

CHAPTER XIX

THE FALL OF THE GREAT PLACE

On the morrow at sundown all that remained of Thomas Owen was laid to rest before the altar of the little church, Nodwengo the king and Hokosa lowering him into the grave, while John, his first disciple, read over him the burial service of the Christians, which it had been one of the dead man's last labours to translate into the language of the Amasuka.

Before the ceremony was finished, a soldier, carrying a spear in his hand, pushed his way through the dense and weeping crowd, and having saluted, whispered something into the ear of the king. Nodwengo started, and, with a last look of farewell at the face of his friend, left the chapel, accompanied by some of his generals who were present, muttering to Hokosa that he was to follow when all was done. Accordingly, some few minutes later, he went and was admitted into the Council Hut, where captains and messengers were to be seen arriving and departing continuously.

"Hokosa," said the king, "you have dealt treacherously with me in the past, but I believe now that your heart is true; at the least I follow the commands of our dead master and trust you. Listen: the outposts have sighted an impi of many regiments advancing towards the Great Place, though whether or no it be my own impi returning victorious from the war with my brother, I cannot say. There is this against it, however,

that a messenger has but just arrived reporting that the generals have perceived the host of Hafela encamped upon a ridge over against the gorge where they awaited him. If that be so, they can scarcely have given him battle, for the messenger is swift of foot and has travelled night and day. Yet how can this be the impi of Hafela, who, say the generals, is encamped upon the ridge?"

"He may have left the ridge, King, having been warned of the ambush."

"It cannot be, for when the runner started his fires burned there and his soldiers were gathered round them."

"Then perhaps his captains sit upon the ridge with some portion of his strength to deceive those who await him in the gorge; while, knowing that here men are few, he himself swoops down on you with the main body of his impi."

"At least we shall learn presently," answered the king; "but if it be as I fear and we are outwitted, what is there that we can do against so many?"

Now one of the captains proposed that they should stay where they were and hold the place.

"It is too large," answered the king, "they will burst the fences and break our line."

Another suggested that they should fly and, avoiding the regiments of Hafela in the darkness of the night, should travel swiftly in search of the main army that had been sent to lie in ambush.

"What," said Nodwengo, "leaving the aged and the women and children to perish, for how can we take such a multitude? No, I will have none of this plan."

Then Hokosa spoke. "King," he said, "listen to my counsel: Command now that all the women and the old men, taking with them such cattle and food as are in the town, depart at once into the Valley of Death and collect in the open space that lies beyond the Tree of Doom, near the spring of water that is there. The valley is narrow and the cliffs are steep, and it may chance that by the help of Heaven we shall be able to hold it till the army returns to relieve us, to seek which messengers must be sent at once with these tidings."

"The plan is good," said the king, though none had thought of it; "but so we shall lose the town."

"Towns can be rebuilt," answered Hokosa, "but who may restore the lives of men?"

As the words left his lips, a runner burst into the council, crying:

"King, the impi is that of Hafela, and the prince heads it in person.

Already his outposts rest upon the Plain of Fire."

Then Nodwengo rose and issued his orders, commanding that all the ineffective population of the town, together with such food and cattle as could be gathered, should retreat at once into the Valley of Death. By this time the four or five thousand soldiers who were left in the Great Place had been paraded on the open ground in front of the king's house, where they stood, still and silent, in the moonlight. Nodwengo and the captains went out to them, and as they saw him come they lifted their spears like one man, giving him the royal salute of "King!" He held up his hand and addressed them.

"Soldiers," he said, "we have been outwitted. My impi is afar, and that of Hafela is at our gates. Yonder in the valley, though we be few, we can defend ourselves till succour reaches us, which already messengers have gone out to seek. But first we must give time for the women and children, the sick and the aged, to withdraw with food and cattle; and this we can do in one way only, by keeping Hafela at bay till they have passed the archway, all of them. Now, soldiers, for the sake of your own lives, of your honour and of those you love, swear to me, in the holy Name which we have been taught to worship, that you will fight out this great fight without fear or faltering."

"We swear it in the holy Name, and by your head, King," roared the regiments.

"Then victory is already ours," answered Nodwengo. "Follow me, Children of Fire!" and shaking his great spear, he led the way towards that portion of the outer fence upon which Hafela was advancing.

By now the town behind them was a scene of almost indescribable tumult and confusion, for the companies detailed to the task were clearing the numberless huts of their occupants, and collecting women, children and oxen in thousands, preparatory to driving them into the defile. Panic had seized many of these poor creatures, who, in imagination, already saw themselves impaled upon the cruel spears of Hafela's troops, and indeed in not a few instances believed those who were urging them forward to be the enemy. Women shrieked and wrung their hands, children wailed piteously, oxen lowed, and the infirm and aged vented their grief in groans and cries to Heaven, or their ancient god, for mercy. In truth, so difficult was the task of marshalling this motley array at night, numbering as it did ten or twelve thousand souls, that a full hour went by before the mob even began to move, slowly and uncertainly, towards the place of refuge, whereof the opening was so narrow that but few of them could pass it at a time.

Meanwhile Hafela was developing the attack. Forming his great army into the shape of a wedge he raised his battle-cry and rushed down on the first line of fortifications, which he stormed without difficulty, for they were defended by a few skirmishers only. Next he attacked the second line, and carried it after heavy fighting, then hurled himself upon the weakest point of the main fence of the vast kraal. Here it was

that the fray began in earnest, for here Nodwengo was waiting for him. Thrice the thousands rolled on in the face of a storm of spears, and thrice they fell back from the wide fence of thorns and the wall of stone behind it. By now the battle had raged for about an hour and a half, and it was reported to the king that the first of the women and children had passed the archway into the valley, and that nearly all of them were clear of the eastern gate of the town.

"Then it is time that we follow them," said the king, "for if we wait here until the warriors of Hafela are among us, our retreat will become a rout and soon there will be none left to follow. Let one company," and he named it, "hold the fence for a while to give us time to withdraw, taking the wounded with us."

"We hear you, king," said one of that company, "but our captain is killed."

"Who among you will take over the command of these men and hold the breach?" asked Nodwengo of the group of officers about him.

"I, King," answered old Hokosa, lifting his spear, "for I care not whether I live or die."

"Go to, boaster!" cried another. "Who among us cares whether he lives or dies when the king commands?"

"That we shall know to-morrow," said Hokosa quietly, and the soldiers laughed at the retort.

"So be it," said the king, and while silently and swiftly he led off the regiments, keeping in the shadow of the huts, Hokosa and his hundred men posted themselves behind the weakened fence and wall. Now, for the fourth time the attacking regiment came forward grimly, on this occasion led by the prince himself. As they drew near, Hokosa leapt upon the wall, and standing there in the bright moonlight where all could see him, he called to them to halt. Instinctively they obeyed him.

"Is it Hafela whom I see yonder?" he asked.

"Ah! it is I," answered the prince. "What would you with me, wizard and traitor?"

"This only, Hafela: I would ask you what you seek here?"

"That which you promised me, Hokosa, the crown of my father and certain other things."

"Then get you back, Hafela, for you shall never win them.. Have I prophesied falsely to you at any time? Not so--neither do I prophesy falsely now. Get you back whence you came, and your wolves with you, else shall you bide here for ever."

"Do you dare to call down evil on me, Wizard?" shouted the prince furiously. "Your wife is mine, and now I take your life also," and with all his strength he hurled at him the great spear he held.

It hissed past Hokosa's head, touching his ear, but he never flinched from the steel.

"A poor cast, Prince," he said laughing; "but so it must have been, for I am guarded by that which you cannot see. My wife you have, and she shall be your ruin; my life you may take, but ere it leaves me, Hafela, I shall see you dead and your army scattered. The Messenger is passed away, but his power has fallen upon me and I speak the truth to you, O Prince and warriors, who are--already dead."

Now a shriek of dismay and fury rose from the hundreds who heard this prophesy of ill, for of Hokosa and his magic they were terribly afraid.

"Kill him! Kill the wizard!" they shouted, and a rain of spears rushed towards him on the wall.

They rushed towards him, they passed above, below, around; but, of them all, not one touched him.

"Did I not tell you that I was guarded by That which you cannot see?" Hokosa asked contemptuously. Then slowly he descended from the wall amidst a great silence.

"When men are scarce the tongue must play a part," he explained to his companions, who stared at him wondering. "By now the king and those with him should have reached the eastern gate; whereas, had we fought at once, Hafela would be hard upon his heels, for we are few, and who can hold a buffalo with a rope of grass? Yet I think that I spoke truth when I told him that the garment of the Messenger has fallen upon my shoulders, and that death awaits him and his companions, as it awaits me also and many of us. Now, friends, be ready, for the bull charges and soon we must feel his horns. This at least is left to you, to die gloriously."

While he was still speaking the first files of the regiment rushed upon the fence, tearing aside the thorns with their hands till a passage was made through them. Then they sprang upon the wall, there to be met by the spears of Hokosa and his men thrusting upward from beneath its shelter. Time after time they sprang, and time after time they fell back dead or wounded, till at last, dashing forward in one dense column, they poured over the stones as the rising tide pours over the rocks on the sea-shore, driving the defenders before them by the sheer weight of numbers.

"This game is played!" cried Hokosa. "Fly now to the eastern gate, for here we can do nothing more."

So they fled, those who survived of them, and after them came the

thousands of the foe, sacking and firing the deserted town as they advanced.

Hokosa and his men, or rather the half of them, reached the gate and passed it in safety, barring it after them, and thereby delaying the attackers till they could burst their way through. Now hundreds of huts were afire, and the flames spread swiftly, lighting up the country far and wide. In the glare of them, Hokosa could see that already a full two-thirds of the crowd of fugitives had passed the narrow arch; while Nodwengo and the soldiers were drawn up in companies upon the steep and rocky slope that led to it, protecting their retreat.

He advanced to the king and reported himself.

"So you have lived through it," said Nodwengo.

"I shall die when my hour comes, and not before," Hokosa answered. "We did well yonder, and yet the most of us are alive to tell the tale, for I knew when and how to go. Be ready, king, for the foe press us close, and that mob behind us crawls onward like a snail."

As he spoke the pursuers broke through the fence and gate of the burning town, and once more the fight began. They had the advantage of numbers; but Nodwengo and his troops stood in a wide road upon higher ground protected on either side by walls, and were, moreover, rested, not breathless and weary with travel like the men of Hafela. Slowly,

fighting, every inch of the way, Nodwengo was pushed back, and slowly the long ant-like line of women and sick and cattle crept through the opening in the rock, till at length all of them were gone.

"It is time," said Nodwengo, glancing behind him, "for our arms grow weary."

Then he gave orders, and company by company the defending force followed on the path of the fugitives, till at length amidst a roar of rage and disappointment, the last of them vanished through the arch, Hokosa among them, and the place was blocked with stones, above which shone a hedge of spears.