

CHAPTER V

THE FEAST OF THE FIRST-FRUITS

On the third morning from this night whereof the strange events have been described, an ox-waggon might have been seen outspanned on the hither side of those ranges of hills that were visible from the river.

These mountains, which although not high are very steep, form the outer barrier and defence of the kingdom of the Amasuka. Within five hundred yards of where the waggon stood, however, a sheer cliffed gorge, fire-riven and water-hewn, pierced the range, and looking on it, Owen knew it for the gorge of his dream. Night and day the mouth of it was guarded by a company of armed soldiers, whose huts were built high on outlook places in the mountains, whence their keen eyes could scan the vast expanses of plain. A full day before it reached them, they had seen the white-capped waggon crawling across the veldt, and swift runners had reported its advent to the king at his Great Place.

Back came the word of the king that the white man, with the waggon and his servant, were to be led on towards the Great Place at such speed as would bring him there in time for him to behold the last ceremony of the feast of first-fruits; but, for the present, that the waggon itself and the oxen were to be left at the mouth of the gorge, in charge of a guard, who would be answerable for them.

Now, on this morning the captain of the guard and his orderlies advanced

to the waggon and stood in front of it. They were splendid men, armed with great spears and shields, and adorned with feather head-dresses and all the wild finery of their regiment. Owen descended from the waggon and came to meet them, and so for a few moments they remained, face to face, in silence. A strange contrast they presented as they stood there; the bare-headed white man frail, delicate, spiritual of countenance, and the warriors great, grave, powerful, a very embodiment of the essence of untamed humanity, an incarnate presentation of the spirit of savage warfare.

"How are you named, White Man?" asked the captain.

"Chief, I am named Messenger."

"The peace of the king be with you, Messenger," said the captain, lifting his spear.

"The peace of God be with you, Chief," answered Owen, holding up his hands in blessing.

"Who is God?" asked the captain.

"Chief, He is the King I serve, and His word is between my lips."

"Then pass on, Messenger of God, and deliver the word of God your King into the ears of my king, at his Great Place yonder. Pass on riding the

beast you have brought with you, for the way is rough; but your waggon, your oxen, and your servants, save this man only who is of the Children of Fire, must stay here in my keeping. Fear not, Messenger, I will hold them safe."

"I do not fear, Chief, there is honour in your eyes."

Some hours later, Owen, mounted on his mule, was riding through the gorge, a guard in front of and behind him, and with them carriers who had been sent to bear his baggage. At his side walked his disciple John, and his face was sad.

"Why are you still afraid?" asked Owen.

"Ah! father, because this is a place of fear. Here in this valley men are led to die; presently you will see."

"I have seen," answered Owen. "Yonder where we shall halt is a mount, and on that mount stands a tree; it is called the Tree of Death, and it stretches a thousand hands to Heaven, praying for mercy that does not come, and from its boughs there hangs fruit, a fruit of dead men--yes, twenty of them hang there this day."

"How know you these things, my father," asked the man amazed, "seeing

that I have never spoken to you of them?"

"Nay," he answered, "God has spoken to me. My God and your God."

Another hour passed, and they were resting by the spring of water, near to the shadow of the dreadful tree, for in that gorge the sun burned fiercely. John counted the bodies that swung upon it, and again looked fearfully at Owen, for there were twenty of them.

"I desire to go up to that tree," Owen said to the guard.

"As you will, Messenger," answered their leader; "I have no orders to prevent you from so doing. Still," he added with a solemn smile, "it is a place that few seek of their own will, and, because I like you well, Messenger, I pray it may never be my duty to lead you there of the king's will."

Then Owen went up to the tree and John with him, only John would not pass beneath the shadow of its branches; but stood by wondering, while his master bound a handkerchief about his mouth.

"How did he know that the breath of the tree is poisonous?" John wondered.

Owen walked to the bole of the tree, and breaking off some of the finger-like leaves of the creeper that twined about it, he pressed

their milky juice into a little bottle that he had made ready. Then he returned quickly, for the sights and odours of the place were not to be borne.

Outside the circle of the branches he halted, and removed the handkerchief from his mouth.

"Be of good cheer," he said to John, "and if it should chance that I am called away before my words come true, yet remember my words. I tell you that this Tree of Death shall become the Tree of Life for all the children of your people. Look! there above you is its sign and promise."

John lifted his eyes, following the line of Owen's outstretched hand, and saw this. High up upon the tree, and standing clear of all the other branches, was one straight, dead limb, and from this dead limb two arms projected at right angles, also dead and snapped off short. Had a carpenter fashioned a cross of wood and set it there, its proportions could not have been more proper and exact. It was very strange to find this symbol of the Christian hope towering above that place of human terror, and stranger still was the purpose which it must serve in a day to come.

Owen and John returned to the guard in silence, and presently they set forward on their journey. At length, passing beneath a natural arch of rock, they were out of the Valley of Death, and before them, not five hundred paces away, appeared the fence of the Great Place.

This Great Place stood upon a high plateau, in the lap of the surrounding hills, all of which were strongly fortified with schanses, pitfalls, and rough walls of stone. That plateau may have measured fifteen miles in circumference, and the fence of the town itself was about four miles in circumference. Within the fence and following its curve, for it was round, stood thousands of dome-shaped huts carefully set out in streets. Within these again was a stout stockade of timber, enclosing a vast arena of trodden earth, large enough to contain all the cattle of the People of Fire in times of danger, and to serve as a review ground for their impis in times of peace or festival.

At the outer gate of the kraal there was a halt, while the keepers of the gate despatched a messenger to their king to announce the advent of the white man. Of this pause Owen took advantage to array himself in the surplice and hood which he had brought with him in readiness for that hour. Then he gave the mule to John to lead behind him.

"What do you, Messenger?" asked the leader of the guard, astonished.

"I clothe myself in my war-dress," he answered.

"Where then is your spear, Messenger?"

"Here," said Owen, presenting to his eyes a crucifix of ivory, most beautifully carved.

"I perceive that you are of the family of wizards," said the man, and fell back.

Now they entered the kraal and passed for three hundred yards or more through rows of huts, till they reached the gate of the stockade, which was opened to them. Once within it, Owen saw a wonderful sight, such a sight as few white men have seen. The ground of the enormous oval before him was not flat. Either from natural accident or by design it sloped gently upwards, so that the spectator, standing by the gate or at the head of it before the house of the king, could take in its whole expanse, and, if his sight were keen enough, could see every individual gathered there.

On the particular day of Owen's arrival it was crowded with regiments, twelve of them, all dressed in their different uniforms and bearing shields to match, not one of which was less than 2500 strong. At this moment the regiments were massed in deep lines, each battalion by itself, on either side of the broad roadway that ran straight up the kraal to where the king, his sons, his advisers and guards, together with the company of wizards, were placed in front of the royal house.

There they stood in absolute silence, like tens of thousands of bronze statues, and Owen perceived that either they were resting or that they were gathered thus to receive him. That the latter was the case soon became evident, for as he appeared, a white spot at the foot of the

slope, countless heads turned and myriads of eyes fastened themselves upon him. For an instant he was dismayed; there was something terrifying in this numberless multitude of warriors, and the thought of the task that he had undertaken crushed his spirit. Then he remembered, and shaking off his fear and doubt, alone, save for his disciple John, holding the crucifix aloft, he walked slowly up the wide road towards the place where he guessed that the king must be. His arm was weary ere ever he reached it, but at length he found himself standing before a thickset old man, who was clad in leopard skins and seated upon a stool of polished wood.

"It is the king," whispered John behind him.

"Peace be to you," said Owen, breaking the silence.

"The wish is good, may it be fulfilled," answered the king in a deep voice, sighing as he said the words. "Yet yours is a strange greeting," he added. "Whence came you, White Man, how are you named, and what is your mission to me and to my people?"

"King, I come from beyond the sea; I am named Messenger, and my mission is to deliver to you the saying of God, my King and--yours."

At these words a gasp of astonishment went up from those who stood within hearing, expecting as they did to see them rewarded by instant death. But Umsuka only said:--

"My King and yours'? Bold words, Messenger. Where then is this King to whom I, Umsuka, should bow the knee?"

"He is everywhere--in the heavens, on the earth, and below the earth."

"If He is everywhere, then He is here. Show me the likeness of this King, Messenger."

"Behold it," Owen answered, thrusting forward the crucifix.

Now all the great ones about the king stared at this figure of a dying man crowned with thorns and hanging on a cross, and then drew up their lips to laugh. But that laugh never left them; a sudden impulse, a mysterious wave of feeling choked it in their throats. A sense of the strangeness of the contrast between themselves in their armed multitudes and this one white-robed man in his loneliness took hold of them, and with it another sense of something not far removed from fear.

"A wizard indeed," they thought in their hearts, and what they thought the king uttered.

"I perceive," he said, "that you are either mad, White Man, or you are a prince of wizards. Mad you do not seem to be, for your eyes are calm, therefore a wizard you must be. Well, stand behind me: by-and-by I will hear your message and ask of you to show me your powers; but before then

there are things which I must do. Are the lads ready? Ho, you, loose the bull!"

At the command a line of soldiers moved from the right, forming itself up in front of the king and his attendants, revealing a number of youths, of from sixteen to seventeen years of age, armed with sticks only, who stood in companies outside a massive gate. Presently this gate was opened, and through it, with a mad bellow, rushed a wild buffalo bull. On seeing them the brute halted, and for a few moments stood pawing the earth and tearing it with its great horns. Then it put down its head and charged. Instead of making way for it, uttering a shrill whistling sound, the youths rushed at the beast, striking with their sticks.

Another instant, and one of them appeared above the heads of his companions, thrown high into the air, to be followed by a second and a third. Now the animal was through the throng and carrying a poor boy on its horn, whence presently he fell dead; through and through the ranks of the regiments it charged furiously backward and forward.

Watching it fascinated, Owen noted that it was a point of honour for no man to stir before its rush; there they stood, and if the bull gored them, there they fell. At length, exhausted and terrified, the brute headed back straight up the lane where the main body of the youths were waiting for it. Now it was among them, and, reckless of wounds or death, they swarmed about it like bees, seizing it by legs, nose, horns and

tail, till with desperate efforts they dragged it to the ground and beat the life out of it with their sticks. This done, they formed up before the king and saluted him.

"How many are killed?" he asked.

"Eight in all," was the answer, "and fifteen gored."

"A good bull," he said with a smile; "that of last year killed but five. Well, the lads fought him bravely. Let the dead be buried, the hurt tended, or, if their harms are hopeless, slain, and to the rest give a double ration of beer. Ho, now, fall back, men, and make a space for the Bees and the Wasps to fight in."

Some orders were given and a great ring was formed, leaving an arena clear that may have measured a hundred and fifty yards in diameter. Then suddenly, from opposite sides, the two regiments, known as the Bees and the Wasps respectively, rushed upon each other, uttering their war-cries.

"I put ten head of cattle on the Bees; who wagers on the Wasps?" cried the king.

"I, Lord," answered the Prince Hafela, stepping forward.

"You, Prince!" said the king with a quick frown. "Well, you are right to

back them, they are your own regiment. Ah! they are at it."

By this time the scene was that of a hell broken loose upon the earth. The two regiments, numbering some 5000 men in all, had come together, and the roar of their meeting shields was like the roar of thunder. They were armed with kerries only, and not with spears, for the fight was supposed to be a mimic one; but these weapons they used with such effect that soon hundreds of them were down dead or with shattered skulls and bruised limbs. Fiercely they fought, while the whole army watched, for their rivalry was keen and for many months they had known that they were to be pitted one against the other on this day. Fiercely they fought, while the captains cried their orders, and the dust rose up in clouds as they swung to and fro, breast thrusting against breast. At length the end came; the Bees began to give, they fell back ever more quickly till their retreat was a rout, and, leaving many stretched upon the ground, amid the mocking cries of the army they were driven to the fence, by touching which they obtained peace at the hands of their victors.

The king saw, and his somewhat heavy, quiet face grew alive with rage.

"Search and see," he said, "if the captain of the Bees is alive and unhurt."

Messengers went to do his bidding, and presently they returned, bringing with them a man of magnificent appearance and middle age, whose left arm had been broken by a blow from a kerry. With his right hand he saluted

first the king, then the Prince Nodwengo, a kindly-faced, mild-eyed man, in whose command he was.

"What have you to say?" asked the king, in a cold voice of anger. "Know you that you have cost me ten head of the royal white cattle?"

"King, I have nothing to say," answered the captain calmly, "except that my men are cowards."

"That is certainly so," said the king. "Let all the wounded among them be carried away; and for you, captain, who turn my soldiers into cowards, you shall die a dog's death, hanging to-morrow on the Tree of Doom. As for your regiment, I banish it to the fever country, there to hunt elephants for three years, since it is not fit to fight with men."

"It is well," replied the captain, "since death is better than shame. Only King, I have done you good service in the past; I ask that it may be presently and by the spear."

"So be it," said the king.

"I crave his life, father," said the Prince Nodwengo; "he is my friend."

"A prince should not choose cowards for his friends," replied the king; "let him be killed, I say."

Then Owen, who had been watching and listening, his heart sick with horror, stood forward and said:--

"King, in the name of Him I serve, I conjure you to spare this man and those others that are hurt, who have done no crime except to be driven back by soldiers stronger than themselves."

"Messenger," answered the king, "I bear with you because you are ignorant. Know that, according to our customs, this crime is the greatest of crimes, for here we show no mercy to the conquered."

"Yet you should do so," said Owen, "seeing that you also must ere long be conquered by death, and then how can you expect mercy who have shown none?"

"Let him be killed!" said the king.

"King!" cried Owen once more, "do this deed, and I tell you that before the sun is down great evil will overtake you."

"Do you threaten me, Messenger? Well, we will see. Let him be killed, I say."

Then the man was led away; but, before he went he found time to thank Owen and Nodwengo the prince, and to call down good fortune upon them.