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rice of Labor.

# THE QUEST OF FATHER MAURICE.

By GRACE KEON.

(From Benziger's Magazine.)

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Father Maurice sat in the big bay window of the rectory parlor. It was bright daylight outside—a day in treacherous March, but full of warm spring sunshine, and this sunshine lay now in great yellow bars on the dark-red floor. A glorious day it was, indeed, with enough of winter's frost in it—just barely enough—to set the blood tingling with the very joy of being alive.

But Father Maurice heeded not the sunshine nor the glory of the God-given day. The blue sky outside did not appeal to him, nor the bracing air, whiffs of which came through the window as if to tempt this lover of nature out into the open. A wide bar of the yellow light barely passed his eyes, and rested on his black, closely-waving hair, bringing out the purple tints in it.

He was a noble-looking priest, tall and strong and finely built. His forehead was that of the thinker—broad, thoughtful, white as polished marble. His eyes looked out on humanity with faith of a child in their depths; the large mouth and the square chin settled the whole countenance into one of determination. A man of whom a mother might be proud as she sent him to fight the battle of God against all the world.

A man to whom the old might look up as the incarnation of all gentleness, and children cling to as the incarnation of all strength.

His books—he was a scholar of no mean attainments—lay piled in a heap at his elbow. His papers, too, in orderly precision, were stacked before him. But he touched nothing. His abstracted gaze rested on the opposite wall, and even as he gazed the rectory parlor faded from his sight, and before him came a vision of the past.

It is a tiny room—kitchen and sitting-room combined. On the scrupulously clean floor is laid a gay rag-carpet. Old-fashioned mottoes are framed upon the walls, and over the mantel is a cheap picture of the Sacred Heart. Muslin curtains, held back by bright red ribbons, are on the windows, and in these windows blossom the flowers their owner loves. She is a little woman, with a shrewd, gentle, kindly face and soft gray eyes—eyes that send forth beams of charity on all her little world. She is a widow, her only child, a boy, her idol. She has marvelous dreams for that boy of hers, and in his most restless, turbulent moments, the thought of his mother helps to curb the untamed spirit, as anxious to outrun bounds and seek mischief as any other lad of his age and healthy activity. She has worked for him since his father's death left him with only her to guide him and take care of him. Like Anna, the mother of Samuel, she dedicated him to the Lord, and in his future were bound up all the simple ambitions of her life—all her desires and hopes. No grand wishes were hers, no longings for things of comfort, no craving for material good. But on the knees of prayer she humbly besought the grace that this one child of hers might be called of God to reap the spiritual harvest.

The prayer was heard. He had the blood of a long line of fighting ancestors in him, even if of humble origin; the free air of America, breathed in at every pore, made his eyes clear and his brain sharp. "We need his kind," said the good old pastor to the delighted mother. "Vigorous, healthy stock—we need him to combat agnosticism and the worship of self."

She did not understand what he meant—but she felt sure that her boy was destined for something wonderful by those very words. He grew and thrived in health of mind and soul and body. From high school to college, from college to seminary. Daily the sweet face grew more wrinkled and more holy. For her boy was God's.

"A poor old woman, sonny," she wrote him, in her cramped, painstaking hand, "a poor old ignorant woman, dear—but who, thanks to you, won't be ashamed to face God."

And what those words meant to Father Maurice only he knew. For if she were to bring him to her God as her offering, dare he detract by a single unworthy thought from the value of the gift she gave? He had too high a sense of the fitness of things not to long to perfect himself to lead the highest life attainable.

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The great day of his ordination came—a happy day for both, bringing with it the wondrous ceremony that set her boy apart from the world of men. On that glorious and wonderful day his mother's face shone upon him with the peace of heaven. She had wept tears of joy, and her lips were trembling. She kissed his hands, his anointed hands, and when he gathered her shrunken figure into his strong young arms she put her gray head on his shoulder and sobbed aloud in very excess of delight.

And after that—silence.

Where she went he did not know. Through what mistaken idea she had managed to efface herself he never discovered. But search for her as he might, from that day forward until this he had never seen his mother's face again, nor heard her voice.

This was the memory that shadowed Father Maurice's eyes and made heavy his heart. Before him on the table lay his bishop's letter—a kindly, tender letter written from a spiritual father to his well-beloved son. In it he spoke of what he knew to be the young priest's earnest longing—a post on the missionary frontier—but also of the faring of his quest, and what chances there seemed to be for its success. For well the bishop knew the anxiety of mind, the pain he suffered, in consequence of this sudden void in his life.

Father Maurice lifted his head from his hand with a sigh, folded the letter carefully, and put it in his breast pocket. Another letter, still unopened, lay at his elbow. He turned it over carefully, not recognizing the chirography. When he finally tore the envelope and perused his contents, a momentary gleam of pleasure lit up his countenance.

"From Max Ramsey of all fellows!" he said in a delightful tone. "Well!"

He skimmed through it, still smiling, then settled back in his chair for a slower reading. It was a breezy epistle and humorous, to judge by the manner in which the smile broadened and settled on his lips. It told briefly of the writer's return from the continent, asked him if he ever regretted old college days, and added in a brief postscript that he had seen the error of his mode of living in England, having fallen under the influence of the English Jesuits.

"So there isn't any chance for you to try your powers after all, fighting Parson Ramsey—as we used to call you," it ended. "You remember I told you once you could never convert me? See what a prophet I am—though it profiteth you nothing. Mother is still as calmly pagan as she brought me up to be. Come and see us, Father Maurice, before she goes again to the land of the idols. If you can upset her easy-going philosophy, her monumental don't-care-ness, you will be entitled to my candid astonishment. It shall be laid at your feet to do with as you please."

The whole letter, written in this nonsensical style touching lightly upon things which Father Maurice knew must have turned into widely different channels the current of an unusually gifted mind, aroused a certain curiosity in the young priest. He replied at once, and the following afternoon found him seated in Mrs. Ramsey's drawing-room, listening to the sweet-faced, stately lady relating some of the incidents of her continental trip. Max Ramsey, a big, bluff, blonde young man, with a bright, engaging countenance, put in a word now and then that served to give his mother's more serious tale a tinge of the ludicrous.

At last they came to the point concerning which Father Maurice was most anxious to hear.

"Mother doesn't understand it," he said, laughing at the suddenly thoughtful face of the still beautiful woman opposite. "She can't understand it, she won't understand it."

"Pray try to look at it with my eyes," said the mother. "He left the breakfast table in the morning—this is an honest fact—laughing heartily at some preposterous dogma of the Catholic faith. At luncheon my boy came in and looked at me.

"Well, mother," he said, "I've got

it. I've always known I'd got it some time, and it's come at last."

"His tone was so solemn—so—so unlike himself—that he frightened me to death."

"Got what, got what?" I cried out.

"The Catholic religion," he answered.

"And she said, 'For heaven's sake, is that all? You scared me so,'" put in Max.

Father Maurice was shaking with laughter. The way in which Mrs. Ramsey mimicked her son's solemn voice, his very actions, was so true to life that he was forced to laugh at her and with her.

"And now that he has found out the why of it," she went on, as if it were a personal grievance, "he won't explain it—I can't get a word out of him to satisfy me."

"My dear mother, it is impossible," said Max, an unusually thoughtful expression coming over his sunny face. "I went out that morning as veritable a pagan as—as you are now. I came back willing to believe anything they told me. Father McIntosh was talking to me—he was very kind, and much interested in both of us. He had often expended his breath in finer language and I knew it. Suddenly, just like a flash, the whole thing dawned on me."

"And I went the next day along the same route. Took particular pains to pass by the same houses even. And when I got to St. Hubert's I made Father McIntosh come out and stand on the very same spot that he had been standing with Max the day before. I was willing to try the experiment," she ended, with a light laugh, "but the spirit didn't move me."

The laugh, the last words, jarred on Father Maurice. He almost shivered at this airy touching on the most solemn of subjects.

"You were willing to try the experiment?" he repeated, in his grave, soft voice. "I should hardly call the ransom of a soul an experiment. It must be more than an experiment when a blind man, for the first time, comes from the chrysalis of his shadowed existence into God's own sunlight. I can imagine him exulting in it with an almost heartbreaking joy, bathing in it, putting out his hands to grasp some of its beauty, holding up objects to it, so that this new and wonderful light may transfigure into loveliness—glowing, iridescent, wonderful—those things he has but known by the poor sense of touch when he walked in the ways of darkness."

The feeling of an intensely spiritual nature vibrated in his tone. Max leaned forward, and Father Maurice scarcely recognized the debonaire friend he had known so well and loved, in this grave-eyed man.

"That's it, that's it, that's it!" Everything, even the most trivial, is transfigured by the golden glow of faith. Maurice, you've explained it wonderfully—mother, can't you understand?"

"Each person has his own stumbling block—a mountain which would be but a molehill in the path of another man," said Father Maurice, smiling. "I should hardly like to try my powers after Father McIntosh—I know of him, he is a wonderful theologian. But what is the difficulty in your case, Mrs. Ramsey?"

"That is a hard question—I have so many," she said. The levity had left her face. It was well to jest indeed, but those few earnest words of his had sunk deeply into her heart, and the grave thoughtfulness of his mien when he said it added to the impression. She shook herself a little, as if trying by that movement to get rid of the feeling that perhaps she was one of those blind ones, who had not yet opened her eyes. "My very first and my very, very worst is non-belief in the power of prayer."

Father Maurice looked interested.

"You see," she went on, eager now to qualify her position before this splendidly grave young priest, this splendidly grave young priest, and speaking with an amount of earnestness that made her son look at her in surprise. "You see, I can't conceive of any Being—supreme or otherwise, whatever He is—wanting one of His or its creatures to bow down before it. Then again, the Creator knows the mind He gave you, He knows also its workings and its wishes, doesn't He? Of what use is prayer in that case? He is aware of all you would say before you speak. And as to praying to the saints—why, it's ridiculous—I can't see that at all. Show me first the reason why of prayer. The rest will come."

"The reason why," said Max, "has been demonstrated to this lady by no less learned priests than Fathers Dupree and Schurman—to say nothing of Father McIntosh, who simply overwhelmed her with dogma."

"Oh, dogma!" with a laugh. "I want practical proof. Show me the answering of one prayer. Then you

can quote all the Fathers of the Church to me."

She spoke very warmly. The picture of a blind man groping in the dark, knowing things only by the sense of touch, annoyed her. Father Maurice, at those last words of hers, caught his breath sharply. His brown eyes grew velvet soft. He leaned forward. His intense face, over which some emotion rippled, disturbing its calm, astonished her. She listened.

"I am a priest four years," he said. "I had a mother once—a mother, Mrs. Ramsey, who never in all her precious life tasted the luxury you know. Her back was bent with work and age, her hands were horny and wrinkled—oh, God in heaven bless those horny hands wherever they may be to-day!" Emotion choked him—he paused. "Her face was seamed and wrinkled and lined," he went on. "Humble she was and poor and a widow—and I—her only son—her only child. She gave me to God, proud of the giving, glad of it, yielding me back to Him who gave me. She prayed for me, Mrs. Ramsey. I was no wiser or better or more talented than the average lad of my years—heedless, indeed, and careless and inclined to levity. But she prayed for me. And her prayers must have touched the Heart of the God she loved in her pure way—for they made me what I am. After Christ, I am His priest by virtue of my mother's prayers."

"Well, on my ordination day she disappeared. There is but one explanation—she was afraid to hamper my career—she was so proud of me. My poor talents were so many sources of joy to her. She thought, maybe, the son she toiled for would be ashamed of the mother who had eaten bitter bread for his sake, and was bent with much toiling up and down another's stairs. Mrs. Ramsey, when you spoke just now I felt suddenly that here was a way—that God meant you for His instrument. Through your prayers He will give me back the one to whom I owe my life, my vocation, mustn't it? How could you, wealthy, aristocratic, moving in the circles that you do—how could you come in contact with a poor little old woman? And I do not ask you to seek her. Just pray—pray that I may find her. God will, in His mercy, give to you what He has not given to me."

He had touched the woman's heart beneath her cold exterior. The tears were streaming down her face—tears she did not check or wipe away, though generally any emotion seemed an insult to the classic calm on which she prided herself. Max put his hand out to meet his friend's, and their fingers clasped warmly. His eyes, too, were moist. Father Maurice looked suddenly ashamed.

"Pray forgive me—for making you feel so badly," he said. "I do not know why I spoke so—it must surely have been an inspiration, Mrs. Ramsey, for—"

"Father Maurice, I have never prayed in my life. I shall do so now for your—for your wishes. There is another way of saying it in Catholic parlance—for your intention, I think it is." She paused a moment, adding a little wistfully: "Maybe if, in return, you—pray for me!" she frowned, for she was wedded to her fetish, and hated to yield her pet point so easily—"I will come out into God's sunshine," she ended with a laugh.

It was fully two months afterward. The May sunshine was warm and serene, and even the busy city appeared glad of the breath of coming summer. A touch of the warmth of material bodies craved was in the air, without a hint of the summer's torridness on its gauzy wings. Father Maurice, walking briskly along the street, found himself halted by glad, familiar tones. He glanced up to find Mrs. Ramsey's face smiling at him. He had seen very little of her this past eight weeks—and even Max managed to call on him only occasionally. The latter sat beside

his mother in the open carriage. There was a blockade just at this point, and at Mrs. Ramsey's order the coachman drew up to the curb and halted. While Father Maurice, his handsome head bared, stood beside her. After the first few words the lady plunged immediately into the subject nearest her heart, her bright eyes on his face.

"Have you heard anything lately?" she asked.

"Concerning my mother?" he questioned, divining at once what she meant. "No; I have not. Did you keep your promise?"

She looked at him without a shadow of her former raillery. Her eyes were earnest, her lips grave.

"I am keeping it faithfully, faithfully—and what is more, shall consider any answer you receive directly due to my prayers. Does that sound presumptuous? I can't help it. It is the queerest feeling, but it is true; I have never been so earnest about anything in my life as I am about this. I think you have bewitched me."

"I think you have been soul-dumb," he answered. "Now that the language of the spirit is finding vent at last in rightful speech, it craves for its true food."

"Thank you—there is a good deal of meaning in that. Perhaps you are right. I read somewhere about storming the citadels of heaven—well, if there is such a thing, I must have weakened a few of the outer ramparts. I—I want more than an answer," she finished somewhat abruptly. "I, who am in darkness, seek the light."

She turned her eyes on her son, who smiled affectionately. The understanding that existed between these two was beautiful. On the son's part the love he entertained for his mother broadened a disposition inclined overmuch to estheticism. It made him manly, as an absorbing affection for another makes the narrowest masculine soul. It softened the woman's somewhat imperious disposition, prone slightly to the arrogance her sheltered, luxurious existence engendered. To Father Maurice the mere sight of them was a keen joy—so perfect was the sympathy between them. He looked from one face to the other, smiling now boyishly.

"I am glad to hear you talk so," he said. "Very glad. You are a few steps further on the great road. Two months ago you would not have said that."

"Maybe not," she answered, adding less gravely: "Will you get in and drive with us a way? Perhaps, too, I can persuade you to have dinner? There is much I should like to ask you."

"Thank you," he answered heartily. "But I am on duty for the evening. Next week—let us say Thursday? Father Carroll may not need me."

"Father Maurice, Father Maurice, please!"

An excited voice called his name, and an excited face met his gaze as he turned quickly at the call. A man had halted in a hasty run past him, and now stood in front of him, hat in hand.

"Thank God, Father, I met you here—I was just going to the rectory. There's a poor woman been run over by the street and she's been carried into the drugstore. They rung up an ambulance, but she wants the priest, quick, too, Father Maurice. I'm afraid she's pretty bad, sir—"

It was the call no servant of God has ever heard in vain. Without a word Father Maurice turned and left his friends, and was soon lost to sight in the throng. As they went along, the man, who attended the church with which Father Maurice was connected, gave him hasty but graphic details of the accident. The crowd around the drugstore fell away as they saw the priest, and hats were lifted as he passed inside.

Two chairs had been drawn together hastily, and on this they had placed the poor creature. A policeman stood inside the door to keep back the curious crowd, some gaping coldly, others sympathetic, but all filled with the gruesome sentiment that animates a crowd anywhere—anxiety to see. A kindly woman who had witnessed the occurrence had been permitted to remain with her. She was a young woman, and tender-hearted, and her eyes were full of tears now. She had removed the little old-fashioned bonnet and the neatly darned gloves, and had made a pillow for the gray head by folding up her own jacket and placing it underneath her. The poor old face was ghastly white—the eyes closed, and the woman who was kneeling beside her on the floor looked up gladly—when she saw the priest.

"Oh," she murmured. "Father—"

He was a stranger to her, but she was a Catholic, and recognized the Roman collar and clerical bearing.

She fell back to allow him to perform his priestly duties.

Why did Father Maurice suddenly grow rigid, and why did that strange mist swim before his eyes? Why did his face grow pale, and his nostrils dilate?

"God, my God!" he whispered. "Any way but this—give her back to me in any way but this—"

He fell on his knees. The startled watchers saw him put one arm under her head and with the other clasp her to him. They did not understand, but the pathos of the group touched them. The big policeman at the door felt his eyes, hardened by much gazing on sorrow, grow moist. He turned his head away. The woman heard his broken tones, saw the old eyes open, and the wrinkled face grow suddenly into beauty under the rush of mother-love that transfigured it.

"My son, my little boy!" she murmured.

"Mother," he whispered back, in a choking voice. "My mother!"

There was silence a moment. The tears were streaming down his face, and the sight worried her. She put up her wrinkled, toil-worn hand and wiped them away with faltering, weak fingers.

"Oh, mother, mother, my mother," he whispered again. "You have almost broken my heart. Where did you go—what have you done, and why, oh, why—"

"Ah, now, sonny—don't. Would it be me to stand in your way, childie, with the light of God shining on your big white forehead that day? 'Twas the day of my life, my boy. And 'twas little to do to take myself out of yours then. God has been good to me, sonny dear. He made you Father Maurice, and then—my boy a priest! Praises be to His holy name forever and forever!"

"Amen," he answered solemnly. Nature, striving in his heart, took second place, as the instinct of the priest asserted itself.

"I have prayed God to give you back to me, my mother," he said. "I have loved you better than you thought I did, but if He gives you to me—only to lose you, dear—His holy will—be done."

It cost him an effort to say the words, for his heart was breaking. But dropping his voice to a whisper, he listened to her faltering confession. He had the holy oils in his pocket, and he found time to anoint her before the end, and still with his arms about her, he repeated over and over the simple prayers for the dying—the prayers she loved. The ambulance surgeon came, but Father Maurice simply motioned him aside. She was going fast then, and one glance at the glazing eyes told the young doctor so. He looked in some surprise at the white face bent so tenderly above the dying woman—at the strong arms that held the shaking old form in their tender clasp.

"She is my mother!" said the priest, in answer to this curious look, and at that the man fell back, touched to the heart at the grief expressed in those simple words. The Catholic woman was on her knees, sobbing audibly.

Outside Mrs. Ramsey saw the crowd, now thinning rapidly away from the drugstore, for excitement in the city is but ephemeral. She called the coachman to halt.

"Father Maurice must be in there, yet," she said. "Go, Max, and see. Perhaps we can help the poor creature, whoever she is."

Max obeyed. He entered the store hastily, coming out a few moments afterward and approaching the beautiful woman who awaited him. Her somewhat languid expression gave way to a look of anxiety when she saw his face. She sat up quickly.

"What is it, Max? Something has happened?"

"Your prayer has been answered, mother dear. I shall stay here—perhaps I can be of some use to Maurice—"

"Max!"

"He has found her, mother, he has found her at last."

"And she is—"

"Dead, dear. Go home without me. I shall come as soon as possible and tell you all about it."

Three months later Father Maurice was sent on his longed-for mission work. Two things he likes to remember of his last few days' stay in New York. One is the reception into the fold of Mrs. Ramsey, who found faith the day his quest ended, and who is now among the humblest children of Mother Church. The other is his last visit to the little mound in Calvary, where rests all that is earthly of his mother's form.