

THE SORROWFUL MYSTERIES

The cold flagstone floor of the church echoed the late autumnal chill outdoors, where the wind had swirled a pile of dry brown-paper leaves into a corner of the porch; but at least the air within was still, and warm with the scent of the devotional candles which glowed red and blue in their coloured dishes. Vera bobbed in genuflection as she crossed the centre aisle, before dropping ten new pence into the box. The coin fell noisily, the echoes dying away in the dim empty space around her, as she held today's candle steadily in one of the flames already burning, before setting it in its wax-smothered holder. As she knelt, her rosary beads began to slip through her pale fingers, one by one, as if finding their own way after years of patient practice. Today it would be the Five Sorrowful Mysteries, appropriately enough. 'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee...' She mouthed the prayers mechanically, her tongue moving behind scarcely-parted lips, allowing only an occasional whispered syllable to escape. She found the peace of the silent church comforting, and as she prayed, half consciously and half not, memories of another autumn, now long ago, came to her.

It had been a colder one than this, she remembered, but on that night the sky had been full of glittering stars above them, whilst under their feet the grass was brittle with frost, and the roadside ruts in the earth were turned to stone. Then, the cold air did not freeze her lungs and make her wheeze and gasp, as now; instead, she had found it exhilarating and affirming, adding to the excitement of being with Tom and feeling his hand warm in hers. The railway station was closed for the night, but there being no reason in those days and in those parts for it to be locked up, they had stepped softly past the gate and along the platform to the waiting room, closing the door behind them against the cold. Tom had produced a hip-flask of Jamieson's, and the warmth on their tongues as they pulled from it helped them forget the chill around them. They had continued to hold hands as they talked. Talking was what they were best at, for they enjoyed each other's company. They didn't always think the same thoughts, and they didn't always agree about things; but they shared something deeper: a view of life, a way of seeing the world. As always, there was humour in their talk: an ironic remark, a light chuckle, a suppressed snort.

Perhaps the whiskey had helped, but they had found something – she couldn't recall what – so funny that they had roared with laughter, so that her sides hurt and her eyes filled with tears. At last, they had calmed down, their laughter had subsided, and she had reached for her handkerchief. When she had finished drying her eyes, she found that now, somehow, her face had drawn close to his, and that she was staring into his eyes. They had remained that way for a long time, looking into each other's souls, she felt, gradually drawing together: and then they had kissed. She remembered how it had felt, warm and comfortable, lips pressed together, the most natural thing in the world; like coming home at last. And then, it had been over. They had drawn apart a little; he had looked confused, had stammered, averted his gaze. It was getting late, he had said. They should be getting back, they would be missed. All lies. 'I'll always be your friend, Tom,' she had said gently, 'always.' She had sometimes wondered if that had been too much to say, just then.

Still the beads passed through her fingers, still her lips moved over the familiar words. 'Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners...'

It must have been a month later, or no more than two, that he was transferred to another parish, thirty miles away. They said the old parish priest there would soon retire, and Tom would take over: a rising star of the church. She had wondered about visiting him there – the journey could be done in a few hours by bus – but she knew what that would do to him. It was already too late.

And within the year, at this season, on this very day, he was dead, having missed the bridge in the dark, and driven into the river. Of course it was an accident; how could it have been suicide, when he had the world at his feet?

'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son...' What a powerful thing is a kiss, she thought, to move heaven and earth. 'For ever and ever, Amen.' The Five Sorrowful Mysteries. Now she would say an Eternal Rest for the souls of the departed; she had always been his friend.

She finished. Crossing herself and getting carefully to her feet, Vera picked up her shopping bag and went from the church, back into the cold world outside.