

The Storyteller

THE MASTER OF THE MILL

I.

'What a picture that church spire with its uplifted cross makes against the sky!'

George Bryson smiled as, leaning forward in his armchair, he looked out upon the scene framed by the window of his little study. It was a typical New England landscape. In the valley lay a neat village, some of whose houses were quaint and old, dating from the Revolution; others aggressively modern and pretentious. Close beside the river rose an imposing pile of factory buildings—the Bryson Cotton Mills; Beyond the settlement, the woods and waters; and the fertile farms stretched away to the purple, mist-veiled hills.

The yellow belfry of the Unitarian meeting-house, almost embowered by the trees of the foreground, had been a familiar object to Mr. Bryson all his life. For he was born in the home where he now lived, and so much had his energy done for the development of his native township that it was now known by his name.

The lofty tower and grey walls of the church within a stone's throw of the mills were, however, a novel feature of the panorama.

'As I sit here sometimes, when the white wind-clouds drift pass the cross, it seems floating in the air; and again at a touch of the sunlight it becomes a cross of flame that sends my memory back to the legend of Constantine and his sign of triumph.'

As the elderly gentleman spoke, pleasantly, yet with the languor of one in ill-health, he turned toward his sister, who, flourishing the daintiest of feather dusters, stood at the reading-table, flecking imaginary dust from the magazines and newspapers and restoring order out of the chaos in which they were heaped together. Like her brother, Miss Bryson was no longer young. Against his sixty odd years she could count at least fifty-five; but she was still in the vigor of perfect health, and it might be seen at a glance that his strength was broken.

There was a striking resemblance between the two long, sallow faces. The eyes of both were light and keen; but while those of the man were calm and steady, betokening a nature that governed itself and was therefore capable of influencing others, the restlessness and fire of the woman's indicated an uncertain temper as well as an ardent disposition. George Bryson had always been considered handsome, but Miss Sarah's features were too masculine for beauty, and even in her teens she was called plain. Paris gowns, Gainsborough hats, and a certain savoir faire now gave her an air of distinction; yet she was, despite these accessories, a veritable Puritan spinster, who clung to her narrowness as tenaciously as if she had never been away from the village, and honestly believed that Dr. Holmes was right when he described Boston as the 'hub of the universe.'

On this morning, therefore, when her brother's gaze strayed again to the graceful spire that, like the hand of a missionary, held aloft the cross, her patience gave way.

'That Romish steeplespoils the view from this side of the house,' she said, sharply. 'How the mill hands built such a church I cannot understand. It must have a great debt.'

'The debt will be paid.'

'Well, if your operatives have funds to throw away, I advise you to lower your scale of wages, George.'

'And have a strike, with the mills idle when we are so rushed with orders that we can scarcely fill them all?' replied Mr. Bryson, quietly. 'You are an excellent housekeeper, Sarah, but I can still manage the mills—with Frank's assistance.'

His sigh as he concluded told that he had already been forced to delegate to another the larger share of the work he loved.

With a toss of her head, which presented a bewildering coiffure of curls and frizzes of the fashionable shade of 'Titian brown,' Miss Sarah went on with her dusting.

'I liked to go into the churches abroad,' continued her brother, amiably adhering to the topic. 'Their atmosphere attracted and impressed me with a mysterious peace. Until that illness two years ago which made it necessary for me to take a vacation, I lived for nothing but business and money-making.'

Notwithstanding the annoyance she naturally felt at being told, in effect, to mind her own affairs, Miss Sarah was not going to be silent and hear a Bryson depreciate himself.

'No one would dare say that of you, George,' she protested, restoring the feathered badge of her sphere

of authority to an embroidered case that hung on the wall and facing about, ready to sound his praises on the housetops if need be. 'No man in the township is so public-spirited as you are. Not only our local undertakings but almost every philanthropic organisation in Boston counts you among its benefactors. Why, I really believe you have given even to the Romish charities. There are the model houses, too, and the library you have built for the mill hands. Why, the mills are famous for never having had a strike but once. Then I must say, though, you surprised me; for you were as unyielding as adamant.'

'Yes, some new operatives held socialist meetings and tried to make trouble; but when they were discharged the matter was soon adjusted,' replied the mill-owner. 'But, my dear sister, all these enterprises of mine are but a proof to the world of my business and financial success. To be sure, I have tried to do some good to others; but I have been thinking lately that if we had learned a little more religion with our philanthropy in the yellow meeting-house yonder we should be the better for it.'

'Oh, the art and architecture of the European churches are, of course, magnificent,' conceded Miss Sarah, grudgingly. 'But how the beggars swarm in and out of them, and lounge on the benches of the porticos! Their presence is very obnoxious to sight-seers. I wonder the authorities do not drive them away!'

'Whom? The sight-seers?' laughed Mr. Bryson. 'Oddly enough, it was this very presence of the beggars that touched me. A Catholic cathedral seemed to me what it claims to be—the house of God to rich and poor alike. The rich come, look, sometimes pray, and then go; but the poor almost live in those churches; and occasionally an unwashed but beauty-loving vagrant of the streets may be found who knows the loveliness of an altarpiece of Guido or Sassaferrato better than the travelled connoisseur. The charitable institutions of the Continent were, moreover, a revelation to me. My own schemes of benevolence seemed petty enough when I saw men and women who had given up every natural tie and joy of life to devote themselves to the service of the unfortunate. We have indeed such heroes and heroines in this country also, only I never realised it before. Surely their religion must be something more than the breath of incense, the tranquility of Gothic aisles, or the majesty of Roman basilicas.'

'Well, no one ever heard of a Bryson being anything but a Unitarian, and I hope no one ever will,' declared Miss Sarah, emphatically, if with apparent irrelevance.

'No, Sarah; if you should happen to become a Theosophist or a Mormon even, we will keep it a dead secret,' replied her brother, with dry humor. 'By the way, I almost forgot to tell you Father Glenn is coming to dinner on Thursday.'

Miss Sarah raised her hands and eyes toward the ceiling.

'A Catholic priest coming to dine at the table of a Bryson!' she exclaimed, in horror. 'I shall not stay to see it; I shall go to Boston for a week's visit.'

'As you please, my dear,' rejoined Mr. Bryson. 'The gentleman, besides being a hard worker among his people, is, I am told, an enthusiast upon the subject of art and ceramics. I thought his conversation might entertain you as well as myself.'

Miss Sarah stared. A priest who was interested in rare old china, her particular fad! She wondered if he could decipher the mark on that piece she bought in Florence.

'Oh, well, George, of course I will not desert you,' she said, changing her tactics, and adding to herself: 'I will remain to protect my brother from this wolf in sheep's clothing, but it is very probable that I shall faint under the ordeal.'

II.

All too soon, according to Miss Sarah, the day arrived that was to introduce into the Bryson mansion the visitor whose expected coming was, she said, enough to make her Puritan ancestors 'turn in their graves.' But had the lady known what the morning would bring, even she would not have worried over so small a matter as an unwelcome dinner guest. Mr. Bryson awoke so listless that he did not rise; and the physician, being hastily summoned, warned the family that the illness from which the patient suffered had made alarming headway during the last few weeks. 'However, with rest and quiet, he may be better again,' said the doctor, hopefully.

George Bryson had long been a widower. He had loved his wife as a man of his strong, reserved nature loves; and now his affection was centred in their only child, Frank, who, grown to manhood, was at present the acting manager of the mills.