

## Shadows at Christmas

justice. When they have sat in the midst of failure, with ill-health cutting midway through their careers, or when they have felt the sting of ingratitude, or have faced undeserved disgrace, they have doubted God and the value of all religion.

Had we lived before the days of Christ, sorrow would have been far less intelligible to us. The Jews who came to Christ all curious about a man born blind could only think of suffering as a punishment for sin: "Who has sinned, this man or his parents?" they ask. If he was blind, his blindness must be the result of someone's sin. They could see no other explanation. In the same way, to them, poverty, failure, ill-health were God's punishment for sin.

### For Self and Dearest

But sorrow takes on a new significance as we look upon the Man of Sorrows. We see the incarnate Son of God choose poverty as His lifelong companion. Before our astonished eyes He smiles into the face of suffering, accepts ingratitude as if it were His due, experiences loneliness, and elects to die held aloft on the scaffold of the cross so that all the world may see His blatant failure.

If God left heaven for earth and made of sorrow His favorite associate, perhaps sorrow is not the horrible evil that men have thought it. Perhaps it has some beautiful and deep significance that can be read only by eyes that have looked into the blood-red sun behind Calvary's hill.

Art loves to paint that first Christmas in the warm colors of heavenly light and a mother's love and joy. The light and love and joy were there, but over the whole scene lay deep shadows. When door after door was slammed in her face, she realized that the world He was coming to save was utterly uninterested in His birth and equally uninterested in His mother. Because she was selected to be the mother, not of an ordinary babe, but of the Infant King, she found herself sharing the birthplace of her child with the beasts of the field.

It was not the stable merely that hurt her mother's heart, nor the straw, nor the manger (sad substitutes for the dainty things she had prepared). She felt the sharper pain of realizing that, though she held up her divine Son for an admiring world to worship, that world was too busy with its own loves and sports and business to send more representatives than a handful of shepherds and three wise men out of all of its thousands to find the Light of the World.

Her Child, however, could make even the stable an antechamber of heaven. Smiling from the folds of her veil were His beautiful eyes, that made her forget the cold winds chanting over the manger and the cattle that were His courtiers. Joy was in her soul—a joy, however, that was smothered almost at once in a dread fear.

asked of her the supreme sacrifice of Calvary. The blood-red sky of Good Friday cast the dark shadow of the cross over the body and the broken heart of a mother. When the centurion's lance plunged into His heart, the sword of prophecy pierced hers as well.

Then, hardly had the glory of Easter filled her world, when He was gone again in the Ascension, that left her, through busy but lonely years, the comforter and inspiration of the Apostles and the first Christians.

Such in briefest outline is the story of the woman God loved best. The wise old man Simeon, who took the Child from her arms at the Presentation, looked upon her with pity. "And thine own soul a sword shall pierce," he said quietly. But even he could not guess how the Man of Sorrows would share with her the companionship of suffering until she became as truly Mother of Sorrows as she was Mother of God.

### His Best Friend

Surely, then, sorrow is not always a punishment for sin; Mary was sinless. It is not always a sign of God's displeasure or anger; Mary was supremely pleasing in His eyes.

Can it be, then, that sorrow is often God's way of complimenting His best friends? Can it be that sorrow is sometimes a sign, not of His anger, but of His special love?

John the Baptist stood close to Christ

follow Him by giving up father, mother, home, all that they have in the world; yet they were the ones He selected from all the world for His closest followers. He has apportioned to His lovers the poverty of Francis of Assisi, the misunderstanding that surrounded John of the Cross, the continued illness of Catherine of Siena, the loneliness of Anthony the Hermit, the fiery death of Joan of Arc, the heroic suffering of The Little Flower.

Suffering, then, is something that Christ gives His friends most freely. When Calvary was over, His enemies went back to temple and palace and home and shop rubbing their hands in satisfaction over His death. When His friends walked back through the dark and the storm, the cross had been planted firmly in their own hearts.

### The Highest Compliment

Suffering, we could well argue, is often the highest compliment Christ pays to His friends. Deliberately He chose it for Himself. Deliberately He gave it to His mother. Deliberately He offered it to every saint. It seems rather clear that the sorrow which comes to good men and women is Christ's way of complimenting them with a share of His cross.

Just the change of a word may often make a world of difference. If we forget the word "sorrow" and for a moment substitute the lovely Catholic word "cross," everything takes on new significance.