

## CHAPTER II. MOPO IS IN TROUBLE

Now, I must tell how my mother did what the boy Chaka had told her, and died quickly. For where his stick had struck her on the forehead there came a sore that would not be healed, and in the sore grew an abscess, and the abscess ate inwards till it came to the brain. Then my mother fell down and died, and I cried very much, for I loved her, and it was dreadful to see her cold and stiff, with not a word to say however loudly I called to her. Well, they buried my mother, and she was soon forgotten. I only remembered her, nobody else did--not even Baleka, for she was too little--and as for my father he took another young wife and was content. After that I was unhappy, for my brothers did not love me, because I was much cleverer than they, and had greater skill with the assegai, and was swifter in running; so they poisoned the mind of my father against me and he treated me badly. But Baleka and I loved each other, for we were both lonely, and she clung to me like a creeper to the only tree in a plain, and though I was young, I learned this: that to be wise is to be strong, for though he who holds the assegai kills, yet he whose mind directs the battle is greater than he who kills. Now I saw that the witch-finders and the medicine-men were feared in the land, and that everybody looked up to them, so that, even when they had only a stick in their hands, ten men armed with spears would fly before them. Therefore I determined that I should be a witch-doctor, for they alone can kill those whom they hate with a word. So I learned the arts of the medicine-men. I made sacrifices, I fasted in the veldt alone, I did all those things of which you have heard, and I learned much; for there is

wisdom in our magic as well as lies--and you know it, my father, else you had not come here to ask me about your lost oxen.

So things went on till I was twenty years of age--a man full grown. By now I had mastered all I could learn by myself, so I joined myself on to the chief medicine-man of our tribe, who was named Noma. He was old, had one eye only, and was very clever. Of him I learned some tricks and more wisdom, but at last he grew jealous of me and set a trap to catch me. As it chanced, a rich man of a neighbouring tribe had lost some cattle, and came with gifts to Noma praying him to smell them out. Noma tried and could not find them; his vision failed him. Then the headman grew angry and demanded back his gifts; but Noma would not give up that which he once had held, and hot words passed. The headman said that he would kill Noma; Noma said that he would bewitch the headman.

"Peace," I said, for I feared that blood would be shed. "Peace, and let me see if my snake will tell me where the cattle are."

"You are nothing but a boy," answered the headman. "Can a boy have wisdom?"

"That shall soon be known," I said, taking the bones in my hand. (1)

(1) The Kafir witch-doctors use the knuckle-bones of animals in their magic rites, throwing them something as we throw dice.--ED.

"Leave the bones alone!" screamed Noma. "We will ask nothing more of our snakes for the good of this son of a dog."

"He shall throw the bones," answered the headman. "If you try to stop him, I will let sunshine through you with my assegai." And he lifted his spear.

Then I made haste to begin; I threw the bones. The headman sat on the ground before me and answered my questions. You know of these matters, my father--how sometimes the witch-doctor has knowledge of where the lost things are, for our ears are long, and sometimes his Ehlose tells him, as but the other day it told me of your oxen. Well, in this case, my snake stood up. I knew nothing of the man's cattle, but my Spirit was with me and soon I saw them all, and told them to him one by one, their colour, their age--everything. I told him, too, where they were, and how one of them had fallen into a stream and lay there on its back drowned, with its forefoot caught in a forked root. As my Ehlose told me so I told the headman.

Now, the man was pleased, and said that if my sight was good, and he found the cattle, the gifts should be taken from Noma and given to me; and he asked the people who were sitting round, and there were many, if this was not just. "Yes, yes," they said, it was just, and they would see that it was done. But Noma sat still and looked at me evilly. He knew that I had made a true divination, and he was very angry. It was a big matter: the herd of cattle were many, and, if they were found where

I had said, then all men would think me the greater wizard. Now it was late, and the moon had not yet risen, therefore the headman said that he would sleep that night in our kraal, and at the first light would go with me to the spot where I said the cattle were. After that he went away.

I too went into my hut and lay down to sleep. Suddenly I awoke, feeling a weight upon my breast. I tried to start up, but something cold pricked my throat. I fell back again and looked. The door of the hut was open, the moon lay low on the sky like a ball of fire far away. I could see it through the door, and its light crept into the hut. It fell upon the face of Noma the witch-doctor. He was seated across me, glaring at me with his one eye, and in his hand was a knife. It was that which I had felt prick my throat.

"You whelp whom I have bred up to tear me!" he hissed into my ear, "you dared to divine where I failed, did you? Very well, now I will show you how I serve such puppies. First, I will pierce through the root of your tongue, so that you cannot squeal, then I will cut you to pieces slowly, bit by bit, and in the morning I will tell the people that the spirits did it because you lied. Next, I will take off your arms and legs. Yes, yes, I will make you like a stick! Then I will"--and he began driving in the knife under my chin.

"Mercy, my uncle," I said, for I was frightened and the knife hurt.

"Have mercy, and I will do whatever you wish!"

"Will you do this?" he asked, still pricking me with the knife. "Will you get up, go to find the dog's cattle and drive them to a certain place, and hide them there?" And he named a secret valley that was known to very few. "If you do that, I will spare you and give you three of the cows. If you refuse or play me false, then, by my father's spirit, I will find a way to kill you!"

"Certainly I will do it, my uncle," I answered. "Why did you not trust me before? Had I known that you wanted to keep the cattle, I would never have smelt them out. I only did so fearing lest you should lose the presents."

"You are not so wicked as I thought," he growled. "Get up, then, and do my bidding. You can be back here two hours after dawn."

So I got up, thinking all the while whether I should try to spring on him. But I was without arms, and he had the knife; also if, by chance, I prevailed and killed him, it would have been thought that I had murdered him, and I should have tasted the assegai. So I made another plan. I would go and find the cattle in the valley where I had smelt them out, but I would not bring them to the secret hiding-place. No; I would drive them straight to the kraal, and denounce Noma before the chief, my father, and all the people. But I was young in those days, and did not know the heart of Noma. He had not been a witch-doctor till he grew old for nothing. Oh! he was evil!--he was cunning as a jackal, and fierce

like a lion.. He had planted me by him like a tree, but he meant to keep me clipped like a bush. Now I had grown tall and overshadowed him; therefore he would root me up.

I went to the corner of my hut, Noma watching me all the while, and took a kerrie and my small shield. Then I started through the moonlight. Till I was past the kraal I glided along quietly as a shadow. After that, I began to run, singing to myself as I went, to frighten away the ghosts, my father.

For an hour I travelled swiftly over the plain, till I came to the hillside where the bush began. Here it was very dark under the shade of the trees, and I sang louder than ever. At last I found the little buffalo path I sought, and turned along it. Presently I came to an open place, where the moonlight crept in between the trees. I knelt down and looked. Yes! my snake had not lied to me; there was the spoor of the cattle. Then I went on gladly till I reached a dell through which the water ran softly, sometimes whispering and sometimes talking out loud. Here the trail of the cattle was broad: they had broken down the ferns with their feet and trampled the grass. Presently I came to a pool. I knew it--it was the pool my snake had shown me. And there at the edge of the pool floated the drowned ox, its foot caught in a forked root. All was just as I had seen it in my heart.

I stepped forward and looked round. My eye caught something; it was the

faint grey light of the dawn glinted on the cattle's horns. As I looked, one of them snorted, rose and shook the dew from his hide. He seemed big as an elephant in the mist and twilight.

Then I collected them all--there were seventeen--and drove them before me down the narrow path back towards the kraal. Now the daylight came quickly, and the sun had been up an hour when I reached the spot where I must turn if I wished to hide the cattle in the secret place, as Noma had bid me. But I would not do this. No, I would go on to the kraal with them, and tell all men that Noma was a thief. Still, I sat down and rested awhile, for I was tired. As I sat, I heard a noise, and looked up. There, over the slope of the rise, came a crowd of men, and leading them was Noma, and by his side the headman who owned the cattle. I rose and stood still, wondering; but as I stood, they ran towards me shouting and waving sticks and spears.

"There he is!" screamed Noma. "There he is!--the clever boy whom I have brought up to bring shame on me. What did I tell you? Did I not tell you that he was a thief? Yes--yes! I know your tricks, Mopo, my child! See! he is stealing the cattle! He knew where they were all the time, and now he is taking them away to hide them. They would be useful to buy a wife with, would they not, my clever boy?" And he made a rush at me, with his stick lifted, and after him came the headman, grunting with rage.

I understood now, my father. My heart went mad in me, everything began to swim round, a red cloth seemed to lift itself up and down before my

eyes. I have always seen it thus when I was forced to fight. I screamed out one word only, "Liar!" and ran to meet him. On came Noma. He struck at me with his stick, but I caught the blow upon my little shield, and hit back. Wow! I did hit! The skull of Noma met my kerrie, and down he fell dead at my feet. I yelled again, and rushed on at the headman. He threw an assegai, but it missed me, and next second I hit him too. He got up his shield, but I knocked it down upon his head, and over he rolled senseless. Whether he lived or died I do not know, my father; but his head being of the thickest, I think it likely that he lived. Then, while the people stood astonished, I turned and fled like the wind. They turned too, and ran after me, throwing spears at me and trying to cut me off. But none of them could catch me--no, not one. I went like the wind; I went like a buck when the dogs wake it from sleep; and presently the sound of their chase grew fainter and fainter, till at last I was out of sight and alone.