

Chapter XVI

THE NIGHT WATCH

Aunt Barbara had again come to live with us on the return to town. There was no room for her on the farm, as my grandmother had occupied the cottage she would have taken. She had boarded with one of her kinsfolk until we moved back. She was very happy over my conversion and baptism.

"Of course, I knowed," she smiled, "that the Lord would save you. I've prayed for you every day since I put you in the cradle. I just watched and waited till I see the glory of God. Now mine eyes have seen. I know the Lord will gather all my chillun in his arms. I have no fear. He is with me always."

Again I stood at her door daily and for a little while heard her voice droning the Psalms, or talking to God whom she insisted was in the room with her. She told me this so often I got afraid to go there at night for fear I'd see God.

An atmosphere of gloom had settled over our home ~~and~~ that puzzled and distressed me and I finally sought Aunt Barbara and asked her what was the matter.

She hesitated and put her hand on my head at last:

"Yo Ma is goin to have a baby, son and we're all scared--"

"Scared?" I whispered. "Scared of what? You were not scared when Delia was born. What are you scared of?"

"I can't tell you, sonny," she signed, "you're too young--"

I begged and pleaded but I couldn't get another word out of her. And that frightened me more than ever. So I sought my father and asked him, sure that he would tell me and he did.

He took my hand in his and looked out of the window as he slowly said; "Your mother, my son, is fifty three years old. A dangerous age to give birth to a child. The doctor is alarmed and I am half crazed with

fear. I try to pray but somehow God seems to hide his face from me."

My hand tightened its grip on his: "Oh, she won't die...don't be afraid. I know she won't. God won't let her. You'll see!"

My faith cheered him and he smiled. I hurried to my mother's bedside and chatted merrily with her for half an hour. What ever fate held in store she faced ~~wix~~ it without a murmur or a fear that I could feel.

And then it happened while I was away at one of my Aunts in the country. When I returned my mother lay in her bed very still and pale but smiling. The baby was a girl with a lot of dark hair on ger tiny head, bright sparkling eyes, and a beautiful face. She caught my finger in her fist and held it so tightly I could hardly get it loose. She smiled at me too. They had named her Addie for Uncle Lee's wife.

I raved over her to my mother and cheered her drooping spirits. I told her to hurry and get well, but she smiled tenderly with a far away look in her eyes that alarmed me. She failed to rally. At the end of a month she was still in bed and much weaker. And the doctor came to see her every day. And every day I went to my room and prayed for her recoveery. But God seemed far away. At the end of two months she was still weaker. At the end of the third month I was desperate and I saw a look of deathly fear in my father's eyes.

I had to know what was the matter. I caught him alone and told him I must know. I couldn't stand it any longer. If she were dying they should tell me and I'd face it, but to see her growing weaker and paler and more helpless each day. I just couldn't stand it. With desperate pleading I said: "Please tell me the truth, is she dying?"

My father's face was a white ~~mask~~ of anguish as he looked at me:

"I don't know, son, I wish I did. The doctors don't know. I've every one in Shelby come. They've done their best."

"But what ails her?" I demanded. "What happened to her? She was not like that when Frank and Delia were born. She was up and herself in three weeks."

"Yes. I know," he faltered.

"Then tell me...tell me," I cried. "What ails her?"

"Something happened to her in the birth of the baby at her advanced age. I knew there was danger of this.." He stopped, choked and went on:"
"But she can't die..She can't I tell you! I've wrestled all night with God ~~in~~ till the gray dawn."

I saw that he was talking to himself, not to me, and I ran. I couldn't bear to see him suffering so helplessly.

And then~~d~~ the awful thing happened. I started into her room the next morning anxious to see if she were better and the door was locked. I knock~~ed~~ and got no response. I knocked again and my father came to the door and said in a voice as though he spoke from the grave:

"You Ma is worse, son. So bad you can't see her now. I'll let you know when you can come in." And then I heard her voice in a strange low tone talking and I hurried to Aunt Barbara, burst into tears and asked her what had happened in the night.

She stroked my head gently and said:"Don't cry, darlin, you Ma will be all right bye and bye. Her nerves couldn't stand any more. Last night they snapped and her mind gave way."

"She's out of her mind?" I whispered in anguish.

"Yes. But God will lift the cloud. He will bring her out all right. I've been praying through the long hours since your Pa told me and the Lord promised me to save her and he will..he will."

I looked into her dear old black face shining with faith and felt my own renewed.

"Yes," I said."She will get well, won't she?"

"Of course, son, run along now and do your work well. You must look after everything. You Pa's so broken up he don't know what he's doing. I've never seen man love a woman as he does your mother."

"I'll see to every thing," I assured her.

And I did faithfully. But it all seemed so foolish, the feeding

of horses, cows, pigs and chickens while I could do nothing for her, the only thing that mattered.

At the end of a week I was allowed to see her and she didn't know me. I ran from the room far down through the fields to the woods and stayed for hours as I tramped in endless circles of horror and despair.

The next week she was better, her mind much clearer. She smiled, drew me close and kissed me. I thought my heart would jump out of my body for the joy and glory of it. I looked at my father through dimmed eyes.

"She's getting well, Pa!" I laughed hysterically. "She's getting well!"

"Yes, son," he smiled, "but you mustn't stay. She needs rest."

I left in a joy that illuminated the world. All through the day and night my heart sang. But my rejoicing was short lived. The next morning she was worse and my father's face was haggard almost beyond recognition when he emerged from a consultation of doctors. There was a curious ring of decision in his voice as he dismissed them at the door and turned back into the hall where I was standing. He stopped a moment, his face deadly white, studied me, brightened and said: "Come into the parlor son, I want to talk to you."

He sat down and I stood near by too tense to drop into a chair. He extended his hand and drew me close to his knee.

"The doctors have just told me that I must send your mother to a sanitarium where she can be treated for her mental trouble. She had no mental trouble. Her mind gives from one cause only. When they stop that she'll get well. The doctors don't know much after all. And the doctors in the sanitarium will know less than ours, when it comes right down to it. Besides there's no institution in the state where she could be properly cared for. They have poor staffs and poorer nurses. I can't bear to think of her in such a place, neglected and maybe ill treated..can you?"

"No, I can't!" I sobbed. "And we won't let her go!"

"That's what I thought you'd say, my son. You love her with a deep tenderness that can endure all things for her sake..as I can. Together now, you and I will nurse her back to life and save her. Will you?"

I squeezed his hand: "You know that I'd give every drop of blood in me for her. I can do anything you tell me."

"It'll be hard on a boy of your age but you can do it if you say you will."

"I will!" I breathed softly.

"All right. We'll begin tonight, taking turns watching at her bedside. She can't be alone a minute. She must take medicine every two hours through the night."

"I can give it to her," I interrupted.

"I'm worn to a frazzle and must sleep tonight after two o'clock. I'll call you at two and you sit with her until I come back at seven. You think you can watch through those five hours every night?"

"Every night!" I stoutly promised.

And then our endless vigils began. My watch was shorter but more dreadful to the nerves of a boy of twelve. When called I jumped from bed a quiver with a nameless fear that all but stopped my heart beat. By the time my clothes were on I regained my poise and cheerfully greeted my father as he left the sick room.

"Sleep good now, Pa" I called. "I'll take care of her until you come. I'll give her the medicine every two hours on the even hour, at four, and six, as she has just had it."

He nodded and stumbled to his bed to get the first sound sleep he had taken in two weeks. I sat down before the wood fire and began my lonely watch. She was asleep, had been fast asleep for an hour. The room was deathly still. The tick of the clock sounded like a sledge hammer striking the seconds. I wondered how she could sleep through it. I decided not to look at the clock so the time would pass more quickly.

I watched the fire for a long time, I judged an hour, and lifted my head to see. I had been in my chair but fifteen minutes. It was incredible, but true. The clock had not missed a stroke.

I settled again in my seat watching the glow of the coals and determined to not look up for nearly two hours, the time to give my mother her medicine. The clock did not strike. The spring for the striker had not been wound so that she would not be disturbed by it. The silence was broken again by the low cry of a whipperwill somewhere in the shadows of the yard. The weird cry made the cold chills run down my spine. I listened in anguish for a long long time. I'd go out and stop the thing if I could. But I couldn't leave the room. That was our pact. One of us would be by her side through every long night, every minute of every hour.

When the bird's call had become well nigh unendurable, I heard Rowland's bark and blessed his faithful old heart. The whipperwill left and again the deathlike stillness brooded over the world. I never knew before that every sound on earth could be hushed like that.

I was sure now it must be near the hour of four when I would give the medicine. I looked at the clock and it was only two forty five. I had passed another half hour instead of the hour and three quarters I had figured. When I tried to imagine the drag of four hours and a quarter more, my heart stopped for a minute. I felt I just couldn't stand it. And then I saw the haggard face of my father watching me in the hall again:

"I can't bear to think of her in such a place neglected and maybe ill treated-can you?"

"No I can't!" I groaned springing up my feet. "Merciful God!" I said to myself, "did I hear his voice in the room? I'll swear I did."

I looked and the door was closed. Of course not, it was just my fancy. I was still for a few minutes and then I heard him again:

"You love her with a deep tenderness that can endure all things for

her sake."

"Yes, sir," I answered. "I can endure -all things for her sake-and I will." And then he repeated: "Together now, you and I will nurse her back to life and save her. Will you?"

And I answered: "I'd give every drop of blood in me for her. I can do anything you tell me."

"You can do it if you say you will."

"I will!" I whispered tensely.

Again I found myself on my feet looking around the room to see if my father had come in and was really speaking to me. The voice inside became so painfully clear I shut it out by a fierce act of will and looked at the clock again. It was just three.

"Oh my God!" I moaned, "it just isn't possible that only an hour has passed!"

Remembering my stout determination to keep my compact I settled in the chair for the second hour. It dragged interminably. Time had become eternity, and the tick of a clock had no meaning. The hours would not pass. I rose and softly paced the floor until I was so tired I dropped again into the chair and brooded over the glowing embers in the fire place. My imagination began to run riot. In the shifting lights of the red hot coals I began to see things...men and women, horses, dogs, cows moving in endless procession through the fire. Two knights in shining armor faced each other beside a brook. By the step on one I saw that he was young. The other moved more deliberately and I knew he was old. They drew their swords and began to fight. All day and all night the combat raged. Weeks and months and years passed and the struggle deepened as seasons came and went. Through springs, summers, and autumns and winters still they fought. At last the younger man stooped beside the brook to drink, lifted his vizor and saw in the mirror of the water that he had become an old, worn and wrinkled man. He turned and saw through the lifted vizor of his foe that he had been fighting death!

"So can I!" I breathed positively. "And I'll win!"

I'd read this strange story somewhere and in the flickering fire I saw the scene reenacted as vividly as if I had stood beside the brook and watched in real life. I shivered at the sight of the white skull I had seen in the second raised vizor. But I set my teeth and swore I'd win the fight.

The second hour passed at last and I got the medicine and gave it to my mother gently from the spoon without waking her. Obeying my words she opened her mouth, swallowed the medicine and dropped back to sleep immediately as if she had not awakened at all. I'm sure she did not wake. She did as I told her in her sleep.

I took my seat again and must have dozed a little for I waked with a shock at the sound of her voice. She was talking in a steady stream of clearly articulated words. I thought at first she was talking in her sleep. But she wasn't. She was living over again vivid scenes of her life. She was reproaching her mother now face to face:

"How could you have allowed me to marry when I was only fifteen years old? A large girl for my age, yes. But you knew that I was hardly a woman. And I'll have to pay for it..an invalid's endless torture, maybe. How could you do such a thing? He was a safe match, yes, He was madly in love with me, yes. He is now and always will be. But that's no excuse. It was a crime..a crime..I tell you!"

I could endure no more. Softly approaching the bedside I laid my hand on her hot forehead: "Don't talk, Ma, please..not that way. I can't stand to hear you!"

She started, looked at me, and said in a perfectly natural voice: "Why, sonny, what are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

I was so happy over the calm look in her eyes that I almost shouted to my father to come, she had regained consciousness. But before I could utter a sound her mind again wandered and she began to mutter incoherent sentences. I kissed her lips into silence and slipped back to

my chair. I looked and to my joy it was five o'clock. The last hour had slipped by more quickly. I must give her the medicine again at six and day would begin to dawn soon after that.

I tiptoed to the bed and watched her sleep for half an hour. How white and death like her face! My heart ached as I recalled her fine complexion and the strong lines of her features in health. I knelt at the foot of the bed and prayed that God might let her live. The prayer soothed my fears and I sat down. When I looked up at the clock it was six. My tired eyelids had drooped. I must have slept sitting in the chair for nearly an hour. I gave her the medicine again without waking her and in a short time my father came and told me to run to bed. He had waked and couldn't go back to sleep. So he came to relieve me earlier than I expected. He stroked my head gently as I passed him and I knew that he was pleased at my brave vigil.

Night after night for three awful months we kept the faith pledge between us..the gray haired man of sixty five and the boy of twelve. And then my father whispered to me one morning: "The trouble is gone, son. Your mother will soon be well."

Her mind stopped wandering and quickly cleared. The happiest day that had ever come into my life dawned when my father called me:

"Son, your Ma wants to see you a minute."

I darted into the room to her bed. She took me in her arms and held me a long long time without a word. And then she said:"Your father has told me how you've watched here for three long months from two o'clock in the morning until breakfast time. I didn't think any little boy in the world could do such a thing.

I couldn't say anything in reply. I just buried my face in her breast, and then lifted my head smiling:

"As soon as you're strong enough, Ma, I'll take you for a long ride. I can drive now as well as any one."