

## Chapter 5

### *Twala the King*

All that afternoon we traveled along the magnificent roadway, heading steadily northwards. Infadoos and Scragga walked with us, while the rest of their troops marched about one hundred paces ahead.

‘Infadoos,’ I said at length, ‘who made this road?’

‘It was made of old time, my lord. None know how or when.’

‘Tell us about Twala, your king,’ I said.

‘Imotu was our king,’ said Infadoos. ‘Twala was his younger brother; and when a famine<sup>1</sup> came, and our people suffered, the wise and terrible woman, Gagool—who does not die—told Twala to kill the king. And so he did, and Gagool made him king; and the people, being mad with hunger and bereft<sup>2</sup> of reason, did not object. And then Imotu’s wife fled towards the mountains, with her little son Ignosi, and there she must have perished, for none have seen her since, nor the child Ignosi.’

‘Then if this child Ignosi had lived he would be the true king of the Kukuana people?’

‘That is so, my lord. The mark of the sacred snake, with which the eldest son of the king is marked at birth, is around his middle. If he lives he is king; but, alas! he is long dead.’

It took three full days’ traveling along Solomon’s Great Road to reach Loo, Twala’s principal place. It was night time when we arrived, and the town was lit by thousands of fires and appeared to be quite enormous. We crossed a moat with a drawbridge, then walked for a good half an hour past endless lines of huts,

<sup>1</sup> *famine*—severe shortage of food.

<sup>2</sup> *bereft of*—deprived of, lacking.

until at last Infadoos halted and showed us into a little group of huts that were to be our quarters.

Food was brought in to us, and we ate and drank before flinging ourselves down to sleep.

Next day, towards evening, we were taken to meet the king, carrying an extra rifle as a gift. Twala, we learned, was making ready for his great annual<sup>1</sup> gathering, at which many regiments<sup>2</sup> from across Kukuanaland are brought up and paraded before the king, and the great witch-hunt is held.

The king’s residence consisted of a large hut looking out onto an enclosed field, which must have covered at least six or seven acres<sup>3</sup> of ground. When we arrived, some twenty thousand warriors had already assembled here. As we advanced through them, these men stood as still as statues, and they were a grand spectacle<sup>4</sup>, with their waving plumes, their glancing spears, and iron-backed ox-hide shields.

We were directed to sit on stools in front of the king’s hut, and we waited in silence for some time, gazed upon by twenty thousand pairs of eyes. At length the door of the hut opened, and a gigantic figure stepped out, that of King Twala, wearing a splendid tiger-skin over his shoulders. He was followed by the boy Scragga, and what appeared to be a withered-up monkey wrapped in a fur cloak. All three sat before us, Twala on his throne, and there was silence once more.

Twala was the most fearsome man I had ever laid eyes on. He had only one eye (the other apparently lost in battle) and an alarmingly cruel expression on his face. He held a huge spear, and there was an enormous diamond bound to his forehead. He raised his spear, and from twenty thousand throats rang out the royal salute of ‘*Koom!*’ which made the ground shake.

<sup>1</sup> *annual*—yearly, or once per year.

<sup>2</sup> *regiments*—army units, or groups of soldiers.

<sup>3</sup> *acres*—an acre is roughly the area of a football field.

<sup>4</sup> *spectacle*—sight.

Twala looked down at us. 'White people, whence' come ye, and what seek ye?' he said grandly.

'We come from the stars,' I said. 'Ask us not how. These matters are too high for thee.'

A flash of anger crossed Twala's face, and he lifted his spear threateningly. My heart thumped wildly, but I maintained my outward composure.

'Forget not that we may strike death from afar,' I said harshly. 'Send in an ox, that I may show thee.'

'Kill me a man, and I will believe,' Twala retorted, laughing scornfully.

'Be it so,' I said coolly. 'Tell your son to stand yonder, and I will show my power.'

Scragga winced, and Twala frowned. 'Let a young ox be driven in,' he said majestically.

Two men at once departed, running swiftly, and moments later an ox ran through the far gate. I gave a nod to Sir Henry. He took aim with his rifle, and in a flash the ox was kicking on its back, shot in the ribs. A sigh of astonishment went up from the assembled thousands.

I turned round coolly. 'Have I lied, O king?'

'Nay, white man, it is the truth,' was the somewhat awed<sup>2</sup> answer.

I then explained that we came in peace, and handed him a rifle as a gift, promising to show him how to use it in time. The king seemed somewhat moved, and gestured to some servants, who brought out gifts in return. Sir Henry, Good and I were each given a battle-axe and, to our surprise, shirts of chain armor. These, we later learned, had been handed down for generations, the Kukuanas having no knowledge of their origin. They were sacred items, reserved for those of royal blood.

As we put on our chain shirts, the monkey-like figure came forward, and we saw that it was no monkey but a woman, so

1 *whence*—where from?

2 *awed*—full of fear and wonder.

old that she was shrunken to the size of a small child. She was a hideous mass of dry, yellow wrinkles, but with bright, fiery eyes. She held up a skinny claw, and croaked, 'Listen to Gagool, O king! I am old, and I know the desires of white men. They come for the bright stones, as did the white men of old who made the great road. Trust them not! Kill them! Let there be blood!'

'White people,' said Twala, after an uncomfortable pause, 'it passes in my mind to kill ye. The wise woman Gagool has spoken strange words. What say ye?'

I laughed. 'Be careful, O king, we are not easy to slay'. Thou hast seen the fate of the ox; wouldst thou be as the ox is?'

The king frowned. 'It is not well to threaten a king.'

'We threaten not, we speak what is true. Try to kill us, O king, and learn.'

Twala hesitated, and there was another strained silence. It was broken suddenly by a loud clatter behind us. A soldier amid the ranks of thousands had dropped his shield.

Twala turned his one cold eye in the direction of the noise. 'Come hither', thou!' he said, in a voice of thunder.

A fine young man stepped out of the ranks and came before him, pale with fear.

'Vile dog!' the king roared. 'Thou shamest me in the presence of these strangers from the stars! Thou must die!' Then he turned to Scragga. 'Kill me this blundering fool.'

Scragga stepped forward with an ill-favored<sup>3</sup> grin, and, lifting his spear, drove it through the young warrior's heart. The lifeless body collapsed to the ground.

We were petrified with horror, and a brief murmur swept through the assembled ranks of soldiers.

'The thrust was a good one,' said the king. 'Take him away.'

The body of the murdered man was quickly carried out of sight.

1 *slay*—kill.

2 *hither*—here.

3 *ill-favored*—ugly.