

The Storyteller

AUNT NORINE'S PRAYER-BOOK

I.

'And to my dearly beloved niece and goddaughter, Marian Morton, I leave my old prayer-book—"St. Vincent's Manual"—that has given me comfort and help in my sorrow for fifty years; asking that she will sometimes make the Stations of the Cross for my departed soul.'

A faint but irrepressible smile flickered around the grave group of mourners as the dry voice of Lawyer Banning read out these words.

Mrs. Marian Morton's face flushed slightly, but she gave no other sign. Aunt Norine had been cruelly disappointed in her, she knew—disappointed by her mixed marriage, her careless, indifferent life, the irreligious education of her children; but she had expected no such stinging public rebuke as this. Her old prayer-book—Aunt Norine's old prayer-book—to her, when she had not been within a church for half a dozen years! Legacies, memorials, bequests to all the other nieces and nephews; and to her, who had once been the best beloved of all, only this!

But the pride which had always been her bitter strength helped Marian Morton to sit calm and unmoved, save for the rising flush on her cheek, while the final terms of the rich Miss Norine Parker's will were read aloud to the mourners, listening with ill-concealed eagerness.

'And all the residue of my estate, not otherwise given or bequeathed, I leave in trust to the pastor of St. Margaret's Church, to be held for the term of ten years, when, with all rentals and interest accruing therefrom, said residue shall be used for the erection of an Orphan's Home in St. Margaret's parish.'

The words fell like a chill upon the breathless listeners. Parker's Mill, with all its fair outstanding land, to become an Orphan's Home, when at least five-and-thirty of Aunt Norine's blood kin had been in a state of hopeful expectancy for the last forty-eight hours! But there were none to dispute Aunt Norine's will in death, as there had been none to defy it in life, none but the dark-haired woman who had broken passionately away from her hold and rule fifteen years ago, and to whom the prayer-book had been left to-day.

Aunt Norine had been calm and clear-headed to the last, as everyone knew. Parker's Farm, with its wide, well-tilled acres stretching down to the willow-girdled river, its 'great house' with its polished floors and glittering windows, its silver and china and linen presses attesting to its old mistress' watchful care, bore witness that Miss Norine's 'faculty' had never failed. Was not the pantry key under her pillow, the spoons counted by her bedside, her silver hair wrapped carefully in its buckle curl-papers, on the very night she had been found, with her worn rosary clasped in her withered fingers, placidly sleeping her last sleep?

Yet, though Aunt Norine had proved her lawful right to have her will and way unto the end, gossiping tongues were busy that evening as the mourners scattered over the sunset hills; and the prospective Orphans' Home received scant approval even from the most charitable.

'It's her own flesh and blood she might have thought of first,' said Cousin Jane Parker sharply. 'There's my own Mary Ann drudging away in the kitchen—she that would be made outright by the few years' schooling a mite of that same Orphans' Home would have given her!'

'And our Henry, with his weak back and lame leg—it would have been nothing more than Christian charity to give a bit of a lift to him instead of strangers that she will never see,' said Mrs. Almira Brown, bitterly.

'Hem! an Orphans' Home!' growled Uncle Josiah Gwynn. 'It's easy seen who was at the bottom of that. Priest and parson are all alike. Once they get the grip of a poor dying fool's purse-strings, blood and kin may starve on all that's left. Norine Parker may have been queer and set in her ways, but she was a kind woman at heart. It was a hard blow her dead hand gave Marian Morton this day, and the priest was behind it sure.'

'I beg your pardon,' said a quick, crisp voice, and little Lawyer Banning, who was making his brisk way to the evening train, broke sharply into the conversation. 'Though it isn't in the line of business, I really must put in a disclaimer here. I can assure you all that Father Morris was as ignorant of the terms of the will

as any of you. It was drawn up three years ago, before he became pastor of St. Margaret's; and he is both surprised and troubled at the responsibility placed upon him.'

But while all other tongues were thus busily discussing the event of the day, one woman was walking homeward without word or sign of the fierce storm raging in her breast. She held her legacy in a reluctant hand—the old brown prayer-book, with its silver corners, its graven clasp. Its touch seemed to sting her like a serpent's fang.

Pride, anger, disappointment, mortification, remorse, swelled the tempest of passion in her heart. Something in Aunt Norine's manner at their last meeting had led her to think, to hope, that the past had been forgiven, that the old woman's heart had softened to her wandering, wayward child of long ago. The old brown prayer-book seemed a hideous mockery of her hopes and dreams. She felt she hated it—hated it and her, the dead woman who had given her this cruel, pitiless public blow. For all knew the sore need in which she stood, despite her defiant strength; all knew that the man she had married against Aunt Norine's will lay crippled and helpless; that the gaunt wolf of poverty stood at the door of her home.

For a moment she stood at the bend of the river, almost yielding to the angry impulse to fling her legacy into the blue depths beneath. But she could not—it seemed as if she dared not; even now the old prayer-book was a holy thing to her. She knew its story; she had heard it from Aunt Norine's lips in those far-off days when she had learned forgotten lessons of faith, hope, and love at her knee.

The old book had been the gift of one whose early death had changed the world to Aunt Norine; whose betrothal ring had bound her as faithfully as the unspoken marriage vow; for whom she had made the Way of the Cross daily for fifty years. She could not fling Aunt Norine's prayer-book away, but her husband must not see, must not hear of it. It would rouse him into demoniac fury, she knew. Hurrying home, she thrust it into an old bureau drawer, out of sight, out of reach, out of memory—as she bitterly resolved—forever.

II.

'Push me closer to the window, mother, so I can breathe. It is so hot, so close, so crowded here! All last night I was dreaming of the woods and the fields, and the river. I thought I heard the plash of the water under the old willows. Oh, how cool and green they looked after these high brick walls!'

And the speaker, a frail girl of seventeen, looked wearily out on the unlovely rows of chimneys and house-tops blurring the blazing stretch of the August sky.

'We will take a day on the boat when you are better, Milly,' answered the mother, whose gaunt, haggard face was sadly changed from that of the Marian Morton of old.

The last seven years had been a sore struggle. Her husband had died, and she had come with Milly and the little boys to this great factory town for work. But misfortunes had followed her thick and fast. The mills had shut down, and Milly's health had given way. Now the children were running wild in the court of the crowded tenement house, while up in the close little room under the roof she and Death were making a fight for her darling's life.

'When I'm better' the girl repeated sadly. 'Do you think that I'll ever be better, mother dear? What did the doctor say last night?'

And she lifted her hollow, wistful eyes to her mother's face.

'That this weather was hard on you, Milly.'

'Yes, and that I was failing fast,' the girl continued. 'I heard him—the poor doctor is not too careful in his speech. That means I am dying, mother.'

'No, no, no, my Milly!—the words came with a hoarse, passionate sob. Don't say that, darling! You are only weak and ill and discouraged. Don't let the doctor's careless words frighten you, dear.'

'I—I can't help it,' answered the girl, with a shiver. 'When I think of it, mother—the awful darkness, the blank into which I cannot see! Dying! What does dying mean? Where do we go, what do we find? If I only knew—if I only knew!'

'Milly, darling, don't talk, don't think like that!' pleaded the wretched mother.

'I must, I must! We never went to church or Sunday-school, because, I suppose, papa and you didn't agree which was right. It has been such hard work to live that we never thought of what it was—to die. But now, mother, I'd like to know something, to believe something; to feel there was some One to pity, to care for me, in this strange darkness, where I must go all alone—all alone!'