

In the Morning

By R. H. Benson

The oratory is a little room, whitewashed, crossed by oaken beams on the walls. The window is opposite the door; and the altar stands to the left. There is a bench or two on the right.

When I entered on this morning the tapers were lighted, the vestments laid out upon the altar, and all prepared. I went across and knelt by the window. Presently I heard the priest's door open, and in a moment more he came in, followed by Parker, who closed the door behind him and came and knelt at the bench. I looked eagerly at the old man's face; it was white and tired-looking, and the eyebrows seemed to droop more than ever, but it was a quiet face. It was only for an instant that I saw it, for he turned to the altar and began to vest: and then when he was ready he began.

It was strange to hear that voice, which had rung with such intensity of pain so few hours before, now subdued and controlled; and to watch the orderly movements of those hands that had twisted and gesticulated with such terrible appeal. I felt that Parker too was watching with a close and awful interest what we both half feared would be a shocking climax to the scenes of the night before, but which we half hoped too would recall and quiet that troubled spirit.

Dawn was now beginning to shine on the western sky. There was a tall holly tree that rose nearly to the level of the window. As I looked out for a moment my eye was caught by the outline of a bird, faintly seen, sitting among the upper branches.

Now I will only mention one incident that took place. I was in such a strange and disordered state of mind that I scarcely now can remember certainly anything but this. As the Priest's Communion drew near there came a sudden soft blow against the window panes. . . .

When the priest began to unvest, I left the chapel and went downstairs to await him in the breakfast room. But as he did not come, I went outside the house for a few minutes, and presently found myself below the chapel window. It seemed to me that I was in a dream—the very earth I trod on seemed unreal. I was unable to think connectedly. The scene in the chapel seemed to stand out vividly. It seemed to me as if in some sense it were a climax, but of what nature, whether triumphant or full of doom, I could not tell.

As I stood there, perplexed, downcast, in the growing glimmer of the day, my eyes fell upon a small rumpled heap at my feet, and looking closer I saw it was the body of a thrush; it was still limp and warm, and as I lifted it I remembered the sudden blow against the window panes. But as I still stood, utterly distracted, the chapel window was thrown open, and Parker's face looked out as I gazed up. He beckoned to me furiously and withdrew, leaving the window swinging.

I laid the thrush under a bush at the corner of the house as I ran round, and came in quickly and up the stairs. Parker met me on the landing.

"He just reeled and fell, sir," he said, "up the stairs into his room. I've laid him on the bed, and must get down to the stables to send for the doctor. Will you stay with him, sir, till I come back ?

And without waiting for an answer he was gone.

That evening I was still sitting by my friend's side. I had food brought up to my room during the day, but except for those short intervals was with him continually. The doctor had come and gone. All that he could tell us was that the old man had had a seizure of some kind, and he had looked grave when I told him of the events of the night before.

“His age is against him, too,” the doctor had said; “I cannot say what will happen.”

And then he had given directions, and had left, promising to return again, at any rate the next morning.

I had been trying to read with a shaded lamp, looking from time to time at the figure of the old man on the bed, as he lay white and quiet, with his eyes closed, as he had lain all day.

At about six o'clock, I had just glanced at my watch, when a slight movement made me turn to the bed again, and I could see in the dim light that his eyes were open and fixed upon me, but all the pain was gone out of them, and they were a child's eyes again. I rose and went to his side, and sat down in the same chair that I had occupied the night before. Immediately I had sat down he put out his hand, and I took it and held it. His eyes smiled at me, and then he spoke, very slowly, with long pauses.

“Well,” he said, “you have been with me and have seen and heard, last night and this morning; but it is all ended, and the valley is lightening again at its eastern end where the sun rises. So it was not all dreams and fancies—those old stories that you bore with so patiently to please me. Now tell me what you heard and saw. Did you see them all in the room last night? and — and” — his eyes grew wide and insistent — “what did you see this morning?”

Now the doctor had told me that he must not be over-excited, but soothed; and honestly enough, though some who may read this may not agree with me, I thought it was better to speak plainly of those things so strange to you and me, but so dear and familiar to him. And so I told him all I had heard and seen.

“Ah!” he said when I had finished, “then we were not quite as one. But still you saw and heard more than most men. Now will you hear one more story? I will not tell you all I saw last night, because the Lord has been gracious to me, and is rising with healing in His wings on me and on many other poor creatures. But the wounds are aching still, and if you will spare me, I will not speak much of the shadows of last night, but only of the joys that came in the morning. Will you hear it?”

“My dear old friend,” I said, “are you sure it will not be too much for you?”

He shook his head; and then, still holding my hand in his, his fingers tightening and relaxing as he told his tale, with many pauses and efforts, he began:

“Last night the sorrows of death came to me,” he said, “and all the blood and agony and desolation of the whole world seemed to be round me. And I have had so little sorrow in my life that I was ill prepared to meet them. Our Lord has always shown me such grace and given me so much joy. But He warned me again and again this autumn. That was why I spoke to you as I did when you came before Christmas.

“Well, last night, all this came to me. And it seemed as if I were partly responsible. Years ago I was set apart as a priest to stand between the dead and the living. It was meant that I should be the meeting-place, as every priest must be, of creation's need and God's grace—as every Christian must be in his station. That is what intercession and the Holy Sacrifice both signify and effect. The two tides of need and fulfilment must meet in a priest's heart. But all my life I have known much of fulfilment and little of need. Last night the first was almost withdrawn, and the second deepened almost beyond bearing. But I knew, as I told you last night, that with the morning would come peace—that I should be able to carry up the burden laid on me, and make it one with Him on Whom the iniquities of us all are laid. But I need not say more of that now. This morning when I went to the altar a lull had come in the storm. But it was all in my heart still. I felt sure that I should have the clear vision once more; and, as I lifted up the Body of our Lord, it came.

“As I lifted It up It disappeared; as those tell us who look in crystals. And this is what I saw. I do not know bow long I saw it, it seemed as if time stood still, but you told me there was no perceptible pause. Well”—and the old man raised himself slightly in the bed—“between my hands I saw a long slope running as it seemed from me downhill. On the nearer higher end of the slope were men going to and fro, and I knew they needed something—and yet many of them did not seem to know it themselves—but they were all in need. One there was who walked quickly, clenching and unclenching his hands, and I knew he fought with sin. And there was a woman with a dead child across her knees; and there was a blind child crying in a corner.

“Then, further down the slope, were wounded creatures of all kinds, and lonely beasts seeking a place to die, and the very grass of the field seemed to be in sorrow, and there were blind sea-creatures gasping. They were not small, as you might think, but I saw them as if I looked through a hole in a wall.

“And they stretched down, rank on rank, heaving and striving, men and beasts warring and trampling down the flowers. There was a thrush I saw, too, shivering in a tree; and the thought of the story I have told you came to my mind, and there were a thousand things that I forget.

“Now, when I saw all this, my hands trembled, but what I saw did not tremble, so I knew that it was real. And then very far away and faint at the foot of the slope was a level silvery mist, like a sea-fog, with delicate currents and lines, now swift and piercing, now slow; and in the mist moved faces; but I could not distinguish the features. And these were the souls that waited until their sins should be done away.

“And then with something like terror I remembered that I held in my hands the Body of the Lord. And I was puzzled and distracted, but I knelt to adore, and as I lowered the Holy Thing, the clouds closed and the light died out. And it may be that I was cowardly—and I think God will pardon an old man for whom the light was too strong—but when I consecrated the chalice, I dared not look at it. At the Communion, too, I closed my eyes again.” The old man paused a moment and then continued. “I heard no sound such as you describe. As I unvested and went to my room I was still perplexed at what I had seen, and could not understand it, and then on a sudden I understood it, and it was then I suppose that I fell down.”

There was a silence for a moment; then I answered.

“I cannot understand even now.”

The priest smiled at me, and his hand closed again on mine.

“I think there is no need for me to tell you that. It will be plain to you soon. Remember what it was that I saw, and where I saw it, and all will be easy.

“You can leave me now for a little,” he went on. “I am perfectly free from pain, and I wish to think. Would you send Parker to me in about an hour’s time?” And then, as I went towards the door, he added:

“One word more. I had forgotten something. I have yet one more clear vision to see before I die. I have seen, you remember, what you too have seen, how all things need God; but there is yet one more thing to see which will make all plain, and I think you can guess what that is. And I pray that you will be with me when I see it.”

Then I turned and went quietly out.