



THE MOTHER OF JESUS

IT was night in the little thatched house by the roadside. The last cart had creaked on its homeward way, and silence had fallen on the house, silence broken now and again by the sharp cry of a child in suffering.

A group in the kitchen gathered around the smouldering turf-embers, and talked in subdued voices. Over all these lay the hush of expectation that comes before a death. The neighbour women had been in and out all day, but now as the time grew shorter they had left the mother with the child, alone but for her old mother, who sat on a creepy stool by the hearth and watched both with eyes of suffering.

When the child cried the young mother drew a sharp breath as though she endured intolerable suffering in silence. They were saying down in the kitchen that the baby was too young to have laid hold upon her life, but to her he was as much a human personality, loving and understanding her as though he were a man and old.

'Oh,' she said, when once again the child cried, 'if he is not to live would I keep him to suffer? Oh, why must he suffer, he who has never known sin?'

The old mother made no answer to the unanswerable question. 'Pray, jewel,' she said; 'there is great power in prayer. Many a child have I seen given back that was farther gone than he.'

'If prayer could keep him I should never do anything but pray again,' said the child's mother, but no spark of hope lit up her hopeless eyes.

'Whisht, dearie, whisht! Pray that the will of God may be done in regard to him.'

'I cannot pray. What am I to say to Alick when he comes back and asks me for his son?'

'He will comfort you, and love you better because of what you suffered without him.'

'I was alone in the terror before he was born. I was alone in my agony, but afterwards I had the child. Now I shall be more alone than any woman in all the world.'

The old mother winced.

'You have your father and me. You were our darling before you ever laid eyes on Alick M'Carthy and his fine red coat.'

The girl did not seem to have heard her. She was watching the tiny face on which the shadows were growing darker.

'He is easier, I think.'

'The pain is leaving him, acushla,' said the old mother, her eyes full of a deeper pain.

'His breathing is easier. Oh, what it would be if he could live! I think I should die of joy.'

'Pray, child!'

'Mother, God is powerful and kind. Do you think if I could give Him the child up that He would give him back to me?'

'If He saw it was good, child. He can do better for him than you can. If He takes him, it is in love.'

'But He cannot want him as I do. I would rear him to be a good man.'

Her eyes prayed for hope to be given her. The old mother came out of her corner and looked at the child.

'Give him to me for a bit, and do you go to the altar in the other room and pray. Rest if you can, child. I am troubled about you, for 'tis only a few weeks since you left your bed. Give him to me; I will call you if there is any change.'

The young mother let the child be taken from her knee. He

still lay quietly without a moan. In the dark room adjoining one little star of light quivered. It was the lamp before Our Lady's Altar.

The statue glimmered whitely above it. There was a handful of flowers set on each side in poor little vases. The arms of the figure were outstretched benignly, and the head was bent a little forward.

A sense of rest and quietness came over the young mother. She knelt at the foot of the statue, and rested her cheek against the linen altar-cloth. In the whitewashed wall a death-watch was ticking monotonously. She put her hands to her ears to shut out the sound, and began to pray.

Now that the suffering child was no longer before her, she prayed with passion. She reached out her hand and clutched at a fold of the statue's garments as though it were a living woman.

'You saw your Son die,' she cried, 'but He was with you three-and-thirty years. You nursed and fed and washed and clothed Him. You had all that joy. Ask Him to spare me mine,—if it is His will, if it is His will.'

She added the words with difficulty, hardly as if her heart were in them, but she felt that if she did not say it her prayers would have less chance. She lifted up her head and prayed with exaltation. She lay at the statue's foot, and prayed with anguish. She was so still that the old mother in the next room said to herself—

'The Lord has sent her rest and sleep to strengthen her against what is coming. Blessed be His Name.'

How long she prayed she knew not. Once, when the silence in the other room had lasted long, the thought came to her that the child was dead.

She thought in a strange, stupefied way of how Alick would hear it. Would it be at night in the barrack-room with the ribaldry and jests going on about him, or would it be in the morning as he came from parade all gay with the soldierly smartness she loved in her hero? Would he think she had

been careless of the child and let him die, or would he wish he had married that other girl who was noisily full of health and life, and would have given him strong children? She was paying the price of her delicate, nervous prettiness, which had made her a pet with the officers' wives, and something infinitely precious and perdurable to her young husband.

Then another cry broke the silence, one thinner and more feeble than before. Her heart came out of its sluggish lethargy, and she would have sprung to her feet and gone to the child, but a strange thing happened. 'The arms of the statue had closed about a baby, and the baby was her own little one that lay dying a few feet away.'

A moment, and she went back to the cradle-side, and stretched her arms mutely for the child.

'Bear up, acushla,' said the old mother; 'he's going fast.'

'I wouldn't keep him,' she said, 'now that I know what he's going to.'

Her voice was low and intense, but so new a tone was in it that the old mother looked at her with alarm. Then she nodded her head, reassured.

'The grace of God has strengthened you,' she said.

'Yes, the grace of God,' said the young mother, coming to the child as if he were but sleeping.

KATHARINE TYNAN.