

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE HIDDEN LIFE

Next time the doctors of the Temple met they wondered if that marvellous Child would come again and teach them. They went over together all He had said, and when they got puzzled afresh they wished they had asked Him who He was and where He lived. He was very young to be a prophet, but surely none of the prophets had spoken as He had done; those who called themselves masters in Israel were no more than children beside Him. He knew the hidden meanings of the Scripture, and, as some of them had found out, He could read their most secret thoughts. They made inquiries and talked about Him for a time, and then, as they could learn nothing, the memory of Him faded from their memory, and most of them forgot Him.

And what is He doing who made such a stir among these learned men? Standing by Joseph's side in the workshop to see how yokes and ploughs are made; how the hammer and the saw and the chisel are used; guiding the tools with weak, unsteady hand; learning to be a carpenter. Later on He works under Joseph's direction, and during the hot hours of the morning and afternoon the two may be seen day after day at their heavy toil. Then our Lord sweeps up the shavings, tidies the shop, and takes the finished work to the little homes around. He waits to see if it gives satisfaction, and holds out His hand for the pay.

Then comes the meeting at the evening meal that makes up for the hard work of the day. The joys and sorrows of these blessed Three are the same, and their hearts are so united that nothing ever happens to disturb their peace. Troubles there are every now and then, and hardships always, for they are poor people. But Jesus makes up to Mary and Joseph for all beside.

No mother ever had such joy as Mary, because none ever had a son so perfect and so loving. But she had sorrows too that were hers alone. Some of us find it hard to keep a secret. God's greatest secret was trusted to Mary, and at times she found it hard to keep. Let us see why.

We know how reverently the Church treats the Blessed Sacrament. Her priests alone may touch it. Their hands must be clean; the corporal on which It rests spotless. A veil must hang before the tabernacle door where It is reserved, a lamp must burn day and night before it. Flowers are to be set around the little throne where It is exposed for Benediction, sweet incense must rise up before It, and hymns be sung in Its praise. And when It is waved above their heads, the faithful bow down in adoration. All we can do must be done to honour the Hidden God who makes Himself so little for love of us.

Now Mary knew as no one else has ever known who He was that went out to work each morning and came home tired at night, who took orders from the villagers, and helped to earn the daily bread. We get used to the miracle of the Blessed Sacrament, as our genuflections before the tabernacle show. But the Real Presence at Nazareth was always as wonderful to Mary as it had been at the first. Her love and her worship, so far from growing

less, grew more intense as time went on. And when she spoke to her Son with the authority of a mother, she never forgot that she was His creature and little handmaid. She knew that whilst He slept on His hard mat at night, or worked in the shop by day, legions of Angels were prostrate in adoration before Him.

It was the keenest pain to her to see Him treated with any want of reverence. When neighbours came into her little home in Egypt, and, meaning to be kind, took up her Babe and dandled and played with Him as if He had been an ordinary child, still more when the townsfolk of Nazareth spoke to Him roughly, found fault with His work, ordered Him here and there, it was hard to look on and say nothing. But she had God's secret to keep, and until the hour had come for her Son to show Himself to the world she must be content to adore in silence and try to make up to Him by her loving reverence for the neglect of those who knew Him not.

Time went on, went quickly in the Holy House, for they were all so happy. Our Lord was quite grown up now, and did all the hard work at the shop. For Joseph's strength was failing. Still he liked to go to the little timber yard, for Jesus was there, and He could sit and watch Him even if he could not help. And there he did sit hour after hour, his eyes fixed on his Foster-Son, watching and wondering why he should have been chosen to be His guardian, why people were allowed to call that Holy One "the Son of Joseph."

At last he could no longer get to his place in the yard. Then, a little later, the end came. There was no illness; the old man simply seemed to fade away. Our Lord prepared him for death, making with him the acts of Faith, Hope, and Charity which get us ready to die. Joseph had always willed just what God willed. It was this habit that made his face so peaceful that his neighbours used to wonder if he had any troubles. Yet sometimes the Will of God was hard. It was hard now.

When other saints die they are glad because they are going to God whom they love, going to be with Jesus and Mary for ever. But Joseph had lived with Jesus and Mary almost all his life. He had toiled for them, provided their daily bread, gone and come with them wherever they went. To look upon the face of Jesus, to be trusted and loved by Mary—this had made the happiness of his life. And now he must leave them and go down to Limbo, the dark, dreary place of waiting. Our Lord knew it was hard. But He comforted him by telling him that the separation would not be for long, and gave him sweet messages to take to the waiting souls. Only three years more and the world would be redeemed, and as soon as the price was paid on Calvary He would come to them and turn Limbo into Paradise.

The end of Joseph's wonderful life was come. His head lay on the breast of Jesus, his hand was clasped in the hands of Mary—and so he died. How they had loved him and how they missed him now! By the parting at that holy deathbed, and by the vacant place in the little home, Jesus and Mary learned to weep with those that weep, and to feel for hearts torn and bleeding by the breaking of the ties that God Himself has made.

It is because of the happiness of St. Joseph's death, with Jesus and Mary by to help and comfort, that we beg this blessed Saint to be with us with Jesus and Mary when we come to

die, and get us the faith, hope, and charity, the contrition, and resignation to God's Will which we shall need in that most dreadful hour:

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, assist me in my last agony. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, may I breathe forth my soul with you in peace.

Our Lord now became the carpenter at Nazareth. Morning and afternoon the sound of the hammer was heard in His shop. Passers by looked in now and then looked carelessly, their attention attracted by the noise. No one stopped to watch reverently, no one so much as dreamed that this—was God! He was expected to make and mend all the simple village furniture, to be grateful for orders, and to do His work cheaply and well. He must be at every one's beck and call, work after hours, leave what He was about, to do something wanted at once; this table must be altered, that plough was too dear. He listens patiently; He undoes His work and does it again. He tries to please His humble customers; He treats them with respect and obeys them cheerfully. And this day after day, all through the Hidden Life!

There need not have been all those years of heavy toil. Our Lord might have had a comfortable and a beautiful home. He might have taught in the synagogue, or written books, or trained disciples. Or, if He chose to work with His hands, His tasks might have been easier and more interesting. Had He thought of Himself things would have been different. But we are told that "He pleased not Himself." He knew that most of His followers would spend their lives in hard, distasteful labour—nothing to look forward to when they get up in the morning, always the same dreary round of little duties. The thought of Nazareth and of the Son of God earning His bread by the sweat of His brow would comfort and cheer these heavy-burdened ones.

This is why He spent almost His whole life in a cottage and a workshop. And there was another reason. What a prince touches, or does, or likes, receives a value which it had not before. When the Son of God came into the world, He found labour despised and shunned. So He consecrated it by the touch of His divine hands, and now it has become honourable and dear to those who love Him. We should esteem it as all the saints have done. How much better is a life of labour than one of ease and luxury! Let us thank God if we have to work hard with our heads or our hands. This will save us from the dangers that idleness brings; and if like our Lord we do our work for the love of God, it will be very pleasing in His sight and deserve a great reward.

When evening came our Lord and His Blessed Mother took their simple meal and said their night prayers together. He would speak to her of the time fast approaching when He must leave her to go out into the world and save the souls of men. She would see Him now and then during the time of His preaching, but His Father's business would fill His days, and prayer His nights. She must be content to follow Him with the holy women who would minister to Him, and mix in the crowd and see and hear Him from afar.

In His tender, loving talks during those last days at Nazareth, He would tell her many

things about that Kingdom of His, the Church, which He was going to found, many secrets which because of her holiness she was fit to hear. When our Lord came to mix with men, we find Him sighing again and again at their want of faith, at the dullness of their understanding, at the slowness of their hearts. What a joy it must have been to Him to have such a one as Mary to teach, and how freely He must have spoken to her during those years of the Hidden Life when she was His one companion.

At last the day of parting came, and as they stood together at the door she bade Him farewell. He was leaving the little home in which God had had such perfect service, and going out into a world in which God was little known and loved. He left behind the one heart that understood His own, the Mother to whom He had trusted His joys, His sorrows, His plans for the souls of men. As time went on He would find many followers and a few devoted friends, but none like those who had made Nazareth a little Heaven upon earth. Mary's heart was breaking when she saw Him go. No one has ever known Jesus as she knew Him, and therefore no one can have any idea of the love with which she cherished and clung to Him. She alone among mothers was allowed, nay, was bound to worship her Son. For thirty years He had been the Life of her life. To part with Him was worse than death. Yet she would not have kept Him a day from the work to which He was going. She was the first and most faithful of His disciples, and she had learned from Him the worth of souls. She knew how dearly He loved them, how He was longing to give His blood to save them from sin and hell, and she was willing and eager to see them saved even at this tremendous price. He was going to torments and to death; the sword of sorrow must pierce her soul; but she bowed her head and said: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done according to His Will."