

CHAPTER VII

THE RECOVERY OF THE KING

For a moment there was silence, then a great cry arose--a cry of "Our father is dead!" Presently with it were mingled other and angrier shouts of "The king is murdered!" and "He is bewitched, the white wizard has bewitched the king! He prophesied evil upon him, and now he has bewitched him!"

Meanwhile the captains and councillors formed a ring about Umsuka, and Hokosa bending over him examined him.

"Princes and Councillors," he said presently, "your father yet lives, but his life is like the life of a dying fire and soon he must be dead. This is sure, that one of two things has befallen him: either the heat has caused the blood to boil in his veins and he is smitten with a stroke from heaven, such as men who are fat and heavy sometimes die of; or he has been bewitched by a wicked wizard. Yonder stands one," and he pointed to Owen, "who not an hour ago prophesied that before the sun was down great evil should overtake the king. The sun is not yet down, and great evil has overtaken him. Perchance, Princes and Councillors, this white prophet can tell us of the matter."

"Perchance I can," answered Owen calmly.

"He admits it!" cried some. "Away with him!"

"Peace!" said Owen, holding the crucifix towards those whose spears threatened his life.

They shrank back, for this symbol of a dying man terrified them who could not guess its significance.

"Peace," went on Owen, "and listen. Be sure of this, Councillors, that if I die, your king will die; whereas if I live, your king may live. You ask me of this matter. Where shall I begin? Shall I begin with the tale of two men seated together some nights ago in a hut so dark that no eyes could see in it, save perchance the eyes of a wizard? What did they talk of in that hut, and who were those men? They talked, I think, of the death of a king and of the crowning of a king. They talked of a price to be paid for a certain medicine; and one of them had a royal air, and one----"

"Will ye hearken to this wild babbler while your king lies dying before your eyes?" broke in Hokosa, in a shrill, unnatural voice; for almost palsied with fear as he was at Owen's mysterious words, he still retained his presence of mind. "Listen now: what is he, and what did he say? He is one who comes hither to preach a new faith to us; he comes, he says, on an embassy from the King of Heaven, who has power over all things, and who, so these white men preach, can give power to His servants. Well, let this one cease prating and show us his strength,

as he has been warned he would be called upon to do. Let him give us a sign. There before you lies your king, and he is past the help of man; even I cannot help him. Therefore, let this messenger cure him, or call upon his God to cure him; that seeing, we may know him to be a true messenger, and one sent by that King of whom he speaks. Let him do this now before our eyes, or let him perish as a wizard who has bewitched the king. Do you hear my words, Messenger, and can you draw this one back from between the Gates of Death?"

"I hear them," answered Owen quietly; "and I can--or if I cannot, then I am willing to pay the penalty with my life. You who are a doctor say that your king is as one who is already dead, so that whatever I may do I cannot hurt him further. Therefore I ask this of you, that you stand round and watch, but molest me neither by word nor deed while I attempt his cure. Do you consent?"

"It is just; we consent," said the councillors. "Let us see what the white man can do, and by the issue let him be judged." But Hokosa stared at Owen wondering, and made no answer.

"Bring some clean water to me in a gourd," said Owen.

It was brought and given to him. He looked round, searching the faces of those about him. Presently his eye fell upon the Prince Nodwengo, and he beckoned to him, saying:--

"Come hither, Prince, for you are honest, and I would have you to help me, and no other man."

The prince stepped forward and Owen gave him the gourd of water. Then he drew out the little bottle wherein he had stored the juice of the creeper, and uncorking it, he bade Nodwengo fill it up with water. This done, he clasped his hands, and lifting his eyes to heaven, he prayed aloud in the language of the Amasuka.

"O God," he prayed, "upon whose business I am here, grant, I beseech Thee, that by Thy Grace power may be given to me to work this miracle in the face of these people, to the end that I may win them to cease from their iniquities, to believe upon Thee, the only true God, and to save their souls alive. Amen."

Having finished his prayer, he took the bottle and shook it; then he commanded Nodwengo to sit upon the ground and hold his father's head upon his knee. Now, as all might see by many signs, the king was upon the verge of death, for his lips were purple, his breathing was rare and stertorous, and his heart stood well-nigh still.

"Open his mouth and hold down the tongue," said Owen.

The prince obeyed, pressing down the tongue with a snuff spoon. Then placing the neck of the bottle as far into the throat as it would reach, Owen poured the fluid it contained into the body of the king, who made a

convulsive movement and instantly seemed to die.

"He is dead," said one; "away with the false prophet!"

"It may be so, or it may not be so," answered Owen. "Wait for the half of an hour; then, if he shows no sign of life, do what you will with me."

"It is well," they said; "so be it."

Slowly the minutes slipped by, while the king lay like a corpse before them, and outside of that silent ring the soldiers murmured as the wind. The sun was sinking fast, and Hokosa watched it, counting the seconds. At length he spoke:--

"The half of the hour that you demanded is dead, White Man, as dead as the king; and now the time has come for you to die also," and he stretched out his hand to take him.

Owen looked at his watch and replied:--

"There is still another minute; and you, Hokosa, who are skilled in medicines, may know that this antidote does not work so swiftly as the bane."

The shot was a random one, but it told, for Hokosa fell back and was

silent.

The seconds passed on as the minute hand of the watch went round from ten to twenty, from twenty to thirty, from thirty to forty. A few more instants and the game was played. Had that dream of his been vain imagining, and was all his faith nothing but a dream wondered Owen? Well, if so, it would be best that he should die. But he did not believe that it was so; he believed that the Power above him would intervene to save--not him, indeed, but all this people.

"Let us make an end," said Hokosa, "the time is done."

"Yes," said Owen, "the time is done--and the king lives!"

Even as he spoke the pulses in the old man's forehead were seen to throb, and the veins in his neck to swell as they had swollen after he had swallowed the poison; then once more they shrank to their natural size. Umsuka stirred a hand, groaned, sat up, and spoke:--

"What has chanced to me?" he said. "I have descended into deep darkness, now once again I see light."

No one answered, for all were staring, terrified and amazed, at the Messenger--the white wizard to whom had been given power to bring men back from the gate of death. At length Owen said:--

"This has chanced to you, King: that evil which I prophesied to you if you refused to listen to the voice of mercy has fallen upon you. By now you would have been dead, had it not pleased Him Whom I serve, working through me, His messenger, to bring you back to look upon the sun. Thank Him, therefore, and worship Him, for He alone is Master of the Earth," and he held the crucifix before his eyes.

The humbled monarch lifted his hand--he who for many years had made obeisance to none--and saluted the symbol, saying:--

"Messenger, I thank Him and I worship Him, though I know Him not. Say now, how did His magic work upon me to make me sick to death and to recover me?"

"By the hand of man, King, and by the virtues that lie hid in Nature. Did you not drink of a cup, and were not many things mixed in the draught? Was it not but now in your mind to speak words that should bring down the head of pride and evil, and lift up the head of truth and goodness?"

"O White Man, how know you these things?" gasped the king.

"I know them, it is enough. Say, who was it that stirred the bowl, King, and who gave you to drink?"

Now Umsuka staggered to his feet, and cried aloud in a voice that was

thick with rage:--

"By my head and the heads of my fathers I smell the plot! My son, the Prince Hafela, has learned my counsel, and would have slain me before I said words that should set him beneath the feet of Nodwengo. Seize him, captains, and let him be brought before me for judgment!"

Men looked this way and that to carry out the command of the king, but Hafela was gone. Already he was upon the hillside, running as a man has rarely run before--his face set towards that fastness in the mountains where he could find refuge among his mother's tribesmen and the regiments which he commanded. Of late they had been sent thither by the king that they might be far from the Great Place when their prince was disinherited.

"He is fled," said one; "I saw him go."

"Pursue him and bring him back, dead or alive!" thundered the king.

"A hundred head of cattle to the man who lays hand upon him before he reaches the impi of the North, for they will fight for him!"

"Stay!" broke in Owen. "Once before this day I prayed of you, King, to show mercy, and you refused it. Will you refuse me a second time? Leave him his life who has lost all else."

"That he may rebel against me? Well, White Man, I owe you much, and for

this time your wisdom shall be my guide, though my heart speaks against such gentleness. Hearken, councillors and people, this is my decree: that Hafela, my son, who would have murdered me, be deposed from his place as heir to my throne, and that Nodwengo, his brother, be set in that place, to rule the People of Fire after me when I die."

"It is good, it is just!" said the council. "Let the king's word be done."

"Hearken again," said Umsuka. "Let this white man, who is named Messenger, be placed in the House of Guests and treated with all honour; let oxen be given him from the royal herds and corn from the granaries, and girls of noble blood for wives if he wills them. Hokosa, into your hand I deliver him, and, great though you are, know this, that if but a hair of his head is harmed, with your goods and your life you shall answer for it, you and all your house."

"Let the king's word be done," said the councillors again.

"Heralds," went on Umsuka, "proclaim that the feast of the first-fruits is ended, and my command is that every regiment should seek its quarters, taking with it a double gift of cattle from the king, who has been saved alive by the magic of this white man. And now, Messenger, farewell, for my head grows weary. To-morrow I will speak with you."

Then the king was led away into the royal house, and save those who were

quartered in it, the regiments passed one by one through the gates of the kraal, singing their war-songs as they went. Darkness fell upon the Great Place, and through it parties of men might be seen dragging thence the corpses of those who had fallen in the fight with sticks, or been put to death thereafter by order of the king.

"Messenger," said Hokosa, bowing before Owen, "be pleased to follow me." Then he led him to a little kraal numbering five or six large and beautifully made huts, which stood by itself, within its own fence, at the north end of the Great Place, not far from the house of the king. In front of the centre hut a fire was burning, and by its light women appeared cleaning out the huts and bringing food and water.

"Here you may rest in safety, Messenger," said Hokosa, "seeing that night and day a guard from the king's own regiment will stand before your doors."

"I do not need them," answered Owen, "for none can harm me till my hour comes. I am a stranger here and you are a great man; yet, Hokosa, which of us is the safest this night?"

"Your meaning?" said Hokosa sharply.

"O man!" answered Owen, "when in a certain hour you crept up the valley yonder, and climbing the Tree of Death gathered its poison, went I not with you? When, before that hour, you sat in yonder hut bargaining with

the Prince Hafela--the death of a king for the price of a girl--was I not with you? Nay, threaten me not--in your own words I say it--'lay down that assegai, or by my spirit your body shall be thrown to the kites, as that of one who would murder the king'--and the king's guest!"

"White Man," whispered Hokosa throwing down the spear, "how can these things be? I was alone in the hut with the prince, I was alone beneath the Tree of Doom, and you, as I know well, were beyond the river. Your spies must be good, White Man."

"My spirit is my only spy, Hokosa. My spirit watched you, and from your own lips he learned the secret of the bane and of the antidote. Hafela mixed the poison as you taught him; I gave the remedy, and saved the king alive."

Now the knees of Hokosa grew weak beneath him, and he leaned against the fence of the kraal for support.

"I have skill in the art," he said hoarsely; "but, Messenger, your magic is more than mine, and my life is forfeit to you. To-morrow morning, you will tell the king all, and to-morrow night I shall hang upon the dreadful Tree. Well, so be it; I am overmatched at my own trade, and it is best that I should die. You have plotted well and you have conquered, and to you belong my place and power."

"It was you who plotted, and not I, Hokosa. Did you not contrive that I

should reach the Great Place but a little before the poison was given to the king, so that upon me might be laid the crime of his bewitching? Did you not plan also that I should be called upon to cure him--a thing you deemed impossible--and when I failed that I should be straightway butchered?"

"Seeing that it is useless to lie to you, I confess that it was so," answered Hokosa boldly.

"It was so," repeated Owen; "therefore, according to your law your life is forfeit, seeing that you dug a pit to snare the innocent feet. But I come to tell you of a new law, and that which I preach I practise. Hokosa, I pardon you, and if you will put aside your evil-doing, I promise you that no word of all your wickedness shall pass my lips."

"It has not been my fashion to take a boon at the hand of any man, save of the king only," said the wizard in a humble voice; "but now it seems that I am come to this. Tell me, White Man, what is the payment that you seek of me?"

"None, Hokosa, except that you cease from evil and listen with an open heart to that message which I am sworn to deliver to you and to all your nation. Also you would do well to put away that fair woman whose price was the murder of him that fed you."

"I cannot do it," answered the wizard. "I will listen to your teaching,

but I will not rob my heart of her it craves alone. White Man, I am not like the rest of my nation. I have not sought after women; I have but one wife, and she is old and childless. Now, for the first time in my days, I love this girl--ah, you know not how!--and I will take her, and she shall be the mother of my children."

"Then, Hokosa, you will take her to your sorrow," answered Owen solemnly, "for she will learn to hate you who have robbed her of royalty and rule, giving her wizardries and your grey hairs in place of them."

And thus for that night they parted.