

The Storyteller

INTO THE SUNSHINE.

'Dwell who will in the valley below
I go up into the sunshine!
Free and warm and glad in its play,
Light and life are in every day,
Burning to brighter and brighter day.
Let who will in the valley stay,
I go up into the sunshine!'

A clear, birdlike young voice sang the words, and they were borne on the scented summer air from a flower-laden garden through the long, open windows of a richly-appointed room. But though the song was full of cheer and the surroundings delightful, no joy, or even passing pleasure was brought through all to the solitary listener, the occupant of the handsome apartment and the mistress of the splendid home, of which it was a part.

A little, shrivelled woman, well towards middle life, yes, 'shrivelled' describes her; always plain of face, marred still more by grieving and disease, which last had also distorted the frail form, so that few could envy the sole heiress of the late Judge Vernon, notwithstanding her great wealth.

'Oh, papa, papa!' she moaned in new anguish, as the singer moved on and the words became inaudible. 'There is no sunshine for your poor Albe, any more, now that you have gone away from her—away behind those awful clouds that dark, dark night—And where? oh where? Into the darkness, papa dear, far, far, far from your Albe. And you left her in darkness here, there to stay until she goes out into the night too, Oh, if that could only be now!—if I could go and meet you, then would the sunshine come to me—no matter how deep the night all about us. But to linger on here alone, alone—no one to care for me—the poor, deformed creature, the insignificant little cripple who can only buy attention with money! Not a loving thought or a real kindness to expect from a living soul! Oh, I cannot bear it—I cannot bear it!'

With arms outstretched and face between, pressed against the polished mahogany table as she half stood, half lay, sobbing wildly.

Judge Vernon had died suddenly a month before, seated in his library. He had passed away some time after midnight, when a fierce tempest was raging without. Alice, aroused by the storm and frightened, had come to the library both to chide her father for remaining so late and to seek his company, when she found the hand upon which hers rested rigid in death.

The shock almost destroyed the life, then the reason of the bereft daughter—the cherished, idolised daughter, who was now utterly alone in the world, and who had sad need of solace and love. Wealth was hers indeed, but as to all else that makes life fair, she was poor as the meanest pauper. She was unlovely, feeble in health and deformed in body. Timid and reserved, clinging only to the one parent she had ever known, and receiving from him the tenderest of a father's affection and solicitude. To him his little Albe—his 'wee, girl' always—was the sweetest and most beautiful of living creatures. Nothing was too good for her—no attention too lavish. He surrounded her with luxury but more with love, and she was happy—so happy—never for one day waking separated from 'dear papa.'

But now he was dead, and she was sick and alone—alone, and oh so lonely, so wretched and despairing. The doctor had ordered her to the air of this mountain hamlet, where she could 'get into the sunshine and gain strength,' he said. And so she had come—here to the great house where she was born, and which she had never seen since her early childhood, all her life since having been spent in a splendid city home or in travel in foreign lands. She had come up to the old house with her maid only the night before unannounced even to the faithful old caretakers. And now she is seated in the drawing-room thrown open to the sunshine for the first time in a full score of years, while her maid gathering flowers for mantel and table, carols gay notes in the garden beyond.

The long, weary summer day passes and the evening falls. Alice is glad of the approach of the night—the sombre hours accord best with her gloomy feelings. As the shadows gather she suddenly starts up from the couch upon which she has been prone for hours, and donning a little hat with veil closely drawn, goes hobbling across the lawn and out upon the well-trodden path to the village.

'No, don't come with me, Lena,' she calls back to the maid, who is about to follow. 'I want to be alone. I am only going to walk a little way. I will be back presently.'

So she goes down the gradually-sloping descent passing huts and cottages until presently she approaches a little frame edifice, where from a tiny bell in a hat-topped little bell is sending out its summons. About the door is gathered a motley group, among which a company of little girls in coarse white frocks and flower-wreathed heads are conspicuous. These form into line, two by two, and after them a company of boys in white blouses and blue badges follow in the same fashion. The procession enters the church, the stragglers about the door following after.

By an impulse, half involuntary and half desire perhaps to divert her mind, Alice enters also sinking into the first seat just within.

'A Catholic church!' she says to herself and gazes about with contemptuous comparison of the poor, bare little temple with the magnificent cathedrals of the faith, she had so often visited abroad. Here are blank walls, unpainted woodwork, a bare floor, where the footfalls—the tramp of coarsely-shod feet, resound distressingly. The altar, a cheap wooden structure, is scarcely made attractive by a profusion of common garden flowers. But the people assembled seem content and devout without. From the old woman beside her in the print gown running a big wooden rosary through her rough, red hands, to the rapt young priest, whose profile looks so like the pictured saints of some of the masters, all are lost to earth, upraised beyond the cloud of human care as they conduct and join in the act of worship, so strange and incomprehensible to the one apart, the rich owner of the mansion on the hill, but really the dweller 'in the valley below.'

It is a strange ceremony to a non-Catholic truly. The children in gala attire again form in line, the foremost carrying a little tinsel-fringed banner. Toward the end of the ranks of the girls four of the larger ones bear a flower-entwined litter on which is a statue of the Blessed Virgin, in comes the priest in his robes carrying the Sacramental God, an acolyte, swinging a smoking censer, preceding him.

'O gloriosa Virgo,' sang the children, placing their burden, the painted statue, on a flower-decked shrine. Another hymn, also in the language of the long past, then the priest made the sign of the cross with uplifted monstrance over the low-bowed, hushed assembly and a few moments later the crowd surges out.

Alice remains, lost in thought, engrossed in study of a problem which in absorbing rests her tortured mind. The subject of her speculation is. What is it in this singular creed which brings the seen and unseen into such close communion, which makes the mysteries beyond part and parcel of life here, which soothes and solaces every lot, gilds the commonplace and hard ways—brings all, who truly follow the light of this faith up out of the mists of the mortal sphere—up into the sunshine.

Her occupation, or preoccupation, was so deep that it was with a start she aroused as the last light was extinguished, save one glimmering red shining along from the direction, doubtless coming to lock the doors, and Alice, rising, groped her way into the little vestibule.

The priest, just turning away from the outer door, stepped aside and held it for her to pass.

It was not late, and the long summer evening had not yet faded into night, so that Alice looking up as she passed the black-robed figure, caught sight of a kindly, pitying look in the face that inspired her with the desire in some way to seek his assistance. The priest by the same intuition, divined that the afflicted little stranger needed help, and as she for a moment hesitated on the step, he addressed her with a kindly, commonplace remark about the beauty of the evening.

Alice, answering, turned her wistful, grief-stricken face toward him. She had pushed up her veil and her expression told a story of sorrow, even before her faltering voice gave utterance to words.

'Sir,' she said, huskily, 'I am in very great trouble. I have recently met with a sad bereavement, a loss by death which leaves me quite alone in the world. I am physically afflicted also, as you see, and I have no friends—no soul who really cares for me. I have no religion, either nothing real, I mean, nothing that can do me any good now. Like those acquaintances, whom I called friends, who were pleasant to deal with when one did not need anything from them, I have adhered to a form of religion—a denominational profession, you know, but I find it has nothing for me in my hour of trouble. I have noticed—I was noticing to-night, when I happened in here, how this belief of yours seems to compensate for everything—seems to reach the depths and heights of human living. Will you tell me about it? Will you explain it to me, and see if I cannot get something of its solace—something of the enthusiasm it lends and which lightens—which seems to lighten even the gloom of the grave—the awful gloom in which I am now despairing?'

She was in tears as she concluded, and the priest took her cold, trembling hand in gentle clasp.

'My child,' he said, and his voice had a jovious ring strange in the mission of consolation, 'you are going to be very happy by-and-by—yes, happy beside your grave, because of it. Come to me at the rectory at any hour convenient for you to-morrow. It was by no chance, sad little one, you came into this church to-night. God's good angels led you thither. You are going to come often now and find here such joy and peace as you have never known. You are going to be a Catholic.'

Alice did not feel so confident of this last, neither desirous, but she went away with a sense of hopefulness of something better to come, she had not experienced in any degree in the dreary weeks since her loss, and for the first time since went to sleep that night on a pillow stained by tears.

The next morning she arose refreshed and with mind alert with a plan she had conceived just before dropping to sleep the previous evening. She had determined to study out in the human side the excellence of this religious system in which she was to be instructed: she would conceal her identity as the rich Miss Vernon in her intercourse with this priest and such others here as she might be brought into contact with. She would be known only as a poor, despondent friend of the house-keeper come to make a little visit for her health, then she could better learn from their conduct toward her the depth and sincerity of their profession as the true followers of the great Friend of the lowly—the Christ of the manger and the carpenter's shop at Nazareth.