

The priest read the letter slowly with grim satisfaction, then placed it on the desk. The sharp screech of a whistle from the quarry announced the noon hour. From the hillside came a deep muffled rumble. Blasting was going on while the quarrymen were at dinner. The sound echoed and re-echoed from the slopes and then died away on the distant peaks.

Father Thorne mused on while a bluebird whistled outside his window. Suddenly his body became tense and he listened; then leaped to his feet as rapid foot-falls sounded on the walk and mounted the porch. He was at the door in an instant, flinging it open to face a dust-stained workman.

'You're wanted at the quarry, Father,' he panted, 'a man hurt while blasting. I guess he's a goner.'

Delaying for a moment to secure his oil-stocks, the priest hurried over the hill after the man. His guide was telling him the story of the accident in broken sentences. Not realising the time when the dynamite would explode, the poor fellow had lingered too near. The shock hurled him to the ground and crushed him with debris.

'He needs you, Father; he's sure a bad one,' he ended with a pant.

They bounded down the slope and made for the engine shanty. A crowd had gathered near the door, but fell back when Father Thorne arrived. Some saluted him; others gazed at him gloweringly; while one grunted: 'All this priest-fuss for a dirty wop.'

The remark struck the priest like a knife-thrust. He deigned not to hear it and stalked into the shanty. On a heap of bags in a corner lay a crumpled, blood-stained man. A smile contorted his face when his eyes rested on the priest. With a feeble cry his eager hands reached toward Father Thorne. The priest was down beside him, and the burden of ten years' sin and sorrow was lifted from his soul, as self-accusations issued from his lips. The priest administered the last rites of the Church and bent over the penitent with prayers and words of consolation.

Suddenly the mangled quarryman sat up, opened his mouth, and the death-rattle gurgled in his throat. He extended his arms, opened his hands, and clutched convulsively at the air, then collapsed upon the bags. He was dead.

The priest arose from his knees and stepped back to gaze at the inanimate form. A shaft of light from the open door fell upon the upturned countenance of the dead man. An ineffable smile lingered upon the lacerated face and parted the lips stained with quarry dust. The eyes were open, surprised at having looked beyond the grave into the face of eternity.

Father Thorne quit the shanty and walked over the hill slowly and solemnly, the death-scene still before him. His little glimpse into the lives of these men aroused in him a desire to go among them and know them better. 'There is work for me here,' he mused. 'These men must be properly watched and tended, for temptation is the same in Grayson as in the smoky cities. I sigh for work; to be up and doing. But am I not selfish when I desire the activity that will bring me before the eyes of the world? Here is work without fanfare or blare of trumpets; why not accept it?'

He followed the path that led over the hill and dipped into the gully behind the quarry. Coming to the summit, he stopped near a clump of trees and listened intently. A long-drawn out moan reached his ears, as of one in agony. He waited, but the sound was not repeated. Then he stepped forward cautiously.

Father Thorne peered between the trees, then caught his breath sharply. In front of him he discerned a man seated upon a log. His elbows rested upon his knees and he nursed his head in his hands. Across his lap lay a surveyor's transit. His bent figure was a picture of abject misery and there was the heave of a stifled sob in his shoulders. No wonder the priest was surprised. It was Jim Rockwell.

Father Thorne's hand fell upon the drooped shoulders. Rockwell jerked himself up, started.

'Jim!'

'Father!'

'What is the matter? Your sister, is she--?'

'No, she is not dead,' Rockwell returned, rising to his feet. He leaned wearily against a nearby tree. The priest's hand was still upon his shoulder.

'What is it, Jim? Perhaps I can do something for you.'

Rockwell shook his head feebly, and the ghost of a smile flickered across his face.

'You wonder why one so gay and light-hearted can come to this? Sometimes I am a hypocrite, for often my smiles are false and my gaiety a sham.'

The priest waited patiently, just a little astonished. Rockwell continued:

'I sometimes hate this place and pant for the great world beyond, where lies work and fame.'

'But—' cried Father Thorne.

The younger man waved him into silence.

'The stuff I told you was put on. I act the contented country gentleman for my sister's sake.'

A little light was breaking upon the priest, but the problem was still hazy. Rockwell turned upon him and cried vehemently.

'Have you ever burned with zeal, desires, ambition to do something big, noble, great for yourself and your fellows? Did the temptress, Success, ever hold the shining goblet to your lips? And did you ever spurn it and not feel remorse? I rejected all and I sometimes suffer.'

Then he proceeded more calmly.

'When I graduated from college I took a civil engineering course at a technical school in Boston. I had great hopes for the future, and I felt that my dreams would soon be realised. Upon graduation a prominent position would be given me, and from this place I would rapidly spring to the top. During my last year at the 'Teck' school, I was called to the bedside of my dying mother. With her expiring breath she made me promise I would never leave my sick sister. This I did readily, and my mother died content.'

'All was lost. My castles came crashing about my ears. When I graduated, I did not accept the position, for I could not take my sister with me. Removal from these hills would kill her in six months. I could not and would not abandon her. So I gave up all, and here I have lived for five years.'

Father Thorne's heart leaped with a happy thrill of admiration for this young man. 'What a noble sacrifice? How could he do more in this world, for was not this greater than fame, ambition, and success? The silence of the woods seemed to breathe an impressive answer. Rockwell's voice aroused the priest.

'Nellie realised what I had given up, but I love her so much I cannot let her see that I suffer sometimes. That is why I try to be happy, gay, light-hearted, to fill the last days of her life with sunshine. When I feel sad, like to-day, I come to the hills with my transit and spend a few hours surveying. Then Nellie's love always fills the void left by the flight of ambition and success. Again comes the thought, is it not sinful to waste my talents; throw away my education, loitering among these hills?'

The priest shook his head slowly.

'You spoke of success, doing something great for your fellow beings. Have you not succeeded in filling one life with joy? Have you not done marvellous things for one of your fellows, the nearest and dearest to you on earth? What is that if not ambition fulfilled, success attained, and noble deeds done?'

'Yes,' cried Jim Rockwell, his old voice and manner returning, 'Milton's words on his blindness always console me. You remember them:

"God doth not need

Either man's work, or His own gifts; who best
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best: His state
Is kingly: thousands at His bidding speed
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."

The words died away like a solemn benediction. Rockwell's countenance was lit with smiles when he faced Father Thorne. Their hands met in a firm knowing grasp, and their eyes read the secret of each other's actions. It was contained in the word 'sacrifice.'

Ken. Mayo

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