

## THE INTERRUPTED PRAYER

It was a day in late spring. Beneath one of the votive lamps in the little church, and facing the picture of our Lady of Votive Help, knelt a figure whose very attitude symbolised prayer. Her intense, burning gaze saw beyond the picture, the church, the sea; her whole body and soul were offering a petition with a fervor that needed not the medium of the lips—they were closed. But suddenly, in the midst of this voiceless prayer, she fell unconscious to the floor.

A young girl, who had entered the church a few moments earlier, and who, in walking through the aisles, had noted with interest and reverence the absorption of the woman in prayer, was about to leave, when the shuffling sound from the elder woman's pew attracted her attention, and she was immediately at her side. When, through the efforts of the girl, the woman revived and sat back trembling, the colorless, quivering lips expressed her thanks with an appealing humility. The girl noticed how frail the woman was and how helplessly weak; how poorly clad, yet how unmistakably refined.

'Madame will permit me to accompany her home?'

'No, Mademoiselle; and I thank you with all my heart. God will bless and reward you. But—I—I—must remain here—longer. My prayer was not finished, and if I go now I may not be able to come back to-day. Thank you, child! But go; I feel better, and, in any case, I must fin—'

'No, Madame,' respectfully interposed the girl; for she had seen the lips grow white again from the effort to talk. 'I can not leave you like this. I pray you pardon me, Madame, but—is it not so that you came early to Mass, perhaps to receive Communion, and then waiting to pray, have not yet broken your fast?'

'Ah, yes, I knew!' as her charge acquiesced with a scarcely perceptible movement of the head. 'Listen, then, Madame, I shall go with you, if you will, and when you have had a cup of tea or some food, I promise to bring you back here to finish these prayers' (and the smile that accompanied this plea was not to be lightly repulsed). 'Besides, you could finish them at home; you have—'

'Mademoiselle does not understand.'

The quick flush on the girl's face was not lost, for the woman immediately added: 'But I shall do as you say; I can return later, since my refusal to go now distresses you.'

The little cottage in which she lived being near the church, she was soon at home.

'You are too kind; I am not used to such services,' said the weak voice, as deft hands were gently removing the bonnet and shawl, and arranging pillows comfortably in the armchair near the sunny window.

'I am so happy that you permit me, Madame,' replied the self-appointed nurse; 'and when I have given you some hot tea, you will lie down and will promise me not to go out again until you are stronger.'

'Ah, yes! It would be well, perhaps; but it may not be. You do not understand, my dear, as I told you before. You can not understand that I must finish my prayers in church.'

The girl turned quickly.

'Madame, I—'

'I know what you would say, but it is in fulfilment of a vow made years ago,' came in low tones to which feebleness added solemnity. And then silence fell in the little room.

It was years since she had mentioned her vow to any one, and then it was to an old priest who had long since died; but now the kindness of this young stranger and her own weakness—yes, that was it, her weakness—had made her talk of personal affairs. Well, she would say no more on that subject. And yet silence now might imply that she was annoyed by the girl's advice to remain at home; and then, somehow, to-day she craved sympathy; and in addition to these reasons, she painfully realised that she was not well, and that she might have to ask for help to get back to the church. So she decided that it would be best, after all, to explain her apparent obstinacy.

'It is an old, old story,' she began, 'written deep on many a mother's soul. I had a son. He was a wild lad, but he had a good, true heart; and on the morning that he went to sea (for I could not keep him) I placed him under the protection of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and asked her to bring him back safe to me. I had faith then that my prayer was heard, and that it would be answered; but God willed otherwise—' And the voice broke. Quickly recovering herself, however, she continued:

'When his ship returned, I went to meet him, only to learn instead that he had not sailed, but would wait for a later boat; and then, after many weeks of endless days, the terrible word came that his ship was lost at sea. My husband had died and I was alone—alone and ill. I would have gladly given up the struggle; but after long, long days I recovered. Having paid my indebtedness—and a long illness costs much, my dear—I sold my home, with its furniture and pictures and books, and came here to this little place by the sea; for the sea haunts me. I cannot leave it. It holds all in holding my son. I chose this house because from its windows I can see the great, wide stretches of the cruel waters. And then, in the little church here, I again saw the picture of our Lady of Perpetual Help; and, although my prayer had not been answered when I sought her aid before, I wanted to hope that she would hear me now; for it is something to have even a strong hope to hold one's life by, since without some kind of anchor many of us would drift to desolate places. I had tried at times to believe that, as a test of faith, the answer had only been delayed; but as I knelt there that first day in the little chapel by the sea, the thought came to me that perhaps our Blessed Mother had answered by bringing him to God instead of to me. And even in my sorrow I could thank her if such were the case; for sailors are careless, and not all who went down with him may have been prepared to go.

'And so at last a great peace flooded my soul; I learned to accept God's will, and to place—not the life now—just the memory of my son in our Lady's keeping. If, in answer to my first petition, she could not bring him back, then I asked that I might, at least, know what manner of preparation had his soul before its departure. And then—I was almost afraid of the promise I was about to make, but the love for my boy was strong within me—I vowed that a votive lamp would perpetually burn in her honor before the picture; Not until to-day has bodily infirmity interfered with my prayers; and now what am I to do if my strength fails me?'

Overcome with emotion and fears, she sank back leaning her head against the pillow, which was not whiter than the pain-stricken face that rested upon it.

'But,' responded the girl, in low, even tones, 'assuredly you meant to keep the conditions of your vow only if your physical strength permitted. If you are unable to walk, and cannot ride, how can the promise be kept? God is not so exacting in demands, nor is His Blessed Mother; and, besides, if you feel bound, you could be released.'

A smile of hopelessness crossed the pale face.

'You do not understand. I must either keep my word or give up hope; and the life would, indeed be hard.'

'But you ask miracles. You say he is dead, and that all who were with him are dead. How, then, can you hear of his last moments? Do you not see what an unreasonable petition yours is? I would not dissuade you from it; but you are so weak, and for your own good—'

'Until the day that I hear from him or of him, I shall keep my vow.' And the white face grew resolute.

'Very well, then, Madame, we shall go soon.' And a soft arm stole around the thin shoulders. 'You are just splendid, and I am so sorry that I must leave here to-day. I am on my way home from a visit in the north, and out of mere curiosity stopped for the day in this quaint little village. I could see the church from the train, but I never dreamed that it would hold