

The Storyteller

MISS HETTY'S TRAMP

Miss Hetty Bonsall lived alone in the house that had belonged to her forefathers for generations. Not quite alone, either, for she had one servant, Nora, who had been in the family since before Miss Hetty was born, and who remained with her, faithful and capable, when the last of her kindred were laid beneath the sod.

Miss Hetty had never married, but she was not at all a blighted flower. Quick, reserved, gentle, and refined, as it was in her blood to be, she had mingled more or less with her friends and neighbors, until the great event happened in her life which made things different. Not suddenly, sharply, or cruelly so, yet decidedly and unmistakably different. Miss Hetty had become a Catholic. The only Catholics in Mapleton were servants, laborers, and factory hands, and when 'it' happened, people shook their heads, and touched their foreheads oracularly, but sadly—needing no spoken word to express the thought that was in them. As time passed, and Miss Hetty—save in this one particular—continued to be exactly her old self and the scarcely breathed theory as to her sanity fell to pieces, her neighbors, still at a loss to account for her strange idiosyncrasy, endeavored to resume their old cordiality. But things were changed, and their mutual relations were never quite the same again.

But if Miss Hetty noticed it—and she must have done so—she never made a sign. Her religion was so comforting and consoling that it made up for everything.

Her conversion had come about in a peculiar way. One evening as she sat watching Nora peeling apples for pies, she asked:

'Nora, how is it that you have always been a Catholic?'

'I was born one, Miss Hetty.'

'Nobody is ever born into a religion, Nora.'

'Well, my people were Catholics, and when she was dying mother made your mother promise to send me to the Sisters' Orphan Asylum. But she hated to see me go to an asylum, and kept me herself instead. She felt it her duty to have me taught the religion of my parents, and sent me over to Four Rivers to Mass every Sunday, besides having me instructed in my Catechism. She was a fine, good woman, Miss Hetty.'

'Indeed she was. And you have clung nobly to your faith, Nora. For a long time you were the only Catholic in Mapleton, weren't you?'

'Yes, Miss Hetty.'

'And now you have a nice church, and a good priest, haven't you?'

'Yes, Miss Hetty.'

'Nora, I am going to tell you something. I have never before breathed it to a living soul. You remember that year I went to the Conservatory at Boston?'

'Yes, I remember it well.'

'I met a young gentleman there whom—I liked—very much. He was studying music. He was a Catholic. When I discovered it I couldn't—well, I had a wrong idea of things then, and so it was ended.'

'And that is why you never married, Miss Hetty?'

'I think it is,' rejoined Miss Hetty, with a little sigh. 'After a while I was not unhappy, but I could never see any one else whom I liked as well. Now you have my little secret. Something in the appearance of your new priest suggests him. Do you think I might call, Nora?'

They were simple souls, both—the servant as simple as the mistress.

'I think you might,' said Nora, and Miss Hetty did. Something had stirred the slumbering past in the spinster's heart. She did not know, she could not know what had become of her youthful lover, but she found herself longing to learn something of the religion he had professed. The result was that the close of the year found her a Catholic. Nora declared that it was a reward for the kindly act of her conscientious mother. Miss Hetty rather leaned toward the same opinion, and Father Furlong said that God not seldom acted.

If Miss Hetty had not had the consolation of religion to sustain her, it is doubtful if she could have borne her subsequent misfortune. In less than a year after her conversion she became blind. She could no longer sew, but she could knit; she could not read, but many times during the day the beads passed through her long, slim fingers, and no one ever heard her murmur.

Deep down in her virgin heart Miss Hetty had always treasured the memory of that youthful fancy, which if it had not been peremptorily and somewhat rudely nipped in the bud, would later, in all probability,

have died a natural death. There were various reasons why it should have been so. There had never been the slightest declaration of love on either side, not even so much as the pressure of a hand. But the timid admiration pictured in a certain pair of Irish eyes had more than once brought a faint blush to the girlish cheek, and though the terrible discovery made, one Sunday morning on her way from the Congregational church, had caused her, as she thought it her bounden duty, to crush the sweet blossom of love beneath the heel of renunciation, she had never actually known those agonies which are known in romance as the pangs of disappointed love. There is hardly a doubt that Miss Hetty was what is vulgarly, but expressively, called 'a born old maid.' Nevertheless, she had cherished a tender recollection, enjoying rather than suffering a gentle sorrow so exquisitely fanciful that it was not in any sense allied to pain. She had had her one little hour, and it had set her apart, in her own imagination, for sweet remembrance that could hardly be called regret.

Since she had been blind Miss Hetty always sat on the piazza overlooking the side garden, where Nora could see her from the kitchen and attend to any of her needs. One evening as she sat thus, busily knitting, the fleecy clouds of gossamer wool dropping lightly and swiftly through her fingers, a shuffling step sounded on the gravel walk.

'Good morning, madam,' said a voice that had once been musical, and was still not unpleasant in its intonations, 'is there any job that a man might do about here to earn his dinner?'

'What can you do?' replied Miss Hetty, letting her work drop into her lap, and glancing nervously about her, while a slight pink flush mounted to her cheeks.

'Do not be alarmed, madame,' continued the man, noticing her perturbation, and attributing it to the dread which many nervous women feel at the sight of an unknown wayfarer.

'I am not—alarmed,' faltered Miss Hetty, as her hands fluttered quickly above her work; 'I am blind.'

'Blind?' echoed the stranger in a sympathetic tone. 'What a pity!'

Then Miss Hetty called to Nora, who was broiling steak, 'the appetising odor of which must have been grateful to a hungry man.'

'Nora,' said Miss Hetty, when the old woman appeared, 'here is a man, to whom I would like you to give a good, satisfying meal. He is anxious to do some work in return for it. Have we anything—is there—any odd job—Nora?'

'He might chop some kindling,' answered Nora. 'But I can't let my steak burn. Go to the kitchen steps, my good man,' she continued, 'and wait there till I dish up Miss Hetty's dinner.'

But the tramp, for such he was in every line and furrow of his dissipated face and slouchy figure, had already taken off his cap and seated himself at Miss Hetty's feet. Resting both hands on his knees, and leaning his curly grizzled head upon them, he looked long and earnestly at the faded, flower-like face, from which beamed forth the pure white soul within. And as he gazed his brows contracted in a frown, he compressed his loose, vacillating lips together, and his bleared, bloodshot eyes grew moist. He must have had an unusually tender heart for a tramp, for he shook his head compassionately once or twice, blinked his bleary eyes, and rose to his feet.

'I can't weed a little just here while I wait,' he said.

'Do so,' replied Miss Hetty, who had resumed her knitting, and he fell to work. While he weeded he hummed snatches of tunes to himself, and again Miss Hetty's hands fluttered nervously through the ice-wool shawl she was making, while her soft brown sightless eyes, beneath their half-closed lids, became suffused with retrospective tears. At dinner her manner was nervous and agitated; Nora could not understand it.

'I do not think I shall take a nap to-day,' Nora, she said, when the meal was finished. 'I will just go back, with my work, to the piazza.'

'Very well, Miss,' said the faithful handmaiden, leading her to her accustomed place; 'but do you feel just yourself? You look feverish.'

'There is nothing the matter, Nora,' replied Miss Hetty. 'I prefer to sit here.'

When Nora went back to her kitchen the tramp had finished his dinner. He sat, with one elbow on the table, surveying the comfortable room.

'That is Miss Bonsall?' he inquired.

'Yes,' replied Nora; 'Miss Hetty Bonsall.'

'You and she occupy this large house alone?' he continued.

'We do,' rejoined Nora sharply; 'but we're not one bit afraid of tramps and thieves. We have a big dog that we let loose at night, and burglar alarms on all the doors and windows. And we have very good neighbors.'