



Obeahman & A Pot-Pourri of Other Stories

He watched the long shaft of sunlight fall across the room like a Zulu's spear. The noise of the hut coming to life pulled his mind fully from the mystical embrace of slumber and lazily he swung his legs out of the bed.

He listened a while to the strident tones of his wife ordering her children around. 'Man caint git no peace,' he muttered to himself peevishly.

With the children dispatched to their various chores and his wife gone to clean other folk's houses, the place became silent once more. He sighed like a man sorely tried and dipped a wooden ladle into the calabash of fresh water his wife brought up from the stream every morning and drank deeply of its cool sweetness. Replacing the ladle he moved across to the battered stove to see if the coffeepot was still warm. Then he noticed it. Lying unobtrusively and half-hidden by the grubby gingham skirt the cooker wore. Tentatively he stretched out a hand before pulling it back and shuddering. He knew what it was. 'She hex me.'

He threw on his clothes and stepped out into the harsh brightness of the noontime veldt. At this time of day with all the able-bodied men in the fields, the women labouring at their endless jobs and the children either in the schoolhouse or helping their parents, the village was quiet with only the old ones and babies around. He ran fly, sullen, jet-black eyes along the row of huts allowing them to rest on the very last one which housed the Obeahman. He sent vicious darts of anger to both his wife and the shaman. 'Whyn't she speak to me? She coulda come to me first.'

Because he was used to lying to both others and himself, this statement did not seem in any way incongruous to him and he conveniently forgot all the times she had approached him, a problem with one of the children, lack of money – she was always complaining too. She was tired, she was ill, her eyes hurt, her back hurt. Lucky

for her she had a man who was patient. Never once had he hit her – well not properly anyway. Leastways not the way you'd hit a man but she bruised easy although sometimes he'd swear she doctored them bruises right up so's they looked worse. And instead of hiding herself away until they faded, the woman was brazen, parading herself around the village with the marks he'd put on her freely on show. 'Shameless.' She was a good worker though, he'd give her that. But he wasn't so bad, not like she painted it. Didn't he always put food on the table whenever he won at cards and didn't he never, ever hit her unless she deserved it? 'Aint no reason fo' a hex.' She'd gone too far this time.

He went back inside and squatted down, studying the fetish lying there on the kitchen floor. It was wrapped up in a tight ball of grass and delicately laced with cobwebs. What was in there? A lock of his hair perhaps? He ran a hand across his skull looking for a bald spot where she could have shaved off his hair in the night. Or maybe some nail clippings? He studied his hands and feet carefully. Hadn't she clipped his nails for him only a few nights before? He pushed his face as close as he dared but the bundle offered no clue and he could not risk empowering the hex further by laying his hands upon it. What if he ignored it? Would the hex disappear? 'A hex is a hex,' he decided and since the thing was hidden he wasn't expected to find it so from that he understood it didn't matter if he noticed it or not. A hex is a hex. His sly brain cartwheeled around in his head. He had to see the Obeahman and convince him to take the curse away. He took a deep breath and stepped into the sunlight again.

'Hex caint never be taken 'way,' the shaman said 'but it can be returned to he who sent it.'

'Or she.'

'Or she,' the Obeahman agreed 'except I aint never put no hex on you and your wife never ask me to.'

'You lying!' he trembled, feeling a cold sweat prickle uncomfortably on his warm body.

'I don't need to lie,' the shaman said simply 'there is no hex, plain and simple.'

He left the hut with real fear now lodged in his belly. Was the Obeahman telling the truth? He offered money – more money than she could ever have paid – but still the man said no. He offered then his one good milking cow, his goat and half a year's profit from his wife's vegetable garden, but the Obeahman shook his head. In desperation he offered Msoto his eldest daughter fourteen now and ripe, but the Obeahman did not change his mind. 'Go home fool,' he'd said.

The fetish lay innocently on the floor and he wondered if it had the power to see him, to watch him and to know exactly when it's power was going to kill him? He ran out of the hut and away from the village towards the town where he knew she'd be working. If he'd been

thinking rationally he'd have known he never did listen to her chatterings long enough to know which house she'd be cleaning that day, but his mind was most irrational. Obeah gets you that way.

Unused to exertion, he was forced to slow his pace but the sweat still poured out of his body, from every orifice it flowed freely, his tongue was dry as dust and his heart hammered in his scrawny chest. Then his head began to spin, faster it went and pulsating too and he veered off the dirt track road into the wide-open veldt. His eyes saw yellow all around and his breathing came ragged and laboured. He lay face down in the coarse patchy scrub and a fierce stabbing pain made him clutch at his heart. He let his breath go slowly, trying to ease both panic and pain but the pain stabbed at him harder and the woolly yellow mist thickened before his eyes. Then the mist separated, became two distinctive shapes which loomed threateningly before him more hideous than he could ever imagine and he shut them out with his eyes. Too late, he remembered the frail human eyelid is no match for Obeah mist and his fly, lazy eyes froze open in their final horror.

It was dusk by the time she got home. She sat down heavily on a stool in the small kitchen, her mind busy wondering what would fill their bellies tonight. She caught sight of something poking out from underneath the stove. She flicked a foot at it but it didn't move. Easing her tired bones downwards she squatted on the floor and pulled out a clump of dirty dried grass. 'Msoto,' she called 'you bin lettin' the goat git inside the house again?'