

CHAPTER III

THE TEMPTATION

Two years have gone by all but a few months, and from the rectory in a quiet English village we pass to a scene in Central, or South Central, Africa.

On the brow of a grassy slope dotted over with mimosa thorns, and close to a gushing stream of water, stands a house, or rather a hut, built of green brick and thatched with grass. Behind this hut is a fence of thorns, rough but strong, designed to protect all within it from the attacks of lions and other beasts of prey. At present, save for a solitary mule eating its provender by the wheel of a tented ox-waggon, it is untenanted, for the cattle have not yet been kraaled for the night. Presently Thomas Owen enters this enclosure by the back door of the hut, and having attended to the mule, which whinnies at the sight of him, goes to the gate and watches there till he sees his native boys driving the cattle up the slope of the hill. At length they arrive, and when he has counted them to make sure that none are missing, and in a few kind words commended the herds for their watchfulness, he walks to the front of the house and, seating himself upon a wooden stool set under a mimosa tree that grows near the door, he looks earnestly towards the west.

The man has changed somewhat since last we saw him. To begin with, he

has grown a beard, and although the hot African sun has bronzed it into an appearance of health, his face is even thinner than it was, and therein the great spiritual eyes shine still more strangely.

At the foot of the slope runs a wide river, just here broken into rapids where the waters make an angry music. Beyond this river stretches a vast plain bounded on the horizon by mountain ranges, each line of them rising higher than the other till their topmost and more distant peaks melt imperceptibly into the tender blue of the heavens. This is the land of the Sons of Fire, and yonder amid the slopes of the nearest hills is the great kraal of their king, Umsuka, whose name, being interpreted, means The Thunderbolt.

In the very midst of the foaming rapids, and about a thousand yards from the house lies a space of rippling shallow water, where, unless it chances to be in flood, the river can be forded. It is this ford that Owen watches so intently.

"John should have been back twelve hours ago," he mutters to himself. "I pray that no harm has befallen him at the Great Place yonder."

Just then a tiny speck appears far away on the plain. It is a man travelling towards the water at a swinging trot. Going into the hut, Owen returns with a pair of field-glasses, and through them scrutinises the figure of the man.

"Heaven be praised! It is John," he mutters, with a sigh of relief.

"Now, I wonder what answer he brings?"

Half an hour later John stands before him, a stalwart native of the tribe of the Amasuka, the People of Fire, and with uplifted hand salutes him, giving him titles of honour.

"Praise me not, John," said Owen; "praise God only, as I have taught you to do. Tell me, have you seen the king, and what is his word?"

"Father," he answered, "I journeyed to the great town, as you bade me, and I was admitted before the majesty of the king; yes, he received me in the courtyard of the House of Women. With his guards, who stood at a distance out of hearing, there were present three only; but oh! those three were great, the greatest in all the land after the king. They were Hafela, the king that is to come, the prince Nodwengo, his brother, and Hokosa the terrible, the chief of the wizards; and I tell you, father, that my blood dried up and my heart shrivelled when they turned their eyes upon me, reading the thoughts of my heart."

"Have I not told you, John, to trust in God, and fear nothing at the hands of man?"

"You told me, father, but still I feared," answered the messenger humbly. "Yet, being bidden to it, I lifted my forehead from the dust and stood upon my feet before the king, and delivered to him the message

which you set between my lips."

"Repeat the message, John."

"O King,' I said, 'beneath those footfall the whole earth shakes, whose arms stretch round the world and whose breath is the storm, I, whose name is John, am sent by the white man whose name is Messenger'--for by that title you bade me make you known--'who for a year has dwelt in the land that your spears have wasted beyond the banks of the river. These are the words which he spoke to me, O King, that I pass on to you with my tongue: "To the King Umsuka, lord of the Amasuka, the Sons of Fire, I, Messenger, who am the servant and the ambassador of the King of Heaven, give greeting. A year ago, King, I sent to you saying that the message which was brought by that white man whom you drove from your land had reached the ears of Him whom I serve, the High and Holy One, and that, speaking in my heart, He had commanded me to take up the challenge of your message. Here am I, therefore, ready to abide by the law which you have laid down; for if guile or lies be found in me, then let me travel from your land across the bridge of spears. Still, I would dwell a little while here where I am before I pass into the shadow of your rule and speak in the ears of your people as I have been bidden. Know, King, that first I would learn your tongue, and therefore I demand that one of your people may be sent to dwell with me and to teach me that tongue. King, you heard my words and you sent me a man to dwell with me, and that man has taught me your tongue, and I also have taught him, converting him to my faith and giving him a new name, the name of

John. King, now I seek your leave to visit you, and to deliver into your ears the words with which I, Messenger, am charged. I have spoken."

"Thus I, John, addressed the great ones, my father, and they listened in silence. When I had done they spoke together, a word here and a word there. Then Hokosa, the king's mouth, answered me, telling the thought of the king: 'You are a bold man, you whose name is John, but who once had another name--you, my servant, who dare to appear before me, and to make it known to me that you have been turned to a new faith and serve another king than I. Yet because you are bold, I forgive you. Go back now to that white man who is named Messenger and who comes upon an embassy to me from the Lord of Heaven, and bid him come in peace. Yet warn him once again that here also we know something of the Powers that are not seen, here also we have our wizards who draw wisdom from the air, who tame the thunderbolt and compel the rain, and that he must show himself greater than all of these if he would not pass hence by the bridge of spears. Let him, therefore, take counsel with his heart and with Him he serves, if such a One there is, and let him come or let him stay away as it shall please him.'"

"So be it," said Owen; "the words of the king are good, and to-morrow we will start for the Great Place."

John heard and assented, but without eagerness.

"My father," he said, in a doubtful and tentative voice, "would it not

perhaps be better to bide here awhile first?"

"Why?" asked Owen. "We have sown, and now is the hour to reap."

"It is so, my father, but as I ran hither, full of the king's words, it came into my mind that now is not the time to convert the Sons of Fire. There is trouble brewing at the Great Palace, father. Listen, and I will tell you; as I have heard, so I will tell you. You know well that our King Umsuka has two sons, Hafela and Nodwengo; and of these Hafela is the heir-apparent, the fruit of the chief wife of the king, and Nodwengo is sprung from another wife. Now Hafela is proud and cruel, a warrior of warriors, a terrible man, and Nodwengo is gentle and mild, like to his mother whom the king loves. Of late it has been discovered that Hafela, weary of waiting for power, has made a plot to depose his father and to kill Nodwengo, his brother, so that the land and those who dwell in it may become his without question. This plot the king knows--I had it from one of his women, who is my sister--and he is very wroth, yet he dare do little, for he grows old and timid, and seeks rest, not war. Yet he is minded, if he can find the heart, to go back upon the law and to name Nodwengo as his heir before all the army at the feast of the first-fruits, which shall be held on the third day from to-night. This Hafela knows, and Nodwengo knows it also, and each of them has summoned his following, numbering thousands and tens of thousands of spears, to attend this feast of the first-fruits. That feast may well be a feast of vultures, my father, and when the brothers and their regiments rush together fighting for the throne, what will chance to the white man who

comes at such a moment to preach a faith of peace, and to his servant, one John, who led him there?"

"I do not know," answered Owen, "and it troubles me not at all. I go to carry out my mission, and in this way or in that it will be carried out. John, if you are fearful or unbelieving leave me to go alone."

"Nay, father, I am not fearful; yet, father, I would have you understand. Yonder there are men who can work wizardry. Wow! I know, for I have seen it, and they will demand from you magic greater than their magic."

"What of it, John?"

"Only this, my father, that if they ask and you fail to give, they will kill you. You teach beautiful things, but say, are you a wizard? When the child of a woman yonder lay dead, you could not raise it as did the Christ; when the oxen were sick with the pest, you could not cure them; or at least, my father, you did not, although you wept for the child and were sorry at the loss of the oxen. Now, my father, if perchance they ask you to do such things as these yonder, or die, say what will happen?"

"One of two things, John: either I shall die or I shall do the things."

"But"--hesitated John--"surely you do not believe that----" and he broke

off.

Owen turned round and looked at his disciple with kindling eyes. "I do believe, O you of little faith!" he said. "I do believe that yonder I have a mission, and that He Whom I serve will give me power to carry out that mission. You are right, I can work no miracles; but He can work miracles Whom everything in heaven and earth obeys, and if there is need He will work them through me, His instrument. Or perhaps He will not work them, and I shall die, because thus His ends will best be forwarded. At the least I go in faith, fearing nothing, for what has he to fear who knows the will of God and does it? But to you who doubt, I say--leave me!"

The man spread out his hands in deprecation; his thick lips trembled a little, and something like a tear appeared at the corners of his eyes.

"Father," he said, "am I a coward that you should talk to me thus? I, who for twenty years have been a soldier of my king and for ten a captain in my regiment? These scars show whether or no I am a coward," and he pointed to his breast, "but of them I will not speak. I am no coward, else I had not gone upon that errand of yours. Why, then, should you reproach me because my ears are not so open as yours, as my heart has not understanding? I worship that God of Whom you have taught me, but He never speaks to me as He does to you. I never meet Him as I walk at night; He leaves me quite alone. Therefore it is that I fear that when the hour of trial comes He may desert you; and unless He covers you

with His shield, of this I am sure, that the spear is forged which shall blush red in your heart, my father. It is for you that I fear, who are so gentle and tender; not for myself, who am well accustomed to look in the eyes of Death, and who expect no more than death."

"Forgive me," said Owen hastily, for he was moved; "and be sure that the shield will be over us till the time comes for us to pass whither we shall need none."

That night Owen rose from the task at which he was labouring slowly and painfully--a translation of passages from the Gospel of St. John into the language of the Amasuka--and going to the open window-place of the hut, he rested his elbows upon it and thought, staring with empty eyes into the blackness of the night. Now it was as he sat thus that a great agony of doubt took possession of his soul. The strength which hitherto had supported him seemed to be withdrawn, and he was left, as John had said, "quite alone." Strange voices seemed to whisper in his ears, reproaching and reviling him; temptations long ago trampled under foot rose again in might, alluring him.

"Fool," said the voices, "get you hence before it is too late. You have been mad; you who dreamed that for your sake, to satisfy your pride, the Almighty will break His silence and strain His law. Are you then better, or greater, or purer than millions who have gone before you, that for

you and you alone this thing should be done? Why, were it not that you are mad, you would be among the chief of sinners; you who dare to ask that the Powers of Heaven should be set within your feeble hand, that the Angels of Heaven should wait upon your mortal breath. Worm that you are, has God need of such as you? If it is His will to turn the heart of yonder people He will do it, but not by means of you. You and the servant whom you are deluding to his death will perish miserably, and this alone shall be the fruit of your presumptuous sin. Get you back out of this wilderness before the madness takes you afresh. You are still young, you have wealth; look where She stands yonder whom you desire. Get you back, and forget your folly in her arms."

These thoughts, and many others of like nature, tore Owen's soul in that hour of strange and terrible temptation. He seemed to see himself standing before the thousands of the savage nation he went to save, and to hear the mocking voices of their witch-finders commanding him, if he were a true man and the servant of that God of Whom he prated, to give them a sign, only a little sign; perhaps to move a stone without touching it with his hand, or to cause a dead bough to blossom.

Then he would beseech Heaven with frantic prayers, and in vain, till at length, amidst a roar of laughter, he, the false prophet and the liar, was led out to his doom. He saw the piteous wondering look of the believer whom he had betrayed to death; he saw the fierce faces and the spears on high. Seeing all this his spirit broke, and, just as the little clock in the room behind him struck the first stroke of midnight,

with a great and bitter cry to God to give him back the faith and strength that he had lost, Owen's head fell forward and he sank into a swoon there upon the window-place.