

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PASSING OF OWEN

Once she was outside of Owen's house, Noma did not tarry. First she returned to Hokosa's kraal, where she had already learnt from his head wife, Zinti, and others the news of his betrayal of the plot of Hafela, of his conversion to the faith of the Christians, and of the march of the impi to ambush the prince. Here she took a little spear, and rolling up in a skin blanket as much dried meat as she could carry, she slipped unnoticed from the kraal. Her object was to escape from the Great Place, but this she did not try to do by any of the gates, knowing them to be guarded. Some months ago, before she started on her embassy, she had noted a weak spot in the fence, where dogs had torn a hole through which they passed out to hunt at night. To this spot she made her way under cover of the darkness--for though she still greatly feared to be alone at night, her pressing need conquered her fears--and found that the hole was yet there, for a tall weed growing in its mouth had caused it to be overlooked by those whose duty it was to mend the fence. With her assegai she widened it a little, then drew her lithe shape through it, and lying hidden till the guard had passed, climbed the two stone walls beyond. Once she was free of the town, she set her course by the stars and started forward at a steady run.

"If my strength holds I shall yet be in time to warn him," she muttered to herself. "Ah! friend Hokosa, this new madness of yours has blunted

your wits that once were sharp enough. You have set me free, and now you shall learn how I can use my freedom. Not for nothing have I been your pupil, Hokosa the fox."

Before the dawn broke Noma was thirty miles from the Great Place, and before the next dawn she was a hundred. At sunset on that second day she stood among mountains. To her right stretched a great defile, a rugged place of rocks and bush, wherein she knew that the regiments of the king were hid in ambush. Perchance she was too late, perchance the impi of Hafela had already passed to its doom in yonder gorge. Swiftly she ran forward on to the trail which led to the gorge, to find that it had been trodden by many feet and recently. Moving to and fro she searched the spoor with her eyes, then rose with a sigh of joy. It was old, and marked the passage of the great company of women and children and their thousands of cattle which, in execution of the plot, had travelled this path some days before. Either the impi had not yet arrived, or it had gone by some other road. Weary as she was, Noma followed the old spoor backwards. A mile or more away it crossed the crest of a hog-backed mountain, from whose summit she searched the plain beyond, and not in vain, for there far beneath her twinkled the watch-fires of the army of Hafela.

Three hours later a woman, footsore and utterly exhausted, staggered into the camp, and waving aside the spears that were lifted to stab her, demanded to be led to the prince. Presently she was there.

"Who is this woman?" asked the great warrior; for, haggard as she was with travel, exhaustion, and the terror of her haunted loneliness, he did not know her in the uncertain firelight.

"Hafela," she said, "I am Noma who was the wife of Hokosa, and for whole nights and days I have journeyed as no woman ever journeyed before, to tell you of the treachery of Hokosa and to save you from your doom."

"What treachery and what doom?" asked the prince.

"Before I answer you that question, Hafela, you must pay me the price of my news."

"Let me hear the price, Noma."

"It is this, Prince: First, the head of Hokosa, who has divorced me, when you have caught him."

"That I promise readily. What more?"

"Secondly, the place of your chief wife to-day; and a week hence, when I shall have made you king, the name and state of Queen of the People of Fire with all that hangs thereto."

"You are ambitious, woman, and know well how to drive a bargain. Well, if you can ask, I can give, for I have ever loved you, and your mind is

great as your body is beautiful. If through your help I should become King of the People of Fire, you shall be their Queen, I swear it by the spirits of my fathers and by my own head. And now--your tidings."

"These are they, Hafela. Hokosa has turned Christian and betrayed the plot to Nodwengo; and the great gorge yonder but three hours march away is ambushed. To-morrow you and your people would have been cut off there had I not run so fast and far to warn you, after which the impis of Nodwengo were commanded to follow your women and cattle over the mountain pass and capture them."

"This is news indeed," said the prince. "Say now, how many regiments are hidden in the gorge?"

"Eight."

"Well, I have fourteen; so, being warned, there is little to fear. I will catch these rats in their own hole."

"I have a better plan," said Noma; "it is this: leave six regiments posted upon the brow of yonder hill and let them stay there. Then when the generals of Nodwengo see that they do not enter the gorge, they will believe that the ambush is discovered, and, after waiting one day or perhaps two, will move out to give battle, thinking that before them is all your strength. But command your regiments to run and not to fight, drawing the army of Nodwengo after them. Meanwhile, yes, this very

night, you yourself with all the men that are left to you must march upon the Great Place, which, though it be strong, can be stormed, for it is defended by less than five thousand soldiers. There, having taken it, you shall slay Nodwengo, proclaiming yourself king, and afterwards, by the help of the impi that you leave here which will march onward to your succour, you can deal with yonder army."

"A great scheme truly," said Hafela in admiration; "but how do I know whether all this tale is true, or whether you do but set a snare for me?"

"Bid scouts go out and creep into yonder gully," answered Noma, "and you will see whether or no I have spoken falsely. For the rest, I am in your hands, and if I lie you can take my life in payment."

"If I march upon the Great Place, it must be at midnight when none see me go," said Hafela, "and what will you do then, Noma, who are too weary to travel again so soon?"

"I will be borne in a litter till my strength comes back to me," she answered. "And now give me to eat and let me rest while I may."

Five hours later, Hafela with the most of his army, a force of something over twenty thousand men, was journeying swiftly but by a circuitous

route towards the Great Place of the king. On the crest of the hill facing the gorge, as Noma had suggested, he left six regiments with instructions to fly before Nodwengo's generals, and when they had led them far enough, to follow him as swiftly as they were able. These orders, or rather the first part of them, they carried out, for as it chanced after two days' flight, the king's soldiers got behind them by a night march, and falling on them at dawn, killed half of them and dispersed the rest. Then it was that Nodwengo's generals learned for the first time that they were following one wing of Hafela's army only, while the main body was striking at the heart of the kingdom, and turned their faces homewards in fear and haste.

On the morning after the flight of Noma, Owen passed into the last stage of his sickness, and it became evident, both to himself and to those who watched him, that at the most he could not live for more than a few days. For his part, he accepted his doom joyfully, spending the time which was left to him in writing letters that were to be forwarded to England whenever an opportunity should arise. Also he set down on paper a statement of the principal events of his strange mission, and other information for the guidance of his white successors, who by now should be drawing near to the land of the Amasuka. In the intervals of these last labours, from time to time he summoned the king and the wisest and truest of them whom he had baptised to his bedside, teaching them what they should do when he was gone, and exhorting them to cling to the

Faith.

On the afternoon of the fourth day from that of the baptism of Hokosa he fell into a quiet sleep, from which he did not wake till sundown.

"Am I still here?" he asked wondering, of John and Hokosa who watched at his bedside. "From my dreams I thought that it was otherwise. John, send a messenger to the king and ask of him to assemble the people, all who care to come, in the open place before my house. I am about to die, and first I would speak with them."

John went weeping upon his errand, leaving Owen and Hokosa alone.

"Tell me now what shall I do?" said Hokosa in a voice of despair, "seeing that it is I and no other who have brought this death upon you."

"Fret not, my brother," answered Owen, "for this and other things you did in the days of your blindness, and it was permitted that you should do them to an end. Kneel down now, that I may absolve you from your sins before I pass away; for I tell you, Hokosa, I believe that ere many days are over you must walk on the same path which I travel to-night."

"Is it so?" Hokosa answered. "Well, I am glad, for I have no longer any lust of life."

Then he knelt down and received the absolution.

Now John returned and Nodwengo with him, who told him that the people were gathering in hundreds according to his wish.

"Then clothe me in my robes and let us go forth," he said, "for I would speak my last words in the ears of men."

So they put the surplice and hood upon his wasted form and went out, John preceding him holding on high the ivory crucifix, while the king and Hokosa supported him, one on either side.

Without his gate stood a low wooden platform, whence at times Owen had been accustomed to address any congregation larger than the church would contain. On this platform he took his seat. The moon was bright above him, and by it he could see that already his audience numbered some thousands of men, women and children. The news had spread that the wonderful white man, Messenger, wished to take his farewell of the nation, though even now many did not understand that he was dying, but imagined that he was about to leave the country, or, for aught they knew, to vanish from their sight into Heaven. For a moment Owen looked at the sea of dusky faces, then in the midst of an intense stillness, he spoke in a voice low indeed but clear and steady:--

"My children," he said, "hear my last words to you. More than three years ago, in a far, far land and upon such a night as this, a Voice spoke to me from above commanding me to seek you out, to turn you from

your idolatry and to lighten your darkness. I listened to the Voice, and hither I journeyed across sea and land, though how this thing might be done I could not guess. But to Him Who sent me all things are possible, and while yet I lingered upon the threshold of your country, in a dream were revealed to me events that were to come. So I appeared before you boldly, and knowing that he had been poisoned and that I could cure him, I drew back your king from the mouth of death, and you said to yourselves: 'Behold a wizard indeed! Let us hear him.' Then I gave battle to your sorcerers yonder upon the plain, and from the foot of the Cross I teach, the lightnings were rolled back upon them and they were not. Look now, their chief stands at my side, among my disciples one of the foremost and most faithful. Afterwards troubles arose: your king died a Christian, and many of the people fell away; but still a remnant remained, and he who became king was converted to the truth. Now I have sown the seed, and the corn is ripe before my eyes, but it is not permitted that I should reap the harvest. My work is ended, my task is done, and I, the Messenger, return to make report to Him Who sent the message.

"Hear me yet a little while, for soon shall my voice be silent. 'I come not to bring peace, but a sword,'--so said the Master Whom I preach, and so say I, the most unworthy of His servants. Salvation cannot be bought at a little price; it must be paid for by the blood and griefs of men, and in blood and griefs must you pay, O my children. Through much tribulation must you also enter the kingdom of God. Even now the heathen is at your gates, and many of you shall perish on his spears, but I tell

you that he shall not conquer. Be faithful, cling to the Cross, and do not dare to doubt your Lord, for He will be your Captain and you shall be His people. Cleave to your king, for he is good; and in the day of trial listen to the counsel of this Hokosa who once was the first of evil-doers, for with him goes my spirit, and he is my son in the spirit.

"My children, fare you well! Forget me not, for I have loved you; or if you will, forget me, but remember my teaching and hearken to those who shall tread upon the path I made. The peace of God be with you, the blessing of God be upon you, and the salvation of God await you, as it awaits me to-night! Friends, lead me hence to die."

They turned to him, but before their hands touched him Thomas Owen fell forward upon the breast of Hokosa and lay there a while. Then suddenly, for the last time, he lifted himself and cried aloud:--

"I have fought a good fight! I have finished my course! I have kept the faith! Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness . . . and not to me only, but to all those who love His appearing."

Then his head fell back, his dark eyes closed, and the Messenger was dead.

Hokosa, the man who had murdered him, having lifted him up to show him to the people, amidst a sound of mighty weeping, took the body in his arms and bore it thence to make it ready for burial.