

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE LOOSING OF NOMA

When Owen heard that it was Hokosa who had poisoned him, he groaned and hid his face in his hands, and thus he remained till the evil tale was finished. Now he lifted his head and spoke, but not to Hokosa.

"O God," he said, "I thank Thee that at the cost of my poor life Thou hast been pleased to lead this sinner towards the Gate of Righteousness, and to save alive those whom Thou hast sent me to gather to Thy Fold."

Then he looked at Hokosa and said:--

"Unhappy man, is not your cup full enough of crime, and have you not sufficiently tempted the mercy of Heaven, that you would add to all your evil deeds that of self-murder?"

"It is better to die to-day by my own hand," answered Hokosa, "than to-morrow among the mockery of the people to fall a victim to your vengeance, Messenger."

"Vengeance! Did I speak to you of vengeance? Who am I that I should take vengeance upon one who has repented? Hokosa, freely do I forgive you all, even as in some few days I hope to be forgiven. Freely and fully from my heart do I forgive you, nor shall my lips tell one word of the

sin that you have worked against me."

Now, when Hokosa heard those words, for a moment he stared stupefied; then he fell upon his knees before Owen, and bowing his head till it touched the teacher's feet, he burst into bitter weeping.

"Rise and hearken," said Owen gently. "Weep not because I have shown kindness to you, for that is my duty and no more, but for your sins in your own heart weep now and ever. Yet for your comfort I tell you that if you do this, of a surety they shall be forgiven to you. Hokosa, you have indeed lost that which you loved, and henceforth you must follow after that which you did not desire. In the very grave of error you have found truth, and from the depths of sin you shall pluck righteousness. Ay, that Cross which you deemed accursed shall lift you up on high, for by it you shall be saved."

Hokosa heard and shivered.

"Who set those words between your lips, Messenger?" he whispered.

"Who set them, Hokosa? Nay, I know not--or rather, I know well. He set them Who teaches us to speak all things that are good."

"It must be so, indeed," replied Hokosa. "Yet I have heard them before; I have heard them from the lips of the dead, and with them went this command: that when they fell upon my ears again I should 'take them for

a sign, and let my heart be turned."

"Tell me that tale," said Owen.

So he told him, and this time it was the white man who trembled.

"Horrible has been your witchcraft, O Son of Darkness!" said Owen, when he had finished; "yet it would seem that it was permitted to you to find truth in the pit of sorcery. Obey, obey, and let your heart be turned. The dead told you that you should be set high above the nation and its king, and that saying I cannot read, though it may be fulfilled in some fashion of which to-day you do not think. At the least, the other saying is true, that in the end comes judgment, and that there shall the sin and the atonement strive together; therefore for judgment prepare yourself. And now depart, for I must talk with the king as to this matter of the onslaught of Hafela."

"Then, that will be the signal for my death, for what king can forgive one who has plotted such treachery against him?" said Hokosa.

"Fear not," answered Owen, "I will soften his heart. Go you into the church and pray, for there you shall be less tempted; but before you go, swear to me that you will work no evil on yourself."

"I swear it, Messenger, since now I desire to live, if only for awhile, seeing that death shuts every door."

Then he went to the church and waited there. An hour later he was summoned, and found the king seated with Owen.

"Man," said Nodwengo, "I am told by the Messenger here that you have knowledge of a plot which my brother the Prince Hafela has made to fall treacherously upon me and put me and my people to the spear. How you come to be acquainted with the plot, and what part you have played in it, I will not now inquire, for so much have I promised to the Messenger. Yet I warn you it will be well that you should tell me all you know, and that should you lie to me or attempt to deceive me, then you shall surely die."

"King, hear all the truth," answered Hokosa in a voice of desperate calm. "I have knowledge of the plot, for it was I who wove it; but whether or not Hafela will carry it out altogether I cannot say, for as yet no word has reached me from him. King, this was the plan that I made." And he told him everything.

"It is fortunate for you, Hokosa," said Nodwengo grimly when he had finished, "that I gave my word to the Messenger that no harm should come to you, seeing that you have repented and confessed. This is certain, that Hafela has listened to your evil counsels, for I gave my consent to his flight from this land with all his people, and already his women and children have crossed the mountain path in thousands. Well, this I swear, that their feet shall tread it no more, for where they are

thither he shall go to join them, should he chance to live to do so.  
Hokosa, begone, and know that day and night you will be watched. Should you so much as dare to approach one of the gates of the Great Place, that moment you shall die."

"Have no fear, O King," said Hokosa humbly, "for I have emptied all my heart before you. The past is the past, and cannot be recalled. For the future, while it pleases you to spare me, I am the most loyal of your servants."

"Can a man empty a spring with a pitcher?" asked the king contemptuously. "By to-morrow this heart of yours may be full again with the blackest treachery, O master of sin and lies. Many months ago I spared you at the prayer of the Messenger; and now at his prayer I spare you again, yet in doing so I think that I am foolish."

"Nay, I will answer for him," broke in Owen. "Let him stay here with me, and set your guard without my gates."

"How do I know that he will not murder you, friend?" asked the king.

"This man is a snake whom few can nurse with safety."

"He will not murder me," said Owen smiling, "because his heart is turned from evil to good; also, there is little need to murder a dying man."

"Nay, speak not so," said the king hastily; "and as for this man, be it

as you will. Come, I must take counsel with my captains, for our danger is near and great."

So it came about that Hokosa stayed in the house of Owen.

On the morrow the Great Place was full of the bustle of preparation, and by dawn of the following day an impi of some seventeen thousand spears had started to ambush Hafela and his force in a certain wooded defile through which he must pass on his way to the mountain pass where his women and children were gathered. The army was not large, at least in the eyes of the People of Fire who, before the death of Umsuka and the break up of the nation, counted their warriors by tens of thousands. But after those events the most of the regiments had deserted to Hafela, leaving to Nodwengo not more than two-and-twenty thousand spears upon which he could rely. Of these he kept less than a third to defend the Great Place against possible attacks, and all the rest he sent to fall upon Hafela far away, hoping there to make an end of him once and for all. This counsel the king took against the better judgment of many of his captains, and as the issue proved, it was mistaken.

When Owen told Hokosa of it, that old general shrugged his shoulders.

"The king would have done better to keep his regiments at home," he said, "and fight it out with Hafela here, where he is well prepared.

Yonder the country is very wide, and broken, and it may well chance that the impi will miss that of Hafela, and then how can the king defend

this place with a handful, should the prince burst upon him at the head of forty thousand men? But who am I that I should give counsel for which none seek?"

"As God wills, so shall it befall," answered Owen wearily; "but oh! the thought of all this bloodshed breaks my heart. I trust that its beatings may be stilled before my eyes behold the evil hour."

On the evening of that day Hokosa was baptised. The ceremony took place, not in the church, for Owen was too weak to go there, but in the largest room of his house and before some few witnesses chosen from the congregation. Even as he was being signed with the sign of the cross, a strange and familiar attraction caused the convert to look up, and behold, before him, watching all with mocking eyes, stood Noma his wife. At length the rite was finished, and the little audience melted away, all save Noma, who stood silent and beautiful as a statue, the light of mockery still gleaming in her eyes. Then she spoke, saying:--

"I greet you, Husband. I have returned from doing your business afar, and if this foolishness is finished, and the white man can spare you, I would talk with you alone."

"I greet you, Wife," answered Hokosa. "Say out your say, for none are present save us three, and from the Messenger here I have no secrets."

"What, Husband, none? Do you ever talk to him of certain fruit that you

ripened in a garden yonder?"

"From the Messenger I have no secrets," repeated Hokosa in a heavy voice.

"Then his heart must be full of them indeed, and it is little wonder that he seems sick," replied Noma, gibing. "Tell me, Hokosa, is it true that you have become a Christian, or would you but fool the white man and his following?"

"It is true."

At the words her graceful shape was shaken with a little gust of silent laughter.

"The wizard has turned saint," she said. "Well, then, what of the wizard's wife?"

"You were my wife before I became Christian; if the Messenger permits it, you can still abide with me."

"If the Messenger permits it! So you have come to this, Hokosa, that you must ask the leave of another man as to whether or no you should keep your own wife! There is no other thing that I could not have thought of you, but this I would never have believed had I not heard it from your lips. Say now, do you still love me, Hokosa?"



"You know well that I love you, now and always," he answered, in a voice that sounded like a groan; "as you know that for love of you I have done many sins from which otherwise I should have turned aside."

"Grieve not over them, Hokosa; after all, in such a count as yours they will make but little show. Well, if you love me, I hate you, though through your witchcraft your will yet has the mastery of mine. I demand of you now that you should loose that bond, for I do not desire to become a Christian; and surely, O most good and holy man, having one wife already, it will not please you henceforth to live in sin with a heathen woman."

Now Hokosa turned to Owen:--

"In the old days," he said, "I could have answered her; but now I am fallen; or raised up--at the least I am changed and cannot. O prophet of Heaven, tell me what I shall do."

"Sever the bond that you have upon her and let her go," answered Owen. "This love of yours is unnatural, unholy and born of witchcraft; have done with it, or if you cannot, at the least deny it, for such a woman, a woman who hates you, can work you no good. Moreover, since she is a second wife, you being a Christian, are bound to free her should she so desire."

"She can work me no good, Messenger, that I know; but I know also that while she struggles in the net of my will she can work me no evil. If I loose the net and the fish swims free, it may be otherwise."

"Loose it," answered Owen, "and leave the rest to Providence. Henceforth, Hokosa, do right, and take no thought for the morrow, for the morrow is with God, and what He decrees, that shall befall."

"I hear you," said Hokosa, "and I obey." For a while he rocked himself to and fro, staring at the ground, then he lifted his head and spoke:--

"Woman," he said, "the knot is untied and the spell is broken. Begone, for I release you and I divorce you. Flesh of my flesh have you been, and soul of my soul, for in the web of sorceries are we knit together. Yet be warned and presume not too far, for remember that which I have laid down I can take up, and that should I choose to command, you must still obey. Farewell, you are free."

Noma heard, and with a sigh of ecstasy she sprang into the air as a slave might do from whom the fetters have been struck off.

"Ay," she cried, "I am free! I feel it in my blood, I who have lain in bondage, and the voice of freedom speaks in my heart and the breath of freedom blows in my nostrils. I am free from you, O dark and accursed man; but herein lies my triumph and revenge--you are not free from me. In obedience to that white fool whom you have murdered, you have loosed

me; but you I will not loose and could not if I would. Listen now, Hokosa: you love me, do you not?--next to this new creed of yours, I am most of all to you. Well, since you have divorced me, I will tell you, I go straight to another man. Now, look your last on me; for you love me, do you not?" and she slipped the mantle from her shoulders and except for her girdle stood before him naked, and smiled.

"Well," she went on, resuming her robe, "the last words of those we love are always dear to us; therefore, Hokosa, you who were my husband, I leave mine with you. You are a coward and a traitor, and your doom shall be that of a coward and a traitor. For my sake you betrayed Umsuka, your king and benefactor; for your own sake you betrayed Nodwengo, who spared you; and now, for the sake of your miserable soul, you have betrayed Hafela to Nodwengo. Nay, I know the tale, do not answer me, but the end of it--ah! that is yet to learn. Lie there, snake, and lick the hand that you have bitten, but I, the bird whom you have loosed, I fly afar--taking your heart with me!" and suddenly she turned and was gone.

Presently Hokosa spoke in a thick voice:--

"Messenger," he said, "this cross that you have given me to bear is heavy indeed."

"Yes, Hokosa," answered Owen, "for to it your sins are nailed."