

A MIDNIGHT CALL

Miss Mary was putting on her hat before the little blurred mirror in the kitchen. The sun shifted in through the drawn green shades of the south windows, making speckled patches on the bright rag carpet, and the cat basked in a little square of sunlight before the screen door. Out on the sunken steps of the back porch, beneath a home-made awning of faded blue, sat a nutting figure in checkered jeans, his shoulders hunched over his elbows upon his knees, meditatively chewing and gazing into space.

"Glory be to God, Hank!" cried Miss Mary, peering out at him. "Isn't it an awful thing? Every day alike to you, and never your foot inside a church on Sunday!" The man on the steps grunted.

"It's the sorry woman your poor old mother'd be if she had lived to see this day!" went on Miss Mary, a bright red spot showing on either faded cheek. "You that never goes to Mass and hasn't knelt your knee to a priest in twenty years—her only son! I wouldn't mind if you had a good safe job." Miss Mary caught her breath sharply. "Glory be to God!" she cried again, raising her voice in anger to hide its quiver. "You won't go to Mass, and you do not know the hour God'll call you away without warning!"

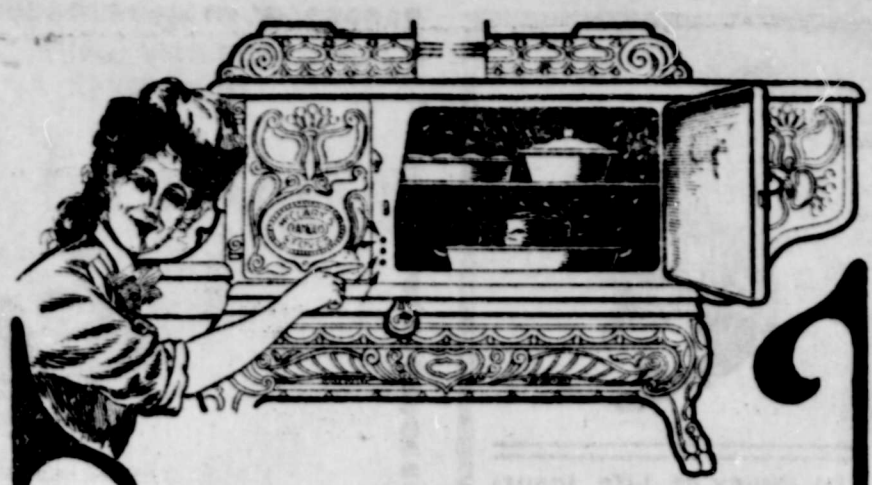
"Tend to your own soul, Mary Ann, and don't mind me!" said the man, sulkily. "It's none too good you are yourself!" He got up, sideways, and shambled down the steps and into the backyard, out of hearing, where he took smoking, his shoulders still hunched up, one hand grasping and holding up the elbow of the hand that steadied the pipe in his mouth.

Miss Mary sighed and muttered in useless anger. She put on her worn silk mitts and took up her parasol. The cat stretched in the sun and followed her lazily to the front door. "Good-by, Peter," said Miss Mary to the cat and shut the screen door. Peter stretched himself in the sun and yawned and went back to his sunny spot.

Miss Mary picked her way with old-fashioned daintiness down the creaked board walk and up the tree-lined street. The little dressmaker, crossing the road at right angles, met her at the corner. "Good morning," she said, timidly, "going to Mass?"

A gleam of sharp humor came into Miss Mary's eyes and her thin lips twitched; where else would she be going at this time of a Sunday morning? Then she frowned coldly, and her old face hardened. Miss Mary had a feeling of enmity toward the little dressmaker, and even her sense of humor would not let her understand for an instant.

"Good morning," she said. "Yes, I'm going to Mass." The little dressmaker fell into step beside her. "I'm going too," she said. "It's a real pleasant day, isn't it?" Very much the same scene had been enacted on this very corner every Sunday morning, rain, hail or shine, for fifteen years now—ever since the little dressmaker had first come to Sayre and hung up her sign on a cottage not far from the house into which Hank and Miss Mary had moved, but a year or two before her coming. From her front window she could see Miss Mary leave her gate, and there, as Miss Mary suspected, the little dressmaker stood Sunday after Sunday, gloved and bonneted, waiting for Miss Mary's appearance, when she had just time to meet her at the corner. Miss Mary had been frankly surprised that first Sunday morning, she had never dreamed that Kittle Klein would come to Sayre. She held her tongue, now when the little dressmaker told Miss Mary and her neighbors, simply and in a few words, that she had come to Sayre to settle down. Beyond these brief Sunday morning walks, Miss Mary purposely saw nothing of the dressmaker. Some one found out that they had both come from the same home town. The village gossips tried to find out more about it, but somehow the most curious did not hit at the truth.



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to him—than the farm. He and Miss Kittle were to have been married last spring, but he had had to leave off. Miss Kittle, vivacious and self-willed as she was, was vexed. She pouted and sulked and flirted with former lovers. Hank's heart was sore. Until this time Hank had never touched liquor, and he had always been a good, practical Catholic. No one can blame Miss Mary because she laid his fall from grace at Kittle Klein's feet.

It was one Saturday night that he had taken Kittle to a sleigh-ride. It was late when he got home, to find that Miss Mary had fallen to sleep on the lounge while waiting for him; and if her eyes had not been half-closed when she let him in, she might have noticed how wild and white was his face. He went upstairs without a word, and Miss Mary could hear him pacing up and down his room as she sank to slumber.

Sunday morning dawned clear and crisp, and Miss Mary and her mother were dressed and had breakfast laid, but no Hank came downstairs. At ten o'clock the horses were hitched, nessed—Miss Mary had gone out and fed them—and Mass was said five miles away. His mother went upstairs with a slow tread. Hank lay in bed with his eyes closed, his head pillowed on his arms. She called him, gently at first, then sharply when he did not answer. He opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Do you know what time it is?" she asked. "Yes," he said. "It's after ten." The widow's eyes opened wide with surprise. "Would you be late for Mass?" she cried. "I don't care," he said, sullenly. "I'm not going." The widow walked with a cane. She stood and stared at her son for one speechless second. Then she thumped her cane upon the floor.

"Get up!" she thundered. "Whatever the cause of this madness, you shall go to Mass while I live!" Hank got up and harnessed the horses and drove with them to Mass. Next day Kittle Klein went away on a visit, and on Tuesday Hank went on the first drunk of his life. Would to God that it had been the last!

Things went headlong to ruin then, despite his mother's and Miss Mary's efforts to keep up. When, in a month, a repentant and a sobered Kittle came home to reclaim her lover, it was too late. That last quarrel had been the bitterest thing of Hank's life. He had run away from the scene of his unhappiness and was tramping the country, looking for a railroad in the mountains, and Hank became a switchman in the yards at Sayre. Something in the reckless spirit of this life no doubt appealed to the man's weak misery.

The following year the mortgage was foreclosed, and the widow died. Kittle Klein was there when she died. In spite of the coldness of disapproval with which they treated her, Kittle clung to these relatives of her lost lover. Hank had not reached her dying bed. Her fading old eyes sought bravely to outstare death until he should come. The priest stood by, the last Sacraments having been administered, reverently reading the prayers for the dying. The widow's face was calm but for that one staining; she was ready and glad to meet her Maker. Her breath became more labored, and death dew gathered on her forehead. It was all too evident that she could not last until her son came. She sought Miss Mary's grief-stricken face and turned from it to sobbing Kittle Klein. Her eyes said much, but they were softened and pitying.

live without it, and he had lost all pride in his personal appearance. At forty, Hank was unbecomingly changed from the gay, handsome, healthy youth whom Kittle Klein had first loved. To-day Miss Mary was even shorter than usual in her replies to the little dressmaker. There had been a big smash-up in the freight-yards the night before, and some one had been killed. It hurt Miss Mary because she laid his fall from grace at Kittle Klein's feet.

It was that very week that Hank was to lay off and did not. There was no good reason for his postponing this desired vacation. The hand of God guides our acts. The little dressmaker was making a dash to dress and she had sat up late into the night to finish it. It had been very hot all day and evening, and the big kerosene lamp in her room had drawn added heat and many flies. These buzzed around her now and made her nervous with their droning noise. The clock ticked monotonously, and the heavy night breeze blew the window curtains at her back with a rubbing, flapping sound. Off in the freight-yards the engines shrieked and clanged their wheels and the switching cars came together with intermittent crashes. She shivered at each new crash and patted down with caressing fingers a fold of the wedding gown. She had wept many bitter tears over its making. The memory of her own wedding-gown folded away in lavender blossoms lived very dear to her heart.

Kittle Klein was not a brave woman. She was a timid one, and now, as she sat alone at night, she had barricaded her opened window with a curious arrangement of chairs to thwart any intruder's attempt to enter. She blessed herself when a belated wayfarer's step passed along the board walk beneath her windows, and she breathed more freely when it had echoed away into the distance. The hollow ring of the clock made her heart quicken; and when suddenly, without a warning stop, a knock sounded at her door, fear seemed to drive the breath from her body. She crushed her hands in the wedding-gown and sat, unable to stir. The clock said three-thirty. Who? Who could it be at this unearthly hour?

The knock sounded again, impatiently. It was a light, feeble knock, like a child's. "Who's there?" she called. She stood up, grasping the table, and her knees shook her whole body. There was no answer. "Who's there?" she called again. The knock was repeated and prolonged with feeble strength. Kittle grasped the scissors in her right hand and the lamp in her left and went to the door. She unlocked it with trembling fingers, and opened it cautiously, with her light held up, peered into the porch. The night was without moon or star, an inky blackness.

A small, thin boy stood in the porch. He had on overalls with a rib over the shoulders and a pair of little bare arms. His hat was tattered around his face. He was unmistakably a railroader's child, but the little dressmaker did not seem to recognize him. "What do you want?" she exclaimed. "There's a man been hurt under the big bridge, and he wants the priest," the child piped. "I see your light and I'm afraid to go alone." "You poor darling!" cried Kittle. "I'll go right along with you!" She turned and hurried back into the room, screwing down the light as she went. She set it on the table and ran back to the door just as she was, without waiting to throw a wrap over her perspiring shoulders. The drying light of her lamp shone in the porch and showed it empty. She called to the child and ran to the gate, but she could not see him. Fear choked her. The freight cars in the yard just then came together with a mighty crash, and somewhere a yardman yelled an order. His voice was terrible in the night air. It seemed to give wings to Kittle's feet. The

child said that a man had been injured under the big bridge and that he wanted a priest. She tore open the gate and ran out over the uneven board walk. At the corner she turned toward the church.

She had been running some minutes before she heard the footsteps beside her. She turned her head, she felt that some one was running with her, but she could see no one. She looked over her shoulder and ran faster. She was no longer a young girl nor little, but fear spurred her onward.

In a little while she knew that footsteps persistently kept beside her and before she reached the corner she heard the labored breathing of a spent runner at her right.

The little dressmaker fell up the parochial steps and pounded upon the door. "Father, Father, Personall!" she cried. "A man is dying in the yards and wants you!"

The good priest had put his head out of the upper window. "Why, why, Miss Kittle!" he cried, "I'll be with you in a moment."

Kittle threw herself about, her back against the door panels, and peered into the darkness. She called, but no one answered her. She could see nor hear no human thing. "I must be going crazy!" thought the little dressmaker. The priest joined her in an incredibly short time, and they started back toward the yards on a run. "Who is it that is hurt, my child?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know, Father!" she cried. "A child came to the door and told me that a man had been hurt under the big bridge and that he wanted a priest, and when I stepped out to come with him to get you the child was gone!" The priest looked at her strangely. He took her arm to aid her tired steps, for somehow it seemed quite natural to both of them that she should be going with the man of God on this strange night mission.

And now again as she ran, on her other side, the little dressmaker heard a third person running, a little ahead of them this time, as if guiding and urging them onward. She wondered if the priest heard the footsteps, too. His face was white and strained, and his brows were knitted. The uneven boards trembled beneath their feet, and now and then a dog barked at them.

Down the main street they sped and turned down the black, bush-lined path that led beneath the great bridge. Lights were moving about on the ground before them, and there was a curiously hushed confusion all about. Kittle's throbbing heart grew suddenly still with choking horror. She had remembered all at once that Hank's shanty was here, beneath the great bridge.

An engine was snoring at the brink of the ditch beneath the bridge beside it, a man was upon his knees holding the head of a prostrate comrade. "It's poor Hank Murphy," a grimy fellow told the little dressmaker, kindly, surprise at seeing her stamped upon his shining black face. "The engine just struck him backing up."

"Just struck him!" cried Kittle. "Not a minute ago," said the man. "We all saw it, but we had not time to do a thing!" The men gathered back, respectfully toward Kittle and the shanty and the doctor's office, but he ain't had time to get back yet."

"Hit just now," the dressmaker repeated to herself, as though awakening from a dream. "Hit just now!" She somewhere on the night breeze behind her, a voice floated to her ear. "Tell my son—" it said, "I will—watch—over him."

When Miss Mary, awakened by the kindhearted railroader, came stumbling down to the tracks, a wrapper thrown carelessly over her night-dress and opened at her shriveled neck, and her sparse gray hair straggling about a wild face, the doctor was already bending over Hank. The priest was beside him, kneeling in the cinders, praying as only a priest can pray. The men had brought up the stretcher. Miss Mary brushed against it as she rushed forward.

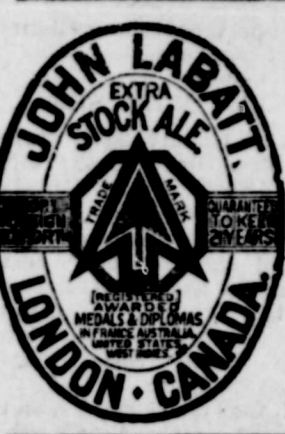
"O my God!" she shrieked, and threw out her old hands to Hank. The doctor pulled her aside roughly. "Hurry boys, the stretcher!" he cried in a strange, ringing voice, "and get this man to my office as quick as you can! It looks like only a few ribs broken—" He stopped and chuckled, nervously, because he all the way, and I could hear her breathe! Oh! Mary, Hank's been to confession and he isn't dead!"

Miss Mary shook her head in dumb bewilderment and mumbled "Amen." Her breath gurgled in her throat, her eyes were dry and staring, and a feverish red had crept into her blanched cheeks. She stumbled past and up the black, bush-lined path, looking straight ahead and Kittle Klein followed her, weeping hysterically now. Once she looked down and saw that Miss Mary's feet were bare and bleeding from the sharp cinders. At the doctor's steps, they met a man coming out.

"The ribs on his right side and his right leg are broken," he said to Miss Mary in a kind of awe-struck voice; the railroad didn't often save its victims thus. "Her's will set the leg now, and then the doctor says he can be carried straight home."

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Miss Mary answered him, incoherently, an uncomprehending look of fear upon her wild face. Kittle had her own shoes off and was upon her knees, forcing them on Miss Mary's bare feet.

"I'll go right home for you and get his bed ready," the little dressmaker was saying. "You go in and hold his hand while they set his leg. Poor old Hank!" she added, wistfully.

Miss Mary turned upon her, fiercely. "I guess I can get his bed ready myself!" she choked. She stood looking down at the little woman kneeling at her feet. The wild look went slowly from her face. "And Hank ain't killed?" she murmured dazedly.

The little dressmaker sobbed anew. "Ain't God good?" she cried. Miss Mary stooped and lifted the little dressmaker to her feet. "I wouldn't have hysterics!" she said in her old sharp way. "Go on and hold his hand yourself!" She gave Kittle Klein a gentle push toward the doctor's door, the years had suddenly rolled away.

And Kittle Klein went into the doctor's office, her pale, faded face all pretty with a new light. Hank would live and the past was past. The men turned curious eyes upon her. They didn't know, but that didn't matter. She went to Hank and he put out his hand to her. Outside, Miss Mary was hurrying home to get things ready for the coming of Hank. Her face had not held a look like this for many years.—Jerome Hart.

Conversion in England (From the London Catholic Times.) H. Down, manager of the National Provincial Bank, Ledbury, and his wife and entire family, together with a number of other members of the Church of England, were received into the Catholic Church at Ledbury on Christmas Eve by the Rev. Father Negley, rector of the mission. The Rev. F. V. Reede, grandnephew of Charles Reede, the novelist, and lately curate at St. Clement's Anglican Church, Cambridge, has also been received into the Catholic Church. The ceremony took place at the Oratory, Edgbaston.

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From "The Meadow Lark" I heard a Lark in the meadow sing: "Life soon passes!" He called from his throne of grasses, "Life is vanishing, vanishing!"

"O Bird," I cried, "what hope is thine, What longed-to-morrow, That thou shouldst such contentment borrow, Nor for thy little day repine?"

I watched him and I pondered long. On my ear beating, Came to me dominant, entreating, That liquid affluence of song. What hope, what rapture in that strain! Like flaming fire My soul swept up and could not tire, Borne on those gusts of bliss and pain.

I mounted at Heaven's gate to cling, "Life soon passes!" Oh joy! O voice from the grasses! Life is vanishing, vanishing! — Evelyn Phinny, in the February Atlantic.