

The Storyteller.

THE PROFESSOR'S SACRIFICE.

THE professor threw down his pen. The last word was written; the work was done. The neat pile of closely written manuscript on the table before him represented months of patient toil before which the strongest day labourer would shrink appalled. Days whose long mental strain knew no relaxation, when the needs of the body were almost forgotten; nights when the taxed brain, still whirling under the fierce pressure, could not be soothed to rest.

But now it was done, the work that would rouse the admiration of all his *confères*, that would give him the only immortality for which he hoped; the work that, like the mighty tower of old, was reared defiantly against the power and wisdom and justice of the living God.

Not that the professor had any such satanic intention; indeed, he cherished vague tender memories of a certain shadowy old cathedral, through whose incensed aisles, echoing with solemn chants, he had been led by his sweet-faced Catholic mother in the far-off past.

But this memory only lingered like a poetic fancy, a morning dream. His mother had died in his early childhood; his father, a careless parent, had married again; and life had become stern, hard prose. A godless home, godless schools, godless teachers, had done their work. Now at forty-five, the professor was as honest a pagan as any who lived before the Star of Bethlehem beamed on the darkened world. If down in his deep strong nature there were any doubts, clamourings, longings, he silenced them with the shibboleth of his clan, 'I cannot see—I do not know.'

The professor was a bachelor. Many years ago a beautiful and noble woman had crossed his path, to whom his heart had yielded the homage that is only given once in a lifetime. His love had been hopeless; already her pure soul had chosen the 'better part,' and a few months after her gentle but decided rejection of his suit, she had entered a religious order abroad. Since then Science had been the only queen of his life, and right royally had she rewarded his service. As writer, lecturer, teacher, his fame extended over two continents; and now this work which he had just completed he felt, with a thrill of pride, would be his crown.

It was the close of a wintry day when the professor put the last stroke upon his manuscript, and rising, with a long sigh of relief, looked out of his window. The western sky burned with a crimson sunset that was flashed back from the city's spires and casements until it melted softly into the violet shadows gathering among the eastern hills.

There was no warring of the light and darkness; but in the opaline gulf between one star already trembled on the very borderland of night and day.

Just opposite the professor's apartments was a little Gothic church, with whose pastor, an old French priest, he had a slight acquaintance. It was sodality evening, and as he stood watching the sunset, the solemn tones of the organ, accompanying a chorus of sweet young voices, welled through the air.

'Father Blanc seems holding high festival this evening,' said the professor with a smile, as he flung up the sash that he might better hear the music which recalled the sweet dream of early childhood, the clearer vision of her who had turned from him into high mist-veiled paths beyond his sight and reach.

And weary with the long strain of effort, the professor stood lost in softening reverie when a hearty clap on the shoulder aroused him to meet the cheery gaze of his old friend Doctor Grey, who had entered unobserved.

'I knocked three times, Lester, and seeing the door ajar ventured to push it open. What's the matter? Are you hypnotised?'

'No,' said the professor laughingly, 'I was simply relaxing; unbending the bow after a long strain. It has been a year since I have taken time to dream.'

'I am glad to find you at leisure,' continued the Doctor, briskly, 'I came with an odd request. There is a poor young chap dying in 'La Misericorde' who begs to see you.'

'Who is he?' asked the professor.

'Oh, you don't know him. His name is Ward—Philip Ward—and though not more than twenty-three or four, he has, I judge, run the gamut of life pretty rapidly. It has brought him down in a quick decline, and he is in a bad way mind and body.'

'But what can I do for him?' queried the professor.

'Absolutely nothing that I can see, was the grim answer. 'It's one of those queer dying fancies that one cannot account for; but he seems to think you can quiet him; give him backbone to meet the inevitable. It seems that he has attended your lectures; read your books; in short, regards you as a sort of high priest of the new scientific cult, and feels that you can cheer or encourage him. I told him I would see you this evening, for the poor lad's hours are numbered. Will you come?'

'Certainly,' answered the professor, though conscious of chilling reluctance to the visit. 'I will go with you at once.'

It was but a short walk to 'La Misericorde.' It was a superb new building—the bequest of a wealthy philanthropist to his native city—entirely free and non-sectarian in its beneficence; managed by trustees, and attended by physicians of all denominations. Its founder had made only one binding clause—that it should be under the charge of the Sisters of Charity for ever.

'And a level-headed arrangement,' said Doctor Grey, as he led his friend through the grounds and entrance hall. 'No fussing; no love-making; no fighting for places and salaries. There's a woman here in charge that I believe could command an army; they imported her for us. She has been through war, famine and pestilence abroad, and fears nothing. She has the heart of a saint, and the head of a

statesman. You can not know Sister Angela without believing there is some place better than earth where such women belong. But here is the room of my poor young patient. You may guess he is in a bad way when even Sister Angela cannot manage him. I have been obliged to get a strong man to hold him in his paroxysms.'

They entered a half-open door, as he spoke. On the spotless bed, in the middle of the little room, lay the pitiful wreck of a once glorious manhood.

The gaunt, wasted frame still showing what had been its early strength and grace, the well-shaped head, with its dark curling locks, must once have been a fitting model for an Apollo or an Antinous. Now it lay so rigid and ghastly on its pillow that the doctor thought for a moment all was over.

'Gone, has he?' he asked of the man who met him near the doorway. The nurse shook his head.

'No, sir; just worn out after one of his wild spells. He will break out again in a minute; his pulse is strong yet. I don't see how he holds out.'

'Keep him as quiet as you can. This is Professor Lester, the gentleman he has been asking for. When he rouses, let him see him.'

And the doctor hurried away to his other patients.

'You are not a clergyman, sir?' said the nurse, doubtfully.

'No,' was the answer.

'Because I could not vouch for my patient's civility if you were. He raves at the very mention of one. Take a chair, sir, he is rousing now.'

The dying man turned restlessly on his pillow as his visitor seated himself at his bedside. The face that met the professor's gaze was that of an absolute stranger, yet the dark burning eyes, sunken in their cavernous sockets, flashed with recognition.

'Professor Lester!' was the hoarsely-gasped greeting. 'You've come to me; I thought you would.'

'Certainly,' was the kindly reply, as the professor took the icy hand extended to him. 'I am glad to be of any service to you. What can I do for you?'

'Do for me! What you have been doing all these years.'

'All these years,' repeated the professor, mystified. 'My dear friend, I fear you mistake me for some one else. We have never, to my knowledge, met before. I do not know you.'

'But I have known you,' panted the sick man eagerly. 'I've heard your lectures; read your books, your writings. You've taught me to see things as you see them, professor, to break loose from all the cursed shackles the prating, canting fools would put on us; to be a man—a free man. I've done it.'

The professor shrank from the evil light that flashed into the dying eye.

'There wasn't any heaven or hell to stop me; so why shouldn't a fellow have his swing? Mine was a wide swing and a fine one, though it seems it wasn't to be a long one. Now they tell me it's come to an end. I've got to die'—a shiver convulsed the gaunt frame—'to die, I've believed in you, professor. You've studied and read and settled up all these things, I know. I've heard you knock all the priests' and parsons' teachings to bits. I want you to tell me, now, again, so it will steady me, what this thing they call dying is?'

There was a moment's silence; the professor found himself mastered by a horror, a repulsion too deep for words. This shattered, evil wreck boasting himself his pupil; appealing to him for guidance and help! But this was no time for protest or argument; the burning eyes, the working lips, the death-damp on the brow, compelled brief and kindly reply.

'Death is the end of all pain, all weakness, all sorrow, all suffering,' he answered gravely.

'Do you know that? How do you know it?' gasped the sick man, clutching his hand.

'That's what comes troubling me in the darkness; that's what burns in my brain and sounds in my ears; that's what is driving me mad with—with—cold creeping fear. Do you know it's the end? Because if you do, I'll snap my fingers at death and all that it brings. I'll believe what you tell me. Look in my face, tell me—as a man to man—do you know that dying is the end of all? do you know?'

The professor, honest gentleman that he was, could only reply:—

'My friend, I answer you as I think, as I believe. I cannot see, I do not know.'

He was unprepared for the awful outburst that greeted his reply.

'Liar! traitor!' were the words that, with a torrent of awful imprecations, fell from the foaming lips. 'You have led me to the brink of hell, and you do not know.'

Shriek after shriek rent the air as the wretched man writhed in another wild paroxysm of rage and pain and fear.

Shocked beyond words at his own part in this scene of despair, the professor sat mute, bewildered, helpless, while the strong nurse strove to hold the struggling patient, when a slender, white-coiffed figure glided to the bedside.

'Leave him to me, Sister Angela,' warned the attendant; 'he may harm you.'

'Begone, woman, begone!' hoarsely cried the dying man; 'don't come near me with your cant. It is too late! I am lost!'

'Not yet, not yet,' answered a low voice, sweet, yet stern in its melody. 'You shall listen to me, Ward. I will not leave you. I am going to kneel here beside you and pray to the God of infinite goodness and love, before Whom you soon will appear, that He may have pity on your poor soul, and in this last hour of His mercy spare you and save you yet.'

And kneeling down she prayed aloud in simple, touching words that a child could have understood, for mercy, for pity, for pardon.