

## HER SECRET WITH THE KING—THE STORY OF A FIRST MASS SAID ON CHRISTMAS MORNING

---

Genevieve Harrington, like most of the girls who had spent any time at the Visitation Convent, had frequently and not without some anxiety considered the question of a religious vocation. The calm, peaceful countenances of her teachers, the religious atmosphere of the beautiful chapel and the sense of the presence of God in and about the institution had produced impressions upon her delicately strung soul which had made her suspect that God was calling her sweetly but gently to embrace this form of life. Not infrequently when at home during the holidays her thoughts and affections wandered back to the Academy on the Hill and seemed to find there what neither the comforts of home nor the attention of friends could supply. And yet in spite of this apparent attraction she thought that she heard a Voice speaking to her and telling her that her life's work lay in another direction. And shortly before her graduation events occurred which confirmed her doubts. Her mother, who had been ailing for some time, became a confirmed invalid requiring almost constant attention, and her father sustained serious reverses in business which obliged him to decrease his household expenses. Under such conditions it was only natural that Genevieve should be called home to assume the double role of housekeeper and nurse. The visions of the past were soon dimmed by the realities of the present, and Genevieve, seeing the finger of God in the changes that had taken place, with good will entered upon her new activities.

And yet the memories remained, not to agitate and to disquiet but rather to stimulate and to sanctify. If she herself had not been chosen to serve God in a special way, she hoped that she might be able to prepare others to hear and to follow the whisperings of Him who would lead them to his innermost sanctuaries. If she was prevented from entering the Promised Land, like Moses, she wished to be God's instrument in bringing others to the threshold. But she, too, was obliged to wander about in the desert for many years before her hope was realized. In fact, it was not till she had reached the age of thirty that she felt at

liberty to accept the matrimonial proposal of John Murphy, a lifelong friend and companion. God, however, was good to her and soon blessed their union with a son.

John Jr.'s advent was received, of course, with holy joy. The mother's first prayers were that he might be reserved for the altar, and she resolved to do everything in her power to direct his life toward that goal. During his tender years she fed him the milk of spiritual doctrine, teaching him to lisp the Pater and Ave, and imparting to him as only a Catholic mother can the truths of our holy religion. Thus it was that the seed was sown which in later life was to blossom and bloom. His entrance into the parochial school was a source of great satisfaction to her, for was not this the first step toward the realization of her heart's desire? During these years she was the confidante of this innocent soul, consoling him in his boyish sorrows, encouraging him in his efforts and warning him against those dangers to which school boys are exposed. Her cares meanwhile had been multiplied by the death of her husband. But what cared she for the additional labor? Was hers not a service of love, having as its sole object the education of her son and if it were God's will his exaltation to the priesthood? Many a time, when all the world was at rest, would she steal into his room and, looking down upon his innocent and serene countenance, pray to God to preserve him from evil and guide his feet into His holy sanctuary.

The years he spent at the grammar-school passed none too quickly, for like all beginnings they were not free from anxieties. After graduation he protested against going to high-school, but at her insistence consented to complete the course. She fully realized how important were these years in the formation of his character—and how dangerous; how necessary it was that his thoughts and aspirations be given a proper direction. Henceforth her direct influence was to be lessened; he must think and act for himself. She had rooted his moral fibre in rich soil; she continued to moisten it with tears of impetration and she was sure that the sunshine of God's grace would not be wanting to strengthen and vivify it. Was the fibre itself strong enough to assimilate the moisture? Would it seek the sunshine? These were the questions she continually asked herself.

No satisfactory answer came, however, until the night of his graduation from high-school. After taking part in the exercises and receiving a modest share of the honors and premiums he

returned home rather late and apparently somewhat dejected in spirits. His mother noticed this immediately. Was he disappointed at not having been leader in his class? This could not be, for she knew from previous experiences that he could accept an honorable defeat with good grace. Was he chagrined at not having received as valuable a graduation present as some of the other boys? She quickly dismissed this suspicion for he had ever been keenly appreciative of whatever she could afford. Thinking only multiplied her doubts and increased her anxiety. At length she broke the silence:

"John," she said, "all is not well with you tonight. What is the matter?"

John looked up surprised, for he thought he had successfully cloaked his thoughts under a cheerful countenance. That he had not done so was evident from her question. So, after a little hesitation, he replied:

"I am considering the future, mother. I don't know what your wishes are, but for some time past I have been thinking of studying for the Church. But since in our circumstances it seems impossible for me to realize this hope—at least for the present—I have decided to obtain work in some office and earn enough money to keep you from working as hard as you have done."

It seemed that a cord snapped in the mother's heart. Her prayer had been answered; her son had not only been preserved from evil but had received the longed-for vocation to the priesthood.

"Son," she said, in the midst of her joyful tears, "your ambition shall be realized. I shall not permit you to remain home for my sake. Father Maguire has offered to help you through your college course and the Bishop will assist you after that. We shall make our preparation together; my sacrifice will be united to yours. May God receive them for His greater honor and glory!"

The years spent at college and the seminary passed swiftly for John and his mother. His life was that of a disciple preparing himself for the not unworthy celebration of the one Great Act of his ministry; that of his mother a reproduction, however faint, of the Blessed Virgin, who ardently desired to participate in her son's sacrifice. Though separated by time and place, their hearts were perfectly attuned. Both were looking forward to the same goal, to a consummation which would more than compensate them for their efforts. In the meantime, the mother had not

escaped the ravages of time and labor. Her rugged constitution had been gradually undermined and during John's last year at the seminary she had frequently been confined to her bed. Indeed, she was so unwell during the days immediately preceding his ordination that the doctor forbade her to undertake the journey to Baltimore, where with fifteen other levites, he was to receive the sacerdotal character. At first it seemed impossible for her to reconcile herself to this grievous disappointment. But hers was naturally a happy disposition which almost unconsciously accepted the inevitable with submission, even with joy, and sought to discover some consoling feature in every situation. If it were actually impossible for her to assist at his ordination, she would endeavor to find some substitute. So, after consulting dear old Father Maguire, she procured a book which contained a detailed description of all that was to take place. Father Maguire had already made arrangements to be present and he hoped that he would be one of the first to place anointed hands on the head of his protegee. On Tuesday morning—the morning set for the ordination—Mrs. Murphy called in one of the neighbors, and just as the clock struck seven they began to follow in spirit the ordination Mass; or, as Father Maguire often laughingly remarked afterwards, they pontificated. The happy mother pictured the formation of the procession in the sacristy and saw it wend its way with solemn and dignified steps to the sanctuary, where the Cardinal was divested of his ordinary robes for those proper for the celebration of Mass. She saw her son in his long white robe, holding a candle in his right hand and carrying the folded vestments on his left arm, take his place in the corona; she watched him ascend with timid yet joyful heart to receive the imposition of hands and the holy unction. And if mother's heart ever pulsed in union with that of her son's, Mrs. Murphy's did during those two short hours. Distance seemed to have been annihilated, and she witnessed the entire ceremony with as great a sense of reality as though she had been bodily present.

After the ordination, the usual blessings having been given and received, John's—or rather Father John's—next thought was of home and mother. And such a homecoming! To realize in one's own person the hopes and aspirations of those one loves is always a source of happiness; but to be, as it were, the crowning joy of a mother's life, to be the answer to her oft-repeated prayers and the reward of her many sacrifices, is a privilege which

only a few have received and which even they have been unable to describe adequately. When hearts are most profoundly moved, lips are speechless. And even when the seal of silence is broken the remarks exchanged are often of a very prosaic nature, while the communication of soul with soul is full of the most sublime poetry. But we are digressing.

John's journey home was uneventful, save for the fact that his eagerness to reach his destination made the Royal Blue and the Merchants' Limited seem to move no faster than locals. At length he was awakened from a reverie by the conductor's announcement: "The next station at which this train stops is B——." Immediately his heart began to beat rapidly; his eyes shone with enthusiasm and his entire countenance was aglow with pleasant anticipation. The closing but not the least happy feature of his ordination-day was soon to be a reality. He would within a few minutes be at his mother's side, and after stooping as a son to embrace her, would rise as a priest to bless her! Only those who have had a similar experience can truly appreciate the emotion which inundated his soul at that time. Never before had he been more sensible of his sonship; never before had he realized as overwhelmingly his priestly dignity. The human and the divine, the natural and the supernatural, seemed for the moment to have blended in a most felicitous union. Well might he have exclaimed with the Psalmist: "Taste and see how sweet is the Lord!" What son other than a son who is at the same time a priest can ever have the assurance that he has actually repaid the debt of love and gratitude which he owes to a kind and loving parent? This is a privilege peculiar to him; and since it arises from no merit of his own, he discovers in it no cause for self-exaltation but only another reason for magnifying the Lord. Truly John had received good measure, "pressed down, shaken together, and running over." But we must draw the curtain over the scene of this first meeting between mother and son. It is a spectacle which should be witnessed only by the angels and the King of the angels, since they alone can understand its grandeur and its import.

Arrangements had been made by which Father John was to celebrate the first of his three Christmas Masses at the Convent on the Hill, so rich in tender associations for Mrs. Murphy. It was to be a low Mass, said at midnight, which only a privileged few would attend. Not a little anxiety, however, was felt by

friends regarding the mother's condition, for the doctor that morning had decidedly opposed her going out into the cool night air. But Mrs. Murphy was not disturbed, for she had received the assurance of an authority higher than that of the doctor that she would not only assist but would also receive Communion at her son's first Mass. Acting upon the advice of her friends she decided to lie down for a few hours, but her mind and heart were too busy with a consideration of the approaching event to allow her to sleep. To see her son at the altar, to hear him pronounce the words of Consecration, to watch him raise the Sacred Host and the golden chalice and to follow him as he descended the steps with the ciborium in hand to administer the Bread of Life to hungry souls—ah, these were thoughts calculated to enrapture the soul of any mother, but particularly of one who might truly regard such acts as the consummation of her own life's work. A certain reverential fear at the thought of the awful dignity to which her son had been elevated was coupled with an ineffable delight in the realization of God's munificence. But love, above all, filled her heart—love, joyous love, ravishing love!

Such was her frame of mind when Father John came in to see her before his departure for the convent, where he had a few final preparations to make. He kissed her, and after urging her not to be overanxious—for excitement would only distress and weaken her—he hurried off, not too confident that she would be able to follow. Shortly afterwards, however, she arose and with the assistance of one of her friends arrayed herself in the silk dress which had been ready these many months, and put on the diamond ring which John's father had given her at the time of their betrothal. It would be untrue to say that she was strictly beautiful; but there radiated from her countenance a certain grace and sweetness which more than compensated for the absence of youthful charms. At eleven-thirty, having wrapped herself in a heavy woolen robe, she allowed herself to be carried to the closed carriage which was waiting at the door and in a few minutes arrived at the convent, where she was immediately taken to the chapel and placed in an arm-chair near the altar-rail. Shortly before twelve the altar-boy lighted the candles, and just as the clock struck the hour Father John left the sacristy. As he entered the sanctuary, he almost instinctively raised his eyes; as he did so, they met those of his mother. The message of sym-

pathy, of joy, of thanksgiving and of love which was conveyed by that glance was more eloquent than any words could have been.

The prayers at the foot of the altar were quickly said and the young levite ascended the mystical Calvary to renew the Sacrifice of the Cross. The Introit and the Kyrie finished, he came to the middle of the altar and began the recitation of the "Gloria in excelsis Deo." As he did so Mrs. Murphy's thoughts reverted to the night when for the first time these words were uttered by the angelic choir to the shepherds on the neighboring hills as they tended their flocks, and it seemed to her that the original conditions were similar to those under which they were now pronounced. Christ was again to be born in the hands of her son; the Sisters of the Visitation, who had consecrated their lives to the purpose of caring for the little ones in the fold of the Lord, were there on the hill-top, listening to the glad tidings; and she herself, not unlike the Blessed Mother, was at the side of her son, her maternal heart overflowing with tender devotion and unspeakable delight. And to complete the picture, Father Maguire, her son's spiritual foster-father, was present, marveling at the wonderful things that had been accomplished. Indeed, so overwhelmed was Mrs. Murphy by the consciousness of the sublime and the supernatural that she scarcely noticed the progress of the services. At the Sanctus, recalled to the world of the material and sensible by the ringing of the bell, she endeavored to kneel, but discovered that she was unable to do so. Not long after, the second bell rang, announcing the approach of the Consecration. Oh, what a solemn silence! Oh, the greatness of the mystery to be accomplished! Slowly and reverently he spoke the sacramental words: "Hoc est enim corpus meum." The Transubstantiation had been accomplished. Her son—no, not her son—but Christ in her son—had spoken the words which renewed the birth of the Babe of Bethlehem! Was ever a mother's heart more joyous? The body in which it was encased seemed altogether too circumscribed to confine its transports, and like the saints she could only exclaim, "Enough, my God, enough!"

Those who were near her were alarmed by the change which seemed to have taken place in her during those few solemn minutes. Her cheeks had lost their natural color; her hands were clasped tightly and her eyes were riveted on a spot slightly above the head of the celebrant. The communion-bell rang, but she retained the same posture. A Sister came and tried to arouse her,

but to no effect. What had happened? Was she not to receive Communion from her son's anointed hands?

After consuming the Sacred Species, Father John turned to give absolution to those who were about to receive. It was then that he noticed that his mother had not been moved to the altar-rail. He continued, however, thinking that she had fainted or was otherwise too unwell to receive. True, he was disappointed at not having been able to give Communion at his first Mass to her whom he loved best in the world; but he felt confident that the same God who had been so good to him on previous occasions would make some provision in the present instance. Accordingly, without further anxiety he returned to the altar and concluded the Mass. In the meantime, Mrs. Murphy had remained in the same passive state. At times, however, her lips moved, but the words were intelligible. After unvesting, Father John postponed his thanksgiving and with Father Maguire hastened to his mother's side. As it was evident that medical assistance was required, while Father Maguire summoned the family physician, he and the Sisters removed her to the guest chamber. The doctor responded quickly and soon restored her to full consciousness. The unhealthy pallor gradually gave way to a more natural hue; her eyes recovered their usual brightness, and at length she began to engage in conversation. It would be difficult to describe the look of amazement which swept over her countenance when one of the Sisters remarked:

"I was very sorry, Mrs. Murphy, you were unable to receive Holy Communion."

"Didn't receive Holy Communion!" Mrs. Murphy exclaimed. "Why—the Child Jesus—"

She then seemed to recollect herself and remained silent. And no one, not even Father John, could prevail upon her to explain what she meant. And yet Father John was satisfied; for he was certain that God had in some mysterious way provided.

Father Maguire, who firmly believed that the age of miracles had not passed, after much reflection and prayer, was convinced that she had been favored with an apparition of the Child Jesus. The less credulous shook their heads and thought she had been dreaming. But the question was never settled; for only God and Mrs. Murphy knew—and neither of them ever told. It was her secret with the King, and she kept it inviolate the rest of her days.

—Fr. Cornelius McCarthy, O. P.