

CHAPTER IX

THE CRISIS

Now, day by day for something over a month Owen preached the Gospel before the king, his councillors, and hundreds of the head men of the nation. They listened to him attentively, debating the new doctrine point by point; for although they might be savages, these people were very keen-witted and subtle. Very patiently did Owen sow, and at length to his infinite joy he also gathered in his first-fruit. One night as he sat in his hut labouring as usual at the work of translation, wherein he was assisted by John whom he had taught to read and write, the Prince Nodwengo entered and greeted him. For a while he sat silent watching the white man at his task, then he said:--

"Messenger, I have a boon to ask of you. Can you teach me to understand those signs which you set upon the paper, and to make them also as does John your servant?"

"Certainly," answered Owen; "if you will come to me at noon to-morrow, we will begin."

The prince thanked him, but he did not go away. Indeed, from his manner Owen guessed that he had something more upon his mind. At length it came out.

"Messenger," he said, "you have told us of baptism whereby we are admitted into the army of your King; say, have you the power of this rite?"

"I have."

"And is your servant here baptised?"

"He is."

"Then if he who is a common man can be baptised, why may not I who am a prince?"

"In baptism," answered Owen, "there is no distinction between the highest and the lowest; but if you believe, then the door is open and through it you can join the company of Heaven."

"Messenger, I do believe," answered the prince humbly.

Then Owen was very joyful, and that same night, with John for a witness, he baptised the prince, giving him the new name of Constantine, after the first Christian emperor.

On the following day Nodwengo, in the presence of Owen, who on this point would suffer no concealment, announced to the king that he had become a Christian. Umsuka heard, and for a while sat silent. Then he

said in a troubled voice:--

"Truly, Messenger, in the words of that Book from which you read to us, I fear that you have come hither to bring, 'not peace but a sword.' Now when the witch-doctors and the priests of fire learn this, that he whom I have chosen to succeed me has become the servant of another faith, they will stir up the soldiers and there will be civil war. I pray you, therefore, keep the matter secret, at any rate for a while, seeing that the lives of many are at stake."

"In this, my father," answered the prince, "I must do as the Messenger bids me; but if you desire it, take from me the right of succession and call back my brother from the northern mountains."

"That by poison or the spear he may put all of us to death, Nodwengo! Be not afraid; ere long when he learns all that is happening here, your brother Hafela will come from the northern mountains, and the spears of his impis shall be countless as the stars of the sky. Messenger, you desire to draw us to the arms of your God--and myself, I am at times minded to follow the path of my son Nodwengo and seek a refuge there--but say, will they be strong enough to protect us from Hafela and the warriors of the north? Already he gathers his clans, and already my captains desert to him. By-and-by, in the spring-time--may I be dead before the day--he will roll down upon us like a flood of water----"

"To fall back like waters from a wall of rock," answered Owen. "Let not

your heart be troubled,' for my Master can protect His servants, and He will protect you. But first you must confess Him openly, as your son has done."

"Nay, I am too old to hurry," said the king with a sigh. "Your tale seems full of promise to one who is near the grave; but how can I know that it is more than a dream? And shall I abandon the worship of my fathers and change, or strive to change, the customs of my people to follow after dreams? Nodwengo has chosen his part, and I do not blame him; yet, for the present I beseech you both to keep silence on this matter, lest to save bloodshed I should be driven to side against you."

"So be it, King," said Owen; "but I warn you that Truth has a loud voice, and that it is hard to hide the shining of a light in a dark place, nor does it please my Lord to be denied by those who confess Him."

"I am weary," replied the old king, and they saluted him and went.

In obedience to the wish of Umsuka his father, the conversion of Nodwengo was kept secret, and yet--none knew how--the thing leaked out. Soon the women in their huts, and the soldiers by their watch-fires, whispered it in each other's ears that he who was appointed to be their future ruler had become a servant of the unknown God. That he had forsworn war and all the delights of men; that he would take but one wife and appear before the army, not in the uniform of a general, but

clad in a white robe, and carry, not the broad spear, but a cross of wood. Swiftly the strange story flew from mouth to mouth, yet it was not altogether believed till it chanced that one day when he was reviewing a regiment, a soldier who was drunk with beer openly insulted the prince, calling him "a coward who worshipped a coward."

Now men held their breaths, waiting to see this fool led away to die by torture of the ant-heap or some other dreadful doom. But the prince only answered:

"Soldier, you are drunk, therefore I forgive you your words. Whether He Whom you blaspheme will forgive you, I know not. Get you gone!"

The warriors stared and murmured, for by those words, wittingly or unwittingly, their general had confessed his faith, and that day they made ribald songs about him in the camp. But on the morrow when they learned how that the man whom the prince spared had been seized by a lion and taken away as he sat at night with his companions in the bivouac, his mouth full of boasting of his own courage in offering insult to the prince and the new faith, then they looked at each other askance and said little more of the matter. Doubtless it was chance, and yet this Spirit Whom the Messenger preached was one of Whom it seemed wisest not to speak lightly.

But still the trouble grew, for by now the witch-doctors, with Hokosa at the head of them, were frightened for their place and power, and

fomented it both openly and in secret. Of the women they asked what would become of them when men were allowed to take but one wife? Of the heads of kraals, how they would grow wealthy when their daughters ceased to be worth cattle? Of the councillors and generals, how the land could be protected from its foes when they were commanded to lay down the spear? Of the soldiers, whose only trade was war, how it would please them to till the fields like girls? Dismay took hold of the nation, and although they were much loved, there was open talk of killing or driving away the king and Nodwengo who favoured the white man, and of setting up Hafela in their place.

At length the crisis came, and in this fashion. The Amasuka, like many other African tribes, had a strange veneration for certain varieties of snakes which they declared to be possessed by the spirits of their ancestors. It was a law among them that if one of these snakes entered a kraal it must not be killed, or even driven away, under pain of death, but must be allowed to share with the human occupants any hut that it might select. As a result of this enforced hospitality deaths from snake-bite were numerous among the people; but when they happened in a kraal its owners met with little sympathy, for the doctors explained that the real cause of them was the anger of some ancestral spirit towards his descendants. Now, before John was despatched to instruct Owen in the language of the Amasuka a certain girl was sealed to him as his future wife, and this girl, who during his absence had been orphaned, he had married recently with the approval of Owen, who at this time was preparing her for baptism. On the third morning after his

marriage John appeared before his master in the last extremity of grief and terror.

"Help me, Messenger!" he cried, "for my ancestral spirit has entered our hut and bitten my wife as she lay asleep."

"Are you mad?" asked Owen. "What is an ancestral spirit, and how can it have bitten your wife?"

"A snake," gasped John, "a green snake of the worst sort."

Then Owen remembered the superstition, and snatching blue-stone and spirits of wine from his medicine chest, he rushed to John's hut. As it happened, he was fortunately in time with his remedies and succeeded in saving the woman's life, whereby his reputation as a doctor and a magician, already great, was considerably enlarged.

"Where is the snake?" he asked when at length she was out of danger.

"Yonder, under the kaross," answered John, pointing to a skin rug which lay in the corner.

"Have you killed it?"

"No, Messenger," answered the man, "I dare not. Alas! we must live with the thing here in the hut till it chooses to go away."

"Truly," said Owen, "I am ashamed to think that you who are a Christian should still believe so horrible a superstition. Does your faith teach you that the souls of men enter into snakes?"

Now John hung his head; then snatching a kerry, he threw aside the kaross, revealing a great green serpent seven or eight feet long. With fury he fell upon the reptile, killed it by repeated blows, and hurled it into the courtyard outside the house.

"Behold, father," he said, "and judge whether I am still superstitious." Then his countenance fell and he added: "Yet my life must pay for this deed, for it is an ancient law among us that to harm one of these snakes is death."

"Have no fear," said Owen, "a way will be found out of this trouble."

That afternoon Owen heard a great hubbub outside his kraal, and going to see what was the matter, he found a party of the witch-doctors dragging John towards the place of judgment, which was by the king's house. Thither he followed to discover that the case was already in course of being opened before the king, his council, and a vast audience of the people. Hokosa was the accuser. In brief and pregnant sentences, producing the dead snake in proof of his argument, he pointed out the enormity of the offence against the laws of the Amasuka wherewith the prisoner was charged, demanding that the man who had killed the house of

his ancestral spirit should instantly be put to death.

"What have you to say?" asked the king of John.

"This, O King," replied John, "that I am a Christian, and to me that snake is nothing but a noxious reptile. It bit my wife, and had it not been for the medicine of the Messenger, she would have perished of the poison. Therefore I killed it before it could harm others."

"It is a fair answer," said the king. "Hokosa, I think that this man should go free."

"The king's will is the law," replied Hokosa bitterly; "but if the law were the king's will, the decision would be otherwise. This man has slain, not a snake, but that which held the spirit of an ancestor, and for the deed he deserves to die. Hearken, O King, for the business is larger than it seems. How are we to be governed henceforth? Are we to follow our ancient rules and customs, or must we submit ourselves to a new rule and a new custom? I tell you, O King, that the people murmur; they are without light, they wander in the darkness, they cannot understand. Play with us no more, but let us hear the truth that we may judge of this matter."

Umsuka looked at Owen, but made no reply.

"I will answer you, Hokosa," said Owen, "for I am the spring of all this

trouble, and at my command that man, my disciple, killed yonder snake. What is it? It is nothing but a reptile; no human spirit ever dwelt within it as you imagine in your superstition. You ask to hear the truth; day by day I have preached it in your ears and you have not listened, though many among you have listened and understood. What is it that you seek?"

"We seek, Messenger, to be rid of you, your fantasies and your religion; and we demand that our king should expel you and restore the ancient laws, or failing this, that you should prove your power openly before us all. Your word, O King!"

Umsuka thought for a while and answered:--

"This is my word, Hokosa: I will not drive the Messenger from the land, for he is a good man; he saved my life, and there is virtue in his teaching, towards which I myself incline. Yet it is just that he should be asked to prove his power, so that an end may be put to doubt and all of us may learn what god we are to worship."

"How can I prove my power," asked Owen, "further than I have proved it already? Does Hokosa desire to set up his god against my God--the false against the true?"

"I do," answered the wizard with passion, "and according to the issue let the judgment be. Let us halt no longer between two opinions, let us

become wholly Christian or rest wholly heathen, for to be divided is to be destroyed. The magic of the Messenger is great; once and for all let us learn if it is more than our magic. Let us put him and his doctrines to the trial by fire."

"What is the trial by fire?" asked Owen.

"You have seen something of it, White Man, but not much. This is the trial by fire: to stand yonder before the face of the god of thunder when a great tempest rages--not such a storm as you saw, but a storm that splits the heavens--and to come thence unscathed. Listen: I who am a 'heaven-herd,' I who know the signs of the weather, tell you that within two days such a tempest as this will break upon us. Then White Man, I and my companions will be ready to meet you on the plain. Take the cross by which you swear and set it up yonder and stand by it, and with you your converts, Nodwengo the prince, and this man whom you have named John, if they dare to go. Over against you, around the symbol of the god by which we swear, will stand I and my company, and we will pray our god and you shall pray your God. Then the storm will break upon us, and when it is ended we shall learn which of us remain alive. If you and your cross are shattered, to us will be the victory; if we are laid low, take it for your own. Your judgment, King!"

Again Umsuka thought and answered:--

"So be it. Messenger, hear me. There is no need for you to accept this

challenge; but if you will not accept it, then go from my country in peace, taking with you those who cleave to you. If on the other hand you do accept it, these shall be the stakes: that if you pass the trial unharmed, and the fire-doctors are swept away, your creed shall be my creed and the creed of the land; but if the fire-doctors prevail against you, then it shall be death or banishment to any who profess that creed. Now choose!"

"I have chosen," said Owen. "I will meet Hokosa and his company on the Place of fire whenever he may appoint, but for the others I cannot say."

"We will come with you," said Nodwengo and John, with one voice; "where you go, Messenger, we will surely follow."