

CHAPTER XII

THE MESSAGE OF HOKOSA

The weeks passed by, and Hokosa sat in his kraal weaving a great plot. None suspected him any more, for though he did not belong to it, he was heard to speak well of the new faith, and to acknowledge that the god of fire which he had worshipped was a false god. He was humble also towards the king, but he craved to withdraw himself from all matters of the State, saying that now he had but one desire--to tend his herds and garden, and to grow old in peace with the new wife whom he had chosen and whom he loved. Owen, too, he greeted courteously when he met him, sending him gifts of corn and cattle for the service of his church. Moreover, when a messenger came from Hafela, making proposals to him, he drove him away and laid the matter before the council of the king. Yet that messenger, who was hunted from the kraal, took back a secret word for Hafela's ear.

"It is not always winter," was the word, "and it may chance that in the springtime you shall hear from me." And again, "Say to the Prince Hafela, that though my face towards him is like a storm, yet behind the clouds the sun shines ever."

At length there came a day when Noma, his wife, was brought to bed. Hokosa, her husband, tended her alone, and when the child was born he groaned aloud and would not suffer her to look upon its face. Yet,

lifting herself, she saw.

"Did I not tell you it was accursed?" she wailed. "Take it away!" and she sank back in a swoon. So he took the child, and buried it deep in the cattle-yard by night.

After this it came about that Noma, who, though her mind owned the sway of his, had never loved him over much, hated her husband Hokosa. Yet he had this power over her that she could not leave him. But he loved her more and more, and she had this power over him that she could always draw him to her. Great as her beauty had ever been, after the birth of the child it grew greater day by day, but it was an evil beauty, the beauty of a witch; and this fate fell upon her, that she feared the dark and would never be alone after the sun had set.

When she was recovered from her illness, Noma sat one night in her hut, and Hokosa sat there also watching her. The evening was warm, but a bright fire burned in the hut, and she crouched upon a stool by the fire, glancing continually over her shoulder.

"Why do you bide by the fire, seeing that it is so hot, Noma?" he asked.

"Because I fear to be away from the light," she answered; adding, "Oh, accursed man! for your own ends you have caused me to be bewitched, ah! and that which was born of me also, and bewitched I am by those shadows that you bade me seek, which now will never leave me. Nor, is this all.

You swore to me that if I would do your will I should become great, ay!
and you took me from one who would have made me great and whom I should
have pushed on to victory. But now it seems that for nothing I made that
awful voyage into the deeps of death; and for nothing, yet living, am
I become the sport of those that dwell there. How am I greater than I
was--I who am but the second wife of a fallen witch-doctor, who sits
in the sun, day by day, while age gathers on his head like frost upon a
bush? Where are all your high schemes now? Where is the fruit of wisdom
that I gathered for you? Answer, Wizard, whom I have learned to hate,
but from whom I cannot escape!"

"Truly," said Hokosa in a bitter voice, "for all my sins against them
the heavens have laid a heavy fate upon my head, that thus with flesh
and spirit I should worship a woman who loathes me. One comfort only is
left to me, that you dare not take my life lest another should be added
to those shadows who companion you, and what I bid you, that you must
still do. Ay, you fear the dark, Noma; yet did I command you to rise
and go stand alone through the long night yonder in the burying-place of
kings, why, you must obey. Come, I command you--go!"

"Nay, nay!" she wailed in an extremity of terror. Yet she rose and
went towards the door sideways, for her hands were outstretched in
supplication to him.

"Come back," he said, "and listen: If a hunter has nurtured up a fierce
dog, wherewith alone he can gain his livelihood, he tries to tame that

dog by love, does he not? And if it will not become gentle, then, the brute being necessary to him, he tames it by fear. I am the hunter and, Noma, you are the hound; and since this curse is on me that I cannot live without you, why I must master you as best I may. Yet, believe me, I would not cause you fear or pain, and it saddens me that you should be haunted by these sick fancies, for they are nothing more. I have seen such cases before to-day, and I have noted that they can be cured by mixing with fresh faces and travelling in new countries. Noma, I think it would be well that, after your late sickness, according to the custom of the women of our people, you should part from me a while, and go upon a journey of purification."

"Whither shall I go and who will go with me?" she asked sullenly.

"I will find you companions, women discreet and skilled. And as to where you shall go, I will tell you. You shall go upon an embassy to the Prince Hafela."

"Are you not afraid that I should stop there?" she asked again, with a flash of her eyes. "It is true that I never learned all the story, yet I thought that the prince was not so glad to hand me back to you as you would have had me to believe. The price you paid for me must have been good, Hokosa, and mayhap it had to do with the death of a king."

"I am not afraid," he answered, setting his teeth, "because I know that whatever your heart may desire, my will follows you, and while I live

that is a cord you cannot break unless I choose to loose it, Noma. I command you to be faithful to me and to return to me, and these commands you must obey. Harken: you taunted me just now, saying that I sat like a dotard in the sun and advanced you nothing. Well, I will advance you, for both our sakes, but mostly for your own, since you desire it, and it must be done through the Prince Hafela. I cannot leave this kraal, for day and night I am watched, and before I had gone an hour's journey I should be seized; also here I have work to do. But the Place of Purification is secret, and when you reach it you need not bide there, you can travel on into the mountains till you come to the town of the Prince Hafela. He will receive you gladly, and you shall whisper this message in his ear:--

"These are the words of Hokosa, my husband, which he has set in my mouth to deliver to you, O Prince. Be guided by them and grow great; reject them and die a wanderer, a little man of no account. But first, this is the price that you shall swear by the sacred oath to pay to Hokosa, if his wisdom finds favour in your sight and through it you come to victory: That after you, the king, he, Hokosa, shall be the first man in our land, the general of the armies, the captain of the council, the head of the doctors, and that to him shall be given half the cattle of Nodwengo, who now is king. Also to him shall be given power to stamp out the new faith which overruns the land like a foreign weed, and to deal as he thinks fit with those who cling thereto.'

"Now, Noma, when he has sworn this oath in your ear, calling down ruin

upon his own head, should he break one word of it, and not before, you shall continue the message thus: "These are the other words that Hokosa set in my mouth: "Know, O Prince, that the king, your brother, grows very strong, for he is a great soldier, who learned his art in bygone wars; also the white man that is named Messenger has taught him many things as to the building of forts and walls and the drilling and discipline of men. So strong is he that you can scarcely hope to conquer him in open war--yet snakes may crawl where men cannot walk. Therefore, Prince, let your part be that of a snake. Do you send an embassy to the king, your brother and say to him:--

"My brother, you have been preferred before me and set up to be king in my place, and because of this my heart is bitter, so bitter that I have gathered my strength to make war upon you. Yet, at the last, I have taken another council, bethinking me that, if we fight, in the end it may chance that neither of us will be left alive to rule, and that the people also will be brought to nothing. To the north there lies a good country and a wide, where but few men live, and thither I would go, setting the mountains and the river between us; for there, far beyond your borders, I also can be a king. Now, to reach this country, I must travel by the pass that is not far from your Great Place, and I pray you that you will not attack my impis or the women and children that I shall send, and a guard before them, to await me in the plain beyond the mountains, seeing that these can only journey slowly. Let us pass by in peace, my brother, for so shall our quarrel be ended; but if you do so much as lift a single spear against me, then I will give you battle,

setting my fortune against your fortune and my god against your God!"

"Such are the words that the embassy shall deliver into the ears of the king, Nodwengo, and it shall come about that when he hears them, Nodwengo, whose heart is gentle and who seeks not war, shall answer softly, saying:--

"Go in peace, my brother, and live in peace in that land which you would win.'

"Then shall you, Hafela, send on the most of your cattle and the women and the children through that pass in the mountains, bidding them to await you in the plain, and after a while you shall follow them with your impis. But these shall not travel in war array, for carriers must bear their fighting shields in bundles and their stabbing spears shall be rolled up in mats. Now, on the sixth day of your journey you shall camp at the mouth of the pass which the cattle and the women have already travelled, and his outposts and spies will bring it to the ears of the king that your force is sleeping there, purposing to climb the pass on the morrow.

"But on that night, so soon as the darkness falls, you must rise up with your captains and your regiments, leaving your fires burning and men about your fires, and shall travel very swiftly across the valley, so that an hour before the dawn you reach the second range of mountains, and pass it by the gorge which is the burying-place of kings. Here you

shall light a fire, which those who watch will believe to be but the fire of a herdsman who is acold. But I, Hokosa, also shall be watching, and when I see that fire I will creep, with some whom I can trust, to the little northern gate of the outer wall, and we will spear those that guard it and open the gate, that your army may pass through. Then, before the regiments can stand to their arms or those within it are awakened, you must storm the inner walls and by the light of the burning huts, put the dwellers in the Great Place to the spear, and the rays of the rising sun shall crown you king.

"Follow this counsel of mine, O Prince Hafela, and all will go well with you. Neglect it and be lost. There is but one thing which you need fear--it is the magic of the Messenger, to whom it is given to read the secret thoughts of men. But of him take no account, for he is my charge, and before ever you set a foot within the Great Place he shall have taken his answer back to Him Who sent him."

Hokosa finished speaking.

"Have you heard?" he said to Noma.

"I have heard."

"Then speak the message."

She repeated it word for word, making no fault. "Have no fear," she

added, "I shall forget nothing when I stand before the prince."

"You are a woman, but your counsel is good. What think you of the plan, Noma?"

"It is deep and well laid," she answered, "and surely it would succeed were it not for one thing. The white man, Messenger, will be too clever for you, for as you say, he is a reader of the thoughts of men."

"Can the dead read men's thoughts, or if they can, do they cry them on the market-place or into the ears of kings?" asked Hokosa. "Have I not told you that, before I see the signal-fire yonder, the Messenger shall sleep sound? I have a medicine, Noma, a slow medicine that none can trace."

"The Messenger may sleep sound, Hokosa, and yet perchance he may pass on his message to another and, with it, his magic. Who can say? Still, husband, strike on for power and greatness and revenge, letting the blow fall where it will."