

## CHAPTER X

### THE SECOND TRIAL BY FIRE

When this momentous discussion was finished, as usual Owen preached before the king, expounding the Scriptures and taking for his subject the duty of faith. As he went back to his hut he saw that the snake which John had killed had been set upon a pole in that part of the Great Place which served as a market, and that hundreds of natives were gathered beneath it gesticulating and talking excitedly.

"See the work of Hokosa," he thought to himself. "Moses set up a serpent to save the people; yonder wizard sets up one to destroy them."

That evening Owen had no heart for his labours, for his mind was heavy at the prospect of the trial which lay before him. Not that he cared for his own life, for of this he scarcely thought; it was the prospects of his cause which troubled him. It seemed much to expect that Heaven again should throw over him the mantle of its especial protection, and yet if it did not do so there was an end of his mission among the People of Fire. Well, he did not seek this trial--he would have avoided it if he could, but it had been thrust upon him, and he was forced to choose between it and the abandonment of the work which he had undertaken with such high hopes and pushed so far toward success. He did not choose the path, it had been pointed out to him to walk upon; and if it ended in a precipice, at least he would have done his best.

As he thought thus John entered the hut, panting.

"What is the matter?" Owen asked.

"Father, the people saw and pursued me because of the death of that accursed snake. Had I not run fast and escaped them, I think they would have killed me."

"At least you have escaped, John; so be comforted and return thanks."

"Father," said the man presently, "I know that you are great, and can do many wonderful things, but have you in truth power over lightning?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because a great tempest is brewing, and if you have not we shall certainly be killed when we stand yonder on the Place of Fire."

"John," he said, "I cannot speak to the lightning in a voice which it can hear. I cannot say to it 'go yonder,' or 'come hither,' but He Who made it can do so. Why do you tempt me with your doubts? Have I not told you the story of Elijah the prophet and the priests of Baal? Did Elijah's Master forsake him, and shall He forsake us? Also this is certain, that all the medicine of Hokosa and his wizards will not turn a lightning flash by the breadth of a single hair. God alone can turn it,

and for the sake of His cause among these people I believe that He will do so."

Thus Owen spoke on till, in reproving the weakness of another, he felt his own faith come back to him and, remembering the past and how he had been preserved in it, the doubt and trouble went out of his mind to return no more.

The third day--the day of trial--came. For sixty hours or more the heat of the weather had been intense; indeed, during all that time the thermometer in Owen's hut, notwithstanding the protection of a thick hatch, had shown the temperature to vary between a maximum of 113 and a minimum of 101 degrees. Now, in the early morning, it stood at 108.

"Will the storm break to-day?" asked Owen of Nodwengo, who came to visit him.

"They say so, Messenger, and I think it by the feel of the air. If so, it will be a very great storm, for the heaven is full of fire. Already Hokosa and the doctors are at their rites upon the plain yonder, but there will be no need to join them till two hours after midday."

"Is the cross ready?" asked Owen.

"Yes, and set up. It is a heavy cross; six men could scarcely carry it. Oh! Messenger, I am not afraid--and yet, have you no medicine? If not,

I fear that the lightning will fall upon the cross as it fell upon the pole and then----"

"Listen, Nodwengo," said Owen, "I know a medicine, but I will not use it. You see that waggon chain? Were one end of it buried in the ground and the other with a spear blade made fast to it hung to the top of the cross, we could live out the fiercest storm in safety. But I say that I will not use it. Are we witch doctors that we should take refuge in tricks? No, let faith be our shield, and if it fail us, then let us die. Pray now with me that it may not fail us."

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It was afternoon. All round the Field of Fire were gathered thousands upon thousands of the people of the Amasuka. The news of this duel between the God of the white man and their god had travelled far and wide, and even the very aged who could scarcely crawl and the little ones who must be carried were collected there to see the issue. Nor had they need to fear disappointment, for already the sky was half hidden by dense thunder-clouds piled ridge on ridge, and the hush of the coming tempest lay upon the earth. Round about the meteor stone which they called a god, each of them stirring a little gourd of medicine that was placed upon the ground before him, but uttering no word, were gathered Hokosa and his followers to the number of twenty. They were all of them arrayed in their snakeskin dresses and other wizard finery. Also each man held in his hand a wand fashioned from a human thigh-bone. In front

of the stone burned a little fire, which now and again Hokosa fed with aromatic leaves, at the same time pouring medicine from his bowl upon the holy stone. Opposite the symbol of the god, but at a good distance from it, a great cross of white wood was set up in the rock by a spot which the witch-doctors themselves had chosen. Upon the banks of the stream, in the place apart, were the king, his councillors and the regiment on guard, and with them Owen, the Prince Nodwengo and John.

"The storm will be fierce," said the king uneasily, glancing at the western sky, upon whose bosom the blue lightnings played with an incessant flicker. Then he bade those about him stand back, and calling Owen and the prince to him, said: "Messenger, my son tells me that your wisdom knows a plan whereby you may be preserved from the fury of the tempest. Use it, I pray of you, Messenger, that your life may be saved, and with it the life of the only son who is left to me."

"I cannot," answered Owen, "for thus by doubting Him I should tempt my Master. Still, it is not laid upon the prince to accompany through this trial. Let him stay here, and I alone will stand beneath the cross."

"Stay, Nodwengo," implored the old man.

"I did not think to live to hear my father bid me, one of the royal blood of the Amasuka, to desert my captain in the hour of battle and hide myself in the grass like a woman," answered the prince with a bitter smile. "Nay, it may be that death awaits me yonder, but nothing

except death shall keep me back from the venture."

"It is well spoken," said the king; "be it as you will."

Now the company of wizards, leaving their medicine-pots upon the ground, formed themselves in a treble line, and marching to where the king stood, they saluted him. Then they sang the praises of their god, and in a song that had been prepared, heaped insult upon the God of the white man and upon the messenger who preached Him. To all of this Owen listened in silence.

"He is a coward!" cried their spokesman; "he has not a word to say. He skulks there in his white robes behind the majesty of the king. Let him go forth and stand by his piece of wood. He dare not go! He thinks the hillside safer. Come out, little White Man, and we will show you how we manage the lightnings. Ah! they shall fly about you like spears in battle. You shall throw yourself upon the ground and shriek in terror, and then they will lick you up and you shall be no more, and there will be an end of you and the symbol of your God."

"Cease your boastings," said the king shortly, "and get you back to your place, knowing that if it should chance that the white man conquers you will be called upon to answer for these words."

"We shall be ready, O King," they cried; and amidst the cheers of the vast audience they marched back to their station, still singing the

blasphemous mocking song.

Now to the west all the heavens were black as night, though the eastern sky still showed blue and cloudless. Nature lay oppressed with silence--silence intense and unnatural; and so great was the heat that the air danced visibly above the ironstone as it dances about a glowing stove. Suddenly the quietude was broken by a moaning sound of wind; the grass stirred, the leaves of the trees began to shiver, and an icy breath beat upon Owen's brow.

"Let us be going," he said, and lifting the ivory crucifix above his head, he passed the stream and walked towards the wooden cross. After him came the Prince Nodwengo, wearing his royal dress of leopard skin, and after him, John, arrayed in a linen robe.

As the little procession appeared to their view some of the soldiers began to mock, but almost instantly the laughter died away. Rude as they were, these savages understood that here was no occasion for their mirth, that the three men indeed seemed clothed with a curious dignity. Perhaps it was their slow and quiet gait, perhaps a sense of the errand upon which they were bound; or it may have been the strange unearthly light that fell upon them from over the edge of the storm cloud; at the least, as the multitude became aware, their appearance was impressive. They reached the cross and took up their stations there, Owen in front of it, Nodwengo to the right, and John to the left.

Now a sharp squall of strong wind swept across the space, and with it came a flaw of rain. It passed by, and the storm that had been muttering and growling in the distance began to burst. The great clouds seemed to grow and swell, and from the breast of them swift lightnings leapt, to be met by other lightnings rushing upwards from the earth. The air was filled with a tumult of uncertain wind and a hiss as of distant rain.

Then the batteries of thunder were opened, and the world shook with their volume. Down from on high the flashes fell blinding and incessant, and by the light of them the fire-doctors could be seen running to and fro, pointing now here and now there with their wands of human bones, and pouring the medicines from their gourds upon the ground and upon each other. Owen and his two companions could be seen also, standing quietly with clasped hands, while above them towered the tall white cross.

At length the storm was straight over head. Slowly it advanced in its awe-inspiring might as flash after flash, each more fantastic and horrible than the last, smote upon the floor of ironstone. It played about the shapes of the doctors, who in the midst of it looked like devils in an inferno. It crept onwards towards the station of the cross, but--it never reached the cross.

One flash struck indeed within fifty paces of where Owen stood. Then of a sudden a marvel happened, or something which to this day the People of Fire talk of as a marvel, for in an instant the rain began to pour like a wall of water stretching from earth to heaven, and the wind changed.



It had been blowing from the west, now it blew from the east with the force of a gale.

It blew and rolled the tempest back upon itself, causing it to return to the regions whence it had gathered. At the very foot of the cross its march was stayed; there was the water-line, as straight as if it had been drawn with a rule. The thunder-clouds that were pressed forward met the clouds that were pressed back, and together they seemed to come to earth, filling the air with a gloom so dense that the eye could not pierce it. To the west was a wall of blackness towering to the heavens; to the east, light, blue and unholy, gleamed upon the white cross and the figures of its watchers.

For some seconds--twenty or more--there was a lull, and then it seemed as though all hell had broken loose upon the world. The wall of blackness became a wall of flame, in which strange and ardent shapes appeared ascending and descending; the thunder bellowed till the mountains rocked, and in one last blaze, awful and indescribable, the skies melted into a deluge of fire. In the flare of it Owen thought that he saw the figures of men falling this way and that, then he staggered against the cross for support and his senses failed him.

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When they returned again, he perceived the storm being drawn back from the face of the pale earth like a pall from the face of the dead, and he

heard a murmur of fear and wonder rising from ten thousand throats.

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Well might they fear and wonder, for of the twenty and one wizards eleven were dead, four were paralysed by shock, five were flying in their terror, and one, Hokosa himself, stood staring at the fallen, a very picture of despair. Nor was this all, for the meteor stone with a human shape which for generations the People of Fire had worshipped as a god, lay upon the plain in fused and shattered fragments.

The people saw, and a sound as of a hollow groan of terror went up from them. Then they were silent. For a while Owen and his companions were silent also, since their hearts were too full for speech. Then he said:--

"As the snake fell harmless from the hand of Paul, so has the lightning turned back from me, who strive to follow in his footsteps, working death and dismay among those who would have harmed us. May forgiveness be theirs who were without understanding. Brethren, let us return and make report to the king."

Now, as they had come, so they went back; first Owen with the crucifix, next to him Nodwengo, and last of the three John. They drew near to the king, when suddenly, moved by a common impulse, the thousands of the people upon the banks of the stream with one accord threw themselves

upon their knees before Owen, calling him God and offering him worship. Infected by the contagion, Umsuka, his guard and his councillors followed their example, so that of all the multitude Hokosa alone remained upon his feet, standing by his dishonoured and riven deity.

"Rise!" cried Owen aghast. "Would you do sacrilege, and offer worship to a man? Rise, I command you!"

Then the king rose, saying:--

"You are no man, Messenger, you are a spirit."

"He is a spirit," repeated the multitude after him.

"I am not a spirit, I am yet a man," cried Owen again, "but the Spirit Whom I serve has made His power manifest in me His servant, and your idols are smitten with the sword of His power, O ye Sons of Fire! Hokosa still lives, let him be brought hither."

They fetched Hokosa, and he stood before them.

"You have seen, Wizard," said the king. "What have you to say?"

"Nothing," answered Hokosa, "save that victory is to the Cross, and to the white man who preaches it, for his magic is greater than our magic. By his command the tempest was stayed, and the boasts we hurled fell

back upon our heads and the head of our god to destroy us."

"Yes," said the king, "victory is to the Cross, and henceforth the Cross shall be worshipped in this land, or at least no other god shall be worshipped. Let us be going. Come with me, Messenger, Lord of the Lightning."