

# The Storyteller

## THE ROMANCE OF A MOSS ROSE.

### I.

'I think he will die.'

The voice that delivered that sentence seemed to come to my ears from vast regions of silence. I opened my eyes (or thought I did) and saw great plains of desolation stretching out, out unto infinity, and all the awful space was filled by that voice. Whose voice was it? God's? Not thus doubtfully does the All-Knowing speak! Man's? Could human tongue fill heaven and earth with its simple utterances? Then I felt myself sinking as gently, as slowly as a feather floats down to earth. This was death.

I had heard how in those last moments the past is unfolded before the soul, for it to read thereon its sins and behold the future punishment they deserve, so I waited. But instead of old, forgotten infractions of the law there rose before me two scenes from those dead years around which instead of a sin a romance of youth was woven.

I was born and reared on a farm in Kentucky—the best place for man or woman to begin existence. My parents were in fairly prosperous circumstances, and there being no necessity for me to begin work on the farm, I decided to fit myself for the profession of medicine. The summer after my graduation I spent my vacation with an uncle in the town of Paris. My uncle's home was in a quiet street, where each house stands back in spacious lawns, whose guardian oaks and elms give them a country seclusion. The property adjoining belonged to a teaching Order of nuns.

As I sat alone by the window my eyes would wander towards the convent. A high fence separated the two lawns, but as the convent was built close to the dividing line, my window gave me a full view of it. I saw the green yard dotted with flower beds, the brick walks, the long, vine-hung piazzas, and if the shutters had been unclosed I could have looked into the rooms. But the windows were closely screened, no light showing anywhere, and the white convent lay like an image of death in the pale moonlight. Like all young doctors, I held myself to be very wise, and as I watched the convent I meditated on the lives of the women who occupied it.

'How utterly useless and unavailing are their days,' I mused. 'There those women are, immured behind those walls, leading an unnatural existence, no good either to themselves or to others. Why, the very flowers they grow are doing more good than they. The flowers at least fulfil the mission for which they were intended.'

As thus I thought my glance fell upon the flower beds. One I particularly noted. It was fashioned in the shape of a heart. In the centre grew a tall plant, a rose bush, I conjectured. Many silly thoughts were mine as I looked on that heart-shaped bed, then I grew sleepy and retired.

The next morning, at a seemingly unearthly hour, the ringing of the convent bell aroused me from a deep slumber. I looked at my watch and saw that it was 5 o'clock. The newness of my surroundings drove sleep from my eyes, so I rose. When dressed I opened the shutters. The convent wore a more cheerful aspect than my fancy of the night gave it. Another bell rang, then for half an hour nothing was heard, no one was seen. Then from various doors on the ground floor nuns came pouring out—some dressed all in black, some with white veils, some wearing the dress of the women of the world, but with lace caps on their heads. They paced the walks or moved among the flowers, while not a few hurried from the kitchen to the milk house, bearing pails or pans or pitchers of milk and cream. And all was silent except for prayer. At a ringing of a third bell they went into the house. As I now gazed upon the flower yard and convent I found my preconceived notions about nuns evaporating, and Tennyson's noble lines took on a grander meaning—

Thrice blest whose lives are faithful prayers,

Whose loves in higher love endure;

What souls possess themselves so pure,

Or is there blessedness like theirs?

As the thought occurred to me that my standing there overgazing the convent and its grounds was, to say the least, questionable conduct, a girl appeared. She was young, I felt she was beautiful, and I experienced a sensation of relief as I saw that, although her dress was black, she wore neither veil nor cap. Her arms were hanging by her sides, and as she stood thus something in her attitude suggested dejection, perhaps misery. Before I could frame a possible thought as to its possible cause, she lifted her black skirt and crossed the yard to the heart-shaped flower bed. As each step brought her nearer her beauty dawned on me by gradations: the erect, supple figure, the head crowned with clustering curls that glistened like gold in the sunlight, the fair oval face, with a soft color in the cheeks, the scarlet mouth, and although I could not see the eyes, I knew they must be beautiful. As she reached the bed and stretched forth a hand toward the flower, I exclaimed softly: 'The white wonder of dear Juliet's hand!' The flower was held between a small thumb and forefinger, and I observed that it was a rose, a moss-rose, almost full blown. As she examined it a regress came to one of the windows and called the young girl to breakfast.

Presently I was summoned down stairs. I was burning with curiosity, but I realised that I must not let my

aunt discover this, and I asked no questions regarding the girl until the following day. My aunt had come to my room with a letter from home, and after hearing its contents she stood for a moment by the window, looking across the fence toward the Sisters' yard.

'That plot of ground is the prettiest I have ever seen!' I remarked, casually.

'Yes, the Sisters have no trouble in getting their flowers to grow and bloom,' replied my aunt. 'They are very sweet and generous with them, too. Many of my best plants were started by them and given to me.'

As she was speaking the young girl, accompanied by a nun, appeared and they began to walk slowly up and down the shaded path, apparently in deep conversation. My aunt looked at them for a moment, then she drew down the blind.

'All the Sisters' boarders have not left them?' I remarked, carelessly, taking up my letter and refolding it to place it in the envelope.

'That is little Marion,' replied my aunt. 'She always stays with them. Her mother was a favorite pupil of the superioress—that nun you saw just now with her—and when Marion was left an orphan and penniless, Mother Eleanor took her. She was only six years old then, and now she is 18. She graduated this year. I suppose she will soon join the Sisterhood.'

There was no reason why as I heard the last sentence I should instantly conceive such a dislike for the venerable lady who was walking in the yard beyond with the young girl. Gradually this dislike began to embrace all Catholic nuns in general, and this community in particular. Instead of the gentle, amiable women they are, I beheld in them a strong arm of the Roman Church reached out to draw into the gloomy cloister the fairest of their sex, and, binding them by solemn vows, leave them to unutterable misery and desolation. I am ashamed to confess it, but when my aunt went down stairs I raised the blind and began to watch the girl and her black-robed companion. I fancy the girl looked even more dejected than when I had first beheld her, and I noticed that she rarely turned her face to the nun, who seemed to be speaking most earnestly, nay, pleadingly.

For a full hour they paced that shaded walk, and as my eyes followed them I wove a terrible tragedy around the life of the friendless girl. I had not the slightest doubt the nun was telling her how sinful the world was, how wicked were all men, and that if she ventured away from the convent her soul would be irretrievably lost. Her only redemption was to remain in the cloister.

'She will frighten the poor child into joining the Order! I exclaimed to myself, will she not suffer then?'

A novice called away the superioress. When alone the girl took out her handkerchief and held it for a moment to her eyes. The sight awoke all my chivalry. I determined to save the doomed girl. But how could I do it? She was utterly unaware of my existence. How could I inform her of it and my desire to save her? If I were to attempt it, might she not see in the very act an indication of man's wiles and evil designs, and in consequence fly to the cloister for protection? As I debated she returned the handkerchief to her pocket and crossed the grass to her heart-shaped bed. For a moment she held the rose between a thumb and finger, looking at it longingly. The sad thoughts which I felt were in her mind made me long to speak, and assure her of my nearness. Fortunately I recalled my aunt's warning; but if my voice were still my voice called out to her. I think—and like so to think—that its voice reached her, for she lifted her head and looked up toward the window before which I stood. For a moment our eyes met, then, with a bright blush on her face, she turned quickly and went into the house.

I pulled down the blind and staggered back into a chair. She had seen me! But what if a nun had seen us both? I shuddered as I thought of the consequences that might fall on the innocent girl. Then I realised that I loved this girl called Marion with the deep love of a young man of one and twenty years.

I went to my room early that evening on the plea of feeling ill. It was no falsehood. I was ill in mind, for I heard from my aunt that there was to be a reception of novices at the convent in a few days, and she expressed the belief that Marion would then enter the Order. I was nearly frantic at the thought. How could I save her from that terrible fate and myself from endless misery? I was firmly convinced then if Marion would not be my wife I must commit suicide. Life without her could not be borne. I lived over for the thousandth time that brief encounter of glances and pondered how I might rescue her. I decided to climb the fence and steal her rosebud. Then when she went to the bed in the morning and found the blossom gone she would look up at the window. I would be there and give her some sign by which she would know of my love and desire to help her. At midnight I climbed the fence and cut pretty Marion's moss rose from its parent stem. I slept but fitfully that night, and long before the deep-voiced bell called the Sisters from their slumber I was at the window waiting for the girl. At the regular time the black robed figure appeared on the walk and my heart gave a thump. She stepped across the grass to the heart-shaped bed. When she beheld her mutilated plant she gave a little cry of sorrow; then she looked toward the window. I dramatically held the rosebud toward her, lifted it to my lips, and laid my other hand on my breast. Surely she could not mistake that silent language of my heart's devotion and undying love! She made no answering sign, but again turned abruptly and left the yard.

All that day and the next I waited for another glimpse of Marion. Then I knew that we had been seen by some of the nuns and instantly began to imagine the