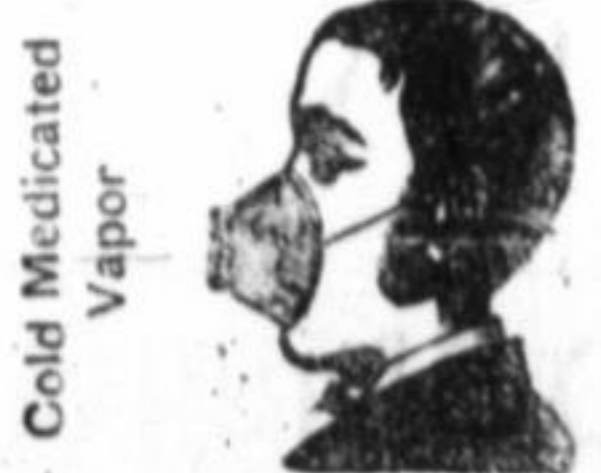


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CHAPTER XXII.—HOW UMSLOPOGAAS HELD THE STAIR.

We looked one at another. "Thou seest," I said, "they have taken away the door. Is there ought with which we may fill the place? Speak quickly, for they will be on us ere the daylight." I spoke thus, because I knew that we must hold this place or none, as there were no inner doors in the palace, the rooms being separated one from another by curtains. I also knew that if we could by any means defend this doorway the murderers could get in nowhere else, for the palace is almost impregnable, that is, since the secret door by which Sraias had entered on that memorable night of attempted murder had, by Nyleptha's order, been closed up with masonry.

"I have it," said Nyleptha, who, as usual, with her, rose to the emergency in a wonderful way. "On the further side of the courtyard are blocks of cut marble—the workmen brought them there for the bed of the new statue of Incubus, my lord; let us block the door with them."

I jumped at the idea, and having dispatched one of the remaining maidens down the great stair to see if she could obtain assistance from the docks below, where her father, who was a great merchant employing many men, had his dwelling-place, and set another to watch through the doorway, we made our way back across the courtyard to where the worn marble lay, and here we met Kara returning from despatching the first two messengers. There were the marble blocks, sure enough, broad, massive lumps, some six inches thick, and weighing about eighty pounds each, and there, too, were a couple of implements like small stretchers, that the workmen used to carry them on.

Without delay we got some of the blocks on the stretchers, and four of the girls carried them to the doorway. "Listen, Macumazah," said Umslopogass, "if these low fellows come, it is I who will hold the stair against them till the door is built up. Nay, nay, it will be a man's death, gainsay me not, old friend. It has been a good day, let it now be good night. See, I throw myself down to rest on the marble there; when their footsteps are nigh, wake thou me, not before, for I need my strength." And without a word he went outside and flung himself down on the marble, and was instantly asleep.

At this time I too was overcome, and was forced to sit down by the doorway, and content myself with directing operations. The girls brought the blocks, while Kara and Nyleptha built them up across the six-foot-wide doorway, a triple row of them, for less would be useless. But the marble had to be brought forty yards, and then there were forty yards to run back, and though the girls labored gloriously, even staggering along alone, each with a block in her arms, it was slow work, dreadfully slow.

The light was growing now, and presently, in the silence, we heard a commotion at the far-off bottom of the stair, and the faint clanking of armed men. As yet the wall was only two feet high, and we had been eight minutes at the building of it. So they had come. Alphonse had heard aught.

The clanking sound came nearer, and in the ghostly gray of the dawn we could make out long files of men, some fifty or so in all, slowly creeping up the stair. They were now at the half-way standing place that rested on the great flying arch; and here, perceiving that something was going on above, they, to our great gain, halted for three or four minutes and consulted, then slowly and cautiously advanced again.

We had been nearly a quarter of an hour at the work now, and it was almost three feet high. Then I awoke Umslopogass. The great man rose, stretched himself, and swung Inkosikaasi around his head.

"It is well," he said. "I feel as a young man once more. My strength has come back to me, ay, even as a lamp flares up before it dies. Fear not, I shall fight a good fight; the wine and the sleep have put a new heart into me. "Macumazah, I have dreamed a dream. I dreamed that thou and I stood together on a star, and looked down on the world, and thou wast as a spirit, Macumazah, for light flamed through thy flesh, but I could not see what was the fashion of mine own face. The hour has come for us, old hunter. So be it we have had our time, but I would that in it I had seen some more such fights as yesterday's."

"Let them bury me after the fashion of my people, Macumazah, and set my eyes toward Zululand," and he took my hand and shook it, and then turned to face the advancing foe.

Just then, to my astonishment, the Zulu officer, Kara, clambered over our improvised wall in his quiet, determined sort of way, and took his stand by the Zulu, unsheathing his sword as he did so. "What, comest thou, too?" I cried out to the old warrior. "Welcome—a welcome to thee, brave heart! Ow! for the man who can die like a man; ow! for the death grip and the ringing of steel. Ow! we are ready. We wet our beaks like eagles, our spears flash in the sun; we shake our assegais, and are hungry to fight. Who comes to give greeting to the Chieftainess (Inkosikaasi)? Who would taste her kiss, whereof the fruit is death? I, the Woodpecker; I, the Slaughterer; I, the Swift-footed! I, Umslopogass! of the tribe of the Maquillisini, of the people of Amazulu, a captain of the regiment of the Nkomabakosi; I, Umslopogass, the son of Indabazimbi, the son of Arpi, the son of Mosilikatze; I, of the royal blood of Tchaka, I, of the King's House, I, the Ringed Man, I, the Induna; I call to them as a buck calls; I challenge them, I await them. Ow! it is thou, it is thou!"

As he spoke, or rather chanted, his wild war-song, the armed men, among whom in the growing light I recognized both Nasta and Agon, came streaming up the stair with a rush, and one big fellow, armed with a heavy spear, dashed up the ten semi-circular steps ahead of his comrades and struck at the great Zulu with his spear. Umslopogass moved his body but not his legs, so that the blow missed him, and the next instant Inkosikaasi crashed through headpiece, hair and skull, and the man's corpse was rattling down the steps. As he dropped, his round hippopotamus-hide shield fell from his hand on the marble, and the Zulu stooped down and seized it, still chanting as he did so.

In another second the sturdy Kara had also slain a man, and then began a scene the like of which has not been known to me.

Up rushed the assailants, one, two, three at a time, and as fast as they came, the ax crashed and the sword swung, and down they rolled again, dead or dying. And over as the fight thickened, the old Zulu of mine seemed to get quicker and his arm stronger. He shouted out his war-cries and the names of chiefs whom he had slain, and the blows of his awful ax rained straight and true, shearing through everything they fell on. There was none of the scientific method he was so fond of about this last immortal fight of his; he had no time for it, but struck with his full strength and at every stroke a man sank in his tracks, and went rattling down the marble steps.

They hacked and hewed at him with swords and spears, wounding him in a dozen places till he streamed red with blood; but the shield protected his head and the chain-shirt his vitals, and for minute after minute, aided by the gallant Zulu, he still held the stair.

Continued on page seven.

Montreal Announcements.

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Lighting Russian Railway Cars. The Russian minister of railways has appointed a commission to select a method of lighting railway cars with electricity, and all the principal companies will hereafter be compelled to use the light on passenger trains. The South Russian railway has for some time used the electric light on all its fast trains from Odessa to Kiev, and the czar's special trains have been so lighted for a long time.—Chicago Times. W. J. DICK & SON. Have opened their NEW STORE (at the Old Stand), showing a large stock of Boots, Shoes, Trunks, Valises, Bags and Satchels of every description from the best houses in the Dominion, including the Superior Manufacturers of J. D. King & Co., J. & T. Bell, Cooper & Smith, H. E. Clarke & Co., and other reliable firms.

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