

CHAPTER XIV

THE EATING OF THE FRUIT

The woman slipped away secretly. When she had gone Hokosa bade his wife bring the basket of fruit into the hut.

"It is best that the butcher should kill the ox himself," she answered meaningly.

He carried in the basket and set it on the floor.

"Why do you speak thus, Noma?" he asked.

"Because I will have no hand in the matter, Hokosa. I have been the tool of a wizard, and won little joy therefrom. The tool of a murderer I will not be!"

"If I kill, it is for the sake of both of us," he said passionately.

"It may be so, Hokosa, or for the sake of the people, or for the sake of Heaven above--I do not know and do not care; but I say, do your own killing, for I am sure that even less luck will hang to it than hangs to your witchcraft."

"Of all women you are the most perverse!" he said, stamping his foot

upon the ground.

"Thus you may say again before everything is done, husband; but if it be so, why do you love me and tie me to you with your wizardry? Cut the knot, and let me go my way while you go yours."

"Woman, I cannot; but still I bid you beware, for, strive as you will, my path must be your path. Moreover, till I free you, you cannot lift voice or hand against me."

Then, while she watched him curiously, Hokosa fetched his medicines and took from them some powder fine as dust and two tiny crowquills. Placing a fruit before him, he inserted one of these quills into its substance, and filling the second with the powder, he shook its contents into it and withdrew the tube. This process he repeated four times on each of the fruits, replacing them one by one in the basket. So deftly did he work upon them, that however closely they were scanned none could guess that they had been tampered with.

"Will it kill at once?" asked Noma.

"No, indeed; but he who eats these fruits will be seized on the third day with dysentery and fever, and these will cling to him till within seven weeks--or if he is very strong, three months--he dies. This is the best of poisons, for it works through nature and can be traced by none."

"Except, perchance, by that Spirit Whom the white man worships, and Who also works through nature, as you learned, Hokosa, when He rolled the lightning back upon your head, shattering your god and beating down your company."

Then of a sudden terror seized the wizard, and springing to his feet, he cursed his wife till she trembled before him.

"Vile woman, and double-faced!" he said, "why do you push me forward with one hand and with the other drag me back? Why do you whisper evil counsel into one ear and into the other prophesy of misfortunes to come? Had it not been for you, I should have let this business lie; I should have taken my fate and been content. But day by day you have taunted me with my fall and grieved over the greatness that you have lost, till at length you have driven me to this. Why cannot you be all good or all wicked, or at the least, through righteousness and sin, faithful to my interest and your own?"

"Because I hate you, Hokosa, and yet can strike you only through my tongue and your mad love for me. I am fast in your power, but thus at least I can make you feel something of my own pain. Hark! I hear that woman at the gate. Will you give her back the basket, or will you not? Whatever you may choose to do, do not say in after days that I urged you to the deed."

"Truly you are great-hearted!" he answered, with cold contempt; "one for

whom I did well to enter into treachery and sin! So be it: having gone so far upon it, come what may, I will not turn back from this journey. Let in that fool!"

Presently the woman stood before them, bearing with her another basket of fruit.

"These are what you seek, Master," she said, "though I was forced to win them by theft. Now give me my own and the medicine and let me go."

He gave her the basket, and with it, wrapped in a piece of kidskin, some of the same powder with which he had doctored the fruits.

"What shall I do with this?" she asked.

"You must find means to sprinkle it upon your sister's food, and thereafter your husband shall come to hate even the sight of her."

"But will he come to love me again?"

Hokosa shrugged his shoulders.

"I know not," he answered; "that is for you to see to. Yet this is sure, that if a tree grows up before the house of a man, shutting it off from the sunlight, when that tree is cut down the sun shines upon his house again."

"It is nothing to the sun on what he shines," said the woman.

"If the saying does not please you, then forget it. I promise you this and no more, that very soon the man shall cease to turn to your rival."

"The medicine will not harm her?" asked the woman doubtfully. "She has worked me bitter wrong indeed, yet she is my sister, whom I nursed when she was little, and I do not wish to do her hurt. If only he will welcome me back and treat me kindly, I am willing even that she should dwell on beneath my husband's roof, bearing his children, for will they not be of my own blood?"

"Woman," answered Hokosa impatiently, "you weary me with your talk. Did I say that the charm would hurt her? I said that it would cause your husband to hate the sight of her. Now begone, taking or leaving it, and let me rest. If your mind is troubled, throw aside that medicine, and go soothe it with such sights as you saw last night."

On hearing this the woman sprang up, hid away the poison in her hair, and taking her basket of fruit, passed from the kraal as secretly as she had entered it.

"Why did you give her death-medicine?" asked Noma of Hokosa, as he stood staring after her. "Have you a hate to satisfy against the husband or the girl who is her rival?"

"None," he answered, "for they have never crossed my path. Oh, foolish woman! cannot you read my plan?"

"Not altogether, Husband."

"Listen then: this woman will give to her sister a medicine of which in the end she must die. She may be discovered or she may not, but it is certain that she will be suspected, seeing that the bitterness of the quarrel between them is known. Also she will give to the Messenger certain fruits, after eating of which he will be taken sick and in due time die, of just such a disease as that which carries off the woman's rival. Now, if any think that he is poisoned, which I trust none will, whom will they suppose to have poisoned him, though indeed they can never prove the crime?"

"The plan is clever," said Noma with admiration, "but in it I see a flaw. The woman will say that she had the drug from you, or, at the least, will babble of her visit to you."

"Not so," answered Hokosa, "for on this matter the greatest talker in the world would keep silence. Firstly, she, being a Christian, dare not own that she has visited a witch-doctor. Secondly, the fruit she brought in payment was stolen, therefore she will say nothing of it. Thirdly, to admit that she had medicine from me would be to admit her guilt, and that she will scarcely do even under torture, which by the new law it is

not lawful to apply. Moreover, none saw her come here, and I should deny her visit."

"The plan is very clever," said Noma again.

"It is very clever," he repeated complacently; "never have I made a better one. Now throw those fruits to the she goats that are in the kraal, and burn the basket, while I go and talk to some in the Great Place, telling them that I have returned from counting my cattle on the mountain, whither I went after I had bowed the knee in the house of the king."

Two hours later, Hokosa, having made a wide detour and talked to sundry of his acquaintances about the condition of his cattle, might have been seen walking slowly along the north side of the Great Place towards his own kraal. His path lay past the chapel and the little house that Owen had built to dwell in. This house was furnished with a broad verandah, and upon it sat the Messenger himself, eating his evening meal. Hokosa saw him, and a great desire entered his heart to learn whether or no he had partaken of the poisoned fruit. Also it occurred to him that it would be wise if, before the end came, he could contrive to divert all possible suspicion from himself, by giving the impression that he was now upon friendly terms with the great white teacher and not disinclined even to become a convert to his doctrine.

For a moment he hesitated, seeking an excuse. One soon suggested itself to his ready mind. That very morning the king had told him not obscurely that Owen had pleaded for his safety and saved him from being put upon his trial on charges of witchcraft and murder. He would go to him, now at once, playing the part of a grateful penitent, and the White Man's magic must be keen indeed if it availed to pierce the armour of his practised craft.

So Hokosa went up and squatted himself down native fashion among a little group of converts who were waiting to see their teacher upon one business or another. He was not more than ten paces from the verandah, and sitting thus he saw a sight that interested him strangely. Having eaten a little of a dish of roasted meat, Owen put out his hand and took a fruit from a basket that the wizard knew well. At this moment he looked up and recognised Hokosa.

"Do you desire speech with me, Hokosa?" he asked in his gentle voice.

"If so, be pleased to come hither."

"Nay, Messenger," answered Hokosa, "I desire speech with you indeed, but it is ill to stand between a hungry man and his food."

"I care little for my food," answered Owen; "at the least it can wait," and he put down the fruit.

Then suddenly a feeling to which the wizard had been for many years a stranger took possession of him--a feeling of compunction. That man was about to partake of what would cause his death--of what he, Hokosa, had prepared in order that it should cause his death. He was good, he was kindly, none could allege a wrong deed against him; and, foolishness though it might be, so was the doctrine that he taught. Why should he kill him? It was true that never till that moment had he hesitated, by fair means or foul, to remove an enemy or rival from his path. He had been brought up in this teaching; it was part of the education of wizards to be merciless, for they reigned by terror and evil craft. Their magic lay chiefly in clairvoyance and powers of observation developed to a pitch that was almost superhuman, and the best of their weapons was poison in infinite variety, whereof the guild alone understood the properties and preparation. Therefore there was nothing strange, nothing unusual in this deed of devilish and cunning murder that the sight of its doing should stir him thus, and yet it did stir him. He was minded to stop the plot, to let things take their course.

Some sense of the futility of all such strivings came home to him, and as in a glass, for Hokosa was a man of imagination, he foresaw their end. A little success, a little failure, it scarcely mattered which, and then--that end. Within twenty years, or ten, or mayhap even one, what would this present victory or defeat mean to him? Nothing so far as he was concerned; that is, nothing so far as his life of to-day was concerned. Yet, if he had another life, it might mean everything. There was another life; he knew it, who had dragged back from its borders the

spirits of the dead, though what might be the state and occupations of those dead he did not know. Yet he believed--why he could not tell--that they were affected vitally by their acts and behaviour here; and his intelligence warned him that good must always flow from good, and evil from evil. To kill this man was evil, and of it only evil could come.

What did he care whether Hafela ruled the nation or Nodwengo, and whether it worshipped the God of the Christians or the god of Fire--who, by the way, had proved himself so singularly inefficient in the hour of trial. Now that he thought of it, he much preferred Nodwengo to Hafela, for the one was a just man and the other a tyrant; and he himself was more comfortable as a wealthy private person than he had been as a head medicine-man and a chief of wizards. He would let things stand; he would prevent the Messenger from eating of that fruit. A word could do it; he had but to suggest that it was unripe or not wholesome at this season of the year, and it would be cast aside.

All these reflections, or their substance, passed through Hokosa's mind in a few instants of time, and already he was rising to go to the verandah and translate their moral into acts, when another thought occurred to him--How should he face Noma with this tale? He could give up his own ambitions, but could he bear her mockery, as day by day she taunted him with his faint-heartedness and reproached him with his failure to regain greatness and to make her great? He forgot that he might conceal the truth from her; or rather, he did not contemplate such concealment, of which their relations were too peculiar and too intimate

to permit. She hated him, and he worshipped her with a half-inhuman passion--a passion so unnatural, indeed, that it suggested the horrid and insatiable longings of the damned--and yet their souls were naked to each other. It was their fate that they could hide nothing each from each--they were cursed with the awful necessity of candour.

It would be impossible that he should keep from Noma anything that he did or did not do; it would be still more impossible that she should conceal from him even such imaginings and things as it is common for women to hold secret. Her very bitterness, which it had been policy for her to cloak or soften, would gush from her lips at the sight of him; nor, in the depth of his rage and torment, could he, on the other hand, control the ill-timed utterance of his continual and overmastering passion. It came to this, then: he must go forward, and against his better judgment, because he was afraid to go back, for the whip of a woman's tongue drove him on remorselessly. It was better that the Messenger should die, and the land run red with blood, than that he should be forced to endure this scourge.

So with a sigh Hokosa sank back to the ground and watched while Owen ate three of the poisoned fruits. After a pause, he took a fourth and bit into it, but not seeming to find it to his taste, he threw it to a child that was waiting by the verandah for any scraps which might be left over from his meal. The child caught it, and devoured it eagerly.

Then, smiling at the little boy's delight, the Messenger called to

Hokosa to come up and speak with him.