

A Voice in the Darkness

by Larry Edwards

He rounded the corner and barged into a half-filled garbage can, tripped and caught himself, then stumbled on. His breath was coming in ragged gasps, and his side where he pressed his right hand felt like it was on fire. But he couldn't stop. He could hear their footsteps echoing off the pavement, and it sounded like they were gaining on him.

He came to the end of the alley and paused. Sucking in great breaths of air, he struggled to clear his head. A sharp pain in his chest caused him to cry out, but he quickly cut it off. Looking behind him once more, he staggered onto the sidewalk, then stopped as a scream sounded.

An old lady, her hands pressed to her face, her eyes opened wide, stood staring at him. He stepped toward her, just to ask her not to make so much noise, but she screamed again and fled in the opposite direction.

Confused, he watched as she ran to the end of the block and disappeared from sight. He felt sweat drip into his eyes and raised his left hand to wipe it away, then froze. That was why the old woman had screamed. He was still carrying the gun in his hand. He cursed and jammed it into his belt, then winced as another pain stabbed through his chest.

Removing his right hand, he saw that his entire side was covered with blood and that a small pool of it had already collected around his feet. And behind him, leading from the alley he had just emerged from, was a bright trail of red drops.

He cursed again. All they had to do was just follow the blood and they'd have him. Taking his handkerchief from his back pocket, he pressed it hard against his side and stumbled on.

He ran in the opposite direction the old woman had taken, crossed over the street and down another alley, then still another. He stopped, knowing that he couldn't go much farther. Maybe it would be best if he just gave himself up, just sat down here against the wall and waited for them? No, he couldn't do that. They'd probably shoot as soon as they saw him. That's what they did when someone shot a cop.

Straightening, he pushed away from the building and peered around the corner. Nothing. To his right were a few buildings, stores of some kind, but since it was Sunday, none of them were open. In the other direction were more buildings, and a filling station, but they were closed also. The only thing alive that he saw was an old mangy dog sniffing at a fire hydrant.

He watched the dog for a second, thinking that it looked like the mutt he used to have when he was a kid, then shook his head. What was he doing, thinking about something like that! It must be the loss of blood.

The pain was getting worse now; every breath that he took felt like someone was driving a knife through his lungs. A cough shook his body and he saw blood where he had spit. For a while he stood there, swaying slightly. Then the street seemed to shimmer and he had the strangest feeling that the

sidewalk had turned into a roller coaster. His stomach lurched and he felt the bile rise in his throat, but he swallowed it back down.

A siren sounded and he jumped, almost passing out from the pain caused by his reaction. He had to keep moving. He lurched across the street and down the other side, past the filling station. He then turned down another street and followed it for a few blocks until he was forced down another alley where he spotted a patrol car.

The sight of the car gave him new strength and he raced along the pavement, darted through the door of a burned-out apartment building, then climbed through a window on the other side. Then the strength left him and he slumped against the wall. He could run no farther.

Wildly he looked around. Then he saw it; its spires rising tall into the morning light, seeming to beckon him, to call to him. Bracing himself against the pain, he pushed away from the building and started for the church.

It loomed larger and larger before him, its stained-glass windows staring bleakly at him, the wide arch of its doors taunting him. He mounted the steps, then fell against the door. Taking the handle in his hand, he held his breath, then sighed when he felt it turning and the door sliding open.

Slipping inside, he closed the door behind him and leaned on it, resting his head against his chest. He felt his eyes beginning to close and he forced them open. He couldn't let go now. No one would think of looking for him here.

Then the thought hit him. What about the people who came to this church? When did they arrive? Though he figured it to be only about five-thirty or so, he didn't know when the services were held here. Maybe the church had a basement, or a small room off from the rest of the church that they didn't use.

He heard a sound in the street behind him—footsteps—and he whirled, pulling the gun from his belt as he did, and slowly began backing down the aisle. He bumped into a pew but didn't fall. His eyes remained glued to the door.

Dammit! Why couldn't whoever it was just walk on? He didn't want to hurt anyone. He hadn't wanted to shoot that cop. If only he hadn't stuck his nose in!

His back struck something solid; he whirled and almost fired, but something in the eyes held him. For a second he thought he was losing his mind, then he realized what it was. It was Jesus nailed to the cross! He had backed into the altar. And the eyes of Jesus seemed to be looking into his own.

He knew it was just the lighting, and maybe because of the way the figure had been built, but those eyes seemed to be trying to tell him something. They seemed to possess a life of their own.

He heard the doors to the church begin to swing open and he tore his eyes away from the crucified figure. He lurched to his right, stopping when he came to the end of the pews. He had to hide. The door was almost open.

Glancing to his side, he saw what looked to be a large, black closet with two doors. He lunged through the closest one and slammed the door behind him. All was silent. Then he heard the footsteps again, coming closer, closer, almost as if whoever was out there knew where he was.

He gripped the gun, aiming it at the door. Please don't come. Please don't. The steps came to the door and his finger tightened on the trigger. Then they passed it, and he heard the next door open, then the rustling of clothes.

He stared at the wall, then noticed a small window set about three feet off the floor with a small black curtain. Hesitantly, he reached forward and slid the curtain aside a little and peered through the window. He could barely make out the shape in the darkness.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

He quickly dropped the curtain and brought his gun back up. Then he smiled, He was in a confessional. He leaned forward and slid the curtain aside again.

"Father . . .?"

The voice was that of a girl and not too old either. He judged her to be in her late teens.

"Father, are you there?"

He had to say something. Taking a deep breath and wincing from the pain, he knelt and brought his face to the opening, then said, "Yes Child." He hoped that sounded priest-like enough.

The girl stated again, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

He racked his brain for something to say, but the pain from his chest was making thinking hard to do. Finally, he just repeated what he had said before, "Yes, Child?"

"Father, I don't know how to start. I mean, I . . ." her voice trailed off and he could hear sobbing coming from the darkness.

"My Child. Surely your sin is not this great." He felt like kicking himself in the ass when he heard the girl break into heavier sobbing.

He mumbled, "Damn," at which the girl's sobs became frantic. She moaned and said, "I know, Father. I'm damned for my sins. I know."

He felt his legs buckle and he slid to the floor, bumping his head on the side of the confessional box, "Hell."

"Yes, Father, I know I'll spend eternity in hell for what I've done! But I love him, Father. And he loves me. We want to be married, but our parents won't let us."

For a moment he lost track of time. Red spots swam before his eyes. Little squiggles of light shot back and forth in the booth, crashing off the sides, exploding off the floor. Then the sound of the girl's voice brought him back.

" . . . and we knew that it was wrong, in the eyes of the Church, but we didn't mean anything wrong by it. We didn't! We love each other."

He whispered weakly, ". . . you love each other?"

"Oh yes, Father. Very much so. That's why I can't understand it being a sin. If two people love each other, then why it is wrong for them to show it?"

He wiped the sweat from his brow and edged closer to the small opening, "Does your parents know about this, er, do your parents know about . . .?"

"No, Father. I'm afraid to tell them. That's why I came here. I thought that . . . I mean . . . if there was any way that I could be forgiven for what I've done. Then maybe I could tell them and they wouldn't be so upset. If they knew that the Church forgave us."

He didn't respond. His thoughts were jumbled, not only from what had happened to him, but from what the girl had said. Evidently she really believed that she had sinned. And for what? For making love with a boy she loved, whom she wanted to marry? He shook his head. Why couldn't those bible-thumpers leave the young alone?

He remembered when he was young. He had sown a few wild oats himself, but he had never worried about offending any God. Hell, why should he? Even though his parents had attended church regularly, he'd stopped going when he was ten or eleven. He hadn't been able to see why it was such a terrible thing to have a little fun. And he still didn't.

He whispered, "Are you so sure that what you did was a sin?"

There was silence for a while before the girl answered him, "Father?"

He said, a bit stronger, "Do you really believe that what you've done is a sin?"

"But Father, doesn't it say in the Bible that one should resist the sins of the flesh? To beware of the cardinal sins?"

"I asked, 'Do you believe that it was a sin?'"

She hesitated, then answered, "No Father, I do not. But I am not the Church."

He thought, then said, "Which do you think is worse? Bringing a life into the world, or taking one out of it?"

"Why, taking one out of it, of course."

"You know, there are many people, good and bad people, who take the lives of others each day. Some do it on purpose, others by accident. Some even by love. So how can you say that the act of creating life, especially if that life is created in love, is a sin?"

"But Father, we are not married in the eyes of the Church."

He chuckled, then said, "Neither were Adam or Eve, but that didn't stop them."

He heard her gasp and thought that he might have gone too far, and he started to continue, but he heard the massive door to the church open, then footsteps sounded. He raised the gun and pointed it at the sounds.

"Father, are you still there?"

Without taking his eyes from the door, he answered, "Yes, my Child, I am still here. I am just praying for guidance." He heard the rustle of her clothes, then her whispered words as she joined him in prayer, and he thought, "Make it a good one, Child. Make it a good one."

He heard the footsteps lead to the girl's door, then heard the girl's gasp of surprise when it was opened. He waited, his finger beginning to tighten on the trigger, his body preparing itself for the bullets he knew would come any second.

The girl's voice was indignant, "What is the meaning of this?"

Another voice, strong, masculine, answered, "Uh, we're looking for . . . I mean, have you seen a man enter this church?"

She answered, "I've been in confession with the Father." Then, anger in her voice, she continued, "What right have you to come in here and interrupt my absolution? How dare you enter a house of God like this?"

He listened, a smile on his face, as the policeman stammered his reply, "Well, uh, you see, we're after a really dangerous man. He killed a policeman in a drug raid. We followed him, but lost him a few blocks away, so we're canvassing the area trying to see if we can find him."

The girl answered, "And do you see him here? I'm not sitting on him. And the good Father's certainly not."

Damn! He wished she hadn't mentioned him. He braced himself. As soon as that door opened he was going to shoot.

"Excuse me, Father, but I'm afraid I've got to ask you a few questions."

He slowly squeezed the trigger as he heard the knob turning in the door, then hesitated, and said, "Son, do you know what it is that you do?"

The knob stopped turning.

"I'm sorry, Father, but we're looking for . . ."

He interrupted, "I know who it is that you are searching for, but do you not hold anything holy? Do you not know the sacredness of confession? Have you no fear of the Lord?"

The policeman answered, "I'm sorry, Father. I really am. I told them that he wouldn't be in here, but they wouldn't believe me."

He loosened his hold on the gun. Maybe it was going to work after all.

"Then go, my Son, and sin no more."

To his amazement, he heard the policeman turn and begin walking away.

Damn, it was going to work!

"Father?"

It was the girl again.

"Father, excuse me if I sound stupid, but are you saying that I am forgiven for my sins?"

"My Child, what are your sins that you need be forgiven for?"

"But surely in the eyes of the Lord . . ."

At her mention of the Lord's eyes his thoughts turned to the figure on the cross. How could those eyes belong to any God who would damn this poor child for what she did?

"Child, do you really and truly love him?"

"Yes, Father, I do."

"And if your parents knew that the Church did not believe you to be guilty of sin, would they allow you to marry?"

"Oh, yes, Father. They would."

"Then go, my Child, with the blessing of the church. Enter into marriage and be happy and know that what you have done is not a sin, but a token of your love for your beloved and for your God, for how better a way to worship Him than to bring about a life in His Name?"

"There is no penance?"

He thought for a second, "Are you from this church? I mean, do you attend services here?"

"No, Father. The priests at my church are very strict, and . . . forgive me Father, but at times they seem to be overly zealous at their calling, especially when it comes to sins of the flesh."

He chuckled, "Dangers of the trade."

"What, Father?"

"Nothing, my Child. Just go with a light heart. You have no penance to make. God be with you forever, my Child."

"Bless you, Father. And thanks."

He whispered, "I'll need it, Child," as she left the confessional and made her way to the door. When he heard the old door open and shut, he tried to push himself to his feet, but he was unable to do so. He dropped the gun and pushed, but he couldn't raise himself.

He was dying and he knew it. That bullet had gone through his side and travelled upwards, perhaps going through his lungs as it went. He laughed. What a place to die, at least for him. In a church!

He thought about those eyes again. Maybe he, too, would be forgiven? What was he saying? He didn't believe in that crap! Look what believing had done to that poor girl. At least she would be happy now, and no thanks to any Power that is.

He heard the door at the front of the church open again, then footsteps once more make their way towards the confessional.

Damn! Now what? They sounded too heavy to belong to the girl. He reached for the gun, but found that he didn't have the strength to lift it. So be it. Let them get him. The laugh would be on them. He was almost dead anyway.

He waited for the door to his cubicle to open, and was surprised when the booth next to him was opened and someone was seated. What was this?

He felt the blood begin to pound in his head, and the dimness of his booth darkened considerably. His breath seemed to catch in his throat. As he began to lose consciousness, he heard the voice of the policeman, "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."