

of their own death from an infuriated crowd; they talked of the necessity of time to abolish an inveterate superstition; but in very deed so ingrained, even in them, was the belief, that the faith which had led many to martyrdom was not sufficient to face the possible dissolution of the earth. So this great argument of the worshippers of Daybut remained unanswered: for as soon as the Bonzes were persuaded that these terrors were no terrors to the Portuguese, they gave out, as we have seen, that the law of their god applied only to natives, and that foreigners were, at least in this world, exempt. This time, however, twenty or thirty of the younger Christians, some few of them sprung from the principal families in Meaco, had determined that the challenge should be accepted: and, truth to say, Father Froes, who knew their weakness better than they did themselves, was more alarmed than edified by the boastfulness of their talk; how they would do that which none had hitherto dared to achieve in Japan; how they would show the worthlessness of the great idol; how they would win for themselves an everlasting name in the Christian annals of the empire. The good priest, though his more abundant labours had left him but comparatively little time for the study of Church history, could not but remember how, when the temple of Serapis was destroyed at Alexandria, and that in a Christian reign, and (as we should now speak) under a Christian establishment, and when there was a similar prophecy that, should the idol itself be destroyed, earth would return to its original chaos,—but one Christian out of many thousands ventured to take hatchet in hand, and smiting the idol in pieces, to give exit to that swarm of rats which was afterwards the ridicule of paganism throughout Egypt.

‘I accept the challenge,’ said Father Froes. ‘Here is a company of those who believe in Christ, born Japanese, who will descend into the valley, and set your idol and all its worshippers at naught.’

‘Not so,’ said Morindono, after a moment’s pause. ‘It is expressly written that but one may have licence to pass at a time. Go, any one of you that will; Daybut commands that we should give him passage; but more than one shall not go; and the multitude is on my side. Said I not well?’ and he looked around on that part of the crowd nearest to him.

A low murmur of applause ran through the auditory. ‘Well,’ said the good Father, ‘it matters very little. That which all are prepared to do together, each is ready to do separately. You, my son,—will you go?’

He spoke to the young man with whom he had been conversing. His Christian name was Joaquim; and he was descended from one of the first families in Meaco.

‘I will go, my Father,’ said the young man, in a trembling voice, ‘if you judge it to be

necessary. But are there not others here better qualified both by age and rank, to face the danger?’

‘The danger!’ repeated Father Froes, in a half contemptuous voice (for he was naturally of a quick temper). But then correcting himself he said, ‘If from any reason you had rather not go, there are enough, I doubt not, who will thankfully run the risk. You, Manoel, what say you?’

‘What if my own faith should fail?’ asked the young nobleman addressed.

Father Froes felt that he had trusted too much to the faith of the converts. He looked round on those who stood nearest to him, and there was the same hesitation in all. He himself, as you have just heard, could do nothing; and among all those for whom he had laboured, among all those who had promised to stand by him, who was there that did not now desert him?

‘You see how it is,’ said Morindono, who observed the hesitation. ‘The Portuguese,—they are governed by different laws from ours, and may safely despise the danger in this world. But if I counted them right when they but now refused to bow their knees to the god of the emperor, there must be at the very least three or four hundred Christians present, and not one has courage by so easy a proof to show that his faith is the true faith. We have challenged them before; I challenge them now: and you see what is the result.’

‘I will go down,’ said a low voice from among the outermost of the Christians.

‘Who spoke?’ asked Father Froes.

‘I heard nothing,’ said the Bonzo. ‘It is time to dismiss this assembly, giving glory to him who has made this world and the heavens above it.’

‘I will go down,’ said the voice again. And the crowd opening, right and left, to permit a passage, a girl came forward—for she could not be more than eighteen or nineteen—and stood in the midst of the assembled princes and nobles.

‘You, Agalha!’ said Father Froes, in astonishment. ‘Why, it was but last week that you were made our Lord’s by baptism!’

‘Even so,’ she replied, very modestly, and yet very firmly. ‘But I have no fear. I trust in no merit of my own, but only in the grace of God; and as you told me of the young shepherd in old time, so I say now, All this assembly shall know that the Lord saveth not by human strength; for the battle is the Lord’s, and He will give them into our hands.’

‘You hear, Morindono,’ said the good Father; ‘your challenge is accepted. And now I claim a fair trial for our faith.’

The Bonzo seemed perplexed. ‘I do not know,’ he said, ‘that a woman has any right to come forward as your champion. It may be that our books speak only of men.’