal.

“*Whau!* that day! The Basutu did not run away when they spied our approach. They were ready for us, and, clustering as thick as bees, they fought behind their stockade with all the valour we could wish. Roaring like lions, we sprang again to the charge, only to be met by their ready spears and battle-axes on the other side of the stockade, and before we could leap over and return stab for stab we were hurled back blinded by great prickly boughs thrust into our faces. They were nearly as numerous as ourselves, and fought as desperately. Twice we were repulsed, and that, to us Zulus, represents more than half a defeat. Our head *induna* was killed, falling upon a heap of corpses, the bodies of those he was leading. One horn of the *impi* was wavering on the verge of rout. Here was my chance; for I had formed a plan.

“Follow me, soldiers of the King!’ I cried. ‘I will find a road in!’

“Measuring the distance with my eyes, I ran and leaped. I could leap in those days as well as run. My leap carried me clear over the stockade, right into the thick of the swarming Basutu. But I was alone. None had followed.

“Then I saw red. How I cut and slashed with the strong, broad – bladed assegai in my hand! Grinning, furious faces hemmed me in; a bright forest of blades struck and hacked at me from every side. I could feel the burning sear of wounds, the stunning shock of knob-kerries on my great war-shield. I could feel more – I could feel blood, that of my enemies; I could feel the keen blade of my assegai shearing through them, as they fell one upon another. Ah, the madness of it! The ecstasy of it! What a glorious form of death was this! I, alone, beset by foes – felling them around me like trees! I, alone, where none had dared follow! Ha! surely no braver deed was ever done! The King would be satisfied now! Dancing, leaping, thrusting, parrying, I hewed my way through the encompassing crowd, further and further into the kraal, further and further to death. But for death I cared nothing now, and I laughed aloud. My furious war-shout was answered by my comrades outside. Ah, but – they were still outside!

“Now my end would be gained. A curl of blue smoke arose from above the lines of huts, and towards this I was making, surely, craftily, cunningly. I had left off fighting now, and was dodging my enemies round and among the huts. Ha! they could not overtake me, for had they not to do with the King’s chief runner? – and there were none to stop me, for all were engaged in defending the stockade.

“The fire at last! It burned bright and clear in front of a larger hut than the rest, and round it sat a ring of witch-doctresses mumbling incantations. So intent were they upon this that I drove my assegai through the nearest before they discovered that a Zulu warrior was in their very midst. *Au!* the she-cats! What a yell they gave as they flung themselves on the ground and screeched for mercy! But I laughed, and, having speared two more of them as they lay there, I snatched the flaming brands from the fire and flung them upon the thatch of half a dozen of the nearest huts, which in an instant were a mass of flame and smoke.

“All this had taken but a moment of time, and now, as my pursuers came up, I shovelled as much of the fire upon my shield as I had time to do, then started to run, dodging them round the huts as before. As I came to the stockade again, those defending it looked round, and seeing a strange figure bearing fire upon a shield, must have taken me in the fray for one of their own witch-doctresses, and instead of attacking me they waited to see what I would do. But they had not long to wait.

“Darting through them, I poured the whole glowing burning mass into the stockade; and, indeed, it was high time, for my shield was nearly charred through. The thick thorn-fence was as dry as months of uninterrupted sunshine could make it. It caught at once, shooting out into myriads of serpentine tongues of fire. *Hau!* It roared, it crackled, and already the flames from the huts I had first set on fire were darting like lightning from thatch to thatch!

“I return, men of the King!” I roared, fearing to be mistaken for one of the Basutu and speared as I leaped back over the stockade. A shout of recognition greeted my words, and, striking right and left, I plunged through the now flaming fence, through the fire itself.

“Now we have them!” I cried, as I once more found myself among my own people. ‘A pretty blaze! Now have we smoked the game from its cover!’

“As the words left my lips there burst forth a wild shrieking and yelling. The wind had fanned the flames so that the kraal was now one mass of red fire and whirling smoke-clouds. The women and children, panic-stricken, were fleeing wildly, rushing headlong upon our spears. But just then the fighting Basutu, massing into a body, charged furiously out of the kraal on the side I was attacking. With their heads lowered, emitting from their teeth a succession of the most shrill and strident whistles, striking to right and to left with their assegais and battle-axes, on they came. Not even the King’s troops could have charged more impetuously, more unswervingly. *Whau!* In a moment they were in our midst. In a moment we had closed up around them. Their whole fighting strength was here, and we had hemmed it in. In a moment they were all broken up into furious struggling groups – and how they fought, how we fought! It was silence then. No man spoke – no man shouted. You could hear only the gasp of laboured breathing, the stamp of striving feet, the jarring crash of shields and weapons, the dull thump of a falling body, the crackling roar of the blazing kraal, whence clouds of smoke were floating across our faces and blinding our eyes so that we could hardly see each other, and struck and stabbed wildly at random, to the peril of friend as well as of foe. But it could not last – we were too many, too invincible. We stood stupidly staring at each other, swaying, tottering with exhaustion and excitement, for the fray had been fierce. Before, around us, lay heaps of weltering corpses, hacked and battered, the blood welling from scores of spear-stabs. These we ripped according to our custom; those of the enemy, that is; for of our own warriors there were also heaps of slain; indeed, the Basutu had fought like cornered lions. No prayer for mercy was upon their lips. Brave, fierce, defiant to the last, they had fallen.

“And now above the crackling roar of the flames and the wild, fierce, triumphant shout which swelled to the heavens from our victorious throats came the doleful shrieking of women, who saw their little ones speared or flung into the flames, who themselves lay beneath the sharp kiss of the spear-blade; for we Zulus, when we see red, spare no living thing. And we saw red that day – ah, yes, we saw red. Ha! By the time a man could have counted fifty from the moment the fighting had ceased not one who had inhabited that kraal, even to the last dog, was left alive.

“*Hau!*” cried Gungana, the second *induna* in command of our *impi*, as he stood gazing upon a heap of the slaughtered women, among whom were several who were young and pleasant to look upon. ‘*Hau!* I think we have made too much of a mouthful of the King’s enemies. Now, some of these would have been better alive than dead, for of girls among us we have none too many. It is a pity we did not save some.’

“Perhaps so,’ said I. ‘But, deferring to your head-ring, O Gungana, I seem to have heard the King say he liked not these intermarriages, and the mingling of the blood of the Amazulu, “the People of the Heavens,” with that of inferior races.’

“I fancied that Gungana looked at me somewhat askance, and a queer smile played about his bearded lips. He was that same *induna* who had come over to us with Tshaka’s force, and him our King had promoted to great honour.

“*Whau*, Untúswa! Thou art but a boy, and claimest to know over-much of the King’s mind,’ he said.

“In fear I do so, my father,’ I replied deferentially. ‘I ask nothing but such a fight as we have had to-day. And have I not fought?’ showing my hacked and charred shield and my body streaming with blood from several ugly gashes. ‘Did I not put in the fire that smoked these wolves out of their den? And now, O my father, will you not whisper it in the ear of the King that the son of Ntelani, although but a boy, can fight, can plan?’

“It may be that I will do so, Untúswa,’ he answered.

“But that strange look was still upon his face as he turned away, and I liked it not. For by this time my continual presence about the King was looked upon with distrust by many of the *indunas*. Even my father was jealous of me, and this being so, wherefore should Gungana look upon me with more favourable eyes? But it was in his power to speak the word which should obtain for me my head-ring, or not to speak it, wherefore I treated him almost as deferentially as I would the King himself. Moreover, I flattered him.

“*Au!*” I cried, ‘am I not but a thoughtless boy? Who am I that I should boast of my own deeds in the presence of an *induna* of the King, before the brain which thought for the *impi*, before the eyes which were the sight of the *impi*? Let it be but whispered in the King’s ear that the son of Ntelani was near the right hand of Gungana throughout the battle. That will be distinction enough.’

“This told. The *induna* turned half round to listen, and a different expression came into his face. This time he looked pleased.

“Rest easy, son of Ntelani,’ he said. ‘The man *whom I sent* to set fire to the kraal will not be forgotten.’

“We Zulus are not like you white people, *Nkose*, whose faces are to be read like a white man reads a book, else had I been quite undone that day. For the idea of setting the kraal on fire had been entirely my own – planned by me, carried out by me alone; that, too, only in time to save us from defeat, which would have meant ruin to Gungana, if not death. And now he coolly gave me to understand that all the credit of it, the generalship of it, was to belong to him. This I had thought was the feat which should win me honour among the people, and my head-ring at the approving word of the King, and now it was all to go to the credit of my commander. I could hardly keep my face from speaking the wrath and disgust I felt – yet I did so, and called out that Gungana was my father, and as his child I had been privileged to do his bidding. For although it flashed upon me that if ever a day of reckoning should come Gungana would fare badly at my hands, yet now I wanted his good word; wherefore I flattered him.

“Just then my eye was attracted by a movement among a heap of bodies lying piled up near me. I thought I heard a smothered groan. Then all the wolf-nature of my warrior blood sprang up within me. Here, then, was something more to slay. Good! With kindling eyes I gripped anew my broad assegai and leaped to the group of bodies. Yes; it was a groan. A pair of legs was protruding from the pile and feebly moving. Seizing them by the ankles, I tugged with all my might.

“Come forth,’ I growled, for I was holding my assegai in my mouth to leave both hands free. ‘Come forth, and taste blade over again. Ha! killing is the only thing good to live for, after all. Come forth!’

“Jerking out these words, I threw the corpses aside as one might throw faggots from a stack of firewood. Then another tug, and I found I was holding by the legs the body of an old man, wrinkled and white-bearded. Beyond a gash or two in the chest, he seemed unwounded, but his head was covered with blood. Clearly, a blow had felled him, but how was he still alive, how had he escaped being ripped, as is our custom?

“‘Ha! I will make that good,’ I muttered savagely, seizing my assegai with that intent.

“But something in the old man’s aspect arrested my arm.

“He was, as I have said, very wrinkled and white-bearded. But his eyes – ah, such eyes! bright, keen, glittering – they were the eyes of a youth who, shoulder to shoulder with his fellow-warriors, is sweeping down upon his first enemy, instead of the filmy orbs of an old man who is tired of looking on this world. They seemed to burn, to pierce through me, to wither up all the strength of my right arm. I could not strike the spear down into his vitals; I could not remove my gaze from his. It was terrible! If his eyes burned like this while he was weak and wounded, and almost lifeless, what would they be like in the full vigour of health? And then I saw that his neck and body were hung with trappings and charms such as the *izanusi* (Witch-doctors) use.

“Strike and slay me, if thou wilt, son of the King’s *induna*,’ he said, and his eyes seemed to glitter more fiercely, like those of a snake. ‘But if so, thou shalt never attain thy dearest desire.’

“Son of the King’s *induna*,’ he had said. This was *tagati* (Wizardry) indeed. How did he know my estate?

“And what desire I the most at this moment?’ said I.

“The head-ring,’ he whispered.

“All young warriors desire that,’ I answered with a laugh. ‘Tell me, O my father, if thy *múti* is strong enough, what desire I further, together with the *isicoco*?’

“The dark-handled assegai of the King,’ he answered, without a moment’s pause.

“‘Whau!’ I cried, bringing my hand to my mouth, and starting back in staring, open-mouthed amazement. This was more than marvellous. The promise which Umzilikazi had made to me, half laughingly, when we two were alone together, was known to this old sorcerer of an alien race, who must have been many days distant at the time. Nor, of course, had he ever seen Nangeza, who alone shared the secret. My desire for the head-ring proved nothing as to his wonder-working powers, because, as I had said, all young men wished for that. But this! In truth it was more than marvellous!

“Thy *múti* is indeed strong, O my father!’ I went on when I had recovered a little. ‘But say – shall I obtain that which I desire?’

“If I die here thou shalt never obtain it. If I live thou shalt have the King’s dark-handled assegai.’

“Now, while I had been talking with this wonderful old man, my comrades and the bulk of our *impi* had been seated on the ground resting after the violence and fury of the fight. Some, too, had wounds to attend to; but all were sitting or lying about resting, and the place where I now stood being a little depression in the ground, they had not noticed me. Now, however, attracted by the sound of voices, several of them came swaggering up.

“Ha, Untúswa!’ roared the foremost. ‘You have found more meat to kill. Come, we will help you kill it.’ And, poisoning his assegai, he sprang forward to the old Mosutu witch-doctor.

(Mosutu and Basutu. Basutu is a plural word, and denotes the tribe, or more than one member of it. The singular is Mosutu.)

“Stand! Stand back!’ I thundered. ‘This is not a man to kill. He must be taken to the King.’

“To the King! Ha, ha! The King does not want to see the faces of such withered old images. You are mad, Untúswa.’

“Mad or sane, this man shall be taken to the King,’ I answered.

“Ha! Since when has Untúswa, the *umfane* been made an *induna*?” they jeered. ‘Of a truth he believes himself a bigger man than the King.’

(Umfane: “boy,” i.e., technically, one who has not attained to the distinction of the head-ring.)

“And others, drawn by the tumult, had come to join the first, and now the air rang with roars and shouts of derision. But above them all the old man’s marvellously prophetic words still echoed in my ears. At all risks I was determined to save him.

“Who is the most about the King, O pack of fools?” I cried. ‘Yourself or I? Know, then, that the Elephant, whose tread shaketh the world, has heard much of these Basutu *izanusi*, who learn their magic in dark caves of the mountains – has often wished to converse with them and test their skill. Here is one of them at last, and go to the King he shall. I would not give much for the life of the man who slays him.’

“Standing over the old witch-doctor with my assegai in my hand confronting that riotous, roaring crowd, flushed with victory and bloodshed, I know not how things might have gone even then. But at that moment the *induna* Gungana, attracted by the tumult, himself drew near, and that in time to catch my last words.

“Give way!” he said, striding through the group – ‘give way! What is this? An *isanusi*, and alive? By the head-ring of the Great Great One from whose rule we have gone out, but he must have brought himself to life again, for assuredly all were slain but a moment before. Ha! that is well. Now shall the King have his oft-expressed wish. He shall behold this Mosutu rain-maker, and test his magic. What – is that you, Untúswa?’

“Now, it happened that Umzilikazi had expressed no such wish. In my despair of finding a plea, I had invented this as a reason for sparing the old magician. I could see now that Gungana’s design was to supplant me in this, even as he had done in my plan for overmastering the Basutu kraal. If sparing the life of the old witch-doctor proved acceptable to the King, he, Gungana, would get the credit for it; if not – then I laughed to myself, for in that case he would have fallen into his own trap. And if anything should go wrong with the King hereafter, who but Gungana was it who had brought this foreign wizard into our camp? But before I could answer a shout went up from the warriors standing in the background, and all heads were turned accordingly.

“The King! The King is coming!” And the words were taken up by all there present, and, with the phrases of *bonga* flowing thick and fast from our lips, all eyes were turned upon a cloud of dust on the horizon – distant, but drawing nearer and nearer.

“Go now, Untúswa, who art the chief runner. Go now, and meet the Great Great One with word of our victory,’ commanded Gungana.”

Chapter Four. The Tyay'igama Dance

“Hardly had the word left Gungana’s lips than I was up and away. No thought of the witch-doctor was in my mind as I sped over the ground in that long, even trot which I could keep up for days, and eventually overtake a horse which had started at the same time. Of cuts and stabs many were upon me, and I was red and hideous with blood, flowing or dried. But this mattered less than nothing, and I laughed loud and joyously as I coursed along to be the first to bear to the King the news he most loved to hear. Of a truth, the old *isanusi* I had saved from death – if, indeed, I had saved him from death – had gone clean out of my mind. Yet, if I had but known it, that day was to my life what the bent rods are to the roof of a hut.

“Soon I found myself in the midst of the great dust-cloud we had seen, and behind it came herds of cattle spreading over the plain, tended by women and boys of all ages. These were the herds which we had brought out from Zululand, increased by those we had taken from the tribes on our way, and which we were carrying with us to the land where we should be commanded to settle.

“‘Make way!’ I shouted. ‘Make way for the “ears of the King”!’

“Then the women shrieked with excitement, and the boys, rushing in among the cattle with shrill whoops, scattered them out of my way; for the path of the King’s messenger must be straight, and woe to whosoever shall obstruct it. The bellowing and trampling of the cattle mingled with the shouts and cries as I dashed straight on. Then I heard a voice say: —

“‘*Yau!* It is Untúswa! Is he not a man? Is he not a warrior indeed, covered with blood and wounds, and carrying the King’s “word”? Look at him, Sitele!’

“I knew the voice, still I could not refrain from turning my head ever so slightly as I ran. Close to my path I beheld Nangeza, looking so tall and fine and straight, standing there with her little sister. *Whau, Nkose!* I would have gone against those Basutu kraals again single-handed to have been allowed to *tunga* with her for a wife.

“Then came another cloud of dust, and the steady tramp of marching feet, and the hum of deep-toned voices; then a wavy shimmer of spear-points, like the sunshine on the blue sea. Spread out over the plain in four dense black columns the regiments marched, and as I, looking neither to the right nor to the left, sped between these, the confused wonder which had greeted my first appearance was succeeded by a dead expectant silence.

“Umzilikazi was riding on horseback near the rear of the army, surrounded by a group of *indunas*, among whom was my father. A circle of *izanusis*, clad in cow-tails and entrails and all the hideous paraphernalia of their order, preceded the King, dancing and waving green boughs as they chanted his praises, and the swift and sudden destruction which even then was falling upon his enemies. As I drew near the doctors scattered out of my path like a lot of frightened jackals, for even they must give way before him who bears the King’s message. Casting my shield and assegais to the ground where their circle had been – for no man may approach armed to have speech with the King – I advanced ten paces nearer, and, halting, raised my right hand and shouted a sonorous *Bayéte!* Then I prostrated myself to the earth.

“‘Rise, son of Ntelani,’ said the King, as soon as the thunder of the salute royal, which had been immediately caught up and re-echoed by the whole army, had ceased. ‘Rise, and speak thy word.’

“‘Those against whom we went forth are removed from the path of the King!’ I cried out in a loud voice. ‘The smoke of their dwellings is rising to the heavens yonder. The path of the King is straight!’

“An immense chorus of *bonga* went up from the army when I had spoken. All were eager to arrive at the scene of the victory. Then the King bade me withdraw, which I was not sorry to do, for I was tired and fasting.

“You may have observed, *Nkose*, that my news was of victory alone; that no questions were asked as to our losses, who had been killed or who had not. It is not the custom of us Zulus, on these occasions, to mix up good and ill news. It was sufficient that the King's enemies were stamped out. The relatives of the slain could hold ceremonies of mourning afterwards if they wished, but that was a private undertaking. Wherefore I only announced to the ears of the nation at large that we were victorious.

“And then, as we drew near to the scene of our fierce and bloody conflict, what remained of the *impi* which had gone out against the Basutu kraals drew near to hail the King. It had gone out a full regiment – as we were in those days about fifteen hundred men – but little more than half were left alive; for, as I have said, the Basutu were numerous, and had fought bravely. Still, as our warriors advanced in a column with waving plumes, and beating time with shield and assegai to the thunder of a mighty war-song, and the marks of the recent battle upon them, my heart swelled within me as I thought that I had borne a man's part that day with these.

“Go forward, Untúswa,’ said the King, who had caught sight of me in the ranks. ‘Go forward and join the fighters, you who have fought so well this day. Your place is among them.’

“I thundered out the royal praises, and darted forth to meet those who were approaching; and falling into my place, we advanced, singing:

“Hail, King, Father of a new nation!
We, thy children, have smoothed a way before thee.
Thine enemies – where are they?
Their dwellings – where are they?
As the smoke which climbeth to heaven
their might is broken and shattered.
Might? Ha! ha! No might had these;
like blades of the grass when trampled,
Down went their bravest before the might of the Elephant,
Beneath the foot of the Elephant, whose tread shaketh the world.
Hail, King! Father! the chief and the maker of nations!’

“Thus sang the warriors, their voices roaring like the thunder of the heavens. Then, having prostrated ourselves, we rose, and wheeling up we fell into rank before the whole army escorting the King, and the march was continued until we were some distance beyond the smoking ruins of the Basutu kraals, for we might not halt upon the site of the battle, lest those who had borne no part in shedding it might be denied by the blood that had flowed. Here our vast camp was pitched, and by the light of hundreds of fires we who had fought, having gone through the ceremony of purification at the hands of the *izanus*, were paraded before the King in full war array, and such of us as could establish a claim were allowed to perform the *Tyayigama*, or the ‘calling by name,’ dance.

“This custom, you must know, *Nkose*, is one which consists of warriors who have performed deeds of distinction during the recent battle being pointed at by their commanders and called forward out of the ranks to dance before the King, while narrating their claims to notice for especial valour – who they have killed and how it has been done. They dance and leap with a quickness and to a height that would astonish you white people, springing from the earth more than their own height in the air, clashing their shields with both feet while leaping, and so on – the while telling of their deeds. It is arranged with the *indunas* in command as to who shall be allowed so to claim notice, and Gungana had readily accorded me a first place.

“Ha! that night! It was a sight to live in a man’s memory. By the red light of a thousand huge fires there was assembled the whole might of a nation, of a new nation, of a nation of warriors. The King sat in the midst of his *indunas*, an open space before him. On either side stretched a monster crescent of armed men, the glint of their spears, the sheen of their great hide shields, flickering in the wavy glow. Up the middle of this space our *impi* advanced, singing a battle-song, even the war-song of Umzilikazi:

“Yaingahlabi leyo’nkunzi!

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