

Ash Wednesday.—The name, Day of Ashes, goes back at least to the eighth century. The ashes used are made by burning the remains of the palms blessed on the Palm Sunday of the year gone by. Before the Mass, the ashes are blessed, sprinkled with holy water, and fumigated with incense. Then, in accordance with a very ancient custom, the faithful, having approached the altar, are marked by the priest upon the forehead with the ashes, and are reminded of death in the solemn words: 'Remember, man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return.' This custom of distributing to all the faithful arose, perhaps about the 8th or 9th century, from a desire to imitate the practice observed in the case of public penitents. These, during their period of penance, went about clad in sack-cloth, and with ashes sprinkled upon their heads. This custom has Scriptural warrant: 'And the men of Ninive believed in God, and they proclaimed a fast, and put on sack-cloth, from the greatest to the least. And the word came to the King of Ninive; and he rose up out of his throne, and cast away his robe from him, and was clothed in sack-cloth and sat in ashes' (Jonas iii., 5-6).

The Storyteller

THE WOMAN NEXT DOOR

Judge Sullivan was deeply perplexed.

There was no doubt that the boy was guilty. The evidence was conclusive and direct. The boy had admitted his participation in the burglary with a defiant manner that almost amounted to boasting. He had refused stubbornly to make any explanations. He had declined persistently to tell the identity of his companions in crime.

But why was he guilty?

This was the question that perplexed the judge. Here was a boy of respectable parentage, apparently normal, much better educated than the average, well-dressed, and certainly not driven to burglary by necessity, calmly admitting that he had helped rob a jewellery store, and despite his admission, daring to look the judge straight in the eye.

Surely there must be some extenuating circumstances, something to account for the boy's conduct. Perhaps he might even be hiding the guilt of some one else through a mistaken sense of honor. Though neither evidence nor investigation had revealed any circumstances to warrant it, Judge Sullivan felt that it was one of those cases in which leniency might properly be exercised if there could be found any possible excuse.

The boy—George Westerly was his name—was the son of most respectable parents. The Westerlys were one of the leading families of the town. The boy's father was in court now, his head bowed with shame at the disgrace his only son's crime had brought on him. Judge Sullivan knew the elder Westerly well, knew him as a staunch churchman and sterling business man. They belonged to the same club and met at many public and private dinners.

He knew, too, that the boy had a fine mother. Mrs. Westerly was a leader in women's activities and widely known as a patron of the arts, yet with it all having a reputation among the women folk as an excellent housekeeper. The boy's sisters were associates of the judge's own daughters. Often, when he got home early, he found the Westerly girls there, both of them lovely girls, active in church affairs and popular in society.

For the family's sake, as well as the boy's, Judge Sullivan hesitated to inflict a prison sentence. To do so would be to put an ineradicable stain on the whole family, yet the crime had been a flagrant one.

The jewellery store that had been robbed was right there in their own town. A policeman had discovered the burglars at work. They had shot and dangerously wounded him. Two of the thieves had escaped. The third—the Westerly boy—had been cap-

tured. In his pocket had been found a revolver. Fortunately for him, none of its cartridges had been exploded.

'George Westerly,' said the judge in kindly tones to the prisoner, 'before sentence is pronounced upon you, is there anything you would like to say in your own behalf?'

Sullen and defiant as ever, the boy eyed the judge without a quaver and shook his head.

'Nothing whatever?' insisted the judge.

'None,' said young Westerly. 'I was caught with the goods and I'm ready to take my medicine.'

In still deeper perplexity Judge Sullivan turned to the father.

'Mr. Westerly, is there anything you would like to say in your son's behalf?'

The father stood up. He made a mighty effort to stand erect, to throw off the burden of shame and grief. He strove unsuccessfully to control his voice.

'Your Honor,' he said, 'I cannot account in any way for my boy's behaviour. I have tried my best to bring him up in a proper way. I have heard the evidence. I have heard his own admissions. I have learned how he must have been deceiving me. He has not only sinned against the community but he has brought everlasting disgrace on his own family—his mother, his sisters, on me, his father.'

At the thought of the shame that was to be henceforth theirs, Mr. Westerly's face hardened, and his voice became stern, relentless, unforgiving.

'I ask no clemency for him, even though he is—he was my son. He has broken the law. He has disgraced his family. He has dishonored his parents. It is best—best for all of us—that the law should take its course. I would ask you only to punish him as his crime merits. The boy has sinned and he should suffer.'

Even though a sobbing woman in the courtroom gasped audibly at the heartlessness of the father, young Westerly betrayed no emotion. He listened to his father with the same defiant, impersonal stare with which he had looked at the judge.

Wiping his glasses and clearing his throat, Judge Sullivan opened his lips to sentence the prisoner, when there was a commotion at the doors of the courtroom.

A frail little white-haired woman, helplessly crippled, was being pushed into the room in a wheeled chair. Even before she was well inside of the room she was stretching out her arms appealingly to the judge.

'Oh, Judge, Judge,' she cried, 'is George Westerly here? I'm not too late, am I?'

At the sound of her shrill piping—like a child's voice grown old and cracked—everyone turned to look. They saw a slender mite of a woman—shrivelled to almost nothing, with a face wherein a million lines told of days and nights of suffering—stretching out little bits of claw-like hands appealingly towards Judge Sullivan. The prisoner saw her, too, and started. His look of sullen indifference gave way to a glad smile that quickly faded. For the first time shame, red shame, crept into his cheeks and his lips quivered.

The little old woman caught sight of him there before the judge. With an imperious gesture she made her attendant push her chair rapidly up the aisle until she was close beside the prisoner's box. Court attendants, lawyers, spectators, even Judge Sullivan himself, observed her curiously, wondering what was about to happen.

'George,' she said plaintively, addressing herself to the prisoner, 'I only just heard about it or I'd have been here sooner.'

Somebody snickered, and Judge Sullivan rapped sharply for order. 'Madam,' he said, leaning forward that he might see the diminutive figure almost obscured by the desk before him, 'what is your interest in this case? Are you a relative of the prisoner?'

For the first time the intruder seemed to realise her surroundings. She looked about her with a dazed air and essayed to speak. At first she could not find her voice, and when she did it quavered so that she could hardly be heard.

'No-o-o, Mr. Judge—your Honor, I mean,' she explained. 'I'm not a relative. I'm—only the woman next door.'