

CHAPTER XI

THE WISDOM OF THE DEAD

On the morrow Owen baptised the king, many of his councillors, and some twenty others whom he considered fit to receive the rite. Also he despatched his first convert John, with other messengers, on a three months' journey to the coast, giving them letters acquainting the bishop and others with his marvellous success, and praying that missionaries might be sent to assist him in his labours.

Now day by day the Church grew till it numbered hundreds of souls, and thousands more hovered on its threshold. From dawn to dark Owen toiled, preaching, exhorting, confessing, gathering in his harvest; and from dark to midnight he pored over his translation of the Scriptures, teaching Nodwengo and a few others how to read and write them. But although his efforts were crowned with so signal and extraordinary a triumph, he was well aware of the dangers that threatened the life of the infant Church. Many accepted it indeed, and still more tolerated it; but there remained multitudes who regarded the new religion with suspicion and veiled hatred. Nor was this strange, seeing that the hearts of men are not changed in an hour or their ancient customs easily overset.

On one point, indeed, Owen had to give way. The Amasuka were a polygamous people; all their law and traditions were interwoven with

polygamy, and to abolish that institution suddenly and with violence would have brought their social fabric to the ground. Now, as he knew well, the missionary Church declares in effect that no man can be both a Christian and a polygamist; therefore among the followers of that custom the missionary Church makes but little progress. Not without many qualms and hesitations, Owen, having only the Scriptures to consult, came to a compromise with his converts. If a man already married to more than one wife wished to become a Christian, he permitted him to do so upon the condition that he took no more wives; while a man unmarried at the time of his conversion might take one wife only. This decree, liberal as it was, caused great dissatisfaction among both men and women. But it was as nothing compared to the feeling that was evoked by Owen's preaching against all war not undertaken in self-defence, and against the strict laws which he prevailed upon the king to pass, suppressing the practice of wizardry, and declaring the chief or doctor who caused a man to be "smelt out" and killed upon charges of witchcraft to be guilty of murder.

At first whenever Owen went abroad he was surrounded by thousands of people who followed him in the expectation that he would work miracles, which, after his exploits with the lightning, they were well persuaded that he could do if he chose. But he worked no more miracles; he only preached to them a doctrine adverse to their customs and foreign to their thoughts.

So it came about that in time, when the novelty was gone off and the

story of his victory over the Fire-god had grown stale, although the work of conversion went on steadily, many of the people grew weary of the white man and his doctrines. Soon this weariness found expression in various ways, and in none more markedly than by the constant desertions from the ranks of the king's regiments. At first, by Owen's advice, the king tolerated these desertions; but at length, having obtained information that an entire regiment purposed absconding at dawn, he caused it to be surrounded and seized by night. Next morning he addressed that regiment, saying:--

"Soldiers, you think that because I have become a Christian and will not permit unnecessary bloodshed, I am also become a fool. I will teach you otherwise. One man in every twenty of you shall be killed, and henceforth any soldier who attempts to desert will be killed also!"

The order was carried out, for Owen could not find a word to say against it, with the result that desertions almost ceased, though not before the king had lost some eight or nine thousand of his best soldiers. Worst of all, these soldiers had gone to join Hafela in his mountain fastnesses; and the rumour grew that ere long they would appear again, to claim the crown for him or to take it by force of arms.

Now too a fresh complication arose. The old king sickened of his last illness, and soon it became known that he must die. A month later die he did, passing away peacefully in Owen's arms, and with his last breath exhorting his people to cling to the Christian religion; to take

Nodwengo for their king and to be faithful to him.

The king died, and that same day was buried by Owen in the gloomy resting-place of the blood-royal of the People of Fire, where a Christian priest now set foot for the first time.

On the morrow Nodwengo was proclaimed king with much ceremony in face of the people and of all the army that remained to him. One captain raised a cry for Hafela his brother. Nodwengo caused him to be seized and brought before him.

"Man," he said, "on this my coronation day I will not stain my hand with blood. Listen. You cry upon Hafela, and to Hafela you shall go, taking him this message. Tell him that I, Nodwengo, have succeeded to the crown of Umsuka, my father, by his will and the will of the people. Tell him it is true that I have become a Christian, and that Christians follow not after war but peace. Tell him, however, that though I am a Christian I have not forgotten how to fight or how to rule. It has reached my ears that it is his purpose to attack me with a great force which he is gathering, and to possess himself of my throne. If he should choose to come, I shall be ready to meet him; but I counsel him against coming, for it will be to find his death. Let him stay where he is in peace, and be my subject; or let him go afar with those that cleave to him, and set up a kingdom of his own, for then I shall not follow him; but let him not dare to lift a spear against me, his sovereign, since if he does so he shall be treated as a rebel and find the doom of a rebel. Begone, and

show your face here no more!"

The man crept away crestfallen; but all who heard that speech broke into cheering, which, as its purport was repeated from rank to rank, spread far and wide; for now the army learned that in becoming a Christian, Nodwengo had not become a woman. Of this indeed he soon gave them ample proof. The old king's grip upon things had been lax, that of Nodwengo was like iron. He practised no cruelties, and did injustice to none; but his discipline was severe, and soon the regiments were brought to a greater pitch of proficiency than they had ever reached before, although they were now allowed to marry when they pleased, a boon that hitherto had been denied to them. Moreover, by Owen's help, he designed an entirely new system of fortification of the kraal and surrounding hills, which would, it was thought, make the place impregnable. These and many other acts, equally vigorous and far-seeing, put new heart into the nation. Also the report of them put fear into Hafela, who, it was rumoured, had now given up all idea of attack.

Some there were, however, who looked upon these changes with little love, and Hokosa was one of them. After his defeat in the duel by fire, for a while his spirit was crushed. Hitherto he had more or less been a believer in the protecting influence of his own god or fetish, who would, as he thought, hold his priests scatheless from the lightning. Often and often had he stood in past days upon that plain while the great tempests broke around his head, and returned thence unharmed, attributing to sorcery a safety that was really due to chance. From time

to time indeed a priest was killed; but, so his companions held, the misfortune resulted invariably from the man's neglect of some rite, or was a mark of the anger of the heavens.

Now Hokosa had lived to see all these convictions shattered: he had seen the lightning, which he pretended to be able to control, roll back upon him from the foot of the Christian cross, reducing his god to nothingness and his companions to corpses.

At first Hokosa was dismayed, but as time went on hope came back to him. Stripped of his offices and power, and from the greatest in the nation, after the king, become one of small account, still no harm or violence was attempted towards him. He was left wealthy and in peace, and living thus he watched and listened with open eyes and ears, waiting till the tide should turn. It seemed that he would not have long to wait, for reasons that have been told.

"Why do you sit here like a vulture on a rock," asked the girl Noma, whom he had taken to wife, "when you might be yonder with Hafela, preparing him by your wisdom for the coming war?"

"Because I am a king-vulture, and I wait for the sick bull to die," he answered, pointing to the Great Place beneath him. "Say, why should I bring Hafela to prey upon a carcass I have marked down for my own?"

"Now you speak well," said Noma; "the bull suffers from a strange

disease, and when he is dead another must lead the herd."

"That is so," answered her husband, "and, therefore, I am patient."

It was shortly after this conversation that the old king died, with results very different from those which Hokosa had anticipated. Although he was a Christian, to his surprise Nodwengo showed that he was also a strong ruler, and that there was little chance of the sceptre slipping from his hand--none indeed while the white teacher was there to guide him.

"What will you do now, Hokosa?" asked Noma his wife upon a certain day.

"Will you turn to Hafela after all?"

"No," answered Hokosa; "I will consult my ancient lore. Listen. Whatever else is false, this is true: that magic exists, and I am its master. For a while it seemed to me that the white man was greater at the art than I am; but of late I have watched him and listened to his doctrines, and I believe that this is not so. It is true that in the beginning he read my plans in a dream, or otherwise; it is true that he hurled the lightning back upon my head; but I hold that these things were accidents. Again and again he has told us that he is not a wizard; and if this be so, he can be overcome."

"How, husband?"

"How? By wizardry. This very night, Noma, with your help I will consult the dead, as I have done in bygone time, and learn the future from their lips which cannot lie."

"So be it; though the task is hateful to me, and I hate you who force me to it."

Noma answered thus with passion, but her eyes shone as she spoke: for those who have once tasted the cup of magic are ever drawn to drink of it again, even when they fear the draught.

It was midnight, and Hokosa with his wife stood in the burying-ground of the kings of the Amasuka. Before Owen came upon his mission it was death to visit this spot except upon the occasion of the laying to rest of one of the royal blood, or to offer the annual sacrifice to the spirits of the dead. Even beneath the bright moon that shone upon it the place seemed terrible. Here in the bosom of the hills was an amphitheatre, surrounded by walls of rock varying from five hundred to a thousand feet in height. In this amphitheatre grew great mimosa thorns, and above them towered pillars of granite, set there not by the hand of man but by nature. It would seem that the Amasuka, led by some fine instinct, had chosen these columns as fitting memorials of their kings, at the least a departed monarch lay at the foot of each of them.

The smallest of these unhewn obelisks--it was about fifty feet high--marked the resting-place of Umsuka; and deep into its granite Owen with his own hand had cut the dead king's name and date of death, surmounting his inscription with a symbol of the cross.

Towards this pillar Hokosa made his way through the wet grass, followed by Noma his wife. Presently they were there, standing one upon each side of a little mound of earth more like an ant-heap than a grave; for, after the custom of his people, Umsuka had been buried sitting. At the foot of each of the pillars rose a heap of similar shape, but many times as large. The kings who slept there were accompanied to their resting-places by numbers of their wives and servants, who had been slain in solemn sacrifice that they might attend their Lord whithersoever he should wander.

"What is that you desire and would do?" asked Noma, in a hushed voice. Bold as she was, the place and the occasion awed her.

"I desire wisdom from the dead!" he answered. "Have I not already told you, and can I not win it with your help?"

"What dead, husband?"

"Umsuka the king. Ah! I served him living, and at the last he drove me away from his side. Now he shall serve me, and out of the nowhere I will call him back to mine."

"Will not this symbol defeat you?" and Noma pointed at the cross hewn in the granite.

At her words a sudden gust of rage seemed to shake the wizard. His still eyes flashed, his lips turned livid, and with them he spat upon the cross.

"It has no power," he said. "May it be accursed, and may he who believes therein hang thereon! It has no power; but even if it had, according to the tale of that white liar, such things as I would do have been done beneath its shadow. By it the dead have been raised--ay! dead kings have been dragged from death and forced to tell the secrets of the grave. Come, come, let us to the work."

"What must I do, husband?"

"You shall sit you there, even as a corpse sits, and there for a little while you shall die--yes, your spirit shall leave you--and I will fill your body with the soul of him who sleeps beneath; and through your lips I will learn his wisdom, to whom all things are known."

"It is terrible! I am afraid!" she said. "Cannot this be done otherwise?"

"It cannot," he answered. "The spirits of the dead have no shape or

form; they are invisible, and can speak only in dreams or through the lips of one in whose pulses life still lingers, though soul and body be already parted. Have no fear. Ere his ghost leaves you it shall recall your own, which till the corpse is cold stays ever close at hand. I did not think to find a coward in you, Noma."

"I am not a coward, as you know well," she answered passionately, "for many a deed of magic have we dared together in past days. But this is fearsome, to die that my body may become the home of the ghost of a dead man, who perchance, having entered it, will abide there, leaving my spirit houseless, or perchance will shut up the doors of my heart in such fashion that they never can be opened. Can it not be done by trance as aforetime? Tell me, Hokosa, how often have you thus talked with the dead?"

"Thrice, Noma."

"And what chanced to them through whom you talked?"

"Two lived and took no harm; the third died, because the awakening medicine lacked power. Yet fear nothing; that which I have with me is of the best. Noma, you know my plight: I must win wisdom or fall for ever, and you alone can help me; for under this new rule, I can no longer buy a youth or maid for purposes of witchcraft, even if one could be found fitted to the work. Choose then: shall we go back or forward? Here trance will not help us; for those entranced cannot read the future, nor

can they hold communion with the dead, being but asleep. Choose, Noma."

"I have chosen," she answered. "Never yet have I turned my back upon a venture, nor will I do so now. Come life, come death, I will submit me to your wish, though there are few women who would dare as much for any man. Nor in truth do I do this for you, Hokosa; I do it because I seek power, and thus only can we win it who are fallen. Also I love all things strange, and desire to commune with the dead and to know that, if for some few minutes only, at least my woman's breast has held the spirit of a king. Yet, I warn you, make no fault in your magic; for should I die beneath it, then I, who desire to live on and to be great, will haunt you and be avenged upon you!"

"Oh! Noma," he said, "if I believed that there was any danger for you, should I ask you to suffer this thing?--I, who love you more even than you love power, more than my life, more than anything that is or ever can be."

"I know it, and it is to that I trust," the woman answered. "Now begin, before my courage leaves me."

"Good," he said. "Seat yourself there upon the mound, resting your head against the stone."

She obeyed; and taking thongs of hide which he had made ready, Hokosa bound her wrists and ankles, as these people bind the wrists and ankles

of corpses. Then he knelt before her, staring into her face with his solemn eyes and muttering: "Obey and sleep."

Presently her limbs relaxed, and her head fell forward.

"Do you sleep?" he asked.

"I sleep. Whither shall I go? It is the true sleep--test me."

"Pass to the house of the white man, my rival. Are you with him?"

"I am with him."

"What does he?"

"He lies in slumber on his bed, and in his slumber he mutters the name of a woman, and tells her that he loves her, but that duty is more than love. Oh! call me back I cannot stay; a Presence guards him, and thrusts me thence."

"Return," said Hokosa starting. "Pass through the earth beneath you and tell me what you see."

"I see the body of the king; but were it not for his royal ornaments none would know him now."

"Return," said Hokosa, "and let the eyes of your spirit be open. Look around you and tell me what you see."

"I see the shadows of the dead," she answered; "they stand about you, gazing at you with angry eyes; but when they come near you, something drives them back, and I cannot understand what it is they say."

"Is the ghost of Umsuka among them?"

"It is among them."

"Bid him prophesy the future to me."

"I have bidden him, but he does not answer. If you would hear him speak, it must be through the lips of my body; and first my body must be emptied of my ghost, that his may find a place therein."

"Say, can his spirit be compelled?"

"It can be compelled, or that part of it which still hover near this spot, if you dare to speak the words you know. But first its house must be made ready. Then the words must be spoken, and all must be done before a man can count three hundred; for should the blood begin to clot about my heart, it will be still for ever."

"Hearken," said Hokosa. "When the medicine that I shall give does its

work, and the spirit is loosened from your body, let it not go afar, no, whatever tempts or threatens it, and suffer not that the death-cord be severed, lest flesh and ghost be parted for ever."

"I hear, and I obey. Be swift, for I grow weary."

Then Hokosa took from his pouch two medicines: one a paste in a box, the other a fluid in a gourd. Taking of the paste he knelt upon the grave before the entranced woman and swiftly smeared it upon the mucous membrane of the mouth and throat. Also he thrust pellets of it into the ears, the nostrils, and the corners of the eyes.

The effect was almost instantaneous. A change came over the girl's lovely face, the last awful change of death. Her cheeks fell in, her chin dropped, her eyes opened, and her flesh quivered convulsively. The wizard saw it all by the bright moonlight. Then he took up his part in this unholy drama.

All that he did cannot be described, because it is indescribable. The Witch of Endor repeated no formula, but she raised the dead; and so did Hokosa the wizard. But he buried his face in the grey dust of the grave, he blew with his lips into the dust, he clutched at the dust with his hands, and when he raised his face again, lo! it was grey like the dust. Now began the marvel; for, though the woman before him remained a corpse, from the lips of that corpse a voice issued, and its sound was horrible, for the accent and tone of it were masculine, and the

instrument through which it spoke--Noma's throat--was feminine. Yet it could be recognised as the voice of Umsuka the dead king.

"Why have you summoned me from my rest, Hokosa?" muttered the voice from the lips of the huddled corpse.

"Because I would learn the future, Spirit of the king," answered the wizard boldly, but saluting as he spoke. "You are dead, and to your sight all the Gates are opened. By the power that I have, I command you to show me what you see therein concerning myself, and to point out to me the path that I should follow to attain my ends and the ends of her in whose breast you dwell."

At once the answer came, always in the same horrible voice:--

"Hearken to your fate for this world, Hokosa the wizard. You shall triumph over your rival, the white man, the messenger; and by your hand he shall perish, passing to his appointed place where you must meet again. By that to which you cling you shall be betrayed, ah! you shall lose that which you love and follow after that which you do not desire. In the grave of error you shall find truth, from the deeps of sin you shall pluck righteousness. When these words fall upon your ears again, then, Wizard, take them for a sign and let your heart be turned. That which you deem accursed shall lift you up on high. High shall you be set above the nation and its king, and from age to age the voice of the people shall praise you. Yet in the end comes judgment; and there shall

the sin and the atonement strive together, and in that hour, Wizard, you shall----"

Thus the voice spoke, strongly at first, but growing ever more feeble as the sparks of life departed from the body of the woman, till at length it ceased altogether.

"What shall chance to me in that hour?" Hokosa asked eagerly, placing his ears against Noma's lips.

No answer came; and the wizard knew that if he would drag his wife back from the door of death he must delay no longer. Dashing the sweat from his eyes with one hand, with the other he seized the gourd of fluid that he had placed ready, and thrusting back her head, he poured of its contents down her throat and waited a while. She did not move. In an extremity of terror he snatched a knife, and with a single cut severed a vein in her arm, then taking some of the fluid that remained in the gourd in his hand, he rubbed it roughly upon her brow and throat and heart. Now Noma's fingers stirred, and now, with horrible contortions and every symptom of agony, life returned to her. The blood flowed from her wounded arm, slowly at first, then more fast, and lifting her head she spoke.

"Take me hence," she cried, "or I shall go mad; for I have seen and heard things too terrible to be spoken!"

"What have you seen and heard?" he asked, while he cut the thongs which bound her wrists and feet.

"I do not know," Noma answered weeping; "the vision of them passes from me; but all the distances of death were open to my sight; yes, I travelled through the distances of death. In them I met him who was the king, and he lay cold within me, speaking to my heart; and as he passed from me he looked upon the child which I shall bear and cursed it, and surely accursed it shall be. Take me hence, O you most evil man, for of your magic I have had enough, and from this day forth I am haunted!"

"Have no fear," answered Hokosa; "you have made the journey whence but few return; and yet, as I promised you, you have returned to wear the greatness you desire and that I sent you forth to win; for henceforth we shall be great. Look, the dawn is breaking--the dawn of life and the dawn of power--and the mists of death and of disgrace roll back before us. Now the path is clear, the dead have shown it to me, and of wizardry I shall need no more."

"Ay!" answered Noma, "but night follows dawn as the dawn follows night; and through the darkness and the daylight, I tell you, Wizard, henceforth I am haunted! Also, be not so sure, for though I know not what the dead have spoken to you, yet it lingers on my mind that their words have many meanings. Nay, speak to me no more, but let us fly from this dread home of ghosts, this habitation of the spirit-folk which we have violated."

So the wizard and his wife crept from that solemn place, and as they went they saw the dawn-beams lighting upon the white cross that was reared in the Plain of Fire.