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A PERIOD OF DARKNESS

THE SMALL HILL was a few hundred yards away from the village. A few tall trees dotted it. In the early morning summer light, the birds in the trees continued their mating and preparation of their homes for their young ones. There was a constant rustle of activity as they mated dizzily on thin branches, fluffed out their feathers or spun in somersaults as they wove nests out of long strands of fresh grass. Now and then they took time off from their labors and rested wide-eyed and absent-minded on the branches. Or suddenly, they would sing. They were undisturbed by the presence of a silent man seated beneath one of the tall trees. He was somewhat like them, a family man who had mated and prepared his home for his young ones.

A long night of brooding reflection had passed for the silent man. He was disturbed by the pain of one who had been dispossessed, and for many hours he sat and looked down at the land and the huts of the village. But neither the land nor the village turned its life towards him. He was an outcast, alone with his pain. Eventually, uncertainly, unsteadily, he arose to his feet and from the bark of the trees, he made a long twine. . . .

Until 1823 Chief Motswasele II had ruled the people of the Bakwena tribe, and all through his rule, which lasted a number of years, people fell into a period of darkness. Although people were always prepared to make obeisance to a hereditary ruler, the tradition of rulership and its relationship to the people was a sacred one. It was regarded that a ruler only existed because there were people to rule. He could not rule by himself and had to put all matters of government before the people; without a public discussion of every event, there was no rule. And so a vast mosaic of government had been built up with its origins lost in time and which involved the whole society, permanently, in dialogue and debate. But the relationship of the ruled to the ruler went deeper than that. It was that of a father governing a vast family with many problems; so that, in reality, a chief had to be born with a heart which bleeds, or invent one along the way as every human problem and difficulty was placed before him.

Chief Motswasele reversed this order. During his rule people ceased to exist and his demented activities gained precedence over everything else. He took other men's wives for himself and allowed his court favorites to do the same, without fear of punishment or penalty. He helped himself freely to the cattle and other property of his people, and due to his aberrant activities he often imposed the death penalty on people.

It was as though in his early rule he had paid lip service to all the courtesies demanded by tradition, because suffering was gradual before people realized that they were hopelessly degraded. He was the sort of ruler people had rarely encountered and initially a phenomenon almost impossible to deal with.

He was so impossible to deal with partly because people traditionally regarded themselves as the property of the Chief and partly because the unspeakable had crept up on them unawares. Nearly all Chiefs were slightly tainted with the evils of Motswasele, but they committed these evils secretly. Motswasele committed all his evils quite openly. Over the years he had become loathsome to people and, in keeping with his way of life, he wore a permanent sneer on his face. Protests against him were only made in whispers around the village.

It was a village demented by hysteria and fright. For a long while people had faced each other with laughter in order that they might live with the unspeakable. They had learned to close their eyes and ears to many things: Who had been murdered? Whose property appropriated? Whose home defiled? They did not choose to know the answers because an incautious look or word had often resulted in the death penalty.

It appeared initially as if the deaths of Leungo and his wife, Keeme, would pass into the stream of general horrors they lived with. The story followed the same pattern and had travelled about the village, in whispers, for many days. They knew the point at which Leungo's wife had been accosted by the Chief. They knew Leungo was away from home on a hunting expedition with a party of other men. They knew of the agitated efforts his family had made to send a messenger to him to ward him off from home. They knew how the secret messenger had in turn been accosted and threatened so that there was no one to warn the man that his home had been invaded. They knew how he had come home late that night and parted silently from his hunting companions. They knew how his wife had heard his footsteps and how that frightened and tremulous cry had rent the silence of the night:

“You cannot come in! The Chief is here!”

They knew how he had halted cautiously, one foot raised, and, equally cautiously, retreated from his home. Up until that point many men knew the story quite well. They knew that the Chief experienced an immense pleasure at that point, like an ailing person. A woman was only desirable to him if she was the possession of another man. At that point many men had disappeared from the village. There were many other villages, not too far distant and they disappeared there and faded into oblivion.

The man, Leungo, did not retreat far—only a few hundred yards away from the village. On awakening that morning, the whole village knew of the silent man on the hill. After a few quick surprised looks the people turned away and minded their own affairs. The joke belonged to the Chief and his favorites. What was the man trying to do? Was he making a challenge?

It was one of the little herdboys who shattered the nervous system of the village. Towards evening of that day he had absentmindedly driven his flock of goats past the small hill with its few tall trees. Looking up, he had seen the man, Leungo, hanging there. Suicide was an almost unknown form of death in those days, and the sight of the dead man, so solitary and alone, had almost driven the little boy out of his mind. At first he walked through the village weeping loudly. When people caught hold of him and tried to quiet him down, his hysteria was frenzied. It took hours to calm him.

Then tragedy was added to tragedy. It was reported in the village that the wife of Leungo had also hung herself. Then what remained of his family simply disappeared during the night; no one knew whence. In the morning no sign remained of the tragedy; all the bodies had been silently removed. Only the empty homestead and animals remained to be plundered by the Chief and his favorites.

An angry whisper swept through the village: “While we were asleep last night the wizard did his daily duty.”

From then onward men’s eyes became hard and uncommunicative, a wall behind which everything was shut up, where thoughts and feelings were strictly private and never shared. Yet those hard, blank stares could swiftly alternate into looks of friendly casualness and ease. A peculiar kind of dialogue started in the village. No names were

mentioned, and yet a full dialogue ensued in brief words and gestures. Extraordinary statements of quietude and tenderness were made.

In their haste to remove the body, the henchmen of the Chief had forgotten Leungo's hunting bag which lay beneath the tall tree. Someone found it there and secretly brought it back to the village. The men behaved as if they did not possess hunting bags of their own. Leungo's bag was opened and examined, tenderly. It was filled with the dried meat of animals and wild fruit and berries. For weeks it was passed around from man to man, and for weeks the quality of Leungo's household was a favored topic of discussion.

Although people lived communally, each family was renowned for its own ways. Some were renowned for their food and beer; some for their skills in tanning and leather work; some for their rich harvests of crops, and some were renowned above all for human qualities. The home of the man, Leungo, and his wife, Keeme, was renowned for its warmth, peace and order. Due to this contentment in the home, both husband and wife often had had an abstracted look in their eyes. People comprehended perfectly why the man had not fled to another village.

They were like stones lying scattered apart, and slowly they all came together. There was no strength in stones when they lay apart. They began to cast eyes around for another ruler, a certain intention being clear in their minds. There were two powerful men in the village, one Segokotlo and the other, Moruakgomo. Segokotlo was the younger brother of Motswasele, and Moruakgomo was the son of a regent, Tshosa, who had ruled the tribe when Motswasele was as yet too young to rule. Moruakgomo was highly favored as he had a tall, strong physique and a loud ringing voice. Very soon he was included in the nighttime plotting and strange dialogue.

"In our custom," the men asked, "who is it who eats last?"

"It is the father of the household who eats last," replied Moruakgomo. "He eats last because he has to see to the well-being of others."

"A bird with long talons is not good to eat," the men said.

And so the dialogue worked itself to the point where it became clear that the people wanted to rid themselves of Motswasele. Moruakgomo at first resisted the idea. "It is not the custom to kill a Chief," he said.

"The jackal will never change his ways of trotting," they answered.

There was no precedent for killing a Chief. If it had ever happened,

it had been a most rare occurrence. But Moruakgomo gave his consent to the secret plan.

In the meanwhile Motswasele was deceived as to the mood of the people. The village appeared more relaxed than usual and a mood of casual friendliness and ease pervaded. One day he sent out word that the regiments were to prepare themselves for war and gather outside the village on an appointed day. The men responded with vigor. All were prepared to assemble outside the village with their weapons and await instructions. War was also one of the grievances they held against Motswasele. During his twenty-year rule, he had involved the tribe in dishonor. He had sent regiments into war against such tribes as the Kgalagadi, who were poor and owned no cattle; he had sent them into battle against tribes weaker than they and kept the area in a state of constant strife and disruption.

Eagerly therefore did the men assemble on the appointed day in the open space outside the village. With patient expressions they listened as Motswasele addressed them about the nature of the present war. Then it was the turn of Moruakgomo to arise and recite a praise poem, stirring the men to battle in his loud, ringing voice. Loud and clear was his voice, but something was wrong with the praise poem. It was not one of praise. It was one of condemnation.

A Chief when fashioned must be fine,
fashioned with proper hands. . . .

The poem went on listing all the evils of Motswasele, the wars of dishonor, the defilement of men's homes, the wanton robbery of their cattle and property. It was so unexpected that it took Motswasele some time to recognize his predicament. Then he slowly raised his head. His eyes widened as he looked out at the assembled men. He opened his mouth . . . and so he died, open-mouthed, and with terror-stricken eyes. For the men arose and, instead of moving off to war, they moved towards him and one by one cast their spears into his body.

Afterwards, they seated themselves near the assassination area, opened their snuff-horns and treated each other to snuff. That was but a brief pause, because in those days people's history progressed with strife and bloodshed. The tribe was soon to be dispersed to the four corners of the earth in the battle that took place between Moruakgomo and Segokotlo for succession to the Chieftanship.

But in that brief pause a triumphant statement was made—people had always had access to power in matters of government, people always lived with the glimmerings of a true democracy.