

# Mary

Ellesa high

MARY

by Ellesa High

A light but steady rain was falling on the city, softly touching buildings, sliding silently down weathered walls into slimy pools in the streets. Nothing moved. Only the cold rain drifted in shrouds of mist, silent and hushed. It was like a foggy night in a graveyard—concrete tombstones of buildings, tumbled and leaning on each other, windowless slabs with only “Condemned” signs for epitaphs. There were no flowers adorning these graves, no trees, not even a blade of grass, but for mile after mile there was nothing but concrete. Concrete and more concrete—seeming to freeze all life into asphalt tombs.

On this block, as on surrounding ones, the streets were empty of all signs of life. Rain alone walked the alleys. The only faint glimmer of light came from the church at the end of the block. Its bell tower reared majestically over the roofs of falling buildings heaped around it. From the top of the tower, Maria could see the lights of the inner city shimmering on the distant horizon. Surely it must be heaven there, lit up by a million stars!

In all her thirteen years, Maria had never been more than a few blocks away from home. So she would climb the many steps to the top of the tower and gaze toward the light, wondering and dreaming what it must be like in heaven.

Of course the only time the lights could be seen was after dark, and she would have to sneak out of the house. No one was on the streets at night now, and many people were afraid to even come out during the day except for sheer necessities. It was too dangerous. Packs of faceless gangs roamed like wolves over the deserted streets and alleys, destroying with vicious cunning anything that moved. But with five other children in the family, it was fairly easy for Maria to slip outside without being missed. Then, like a small shadow, she would dart over to the church.

Tonight she just had to escape after a too-small meal for too many mouths. Of course Papa was gone, maybe for days, but when he was gone the children screamed even louder than when he was there, brooding silently over the table. Every meal the children would try to take Maria's share, and every time her mother would say, "You kids, taking hers cause she can't talk. Give it to her." Then after dinner her three other sisters and two brothers played games, yelling and whooping, while Mama muttered under her breath and did the dishes. Maria quietly slipped through the cracked wooden door, down the hall, and into the dripping streets.

Every time she entered the church, it was like finding a treasure. She stood, clapsing her thin hands together, staring fixedly at the high vaulted ceiling many heavens above her bedraggled head, and at the eight strained glass windows on the sides of the church, as if for the first time wondering how rainbows had been caught and put in the glass. Then she walked toward the altar where Father Joseph was refilling the supply of sacred wine. It seemed that he was always pouring a fresh draught of holy drink into the silver receptacle on the altar. Maria thought of him this way—even when not performing sacred duties his clothes seemed full of the warm smell of wine.

Father Joseph looked up and stumbled down the single step as he came forward to greet her.

"Ah, my little Maria, I didn't expect you tonight. I thought the rain—but I should have known. I am so glad—You are the only one today that has come."

She usually was, for even on Sundays only a few old women dared trek from home to church for service.

"Yes, I have been alone all day. I didn't give a single mass. If only you could talk, I could at least give a confessional."

She waited patiently through his sighs for the next part of his daily sermon.

"But Maria, we all must suffer. Life is not easy, the way is hard and filled with pain, but the afflicted will receive their reward in heaven. The poor will be rich and the blind will see. There I will have a full congregation and you will be able to sing praises to God. All is light and love in its joyous streets. Someday we will see it, but we must be patient."

She was sure she had already seen this wonderful place where God lived and angels fluttered. As always she turned and ran toward the tower steps, and Father Joseph's bent and faded figure walked unsteadily back to the altar where he continued to drain and refill the silver pitcher of wine.

Maria skipped faster than usual up the cold stone steps that spiraled closer and closer together as she neared the top of the tower. Her quiet moon-like face was faintly flushed and her small bird-like lips parted in quick breaths. She flew past the giant rusted bell with a broken rope that hung in silence, as it had hung—crucified in soundlessness for year after year. She felt close to that bell—for no one she knew had ever heard either of their songs or even troubled themselves to rub the rust away and see the burnished metal below.

But tonight Maria did not stop to look at the bell or even stop to think of it in a moment's rest. The sad rain drops and Father Joseph's weary face had filled her with an unknown fear. She must see heaven and be sure it was still there! She reached the window of the tower and peered out anxiously.

No heaven! No lights shimmering in the distance! No shining horizon of hope, now or ever! Only weeping mists and fogs of night. No, it must be there—it was always there—her eyes frantically searched the dark again, but the windowed rains of winter had veiled the world in darkness. The clear autumn nights were over and would only be remembered in the soot and ashes, mourning of winter snows to come.

She walked slowly down the winding steps, again not stopping at the bell. She saw nothing. The agonizing muteness in her throat that



also froze the bell's tongue in motionless space would never be changed now. Never!

She turned the last round of steps and moved from force of habit back toward the altar. She didn't even notice Father Joseph hunched on the step to the altar instead of his usual heavy sleep in one of the pews, until she almost hit him.

"It has been a horrible day today." His pale blue eyes were slightly out of focus and his thin body was all drawn together.

"No mass, not even a confession. Day after day." He tried to concentrate his eyes on her face.

"Oh, Maria. It's you. Why couldn't it be someone else? No one comes—I can't bear it any longer. It's all over, life is too hard, too long. If only you could talk. . . . It's all over for me, but not you. See Mary?"

He gestured jerkily with one arm at the statue of Mary surrounded by a circle of glowing candles.

"She is your guardian. You are named after her. She intercedes for us to God. She protects us. She will help you find your way."

He mechanically muttered some other passages like the poor will be rich and then weaved toward the confessional booth, stumbling through its cobwebbed entrance and collapsing in a stupor.

Maria just stood for a moment. How could Mary intercede for her if there were no heaven? It could not be, yet the Father said it was so and she had always believed him before. Perhaps she could not see as well as not speak. Maybe, by some miraculous chance, if she prayed to the Virgin Mary she would guide her to heaven.

Maria dropped to her knees in front of the statue, squenching her eyes tightly shut. Her hands trembled in prayer. "Please! Help me, Mother of God. Lead me to heaven. If I can speak, I will only say praises to you. Oh, please!" She looked pleadingly up at the statue's face. Its plastered countenance was benign but black. Maria covered her face with her hands. "Please, please! Show me the way! Show me the way!"

She heard a low voice but could not tell if it were someone speaking close to her or the inner whispering of her mind. The thing under the ground that moved. Yes, yes, it could take her! She knew it could! Others rode it all the time, but she never could tell anyone she wanted to ride too. She would force herself on it! It would take her to the shimmering lights of heaven. She wiped her face triumphantly on

her already tear-stained dress and walked quickly out of the church into the rain.

There were the stairs leading below the street. Clampering down them, she ran into the subway tunnel, but there was only deeper blackness in the mazelike tunnels that jutted away in several different directions.

A slight movement suddenly broke the tomb-like silence. Like rats the gang of pimple-faced hoods began moving toward her. There was no action in the town tonight, and the constant rain had even forced this pack of long-knived vermin into their holes. Here was something to do at last! No one spoke, but a low snicker and a shuffling of feet filled the air.

Maria backed toward the stairs. She could not see them, but that horrible laughter—She burst up the stairs into the street and ran toward the church, but closer and closer—that laughter, always behind her—She threw open the doors and ran to the statute surrounded by glimmering candles. "Oh please Mary, help me! Help me! Please, please!"

A scream shattered the air and for the only time in her life she could speak.

AHOWAH! Her screams shrieked through the church, echoing slightly up the bell tower. Then rough hands grabbed her shoulders and threw her into a pew. They shoved themselves into her body, then slashed and gorged the rest of her body into mangled pieces.

Father Joseph never moved in the confession booth, and the statue stared on—benign but blank.

