

# The Sorrows of the World

By R. H. Benson

As the days went on I became more reassured about my friend, Parker told me there was an improvement since I had come: and the shadow in his eyes seemed a little lightened. On Christmas Eve the Rector called, and they were shut up together in the chapel for an hour after tea; and the old man, I suppose, made his confession. He seemed brighter than ever that evening, and told me story after story after dinner, old tales of when he was a child.

On Christmas morning he celebrated the Holy Mysteries as usual in the chapel, and I received the Communion at his hands. We went to church in the brougham, and that was the last time the old priest was seen in public. There was intense curiosity about him in the village, as well as the greatest reverence and love for him, and I noticed a ripple of interest along the benches as we passed up to the Hall pew.

On the evening of Christmas Day he had provided a Christmas tree in the servants' hall; but we only looked in for a moment when the shouting was at its loudest, and he nodded at a child or two who caught sight of him, and I saw his whole face kindle with joy and tenderness, and then we went back to the fire in the sitting-room.

The morning of St. John's Day broke dark and heavy. We had to have candles at breakfast, and the old man seemed curiously changed and depressed again. He hardly spoke at all, and looked at me almost resentfully, like an overwrought child, when I failed to blow out the spirit lamp at the first attempt.

All day long the gloom outside seemed to gather, the sun went down in a pale sky barred with indigo, and the wind began to rise.

The old man, after a word or two, went to his room soon after dinner, and I understood from Parker, who presently came in that the master was exceedingly sorry for his discourtesy, but that he did not feel equal to conversation, and intended to go to bed early, and that he would be obliged if I could manage to amuse myself alone that evening. But I, too, went upstairs early, feeling a little uneasy.

On the top landing of the north end of the house there are three doors: the central one is the chapel door: that on the right, approached by two little steep steps of its own, was the priest's room; that on the left opposite was my own room. As I went in, I noticed that a light shone from under the chapel door, and that his own door was wide open, showing the flickering light of the fire within. As I paused I saw Parker pass across the doorway, and called to him in a low voice.

"Yes, sir; he's fairly well, I think," he answered to my inquiry. "He is in the chapel just now, and is coming to bed directly. He told me just now, sir, too, to ask whether you would serve him to-morrow morning."

"Certainly," I said; "but are you sure he ought to get up? He has not been well all day."

"Well, sir," said Parker; "I will do my best to persuade him to stay in bed, and will let you know if I succeed, but I doubt whether the master will be persuaded."

As I crossed outside the chapel door to go to my own room, I heard a murmur from within, with a word or two which I cannot write down.

Before I was in bed I heard the chapel door open, and footsteps go up the little steps opposite, and the door close. Presently it opened again; and then a tap at my door.

“It’s only me, sir,” said Parker’s voice. “May I speak to you a moment?” and then he came in with a candle in his hand.

“I’m not easy about him, sir,” he said. “But he won’t let me sleep in his room, as I asked. I’ve come to ask you whether you will let me lie down on your sofa. I don’t like to leave him. My own room is at the other end of the house. Excuse me, sir, if I’ve asked what I shouldn’t. But I don’t like to sleep on the landing for fear he should look out and see me, and be displeased.”

Of course I assented, almost eagerly, for I felt a strange discomfort and loneliness myself.

Parker went noiselessly downstairs and got a rug or two and a pillow, and then, with many apologies, lay down on the sofa near the window. My bed stood at the other end of the long narrow room under the sloping side of the roof. I blew the candles out presently, and the room was in darkness.

I could not sleep at first. I was anxious for my friend, and I lay and listened for the slightest sound from the landing. But Parker’s face, as I had seen it as he had stood with the candle in his hand reassured me that he too would be on the watch. The wind had half died down again. Only there came gusts from time to time that shook the leaded windows. Gradually I began to doze, then I suppose I dropped off to sleep, and I dreamed.

In my dream I knew that I was still in my room, lying on my bed, but the room seemed illuminated with a light whose source I could not imagine. The curtains, I thought, were no longer drawn over the windows, but looped back, and the light from my room fell distinctly upon the panes. I thought I was sitting up in bed watching for something at the window, something which would terrify me when it came. And then as I watched there came a gust of wind, and lashed, to judge by the sound, a big spray of ivy across the outside. Then again it came, and again, but the sound grew more distinct. I could see nothing at the window, but there came that ceaseless patter and tap, like a thousand fingers. Then a dead leaf or two was whirled up, stuck for a moment on the glass, and whirled away again. It seemed to me that the ivy-spray and the leaves were clamouring to be admitted into shelter from that wild wind outside. I grew terrified at their insistence, and tried in my dream to call to Parker, whom I fancied to be still in the room, and in the struggle awoke, and the room was dark. No; as I looked about me it was not quite dark. There lay across the floor an oblong patch of light from the door. I gradually realised that the door was open; there came a draught round the corner at the foot of my bed. I sat up and called gently to Parker. But there was no answer. I got out of bed noiselessly, and went across the floor to where I saw the dim outlines of the sofa. As I drew near I stumbled over a rug, and then felt the pillow, also on the floor. I put my hands almost instinctively down, and felt that the sofa was still warm, but Parker was gone. Then I looked out of the door. The landing was lit by an oil-lamp, and its light fell upon the priest’s door. It was almost closed, but I could hear a faint murmur of voices.

I put on my dressing-gown and slippers and went out. Almost simultaneously the door opposite opened a little wider, and Parker’s face looked out, white and scared. When he saw me, he came swiftly out and down the stairs, beckoning to me; but as we met, a loud high voice came from the priest’s room.

“Parker, Parker! tell him to come in— at once—at once. Don’t leave me.”

“Go in, sir; go in,” Parker said, in a loud whisper to me, pushing me towards the door. I went quickly up the two steep steps and entered, Parker close behind me, and I heard him close the door softly.

There was a tall screen on my left, and behind it was the bed, with the head in the corner of the room; a fire was burning near the bed. I came round the screen quickly, and saw the priest sitting

up in bed. He wore a tippet over his shoulders and a small skull-cap on his head. His eyes were large and bright, and looked at me almost unintelligently. His hands were hidden by the bedclothes. There was a little round table by the head of the bed, on which stood two burning candles in silver candlesticks. I drew up a chair by the table and sat down.

“My old friend,” I said, “what is it? Cannot you sleep?”

He made no answer to me directly, but stared past me round the room, and then fixed his eyes at the foot of the bed.

“The sorrows of the world,” he said, “and the sorrows under the earth. They come to me now, because I have not understood them, nor wept for them.”

And then he drew out his old, thin, knotted hands, and clasped them outside the rug that lay on the outside of the bed. I laid my own hand upon them.

“You have had a greater gift than that,” I said. “You have known instead the joys of the world.”

He paid no attention to me, but stared mournfully before him, but he did not withdraw his hands.

There came a sudden gust of wind outside; and even in that corner away from the window the candle flames leant over to one side, and then the chimney behind me sighed suddenly.

The priest unclasped his hands, and my own hand fell suddenly on the coverlet. He stretched out his left hand to the window as it still shook, and pointed at it in silence, glaring over my head as he did so.

Almost instinctively I turned to the long low window and looked. But the curtains were drawn over it: they were just stirring and heaving in the draught, but there was nothing to be seen. I could hear the pines tossing and sighing like a troubled sea outside.

Then he broke out into a long wild talk, now in a whisper, and now breaking into something like a scream.

Parker came quickly round from the doorway, where he had been waiting out of sight, and stood behind me, anxious and scared. Sometimes I could not hear what the priest said: he muttered to himself much of it I could not understand: and some of it I cannot bring myself to write down—so sacred was it—so revealing of his soul’s inner life hidden with Christ in God.

“The sorrows of the world,” he cried again; “they are crying at my window, at the window of a hard old man and a traitorous priest . . . betrayed them with a kiss. . . . Ah! the Holy Innocents who have suffered! Innocents of man and bird and beast and flower; and I went my way or sat at home in the sunshine; and now they come crying to me to pray for them. How little I have prayed!” Then he broke into a torrent of tender prayer for all suffering things. It seemed to me as he prayed as if the wind and the pines were silent. Then he began again:

“Their pale faces look through the glass; no curtains can shut them out. Their thin fingers tap and entreat. . . . And I have dosed my heart at that door and cannot open it to let them in. . . . There is the face of a dog who has suffered—his teeth are white, but his eyes are glazed and his tongue hangs out. . . . There is a rose with drenched petals—a rose whom I forgot. See how the wind has battered it. . . . The sorrows of the world! . . . There come the souls from under the earth, crying for one to release them and let them go—souls that all men have forgotten, and I, the chief of sinners. . . , I have lived too much in the sweetness of God and forgotten His sorrows.

Then he turned to a crucifix of ebony and silver that hung on the wall at his side, and looked on it silently. And then again he broke into compassionate prayer to the Saviour of the world, entreating Him by His Agony and Bloody Sweat, by His Cross and Passion, to remember all suffering things. That prayer that I heard gave me a glimpse into mysteries of which I had not

dreamed; mysteries of the unity of Christ and His members, a unity of pain. These great facts, which I thank God I know more of now, stood out in fiery lines against the dark sorrow that seemed to have filled the room from this old man's heart.

Then suddenly he turned to me, and his eyes so searched my own that I looked down, while his words lashed me.

"You, my son," he said, "what have you done to help our Lord and His children? Have you watched or slept? Couldst thou not watch with me one hour? What share have you borne in the Incarnation? Have you believed for those who could not believe hoped for the despairing, loved and adored for the cold? And if you could not understand nor do this, have you at least welcomed pain that would have made you one with them? Have you even pitied them? Or have you hidden your face for fear you should grieve too much? But what am I that I should find fault? " Then he broke off again into self-reproach.

At this point Parker bent over me and whispered:

"He will die, sir, I think, unless you can get him to be quiet."

The old man overheard, and turned almost fiercely.

"Quiet?" he cried, "when the world is so unquiet! Can I rest, do you think, with those at my window?" Then, with a loud cry, "Ah! they are in the room! They look at me from the air! I cannot bear it." And he covered his face with his old thin hands, and shrank back against the wall.

I got up from my seat, and looked round as I did so. It seemed to my fancy as if there were some strange Presence filling the room. It seemed as I turned as if crowding faces swiftly withdrew themselves over and behind the screen. A picture on the wall overhead lifted and dropped again like a door as if to let something escape. The coverlet, which was a little disarranged by the old man's movement, rippled gently as if some one who had been seated on the bed had risen. I heard Parker, too, behind me draw his breath quickly through his teeth. All this I noticed in a moment; the next I had bent over the bed towards the priest and put my hand on his shoulder. Either he or I was trembling, I felt as I touched him.

"My dear old friend," I said, "cannot you lie down quietly a little? You cannot think how you are distressing us both."

Then I added a word or two, presumptuously, I felt, in the presence of this old man, who knew so much about the Love of God and the Compassion of our Saviour.

Presently he withdrew his hands and looked at me.

"Yes, yes," he said; "but you do not understand. I am a priest."

I sat down again. I tried hard to control a great trembling that had seized me. Still he watched me. Then he said more quietly:

"Is it nearly morning?"

"It is not yet twelve o'clock, sir," said Parker's voice steadily behind me.

"Then I must watch and pray a little longer," said the old man. "Joy cometh in the morning."

Then quite quietly he turned and lifted the crucifix from its nail, kissed it and replaced it. Then he put his hands over his face again and remained still.

The wind outside seemed quieter. But whenever it sighed in the chimney or at the window the priest winced a little, as if a sudden pain had touched him.

He was supported by pillows behind his back and head, against which he leaned easily. After a few minutes of silence his hands dropped and clasped themselves on his lap. His eyes were closed, and he seemed breathing steadily. I hoped that he would fall asleep so. But as I turned to whisper to Parker, I suppose I must have made a slight noise, for when I looked at the servant he

paid no attention to me, but was looking at his master. I turned back again, and saw the old man's eyes gazing straight at me.

"Yes," he said; "go and sleep; why are you here? Parker, why did you allow him to come?"

"I woke up and came myself," I said. "Parker did not disturb me."

"Well, go back to bed now. You will serve me in the morning?"

I tried to say something about his not being fit to get up, but he waved it aside.

"You cannot understand," he said quietly. "That is my one hope and escape. Joy cometh in the morning. There are many souls here and elsewhere that are waiting for that joy, and I must not disappoint them. And I, too," he added softly, "I, too, look for that joy. Go now, and we will meet in the morning." And he smiled at me so gently that I got up and went, feeling comforted.

After I had been in bed a little while, I heard the priest's door open and close again, and then Parker tapped at my open door and came in.

"I have left him, quiet, sir. I do not think he will sleep, but he would not let me stay."

"Have you ever seen him like this before?" I asked.

"Never quite like this, sir," he said; and as I looked at the old servant I saw that his eyes were bright with tears, and his lips twitching.

"Well," I said, "we have both heard strange things to-night. Your master whom you love is in the hands of God."

The old servant's face broke into lines of sorrow; and then the tears ran down his face.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "I am not quite myself. Shall I put the candle out, sir?" Then he lay down on the sofa.

"One word more, Parker. You will wake me if you hear anything more. And anyhow you will call me at seven if I should be asleep."

"Certainly, sir," answered Parker's voice from the darkness.

I slept and woke often that night. Each time I woke I went quietly to the door and looked across the landing and listened. Each time I was not so quiet but that Parker heard me and was by me as I looked, and each time there was a line of light under the priest's door; and once or twice a murmur of one voice at least from the room.

Towards morning I fell into a sound sleep, and awoke to find Parker arranging my clothes and setting ready my bath. The rugs and the pillow were gone from the sofa, and there was no sign on the servant's face that anything unusual had happened during the night.

"How is he?" I asked quickly. "Have you seen him?"

Yes, sir," said Parker; "he is dressing now, and will be ready at half-past seven. It is a little before seven now, sir."

"But how is he?" I asked again.

"I scarcely know, sir," answered Parker. "He does not seem ill, but he is very silent again this morning, sir."

Then, after a pause, "Is there anything I can do for you, sir?"

"There is nothing more, thank you," I said, and he left the room.

I got up presently and dressed. The morning was still dark, and I dressed by candlelight. When I drew the curtains back the sky had just begun to glimmer in the reflected dawn from the other side of the house; but it was too dark to see to read except by artificial light.

I went out on to the landing, paused a moment, and heard a footstep in the priest's room. Then I opened the door of the oratory and went in.