

### CHAPTER III. MOPO VENTURES HOME

I threw myself down on the grass and panted till my breath came back; then I went and hid in a patch of reeds down by a swamp. All day long I lay there thinking. What was I to do? Now I was a jackal without a hole. If I went back to my people, certainly they would kill me, whom they thought a thief. My blood would be given for Noma's, and that I did not wish, though my heart was sad. Then there came into my mind the thought of Chaka, the boy to whom I had given the cup of water long ago. I had heard of him: his name was known in the land; already the air was big with it; the very trees and grass spoke it. The words he had said and the vision that my mother had seen were beginning to come true. By the help of the Umtetwas he had taken the place of his father Senzangacona; he had driven out the tribe of the Amaquabe; now he made war on Zweete, chief of the Endwande, and he had sworn that he would stamp the Endwande flat, so that nobody could find them any more. Now I remembered how this Chaka promised that he would make me great, and that I should grow fat in his shadow; and I thought to myself that I would arise and go to him. Perhaps he would kill me; well, what did it matter? Certainly I should be killed if I stayed here. Yes, I would go. But now my heart pulled another way. There was but one whom I loved in the world--it was my sister Baleka. My father had betrothed her to the chief of a neighbouring tribe, but I knew that this marriage was against her wish. Perhaps my sister would run away with me if I could get near her to tell her that I was going. I would try--yes, I would try.

I waited till the darkness came down, then I rose from my bed of weeds and crept like a jackal towards the kraal. In the mealie gardens I stopped awhile, for I was very hungry, and filled myself with the half-ripe mealies. Then I went on till I came to the kraal. Some of my people were seated outside of a hut, talking together over a fire. I crept near, silently as a snake, and hid behind a little bush. I knew that they could not see me outside the ring of the firelight, and I wanted to hear what they said. As I guessed, they were talking of me and called me many names. They said that I should bring ill-luck on the tribe by having killed so great a witch-doctor as Noma; also that the people of the headman would demand payment for the assault on him. I learned, moreover, that my father had ordered out all the men of the tribe to hunt for me on the morrow and to kill me wherever they found me. "Ah!" I thought, "you may hunt, but you will bring nothing home to the pot." Just then a dog that was lying by the fire got up and began to sniff the air. I could not see what dog it was--indeed, I had forgotten all about the dogs when I drew near the kraal; that is what comes of want of experience, my father. The dog sniffed and sniffed, then he began to growl, looking always my way, and I grew afraid.

"What is the dog growling at?" said one man to another. "Go and see." But the other man was taking snuff and did not like to move. "Let the dog go and see for himself," he answered, sneezing, "what is the good of keeping a dog if you have to catch the thief?"

"Go on, then," said the first man to the dog. And he ran forward,

barking. Then I saw him: it was my own dog, Koos, a very good dog. Presently, as I lay not knowing what to do, he smelt my smell, stopped barking, and running round the bush he found me and began to lick my face. "Be quiet, Koos!" I whispered to him. And he lay down by my side.

"Where has that dog gone now?" said the first man. "Is he bewitched, that he stops barking suddenly and does not come back?"

"We will see," said the other, rising, a spear in his hand.

Now once more I was terribly afraid, for I thought that they would catch me, or I must run for my life again. But as I sprang up to run, a big black snake glided between the men and went off towards the huts. They jumped aside in a great fright, then all of them turned to follow the snake, saying that this was what the dog was barking at. That was my good Ehlose, my father, which without any doubt took the shape of a snake to save my life.

When they had gone I crept off the other way, and Koos followed me. At first I thought that I would kill him, lest he should betray me; but when I called to him to knock him on the head with my kerrie, he sat down upon the ground wagging his tail, and seemed to smile in my face, and I could not do it. So I thought that I would take my chance, and we went on together. This was my purpose: first to creep into my own hut and get my assegais and a skin blanket, then to gain speech with Baleka. My hut, I thought, would be empty, for nobody sleeps there except

myself, and the huts of Noma were some paces away to the right. I came to the reed fence that surrounded the huts. Nobody was to be seen at the gate, which was not shut with thorns as usual. It was my duty to close it, and I had not been there to do so. Then, bidding the dog lie down outside, I stepped through boldly, reached the door of my hut, and listened. It was empty; there was not even a breath to be heard. So I crept in and began to search for my assegais, my water-gourd, and my wood pillow, which was so nicely carved that I did not like to leave it. Soon I found them. Then I felt about for my skin rug, and as I did so my hand touched something cold. I started, and felt again. It was a man's face--the face of a dead man, of Noma, whom I had killed and who had been laid in my hut to await burial. Oh! then I was frightened, for Noma dead and in the dark was worse than Noma alive. I made ready to fly, when suddenly I heard the voices of women talking outside the door of the hut. I knew the voices; they were those of Noma's two wives, and one of them said she was coming in to watch by her husband's body. Now I was in a trap indeed, for before I could do anything I saw the light go out of a hole in the hut, and knew by the sound of a fat woman puffing as she bent herself up that Noma's first wife was coming through it. Presently she was in, and, squatting by the side of the corpse in such a fashion that I could not get to the door, she began to make lamentations and to call down curses on me. Ah! she did not know that I was listening. I too squatted by Noma's head, and grew quick-witted in my fear. Now that the woman was there I was not so much afraid of the dead man, and I remembered, too, that he had been a great cheat; so I thought I would make him cheat for the last time. I placed my hands beneath his

shoulders and pushed him up so that he sat upon the ground. The woman heard the noise and made a sound in her throat.

"Will you not be quiet, you old hag?" I said in Noma's voice. "Can you not let me be at peace, even now when I am dead?"

She heard, and, falling backwards in fear, drew in her breath to shriek aloud.

"What! will you also dare to shriek?" I said again in Noma's voice; "then I must teach you silence." And I tumbled him over on to the top of her.

Then her senses left her, and whether she ever found them again I do not know. At least she grew quiet for that time. For me, I snatched up the rug--afterwards I found it was Noma's best kaross, made by Basutos of chosen cat-skins, and worth three oxen--and I fled, followed by Koos.

Now the kraal of the chief, my father, Makedama, was two hundred paces away, and I must go thither, for there Baleka slept. Also I dared not enter by the gate, because a man was always on guard there. So I cut my way through the reed fence with my assegai and crept to the hut where Baleka was with some of her half-sisters. I knew on which side of the hut it was her custom to lie, and where her head would be. So I lay down on my side and gently, very gently, began to bore a hole in the grass covering of the hut. It took a long while, for the thatch was thick,

but at last I was nearly through it. Then I stopped, for it came into my mind that Baleka might have changed her place, and that I might wake the wrong girl. I almost gave it over, thinking that I would fly alone, when suddenly I heard a girl wake and begin to cry on the other side of the thatch. "Ah," I thought, "that is Baleka, who weeps for her brother!" So I put my lips where the thatch was thinnest and whispered:--

"Baleka, my sister! Baleka, do not weep! I, Mopo, am here. Say not a word, but rise. Come out of the hut, bringing your skin blanket."

Now Baleka was very clever: she did not shriek, as most girls would have done. No; she understood, and, after waiting awhile, she rose and crept from the hut, her blanket in her hand.

"Why are you here, Mopo?" she whispered, as we met. "Surely you will be killed!"

"Hush!" I said. And then I told her of the plan which I had made. "Will you come with me?" I said, when I had done, "or will you creep back into the hut and bid me farewell?"

She thought awhile, then she said, "No, my brother, I will come, for I love you alone among our people, though I believe that this will be the end of it--that you will lead me to my death."

I did not think much of her words at the time, but afterwards they came

back to me. So we slipped away together, followed by the dog Koos,  
and soon we were running over the veldt with our faces set towards the  
country of the Zulu tribe.