

## CHAPTER II.

## THE FIRST DOLOR.

## THE PROPHECY OF ST. SIMEON.

NOWHERE in the Old Testament do we seem to come so near to God as in the book of Job. Nowhere is He more awfully enshrouded in mystery, or more terrible in His counsels regarding the children of men; and yet nowhere is He more plainly or more tenderly our Father. It is because the mystery of suffering is depicted therein. Because it is all so human, it seems to lead us so far into the divine. Because it is the uttermost trial of the creature, he lies the more completely in the Creator's arms. The calamities of Job are to the Old Testament what the Passion of our Lord is to the New, and the one was an intentional foreshadowing of the other. When we come to speak of our Lady's dolours, we remember the touching picture of Job's friends, when they heard of his afflictions and came to visit him. "When they had lifted up their eyes afar off, they knew him not, and crying out they wept, and rending their garments, they sprinkled dust upon their heads toward heaven. And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no man spoke to him a word; for they saw that his grief was very great." They knew that silence was the best consolation. There was

nothing which could so touch the heart of the mourner, as the fact that his friends appreciated the excess of his bereavement. When at last they spoke, then they irritated. The charm of their sweet silent presence was gone. Sympathy degenerated into an argument. An unconvincing argument could end only in reproach. They, more than Job himself, "wrapped up sentences in unskilful words." But still more wonderful than this silence of the friends of Job was the silence of Jesus on the Cross, deeply suffering a distinct inward martyrdom because of the sorrows of His Mother. He spoke no word to her, but that one whereby He made her over to St. John. No maxim full of celestial wisdom, no tone of filial endearment, no acknowledgment that He saw and felt her sufferings, no blessing full of grace and fortitude, fell on her ear as He hung upon the Cross. In truth, she needed none of them. She saw His Heart. She understood her Son. She was by this time marvelously accustomed to the ways of God. Silence was His devotion to her sorrows, just as silence was the magnificence of her suffering. Silence was in truth a wonderful thing with Jesus and Mary. Indeed, it was almost the colloquy they had held together for Three-and-Thirty Years. But His silence was the silence of a full heart; and it is somewhat of that fullness which we must ask of Him when we meditate on His Mother's sorrows. We cannot think rightly of them, unless He vouchsafes to help us to the truth. All we ask is one spark of what burned in Him during those silent hours: one spark would be enough to set our hearts on fire, and consume us with keenest love

for the remainder of our mortal years. He must be our model in sympathy with Mary, as He is in all things else. Like all the rest of sanctity, it is He Himself who taught devotion to our Lady, both by precept and example.

Forty days had gone since the angels sang at midnight. Mary and Joseph had been deep down all the while in divine mysteries. The shepherds had worshipped the new-born Babe. The three kings had laid their mystic offerings at His feet, and the new star had melted away in the purple of the nocturnal skies. The world had gone upon its road as usual. Every morning there was political news in Rome, every morning philosophical discussions in the schools of Athens. The caravans went in and out of the gates of the white Damascus, and the sun shone on the bend of the Orontes at Antioch. The imperial officials made up their books and lists at Bethlehem, and Joseph and Mary were items in the account of the provincial taxation. In the common course of things, and according to the law, on the first of January Jesus for the first time had shed His blood. How much had passed since the twenty-fifth of December! Since that day the Creator had been visible in His own creation, though it was almost under ground, in a kind of grotto, or natural stable for kine. Now the second of February was come. Joseph and Mary, with the Child, leave the spot where those Forty Days have fled as swiftly as a heavenly vision. They wind round the skirt of the narrow hill whereon the city is built. The pruned vineyards on the steeps have scarcely yet begun to weep their vernal tears where the knife has

wounded them. But the cornfields where Ruth gleaned are green, and the clear sunshine of early spring is on the gray rocks by Rachel's tomb. The roofs of the Holy City are in sight, with the glorious temple shining above all. To that temple, His own temple, the visible Infant God was now going.

Mary had spent twelve years of her sinless life in the courts of the temple. It was there that she had outwardly dedicated her virginity to God, which she had vowed in the first moment of her Immaculate Conception. It was there she meditated over the ancient scriptures, and learned the secrets of the Messias. She was coming back to it again, still virgin, yet, mystery of grace! a mother with a child. She came to be purified, who was purer than the untrodden snow on Lebanon. She came to present her Child to God, and do for the Creator what no creature but herself could do, give Him a gift fully equal to Himself. When the second temple was built, the ancients of the people lifted up their voices and wept, because its glory was not equal to the glory of the first; but the first temple had never seen such a day as that which was now dawning on the temple of Herod. The glory of the Holy of Holies was but a symbol of the real glory, which Mary was now bearing thitherward in her arms. But she had two offerings with her. She bore one, and Joseph the other. She bore her Child, and he the pair of turtle-doves, or two young pigeons, for her purification. Many saw them pass. But there was nothing singular in them, nothing especially attractive to the eyes of the beholders. So it always is where God is. Now that He is visible,

He is in truth, except to faith and love, just as invisible as He ever was.

Others, too, were drawing toward the temple for the morning sacrifices. There was the aged Simeon. The blossoms of the grave were clustered thickly on his head. He had outlived his own day, with its men and things, its sympathies and associations. He was not mixed up with the spirit of the times. He was above its politics. He kept apart from the conflicts of its disputatious Pharisees and Sadducees. The world seemed to him to be growing more and more intolerably wicked, and less and less a place for him, less and less a home at all possible for weary souls. But there was one thing he had longed to see. He was willing heaven should be put off, if only he might see that sight on earth. The Christ! God had promised him that so it should be. "He had received an answer from the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death before he had seen the Christ of the Lord." He was coming that day to the morning sacrifice, whether with clear views, or any spiritual presentiments, or an unwonted fire in his heart, who can tell? There was another, also, that morning in the temple, a widow of fourscore years and four, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser, from the olive-spotted plain of Acre and the mild inlets of the western sea. The spirit of prophecy dwelt within her. She needed not to come to the temple; for she never departed from it, "by prayers and fasting serving night and day." And now Mary and Joseph have entered with the Child. What preparations has not God vouchsafed to make for that solemnity in the temple on the second

of February! How many graces have gone to sanctify the aged Simeon! What long years of austerity and what great heights of prayer are known to the soul of Anna! There has been more work in the soul of Joseph than went to the creation of the world. Mary is the very chosen trophy of the divine magnificence. Volumes of commentary have been written on her gifts, her graces, and her interior beauty, and yet how little do we know! Then there is the Incarnate Word, whom the silent angels of the temple are worshipping in tremulous awe, as He crosses the threshold of His earthly house. Was there any lighting up in the Infant's eye as He took possession of His temple? Did the lights go out in the Holy of Holies, now that the Holiest of all was outside the veil, throned in a mortal Mother's arms?

Mary made her offerings, and "performed all things according to the law of the Lord." For the spirit of Jesus was a spirit of obedience; and, although the brightness of angelic innocence was dull beside the whiteness of her purity, she obeyed the law of God in the ceremony of her purification, the more readily as it was in fact a concealment of her graces. But she bore also in her arms her true turtle-dove, to do for Him likewise "according to the custom of the law." She placed Him in the arms of the aged priest Simeon, as she has done since in vision to so many of the saints; and the full light broke on Simeon's soul. Weak with age, he threw his arms around His God. He bore the whole weight of his Creator, and yet stood upright. The sight of that infant Face was nothing less than the glory of heaven. The Holy Ghost had kept His

promise. Simeon had seen—nay, was at that moment handling—"the Lord's Christ." O blessed priest! worn down with age, wearied with thy long years of waiting for the "consolation of Israel," kept alive in days which were out of harmony with thy spirit, even as St. John the Evangelist was after thee, surely He who made thee, He who is so soon to judge thee, He whom thou art folding so fondly in thine arms, must have sent the strength of His omnipotence into thy heart, else thou wouldst never have been able to bear the flood of strong gladness which at that moment broke in upon thy spirit! Look at Him again. See those red lips so soon to speak thy sentence of eternal life. Light thy heart at the fire of those little eyes. It is the Christ! Oh, how much prophecy is fulfilled! The history of the world is finding its accomplishment. The crown is being put upon creation. The long secular yearnings of patriarchs, and kings, and prophets,—they were all after the beauty of that Infant Face. Thou hast seen the Christ. Every thing is in that word. The sight was heaven. Earth has nothing more to do with thee. It had best roll itself away from under thy feet as quickly as possible, and let thee drop into the infinite Bosom of thy Father, the beauty of whose Son may kill thee by the gentlest and most beautiful of deaths.

It is hard for him to part with that sweet burden from his arms. In that extreme old age the vents of song have been opened in his soul, and in the silence of the temple he sings his *Nunc dimittis*, even as Zachary sang his *Benedictus*, and Mary her *Magnificat*. Age after age shall take up the strain. All the

poetry of Christian weariness is in it. It gives a voice to the heavenly detachment and unworldliness of countless saints. It is the heart's evening light, after the working hours of the day, to millions and millions of believers. The very last compline that the Church shall sing, before the midnight when the doom begins and the Lord breaks out upon the darkness from the refulgent east, shall overflow with the melodious sweetness of Simeon's pathetic song. Joseph was wrapt even then in an ecstasy of holy admiration. Even Mary "wondered" at the words, so deep, so beautiful, so true; for she knew, as no others knew, how marvellously her Babe was of a truth the light of all the world. And when, in her humility, she knelt for the blessing of the aged priest, had he Jesus in his arms still when he blessed her, and did he wave the Child above her in the sign of the cross, like a Christian Benediction, or had she Jesus in her arms, holding Him at His own creature's feet to get a blessing? Either way, how wonderful the mystery! But what a strange blessing for thee, happy sinless Mother! There is other poetry in Simeon than those strains of light which flashed from him but a while ago. There is other music now for Mary's ear, the terrible music of dark prophecy which the Holy Ghost utters from His sanctuary in the old priest's heart; and we would fain think that Simeon held Jesus in his arms when he uttered it, by the very way in which he begins. "Behold, this Child is set for the fall, and for the resurrection of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be contradicted. And thy own soul a sword shall pierce, that out of many hearts thoughts may be revealed."

Simeon was silent. But over Mary's soul there came an inexplicable change. Perhaps she learned now what she had not known before. But more probably it only came to her then in another way. Yet it was a change, an operation of grace, a new sanctification, an immense work of God. A clear and detailed vision of all her sorrows, especially of the whole Passion, was with its minutest circumstances instantaneously impressed upon her soul; and her immaculate heart was deluged with a sea of sorrow, which was supernatural both in its kind and its intensity. It seemed as if the vision came from the very face of Jesus, as if His eyes looked it into her and engraved it there. She saw His own Heart all unveiled, with all its inward dispositions. It was as if the Incarnation had come upon her again, and in a different way. She was raised to fresh heights of holiness. She entered upon another vast region of her appanage as the Mother of God. She was the same Mary, and yet a different one, who but a while ago had entered the temple. But there was no surprise with this portentous change. No starting, no weak tremor, no fluttering of the spirit. Her unshaken peace grew more peaceful, because of the world of bitterness that had gone down into it. The Light of the World had flashed up on high in Simeon's arms, in Simeon's song, and there followed darkness, deeper, thicker, more palpable, than that of Egypt. Suddenly out of the sunshine of Bethlehem, she found herself in the heart of the eclipse on Calvary; and she was calm as before, with unastonished dignity, with the tranquility of unutterable love, with the strength of divinest union,

and with the sword right through her broken heart, which should remain there for eight-and-forty years, and then, when Jesus should draw it out of the wound, she would bleed to death with love.

She heard Anna come into the temple, and acknowledge Jesus as her God. She heard the words the aged prophetess spoke about Him to those there who "looked for the redemption of Israel." She was careful that the least things which the law ordained should be obediently fulfilled; and then, with Joseph and the Child, she wended her way back to the green hollow of Galilee, to the steep sloping streets of the sequestered Nazareth, with the sword, that sharp sword of the Holy Ghost, within her heart. Since she left her home in December, how much has passed! But the sunset looks on Nazareth, gilding its white cottages, as though all things had gone on the same from the beginning. Oh, how cruel unchanging nature looks to a heart that has been changed in its own despite!

Such is the mystery of our Lady's first dolor. Let us now pass to the consideration of its peculiarities. The time at which it came, the action in which it found her engaged, are remarkable. She had just given to God a gift equal to Himself. There never had been such an offering made to Him since creation began. There never can be such another, only repetitions of the same. She had thus surpassed all angelic worship; and she well knew that in giving Jesus back to God she was giving Him away from herself. Her reward was immediate: it was an unutterable lifelong sorrow. Such is the way of God. This first dolor

discloses to us one of the most universal supernatural principles, which characterize His dealings with His saints. Earthly sorrows are the roots of heavenly joys. A cross is a crown begun. Suffering is dearer to the Saints than happiness; for the similitude of Christ has passed upon them. They have His tastes, His inclinations. They thirst for suffering, because there is something in it which is favorable to union with God. It puts out the deceitful lights of the world; and darkness is the light by which we can most spiritually discern God. Moreover, the immensity of the sorrow, and the instantaneous manner in which it followed upon her oblation, illustrate the surpassing holiness of our Blessed Mother. God proportioned her cross to her powers of bearing it. Nor was there any reason for delay. She needed no preparation, no gradual process of inferior graces, no ascending scale of lesser crosses. A whole world of sorrow might fall at once upon her. She was ready for it, more immovable than the hills which stood around Jerusalem. Oh, who would ever have dreamed that human fortitude could have been so like divine omnipotence?

Henceforth every action became a suffering, every source of joy a fountain of bitterness. There was no hiding-place in her soul, whither the bitterness did not penetrate. Every look at Jesus, every movement that He made, every word He uttered,—all stirred, quickened, diffused, the bitterness that was in her. The very lapse of time itself was bitterness, for she saw Gethsemane and Calvary coming down the stream toward her. Postures and attitudes, in which she saw

her beloved Son, no matter how natural they were, or, as we should speak, accidental, had some startling likeness in them to something which was to happen in the Passion. He was a constant study to her for the Passion, a model which she had always before her. When a carpenter's tool pressed against the palm of His hand, she saw the wound of the nail there. The white brow of boyhood often seemed as if it had a coronal of rosy spots around where the thorns should be. The prickly pears, that made garden-hedges for the villagers of Nazareth, always reminded her of the crown of thorns. The Passion had become an inevitable vision to her. It was always before her eyes. She could not look away. She could not see either to the right or the left of that apparition, which like a blood-red sunset occupied the whole field of sight. Never was there such a strange alchemy of life. Every thing about it was commuted into bitterness. The brightest joys made the most rigorous bitters; and the process went on the most successfully, when the sun was shining brightest, and the mother's heart expanded to its genial light and heat. We could not bear so much as five minutes of the suffering she then endured: and hers was lifelong. She belonged to sorrow. It had drawn her life under its dark waters. Her life was hidden in the Heart of Jesus, amid gloomy forms, appalling shadows, dread insights into horrible gulfs of sin, thunders and lightnings of divine wrath, frenzies of lawless demons, excesses of human cruelty, and a very living show of instruments of the Passion.

But common life was still to go on; common duties

had still to be performed. No truce was given her, no dispensation. It is not often that extreme poverty can grant a dispensation even to the extremest grief. And in her life the hardships of poverty were carried to the uttermost. Whenever she had aught to spare, it went straightway to the poor. Joseph and herself had to earn their livelihood, and Jesus must share the task when He is old enough. Now let us think of this. When grief has come and fastened its burden upon our backs, when the white-faced dead is lying in a silent room upstairs, we have tried to move about the house as usual, and to give our orders, and to take an interest, or to seem to do so, in a variety of things, and to appear calm. And did it succeed? Was it not just the most heart-breaking thing of all? Oh, yes! we should have rested. The planet should have stopped whirling eastward for a while, and all the world's duties stood still in a dead calm, till we had lain down and wept, and then got up again to go about our work. Yet we never had more than the touch of God's little finger upon us, while both His Hands, heavier than a thousand worlds, held Mary down in the dust. Nevertheless, no duty saw her absent. No common thing missed at her hands the same degree of zeal and attentiveness which the greatest could require. She seemed busy everywhere, engrossed in every thing, with a mind all free and at her own disposal. She went and drew water from the well. She cleaned the house, and prepared the food, and spun the flax. Every thing was at its right time and in its proper place. But the sword was there, in the very quick of her heart. It stirred at each step,

till it made every nerve shrink, and her whole being thrill with agony. And this did not last a week, until her dead was buried, and the green grass of the grave-mound waved above it, and time went by shaking healing off its wings on the soul which sorrow had parched and dried. Oh, no! Her dead was never buried. There He was, living before her, and it was His very life that to her was continual death. What a life,—to work, to be active, to be collected, to be unselfish, under such an overwhelming burden! Her grief was all interior. She was obliged to deny it the satisfaction of an outlet. She would have seemed beside herself, and would have been treated accordingly, had she allowed it to appear. Her very thoughts were poisoned with wormwood: but she must not speak. Who would have understood her, if she had spoken? She must not weep, or only in secret and at dead of night; for why should she weep without visible cause for it? She had food, she had raiment, she had Joseph for a husband, Jesus for a son. Summer came, and filled the hollow valley with greenness and with plenty. Away from the great roads, peace and tranquility were round Nazareth. Why should she mourn? Never has the earth seen a grief like this, never a grief like it in magnitude, never a grief of like kind with this.

Time brought no relief. The vision was always there with a terrible fidelity. And it was the same vision, too. There was not even the cheerless comfort of a vicissitude of sorrow. It belonged to the greatness of her mind that she could call before her at any moment all the impressions which had ever been made upon her, that they should continually be present