

CHAPTER IV

THE VISION

Was it swoon or sleep?

At least it seemed to Owen that presently once again he was gazing into the dense intolerable blackness of the night. Then a marvel came to pass, for the blackness opened, or rather on it, framed and surrounded by it, there appeared a vision. It was the vision of a native town, having a great bare space in the centre of it encircled by hundreds or thousands of huts. But there was no one stirring about the huts, for it was night--not this his night of trial indeed, since now the sky was strewn with innumerable stars. Everything was silent about that town, save that now and again a dog barked or a fretful child wailed within a hut, or the sentries as they passed saluted each other in the name of the king.

Among all those hundreds of huts, to Owen it seemed that his attention was directed to one which stood apart surrounded with a fence. Now the interior of the hut opened itself to him. It was not lighted, yet with his spirit sense he could see its every detail: the polished floor, the skin rugs, the beer gourds, the shields and spears, the roof-tree of red wood, and the dried lizard hanging from the thatch, a charm to ward off evil. In this hut, seated face to face halfway between the centre-post and the door-hole, were two men. The darkness was deep about them, and

they whispered to each other through it; but in his dream this was no bar to Owen's sight. He could discern their faces clearly.

One of them was that of a man of about thirty-five years of age. In stature he was almost a giant. He wore a kaross of leopard skins, and on his wrists and ankles were rings of ivory, the royal ornaments. His face was fierce and powerful; his eyes, which were set far apart, rolled so much that at times they seemed all white; and his fingers played nervously with the handle of a spear that he carried in his right hand. His companion was of a different stamp; a person of more than fifty years, he was tall and spare in figure, with delicately shaped hands and feet. His hair and little beard were tinged with grey, his face was strikingly handsome, nervous and expressive, and his forehead both broad and high. But more remarkable still were his eyes, which shone with a piercing brightness, almost grey in colour, steady as the flame of a well-trimmed lamp, and so cold that they might have been precious stones set in the head of a statue.

"Must I then put your thoughts in words?" said this man in a clear quick whisper. "Well, so be it; for I weary of sitting here in the dark waiting for water that will not flow. Listen, Prince; you come to talk to me of the death of a king--is it not so? Nay do not start. Why are you affrighted when you hear upon the lips of another the plot that these many months has been familiar to your breast?"

"Truly, Hokosa, you are the best of wizards, or the worst," answered

the great man huskily. "Yet this once you are mistaken," he added with a change of voice. "I came but to ask you for a charm to turn my father's heart----"

"To dust? Prince, if I am mistaken, why am I the best of wizards, or the worst, and why did your jaw drop and your face change at my words, and why do you even now touch your dry lips with your tongue? Yes, I know that it is dark here, yet some can see in it, and I am one of them. Ay, Prince, and I can see your mind also. You would be rid of your father: he has lived too long. Moreover his love turns to Nodwengo, the good and gentle; and perhaps--who can say?--it is even in his thought, when all his regiments are about him two days hence, to declare that you, Prince, are deposed, and that your brother, Nodwengo, shall be king in your stead. Now, Nodwengo you cannot kill; he is too well loved and too well guarded. If he died suddenly, his dead lips would call out 'Murder!' in the ears of all men; and, Prince, all eyes would turn to you, who alone could profit by his end. But if the king should chance to die--why he is old, is he not? and such things happen to the old. Also he grows feeble, and will not suffer the regiments to be doctored for war, although day by day they clamour to be led to battle; for he seeks to end his years in peace."

"I say that you speak folly," answered the prince with vehemence.

"Then, Son of the Great One, why should you waste time in listening to me? Farewell, Hafela the Prince, first-born of the king, who in a day to

come shall carry the shield of Nodwengo; for he is good and gentle, and will spare your life--if I beg it of him."

Hafela stretched out his hand through the darkness, and caught Hokosa by the wrist.

"Stay," he whispered, "it is true. The king must die; for if he does not die within three days, I shall cease to be his heir. I know it through my spies. He is angry with me; he hates me, and he loves Nodwengo and the mother of Nodwengo. But if he dies before the last day of the festival, then that decree will never pass his lips, and the regiments will never roar out the name of Nodwengo as the name of the king to come. He must die, I tell you, Hokosa, and--by your hand."

"By my hand, Prince! Nay; what have you to offer me in return for such a deed as this? Have I not grown up in Umsuka's shadow, and shall I cut down the tree that shades me?"

"What have I to offer you? This: that next to myself you shall be the greatest in the land, Hokosa."

"That I am already, and whoever rules it, that I must always be. I, who am the chief of wizards; I, the reader of men's hearts; I, the hearer of men's thoughts! I, the lord of the air and the lightning; I, the invulnerable. If you would murder, Prince, then do the deed; do it knowing that I have your secret, and that henceforth you who rule shall

be my servant. Nay, you forget that I can see in the dark; lay down that assegai, or, by my spirit, prince as you are, I will blast you with a spell, and your body shall be thrown to the kites, as that of one who would murder his king and father!"

The prince heard and shook, his cheeks sank in, the muscles of his great form seemed to collapse, and he grovelled on the floor of the hut.

"I know your magic," he groaned; "use it for me, not against me! What is there that I can offer you, who have everything except the throne, whereon you cannot sit, seeing that you are not of the blood-royal?"

"Think," said Hokosa.

For a while the prince thought, till presently his form straightened itself, and with a quick movement he lifted up his head.

"Is it, perchance, my affianced wife?" he whispered; "the lady Noma, whom I love, and who, according to our custom, I shall wed as the queen to be after the feast of first-fruits? Oh! say it not, Hokosa."

"I say it," answered the wizard. "Listen, Prince. The lady Noma is the only child of my blood-brother, my friend, with whom I was brought up, he who was slain at my side in the great war with the tribes of the north. She was my ward: she was more; for through her--ah! you know not how--I held my converse with the things of earth and air, the very

spirits that watch us now in this darkness, Hafela. Thus it happened, that before ever she was a woman, her mind grew greater than the mind of any other woman, and her thought became my thought, and my thought became her thought, for I and no other am her master. Still I waited to wed her till she was fully grown; and while I waited I went upon an embassy to the northern tribes. Then it was that you saw the maid in visiting at my kraal, and her beauty and her wit took hold of you; and in the council of the king, as you have a right to do, you named her as your head wife, the queen to be.

"The king heard and bowed his head; he sent and took her, and placed her in the House of the Royal Women, there to abide till this feast of the first-fruits, when she shall be given to you in marriage. Yes, he sent her to that guarded house wherein not even I may set my foot. Although I was afar, her spirit warned me, and I returned, but too late; for she was sealed to you of the blood-royal, and that is a law which may not be broken.

"Hafela, I prayed you to return her to me, and you mocked me. I would have brought you to your death, but it could not have availed me: for then, by that same law, which may not be broken, she who was sealed to you must die with you; and though thereafter her spirit would sit with me till I died also, it was not enough, since I who have conquered all, yet cannot conquer the fire that wastes my heart, nor cease to long by night and day for a woman who is lost to me. Then it was, Hafela, that I plotted vengeance against you. I threw my spell over the mind of the

king, till he learnt to hate you and your evil deeds; and I, even I, have brought it about that your brother should be preferred before you, and that you shall be the servant in his house. This is the price that you must pay for her of whom you have robbed me; and by my spirit and her spirit you shall pay! Yet listen. Hand back the girl, as you may do--for she is not yet your wife--and choose another for your queen, and I will undo all that I have done, and I will find you a means, Hafela, to carry out your will. Ay, before six suns have set, the regiments rushing past you shall hail you King of the Nation of the Amasuka, Lord of the ancient House of Fire!"

"I cannot," groaned the prince; "death were better than this!"

"Ay, death were better; but you shall not die, you shall live a servant, and your name shall become a mockery, a name for women to make rhymes on."

Now the prince sprang up.

"Take her!" he hissed; "take her! you, who are an evil ghost; you, beneath whose eyes children wail, and at whose passing the hairs on the backs of hounds stand up! Take her, priest of death and ill; but take my curse with her! Ah! I also can prophecy; and I tell you that this woman whom you have taught, this witch of many spells, whose glance can shrivel the hearts of men, shall give you to drink of your own medicine; ay, she shall dog you to the death, and mock you while you perish by an

end of shame!"

"What," laughed the wizard, "have I a rival in my own arts? Nay, Hafela, if you would learn the trade, pay me well and I will give you lessons. Yet I counsel you not; for you are flesh, nothing but flesh, and he who would rule the air must cultivate the spirit. Why, I tell you, Prince, that even the love for her who is my heart, the lady whom we both would wed, partaking of the flesh as, alas! it does, has cost me half my powers. Now let us cease from empty scoldings, and strike our bargain.

"Listen. On the last day of the feast, when all the regiments are gathered to salute the king there in his Great Place according to custom, you shall stand forth before the king and renounce Noma, and she shall pass back to the care of my household. You yourself shall bring her to where I stand, and as I take her from you I will put into your hand a certain powder. Then you shall return to the side of the king, and after our fashion shall give him to drink the bowl of the first-fruits; but as you stir the beer, you will let fall into it that powder which I have given you. The king will drink, and what he leaves undrunk you will throw out upon the dust.

"Now he will rise to give out to the people his royal decree, whereby, Prince, you are to be deposed from your place as heir, and your brother, Nodwengo, is to be set in your seat. But of that decree never a word shall pass his lips; if it does, recall your saying and take back the lady Noma from where she stands beside me. I tell you that never a word

will pass his lips; for even as he rises a stroke shall take him, such a stroke as often falls upon the fat and aged, and he will sink to the ground snoring through his nostrils. For a while thereafter--it may be six hours, it may be twelve--he shall lie insensible, and then a cry will arise that the king is dead!"

"Ay," said Hafela, "and that I have poisoned him!"

"Why, Prince? Few know what is in your father's mind, and with those, being king, you will be able to deal. Also this is the virtue of the poison which I choose, that it is swift, yet the symptoms of it are the symptoms of a natural sickness. But that your safety and mine may be assured, I have made yet another plan, though of this there will be little need. You were present two days since when a runner came from the white man who sojourns beyond our border, he who seeks to teach us, the Children of Fire, a new faith, and gives out that he is the messenger of the King of heaven. This runner asked leave for the white man to visit the Great Place, and, speaking in the king's name, I gave him leave. But I warned his servant that if his master came, a sign should be required of him to show that he was a true man, and had of the wisdom of the King of Heaven; and that if he failed therein, then that he should die as that white liar died who visited us in bygone years.

"Now I have so ordered that this white man, passing through the Valley of Death yonder, shall reach the Great Place not long before the king drinks of the cup of the first-fruits. Then if any think that something

out of nature has happened to the king, they will surely think also that this strange prayer-doctor has wrought the evil. Then also I will call for a sign from the white man, praying of him to recover the king of his sickness; and when he fails, he shall be slain as a worker of spells and the false prophet of a false god, and so we shall be rid of him and his new faith, and you shall be cleared of doubt. Is not the plan good, Prince?"

"It is very good, Hokosa--save for one thing only."

"For what thing?"

"This: the white man who is named Messenger might chance to be a true prophet of a true God, and to recover the king."

"Oho, let him do it, if he can; but to do it, first he must know the poison and its antidote. There is but one, and it is known to me only of all men in this land. When he has done that, then I, yes, even I, Hokosa, will begin to inquire concerning this God of his, who shows Himself so mighty in person of His messenger." And he laughed low and scornfully.

"Prince, farewell! I go forth alone, whither you dare not follow at this hour, to seek that which we shall need. One word--think not to play me false, or to cheat me of my price; for whate'er betides, be sure of this, that hour shall be the hour of your dooming. Hail to you, Son of

the King! Hail! and farewell." Then, removing the door-board, the wizard passed from the hut and was gone.

The vision changed. Now there appeared a valley walled in on either side with sloping cliffs of granite; a desolate place, sandy and, save for a single spring, without water, strewn with boulders of rock, some of them piled fantastically one upon the other. At a certain spot this valley widened out, and in the mouth of the space thus formed, midway between the curved lines of the receding cliffs, stood a little hill or koppie, also built up of boulders. It was a place of death; for all around the hill, and piled in hundreds between the crevices of its stones, lay the white bones of men.

Nor was this all. Its summit was flat, and in the midst of it stood a huge tree. Even had it not been for the fruit which hung from its branches, the aspect of that tree must have struck the beholder as uncanny, even as horrible. The bark on its great bole was leprous white; and from its gaunt and spreading rungs rose branches that subdivided themselves again and again, till at last they terminated in round green fingers, springing from grey, flat slabs of bark, in shape not unlike that of a human palm. Indeed, from a little distance this tree, especially if viewed by moonlight, had the appearance of bearing on it hundreds or thousands of the arms and hands of men, all of them stretched imploringly to Heaven.

Well might they seem to do so, seeing that to its naked limbs hung the bodies of at least twenty human beings who had suffered death by order of the king or his captains, or by the decree of the company of wizards, whereof Hokosa was the chief. There on the Hill of Death stood the Tree of Death; and that in its dank shade, or piled upon the ground beneath it, hung and lay the pitiful remnants of the multitudes who for generations had been led thither to their doom.

Now, in Owen's vision a man was seen approaching by the little pathway that ran up the side of the mount--the Road of Lost Footsteps it was called. It was Hokosa the wizard. Outside the circle of the tree he halted, and drawing a tanned skin from a bundle of medicines which he carried, he tied it about his mouth; for the very smell of that tree is poisonous and must not be suffered to reach the lungs.

Presently he was under the branches, where once again he halted; this time it was to gaze at the body of an old man which swung to and fro in the night breeze.

"Ah! friend," he muttered, "we strove for many years, but it seems that I have conquered at the last. Well, it is just; for if you could have had your way, your end would have been my end."

Then very leisurely, as one who is sure that he will not be interrupted, Hokosa began to climb the tree, till at length some of the green fingers

were within his reach. Resting his back against a bough, one by one he broke off several of them, and averting his face so that the fumes of it might not reach him, he caused the thick milk-white juice that they contained to trickle into the mouth of a little gourd which was hung about his neck by a string. When he had collected enough of the poison and carefully corked the gourd with a plug of wood, he descended the tree again. At the great fork where the main branches sprang from the trunk, he stood a while contemplating a creeping plant which ran up them. It was a plant of naked stem, like the tree it grew upon; and, also like the tree, its leaves consisted of bunches of green spikes having a milky juice.

"Strange," he said aloud, "that Nature should set the bane and the antidote side by side, the one twined about the other. Well, so it is in everything; yes, even in the heart of man. Shall I gather some of this juice also? No; for then I might repent and save him, remembering that he has loved me, and thus lose her I seek, her whom I must win back or be withered. Let the messenger of the King of Heaven save him, if he can. This tree lies on his path; perchance he may prevail upon its dead to tell him of the bane and of the antidote." And once more the wizard laughed mockingly.

The vision passed. At this moment Thomas Owen, recovering from his swoon, lifted his head from the window-place. The night before him was

as black as it had been, and behind him the little American clock was still striking the hour of midnight. Therefore he could not have remained insensible for longer than a few seconds.

A few seconds, yet how much he had seen in them. Truly his want of faith had been reproved--truly he also had been "warned of God in a dream,"--truly "his ears had been opened and his instruction sealed." His soul had been "kept back from the pit," and his life from "perishing by the sword;" and the way of the wicked had been made clear to him "in a dream, in a vision of the night when deep sleep falleth upon men."

Not for nothing had he endured that agony, and not for nothing had he struggled in the grip of doubt.