

CHAPTER XIII

THE BASKET OF FRUIT

Three days later it was announced that according to the custom of the women of the People of Fire, Noma having given birth to a still-born child, was about to start upon a journey to the Mount of Purification. Here she would abide awhile and make sacrifice to the spirits of her ancestors, that they might cease to be angry with her and in future protect her from such misfortunes. This not unusual domestic incident excited little comment, although it was remarked that the four matrons by whom she was to be accompanied, in accordance with the tribal etiquette, were all of them the wives of soldiers who had deserted to Hafela. Indeed, the king himself noticed as much when Hokosa made the customary formal application to him to sanction the expedition.

"So be it," he said, "though myself I have lost faith in such rites. Also, Hokosa, I think it likely that although your wife goes out with company, she will return alone."

"Why, King?" asked Hokosa.

"For this reason--that those who travel with her have husbands yonder at the town of the Prince Hafela, and the Mount of Purification is on the road thither. Having gone so far, they may go farther. Well, let them go, for I desire to have none among my people whose hearts turn

otherwhere, and it would not be wonderful if they should choose to seek their lords. But perchance, Hokosa, there are some in this town who may use them as messengers to the prince"--and he looked at him keenly.

"I think not, King," said Hokosa. "None but a fool would make use of women to carry secret words or tidings. Their tongues are too long and their memories too bad, or too uncertain."

"Yet I have heard, Hokosa, that you have made use of women in many a strange work. Say now, what were you doing upon a night a while ago with that fair witch-wife if yours yonder in the burying-place of kings, where it is not lawful that you should set your foot? Nay, deny it not. You were seen to enter the valley after midnight and to return thence at the dawn, and it was seen also that as she came homewards your wife walked as one who is drunken, and she, whom it is not easy to frighten, wore a face of fear. Man, I do not trust you, and were I wise I should hunt you hence, or keep you so close that you could scarcely move without my knowledge.

"Why should I trust you?" Nodwengo went on vehemently. "Can a wizard cease from wizardry, or a plotter from his plots? No, not until the waters run upward and the sun shines at night; not until repentance touches you and your heart is changed, which I should hold as much a marvel. You were my father's friend and he made you great; yet you could plan with my brother to poison him, your king. Nay, be silent; I know it, though I have said nothing of it because one that is dear to me has

interceded for you. You were the priest of the false god, and with that god are fallen from your place, yet you have not renounced him. You sit still in your kraal and pretend to be asleep, but your slumber is that of the serpent which watches his time to strike. How do I know that you will not poison me as you would have poisoned my father, or stir up rebellion against me, or bring my brother's impis on my head?"

"If the King thinks any of these things of his servant," answered Hokosa in a humble voice, but with dignity, "his path is plain: let him put me to death and sleep in peace. Who am I that I should full the ears of a king with my defence against these charges, or dare to wrangle with him?"

"Long ago I should have put you to death, Hokosa," answered Nodwengo sternly, "had it not been that one has pleaded for you, declaring that in you there is good which will overcome the evil, and that you who now are an axe to cut down my throne, in time to come shall be a roof-tree for its support. Also, the law that I obey does not allow me to take the blood of men save upon full proof, and against you as yet I have no proof. Still, Hokosa, be warned in time and let your heart be turned before the grave claims your body and the Wicked One your soul."

"I thank you, King, for your gentle words and your tender care for my well-being both on earth and after I shall leave it. But I tell you, King, that I had rather die as your father would have killed me in the old days, or your brother would kill me now, did either of them hate or

fear me, than live on in safety, owing my life to a new law and a new mercy that do not befit the great ones of the world. King, I am your servant," and giving him the royal salute, Hokosa rose and left his presence.

"At the least there goes a man," said Nodwengo, as he watched him depart.

"Of whom do you speak, King?" asked Owen, who at that moment entered the royal house.

"Of him whom you must have touched in the door-way, Messenger, Hokosa the wizard," answered the king, and he told him of what had passed between them. "I said," he added, "that he was a man, and so he is; yet I hold that I have done wrong to listen to your pleading and to spare him, for I am certain that he will bring bloodshed upon me and trouble on the Faith. Think now, Messenger, how full must be that man's heart of secret rage and hatred, he who was so great and is now so little! Will he not certainly strive to grow great again? Will he not strive to be avenged upon those who humbled him and the religion they have chosen?"

"It may be," answered Owen, "but if so, he will not conquer. I tell you, King, that like water hidden in a rock there is good in this man's heart, and that I shall yet find a rod wherewith to cause it to gush out and refresh the desert."

"It is more likely that he will find a spear wherewith to cause your blood to gush out and refresh the jackals," answered the king grimly; "but be it as you will. And now, what of your business?"

"This, King: John, my servant, has returned from the coast countries, and he brings me a letter saying that before long three white teachers will follow him to take up the work which I have begun. I pray that when they come, for my sake and for the sake of the truth that I have taught you, you will treat them kindly and protect them, remembering that at first they can know little of your language or your customs."

"I will indeed," said the king, with much concern. "But tell me, Messenger, why do you speak of yourself as of one who soon will be but a memory? Do you purpose to leave us?"

"No, King, but I believe that ere long I shall be recalled. I have given my message, my task is well-nigh ended and I must be turning home. Save for your sakes I do not sorrow at this, for to speak truth I grow very weary," and he smiled sadly.

Hokosa went home alarmed and full of bitterness, for he had never guessed that the "servant of the Messenger," as he called Nodwengo the King, knew so much about him and his plans. His fall was hard to him, but to be thus measured up, weighed, and contemptuously forgiven was

almost more than he could bear. It was the white prophet who had done this thing; he had told Nodwengo of his, Hokosa's, share in the plot to murder the late King Umsuka, though how he came to know of that matter was beyond guessing. He had watched him, or caused him to be watched, when he went forth to consult spirits in the place of the dead; he had warned Nodwengo against him. Worst of all, he had dared to treat him with contempt; had pleaded for his life and safety, so that he was spared as men spare a snake from which the charmer has drawn the fangs. When they met in the gate of the king's house yonder this white thief, who had stolen his place and power, had even smiled upon him and greeted him kindly, and doubtless while he smiled, by aid of the magic he possessed, had read him through and gone on to tell the story to the king. Well, of this there should be an end; he would kill the Messenger, or himself be killed.

When Hokosa reached his kraal he found Noma sitting beneath a fruit tree that grew in it, idly employed in stringing beads, for the work of the household she left to his other wife, Zinti, an old and homely woman who thought more of the brewing of the beer and the boiling of the porridge than of religions or politics or of the will of kings. Of late Noma had haunted the shadow of this tree, for beneath it lay that child which had been born to her.

"Does it please the king to grant leave for my journey?" she asked, looking up.

"Yes, it pleases him."

"I am thankful," she answered, "for I think that if I bide here much longer, with ghosts and memories for company, I shall go mad," and she glanced at a spot near by, where the earth showed signs of recent disturbance.

"He gives leave," Hokosa went on, taking no notice of her speech, "but he suspects us. Listen----" and he told her of the talk that had passed between himself and the king.

"The white man has read you as he reads in his written books," she answered, with a little laugh. "Well, I said that he would be too clever for you, did I not? It does not matter to me, for to-morrow I go upon my journey, and you can settle it as you will."

"Ay!" answered Hokosa, grinding his teeth, "it is true that he has read me; but this I promise you, that all books shall soon be closed to him. Yet how is it to be done without suspicion or discovery? I know many poisons, but all of them must be administered, and let him work never so cunningly, he who gives a poison can be traced."

"Then cause some other to give it and let him bear the blame," suggested Noma languidly.

Hokosa made no answer, but walking to the gate of the kraal, which was

open, he leaned against it lost in thought. As he stood thus he saw a woman advancing towards him, who carried on her head a small basket of fruit, and knew her for one of those whose business it was to wait upon the Messenger in his huts, or rather in his house, for by now he had built himself a small house, and near it a chapel. This woman saw Hokosa also and looked at him sideways, as though she would like to stop and speak to him, but feared to do so.

"Good morrow to you, friend," he said. "How goes it with your husband and your house?"

Now Hokosa knew well that this woman's husband had taken a dislike to her and driven her from his home, filling her place with one younger and more attractive. At the question the woman's lips began to tremble, and her eyes swam with tears.

"Ah! great doctor," she said, "why do you ask me of my husband? Have you not heard that he has driven me away and that another takes my place?"

"Do I hear all the gossip of this town?" asked Hokosa, with a smile.

"But come in and tell me the story; perchance I may be able to help you, for I have charms to compel the fancy of such faithless ones."

The woman looked round, and seeing that there was no one in sight, she slipped swiftly through the gate of the kraal, which he closed behind her.

"Noma," said Hokosa, "here is one who tells me that her husband has deserted her, and who comes to seek my counsel. Bring her milk to drink."

"There are some wives who would not find that so great an evil," replied Noma mockingly, as she rose to do his bidding.

Hokosa winced at the sarcasm, and turning to his visitor, said:--

"Now tell me your tale; but say first, why are you so frightened?"

"I am frightened, master," she answered, "lest any should have seen me enter here, for I have become a Christian, and the Christians are forbidden to consult the witch-doctors, as we were wont to do. For my case, it is----"

"No need to set it out," broke in Hokosa, waving his hand. "I see it written on your face; your husband has put you away and loves another woman, your own half-sister whom you brought up from a child."

"Ah! master, you have heard aright."

"I have not heard, I look upon you and I see. Fool, am I not a wizard? Tell me----" and taking dust into his hand, he blew the grains this way and that, regarding them curiously. "Yes, it is so. Last night you crept

to your husband's hut--do you remember, a dog growled at you as you passed the gate?--and there in front of the hut he sat with his new wife. She saw you coming, but pretending not to see, she threw her arms about his neck, kissing and fondling him before your eyes, till you could bear it no longer, and revealed yourself, upbraiding them. Then your rival taunted you and stirred up the man with bitter words, till at length he took a stick and beat you from the door, and there is a mark of it upon your shoulder."

"It is true, it is too true!" she groaned.

"Yes, it is true. And now, what do you wish from me?"

"Master, I wish a medicine to make my husband hate my rival and to draw his heart back to me."

"That must be a strong medicine," said Hokosa, "which will turn a man from one who is young and beautiful to one who is past her youth and ugly."

"I am as I am," answered the poor woman, with a touch of natural dignity, "but at least I have loved him and worked for him for fifteen long years."

"And that is why he would now be rid of you, for who cumpers his kraal with old cattle?"

"And yet at times they are the best, Master. Wrinkles and smooth skin seem strange upon one pillow," she added, glancing at Noma, who came from the hut carrying a bowl of milk in her hand.

"If you seek counsel," said Hokosa quickly, "why do you not go to the white man, that Messenger in whom you believe, and ask him for a potion to turn your husband's heart?"

"Master, I have been to him, and he is very good to me, for when I was driven out he gave me work to do and food. But he told me that he had no medicine for such cases, and that the Great Man in the sky alone could soften the breast of my husband and cause my sister to cease from her wickedness. Last night I went to see whether He would do it, and you know what befell me there."

"That befell you which befalls all fools who put their trust in words alone. What will you pay me, woman, if I give you the medicine which you seek?"

"Alas, master, I am poor. I have nothing to offer you, for when I would not stay in my husband's kraal to be a servant to his new wife, he took the cow and the five goats that belonged to me, as, I being childless, according to our ancient law he had the right to do."

"You are bold who come to ask a doctor to minister to you, bearing no

fee in your hand," said Hokosa. "Yet, because I have pity on you, I will be content with very little. Give me that basket of fruit, for my wife has been sick and loves its taste."

"I cannot do that, Master," answered the woman, "for it is sent by my hand as a present to the Messenger, and he knows this and will eat of it after he has made prayer to-day. Did I not give it to him, it would be discovered that I had left it here with you."

"Then begone without your medicine," said Hokosa, "for I need such fruit."

The woman rose and said, looking at him wistfully:--

"Master, if you will be satisfied with other fruits of this same sort, I know where I can get them for you."

"When will you get them?"

"Now, within an hour. And till I return I will leave these in pledge with you; but these and no other I must give to the Messenger, for he has already seen them and might discover the difference; also I have promised so to do."

"As you will," said Hokosa. "If you are with the fruit within an hour, the medicine will be ready for you, a medicine that shall not fail."