

CHAPTER XXI

HOKOSA IS LIFTED UP

"What would you?" asked Hokosa of the herald as he halted a short spear-cast from the wall.

"My master, the Prince Hafela, desires to treat with your master, Nodwengo. Many men have fallen on either side, and if this war goes on, though victory must be his at last, many more will fall. Therefore, if any plan can be found, he desires to spare their lives."

Now Hokosa spoke with the king, and answered:--

"Then let Hafela come beneath the wall and we will talk with him."

"Not so," answered the herald. "Does a buck walk into an open pit? Were the prince to come here it might chance that your spears would talk with him. Let Nodwengo follow me to the camp yonder, where we promise him safe conduct."

"Not so," answered Hokosa. "'Does a buck walk into an open pit?' Set out your message, and we will consider it."

"Nay, I am but a common man without authority; but I am charged to make you another offer, and if you will not hear it then there is an end."

Let Hokosa advance alone to that flat rock you see yonder, and there he shall be met, also alone, by one having power to talk with him, namely, by the Lady Noma, who was once his wife. Thus they can confer together midway between the camps and in full sight of both of them, nor, no man being near, can he find cause to be afraid of an unarmed girl. What say you?"

Hokosa turned and talked with the king.

"I think it well that you should not go," said Nodwengo. "The offer seems fair, and the stone is out of reach of their spears; still, behind it may lurk a scheme to kill or capture you, for Hafela is very cunning."

"It may be so, King," answered Hokosa; "still, my heart tells me it is wisest that I should do this thing, for our case is desperate, and if I do it not, that may be the cause of the death of all of us to-morrow. At the worst, I am but one man, and it matters little what may chance to me; nor shall I come to any harm unless it is the will of Heaven that it should be so; and be sure of this, that out of the harm will arise good, for where I go there the spirit of the Messenger goes with me. Remember that he bade you listen to my counsel while I remain with you, seeing that I do not speak of my own wisdom. Therefore let me go, and if it should chance that I am taken, trouble not about the matter, for thus it will be fated to some great end. Above all, though often enough I have been a traitor in the past, do not dream that I betray you, keeping in

mind that so to do would be to betray my own soul, which very soon must render its account on high."

"As you will, Hokosa," answered the king. "And now tell those rebel dogs that on these terms only will I make peace with them--that they withdraw across the mountains by the path which their women and children have taken, leaving this land for ever without lifting another spear against us. If they will do this, notwithstanding all the wickedness and slaughter that they have worked, I will send command to my impi to let them go unharmed. If they will not do this, I put my trust in the God I worship and will fight this fray out to the end, knowing that if I and my people perish, they shall perish also."

Now Nodwengo himself spoke to the herald who was waiting beyond the wall.

"Go back to him you serve," he said, "and say that Hokosa will meet her who was his wife upon the flat stone and talk with her in the sight of both armies, bearing my word with him. At the sound of the blowing of a horn shall each of them advance unarmed and alone from either camp. Say to my brother also that it will indeed be ill for him if he attempts treachery upon Hokosa, for the man who causes his blood to flow will surely die, and after death shall be accursed for ever."

The herald went, and presently a horn was blown.

"Now it comes into my mind that we part for the last time," said Nodwengo in a troubled voice as he took the hand of Hokosa.

"It may be so, King; in my heart I think that it is so; yet I do not altogether grieve thereat, for the burden of my past sins crushes me, and I am weary and seek for rest. Yet we do not part for the last time, because whatever chances, in the end I shall make my report to you yonder"--and he pointed upwards. "Reign on for long years, King--reign well and wisely, clinging to the Faith, for thus at the last shall you reap your reward. Farewell!"

Now again the horn blew, and in the bright moonlight the slight figure of Noma could be seen advancing towards the stone.

Then Hokosa sprang from the wall and advanced also, till at the same moment they climbed upon the stone.

"Greeting, Hokosa," said Noma, and she stretched out her hand to him.

By way of answer he placed his own behind his back, saying: "To your business, woman." Yet his eyes searched her face--the face which in his folly he still loved; and thus it came about that he never saw sundry of the dead bodies, which lay in the shadow of the stone, begin to quicken into life, and inch by inch to arise, first to their knees and next to their feet. He never saw or heard them, yet, as the words left his lips, they sprang upon him from every side, holding him so that he could not

move.

"Away with him!" cried Noma with a laugh of triumph; and at her command he was half-dragged and half-carried across the open space and thrust violently over a stone wall into the camp of Hafela.

Now Nodwengo and his soldiers saw what had happened, and with a shout of "Treachery!" some hundreds of them leapt into the plain and began to run towards the koppie to rescue their envoy.

Hokosa heard the shout, and wrenching himself round, beheld them.

"Back!" he cried in a clear, shrill voice. "Back! children of Nodwengo, and leave me to my fate, for the foe waits for you by thousands behind the wall!"

A soldier struck him across the mouth, bidding him be silent; but his warning had come to the ears of Nodwengo, causing him and his warriors to halt and begin a retreat. It was well that they did so, for seeing that they would not come on, from under the shelter of the wall and of every rock and stone soldiers jumped up by companies and charged, driving them back to their own schanse. But the king's men had the start of them, and had taken shelter behind it, whence they greeted them with a volley of spears, killing ten and wounding twice as many more.

Now it was Hokosa's turn to laugh, and laugh he did, saying:--

"My taking is well paid for already, Prince. A score of your best warriors is a heavy price to give for the carcass of one weary and aging man. But since I am here among you, captured with so much pain and loss, tell me of your courtesy why I have been brought."

Then the prince shook his spear at him and cursed him.

"Would you learn, wizard and traitor?" he cried. "We have caught you because we know well that while you stay yonder your magic counsel will prevail against our might; whereas, when once we hold you fast, Nodwengo will wander to his ruin like a blind and moonstruck man, for you were to him both eyes and brain."

"I understand," said Hokosa calmly. "But, Prince, how if I left my wisdom behind me?"

"That may not be," answered Hafela, "since even a wizard cannot throw his thoughts into the heart of another from afar."

"Ah! you think so, Prince. Well, ask Noma yonder if I cannot throw my thoughts into her heart from afar: though of late I have not chosen to do so, having put aside such spells. But let it pass, and tell me, having taken me, what is it you propose to do with me? First, however, I will give you for nothing some of that wisdom which you grudge to Nodwengo the king. Be advised by me, Prince, and take the terms that he

offers to you--namely, to turn this very night and begone from the land without harm or hindrance. Will you receive my gift, Hafela?"

"What will happen if I refuse it?" asked the prince slowly.

Now Hokosa looked at the dust at his feet, then he gazed upwards searching the heavens, and answered:--

"Did not I tell you yesterday? I think that this will happen. I think--but who can be quite sure of the future, Hafela?--that you and the most of your army by this hour to-morrow night will be lying fast asleep about this place, with jackals for your bedfellows."

The prince heard and trembled at his words, for he believed that if he willed it, Hokosa could prophesy the truth.

"Accursed dog!" he said. "I am minded to be guided by your saying; but be sure of this, that if I follow it, you shall stay here to sleep with jackals, yes, this very night."

Then Noma broke in.

"Be not mad, Hafela!" she said. "Will you listen to the lies that this renegade tells to work upon your fears? Will you abandon victory when it lies within your grasp, and in place of a great king become a fugitive whom all men mock at, an outcast to be hunted down at leisure by that

brother against whom you dared to rebel, but on whom you did not dare to shut your hand when he lay in its hollow? Silence the tongue of this captive rogue for ever and become a man again, with the heart of a man."

"Now," said Hokosa gently; "many would find it hard to believe that I reared this woman from childhood, nursing her with my own hands when she was sick and giving her of the best I had; that afterwards, when you stole her from me, Prince, I sinned deeply to win her back. That I married her and sinned yet more deeply to give her the greatness she desired; and at last, of my own will, I loosed the bonds by which I held her, although I could not thrust her memory from my heart. Yet I have earned it all, for I made her the tool of my witchcraft, and therefore it is just that she should turn and rend me. Well, if you like it, take her counsel, Prince, and let mine go, for I care nothing which you take; only, forgive me if I prophesy once more and for the last time--I am sure that Nodwengo yonder spoke truth when he bade your herald tell me that he who causes my blood to flow shall surely die and for it be called to a strict account. Prince, I am a Christian now, and believe me, whatever you may do, I seek no revenge upon you; having been myself forgiven so much, in my turn I have learned to forgive. Yet it may be ill for that man who causes my blood to flow."

"Let him be strangled," said a captain who stood near by, "and then there will be no blood in the matter."

"Friend," answered Hokosa, "you should have been not a soldier but a

pleader of causes. True it is then that the prince will only cause my life to fly, but whether that is a smaller sin I leave you to judge."

"Keep him prisoner," said another, "till we learn how these matters end."

"Nay," answered Hafela, "for then he will surely outwit us and escape. Noma, what shall we do with this man who was your husband? Tell us, for you should know best how to deal with him."

"Let me think," she answered, and she looked first at the ground beneath her, next around her, then upwards toward the skies.

Now they stood at the foot of the koppie, on the flat top of which grew the great Tree of Doom, that for generations had served the People of Fire as a place of execution of their criminals, or of those who fell under the ban of the king or of the witch-doctors. Among and above the finger-like fronds of this strange and dreadful-looking tree towered that white dead limb shaped like a cross, which Owen had pointed out to his disciple John, taking it to be a sign and a promise. This cross stood out clear against the sinking moon. It caught Noma's eye, and a devilish thought entered into her heart.

"You would keep this fellow alive?" she said, "and yet you would not suffer him to escape. See, there above you is a cross such as he worships. Bind him to it as he says the Man whom he worships was bound,

and let that dead Man help him if he may."

The prince and those about Noma shrank back a little in horror. They were cruel men rendered more cruel by their superstitious fear of one whom they believed to be uncanny; one to whom they attributed inhuman powers which he was exercising to their destruction, but still this doom seemed dreadful to them. Noma read their minds and went on passionately:--

"You deem me unmerciful, but you do not know what I have suffered at this wizard's hands. For his sake and because of him I am haunted. For his own purposes he opened the gates of Distance, he sent me down among the dwellers in Death, causing me to interpret their words for him. I did so, but the dwellers came back out of Death with me, and from that hour they have not left me, nor will they ever leave me; for night by night they sojourn at my side, tormenting me with terrors. He has told me that through my mouth that spirit whom he drew into my body prophesied that he should be 'lifted up above the people.' Let the prophecy be fulfilled, let him be lifted up, for then perchance the ghosts will depart from me and I shall win peace and sleep. Also, thus alone can you hold him safe and yet shed no blood."

"Be it so," said the prince. "When we plotted together of the death of the king, and as your price, Hokosa, you bargained for the girl whom I had chosen to wife, did I not warn you that this witch of many spells, who holds both our hearts in her little hands, should yet hound you to

death and mock you while you perished by an end of shame? What did I tell you, Hokosa?"

Now when he heard his fate, Hokosa bowed his head and trembled a little. Then he lifted it, and exclaimed in a clear voice:--

"It is true, Prince, but I will add to your words. She shall bring both of us to death. For me, I am honoured indeed in that there has been allotted to me that same end which my Master chose. To that cross let my sins be fastened and with them my body."

Now the moon sank, but in the darkness men were found who dared to climb the tree, taking with them strips of raw hide. They reached the top of it, four of them, and seating themselves upon the arms of the cross, they let down a rope, the noose of which was placed about the body of Hokosa. As it tightened upon him, he turned his calm and dreadful eyes on to the eyes of Noma and said to her:--

"Woman, I do not reproach you; but I lay this fate upon you, that you shall watch me die. Thereafter, let God deal with you as He may choose."

Now, when she heard these words Noma shrieked aloud, for of a sudden she felt that the power of the will of Hokosa, from which she had been freed by him, had once more fallen upon her, and that come what might she was doomed to obey his last commands.

Little by little the soldiers drew him up and in the darkness they bound him fast there upon the lofty cross. Then they descended and left him, and would have led Noma with them from the tree. But this they could not do, for always she broke from them screaming, and fled back to its shadow.

Then, seeing that she was bewitched, Hafela commanded that they should bind a cloth about her mouth and leave her there till her senses returned to her in the sunlight--for none of them dared to stop with her in the shadow of that tree, since the odours of it were poisonous to man. Also they believed the place to be haunted by evil spirits.