

'It may not be so at all,' returned the Father, who was an excellent Japanese scholar. 'Your challenge, by the very words of your books, is open to man, woman, or child. I defy you to prove it otherwise. It is true, and I own it with all shame, that, partly no doubt through my fault, the worshippers of the true God have been content to leave the honour of this day with your wretched idol. But now—all praise be to Him!—it is so no longer; and I demand, according to your own law, free passage for this woman, who is minded to take the risk upon herself.'

Morindono might perhaps have hesitated longer, but there was a kind of suppressed murmur in the crowd which showed him that the Christian challenge could not be suppressed, and must not be trifled with. However he tried one last appeal to the multitude.

'Are you content,' he said, 'men of Meaco, that we should risk the annihilation of all that we hold most dear, because one silly girl is minded to provoke the indignation of our god?'

'It is not so,' interrupted Father Froes. 'You said yourself but now, that there was an alternative. Let him—or, rather let the power whom you all serve, Satan, slay her, if he can, before she can pass the valley. I defy your god and your master, equally. And let all this multitude be assured that the meanest and unworthiest Christian among us, and I myself may be he, has more than power to put to flight all the host of evil spirits who are with you, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by virtue of His Cross. Be of good cheer, Agatha,' he continued (for the poor child was very pale, not from fear but from excitement), 'and rest assured that our Lord will, by your means, win Himself great glory this day.'

Morindono perceived from the increasing murmur that ran through the crowd, that it would not be possible to avoid accepting the challenge. 'At all events,' said he, 'time shall be given on both sides. An hour before sunset you shall make the attempt. But remember, that as surely as we are here assembled this day in the presence of our god, so surely if you yourself do not fall a sacrifice to his indignation, you will bring about the end of all things.' And he proceeded to dilate on this return to chaos, hoping that the lapse of some hours and time for thought might put a stop to a momentary enthusiasm. Nor had he chosen that precise period without good reason. For as the sun declined behind the mountains the jets of fire assumed a more formidable appearance; and the gloominess gathering in over the scene might well be thought sufficient to strike terror into a firmer heart than that of Agatha.

Proclamation was accordingly made; and the news spread like wildfire through the vast multitude. All through that day,—and a long day it seemed to the spectators,—the subject

was discussed in larger or smaller knots; the usual games failed to excite their accustomed interest, the wonted ceremonies went on as a matter of form, and without spirit. The appointed time began to draw near. A general move was made to every point which seemed to command a better view of the descent from the knoll on which floated the standard of the Green Dragon.

The sun wants an hour to his setting. The Bonze has already ascended the pulpit. The prince has again taken his place under the royal canopy. Father Froes has encouraged and comforted to the best of his ability, (and he was no untried champion in this kind of warfare,) her who had thus come forward as the champion of the faith. The little band of Christians drew up close to the knoll, some with looks of shame, some of terror, all with the deepest interest.

'Now, then, said Morindono, seeing Agatha unshaken, 'now, then, foolhardy, miserable girl, there is the path to your destruction. Now, then, men of Japan, take your last look of her who thus goes deliberately to tempt the fury of our god, and to prepare for herself a place compared to which those fountains of fire would be but cooling streams.'

'Now, then,' said Father Froes, on the other side, 'you are called upon to do such honour to our Lord as no Japanese maiden has been able to win for Him before. Go forth, my child, with a good courage, and the God in whose hands is the strength of the hills be with you.'

She knelt for one moment before him, received his blessing, and then with a reverence after the Japanese fashion, to the prince, advanced to the edge of the crater. The crowd by one simultaneous movement pressed close to the very verge. It was not so steep but that with careful footing you might descend without using your hands. No track was there to point out the way to the adventurer; no foot of man had ever trodden that valley: and Agatha might have thought, and perhaps did think, of that saying of old, 'Ye have not passed this way heretofore.'

She came to the very edge, turned once round and gave one hurried glance at the sea of heads which circled in the declivity, and then steadily and carefully began to descend. Great rocks lay here and there scattered about on its steep sides; the vegetation was scant and thin, and the volcanic fragments crunched and ground beneath her feet. Among the crowd above, such was the intensity of their suspense, you might have heard a pin fall; and still she descended lower and lower, and still every glance among the multitude was fixed on her progress. Long before she had finished the descent the sun dipped behind the western mountains. A purple gloominess settled in over the crater; the wreaths of smoke began to assume a red terrible glow; it needed a good sight now clearly to distinguish