

## CHAPTER XX

### NOMA SETS A SNARE

Thus ended the first night's battle, since for this time the enemy had fought enough. Nodwengo and his men had also had enough, for out of the five thousand of them some eleven hundred were killed or wounded. Yet they might not rest, for all that night, assisted by the women, they laboured, building stone walls across the narrowest parts of the valley. Also the cattle, women and children were moved along the gorge, which in shape may be compared to a bottle with two necks, one at either end, and encamped in the opening of the second neck, where was the spring of water. This spot was chosen both because here alone water could be obtained, without which they could not hold out more than a single day, and because the koppie whereon grew the strange-looking euphorbia known as the Tree of Doom afforded a natural rampart against attack.

Shortly after dawn, while the soldiers were resting and eating of such food as could be procured--for the most part strips of raw or half-cooked meat cut from hastily killed cattle--the onslaught was renewed with vigour, Hafela directing his efforts to the forcing of the natural archway. But, strive as he would, this he could not do, for it was choked with stones and thorns and guarded by brave men.

"You do but waste your labour, Hafela," said Noma, who stood by him watching the assault.

"What then is to be done?" he asked, "for unless we come at them we cannot kill them. It was clever of them to take refuge in this hole. I thought surely that they would fight it out yonder, beneath the fences of the Great Place."

"Ah!" she answered, "you forgot that they had Hokosa on their side. Did you then think to catch him sleeping? This retreat was Hokosa's counsel. I learned it from the lips of that wounded captain before they killed him. Now, it seems that there are but two paths to follow, and you can choose between them. The one is to send a regiment a day and a half's journey across the cliff top to guard the further mouth of the valley and to wait till these jackals starve in their hole, for certainly they can never come out."

"It has started six hours since," said Hafela, "and though the precipices are steep, having the moon to travel by, it should reach the river mouth of the valley before dawn to-morrow, cutting Nodwengo off from the plains, if indeed he should dare to venture out upon them, which, with so small a force, he will not do. Yet this first plan of yours must fail, Noma, seeing that before they starve within, the generals of Nodwengo will be back upon us from the mountains, catching us between the hammer and the anvil, and I know not how that fight would go."

"Yet, soon or late, it must be fought."

"Nay," he answered, "for my hope is that should the impi return to find Nodwengo dead, they will surrender and acknowledge me as king, who am the first of the blood royal. But what is your second plan?"

By way of answer, she pointed to the cliff above them. On the right-hand side, facing the archway, was a flat ledge overhanging the valley, at a height of about a hundred feet.

"If you can come yonder," she said, "it will be easy to storm this gate, for there lie rocks in plenty, and men cannot fight when stones are dropping on their heads."

"But how can we come to that home of vultures, where never man has set a foot? Look, the cliff above is sheer; no rock-rabbit could stand upon it."

With her eye Noma measured the distance from the brink of the precipice to the broad ledge commanding the valley.

"Sixty paces, not more," she said. "Well, yonder are oxen in plenty, and out of their hides ropes can be made, and out of ropes a ladder, down which men may pass; ten, or even five, would be enough."

"Well thought of Noma," said Hafela. "Hokosa told us last night that to him had passed the wisdom of the Messenger; but if this be so, I think

that to you has passed the guile of Hokosa."

"It seems to me that some of it abides with him," answered Noma laughing.

Then the prince gave orders, and, with many workers of hides toiling at it, within two hours the ladder was ready, its staves, set twenty inches apart, being formed of knob-kerries, or the broken shafts of stabbing spears. Now they lowered it from the top of the precipice so that its end rested upon the ledge, and down it came several men, who swung upon its giddy length like spiders on a web. Reaching this great shelf in safety and advancing to the edge of it, these men started a boulder, which, although as it chanced it hurt no one, fell in the midst of a group of the defenders and bounded away through them.

"Now we must be going," said Hokosa, looking up, "for no man can fight against rocks, and our spears cannot reach those birds. Had the army been taught the use of the bow, as I counselled in the past days, we might still have held the archway; but they called it a woman's weapon, and would have none of it."

As he spoke another stone fell, crushing the life out of a man who stood next to him. Then they retreated to the first wall, which had been piled up during the night, where it was not possible to roll rocks upon them from the cliffs above. This wall, and others reared at intervals behind it, they set to work to strengthen as much as they could, making the

most of the time that was left to them before the enemy could clear the way and march on to attack.

Presently Hafela's men were through and sweeping down upon them with a roar, thinking to carry the wall at a single rush. But in this they failed; indeed, it was only after an hour's hard fighting and by the expedient of continually attacking the work with fresh companies that at length they stormed the wall.

When Hokosa saw that he could no longer hold the place, but before the foe was upon him, he drew off his soldiers to the second wall, a quarter of a mile or more away, and here the fight began again. And so it went on for hour after hour, as one by one the fortifications were carried by the weight of numbers, for the attackers fought desperately under the eye of their prince, caring nothing for the terrible loss they suffered in men. Twice the force of the defenders was changed by order of Nodwengo, fresh men being sent from the companies held in reserve to take the places of those who had borne the brunt of the battle. This indeed it was necessary to do, seeing that it was impossible to carry water to so many, and in that burning valley men could not fight for long athirst. Only Hokosa stayed on, for they brought him drink in a gourd, and wherever the fray was fiercest there he was always; nor although spears were rained upon him by hundreds, was he touched by one of them.

At length as the night fell the king's men were driven back from their

last scherm in the western half of the valley, across the open space back upon the koppie where stood the Tree of Doom. Here they stayed a while till, overmatched and outworn, they were pushed from its rocks across the narrow stretch of broken ground into the shelter of the great stone scherm or wall that ran from side to side of the further neck of the valley, whereon thousands of women and such men as could be spared had been working incessantly during the past night and day.

It was as he retreated among the last upon this wall that Hokosa caught sight of Noma for the first time since they parted in the house of the Messenger. In the forefront of his troops, directing the attack, was Hafela the prince, and at his side stood Noma, carrying in her hand a little shield and a spear. At this moment also she saw him and called aloud to him:--

"You have fought well, Wizard, but to-morrow all your magic shall avail you nothing, for it will be your last day upon this earth."

"Ay, Noma," he answered, "and yours also."

Then of a sudden a company of the king's men rushed from the shelter of the wall upon the attackers driving them back to the koppie and killing several, so that in the confusion and gathering darkness Hokosa lost sight of her, though a man at his side declared that he saw her fall beneath the thrust of an assegai. Thus ended the second day.

Now when the watch had been set the king and his captains took counsel together, for their hearts were heavy.

"Listen," said Nodwengo: "out of five thousand soldiers a thousand have been killed and a thousand lie among us wounded. Hark to the groaning of them! Also we have with us women and children and sick to the number of twelve thousand, and between us and those who would butcher them every one there stands but a single wall. Nor is this the worst of it: the spring cannot supply the wants of so great a multitude in this hot place, and it is feared that presently the water will be done. What way shall we turn? If we surrender to Hafela, perhaps he will spare the lives of the women and children; but whatever he may promise, the most of us he will surely slay. If we fight and are defeated, then once his regiments are among us, all will be slain according to the ancient custom of our people. I have bethought me that we might retreat through the valley, but the river beyond is in flood; also it is certain that before this multitude could reach it, the prince will have sent a force to cut us off while he himself harasses our rear. Now let him who has counsel speak."

"King, I have counsel," said Hokosa. "What were the words that the Messenger spoke to us before he died? Did he not say: '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'? Did he not say: 'Be faithful, cling to the Cross, and do not dare to doubt your Lord, for He will protect you, and your children after you, and He will be your Captain

and you shall be His people'? Did he not bid you also to listen to my counsel? Then listen to it, for it is his: Your case seems desperate, but have no fear, and take no thought for the morrow, for all shall yet be well. Let us now pray to Him that the Messenger has revealed to us, and Whom now he implores on our behalf in that place where he is to guide us and to save us, for then surely He will hearken to our prayer."

"So be it," said Nodwengo, and going out he stood upon a pillar of stone in the moonlight and offered up his supplication in the hearing of the multitude.

Meanwhile, those of the camp of Hafela were also taking counsel. They had fought bravely indeed, and carried the schanses; but at great cost, since for every man that Nodwengo had lost, three of theirs had fallen. Moreover, they were in evil case with weariness and the want of water, as each drop they drank must be carried to them from the Great Place in bags made of raw hide, which caused it to stink, for they had but few gourds with them.

"Now it is strange," said Hafela, "that these men should fight so bravely, seeing that they are but a handful. There can be scarce three thousand of them left, and yet I doubt not that before we carry those last walls of theirs as many of us or more will be done. Ay! and after they are done with, we must meet their great impi when it returns, and of what will befall us then I scarcely like to think."



"Ill-fortune will befall you while Hokosa lives," broke in Noma. "Had it not been for him, this trouble would have been done with by now; but he is a wizard, and by his wizardries he defeats us and puts heart into Nodwengo and the warriors. You, yourself, have seen him this day defying us, not once but many times, for upon his flesh steel has no power. Ay! and this is but the beginning of evil, for I am sure that he leads you into some deep trap where you shall perish everlastingly. Did he not himself declare that the power of that dead white worker of miracles has fallen upon him, and who can fight against magic?"

"Who, indeed?" said Hafela humbly; for like all savages he was very superstitious, and, moreover, a sincere believer in Hokosa's supernatural capacities. "This wizard is too strong for us; he is invulnerable, and as I know well he can read the secret thoughts of men and can suck wisdom from the dead, while to his eyes the darkness is no blind."

"Nay, Hafela," answered Noma, "there is one crack in his shield. Hear me: if we can but catch him and hold him fast we shall have no need to fear him more, and I think that I know how to bait the trap."

"How will you bait it?" asked Hafela.

"Thus. Midway between the koppie and the wall behind which lie the men of the king stands a flat rock, and all about that rock are stretched the bodies of dead soldiers. Now, this is my plan: that when next one

of those dark storm-clouds passes over the face of the moon six of the strongest of our warriors should creep upon their bellies down this way and that, as though they were also numbered with the slain. This done, you shall despatch a herald to call in the ears of the king that you desire to treat with him of peace. Then he will answer that if this be so you can come beneath the walls of his camp, and your herald shall refuse, saying that you fear treachery. But he must add that if Nodwengo will bid Hokosa to advance alone to the flat rock, you will bid me, Noma, whom none can fear, to do likewise, and that there we can talk in sight of both armies, and returning thence, make report to you and to Nodwengo. Afterwards, so soon as Hokosa has set his foot upon the rock, those men who seem to be dead shall spring upon him and drag him to our camp, where we can deal with him; for once the wizard is taken, the cause of Nodwengo is lost."

"A good pitfall," said the prince; "but will Hokosa walk into the trap?"

"I think so, Hafela, for three reasons. He is altogether without fear; he will desire, if may be, to make peace on behalf of the king; and he has this strange weakness, that he still loves me, and will scarcely suffer an occasion of speaking with me to go past, although he has divorced me."

"So be it," said the prince; "the game can be tried, and if it fails, why we lose nothing, whereas if it succeeds we gain Hokosa, which is much; for with you I think that our arms will never prosper while that

accursed wizard sits yonder weaving his spells against us, and bringing our men to death by hundreds and by thousands."

Then he gave his orders, and presently, when a cloud passed over the face of the moon, six chosen men crept forward under the lee of the flat rock and threw themselves down here and there amongst the dead.

Soon the cloud passed, and the herald advanced across the open space blowing a horn, and waving a branch in his hand to show that he came upon a mission of peace.