

CHAPTER VI

THE DRINKING OF THE CUP

Now the king's word was done, the anger went out of his eyes, and once more his countenance grew weary. A command was issued, and, with the most perfect order, moving like one man, the regiments changed their array, forming up battalion upon battalion in face of the king, that they might give him the royal salute so soon as he had drunk the cup of the first-fruits.

A herald stood forward and cried:--

"Hearken, you Sons of Fire! Hearken, you Children of Umsuka, Shaker of the Earth! Have any of you a boon to ask of the king?"

Men stood forward, and having saluted, one by one asked this thing or that. The king heard their requests, and as he nodded or turned his head away, so they were granted or refused.

When all had done, the Prince Hafela came forward, lifted his spear, and cried:--

"A boon, King!"

"What is it?" asked his father, eyeing him curiously.

"A small matter, King," he replied. "A while ago I named a certain woman, Noma, the ward of Hokosa the wizard, and she was sealed to me to fill the place of my first wife, the queen that is to be. She passed into the House of the Royal Women, and, by your command, King, it was fixed that I should marry her according to our customs to-morrow, after the feast of the first-fruits is ended. King, my heart is changed towards that woman; I no longer desire to take her to wife, and I pray that you will order that she shall now be handed back to Hokosa her guardian."

"You blow hot and cold with the same mouth, Hafela," said Umsuka, "and in love or war I do not like such men. What have you to say to this demand, Hokosa?"

Now Hokosa stepped forward from where he stood at the head of the company of wizards. His dress, like that of his companions, was simple, but in its way striking. On his shoulders he wore a cloak of shining snakeskin; about his loins was a short kilt of the same material; and round his forehead, arms and knees were fillets of snakeskin. At his side hung his pouch of medicines, and in his hand he held no spear, but a wand of ivory, whereof the top was roughly carved so as to resemble the head of a cobra reared up to strike.

"King," he said, "I have heard the words of the prince, and I do not think that this insult should have been put upon the Lady Noma, my ward,

or upon me, her guardian. Still, let it be, for I would not that one should pass from under the shadow of my house whither she is not welcome. Without my leave the prince named this woman as his queen, as he had the right to do; and without my leave he unnames her, as he has the right to do. Were the prince a common man, according to custom he should pay a fine of cattle to be held by me in trust for her whom he discards; but this is a matter that I leave to you, King."

"You do well, Hokosa," answered Umsuka, "to leave this to me. Prince, you would not wish the fine that you should pay to be that of any common man. With the girl shall be handed over two hundred head of cattle. More, I will do justice: unless she herself consents, she shall not be put away. Let the Lady Noma be summoned."

Now the face of Hafela grew sullen, and watching, Owen saw a swift change pass over that of Hokosa. Evidently he was not certain of the woman. Presently there was a stir, and from the gates of the royal house the Lady Noma appeared, attended by women, and stood before the king. She was a tall and lovely girl, and the sunlight flashed upon her bronze-hued breast and her ornaments of ivory. Her black hair was fastened in a knot upon her neck, her features were fine and small, her gait was delicate and sure as that of an antelope, and her eyes were beautiful and full of pride. There she stood before the king, looking round her like a stag. Seeing her thus, Owen understood how it came about that she held two men so strangely different in the hollow of her hand, for her charm was of a nature to appeal to both of them--a charm

of the spirit as well as of the flesh. And yet the face was haughty, a face that upon occasion might even become cruel.

"You sent for me and I am here, O King," she said, in a slow and quiet voice.

"Listen, girl," answered the king. "A while ago the Prince Hafela, my son, named you as her who should be his queen, whereon you were taken and placed in the House of the Royal Women, to abide the day of your marriage, which should be to-morrow."

"It is true that the prince has honoured me thus, and that you have been pleased to approve of his choice," she said, lifting her eyebrows. "What of it, O King?"

"This, girl: the prince who was pleased to honour you is now pleased to dishonour you. Here, in the presence of the council and army, he prays of me to annul his sealing to you, and to send you back to the house of your guardian, Hokosa the wizard."

Noma started, and her face grew hard.

"Is it so?" she said. "Then it would seem that I have lost favour in the eyes of my lord the prince, or that some fairer woman has found it."

"Of these matters I know nothing," replied the king; "but this I know,

that if you seek justice you shall have it. Say but the word, and he to whom you were promised in marriage shall take you in marriage, whether he wills or wills it not."

At this speech, the face of Hafela was suddenly lit up as with the fire of hope, while over that of Hokosa there passed another subtle change. The girl glanced at them both and was silent for a while. Her breast heaved and her white teeth bit upon her lip. To Owen, who noted all, it was clear that rival passions were struggling in her heart: the passion of power and the passion of love, or of some emotion which he did not understand. Hokosa fixed his calm eyes upon her with a strange intensity of gaze, and while he gazed his form quivered with a suppressed excitement, much as a snake quivers that is about to strike its prey. To the careless eye there was nothing remarkable about his look and attitude; to the observer it was evident that both were full of extraordinary purpose. He was talking to the girl, not with words, but in some secret language that he and she understood alone. She started as one starts who catches the tone of a well-remembered voice in a crowd of strangers, and lifting her eyes from the ground, whither she had turned them in meditation, she looked up at Hokosa.

Instantly her face began to change. The haughtiness and anger went out of it, it grew troubled, the lips parted in a sigh. First she bent her head and body towards him, then without more ado she walked to where he stood and took him by the hand. Here, at some whispered word or sign, she seemed to recover herself, and again resuming the character of a

proud offended beauty, she curtsayed to Umsuka, and spoke:--

"O King, as you see, I have made my choice. I will not force myself upon a man who scorns me, no, not even to share his place and power, though it is true that I love them both. Nay, I will return to Hokosa my guardian, and to his wife, Zinti, who has been as my mother, and with them be at peace."

"It is well," said the king, "and perhaps, girl, your choice is wise; perhaps your loss is not so great as you have thought. Hafela, take you the hand of Hokosa and release the girl back to him according to the law, promising in the ears of men before the first month of winter to pay him two hundred head of cattle as forfeit, to be held by him in trust for the girl."

In a sullen voice, his lips trembling with rage, Hafela did as the king commanded; and when the hands of the conspirators unclasped, Owen perceived that in that of the prince lay a tiny packet.

"Mix me the cup of the first-fruits, and swiftly," said the king again, "for the sun grows low in the heavens, and ere it sinks I have words to say."

Now a polished gourd filled with native beer was handed to Nodwengo, the second son of the king, and one by one the great councillors approached, and, with appropriate words, let fall into it offerings emblematic of

fertility and increase. The first cast in a grain of corn; the second, a blade of grass; the third, a shaving from an ox's horn; the fourth, a drop of water; the fifth, a woman's hair; the sixth, a particle of earth; and so on, until every ingredient was added to it that was necessary to the magic brew.

Then Hokosa, as chief of the medicine men, blessed the cup according to the ancient forms, praying that he whose body was the heavens, whose eyes were lightning, and whose voice was thunder, the spirit whom they worshipped, might increase and multiply to them during the coming year all those fruits and elements that were present in the cup, and that every virtue which they contained might comfort the body of the king.

His prayer finished, it was the turn of Hafela to play his part as the eldest born of the king. Kneeling over the cup which stood upon the ground, a spear was handed to him that had been made red hot in the fire. Taking the spear, he stabbed with it towards the four quarters of the horizon; then, muttering some invocation, he plunged it into the bowl, stirring its contents till the iron grew black. Now he threw aside the spear, and lifting the bowl in both hands, he carried it to his father and offered it to him.

Although he had been unable to see him drop the poison into the cup, a glance at Hafela told Owen that it was there; for though he kept his face under control, he could not prevent his hands from twitching or the sweat from starting upon his brow and breast.

The king rose, and taking the bowl, held it on high, saying:--

"In this cup, which I drink on behalf of the nation, I pledge you, my people."

It was the signal for the royal salute, for which each regiment had been prepared. As the last word left the king's lips, every one of the thirty thousand men present in that great place began to rattle his kerry against the surface of his ox-hide shield. At first the sound produced resembled that of the murmur of the sea; but by slow and just degrees it grew louder and ever louder, till the roar of it was like the deepest voice of thunder, a sound awe-inspiring, terrible.

Suddenly, when its volume was most, four spears were thrown into the air, and at this signal every man ceased to beat upon his shield. In the place itself there was silence, but from the mountains around the echoes still crashed and volleyed. When the last of them had died away, the king brought the cup to the level of his lips. Owen saw, and knowing its contents, was almost moved to cry out in warning. Indeed, his arm was lifted and his mouth was open, when by chance he noted Hokosa watching him, and remembered. To act now would be madness, his time had not yet come.

The cup touched the king's lips, and at the sign from every throat in that countless multitude sprang the word "King!" and every foot

stamped upon the ground, shaking the solid earth. Thrice the monarch drank, and thrice this tremendous salute, the salute of the whole nation to its ruler, was repeated, each time more loudly than the last. Then pouring the rest of the liquor on the ground, Umsuka set aside the cup, and in the midst of a silence that seemed deep after the crash of the great salute, he began to address the multitude:--

"Hearken, Councillors and Captains, and you, my people, hearken. As you know, I have two sons, calves of the Black Bull, princes of the land--my son Hafela, the eldest born, and my son Nodwengo, his half-brother----"

At this point the king began to grow confused. He hesitated, passing his hand over his eyes, then slowly and with difficulty repeated those words which he had already said.

"We hear you, Father," cried the councillors in encouragement, as for the second time he paused. While they still spoke, the veins in the king's neck were seen to swell suddenly, foam flecked with blood burst from his lips, and he fell headlong to the ground.