

CHAPTER II

THOMAS OWEN

Thomas Owen went to his room, but not to bed. Taking a Bible from the table, he consulted reference after reference.

"The promise is clear," he said aloud presently, as he shut the book; "clear and often repeated. There is no escape from it, and no possibility of a double meaning. If it is not true, then it would seem that nothing is true, and that every Christian in the world is tricked and deluded. But if it is true, why do we never hear of miracles?"

The answer is easy: Because we have not faith enough to work them. The Apostles worked miracles; for they had seen, therefore their faith was perfect. Since their day nobody's faith has been quite perfect; at least I think not. The physical part of our nature prevents it. Or perhaps the miracles still happen, but they are spiritual miracles."

Then he sat down by the open window, and gazing at the dreamy beauty of the summer night, he thought, for his soul was troubled. Once before it had been troubled thus; that was nine years ago, for now he was but little over thirty. Then a call had come to him, a voice had seemed to speak to his ears bidding him to lay down great possessions to follow whither Heaven should lead him. Thomas Owen had obeyed the voice; though, owing to circumstances which need not be detailed, to do so he was obliged to renounce his succession to a very large estate, and to

content himself with a younger son's portion of thirty thousand pounds and the reversion to the living which he had now held for some five years.

Then and there, with singular unanimity and despatch, his relations came to the conclusion that he was mad. To this hour, indeed, those who stand in his place and enjoy the wealth and position that were his by right, speak of him as "poor Thomas," and mark their disapprobation of his peculiar conduct by refusing with an unvarying steadiness to subscribe even a single shilling to a missionary society. How "poor Thomas" speaks of them in the place where he is we may wonder, but as yet we cannot know--probably with the gentle love and charity that marked his every action upon earth. But this is by the way.

He had entered the Church, but what had he done in its shadow? This was the question which Owen asked himself as he sat that night by the open window, arraigning his past before the judgment-seat of conscience. For three years he had worked hard somewhere in the slums; then this living had fallen to him. He had taken it, and from that day forward his record was very much of a blank. The parish was small and well ordered; there was little to do in it, and the Salvation Army had seized upon and reclaimed two of the three confirmed drunkards it could boast.

His guest's saying echoed in his brain like the catch of a tune--"that you might lead that life and attain that death." Supposing that he were bidden so to do now, this very night, would he indeed "think

differently"? He had become a priest to serve his Maker. How would it be were that Maker to command that he should serve Him in this extreme and heroic fashion? Would he flinch from the steel, or would he meet it as the martyrs met it of old?

Physically he was little suited to such an enterprise, for in appearance he was slight and pale, and in constitution delicate. Also, there was another reason against the thing. High Church and somewhat ascetic in his principles, in the beginning he had admired celibacy, and in secret dedicated himself to that state. But at heart Thomas was very much a man, and of late he had come to see that which is against nature is presumably not right, though fanatics may not hesitate to pronounce it wrong. Possibly this conversion to more genial views of life was quickened by the presence in the neighbourhood of a young lady whom he chanced to admire; at least it is certain that the mere thought of seeing her no more for ever smote him like a sword of sudden pain.

That very night--or so it seemed to him, and so he believed--the Angel of the Lord stood before him as he was wont to stand before the men of old, and spoke a summons in his ear. How or in what seeming that summons came Thomas Owen never told, and we need not inquire. At the least he heard it, and, like the Apostles, he arose and girded his loins to obey. For now, in the hour of trial, it proved that this man's faith partook of the nature of their faith. It was utter and virgin; it was not

clogged with nineteenth-century qualifications; it had never dallied with strange doctrines, or kissed the feet of pinchbeck substitutes for God. In his heart he believed that the Almighty, without intermediary, but face to face, had bidden him to go forth into the wilderness there to perish. So he bowed his head and went.

On the following morning at breakfast Owen had some talk with his friend the Deputation.

"You asked me last night," he said quietly, "whether I would undertake a mission to that people of whom you were telling me--the Sons of Fire. Well, I have been thinking it over, and come to the conclusion that I will do so----"

At this point the Deputation, concluding that his host must be mad, moved quietly but decidedly towards the door.

"Wait a moment," went on Owen, in a matter-of-fact voice, "the dog-cart will not be round for another three-quarters of an hour. Tell me, if it were offered to you, and on investigation you proved suitable, would you care to take over this living?"

"Would I care to take over this living?" gasped the astonished Deputation. "Would I care to walk down that garden and find myself in Heaven? But why are you making fun of me?"

"I am not making fun of you. If I go to Africa I must give up the living, of which I own the advowson, and it occurred to me that it might suit you--that is all. You have done your share; your health is broken, and you have many dependent upon you. It seems right, therefore, that you should rest, and that I should work. If I do no good yonder, at the least you and yours will be a little benefited."

That same day Owen chanced to meet the lady who has been spoken of as having caught his heart. He had meant to go away without seeing her, but fortune brought them together. Hitherto, whilst in reality leading him on, she had seemed to keep him at a distance, with the result that he did not know that it was her fixed intention to marry him. To her, with some hesitation, he told his plans. Surprised and frightened into candour, the lady reasoned with him warmly, and when reason failed to move him she did more. By some subtle movement, with some sudden word, she lifted the veil of her reserve and suffered him to see her heart. "If you will not stay for aught else," said her troubled eyes, "then, love, stay for me."

For a moment he was shaken. Then he answered the look straight out, as was his nature.

"I never guessed," he said. "I did not presume to hope--now it is too late! Listen! I will tell you what I have told no living soul, though

thereafter you may think me mad. Weak and humble as I am, I believe myself to have received a Divine mission. I believe that I shall execute it, or bring about its execution, but at the ultimate cost of my own life. Still, in such a service two are better than one. If you--can care enough--if you----"

But the lady had already turned away, and was murmuring her farewell in accents that sounded like a sob. Love and faith after this sort were not given to her.

Of all Owen's trials this was the sharpest. Of all his sacrifices this was the most complete.