

CHAPTER XV

NOMA COMES TO HAFEELA

Hokosa advanced to the verandah and bowed to the white man with grave dignity.

"Be seated," said Owen. "Will you not eat? though I have nothing to offer you but these," and he pushed the basket of fruits towards him, adding, "The best of them, I fear, are already gone."

"I thank you, no, Messenger; such fruits are not always wholesome at this season of the year. I have known them to breed dysentery."

"Indeed," said Owen. "If so, I trust that I may escape. I have suffered from that sickness, and I think that another bout of it would kill me. In future I will avoid them. But what do you seek with me, Hokosa? Enter and tell me," and he led the way into a little sitting-room.

"Messenger," said the wizard, with deep humility, "I am a proud man; I have been a great man, and it is no light thing to me to humble myself before the face of my conqueror. Yet I am come to this. To-day when I was in audience with the king, craving a small boon of his graciousness, he spoke to me sharp and bitter words. He told me that he had been minded to put me on trial for my life because of various misdoings which are alleged against me in the past, but that you had pleaded for me

and that for this cause he spared me. I come to thank you for your gentleness, Messenger, for I think that had I been in your place I should have whispered otherwise in the ear of the king."

"Say no more of it, friend," said Owen kindly, "We are all of us sinners, and it is my place to push back your ancient sins, not to drag them into the light of day and clamour for their punishment. It is true I know that you plotted with the Prince Hafela to poison Umsuka the King, for it was revealed to me. It chanced, however, that I was able to recover Umsuka from his sickness, and Hafela is fled, so why should I bring up the deed against you? It is true that you still practise witchcraft, and that you hate and strive against the holy Faith which I preach; but you were brought up to wizardry and have been the priest of another creed, and these things plead for you.

"Also, Hokosa, I can see the good and evil struggling in your soul, and I pray and I believe that in the end the good will master the evil; that you who have been pre-eminent in sin will come to be pre-eminent in righteousness. Oh! be not stubborn, but listen with your ear, and let your heart be softened. The gate stands open, and I am the guide appointed to show you the way without reward or fee. Follow them ere it be too late, that in time to come when my voice is stilled you also may be able to direct the feet of wanderers into the paths of peace. It is the hour of prayer; come with me, I beg of you, and listen to some few words of the message of my lips, and let your spirit be nurtured with them, and the Sun of Truth arise upon its darkness."

Hokosa heard, and before this simple eloquence his wisdom sank confounded. More, his intelligence was stirred, and a desire came upon him to investigate and examine the canons of a creed that could produce such men as this. He made no answer, but waiting while Owen robed himself, he followed him to the chapel. It was full of new-made Christians who crowded even the doorways, but they gave place to him, wondering. Then the service began--a short and simple service. First Owen offered up some prayer for the welfare of the infant Church, for the conversion of the unbelieving, for the safety of the king and the happiness of the people. Then John, the Messenger's first disciple, read aloud from a manuscript a portion of the Scripture which his master had translated. It was St. Paul's exposition of the resurrection from the dead, and the grandeur of its thoughts and language were by no means lost upon Hokosa, who, savage and heathen though he might be, was also a man of intellect.

The reading over, Owen addressed the congregation, taking for his text, "Thy sin shall find thee out." Being now a master of the language, he preached very well and earnestly, and indeed the subject was not difficult to deal with in the presence of an audience many of whose pasts had been stepped in iniquities of no common kind. As he talked of judgment to come for the unrepentant, some of his hearers groaned and even wept; and when, changing his note, he dwelt upon the blessed future state of those who earned forgiveness, their faces were lighted up with joy.

But perhaps among all those gathered before him there were none more deeply interested than Hokosa and one other, that woman to whom he had sold the poison, and who, as it chanced, sat next to him. Hokosa, watching her face as he was skilled to do, saw the thrusts of the preacher go home, and grew sure that already in her jealous haste she had found opportunity to sprinkle the medicine upon her rival's food. She believed it to be but a charm indeed, yet knowing that in using such charms she had done wickedly, she trembled beneath the words of denunciation, and rising at length, crept from the chapel.

"Truly, her sin will find her out," thought Hokosa to himself, and then in a strange half-impersonal fashion he turned his thoughts to the consideration of his own case. Would his sin find him out? he wondered. Before he could answer that question, it was necessary first to determine whether or no he had committed a sin. The man before him--that gentle and yet impassioned man--bore in his vitals the seed of death which he, Hokosa, had planted there. Was it wrong to have done this? It depended by which standard the deed was judged. According to his own code, the code on which he had been educated and which hitherto he had followed with exactness, it was not wrong. That code taught the necessity of self-aggrandisement, or at least and at all costs the necessity of self-preservation. This white preacher stood in his path; he had humiliated him, Hokosa, and in the end, either of himself or through his influences, it was probable that he would destroy him. Therefore he must strike before in his own person he received a mortal

blow, and having no other means at his command, he struck through treachery and poison.

That was his law which for many generations had been followed and respected by his class with the tacit assent of the nation. According to this law, then, he had done no wrong. But now the victim by the altar, who did not know that already he was bound upon the altar, preached a new and a very different doctrine under which, were it to be believed, he, Hokosa, was one of the worst of sinners. The matter, then, resolved itself to this: which of these two rules of life was the right rule?

Which of them should a man follow to satisfy his conscience and to secure his abiding welfare? Apart from the motives that swayed him, as a mere matter of ethics, this problem interested Hokosa not a little, and he went homewards determined to solve it if he might. That could be done in one way only--by a close examination of both systems. The first he knew well; he had practised it for nearly forty years. Of the second he had but an inkling. Also, if he would learn more of it he must make haste, seeing that its exponent in some short while would cease to be in a position to set it out.

"I trust that you will come again," said Owen to Hokosa as they left the chapel.

"Yes, indeed, Messenger," answered the wizard; "I will come every day, and if you permit it, I will attend your private teachings also, for I accept nothing without examination, and I greatly desire to study this

new doctrine of yours, root and flower and fruit."

On the morrow Noma started upon her journey. As the matrons who accompanied her gave out with a somewhat suspicious persistency, its ostensible object was to visit the Mount of Purification, and there by fastings and solitude to purge herself of the sin of having given birth to a stillborn child. For amongst savage peoples such an accident is apt to be looked upon as little short of a crime, or, at the least, as indicating that the woman concerned is the object of the indignation of spirits who need to be appeased. To this Mount, Noma went, and there performed the customary rites.

"Little wonder," she thought to herself, "that the spirits were angry with her, seeing that yonder in the burying-ground of kings she had dared to break in upon their rest."

From the Place of Purification she travelled on ten days' journey with her companions till they reached the mountain fastness where Hafela had established himself. The town and its surroundings were of extraordinary strength, and so well guarded that it was only after considerable difficulty and delay that the women were admitted. Hearing of her arrival and that she had words for him, Hafela sent for Noma at once, receiving her by night and alone in his principal hut. She came and stood before him, and he looked at her beauty with admiring eyes, for he

could not forget the woman whom the cunning of Hokosa had forced him to put away.

"Whence come you, pretty one?" he asked, "and wherefore come you? Are you weary of your husband, that you fly back to me? If so, you are welcome indeed; for know, Noma, that I still love you."

"Ay, Prince, I am weary of my husband sure enough; but I do not fly to you, for he holds me fast to him with bonds that you cannot understand, and fast to him while he lives I must remain."

"What hinders, Noma, that having got you here I should keep you here? The cunning and magic of Hokosa may be great, but they will need to be still greater to win you from my arms."

"This hinders, Prince, that you are playing for a higher stake than that of a woman's love, and if you deal thus by me and my husband, then of a surety you will lose the game."

"What stake, Noma?"

"The stake of the crown of the People of Fire."

"And why should I lose if I take you as a wife?"

"Because Hokosa, seeing that I do not return and learning from his spies

why I do not return, will warn the king, and by many means bring all your plans to nothing. Listen now to the words of Hokosa that he has set between my lips to deliver to you"--and she repeated to him all the message without fault or fail.

"Say it again," he said, and she obeyed.

Then he answered:--

"Truly the skill of Hokosa is great, and well he knows how to set a snare; but I think that if by his counsel I should springe the bird, he will be too clever a man to keep upon the threshold of my throne. He who sets one snare may set twain, and he who sits by the threshold may desire to enter the house of kings wherein there is no space for two to dwell."

"Is this the answer that I am to take back to Hokosa?" asked Noma. "It will scarcely bind him to your cause, Prince, and I wonder that you dare to speak it to me who am his wife."

"I dare to speak it to you, Noma, because, although you be his wife, all wives do not love their lords; and I think that, perchance in days to come, you would choose rather to hold the hand of a young king than that of a witch-doctor sinking into eld. Thus shall you answer Hokosa: You shall say to him that I have heard his words and that I find them very good, and will walk along the path which he has made. Here before you I

swear by the oath that may not be broken--the sacred oath, calling down ruin upon my head should I break one word of it--that if by his aid I succeed in this great venture, I will pay him the price he asks. After myself, the king, he shall be the greatest man among the people; he shall be general of the armies; he shall be captain of the council and head of the doctors, and to him shall be given half the cattle of Nodwengo. Also, into his hand I will deliver all those who cling to this faith of the Christians, and, if it pleases him, he shall offer them as a sacrifice to his god. This I swear, and you, Noma, are witness to the oath. Yet it may chance that after he, Hokosa, has gathered up all this pomp and greatness, he himself shall be gathered up by Death, that harvest-man whom soon or late will garner every ear;" and he looked at her meaningly.

"It may be so, Prince," she answered.

"It may be so," he repeated, "and when----"

"When it is so, then, Prince, we will talk together, but not till then.

Nay, touch me not, for were he to command me, Hokosa has this power over me that I must show him all that you have done, keeping nothing back.

Let me go now to the place that is made ready for me, and afterwards you shall tell me again and more fully the words that I must say to Hokosa my husband."

On the morrow Hafela held a secret council of his great men, and the next day an embassy departed to Nodwengo the king, taking to him that message which Hokosa, through Noma his wife, had put into the lips of the prince. Twenty days later the embassy returned saying that it pleased the king to grant the prayer of his brother Hafela, and bringing with it the tidings that the white man, Messenger, had fallen sick, and it was thought that he would die.

So in due course the women and children of the people of Hafela started upon their journey towards the new land where it was given out that they should live, and with them went Noma, purposing to leave them as they drew near the gates of the Great Place of the king. A while after, Hafela and his impis followed with carriers bearing their fighting shields in bundles, and having their stabbing spears rolled up in mats.