

# The Storyteller

## THE CHURCH OPPOSITE

St. Paul's Church across the way—Gothic in outline, of grey stone and vine-covered, with a plot of grass in front of it, a pretty rectory, also of vine-covered stone, in a well-kept lawn to the right, tall maples hiding the roofs of both church and rectory—was the deciding pro in a decision made difficult by a variety of cons in favor of the front room in Mrs. Dawson's select boarding-house.

A spinster without domestic ties, with an inherited tendency to rheumatism, an inherited love of the beautiful, and an inherited meagre income must perforce acquire a sound judgment and an instinct for relative values if these qualities happen not to be also a part of her inheritance.

The room had pea-green paper, an ancient Brussels carpet with faded roses still clinging here and there to its threadbare surface, and a set of cheap oak furniture; but a change of heart in Mrs. Dawson, I reasoned, might result in fresh wall paper and a painted floor with rugs, while nothing less than fire or flood could remove the church—the church that recalled halcyon English days, uplands of daffodils and daisies, youth, friends, and the fleeting bits of happiness that had been my portion; the church that brought back forgotten poems of Wordsworth and the quieter lyrics of Tennyson; the churchyard with its bird choruses in the maples, its splendid moonlit solitudes, where I and myself, so long close friends, could ponder over the strange whys of life, and find in the stars above the dark-leaved maples the key to its higher and finer things.

Mrs. Dawson proved open to conviction in the matter of wall paper, and a lady giving up housekeeping sold a rug ridiculously cheap, so all things worked for good and verified the soundness of my judgment.

'Nearly all my boarders go to St. Paul's across the way, whether they be Episcopal or not,' explained Mrs. Dawson. 'I guess you'll find about the best preaching there, and by far and away the best music. I'm a Baptist myself, and I don't believe but what the Lord when he said He baptised, meant baptised like He was in the River Jordan, and not just sprinkled, but I ain't got no call to meddle with other folks' beliefs.'

However, the good woman had troublesome suspicions of a call to meddle with mine when she found that I passed by the beautiful little church opposite, with its allurements of 'good preaching and the best music,' to wend my hobbling rheumatic way to a large, square, ugly brick structure some ten squares off, where an Irish priest offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

On my return she said: 'The nicest people in Ovington are Episcopal, or Episcopalian and Presbyterians, a few rich folks are Methodists, but the Catholics are nearly all of 'em just plum common!'

There was evident her twin desire to enlighten a stranger as to the unwisdom of her course and to give a telling knock to an old foe. As a faithful subscriber to the Baptist flag, Mrs. Dawson's prejudice against all things Catholic was easily explained.

'I'd think you with your rheumatism would want to go to the nearest church, and Mr. Elwell is the next thing to a priest, he wears a sort of white night-gown when he preaches, and has candles on the altar, and he reads prayers out of a book, so I'd think you wouldn't find much difference between his church and your own. It beats me how a free-born American can abide havin' an Eytalian in Rome bossin' her Church!'

I ventured the modest reminder that St. Paul had been a Roman citizen, and therefore ineligible according to her for the titular saintship of the church opposite, but Mrs. Dawson met me with the incontrovertible statement that St. Paul is dead.

I did not pursue the argument. It seemed strange to have these old insular prejudices, that I had associated with Know-Nothing outbreaks and an iron age of culture, lift their heads in hostile greeting at the threshold of my new home. Coming straight from Europe, where four-fifths of the denominations that flourish in America are not even known by name, and where some worthy people are not sure that Unitarianism is not a sort of fruit or fresh-air cure, it was a distinct shock to find that I must readjust my mental attitudes.

On my way to early Mass I not infrequently fell in with Mrs. Desmond and her daughter Annie, whose acquaintance I had formed when in quest of lodgings. The one was old, bent, work-worn and shabby, the other beautiful, dainty, and fashionably gowned. To do her justice, Annie Desmond's clothes were largely the result

of her own skill and taste, and represented time, days and weeks of time, rather than mere dollars. In fact, as I got to know her better the girl's life seemed to resolve itself into two unequal portions, the one given to preparation for parties, the other to the parties themselves. The Desmonds belonged to the social struggles. Mrs. Desmond, a widow who earned a living for herself and her children by keeping boarders, appeared to have no ambitions for herself; and this patient self-abnegation made her over-weening ambition for Annie, her first-born, partake almost of the nature of the heroic. The hard tasks of life were for her, the pleasures for Annie. Annie's hands were white and soft, fitted for playing the piano, at which she spent several hours a day, embroidering a lunch cloth, or gracefully plying the tennis racquet.

Annie Desmond, I soon discovered, occupied but a tentative place in Ovington society. Her friendships, formed in the High School, were the stepping stones, and her own superb beauty was the hostage to whatever of popularity she enjoyed among the leading people. The girl was, indeed, so exquisitely beautiful that to look at her was a delight—a mass of Titian hair, a complexion of snow and roses, brown eyes and well-cut features, marred only, to the hypercritical, by a little chin, round and babyish and weak.

In our desultory chats on the way from Mass Mrs. Desmond confided many of her past disappointments and future hopes to me, seeming to attach an undue importance to my point of view of life and things in general, my long residence in Europe giving me some sort of prescriptive right, in her eyes, to set up as arbiter of standards and usages. The novelty of the situation had its amusing side. As for Annie herself, her admiration was so evident and artless that it would have taken a flinty heart to fail to respond with a very real affection.

I saw a good deal of Annie; frequently she passed my windows, now with one young man, now with another, sometimes with two, so that there was really no cause for surprise when one glorious day in October she flashed by with Horace Granger in his dazzling new automobile.

The Grangers are the leaders of the leading people in Ovington, and Horace is the only son. His father is president of the Ovington First National Bank, director of a street railway, owner of a wheat ranch of five thousand acres. All this wealth will one day be the heritage of Horace and his two sisters. Ovington mothers are merely human, so that Horace was a sort of Buddha in a swallow-tail coat.

Mrs. Granger is an autocrat with iron-gray hair and a double chin. Were she to wear crinolines and blacken her teeth the other Ovington matrons would speedily do likewise. When she appears at a party I cannot help thinking farcically of flies around a dish of honey. A handsome, masterful, naturally intelligent woman she is, made supremely arrogant by the adulation that has so long been her portion. I am constantly reminded by Mrs. Granger of another autocrat whom I once knew rather well—Mrs. Radcliff, who reigns over a bigger, oh! a much bigger kingdom, although Mrs. Radcliff would, I am sure, haughtily resent the comparison. Mrs. Radcliff has many things lacking in Mrs. Granger—a fine perception in accents, a cultivated judgment as to pictures and tapestries, an intimacy with French and German and Italian, a familiarity with high society in many lands; yet despite these multitudinous differences I still hold my opinion as to the kinship of the two women; their souls, if not sisters, are surely first cousins. For I have discovered in the course of a long and varied career that human nature is very, very human.

I confessed to myself a lively curiosity as to how Mrs. Granger regarded Annie Desmond. The attitude of the son did not leave one long in doubt. The automobile had become Annie's oar of triumph. I sometimes wondered just what Horace found in the girl, apart from her rare beauty, or was there anything else, was that the all-sufficient charm?

The other girls were divided into two camps, the philosophers who turned to the rising sun, and the bats who tried vainly to hide it under the little tab of envy.

Shortly after Christmas Annie came to see me, to announce in starry-eyed ecstasy her engagement to Horace Granger. It was joy to witness her joy. Cinderella and the Prince were, indeed, no far-fetched parallel. The world and its treasures by a touch of a fairy's wand had become her own.

After her engagement was announced I did not see much of Annie; naturally her time was taken up with her lover, the round of social functions in her honor, and the trousseau. Being a philosopher, too, in my small way, I realised that my own importance to the girl's sense of altered values had speedily dwindled. I,