

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIRST TRIAL BY FIRE

On the following day, while Owen sat eating his morning meal with a thankful heart, a messenger arrived saying that the king would receive him whenever it pleased him to come. He answered that he would be with him before noon, for already he had learned that among natives one loses little by delay. A great man, they think, is rich in time, and hurries only to wait upon his superiors.

At the appointed hour a guard came to lead him to the royal house, and thither Owen went, followed by John bearing a Bible. Umsuka was seated beneath a reed roof supported by poles and open on all sides; behind him stood councillors and attendants, and by him were Nodwengo the prince, and Hokosa, his mouth and prophet. Although the day was hot, he wore a kaross or rug of wild catskins, and his face showed that the effects of the poisoned draught were still upon him. At the approach of Owen he rose with something of an effort, and, shaking him by the hand, thanked him for his life, calling him "doctor of doctors."

"Tell me, Messenger," he added, "how it was that you were able to cure me, and who were in the plot to kill me? There must have been more than one," and he rolled his eyes round with angry suspicion.

"King," answered Owen, "if I knew anything of this matter, the Power

that wrote it on my mind has wiped it out again, or, at the least, has forbidden me to speak of its secret. I saved you, it is enough; for the rest, the past is the past, and I come to deal with the present and the future."

"This white man keeps his word," thought Hokosa to himself, and he looked at him thanking him with his eyes.

"So be it," answered the king; "after all, it is wise not to stir a dung-heap, for there we find little beside evil odours and the nests of snakes. Now, what is your business with me, and why do you come from the white man's countries to visit me? I have heard of those countries, they are great and far away. I have heard of the white men also--wonderful men who have all knowledge; but I do not desire to have anything to do with them, for whenever they meet black people they eat them up, taking their lands and making them slaves. Once, some years ago, two of you white people visited us here, but perhaps you know that story."

"I know it," answered Owen; "one of those men you murdered, and the other you sent back with a message which he delivered into my ears across the waters; thousands of miles away."

"Nay," answered the king, "we did not murder him; he came to us with the story of a new God who could raise the dead and work other miracles, and gave such powers to His servants. So a man was slain and we begged of him to bring him back to life; and since he could not, we killed him

also because he was a liar."

"He was no liar," said Owen; "since he never told you that he had power to open the mouth of the grave. Still, Heaven is merciful, and although you murdered him that was sent to you, his Master has chosen me to follow in his footsteps. Me also you may murder if you will, and then another and another; but still the messengers shall come, till at last your ears are opened and you listen. Only, for such deeds your punishment must be heavy."

"What is the message, White Man?"

"A message of peace, of forgiveness, and of life beyond the grave, of life everlasting. Listen, King. Yesterday you were near to death; say now, had you stepped over the edge of it, where would you be this day?"

Umsuka shrugged his shoulders. "With my fathers, White Man."

"And where are your fathers?"

"Nay, I know not--nowhere, everywhere: the night is full of them; in the night we hear the echo of their voices. When they are angry they haunt the thunder-cloud, and when they are pleased they smile in the sunshine. Sometimes also they appear in the shape of snakes, or visit us in dreams, and then we offer them sacrifice. Yonder on the hillside is a haunted wood; it is full of their spirits, White Man, but they cannot

talk, they only mutter, and their footfalls sound like the dropping of heavy rain, for they are strengthless and unhappy, and in the end they fade away."

"So you say," answered Owen, "who are not altogether without understanding, yet know little, never having been taught. Now listen to me," and very earnestly he preached to him and those about him of peace, of forgiveness, and of life everlasting.

"Why should a God die miserably upon a cross?" asked the king at length.

"That through His sacrifice men might become as gods," answered Owen.

"Believe in Him and He will save you."

"How can we do that," asked the king again, "when already we have a god? Can we desert one god and set up another?"

"What god, King?"

"I will show him to you, White Man. Let my litter be brought."

The litter was brought and the king entered it with labouring breath. Passing through the north gate of the Great Place, the party ascended a slope of the hill that lay beyond it till they reached a flat plain some hundreds of yards in width. On this plain vegetation grew scantily, for here the bed rock of ironstone, denuded with frequent and heavy rains,

was scarcely hidden by a thin crust of earth. On the further side of the plain, however, and separated from it by a little stream, was a green bank of deep soft soil, beyond which lay a gloomy valley full of great trees, that for many generations had been the burying-place of the kings of the Amasuka.

"This is the house of the god," said the king.

"A strange house," answered Owen, "and where is he that dwells in it?"

"Follow me and I will show you, Messenger; but be swift, for already the sky grows dark with coming tempest."

Now at the king's command the bearers bore him across the sere plateau towards a stone that lay almost in its centre. Presently they halted, and, pointing to this mass, the king said:--

"Behold the god!"

Owen advanced and examined the object. A glance told him that this god of the Amasuka was a meteoric stone of unusual size. Most of such stones are mere shapeless lumps, but this one bore a peculiar resemblance to a seated human being holding up one arm towards the sky. So strange was this likeness that, other reasons apart, it seemed not wonderful that savages should regard the thing with awe and veneration. Rather would it have been wonderful had they not done so.

"Say now," said Owen to the king when he had inspected the stone, "what is the history of this dumb god of yours, and why do you worship him?"

"Follow me across the stream and I will tell you, Messenger," answered the king, again glancing at the sky. "The storm gathers, and when it breaks none are safe upon this plain except the heaven doctors such as Hokosa and his companions who can bind the lightning."

So they went and when they reached the further side of the stream Umsuka descended from his litter.

"Messenger," he said, "this is the story of the god as it has come down to us. From the beginning our land has been scourged with lightning above all other lands, and with the floods of rain that accompany the lightning. In the old days the Great Place of the king was out yonder among the mountains, but every year fire from heaven fell upon it, destroying much people: and at length in a great tempest the house of the king of that day was smitten and burned, and his wives and children were turned to ashes. Then that king held a council of his wizards and fire-doctors, and these having consulted the spirits of their forefathers, retired into a place apart to fast and pray; yes, it was in yonder valley, the burying ground of kings, that they hid themselves. Now on the third night the God of Fire appeared to the chief of the doctors in his sleep, and he was shaped like a burning brand and smoke went up from him. Out of the smoke he spoke to the doctor, saying: 'For

this reason it is that I torment your people, that they hate me and curse at me and pay me little honour.'

"In his dream the doctor answered: 'How can the people honour a god that they do not see?' Then the god said: 'Rise up now in the night, all the company of you, and go take your stand upon the banks of yonder stream, and I will fall down in fire from heaven, and there on the plain you shall find my image. Then let your king move his Great Place into the valley beneath the plain, and henceforth my bolts shall spare it and him. Only, month by month you shall make prayers and offerings to me; moreover, the name of the people shall be changed, for it shall be called the People of Fire.'

"Now the doctor rose, and having awakened his companions, he told them of his vision. Then they all of them went down to the banks of this stream where we now stand. And as they waited there a great tempest burst over them, and in the midst of that tempest they saw the flaming figure of a man descend from heaven, and when he touched the earth it shook. The morning came and there upon the plain before them, where there had been nothing, sat the likeness of the god as it sits to-day and shall sit for ever. So the name of this people was changed, and the king's Great Place was built where it now is.

"Since that day, Messenger, no hut has been burned and no man killed in or about the Great Place by fire from heaven, which falls only here where the god is, though away among the mountains and elsewhere men are

sometimes killed. But wait a while and you shall see with your eyes. Hokosa, do you, whom the lightning will not touch, take that pole of dead wood and set it up yonder in the crevice of the rock not far from the figure of the god."

"I obey," said Hokosa, "although I have brought no medicines with me. Perhaps," he added with a faint sneer, "the white man, who is so great a wizard, will not be afraid to accompany me."

Now Owen saw that all those present were looking at him curiously. It was evident they believed that he would not dare to accept the challenge. Therefore he answered at once and without hesitation:--

"Certainly I will come; the pole is heavy for one man to carry, and where Hokosa goes, there I can go also."

"Nay, nay, Messenger," said the king, "the lightning knows Hokosa and will turn from him, but you are a stranger to it and it will eat you up."

"King," answered Owen, "I do not believe that Hokosa has any power over the lightning. It may strike him or it may strike me; but unless my God so commands, it will strike neither of us."

"On your head be it, White Man," said Hokosa, with cold anger. "Come, aid me with the pole."

Then they lifted the dead tree, and between them carried it into the middle of the plain, where they set it up in a crevice of the rock. By this time the storm was almost over them, and watching it Owen perceived that the lightnings struck always along the bank of the stream, doubtless following a hidden line of the bed of ironstone.

"It is but a very little storm," said Hokosa contemptuously, "such as visit us almost every afternoon at this period of the year. Ah! White Man, I would that you could see one of our great tempests, for these are worth beholding. This I fear, however, that you will never do, seeing it is likely that within some few minutes you will have passed back to that King who sent you here, with a hole in your head and a black mark down your spine."

"That we shall learn presently, Hokosa," answered Owen; "for my part, I pray that no such fate may overtake you."

Now Hokosa moved himself away, muttering and pointing with his fingers, but Owen remained standing within about thirty yards of the pole. Suddenly there came a glare of light, and the pole was split into fragments; but although the shock was perceptible, they remained unhurt. Almost immediately a second flash leaped from the cloud, and Owen saw Hokosa stagger and fall to his knees. "The man is struck," he thought to himself, but it was not so, for recovering his balance, the wizard walked back to the stream.

Owen never stirred. From boyhood courage had been one of his good qualities, but it was a courage of the spirit rather than of the flesh. For instance, at this very moment, so far as his body was concerned, he was much afraid, and did not in the least enjoy standing upon an ironstone plateau at the imminent risk of being destroyed by lightning. But even if he had not had an end to gain, he would have scorned to give way to his human frailties; also, now as always, his faith supported him. As it happened the storm, which was slight, passed by, and no more flashes fell. When it was over he walked back to where the king and his court were standing.

"Messenger," said Umsuka, "you are not only a great doctor, you are also a brave man, and such I honour. There is no one among us here, not being a lord of the lightning, who would have dared to stand upon that place with Hokosa while the flashes fell about him. Yet you have done it; it was Hokosa who was driven away. You have passed the trial by fire, and henceforth, whether we refuse your message or accept it, you are great in this land."

"There is no need to praise me, King," answered Owen. "The risk is something; but I knew that I was protected from it, seeing that I shall not die until my hour comes, and it is not yet. Listen now: your god yonder is nothing but a stone such as I have often seen before, for sometimes in great tempests they come to earth from the clouds. You are not the first people that have worshipped such a stone, but now we know

better. Also this plain before you is full of iron, and iron draws the lightning. That is why it never strikes your town below. The iron attracts it more strongly than earth and huts of straw. Again, while the pole stood I was in little danger, for the lightning strikes the highest thing; but after the pole was shattered and Hokosa wisely went away, then I was in some danger, only no flashes fell. I am not a magician, King, but I know some things that you do not know, and I trust in One whom I shall lead you to trust also."

"We will talk of this more hereafter," said the king hurriedly, "for one day, I have heard and seen enough. Also I do not believe your words, for I have noted ever that those who are the greatest wizards of all say continually that they have no magic power. Hokosa, you have been famous in your day, but it seems that henceforth you who have led must follow."

"The battle is not yet fought, King," answered Hokosa. "To-day I met the lightnings without my medicines, and it was a little storm; when I am prepared with my medicines and the tempest is great, then I will challenge this white man to face me yonder, and then in that hour my god shall show his strength and his God shall not be able to save him."

"That we shall see when the time comes," answered Owen, with a smile.

That night as Owen sat in his hut working at the translation of St. John, the door was opened and Hokosa entered.

"White Man," said the wizard, "you are too strong for me, though whence you have your power I know not. Let us make a bargain. Show me your magic and I will show you mine, and we will rule the land between us. You and I are much akin--we are great; we have the spirit sight; we know that there are things beyond the things we see and hear and feel; whereas, for the rest, they are fools, following the flesh alone. I have spoken."

"Very gladly will I show you my magic, Hokosa," answered Owen cheerfully, "since, to speak truth, though I know you to be wicked, and guess that you would be glad to be rid of me by fair means or foul; yet I have taken a liking for you, seeing in you one who from a sinner may grow into a saint."

"This then is my magic: To love God and serve man; to eschew wizardry, wealth, and power; to seek after holiness, poverty and humility; to deny your flesh, and to make yourself small in the sight of men, that so perchance you may grow great in the sight of Heaven and save your soul alive."

"I have no stomach for that lesson," said Hokosa.

"Yet you shall live to hunger for it," answered Owen. And the wizard went away angered but wondering.