

CAN A MOTHER FORGET?



None of the poorest and most overcrowded parts of poor and overcrowded London stands a little whitewashed house, differing from the squalid houses round it only in its perfect cleanliness—for on entering, nothing but the plainest and most necessary furnishings were to be found.

One bitter night early in February there sat, in the hardly furnished sitting room, a young priest. He was evidently expecting some one, and some one he loved; for, from time to time, he stirred the fire and looked with something like a sigh at the meagre meal which was prepared on the table. 'I must not put on coal,' he said to himself; 'for if the fire is really bright when he comes in, he will grudge himself the warmth. I dare not make ready a comfortable meal, for he will grudge himself the food. It is always so, for he thinks that he alone can do without rest, warmth, and comfort; for oh! how tender and thoughtful he is about every one else!' As he sat down again the door opened to admit a tall, powerful man, looking weary beyond words, and wet to the skin. It needed not his clerical dress to assure any who saw him what his calling was; for interesting as his face must have been under any circumstances, it was rendered beautiful by the beauty of holiness, and the strength and sweetness mingled in it made it like the face of an angel.

'Dear brother,' he said, as he came in, 'I can go out no more this night, for my body is so weary and my heart so sore, that I feel helpless and dispirited, as I have rarely felt before. The sin and the suffering, the wretchedness and poverty, and, above all, the cry of the children, are breaking my heart. And if mine—O Thou loving Shepherd! what must the suffering be to Thee, in Thy perfect purity and unequalled tenderness? How long, O Lord, how long!'

He sank down on a chair and buried his face in his hands for a few moments, while the younger priest looked at him sadly and anxiously. It was so unusual for Father Warren's face to be clouded, and so rare for his spirit to be despondent, that he felt sure something was wrong, and that overwork and constant exposure were at last beginning to tell even on his magnificent health and frame. 'Now, dear Father,' he said beseechingly, 'do put on dry clothes, and rest this evening, and take a long quiet sleep; for if you persist in this constant self forgetfulness, you will have to give up work altogether, and I think no greater trouble could befall you and us than that.'

'Well, truly,' replied Father Warren, 'I am resolved to go out no more this night, for, though the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak.' He had hardly finished speaking when a ring was heard at the door, and the servant entering said, 'Father, a lady desires to see you, and begs you will not refuse her.'

'Let me go,' said the young priest, jumping up. 'It is too hard this perpetual importunity. I will speak to her, and tell her how unfit you are to do anything more or see any one this evening.'

'Do so, my son,' said Father Warren, 'but let it be courteously and gently said, as befits those who speak in the name of a gentle and never weary Master.'

The young man crossed himself, and left the room; he returned, however, after a few minutes, with a disappointed and somewhat mortified air.

'She will have none of me, dear Father, but desires to see you and you only; and in very truth I feel myself asking for her; her pleading is so touching and her longing so earnest, that I have gone over to her side, and can resist her wish no longer.'

Father Warren rose briskly and said, 'Do not let her wait a moment longer. I feel in blame, that she has waited so long already. Bring her in at once, I pray you; and while the priest hastened to obey, he placed a chair near the fire, and muttering to himself, 'Neither turneth a deaf ear to any poor man,' he put the teapot on the table, and prepared to receive cordially the unexpected visitor.

The door was gently opened by a tall lady, dressed in black. She was exceedingly fair to see, beautiful in feature and carriage beyond most women; but there was an inexpressible charm far beyond even that—a dignity and perfection of manner and appearance such as Father Warren had never seen before.

Advancing towards him, she said in a low, clear, and most melodious voice, 'Forgive me, dear Father, for disturbing you so late, and on such a night; but no other could fulfil so well the mission which I ask you to undertake. Will you come with me to bring comfort and happiness to a departing and erring soul? and will you bring the Holy Sacrament with you, that, having confessed and been absolved, he may go hence in peace?'

'Dear lady,' answered Father Warren, 'I have not eaten since the morning. My clothes are wet through, and I am very weary. Another priest of God more worthy than I shall go with you.'

'Nay,' she said, looking wistfully at him, 'I pray you, go with me yourself, for to you I was sent, and the time is very short. I beseech you to come with me and make no delay. By the love of the blessed Mother of her Son, by the love of that Son for all His erring children, I implore you to come with me, and come quickly.'

She pleaded so earnestly and tenderly, and yet with something of authority in her tone, that the Father yielded; and forgetting all but her anxiety and that someone had need of him, he hastily put on a cloak and left the house with her.

A strong, biting wind and sharp, sleety rain made walking difficult and conversation almost impossible, so he followed the lady silently as they sped quickly along the narrow streets. Father Warren could not but marvel exceedingly that the lady did not seem to be aware of wind nor rain nor anything round her, but with firm tread and head erect she walked calmly and quietly though very rapidly on.

She moved as one with a set purpose, while a smile of hope brightened her grave face.

At last, after walking thus for a considerable distance, they came to one of those quiet old fashioned squares, once the chosen residence of the wealthiest Londoners, but now deserted for places further from the crowded centre of the huge city.

She stopped at one of the houses, and knocking firmly and decidedly at the door, she turned round to the priest, and said, 'I have shown you the place and told you of the sore need of one who lives there. I can do no more, and must go now. May the blessing of God the Father, the love of God the Son, and the help of God the Spirit go with you now.'

She turned rapidly away and was quickly out of sight, leaving the priest a little bewildered at receiving so solemn a blessing from a lady and a stranger, and yet with the feeling that there was nothing unsuitable nor unbecoming in her giving it.

Before, however, he had time to collect his thoughts or explain to himself what he really felt about it all, the door was opened by a stout, comfortable, respectable servant, who seemed rather astonished at his appearance. 'I have been summoned to a dying bed,' he said, 'pray take me at once to the room.'

The woman looked perplexed, and answered—'There ain't no dying beds here, nor hasn't been this long time. Thanks be to heaven, we're all well in this house, sir!'

'There must be some mistake,' replied Father Warren, 'for I was conducted here by a lady who fetched me herself to the very door, and was in much anxiety and haste.'

'There's no lady got no right to fetch anyone here, and mistake there surely is,' said the woman, rather testily; but looking at the priest, and recognising his holy character, she went on—'But you had better come in and explain it to the young master—for sure ain't he wouldn't like a beggar turned from the door on a cruel night like this, let alone a holy man like you, as is well-known to the poor and needy.' So saying, she led the priest into a most comfortable room, where was seated alone a young man evidently waiting for his dinner, preparations for which were on the table before him.

'This reverend gentleman has been led astray, sir, by some visiting lady, and brought out of his home, which better he would have been on a night like this, as rampaging the streets to come to a house where dying beds there is none, and nothing but health and comfort the Lord be praised. But I knew as you would not wish him sent away, sir, for the sake of her as is gone, and perhaps you can put him in the way to find the right 'ouse.'

The young man smiled, evidently well accustomed to the ways of his faithful old servant, and rising courteously, led Father Warren to a seat by the blazing fire. 'Why, you are wet through and through!' he said. 'At least let me take off your cloak, and rest a little, while you tell me how I come to the honour of this visit.'

The father could not withstand the genial greeting, and, sitting down, told the young man how he came there. As he tried to do this, however, he found himself quite at a loss to explain the impression the lady had made on him, and how powerless he felt to resist her importunity, or even to question her as to where she was leading him.

His host was grieved and concerned at the useless fatigue and exposure he had gone through, and said, 'I fear you have, in your ready self-sacrifice, given way too easily to some charitable lady, more zealous than judicious, who, in her desire to do much, has, to night at least, done too much, and made a mistake in an address which we can neither of us now rectify.'

Father Warren shook his head sadly, for he felt how completely he had failed to represent truly his calm and dignified visitor, and he sighed as he thought how, after all, her mission had failed.

'I shall not let you go out again till you are thoroughly warm and fed,' said the young man; 'and you must just console yourself by the thought of the kindness you are doing in sharing my lonely dinner, and in giving me the pleasure of your company on such a dismal night as this.'

The worn-out, hungry man yielded to the cordiality and heartiness of the bright youth's manner, and soon they were talking together as though they were old friends. They seemed drawn toward each other in some mysterious way, and their hearts were opened, and they spoke as neither had done for years.

'I once belonged to your Church,' said the lad in rather sad, regretful tones; 'but I belong to no Church now. Since my dear mother died, nothing seems of real interest, and I feel that if she were indeed living in any state, she would find some way to communicate with me, for heaven itself could bring no joy to her if I were shut outside. And indeed it is much the same with me, for I have tried every kind of life to forget my loneliness, but everything becomes dreariness without her, and I have found no one to fill her place.'

'Nay, not so, dear boy,' said Father Warren, very gently, 'you have not tried everything—not faith and patience and perfect submission, with forgetfulness of self, the only things that can bring you peace and content.'

'I do not want peace,' replied the boy—for he was little more in his impetuous, loving heart—'I want happiness, I want my mother, I want my old full life back again. It cannot be true that she is living anywhere, in any condition, and has forgotten her only child, her boy, her companion, and her friend. My father died suddenly of heart disease before I was born, and my mother and I were all in all to each other; we had not a thought apart. No! she is dead indeed! gone for ever! Dust and ashes! and the sooner I am the same, the sooner will the aching of my heart be stopped, and a useless life be over!'

Father Warren was deeply moved by the passionate outcry and evident sincerity of the lad's grief. His mother had been dead for three years, and he had not allowed anything to be touched or altered in the old house. He could not bear any change in her arrangements, and her books and work lay about as if she were still a living presence there.

As they talked together it became evident that the young man had drifted into disbeliever of all kinds, and was tossed about on that dreary sea, forlorn and hopeless.

It would not become me to try and repeat the powerful arguments and loving pleadings used by the faithful servant of his Master to win back this lost soul.

The life of the priest was well known to the lad, and he remembered in what terms his mother had always spoken of him; how she had told of rank and wealth put aside by him, that he might the better bring comfort and hope to the poor neglected people among whom he lived; and his heart burned within him as the holy man pleaded with him more and more strongly to return to the fold he had left, but where his place was always kept ready for him.

'Come back, come back,' he said, 'to the faith and to the Church which made your mother what she was—what she is. It is you who, by unbelief and waywardness, have

raised the barrier between you. It is you who have closed the door so that her holy angel cannot come to you. Return to the Church of God. Confess your sins and receive absolution, remembering that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, than over ninety and nine just men that need no repentance. Open your ears and your heart now, so that, through my poor lips, you may hear your angel mother pleading with you for your soul's salvation—for another triumph for the blessed Saviour's cross.'

I know not what further words he used, no dare I venture to describe the feelings of the youth as he listened; but, after a while, his better nature conquered entirely, and kneeling before the priest, he cried, 'Receive me back again, I pray you, and bless me, even me also, O my Father!'

Father Warren, however, replied thoughtfully, 'I think it wiser and better, my son, that you should take this solemn step when you are calmer and have fully considered it with prayer, for surely a second backsliding would be far more grievous than a first. I will leave you now and return again to-morrow.'

'Now, I beseech you, dear Father, do not leave me so, unabsolved; but if in your wisdom you think it well that I should reflect further alone, then go into my library and take there the rest you so much need for a few hours, while I remain here and think of all you have said.'

To this Father Warren assented, and passed into the adjoining room, leaving the young man alone.

He looked round him before sitting down, and found in the books, magazines, little works of art, and pictures, further evidence of the refinement and intelligence which had been so marked in everything he had seen in the house. But what arrested his attention most, and fascinated while it startled him, was the picture of a beautiful lady in full evening dress which hung over an old bureau, and beneath which was a vase of white flowers, evidently placed there by some loving hand.

'Where have I seen that face before?' he thought. 'It seems fresh in my memory, and yet I have seen none such for many years.' He took up a book and sat down before the fire, trying to rest. Tired as he was, he could not sleep, for the picture seemed to haunt and disturb him. Again and again he rose to look at it, till suddenly it flashed across him, 'The lady that brought me here to-night! How like, and yet how different!'

While he was still standing looking, his new friend entered, and said quickly, 'You are looking at the portrait of my mother! It is very like her. Is she not beautiful? Can you not feel how how I must miss her sweet company every hour of the day? Is it not strange that I feel nearer her to night than I have ever done since she died and left me alone? Indeed I feel now as if she were not really dead—as if we must meet again. Will you receive my confession now, Father, and give me absolution before I sleep, and then I think I shall feel as if the black wall between us had been broken down for ever.'

'Willingly, my son,' answered the good priest.

Into that solemn interview and subsequent conversation it is not for us to intrude, but it was very late before they parted for the night, and it was arranged that they should meet again at the seven o'clock service in the Mission-room chapel the following morning.

Imagine then the disappointment of Father Warren when the service began and ended, and his young friend did not appear.

He was very sad. Accustomed as he was to disappointments of this kind, he had never felt one so keenly as this before. He had been so confident of the lad's earnestness, of the strength of his resolve, that he would not give up hope. 'I will go and see him,' he thought, 'before I return home or break my fast. Holy Mother, go with me, I beseech thee!'

He hastened away, and not without some difficulty found the house again. He was not surprised to find the blinds down and no sign of life, for it was not yet eight o'clock. 'Ah! here is the explanation,' he exclaimed cheerfully. 'Unaccustomed to such early hours, both servants and master are still probably asleep,' and he knocked loudly at the door.

It was quickly opened by the same servant as the evening before. But oh! how changed in her appearance. Her eyes were streaming with tears, and she looked ten years older. In a voice broken by sobs she said, 'He is dead. He is gone. Passed away in the night in his sleep; no sound; no cry. The best master that ever lived. He told my husband to call him very early, and when he went to do so, he found him lying quiet and calm, like a marble image.' Father Warren passed by her silently into the room; and there indeed, he found him lying calm and quiet, and very peaceful, but with such a look of bright happiness on his beautiful young face, as showed plainly that he had felt neither solitude nor fear when the Angel of Death came to fetch him away.

'Who can doubt that it was his mother who came for me last night?' said the priest to himself. 'For can a mother ever forget, even in heaven, the child of her love on earth?'

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