

Chapter 2

Learning Many Lessons

One of the strange paradoxes in life is to feel a part of something and yet apart from that very something - a sense of abstraction in the middle of a social gathering, a sudden remoteness in the midst of active participation in a group activity, an inexplicable and involuntary withdrawal, for perhaps only a moment, from a situation with which one is closely identified. For most, this feeling is one which comes rarely. But in my case, it was an ever present knowledge which continued throughout my childhood years. My family was a loving, close-knit one, and I was, and felt I was, a very close part of it. Yet in many ways I always felt like the “odd sheep,” and in a manner I cannot describe. I always felt apart from them – somehow different, somehow singled out.

I have a most vivid memory of an event that occurred when I was a young girl, perhaps ten or eleven years of age. On a summer evening, I was outdoors playing with my older sister and other children, playing around the street light in front of our home, a favorite area for our pastimes. We were having an even livelier time than usual. The laughter was louder, the fun more strenuous, when suddenly I felt the now familiar touch of the Hand upon my shoulder.

A sudden feeling of the need to call upon God swept over me like an irresistible wave. Scarcely knowing what I was doing, I began to repeat the Lord’s Prayer over and over again; “Our Father which are I Heaven . . . Our Father which are in Heaven...”

As the sensation increased in intensity, moment after moment, I became weaker even to the point of perspiring in the anxiety and pressure of the intolerable burden. In a small, pleading voice I begged my older sister, Mary, to stop playing and come with me to the porch where I had something to confide in her. She was absorbed in her pleasure, but at last I prevailed upon her to leave the group and accompany me to the porch, where we both sat on my dad’s old wicker rocker.

Provoked at stopping her play, she asked me again and again what was the matter with me. Why did I break up the fun? I replied

falteringly that I felt very troubled, for I feared something was happening to someone who needed my prayers, and I felt constrained to offer up those prayers.

My sister looked at me unbelievably. This was not like me. Far from being a pious child, I was one that loved to play and have fun, one that indeed was usually the ringleader in the pursuit of games and laughter. At any rate, she made it clear that she did not share my sensations and declared that as I had spoiled the fun and was talking nonsense, she might as well go to bed.

I begged her not to leave me, to stay until I learned what the trouble was, for I felt it growing ever closer at hand. But she insisted on going to bed. Rather than being left alone, I followed her there. Far from sleep, I sat upright in bed with my arms around my knees waiting – waiting for the catastrophe that was sure to come.

Suddenly I heard footsteps and voices in the street, coming nearer increasing in volume. I sprang out of bed and called to my sister, “There it is!”

We both ran down the stairs and out onto the porch, which was being mounted by a group of men who were carrying the still form of my brother. He had been terribly burned almost beyond recognition by an accidental explosion of some fireworks intended for the Fourth of July. In the midst of my horror, sadness, and fear, I yet thanked God that He would account me worthy to lay a burden of prayer upon me, small and weak though I was. Again I began to repeat the Lord’s Prayer over and over, scarcely knowing what I was saying, but inalterably convinced that I was at least talking directly to God.

I found then, and the knowledge has been confirmed many times since, that God can lay a burden on a child, that God can even call a child to prayer, and He will answer. My brother recovered completely without even a scar.

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Happy the child, and later the grown-up, who has happy memories of his school days. I have such fond remembrances of my years in St. Cecilia’s Convent School, where my life was touched and enriched by the teaching of the Sisters of the Franciscan Order, whom I learned to love, respect, and reverence. I recall clearly at the age of eleven in the seventh grade, how my classmates and I used to attend Lenten services given by our parish priest, a kindly, good-humored cleric of German

extraction. It was our task after a sermon to submit an essay on what we had gleaned from his preaching. It was a never-ending source of amusement and amazement to Father Zimmerman to read my searching and ingenious interpretations of his messages, so different from the simple and conventional analyses of my classmates. I loved him, and he loved me, but that did not save me from his continual teasing about my Christian name, Myrtle, because it was not a Catholic saint's name according to the custom.

In his slight Teutonic accent he would repeat, "Who ever heard of a St. Myrtle?" Then he and all the children would laugh, much to my embarrassment. Finally one day, when I felt I could stand the taunting no longer and my "Irish rose up," I retorted sharply, "Someday when I die, there will be a Saint Myrtle!" This, of course, only served to redouble the laughter, but the good Father, needless to say, teased me no longer.

I had not yet learned then, as I know now, that God is as interested in living saints as He is in those who have died, and that His love and grace are poured out upon them in no lesser measure because they still walk on earth. But though that lesson was yet to come, I did learn many others both academic and spiritual as the touch of *His Hand* upon my shoulder lingered longer and pressed more firmly each time it rested upon me.