

The Storyteller

FOR THE SAKE OF A SOUL

If you had asked anybody in Deepdean who was the one indispensable person in the little parish, he or she would have answered immediately: 'Mrs. Pennywell.' Mrs. Pennywell was the only 'character' worth while, they would have told you, and although her first cousin, Father Devine, who was pastor of the church of St. Michael, called her 'Mrs. Pennywise,' half-jokingly, it was well for him that she was true to the name he gave her so facetiously. She was not 'pound-foolish' either; as careful with the none too plentiful resources of the rectory as if they had been her own—more careful, in fact.

She had been old Father Devine's housekeeper for eighteen years. Some said that in her girlhood and early womanhood great trouble had been her portion, and it was known that her two children were buried side by side in the little churchyard. She never spoke of them to any one. But if a child were ill or neglected Susan Pennywell's ready hands were there, and her sharp tongue also. She was a born nurse, and more than one lusty little fellow owed his life to her knowledge and her care.

She did not set aside the older folks—but her tenderness seemed all for the children, and there was no waif too poor to claim that tenderness, let his creed or color be what it might. Father Devine rallied her more than once on her 'young army,' and she gave him word for word, merrily and often wittily.

'What a mother Susan Pennywell would be,' said people often. 'What a pity her children were not spared to her.'

A strange light shone in the honest gray eyes when she heard this—not sorrow, rather the light of purpose and earnestness. They did not know how cheerfully and with what motive Susan Pennywell had laid her children side by side in the grave when the epidemic swept through the town a score of years before.

The Catholic church at Deepdean was a model of cleanliness, in which fact Mrs. Pennywell seemed to take a satisfaction amounting to pride. Often, when she was sitting in the back porch of the priest's cottage, she would lay aside her knitting or her sewing to 'run over' to the church for a look around, to see that nothing was awry. And generally nothing was. A village or two, perhaps, would be kneeling for a few brief moments before the tabernacle, for Father Devine kept the little church open, that those who so desired might rest from the world's care a little while and converse with God.

It happened one Match afternoon that Mrs. Pennywell had just taken from the oven one of the fine 'batches' of home-made biscuits which stamped her, in her opinion and that of her neighbors, the finest 'baker' in the town. She set the brown rolls on the table to cool, and surveyed them with silent satisfaction, her hands on her hips. Drawn perhaps by the savory odor—Father Devine was as bad as one of her 'young army' on baking-day—the priest appeared suddenly from the dining-room.

'I'll take ~~the~~ biscuit for my supper, Susan Pennywell,' he announced, chuckling.

'And be telling me what a fool I am to give you such things to-morrow,' she said, half-laughing. 'At your age, Cousin Luke, I'd be ashamed to ask for hot bread.'

'I've been eating yours a good many years now,' he answered. 'And I'm pretty sound.'

'Did you go to see Mrs. Daly?' asked Susan, irrelevantly.

'I did—the poor soul. She won't be living much longer.'

'And little Joe?'

The priest smiled.

'We'll do something for little Joe, Susan,' he said. Then looking back as he left the room, he added, quizzically. 'On one condition. hot biscuits—'

Susan nodded. Then she slipped her apron off and put on her hat.

'God make it easy for the poor thing,' she said under her breath. 'The poor thing!' Something choked her. 'Poor thing, poor thing!'

She knelt before the tabernacle, her kind heart sore for the woman who was dying, and for the little four-year-old boy who was being left motherless, and worse than fatherless. A shadow lay heavy on her forehead, and the lines about her mouth were set more deeply as she rose. Passing through the church, she noticed a man bending half over the top of the pew in front of

him, his gray head hidden in his hands. He did not look up, he did not hear her. The attitude of the body was that of a man exhausted either by fatigue or mental distress. When Mrs. Pennywell reached the door she turned, looking over the lounging figure with disapproving eyes.

'He don't belong to Deepdean,' she thought. 'Some tramp come in to sleep in the quietness of God's house.' She hesitated—then shook her head and went back to the cottage.

But, although she had much to do, and although she tried very hard, she could not get the memory of that bowed head and shrinking figure from her thoughts.

'Perhaps he was hungry,' she imagined. 'Queer if an ordinary tramp would come into St. Michael's. And if he wanted to sleep, why didn't he stretch himself out on one of the benches—'

Father Devine was sitting down to supper when word came that Mrs. Daly was dead. Susan Pennywell looked at her cousin with gloomy eyes.

'There's some strange feeling hanging over me, Luke,' she said. 'I'll go down and bring little Joe back with me. There was a poor old soul in church to-day who I thought was a tramp, and it seems to me now as if I ought to have spoken to him. I don't know why I feel this strange. If he's there when you go over to lock the door after supper, ask him if you can do anything for him. He's tormenting me, somehow.'

'Why, Susan woman, you're getting fanciful,' said Father Devine. 'Don't be letting such things bother you—'

'I'd hate to have a creature hungry near me,' said Susan. 'I—I was hungry myself—once—before you—'. That's past, Luke, but I can't forget it.'

Father Luke frowned.

'Good gracious, woman, you talk as if I weren't in your debt a thousand times over!' Susan Pennywell is the strong right arm of this parish. I'd like to know what I—'

But Susan was gone, and Father Devine left to finish his sentence to his untasted supper. He frowned portentously several times—Susan's allusions to the early years of her unhappy life always disturbed him.

She went down to Mrs. Daly's, where the neighbors were already engaged in the last kindly offices they could give the dead woman. There was nothing for her to do, so she stayed only a few minutes, and bundling up the frightened four-year-old child, she took him in her strong arms, comforting him with promises of the good things that were to be his when he reached Father Devine's house. Her way led past the church, and here she paused. The priest had not yet come to lock it up, and the lights from the two tiny lamps in the wall brackets shone dimly through the gloom.

'We'll go into the church, Joe,' she said tenderly. And we'll say a prayer that God may be good to poor mamma, dear. Remember, if you pray very hard and ask God with great love, He will listen to you.'

The little child nodded several times, and holding her hand, he walked fearlessly up to the plain wooden altar-railing. Susan peered about her anxiously, but she could see nothing, and she breathed a quick sigh of relief. She was glad that the man had disappeared. She said the 'De Profundis,' and whispered the 'Eternal Rest' to the little fellow, making him repeat it after her, and then she bade him ask the Lord to be merciful to his mother and take her straight to heaven.

Which she has deserved, God knows,' thought the good soul, as she left the altar-rail with the child. 'If suffering can earn it.'

And then her eyes, sharper now than when she had entered, saw an indistinct something in the corner of the pew nearest the door. She stopped.

'What are you doing here?' she asked, sharply. 'Who are you?'

The figure did not move.

'Come, come!' she said, more sharply still, although there was a tremor in her voice. 'Come, wake up! What is the matter with you?'

She was a brave woman indeed—she entered the pew—the child following. The man leaned forward and grasped at her dress, turning his head painfully.

'It's Susan,' he said. 'Susan—and little Jem. Ah, Susan, don't be hard on a dying man—don't be.'

Something in the ashen face made her blood run cold. Her hand slipped from his shoulder, and she fell into the seat with a groan.

'John Pennywell!' she said.

He tried to see her face, but he could not. He grasped the back of the pew in front of him, his eyes straining pitifully toward her. Her hands covered her face in the pain, the shock of that recognition. At last she drew them away and rose to her feet.