

CHAPTER FIVE – HOLY MARY

Have you ever watched the clouds on a wild day hiding the sun? They move along, a dark, heavy mass, as if determined to keep his light from the waiting world. At times, through the rifts, you catch a glimpse of him; or there is a golden border which shows he is somewhere near. You think he must be coming soon. But no, it is all too dark for him yet. Suddenly, in the midst of the gloom appears a little white cloud. It grows bright, brighter and brighter as he fills it with his glory. Yes, surely he is there; only his splendor could make it shine like that. A few moments at most and he must show himself; a few moments and he will scatter the darkness and flood the earth with light.

Hidden among the mountains of Galilee, amid a profusion of wild flowers, lies the village of Nazareth, the houses, small, low, with flat roofs, looking like little white boxes set on the slope of the hill. That one, half cottage, half rock, the lowest in the steep street, is the home of Joseph, the carpenter of the place. All things are in quiet silence. Night is in the midst of her course. No light anywhere, except the stars overhead, and they shine out brightly in the clear, frosty air, for it is the month of March. Yes! a lamp is burning in that last house. Who can be the watcher there when all the village is asleep? Let us go in noiselessly and see.

Alone in her little room kneels a girl of fourteen. What a wonderful face! so grave and yet so sweet, so childlike and innocent, and still so full of dignity. She must be very near to God. A great reverence comes over us as we gaze upon her, and we fall on our knees. This can be no ordinary child. Let us go back fourteen years and learn what we can about her.

Her name is Miriam, or Mary, which means "Lady," and also "Star of the Sea." Her holy parents, Joachim and Anne, had prayed long and earnestly for a child to gladden their old age before this blessed child was given them. Who shall ever tell what she was to them! They were never tired of watching her at prayer or play, and when she thought herself alone; and they soon found out that she knew more about God and holy things than they could tell her. It seemed to them that God Himself was her Teacher, and they revered her as one very precious in His sight. What would have been their awe and their joy had they known that she was to be the Mother of His only Son! Yes, she was to be the woman promised long ago in Paradise who was to crush the serpent's head, the Mother of Him who was to redeem the world, the Mother of God. And God was getting her ready for this. Think what a preparation it must have been.

Solomon's Temple was many years building because everything in it had to be of such costly material marbles, and sweet-scented, incorruptible cedar, and precious stones, all "artfully wrought and carved. The floor of the house was overlaid with gold within and without, and there was nothing in the Temple that was not gold or covered with gold—the altar of gold, and the table of gold, and the golden candlesticks of pure gold, and flowers like lilies, and the lamps over them of gold, and golden snuffers, and censers of most pure

gold, and the hinges for the doors of the inner house of the Holy of Holies* gold, pure gold, most pure gold." (III Kings V: viii) Why? Because everything about this house of God must be as far as possible worthy of Him. Yet the Temple of Jerusalem, with its Holy of Holies, its Ark of the Covenant, and its Tables of the Law, what was it compared with that Blessed One whom He had chosen to be His Mother? What must He do to make her worthy, as far as she could be worthy, to have God for her Son?

First of all there must be no sin. When we are going to embroider richly on white satin, we take care to see that it is spotless. It would be wasting our silk and our gold thread to lay them on what is soiled, or ever has been soiled. God prizes spotlessness more than we do. He was going to enrich His Mother with His best gifts, and the first must be a perfect purity. No stain of sin must so much as come near her. She must be more dazzling in her whiteness than the Angels who come nearest His throne.

But what about original sin? was not Mary a child of Adam? Yes; and she would have been stained with Adam's sin had not God kept her free because of her nearness to Himself. She was not cleansed from original sin as babies are when they have been baptized, for no sin of any kind ever touched her.

Some people cannot understand why Mary should have had this perfect freedom from sin which we call the Immaculate Conception. It would be clear as day to them if they would think who Mary is. A Protestant lady, who had this difficulty, was asked:

"Do you believe that Jesus Christ the Son of Mary is truly God?"

"I do," she answered reverently.

"And is there anything God could do for His Mother that He would not for His own sake be bound to do?"

She was silent for a moment, and then said: "I do not think there is."

It was the Precious Blood that even before our Lord came saved Mary so grandly, and preserved her from the sin that has spoilt everyone else: "My spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour," she says. "For He that is mighty hath done great things to me."

Imagine a burning mountain throwing up flames and volumes of smoke; the burning lava pouring down the sides, destroying fields, vineyards, cottages, cattle. Down it rushes, leaving everything a black ruin behind it. Down, down, till it is suddenly checked before a fair garden that lies in its way; checked and turned aside, so that no harm is done, and the trees and flowers and fruit look all the more lovely for the desolation around.

So was the torrent of original sin stayed when it came to Mary.

When the little Mary was three years old, she was carried by her parents to the Temple to be solemnly offered to God. She understood quite well what she was going to do. She knew that God had done great things for her, and she wanted to give herself entirely to Him, that He might do just as He liked with her always, whether it was what she liked or not. With her hands joined, her face bright with holy joy, she went up alone the fifteen steps, her parents looking on with admiration and gladness. And with sorrow, too. 'For they were going to leave her in the Temple to be brought up with other Jewish girls, and they thought how sad and lonely they would be without her. As she grew older Mary spent her time in prayer, in working for the Temple, and in studying the holy Scriptures. The parts she liked best were the prophecies which told of the promised Redeemer. She knew His time was come. Perhaps He was even now upon earth. Perhaps His Mother might be in want of a little servant. Oh, how happy she would be to wait upon them both!

When she was about fourteen years old, she left her home in the Temple to be espoused to Joseph, a carpenter, and to take care of a little home of her own at Nazareth. Her life was different now. No more glorious services morning and evening, but a life of work, and of very humble work. But she was content, more than content; she was quite happy, and she made Joseph happy by her brightness, her tenderness, her sweet, unselfish ways. As he came to know her more and more, he was filled with the deepest reverence for her, child though she was. And he was worthy of her, for he came next to her in holiness and nearness to God. He was trusted with the greatest treasure God had on earth, and he was about to be trusted with One more precious still.