



Evening Prayer

By Sarah Pottinger

(Adult Category)

Cranmer's call to prayer is silenced and has been for many a month; a deep voice breaks the hush: 'O Lord open thou our lips.' But my grief frozen mouth remains unable to shew forth praise of any kind. Once a sister, but no longer, my heart breaks every morning anew when it wakes to the reality of what life now is. A fiancée still, by means of scrumpled, scribbled, notelets, to a man whose face I can barely remember and whose touch I have yet to know.

'O God, make speed to save us.' Yes, please do, I implore you; hasten to help us awaken from this hellish dream. Every evening I trudge across the Square to the Minster and plead with this invisible, seemingly useless, God - my faith in whom died with my brother, killed by a gas attack near Ypres, one might say - but still I come, because in truth I am too afraid not to. This God might have it in his power to bring Bertie home to me; and so I keep trying to believe it.

The pews creak as the scant congregation rises. We are the same select group most evenings, each accompanied by grief and hope in differing measure. Smiles and nods are exchanged but little more in this public place for private thought and prayer. We are the faithful few, and every evening I take my place among this little band and do the best I can amidst my grief to praise the name of the Lord with whom I am utterly furious.

'Deliver me, O Lord from the evil man: preserve me from the violent man; Which imagine mischiefs in their heart; continually are they gathered together for war.' The psalm begins and I find myself overwhelmed - I feel that all too familiar prickle behind my eyes. My confusion and guilt and my own useless existence swirls, and now I am angry. I am preserved from the evil man and from the violent man, but at what cost? My own dear brother's life, and he just one amongst countless others. Why am I here, in this little Dorset idyll, when our boys are not? Why have they been taken from us so

brutally? And how is it that people can bear to go about their business and to the market on a Saturday as if all is well?

King David's words stick in my throat - I feign a cough. The antiphonal nature of the psalm provides little respite betwixt my feeble efforts. My face is wet now, glistening with warm tears on my stony cold cheeks. Yes, hear the voice of my supplications, let no burning coals fall upon them, cast them not into fires or pits! Send them home, all of them! English, German, Russian, or otherwise, they are boys, brothers, husbands, lovers. They all deserve to dwell in your presence, each and every one. I am trembling now, but unsure as to whether the biting cold of this harsh winter, or the agnostic fury bubbling within me is the cause.

We sit, I dream. The monotonous tones of the Rector resonate through the half-darkness, with the tale of some Abrahamic fratricidal rift. Man has changed so little: What a fool he remains, master of his own destruction.

...

'My soul doth magnify the Lord', and my spirit is rejoicing in God my saviour - no, his saviour - for this morning at Allendale house we received the most welcome letter. Bertie is alive - he is alive! And he is soon to be on his way home. I can scarcely believe it! He hath exalted the humble and meek; He hath filled the hungry with good things!

We sit, I dream. The monotone Rector seems slightly, only slightly, more animated. A tale of hope, of love and of a new kingdom. Yes, He is alive.

'Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace'. I smile - what perfectly apposite words. I feel that all too familiar prickle behind my eyes, my eyes which have seen thy salvation. My face is wet now, and I am trembling - but it is joy, sheer joy, and not the cold of this late November day which is the cause. 'O Lord, shew thy mercy upon us.' Thy salvation has been granted to us: now I can dare to dream, to look to the future. 'O Lord, save the King.' Mercifully you heard us when we called upon thee! 'Give peace in our time, O Lord.' And so you have - so you have! My cheeks flush with excitement as I do my best to stifle my relief laden sobs. We shall be together once more, we shall marry, we shall pass our time in rest and quietness. He and I: united.

The well-rested Quarterjack chimes as our Holy huddle emerges from this ancient monument to hope. The sun has set, and yet there is no darkness in this night; no peril; no danger. The sky is the same sky which has accompanied me home evening after evening on this purgatorial treadmill - but tonight it seems lighter, softer, and in an almost inexplicable way, loving. Amen.