

CHAPTER X. THE TRIAL OF MOPO

Now I sat four days in the huts of the tribe whither I had been sent, and did the king's business. And on the fifth morning I rose up, together with those with me, and we turned our faces towards the king's kraal. But when we had journeyed a little way we met a party of soldiers, who commanded us to stand.

"What is it, king's men?" I asked boldly.

"This, son of Makedama," answered their spokesman: "give over to us your wife Macropha and your children Umslopogaas and Nada, that we may do with them as the king commands."

"Umslopogaas," I answered, "has gone where the king's arm cannot stretch, for he is dead; and for my wife Macropha and my daughter Nada, they are by now in the caves of the Swazis, and the king must seek them there with an army if he will find them. To Macropha he is welcome, for I hate her, and have divorced her; and as for the girl, well, there are many girls, and it is no great matter if she lives or dies, yet I pray him to spare her."

Thus I spoke carelessly, for I knew well that my wife and child were beyond the reach of Chaka.

"You do well to ask the girl's life," said the soldier, laughing, "for

all those born to you are dead, by order of the king."

"Is it indeed so?" I answered calmly, though my knees shook and my tongue clove to my lips. "The will of the king be done. A cut stick puts out new leaves; I can have more children."

"Ay, Mopo; but first you must get new wives, for yours are dead also, all five of them."

"Is it indeed so?" I answered. "The king's will be done. I wearied of those brawling women."

"So, Mopo," said the soldier; "but to get other wives and have more children born to you, you must live yourself, for no children are born to the dead, and I think that Chaka has an assegai which you shall kiss."

"Is it so?" I answered. "The king's will be done. The sun is hot, and I tire of the road. He who kisses the assegai sleeps sound."

Thus I spoke, my father, and, indeed, in that hour I desired to die.

The world was empty for me. Macropha and Nada were gone, Umslopogaas was dead, and my other wives and children were murdered. I had no heart to begin to build up a new house, none were left for me to love, and it seemed well that I should die also.

The soldiers asked those with me if that tale was true which I told of the death of Umslopogaas and of the going of Macrophah and Nada into Swaziland. They said, Yes, it was true. Then the soldiers said that they would lead me back to the king, and I wondered at this, for I thought that they would kill me where I stood. So we went on, and piece by piece I learned what had happened at the king's kraal.

On the day after I left, it came to the ears of Chaka, by the mouth of his spies, that my second wife--Anadi--was sick and spoke strange words in her sickness. Then, taking three soldiers with him, he went to my kraal at the death of the day. He left the three soldiers by the gates of the kraal, bidding them to suffer none to come in or go out, but Chaka himself entered the large hut where Anadi lay sick, having his toy assegai, with the shaft of the royal red wood, in his hand. Now, as it chanced, in the hut were Unandi, the mother of Chaka, and Baleka, my sister, the wife of Chaka, for, not knowing that I had taken away Umslopogaas, the son of Baleka, according to their custom, these two foolish women had come to kiss and fondle the lad. But when they entered the hut they found it full of my other wives and children. These they sent away, all except Moosa, the son of Anadi--that boy who was born eight days before Umslopogaas, the son of Chaka. But they kept Moosa in the hut, and kissed him, giving him imphi (1) to eat, fearing lest it should seem strange to the women, my wives, if, Umslopogaas being gone, they refused to take notice of any other child.

(1) A variety of sugar-cane.--ED.

Now as they sat thus, presently the doorway was darkened, and, behold! the king himself crept through it, and saw them fondling the child Moosa. When they knew who it was that entered, the women flung themselves upon the ground before him and praised him. But he smiled grimly, and bade them be seated. Then he spoke to them, saying, "You wonder, Unandi, my mother, and Baleka, my wife, why it is that I am come here into the hut of Mopo, son of Makedama. I will tell you: it is because he is away upon my business, and I hear that his wife Anadi is sick--it is she who lies there, is it not? Therefore, as the first doctor in the land, I am come to cure her, Unandi, my mother, and Baleka, my sister."

Thus he spoke, eyeing them as he did so, and taking snuff from the blade of his little assegai, and though his words were gentle they shook with fear, for when Chaka spoke thus gently he meant death to many. But Unandi, Mother of the Heavens, answered, saying that it was well that the king had come, since his medicine would bring rest and peace to her who lay sick.

"Yes," he answered; "it is well. It is pleasant, moreover, my mother and sister, to see you kissing yonder child. Surely, were he of your own blood you could not love him more."

Now they trembled again, and prayed in their hearts that Anadi, the sick woman, who lay asleep, might not wake and utter foolish words in her

wandering. But the prayer was answered from below and not from above, for Anadi woke, and, hearing the voice of the king, her sick mind flew to him whom she believed to be the king's child.

"Ah!" she said, sitting upon the ground and pointing to her own son, Moosa, who squatted frightened against the wall of the hut. "Kiss him, Mother of the Heavens, kiss him! Whom do they call him, the young cub who brings ill-fortune to our doors? They call him the son of Mopo and Macropha!" And she laughed wildly, stopped speaking, and sank back upon the bed of skins.

"They call him the son of Mopo and Macropha," said the king in a low voice. "Whose son is he, then, woman?"

"Oh, ask her not, O king," cried his mother and his wife, casting themselves upon the ground before him, for they were mad with fear. "Ask her not; she has strange fancies such as are not meet for your ears to hear. She is bewitched, and has dreams and fancies."

"Peace!" he answered. "I will listen to this woman's wanderings. Perhaps some star of truth shines in her darkness, and I would see light. Who, then, is he, woman?"

"Who is he?" she answered. "Are you a fool that ask who he is? He is--hush!--put your ear close--let me speak low lest the reeds of the hut speak it to the king. He is--do you listen? He is--the son of Chaka

and Baleka, the sister of Mopo, the changeling whom Unandi, Mother of the Heavens, palmed off upon this house to bring a curse on it, and whom she would lead out before the people when the land is weary of the wickedness of the king, her son, to take the place of the king."

"It is false, O king!" cried the two women. "Do not listen to her; it is false. The boy is her own son, Moosa, whom she does not know in her sickness."

But Chaka stood up in the hut and laughed terribly. "Truly, Nobela prophesied well," he cried, "and I did ill to slay her. So this is the trick thou hast played upon me, my mother. Thou wouldst give a son to me who will have no son: thou wouldst give me a son to kill me. Good! Mother of the Heavens, take thou the doom of the Heavens! Thou wouldst give me a son to slay me and rule in my place; now, in turn, I, thy son, will rob me of a mother. Die, Unandi!--die at the hand thou didst bring forth!" And he lifted the little assegai and smote it through her.

For a moment Unandi, Mother of the Heavens, wife of Senzangacona, stood uttering no cry. Then she put up her hand, and drew the assegai from her side.

"So shalt thou die also, Chaka the Evil!" she cried, and fell down dead there in the hut.

Thus, then, did Chaka murder his mother Unandi.

Now when Baleka saw what had been done, she turned and fled from the hut into the Emposeni, and so swiftly that the guards at the gates could not stop her. But when she reached her own hut Baleka's strength failed her, and she fell senseless on the ground. But the boy Moosa, my son, being overcome with terror, stayed where he was, and Chaka, believing him to be his son, murdered him also, and with his own hand.

Then he stalked out of the hut, and leaving the three guards at the gate, commanded a company of soldiers to surround the kraal and fire it. This they did, and as the people rushed out they killed them, and those who did not run out were burned in the fire. Thus, then, perished all my wives, my children, my servants, and those who were within the gates in their company. The tree was burned, and the bees in it, and I alone was left living--I and Macropha and Nada, who were far away.

Nor was Chaka yet satisfied with blood, for, as has been told, he sent messengers bidding them kill Macropha, my wife, and Nada, my daughter, and him who was named my son. But he commanded the messengers that they should not slay me, but bring me living before him.

Now when the soldiers did not kill me I took counsel with myself, for it was my belief that I was saved alive only that I might die later, and in a more cruel fashion. Therefore for awhile I thought that it would be well if I did that for myself which another purposed to do for me. Why should I, who was already doomed, wait to meet my doom? What had I left

to keep me in the place of life, seeing that all whom I loved were dead or gone? To die would be easy, for I knew the ways of death. In my girdle I carried a secret medicine; he who eats of it, my father, will see the sun's shadow move no more, and will never look upon the stars again. But I was minded to know the assegai or the kerrie; nor would I perish more slowly beneath the knives of the tormentors, nor be parched by the pangs of thirst, or wander eyeless to my end. Therefore it was that, since I had sat in the doom ring looking hour after hour into the face of death, I had borne this medicine with me by night and by day. Surely now was the time to use it.

So I thought as I sat through the watches of the night, ay! and drew out the bitter drug and laid it on my tongue. But as I did so I remembered my daughter Nada, who was left to me, though she sojourned in a far country, and my wife Macrophia and my sister Baleka, who still lived, so said the soldiers, though how it came about that the king had not killed her I did not know then. Also another thought was born in my heart. While life remained to me, I might be revenged upon him who had wrought me this woe; but can the dead strike? Alas! the dead are strengthless, and if they still have hearts to suffer, they have no hands to give back blow for blow. Nay, I would live on. Time to die when death could no more be put away. Time to die when the voice of Chaka spoke my doom. Death chooses for himself and answers no questions; he is a guest to whom none need open the door of his hut, for when he wills he can pass through the thatch like air. Not yet would I taste of that medicine of mine.

So I lived on, my father, and the soldiers led me back to the kraal of Chaka. Now when we came to the kraal it was night, for the sun had sunk as we passed through the gates. Still, as he had been commanded, the captain of those who watched me went in before the king and told him that I lay without in bonds. And the king said, "Let him be brought before me, who was my physician, that I may tell him how I have doctored those of his house."

So they took me and led me to the royal house, and pushed me through the doorway of the great hut.

Now a fire burned in the hut, for the night was cold, and Chaka sat on the further side of the fire, looking towards the opening of the hut, and the smoke from the fire wreathed him round, and its light shone upon his face and flickered in his terrible eyes.

At the door of the hut certain councillors seized me by the arms and dragged me towards the fire. But I broke from them, and prostrating myself, for my arms were free, I praised the king and called him by his royal names. The councillors sprang towards me to seize me again, but Chaka said, "Let him be; I would talk with my servant." Then the councillors bowed themselves on either side, and laid their hands on their sticks, their foreheads touching the ground. But I sat down on the floor of the hut over against the king, and we talked through the fire.

"Tell me of the cattle that I sent thee to number, Mopo, son of Makedama," said Chaka. "Have my servants dealt honestly with my cattle?"

"They have dealt honestly, O king," I answered.

"Tell me, then, of the number of the cattle and of their markings, Mopo, forgetting none."

So I sat and told him, ox by ox, cow by cow, and heifer by heifer, forgetting none; and Chaka listened silently as one who is asleep. But I knew that he did not sleep, for all the while the firelight flickered in his fierce eyes. Also I knew that he did but torment me, or that, perhaps, he would learn of the cattle before he killed me. At length all the tale was told.

"So," said the king, "it goes well. There are yet honest men left in the land. Knowest thou, Mopo, that sorrow has come upon thy house while thou wast about my business."

"I have heard it, O king!" I answered, as one who speaks of a small matter.

"Yes, Mopo, sorrow has come upon thy house, the curse of Heaven has fallen upon thy kraal. They tell me, Mopo, that the fire from above ran briskly through they huts."

"I have heard it, I king!"

"They tell me, Mopo, that those within thy gates grew mad at the sight of the fire, and dreaming there was no escape, that they stabbed themselves with assegais or leaped into the flames."

"I have heard it, O king! What of it? Any river is deep enough to drown a fool!"

"Thou hast heard these things, Mopo, but thou hast not yet heard all. Knowest thou, Mopo, that among those who died in thy kraal was she who bore me, she who was named Mother of the Heavens?"

Then, my father, I, Mopo, acted wisely, because of the thought which my good spirit gave me, for I cast myself upon the ground, and wailed aloud as though in utter grief.

"Spare my ears, Black One!" I wailed. "Tell me not that she who bore thee is dead, O Lion of the Zulu. For the others, what is it? It is a breath of wind, it is a drop of water; but this trouble is as the gale or as the sea."

"Cease, my servant, cease!" said the mocking voice of Chaka; "but know this, thou hast done well to grieve aloud, because the Mother of the Heavens is no more, and ill wouldst thou have done to grieve because the fire from above has kissed thy gates. For hadst thou done this last

thing or left the first undone, I should have known that thy heart was wicked, and by now thou wouldst have wept indeed--tears of blood, Mopo. It is well for thee, then, that thou hast read my riddle aright."

Now I saw the depths of the pit that Chaka had dug for me, and blessed my Ehlose who had put into my heart those words which I should answer. I hoped also that Chaka would now let me go; but it was not to be, for this was but the beginning of my trial.

"Knowest thou, Mopo," said the king, "that as my mother died yonder in the flames of thy kraal she cried out strange and terrible words which came to my ears through the singing of the fire. These were her words: that thou, Mopo, and thy sister Baleka, and thy wives, had conspired together to give a child to me who would be childless. These were her words, the words that came to me through the singing of the fire. Tell me now, Mopo, where are those children that thou leddest from thy kraal, the boy with the lion eyes who is named Umslopogaas, and the girl who is named Nada?"

"Umslopogaas is dead by the lion's mouth, O king!" I answered, "and Nada sits in the Swazi caves." And I told him of the death of Umslopogaas and of how I had divorced Macropha, my wife.

"The boy with the lion eyes to the lion's mouth!" said Chaka. "Enough of him; he is gone. Nada may yet be sought for with the assegai in the Swazi caves; enough of her. Let us speak of this song that my

mother--who, alas! is dead, Mopo--this song she sang through the singing of the flames. Tell me, Mopo, tell me now, was it a true tale."

"Nay, O king! surely the Mother of the Heavens was maddened by the Heavens when she sang that song," I answered. "I know nothing of it, O king."

"Thou knowest naught of it, Mopo?" said the king. And again he looked at me terribly through the reek of the fire. "Thou knowest naught of it, Mopo? Surely thou art a-cold; thy hands shake with cold. Nay, man, fear not--warm them, warm them, Mopo. See, now, plunge that hand of thine into the heart of the flame!" And he pointed with his little assegai, the assegai handled with the royal wood, to where the fire glowed reddest--ay, he pointed and laughed.

Then, my father, I grew cold indeed--yes, I grew cold who soon should be hot, for I saw the purpose of Chaka. He would put me to the trial by fire.

For a moment I sat silent, thinking. Then the king spoke again in a great voice: "Nay, Mopo, be not so backward; shall I sit warm and see thee suffer cold? What, my councillors, rise, take the hand of Mopo, and hold it to the flame, that his heart may rejoice in the warmth of the flame while we speak together of this matter of the child that was, so my mother sang, born to Baleka, my wife, the sister of Mopo, my servant."

"There is little need for that, O king," I answered, being made bold by fear, for I saw that if I did nothing death would swiftly end my doubts. Once, indeed, I bethought me of the poison that I bore, and was minded to swallow it and make an end, but the desire to live is great, and keen is the thirst for vengeance, so I said to my heart, "Not yet awhile; I will endure this also; afterwards, if need be, I can die."

"I thank the king for his graciousness, and I will warm me at the fire. Speak on, O king, while I warm myself, and thou shalt hear true words," I said boldly.

Then, my father, I stretched out my left hand and plunged it into the fire--not into the hottest of the fire, but where the smoke leapt from the flame. Now my flesh was wet with the sweat of fear, and for a little moment the flames curled round it and did not burn me. But I knew that the torment was to come.

For a short while Chaka watched me, smiling. Then he spoke slowly, that the fire might find time to do its work.

"Say, then, Mopo, thou knowest nothing of this matter of the birth of a son to thy sister Baleka?"

"I know this only, O king!" I answered, "that a son was born in past years to thy wife Baleka, that I killed the child in obedience to thy

word, and laid its body before thee."

Now, my father, the steam from my flesh had been drawn from my hand by the heat, and the flame got hold of me and ate into my flesh, and its torment was great. But of this I showed no sign upon my face, for I knew well that if I showed sign or uttered cry, then, having failed in the trial, death would be my portion.

Then the king spoke again, "Dost thou swear by my head, Mopo, that no son of mine was suckled in thy kraals?"

"I swear it, O king! I swear it by thy head," I answered.

And now, my father, the agony of the fire was such as may not be told. I felt my eyes start forward in their sockets, my blood seemed to boil within me, it rushed into my head, and down my face their ran two tears of blood. But yet I held my hand in the fire and made no sign, while the king and his councillors watched me curiously. Still, for a moment Chaka said nothing, and that moment seemed to me as all the years of my life.

"Ah!" he said at length, "I see that thou growest warm, Mopo! Withdraw thy hand from the flame. I am answered; thou hast passed the trial; thy heart is clean; for had there been lies in it the fire had given them tongue, and thou hadst cried aloud, making thy last music, Mopo!"

Now I took my hand from the flame, and for awhile the torment left me.

"It is well, O king," I said calmly. "Fire has no power of hurt on those whose heart is pure."

But as I spoke I looked at my left hand. It was black, my father--black as a charred stick, and the nails were gone from the twisted fingers. Look at it now, my father; you can see, though my eyes are blind. The hand is white, like yours--it is white and dead and shrivelled. These are the marks of the fire in Chaka's hut--the fire that kissed me many, many years ago; I have had but little use of that hand since this night of torment. But my right arm yet remained to me, my father, and, ah! I used it.

"It seems that Nobela, the doctress, who is dead, lied when she prophesied evil on me from thee, Mopo," said Chaka again. "It seems that thou art innocent of this offence, and that Baleka, thy sister, is innocent, and that the song which the Mother of the Heavens sang through the singing flames was no true song. It is well for thee, Mopo, for in such a matter my oath had not helped thee. But my mother is dead--dead in the flames with thy wives and children, Mopo, and in this there is witchcraft. We will have a mourning, Mopo, thou and I, such a mourning as has not been seen in Zululand, for all the people on the earth shall weep at it. And there shall be a 'smelling out' at this mourning, Mopo. But we will summon no witch-doctors, thou and I will be witch-doctors, and ourselves shall smell out those who have brought these woes upon us. What! shall my mother die unavenged, she who bore me and has perished by

witchcraft, and shall thy wives and children die unavenged--thou being innocent? Go forth, Mopo, my faithful servant, whom I have honoured with the warmth of my fire, go forth!" And once again he stared at me through the reek of the flame, and pointed with his assegai to the door of the hut.