



***WHEN SORROW
COMES***

When Sorrow Comes

By

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**Cover Art: Photograph of a crying Angel by Linda Allardice.
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RUINED WITHOUT FAULT

HEAD in hands, he sat amid the wreckage of his life. Another Job, he thought ironically, and gritted his teeth as he contrasted Job's patience and his own fierce resentment. Why, why, why all this ruin? If it involved only himself, he could endure it patiently; but not when it was sweeping his family into poverty and unhappiness as well.

The house he and his wife had planned and built together would have to go. His wife, none too strong, would gladly enough give up her maids, but he dreaded to see her once more start the dull, grinding routine from which his success had lifted her. His eldest boy, thank God, was making his own way in the world; but Fred, his second, would have to leave college or work his way though. Now, Mary and Pauline could hardly remain at their expensive convent school.

He reviewed his life swiftly, trying to discover some fault on his part that might have deserved this failure. The most acute business sense was not, he kept assuring himself, proof against a dishonest partner. He wondered, with a shudder, just how far the law was going to hold him responsible for the crimes of the man who had tricked him as much as the man had tricked the firm's clients.

Yes, God had certainly punished him. Why? He could honestly say that he had tried to be faithful to God—weekly at Communion, yearly at a closed retreat, an example to his children. His charities had been notable and, he liked to remember, very largely unknown—anonymous gifts to orphanages and to a list of dependants of all ages and classes. He had sincerely loved his wife and tried to make her happy. His children had found him a generous, if just, father.

Then why this wreckage? Why the ruin of his life and theirs? Why the awful burden of sorrow upon his shoulders? His face was haggard as he raised it to look questioning into the face of God. Was this just? Bitterly he wondered.

DEAD IN HER ARMS

SHE was grateful they had left her at last. Pity stung the wound in her soul like acid. She wanted to be alone with her grief, undisturbed, without the maddening necessity of listening to platitudes or accepting the service of formally sympathetic hands.

A light breeze from between the drawn drapes caught a candle flame and the shadows fluttered across the face of her dead son. She rose and stood above him, almost a modern Mother of Sorrows, tearless but stricken in the presence of her dear dead.

Even in death, he looked strong and fine. Her mind raced back over the thousand beautiful intimacies that had tied him to her heart with cords that seemed to pierce its flesh. Her infant, her baby, her little child, her boy, her young-man son—and now this!

Then her mind sped ahead to the future he had painted for her just before that fatal vacation trip down the river. “And when I say my first Mass,” she heard him say, in a glorious moment, “you’ll be kneeling there at the altar rail, and I’ll come to bless you first, as I shall whisper your name first to the God I hold in my hands.”

No first Mass now, she thought bitterly; no Mass save the repeated requiems for the son who had left her another widow of Naim, but without the Miracle Worker to give him back to her.

Crushed, she sank to her knees. She could not pray; not even for him. All her lips would do was whisper an automatic, “Why? Why? Why?” If God had snuffed out the life of some bad boy, He would have saved the world much misery. If He had only picked some other son who had no such promise or future! Why did He want this young future priest? Why must she carry this weight of sorrow? She had given God her life’s best efforts, trained her boy from infancy to hate sin, to keep his soul pure, to turn his eyes towards the altar.

Was God just? Surely, He was not merciful. Her heart grew hard and her soul revolted under the weight of the grief that bore her down.

THE BLINDING FLASH

THE long, delicate, slightly stained fingers of the young Catholic chemist moved hesitantly over the bed cover, fumbled at the buttons of the regulation hospital nightdress, and then fearfully touched the bandages over his eyes.

The smell of the anesthetics still hung insistently about him. His anesthetic-drenched brain plodded about among the details of what seemed an awful dream—the fascinating experiment, the quiet call to the laboratory assistant for a special ingredient, the bottle seized carelessly, the test-tube in the flame, the crack, and the flaming light of explosion.

“Nurse,” he cried, writhing in terrible apprehension, “how bad is this? Did they save my sight? Shall I see again?”

The vague murmur of the unseen nurse’s voice, the sympathetic rearrangement of his pillows, and the skilful avoidance of a direct reply were all the answer he needed. Blind! And with a career just beginning to open before him.

He had carefully planned to be the sort of chemist that is proud to be a Catholic. Pasteur, he had often said, must have more successors today. A dozen times during his training, it would have been easy to swing from the path of faith into the byways of unbelief. Clever

professors had pointed the way for him. Chemists could be plausible in their infidelity. He had clung to his faith however, studied the Catholic side of doubtful questions, grown to see more and more clearly the strength, power, and beauty of Catholic truth, until he had dedicated his life as a chemist to the cause of Christ and His Church. Yet, through the gesture of an incompetent assistant, his sight was gone forever.

This seemed God had given an odd return for what he had tried to give God. God evidently was not much interested in scientists who believed in and defended Him. He recalled the names of half a dozen scientists who were spending their energies in the hope of finding a proof that God did not exist. They could all see. No accident flared up to sear their eyes into paralyzing darkness.

Is this a God of justice and mercy? Hysterically he laughed and, as the nurse hurried to him, he flung himself back on the pillows; his mirthless laughter shook his shoulders and sent red-hot barbs of pain through his tortured eyes.

SORROW FROM A GOD OF LOVE?

INSTANCES like the foregoing might be piled on instances. Man stands first mystified and then resentful in the presence of sorrow. Death and sickness puzzle him, sometimes almost hopelessly. Pain twists his mouth into a sneer of unbelief.

If God so loves the world, why does He permit all this? If He is the loving, tenderhearted Father towards His children, how does He explain to them the suffering of humanity?

There are times, of course, when sorrow and suffering are almost easy to explain. Sin makes us criminals in God's eyes. Sin is the act of a disobedient and ungrateful child. Through sin, the sinner tries, to the utmost of his power, to upset God's work, smash the moral order of the universe, and harm God's unprotected little ones. When pain, death, sickness, or sorrow break over the sinner's head, they are the thunderings of God's just wrath. Suffering punishes sin.

The lovely story of the Prodigal Son has brought home to all of us another important and almost obvious purpose of sorrow. Sorrow and failure are the swift and terrible reminders that we have wandered far from our Father's house. Wealth, we all know, has a way of making men forget God. It makes them self-assured and cocky. God seems decidedly unimportant when one's bank account shows millions in investments and the laughter and music of sin are sounded with delightful persuasiveness by flatterers. Many a sinner has turned his eyes towards his Father only when he woke among husks and saw the receding backs of his former companions as they hurried off to newer loves and wealthier new arrivals.

The loss of wealth has often jolted a man out of sinful self-sufficiency. The sudden collapse of a woman's beauty frequently makes her see the ugliness of vice that has

been lurking behind the mask of her personal charm. Failure has sent more than one proud man reeling broken into the arms of God.

Not Complete

This is clear enough, but it is not a complete explanation of the mystery of sorrow. It is right enough that the sinner should suffer, but why the saint? While we recognize the criminal deserves the blows of justice, what of the fine Catholic gentleman, the devoted mother, the faithful chemist of the incidents we have related?

All through life, we see scrupulously honest men suffering from failure and poverty, while sinners drive their high-powered cars from glistening offices to swanky clubs. We see a pure, charming girl give her life to an ungracious brood of brothers and sisters and come at last to a neglected and lonely old age, while some other girl, fundamentally far less charming, rides the wave of successfully commercialized passions to national notoriety and the flaming glory of electric lights.

This is puzzling; and, because it is puzzling, men and women have doubted God's goodness and justice. When they have sat in the midst of failure, with ill health cutting midway through their careers, or when they have felt the sting of ingratitude, or have faced undeserved disgrace, they have doubted God and the value of all religion.

If we had lived before the days of Christ, sorrow would have been far less intelligible to us. The Jews who came to Christ all curious about a man born blind could only think of suffering as a punishment for sin: "Who has sinned, this man or his parents?" they ask. If he was blind, his blindness must be the result of someone's sin. They could see no other explanation. In the same way, to them, poverty, failure, ill health were punishment for sin.

For Self and Dearest

Yet, sorrow takes on a new significance as we look upon the Man of Sorrows. We see the incarnate Son of God choose poverty as His lifelong companion. Before our astonished eyes He smiles into the face of suffering, accepts ingratitude as if it were His due, experiences loneliness, and elects to die held aloft on the scaffold of the cross so all the world may see His blatant failure.

If God left heaven for earth and made sorrow His favorite associate, perhaps sorrow is not the horrible evil that men have thought it to be. Perhaps it has some beautiful and deep significance that can be read only by eyes that have looked into the blood-red sun behind Calvary's hill.

If we should find that Christ shares His sufferings with His nearest and dearest, might we not feel that sometimes sorrow comes, not as a curse, but as a blessing? After all, what He gives to Mary and Joseph, to John His precursor, to the greatest of the saints, can hardly be a very terrible thing. We can easily fancy the self-sacrificing Savior keeping hard and bitter things for Himself. We cannot fancy Him sharing those hard and bitter things with His Mother unless He thought them precious.

To study the mystery of suffering, we have only to look at the life of the person Christ loved most dearly. The life of Mary was shadowed with the same dark clouds that filled the life of the Savior. She was the sorrowful Mother of Christ, who was the Man of Sorrows.

Shared With His Mother

No sane man will question Christ's love of His Mother. She did more for Him than all the rest of mankind together. From the moment she welcomed Him into her heart at the Incarnation until the years when she followed His disciples with prayer and inspiration as they went about the conversion of the world, He was the one final object of her thought and labor. Her arms cradled His pitiful infancy. Her house was important to her simply because it sheltered Him. She watched sleeplessly over His crib, carried Him in her arms to safety in Egypt, trained His first steps, prepared the garments He wore and the food He ate, followed Him patiently and self-effacingly through His public life, shared His passion, and mothered His disciples after the Ascension.

To no other did He owe so much, yet we insult the grateful Heart of Christ if we do not acknowledge that His love was proportioned to her goodness to and her service of Him.

Since all this is evidently true, we may be sure that Christ bestowed upon His Mother only the things He thought worthy of her and important for her beautiful soul. If then He shared with her His sorrow, His pain, and the cross He carried all through life, are we not safe in acknowledging that He regarded these things as worthy and important? For the rest of the martyrs there was one sword. For Mary there were seven. Christ loved her beyond and above all other creatures; yet sorrow stalked her from the first moment she welcomed the incarnate God into her heart.

The childhood of Mary was sheltered and uneventful. She was deeply dear to her aged father and mother, who regarded her as an unexpected blessing sent from on high. The safe precincts of the Temple held her protectively during the early years of her training. Her soul was calm with the unruffled peace of virginity. On the eve of the Incarnation, Mary could look back upon a sinless life of tranquility and she thought she could look forward to years of quiet innocence. Her heritage from

her parents would keep her in moderate comfort. The Temple offered her well-beloved shrines of worship. The needy of her village would occupy her tender being with satisfying and useful work.

The Dawn of Sorrow

Then into her uneventful life came the greatest privilege ever given to a woman. The angel asked her to assume the magnificent dignity of mothering God Himself. She bowed her head, and, near her heart, the Son of God became incarnate for mankind. She alone, of all women, could look into her soul and know that she was God's Mother. With rapture, she realized her heart was the first of all tabernacles to shelter Jesus Christ the King.

Yet hardly had that joy lighted her days and her hospitality welcomed the Son of God, when sorrow entered with shadowy feet. In the eyes of Joseph, she read a pained questioning. He knew she was good and pure; yet he was faced with the unexplained fact of her motherhood. As she moved about their little home, she could feel the silent, puzzled gaze of Joseph following her.

This was a terrible trial for Mary. She loved the gallant, gentle man God had selected to protect her. Yet, now between them were sudden, frightening silences. Because of the privilege of being the Mother of God, she saw her reputation for purity imperiled. She knew she was hurting the one whom, next to her unborn Son, she loved best.

Hardest of all, she could not speak in her own defense. She was carrying God's secret, and she must await God's solution to her problem.

At the same time Christ had come into her life, He had brought the beginnings of the grief and pain that, quite as much as the joy and consolations, were to accompany their long association. Henceforth, in her life there would be Jesus, Joseph, and the grim, relentless figure of Sorrow.

At last, the angel spoke reassuringly to Joseph and His worried look changed to one of deepest reverence. Then Mary was free, like all other young mothers, to dream of the child who would be hers. Lovingly she prepared for His coming. Day by day, the stack of baby garments grew under her skilful fingers. Joseph built a cradle, which she finished in a soft, warm fabric and placed in a corner of the nursery. Everything was made ready for His comfort and care.

Then out of proud Rome came the heartless order that sent their entire world travelling towards the appointed centers of census registration. Mary talked that dreaded journey over with Joseph and found that they must travel light. Only essentials could be taken. No cradle. No piles of baby clothes.

So she looked at the garments He was never to wear, paused to touch regretfully the cradle He would never occupy, as, obedient to a pagan law, she left her comfortable home for Bethlehem and a stable.

Shadows at Christmas

Art loves to paint that first Christmas in the warm colors of heavenly light and a mother's love and joy. The light and love and joy were there, but over the whole scene lay deep shadows. When door after door was slammed in their face, she realized that the world He was coming to save was utterly disinterested in His birth and equally disinterested in His Mother. Because she was selected to be the Mother of, not an ordinary babe, but the Infant King, she found herself sharing the birthplace of her Child with the beasts of the field.

Her mother's heart was hurt not merely by the stable, or the straw, or the manger (sad substitutes for the dainty things she had prepared). She felt the sharper pain of realizing that, though she held up her Divine Son for an admiring world to worship, the world was too busy with its own loves, sports, and business to send more than a handful of shepherds and three wise men out of all of its thousands to find the Light of the World.

Her Child, however, could make even the stable an antechamber of heaven. His beautiful eyes smiling from the folds of her veil made her forget the cold winds chanting over the manger and the cattle that were His courtiers. Joy was in her soul—a joy, however, that was smothered almost at once in dread and fear.

Flight

She was sleeping peacefully with the Baby in her arms, when suddenly the voice of Joseph roused her. Armed soldiers, he whispered, had just left the palace of Herod to murder the Child. Flight was the order of the angel who had brought the warning. Where to? To Egypt, from which their forefathers had so gladly escaped.

Mary shuddered. Egypt was the dark, mysterious land of filthy idols and squat temples, of an alien people speaking a strange tongue, regarding Jews with an old, inherited dislike. Was this the land to which she must carry her Baby?

Speed offered their only safety. She dressed the Child hurriedly, flung about her a cloak, stepped out into the still darkness, and at the side of Joseph turned from friends, home, associations, a familiar village and people, and hurried off to an unfriendly land of exile.

As they fled along the dark way, there rose to Mary's ears the wail of other mothers weeping over the little ones martyred as substitutes for her Baby. Their sorrow was her own. Tears for them filled her eyes as she clutched her Baby tighter to her breast and hastened her steps.

Certainly, for her, Christ did not seem to be the Prince of Peace. He had come bringing with Him a long journey from her native town, the cold of Christmas morning, and now perils by night, the danger of armed soldiers, flight under cover of darkness, and years of lonely exile in a strange land.

Pride in a Son

After the weary waiting in Egypt, the family's humble home in Nazareth and the first years spent there with Jesus and Joseph came as an interlude of pure happiness. Jesus grew to boyhood under Mary's watchfulness. Then, when He was twelve, the peace was blasted by a sorrow that fell just short of tragedy.

Mary accompanied Jesus on His first trip to Jerusalem with all the glad pride of a mother's heart. For the first time, her Son was to appear before the waiting world. Out of the corner of her eye, she dwelt on His young, straight figure and the soft hair (the color of her own) that framed His clean-cut face.

They reached the Temple, offered their sacrifice in company with tens of thousands of other worshippers, and all the while Mary glowed as she noticed the instinctive glances of admiration that followed Him, her Boy, now almost a young man.

Lost

Then came the crash of near-tragedy.

Almost from out of her hand, He was gone. At first she told herself reassuringly that He was somewhere near, at prayer in a nook of the Temple, or watching the crowds come and go, or perhaps talking with some boy of His own age. Yet, when night came and He was still missing, fear contracted her heart. Could it be that His sacrifice of Himself for His people was to be accomplished on this very first visit to the Temple?

Fear grew into the very real agony of dread. She seized chance acquaintances by the arm, begging for news. She searched dark corners of the stairs or the shadows of the columns where He might have dropped off into a youthful sleep. Her throat grew dry and tight as head after head shook in reply to her terrified questioning.

Morning broke at last and she went through all the horrid imaginings of a mother who has lost her son—he is dead; he is kidnapped; some terrible accident has befallen him; he has fallen into brutal hands. All through the day, she carried on her feverish quest. The second night saw her drag her exhausted feet relentlessly down the long corridors of the Temple, searching with bloodshot eyes for a trace of her Son, running as a youthful head attracted her attention, only to stop short in agony as a closer view revealed a strange face.

Any mother can guess what she suffered. Three days without a word or sign! She was experiencing all the agony of separation by death, with none of the reassurances that come even in the presence of the dead body of the one we love.

She found Him at last, but in that blissful moment she must have realized that she was paying abundantly, in sorrow and the awful pain of loss, for the privilege of being the Mother of the Christ whose Father's business must come even before His love of Mother and home.

Farewell

Mother-like she would have loved to give Him everything the rich give their children—comforts, opportunity for innocent pleasure, a home fitted to His dignity. But she was poor, and she saw Him without even the small comforts that other mothers of the village could afford. The Son of God was her charge and she could give Him only the coarse food and rough garments of the poor.

In fact, when the black angel of death swooped down on her home and carried off Joseph, the pain of that loss was followed by the knowledge that the Master of the Universe was making tables and chairs for the poor in an unimportant provincial town so He could earn the food she ate and the clothes she wore.

Then early one morning they stood together in the doorway, the Mother and the tall Son, who was now a grown man. The long road of His public ministry stretched before Him. Both knew He would never return to spend even a few hours in her home.

His strong arm circled her shoulders and she rested for a moment against His Heart. How could she give Him up when she knew that down that road were the hardships of the public life, hatred, rejection, brutal conspiracies, and at the end a grim cross waiting with outstretched arms?

“My Father's business,” He repeated, as He had done so often. She bravely drew herself up, smiled into His eyes, kissed Him for the last time, and, as He strode down the road, waved after Him tearlessly. Tears could come when the door had closed on His distant figure. Then she could face the loneliness of her house, in which everything had

been made precious by His dear, familiar use. She was alone as few mothers have ever been alone, knowing that, though she kept waiting instinctively, she would never again hear His footsteps upon the path or His fingers rapping cheerfully at her door.

Calvary and After

During the years of His public life, she watched His mission understandingly. She perceived as no one else did the growing opposition all about Him. She watched helplessly while treachery, guile, leagues, and plots tightened about Him until they were ready to crush the last drop of blood from His Heart. Her pride in Him cried out that He must be a triumphant success; her mind knew success was not His way to victory. She longed for the people to insist upon His kingship; she dreaded the moment when they would cast Him off forever.

Then, as He shared all else with her, He asked of her the supreme sacrifice of Calvary. The blood-red sky of Good Friday cast the dark shadow of the cross over the body and the broken heart of His mother. When the centurion's lance plunged into His Heart, the sword of prophecy pierced hers as well.

Hardly had the glory of Easter filled her world, when He was gone again in the Ascension. That left her to be, through busy but lonely years, the comforter and inspiration of the Apostles and the first Christians.

Such, in briefest outline, is the story of the woman God loved best. The wise old man Simeon, who took the Child from her arms at the Presentation, looked upon her with pity. "And thine own soul a sword shall pierce," he said quietly. Even Simeon could not guess how the Man of Sorrows would share with Mary the companionship of suffering until she became as truly Mother of Sorrows as she was Mother of God.

Surely, then, sorrow is not always a punishment for sin; Mary was sinless. It is not always a sign of God's displeasure or anger; Mary was supremely pleasing in His eyes.

His Best Friend

Can it be, then, that sorrow is often God's way of complimenting His best friends? Can it be that sorrow is sometimes a sign, not of His anger, but of His special love?

John the Baptist stood close to Christ during His mortal life, in work for Him and devotion to Him. John gave a lifetime of devotion to preparing the pathway over which Christ was to walk into His kingdom. When finally he saw the Savior near the Jordan, he

stepped aside, declared his own mission abrogated, and sent his disciples to follow Christ. Later Christ spoke of him words of praise such as He spoke of no other man.

Yet John's life began with voluntary renunciation of home, countrymen, and civilized society, and ended with martyrdom.

Christ seems never to have visited him except when He came to receive baptism at His precursor's hands. When John sent his own disciples, Christ took them and left John without followers. Christ wrought a miracle to raise the dead Lazarus; but He let the despicable Herod capture, imprison, and behead the man who had served Him with the utmost devotion.

John was someone dear to Christ, yet the trail of sorrow crossed his life. Surely, Our Lord must think sorrow is precious when He shares it so generously with His best friend.

For His Dearest

In fact, similarly, He has consistently shared sorrow with His other friends, the saints. From the martyrs He has asked a death patterned on His own. From the confessors He has asked a long lifetime of labor, penance, privation, self-renunciation. He has invited young men and women to follow Him by giving up father, mother, home, all they have in the world; yet they were the ones He selected from the entire world for His closest followers. He has apportioned to His lovers the poverty of Francis of Assisi, the misunderstanding that surrounded John of the Cross, the continued illness of Catherine of Siena, the loneliness of Anthony the Hermit, the fiery death of Joan of Arc, and the heroic suffering of the Little Flower.

Suffering, then, is something that Christ gives His friends most freely. When Calvary was over, His enemies went back to their temple, their palace, their homes, and their shops, rubbing their hands in satisfaction over His death. When His friends walked back through the dark and the storm, His Cross had been planted firmly in their hearts.

The Highest Compliment

Suffering, we could well argue, is often the highest compliment Christ pays to His loved ones and friends. He chose it deliberately for Himself. He gave it deliberately to His Mother. He offered it deliberately to every saint. It seems rather clear. The sorrow that comes to good men and women is Christ's way of complimenting them with a share of His cross.

Just the change of a word may often make a world of difference. If we forget the word “sorrow” and for a moment and substitute the lovely Catholic word “cross,” everything takes on new significance.

Let Me Help

“This is not my sorrow,” cries the Catholic when failure, grief, or illness enters his life. “This is my share of the cross.” As he uses the phrase, he sees the picture of a roaring crowd seething about a weary, shaken figure that toils up a hill. Just days before, the same crowd had been glad to fling the palms of victory and their own garments in the way of the very man who now plods on to death. Yet, on Palm Sunday, they thought they saw a king moving toward a triumphant kingship and a victory over Caesar and hated Rome. Then they begged for a chance to hold the stirrup or the lead-rope of His mule. They pressed close, thrusting their faces near His so when He was king He would remember and honor them for their part in His public acclamation. He was wonderfully popular that Palm Sunday as He rode, so the people thought, towards a throne and an empire.

Then, as He marched in the procession of Good Friday, though He was surrounded by a mad crowd, He marched alone. Nobody offered a hand to help Him manage His cross. Everyone was afraid even to touch this symbol of shame. When finally He sank down completely exhausted and the soldiers, letting Him lie there for a moment, searched the crowd for a strong back to prop up the cross, men shrank back and shriveled up in the hope of escaping notice. A wayfarer and stranger was finally dragged out of the crowd by sheer force and compelled to carry the cross behind Christ.

With a vision of that day in his mind, the Catholic cries out bravely, “If Christ wants me to help Him carry His cross by failure, suffering, ill health, I shall not shrink back like the mob on Good Friday. I have walked with Him willingly enough in His triumphs. Shall I refuse to walk with Him in the *“via crucis?”*”

Therefore, when sorrow weighs heavily, the Catholic knows it is not the pressure of unbearable and unreasonable suffering; it is the weight of the cross that he carries in company with Jesus Christ.

This is the way the saints have regarded sorrow. They were afraid when they were without. They feared that perhaps Christ thought them unworthy of this strange but beautiful compliment that He paid to all His best beloved. And they cried out, as Teresa of Avila did, “To suffer or to die?” Or, like Ignatius of Loyola, they were quick, when opportunity offered, to choose the cross. “If you were given the choice,” he was asked, “between a long life of work and suffering for Christ and an immediate and certain entrance into heaven, which would you choose?” Unhesitatingly he replied, “The life of work and suffering.”

Genius through Suffering

From a purely natural viewpoint, sorrow has often been a great boon to mankind. Literature is full of men and women who were simple, good craftsmen in their art, who suddenly became great when the touch of suffering mellowed or matured them, gave them depth and understanding, and lifted them from mediocrity of feeling to great heights of emotional power.

The shallow master of epigrams, Oscar Wilde, became, after the horrible sorrow of trial and imprisonment, author of the majestic “De Profundis” and the immortal “Ballad of Reading Gaol.” A fourth-rate newspaperman and banker in a little Texas town is brought, probably without guilt, before the court and sentenced to prison. He serves his term and passes from prison into the complete obscurity of New York. As Sidney Porter, he had written silly little yarns and unimportant local jokes. As O. Henry, he wrote out of the heart of humanity. Shakespeare went through the dark night of his soul and emerged the author of three of the world’s greatest tragedies. From the Civil War-crushed soul of Lincoln came the brief but unforgettable Gettysburg address.

The natural value of suffering is something the world has experienced too frequently yet has altogether missed. We have seen proud men learn humility through suffering. Hard men have come through sorrow gentle and considerate. While success has made men relentless towards their fellow men, failure has made them merciful when power was once more placed in their hands. Most vividly of all, mankind has seen how the sorrows of a mother make her gentle with the weak, understanding towards the stupid, and forgiving even towards the ungrateful and ungracious.

Idolatry

For the Catholic, sorrow takes much higher ground than this. The human heart, the Catholic knows, very readily gets itself clogged with things of little importance. Idolatry is easy even in modern times. Men and women worship money, fashion, cleverness, beauty, comforts, luxuries, their own children. Their hearts grow so devoted to the daily ritual of their gods that they have not time for the one and only God. Silly people serve fashion even when it demands the liturgy of sin. Even the children of the good sometimes become idols in the temple of their parents’ souls.

Then, some sudden misfortune throws down the false gods and the idolators look up to see the face of the true God gazing down upon their grief. The realization rushes in that there can be no false gods before Him. They grasp the truth that even the purest human loves are transient, fickle, unstable, and that no love can satisfy the heart except the love of God Himself. For them, sorrow has been the beginning of a complete and satisfying service of God in the temple of their souls.

Wealth and success are not always an aid to greatness. Even the pagan artist dreads love, money, or creature comforts coming to him in overabundance. Great books are written to meet the demands of insistent landlords. Great pictures are painted under the impulse of an empty stomach. Some of the most magnificent music was first played on pianos the rent on which was long overdue. We watch genius transplanted from its garret to a luxurious studio maintained with a large income and frequented by admiring friends, and note how often the art of that genius grows feeble, self-imitative, and ineffective.

Therefore, in the midst of ease and comfort, in the midst of too much success and too many friends, God observes the soul grow slack and slovenly. Gently and mercifully He sends sorrow to cut away the softening and debilitating influences, and the soul, though suffering from His merciful knife, rises to find itself growing strong again, unhampered, unencumbered in its way towards God and heaven.

Training to Pity

Thus, men and women learn pity for the sufferings of others from their own personal suffering and the personal suffering of those close to them. Those who once felt great human need themselves build refuge for others. Gentleness tempers the strength and kindness warms the chill of a man or a woman who has lived, as Christ the Good Shepherd lived, close to suffering and pain. While success again and again lifts an arrogant chin towards the cold stars, failure bends the head low enough to see the oppressed under their burdens, the man fallen into the gutter, the sick in their beds, and the woman shrinking frightened into some alleyway.

Still, all this is unimportant in considering Christ's compliment in sharing His sufferings with us.

It is strangely easy to forget why Christ hung on the cross. Mankind had sinned and had gloried in its sin. The open gates of hell's fearful prison-house stretched wide in front of the entire human race. Unatoned sin cried out to a just God for vengeance, and God's hand was raised to strike the criminals. Then, between that upraised hand and the sinners, who were blindly careless of their doom, came the figure of Christ. In a very true sense, He flung over Himself the disguise of a sinner.

Co-Victims

"Let me," He cried to His Father, "suffer in place of Your rebellious children. The pain they should endure I gladly take for Myself. They deserve to die in agony for the crimes

of their bloodied hands. I take their death upon Me. Forget, Heavenly Father, that I am guiltless. Look only upon the disguise I wear, the fouled red cloak of their sins.”

God accepted the substitute, struck Christ, His Beloved Son, instead of the sinners, and forgave the race its sins because Christ had died on the cross in their stead.

Sinners still go on in the ways of crime. Laughing, they still flout God, wage war upon His kingdom, defy and smash His laws, and take His best gifts to use them in the cause of the Prince of Evil. Today, as before His coming, they sin and will not repent.

Eventually, good men and women find the cross entering their lives. Illness racks them. Failure overwhelms their hopes. Death enters the household and strikes down their first-born. Looking up, they recognize the shadows of Calvary across their pathway. If they have faith and knowledge and real love, they realize at once the possibilities of all this. They can mount their cross and offer their sufferings for the sinners who will not help themselves. They become voluntary victims of sin, taking the place of the murderer, the lustful, or the thief (from the slums or from Wall Street). With arms outstretched, they beg God to accept their sufferings as atonement for unrepented sins and to save His children from the consequences of their crimes.

Victims Can Become “Other Christs”

There is no greater heroism than this. In the arc of His justly descending sword, God sees, as it were, another cross raised and another guiltless victim. The shadow of that cross falls protectively over the sinner. God draws back His sword, accepts the substitution, and sends undeserved grace to the sinner. Thus, suffering has made its victim “another Christ” and won another soul for heaven.

It is impossible to over-estimate the good that comes to the world from the crosses of willing companions of the suffering Christ. Catholic universities are built, not merely by the labors of a devoted faculty, but by the patient sufferings of some unknown member offering up a life of pain and illness for the good of the greater cause.

Convents know themselves blessed when some heroic Sister, racked with arthritis, lies on a perpetual cross, offering up her tortures smilingly and patiently in union with Christ. The unselfish labor and weariness of a good mother, her calm acceptance of ingratitude, her tireless sharing of Mary’s life of devoted self-annihilation, are things that make sons great men and daughters pure, noble women.

People who failed yet accept their misfortunes in union with Christ’s apparent failures are more likely to have successful sons than great, proud, self-sufficient successes. A trial accepted in union with the crucified Christ and offered up for the salvation of the world means sins forgiven, souls sanctified, causes turned from failures to success, God’s kingdom advanced, and the whole world moved closer to its Maker and Savior.

Joy Follows

Once more, we turn back to the story of Mary, Mother of Sorrows. As we do so, a sudden brilliance breaks through the dark picture of her sufferings. We see that her every grief was a prelude to a deep and splendid joy.

The hurt in the eyes of Joseph gave way to a look of adoring understanding as he realized that the greatest of women and her Divine Son were committed to his care. After the angelic answer to his questionings, Mary received many lovely months when she walked in perpetual and unbroken Holy Communion with Christ, the living tabernacle of the Most High.

The poverty of Bethlehem cut Mary to the soul; but even that poverty was forgotten when wise men knelt at the feet of her Babe and poured out their rich gifts as homage from kings to the King of Kings.

Christ was lost in the Temple for three days. Yet, Mary found Him and He put His hand into hers and walked continuously at her side for eighteen more years. She had the exquisite joy of His devoted service and uninterrupted companionship. Three days of loss were a slight price to pay for the blessed eighteen years that followed them. To do His Father's bidding, He had hurt her terribly. In recompense, from the age of twelve to the age of thirty, He made amends as no son had done before, by love, tender association, care, and close union of heart with heart.

Even the horrors of Good Friday had an end. Quietly she mourned until, with the first pink light of Easter's dawn, He stood before her, radiant, triumphant, and holding out His arms to her embrace. Terrible as had been the Passion, every vestige of it was obliterated when she looked upon her glorious Son and knew the sorrows of death had been swallowed up in the victory of resurrection.

Lonely years followed the Ascension, but Mary endured them bravely for the sake of His disciples, who needed her. Then, her period of loneliness finally passed, and she died smiling with the certainty that her Son waited for her just beyond the grave. How truly He awaited her even she did not know until her tomb burst open and her stainless body and her stainless soul were carried together to heaven in the glory of the Assumption. Mary had been Queen of Martyrs; He crowned her Queen of Heaven. Mary had been Mother of the suffering Christ; He made her Mother of all humanity.

Sorrow was for Mary, in every instance, the prelude to a deeper happiness. Pain was the short road by which she traveled to joy. Beyond her martyrdom glistened a crown of twelve stars.

Choose Bravely

Sorrow and suffering come into the life of everyone. We have, however, a clear choice. When the shadow of the cross falls upon us, we may lift our heads to question God's justice. We may hate the suffering and refuse to accept the companionship of the suffering Christ. Or we may take suffering gratefully to our hearts as pure proof of that love with which Christ honored Mary; Joseph; John the Baptist; Peter, crucified head down; Athanasius hunted into exile as an outcast failure; Mary Ward flung into prison because of her farsighted belief in what nuns could do for God and His Church; and all His saints.

The saints dared to call sorrow a beautiful thing. Christ, in one of His most startling paradoxes, cried out, "My yoke is sweet and My burden light." Sweet and light? Sorrow does not seem so sweet and light when we struggle resentfully against its yoke and burden. Then, sorrow chafes our shoulders and rubs them raw. Yet, when we let Christ place the yoke of sorrow upon our shoulders with His gentle hands, we know that our yoke is borne by two, Christ and ourselves. We remember that, even Simon of Cyrene did not carry the cross alone. He bore it behind Our Lord, who carried the heavier share.

With all of this before us, sorrow and suffering become deeply significant and beautiful. We see them as opportunities to assure our Savior we love not only His Kingship, but His sacrifice as well. We ask not only a share in His crown but also a share in His cross.

Once we look at sorrow as a sharing of Christ's Calvary, a wonderful thing happens. The dull red of Good Friday grows strangely warm and beautiful; the shadows that seem to hang so thick about the cross are pierced by bright swords of light; and our delighted eyes see, as Mary saw, that after Calvary we can obtain the glory, the joy, and the unending happiness of Easter.

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