

CHAPTER XXII

THE VICTORY OF THE CROSS

The sun rose suddenly over the edge of the cliffs, and while it was yet deep shadow in the valley, its red light struck upon the white cross of perished wood that towered above the Tree of Doom and on the black shape of Hokosa crucified to it living. The camp of the king saw and understood, and from every throat of the thousands of men, women and children gathered there, went up a roar of rage and horror. The king lifted his hand, and silence fell upon the place; then he mounted on the wall and cried aloud:--

"Do you yet live, Hokosa, or is it your body only that those traitors have fastened to the tree?"

Back came the answer through the clear still air:--

"I live, O King!"

"Endure then a little while," called Nodwengo, "and we will storm the tree and save you."

"Nay," answered Hokosa, "you cannot save me; yet before I die I shall see you saved."

Then his words were lost in tumult, for the third day's fighting began. Desperately the regiments of Hafela rushing across the open space, hurled themselves upon the fortifications, which, during the night, had been strengthened by the building of two inner walls. Nor was this all, for suddenly a cry told those in front that the regiment which Hafela had despatched across the mountains had travelled up the eastern neck of the valley, and were attacking the position in their rear. Well was it for Nodwengo now that he had listened to the counsel of Hokosa, and, wearied as his soldiers were, had commanded that here also a great wall should be built.

For two hours the fight raged, and then on either side the foe fell back, not beaten indeed, though their dead were many, but to rest and take counsel. But now a new trouble arose: from all the camp of Nodwengo there went up a moan of pain to Heaven, for since the evening of yesterday the spring had given out, and they had found no water wherewith to wet their lips. During the night they bore it; but now the sun beating down on the black rocks with fearful force scorched them to the marrow, till they began to wither like fallen leaves, and already wounded men and children died, while the warriors cut the throats of oxen and drank their blood.

Hokosa hanging on his cross heard this moaning and divined its cause.

"Be of good comfort, children of Nodwengo," he cried; "for I will pray that rain be sent upon you." And he lifted his head and prayed.

Now, whether it was by chance or whether his prayer was heard, who can say? At least it happened that immediately thereafter clouds began to gather and to thicken in the blue of Heaven, and within two hours rain fell in torrents, so that every one could drink his fill, and the spring being replenished at its sources, flowed again strongly.

After the rain came cold and moaning winds, and after the wind a great gloom and thunder.

Now, taking advantage of the shadow, the regiments of Hafela renewed their attack, and this time they carried the first of the three walls, for its defenders grew feeble and few in number. There they paused a while, and save for the cries of the wounded and of frightened women, the silence was great.

"Let your hearts be filled up!" cried the voice of Hokosa through the silence; "for the sunlight shines upon the plain of the Great Place yonder, and in it I see the sheen of spears. The impi travels to your aid, O children of Nodwengo."

Now, at this tidings the people of the king shouted for joy; but Hafela called to his regiments to make an end of them, and they hurled themselves upon the second wall, fighting desperately. Again and again they were beaten back, and again and again they came on, till at length they carried this wall also, driving its defenders, or those who

remained alive of them, into the third entrenchment, and paused to rest awhile.

"Pray for us, O Prophet who are set on high!" cried a voice from the camp, "for if succour do not reach us speedily, we are sped."

Before the echoes of the voice had died away, a flash of lightning flared through the gloom, and in the light of it Hokosa saw that the king's impi was rushing up the gorge.

"Fight on! Fight on!" he called in answer. "I have prayed to Heaven, and your succour is at hand."

Then, with a howl of rage, Hafela's regiments hurled themselves upon the third and last entrenchment, attacking it at once in front and rear. Twice they nearly carried it, but each time the wild scream of Hokosa on high was heard above the din, conjuring its defenders to fight on and fear not, for Heaven had sent them help. They fought as men have seldom fought before, and with them fought the women and even the children. They were few and the foe was still many, but they listened to the urging of him whom they believed to be inspired in his death-agony upon the cross above them, and still they held their own. Twice portions of the wall were torn down, but they filled the breach with the corpses of the dead, ay! and with the bodies of the living, for the wounded, the old men and the very women piled themselves there in the place of stones. No such fray was told of in the annals of the People of Fire as

this, the last stand of Nodwengo against the thousands of Hafela. Now all the shouting had died away, for men had no breath left wherewith to shout, only from the gloomy place of battle came low groans and the deep sobbing sighs of warriors gripped in the death-hug.

"Fight on! Fight on!" shrilled the voice of Hokosa on high. "Lo! the skies are open to my dying sight, and I see the impis of Heaven sweeping to succour you. Behold!"

They dashed the sweat from their eyes and looked forth, and as they looked, the pall of gloom was lifted, and in the golden glow of many-shafted light, they saw, not the legions of Heaven indeed, but the regiments of Nodwengo rushing round the bend of the valley, as dogs rush upon a scent, with heads held low and spears outstretched.

Hafela saw them also.

"Back to the koppie," he cried, "there to die like men, for the wizardries of Hokosa have been too strong for us, and lost is this my last battle and the crown I came to seek!"

They obeyed, and all that were left of them, some ten thousand men, they ran to the koppie and formed themselves upon it, ring above ring, and here the soldiers of Nodwengo closed in upon them.

Again and for the last time the voice of Hokosa rang out above the fray.

"Nodwengo," he cried, "with my passing breath I charge you have mercy and spare these men, so many of them as will surrender. The day of bloodshed has gone by, the fray is finished, the Cross has conquered. Let there be peace in the land."

All men heard him, for his piercing scream, echoed from the precipices, came to the ears of each. All men heard him, and, even in that fierce hour of vengeance, all obeyed. The spear that was poised was not thrown, and the kerry lifted over the fallen did not descend to dash away his life.

"Hearken, Hafela!" called the king, stepping forward from the ranks of the attackers. "He whom you have set on high to bring defeat upon you charges me to give you peace, and in the name of the conquering Cross I give peace. All who surrender shall dwell henceforth in my shadow, nor shall the head or the heel of one of them be harmed, although their sin is great. One life only will I take, the life of that witch who brought your armies down upon me to burn my town and slay my people by thousands, and who but last night betrayed Hokosa to his death of torment. All shall go free, I say, save the witch; and for you, you shall be given cattle and such servants as will cling to you to the number of a hundred, and driven from the land. Now, what say you? Will you yield or be slain? Swift with your answer; for the sun sinks, and ere it is set there must be an end in this way or in that."

The regiments of Hafela heard, and shouted in answer as with one voice:--

"We take your mercy, King! We fought bravely while we could, and now we take your mercy, King!"

"What say you, Hafela?" repeated Nodwengo, addressing the prince, who stood upon a point of rock above him in full sight of both armies.

Hafela turned and looked at Hokosa hanging high in mid-air.

"What say I?" he answered in a slow and quiet voice. "I say that the Cross and its Prophet have been too strong for me, and that I should have done well to follow the one and to listen to the counsel of the other. My brother, you tell me that I may go free, taking servants with me. I thank you and I will go--alone."

And setting the handle of his spear upon the rock, with a sudden movement he fell forward, transfixing his heart with its broad blade, and lay still.

"At least he died like one of the blood-royal of the Sons of Fire!" cried Nodwengo, while the armies stood silent and awestruck, "and with the blood-royal he shall be buried. Lay down your arms, you who followed him and fought for him, fearing nothing, and give over to me the witch that she may be slain."

"She hides under the tree yonder!" cried a voice.

"Go up and take her," said Nodwengo to some of his captains.

Now Noma, crouched on the ground beneath the tree, had seen and heard all that passed. Perceiving the captains making their way towards her through the lines of the soldiers, who opened out a path for them, she rose and for a moment stood bewildered. Then, as though drawn by some strange attraction, she turned, and seizing hold of the creeper that clung about it, she began to climb the Tree of Doom swiftly. Up she went while all men watched, higher and higher yet, till passing out of the finger-like foliage she reached the cross of dead wood whereto Hokosa hung, and placing her feet upon one arm of it, stood there, supporting herself by the broken top of the upright.

Hokosa was not yet dead, though he was very near to death. Lifting his glazing eyes, he knew her and said, speaking thickly:--

"What do you here, Noma, and wherefore have you come?"

"I come because you draw me," she answered, "and because they seek my life below."

"Repent, repent!" he whispered, "there is yet time and Heaven is very merciful."

She heard, and a fury seized her.

"Be silent, dog!" she cried. "Having defied your God so long, shall I grovel to Him at the last? Having hated you so much, shall I seek your forgiveness now? At least of one thing I am glad--it was I who brought you here, and with me and through me you shall die."

Then, placing one foot upon his bent head as if in scorn, she leaned forward, her long hair flying to the wind, and cursed Nodwengo and his people, naming them renegades and apostates, and cursed the soldiers of Hafela, naming them cowards, calling down upon them the malison of their ancestors.

Hokosa heard and muttered:--

"For your soul's sake, woman, repent! repent, ere it be too late!"

"Repent!" she screamed, catching at his words. "Thus do I repent!" and drawing the knife from her girdle, she leant over him and drove it hilt-deep into his breast.

Then with a sudden movement she sprang upwards and outwards into the air, and rushing down through a hundred feet of space, was struck dead upon that very rock where the corpse of Hafela lay.

Now, beneath the agony of the life Hokosa lifted his head for the last time, crying in a great voice:--

"Messenger, I come, be you my guide," and with the words his soul passed.

"All is over and ended," said a voice. "Soldiers, salute the king with the royal salute."

"Nay," answered Nodwengo. "Salute me not, salute the Cross and him who hangs thereon."

So, while the rays of the setting sun shone about it, regiment by regiment that great army rushed past the koppie, and pausing opposite to the cross and its burden, they rendered to it the royal salute of kings.

Then the night fell, and thus through the power of Faith that now, as of old, is the only true and efficient magic, was accomplished the mission to the Sons of Fire of the Saint and Martyr, Thomas Owen, and of his murderer and disciple, the Wizard Hokosa.