

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE REPENTANCE OF HOKOSA

Hokosa kept his promise. On the morrow of his first attendance there he was again to be seen in the chapel, and after the service was over he waited on Owen at his house and listened to his private teaching. Day by day he appeared thus, till at length he became master of the whole doctrine of Christianity, and discovered that that which at first had struck him as childish and even monstrous, now presented itself to him in a new and very different light. The conversion of Hokosa came upon him through the gate of reason, not as is usual among savages--and some who are not savage--by that of the emotions. Given the position of a universe torn and groaning beneath the dual rule of Good and Evil, two powers of well-nigh equal potency, he found no great difficulty in accepting this tale of the self-sacrifice of the God of Good that He might wring the race He loved out of the conquering grasp of the god of Ill. There was a simple majesty about this scheme of redemption which appealed to one side of his nature. Indeed, Hokosa felt that under certain conditions and in a more limited fashion he would have been capable of attempting as much himself.

Once his reason was satisfied, the rest followed in a natural sequence. Within three weeks from the hour of his first attendance at the chapel Hokosa was at heart a Christian.

He was a Christian, although as yet he did not confess it; but he was also the most miserable man among the nation of the Sons of Fire. The iniquities of his past life had become abominable to him; but he had committed them in ignorance, and he understood that they were not beyond forgiveness. Yet high above them all towered one colossal crime which, as he believed, could never be pardoned to him in this world or the next. He was the treacherous murderer of the Messenger of God; he was in the very act of silencing the Voice that had proclaimed truth in the dark places of his soul and the dull ears of his countrymen.

The deed was done; no power on earth could save his victim. Within a week from the day of eating that fatal fruit Owen began to sicken, then the dysentery had seized him which slowly but surely was wasting out his life. Yet he, the murderer, was helpless, for with this form of the disease no medicine could cope. With agony in his heart, an agony that was shared by thousands of the people, Hokosa watched the decrease of the white man's strength, and reckoned the days that would elapse before the end. Having such sin as thus upon his soul, though Owen entreated him earnestly, he would not permit himself to be baptised. Twice he went near to consenting, but on each occasion an ominous and terrible incident drove him from the door of mercy.

Once, when the words "I will" were almost on his lips, a woman broke in upon their conference bearing a dying boy in her arms.

"Save him," she implored, "save him, Messenger, for he is my only son!"

Owen looked at him and shook his head.

"How came he like this?" he asked.

"I know not, Messenger, but he has been sick ever since he ate of a certain fruit which you gave to him;" and she recalled to his mind the incident of the throwing of a fruit to the child, which she had witnessed.

"I remember," said Owen. "It is strange, but I also have been sick from the day that I ate of those fruits; yes, and you, Hokosa, warned me against them."

Then he blessed the boy and prayed over him till he died; but when afterwards he looked round for Hokosa, it was to find that he had gone.

Some eight days later, having to a certain extent recovered from this shock, Hokosa went one morning to Owen's house and talked to him.

"Messenger," he said, "is it necessary to baptism that I should confess all my sins to you? If so, I can never be baptised, for there is wickedness upon my hands which I am unable to tell into the ear of living man."

Owen thought and answered:--

"It is necessary that you should repent all of your sins, and that you should confess them to heaven; it is not necessary that you should confess them to me, who am but a man like yourself."

"Then I will be baptised," said Hokosa with a sigh of relief.

At this moment, as it chanced, their interview was again interrupted, for runners came from the king requesting the immediate presence of the Messenger, if he were well enough to attend, upon a matter connected with the trial of a woman for murder. Thinking that he might be of service, Owen, leaning on the shoulder of Hokosa, for already he was too weak to walk far, crept to the litter which was waiting for him, and was borne to the place of judgment that was before the house of the king. Hokosa followed, more from curiosity than for any other reason, for he had heard of no murder being committed, and his old desire to be acquainted with everything that passed was still strong on him. The people made way for him, and he seated himself in the first line of spectators immediately opposite to the king and three other captains who were judges in the case. So soon as Owen had joined the judges, the prisoner was brought before them, and to his secret horror Hokosa recognised in her that woman to whom he had given the poison in exchange for the basket of fruit.

Now it seemed to Hokosa that his doom was on him, for she would certainly confess that she had the drug from him. He thought of flight

only to reject the thought, for to fly would be to acknowledge himself an accessory. No, he would brazen it out, for after all his word was as good as hers. With the prisoner came an accuser, her husband, who seemed sick, and he it was who opened the case against her.

"This woman," he said, "was my wife. I divorced her for barrenness, as I have a right to do according to our ancient law, and I took another woman to wife, her half-sister. This woman was jealous; she plagued me continually, and insulted her sister, so that I was forced to drive her away. After that she came to my house, and though they said nothing of it at the time, she was seen by two servants of mine to sprinkle something in the bowl wherein our food was cooking. Subsequently my wife, this woman's half-sister, was taken ill with dysentery. I also was taken ill with dysentery, but I still live to tell this story before you, O King, and your judges, though I know not for how long I live. My wife died yesterday, and I buried her this morning. I accuse the woman of having murdered her, either by witchcraft or by means of a medicine which she sprinkled on the food, or by both. I have spoken."

"Have you anything to say?" asked the king of the prisoner. "Are you guilty of the crime whereof this man who was your husband charges you, or does he lie?"

Then the woman answered in a low and broken voice:--

"I am guilty, King. Listen to my story:" and she told it all as she told

it to Hokosa. "I am guilty," she added, "and may the Great Man in the sky, of Whom the Messenger has taught us, forgive me. My sister's blood is upon my hands, and for aught I know the blood of my husband yonder will also be on my hands. I seek no mercy; indeed, it is better that I should die; but I would say this in self-defence, that I did not think to kill my sister. I believed that I was giving to her a potion which would cause her husband to hate her and no more."

Here she looked round and her eyes met those of Hokosa.

"Who told you that this was so?" asked one of the judges.

"A witch-doctor," she answered, "from whom I bought the medicine in the old days, long ago, when Umsuka was king."

Hokosa gasped. Why should this woman have spared him?

No further question was asked of her, and the judges consulted together. At length the king spoke.

"Woman," he said, "you are condemned to die. You will be taken to the Doom Tree, and there be hanged. Out of those who are assembled to try you, two, the Messenger and myself, have given their vote in favour of mercy, but the majority think otherwise. They say that a law has been passed against murder by means of witchcraft and secret medicine, and that should we let you go free, the people will make a mock of that law."

So be it. Go in peace. To-morrow you must die, and may forgiveness await you elsewhere."

"I ask nothing else," said the woman. "It is best that I should die."

Then they led her away. As she passed Hokosa she turned and looked him full in the eyes, till he dropped his head abashed. Next morning she was executed, and he learned that her last words were: "Let it come to the ears of him who sold me the poison, telling me that it was but a harmless drug, that as I hope to be forgiven, so I forgive him, believing that my silence may win for him time for repentance, before he follows on the road I tread."

Now, when Hokosa heard these words he shut himself up in his house for three days, giving out that he was sick. Nor would he go near to Owen, being altogether without hope, and not believing that baptism or any other rite could avail to purge such crimes as his. Truly his sin had found him out, and the burden of it was intolerable. So intolerable did it become, that at length he determined to be done with it. He could live no more. He would die, and by his own hand, before he was called upon to witness the death of the man whom he had murdered. To this end he made his preparations. For Noma he left no message; for though his heart still hungered after her, he knew well that she hated him and would rejoice at his death.

When all was ready he sat down to think a while, and as he thought, a

man entered his hut saying that the Messenger desired to see him. At first he was minded not to go, then it occurred to him that it would be well if he could die with a clean heart. Why should he not tell all to the white man, and before he could be delivered up to justice take that poison which he had prepared? It was impossible that he should be forgiven, yet he desired that his victim should learn how deep was his sorrow and repentance, before he proved it by preceding him to death. So he rose and went.

He found Owen in his house, lying in a rude chair and propped up by pillows of bark. Now he was wasted almost to a shadow, and in the pale pinched face his dark eyes, always large and spiritual, shone with unnatural lustre, while his delicate hands were so thin that when he held them up in blessing the light showed through them.

"Welcome, friend," he said. "Tell me, why have you deserted me of late? Have you been ill?"

"No, Messenger," answered Hokosa, "that is, not in my body. I have been sick at heart, and therefore I have not come."

"What, Hokosa, do your doubts still torment you? I thought that my prayers had been heard, and that power had been given me to set them at rest for ever. Man, let me hear the trouble, and swiftly, for cannot you who are a doctor see that I shall not be here for long to talk with you? My days are numbered, Hokosa, and my work is almost done."



"I know it," answered Hokosa. "And, Messenger, my days are also numbered."

"How is this?" asked Owen, "seeing that you are well and strong. Does an enemy put you in danger of your life?"

"Yes, Messenger, and I myself am that enemy; for to-day I, who am no longer fit to live, must die by my own hand. Nay, listen and you will say that I do well, for before I go I would tell you all. Messenger, you are doomed, are you not? Well, it was I who doomed you. That fruit which you ate a while ago was poisoned, and by my hand, for I am a master of such arts. From the beginning I hated you, as well I might, for had you not worsted me and torn power from my grasp, and placed the people and the king under the rule of another God? Therefore, when all else failed, I determined to murder you, and I did the deed by means of that woman who not long ago was hung for the killing of her sister, though in truth she was innocent." And he told him what had passed between himself and the woman, and told him also of the plot which he had hatched to kill Nodwengo and the Christians, and to set Hafela on the throne.

"She was innocent," he went on, "but I am guilty. How guilty you and I know alone. Do you remember that day when you ate the fruit, how after it I accompanied you to the church yonder and listened to your preaching? 'Your sin shall find you out,' you said, and of a surety mine has found me out. For, Messenger, it came about that in listening to

you then and afterwards, I grew to love you and to believe the words you taught, and therefore am I of all men the most miserable, and therefore must I, who have been great and the councillor of kings, perish miserably by the death of a dog.

"Now curse me, and let me go."