

# The Storyteller

## A MIDNIGHT CALL

Miss Mary was putting on her hat before the little blurred mirror in the kitchen. Out on the sunken steps of the back porch, beneath a home-made awning of faded blue, sat a hulking figure in checkered jeans, his shoulders hunched over, his elbows upon his knees, meditatively chewing and gazing into space.

'Glory be to God, Hank!' cried Miss Mary, peering out at him. 'Isn't it an awful thing? Every day alike to you, and never your foot inside a church on Sunday!'

The man on the steps grunted.

'It's the sorry woman your old mother'd be if she had lived to see this day!' went on Miss Mary, a bright red spot showing on either faded cheek. 'You that never goes to Mass and hasn't kneeled your knee to a priest in twenty years—her only son! I wouldn't mind if you had a good safe job—Miss Mary caught her breath sharply. 'Glory be to God!' she cried again, raising her voice in anger to hide its quiver. 'You won't go to Mass, and you don't know the hour God'll call you away without warning!'

'Tend to your own soul, Mary Ann, and don't mind me!' said the man sulkily. 'It's none too good you are yourself!'

He got up, sideways, and shambled down the steps and into the backyard, out of hearing, where he stood smoking, his shoulders still hunched up, one hand grasping and holding up the elbow of the hand that steadied the pipe in his mouth.

Miss Mary sighed and muttered in useless anger. She put on her worn silk mits and took up her parasol. The cat stretched in the sun and followed her lazily to the front door.

'Good-bye, Peter,' said Miss Mary to the cat, and shut the screen door. Peter stretched himself in the sun and yawned and went back to his sunny spot.

Miss Mary picked her way with old-fashioned daintiness down the blackened board walk and up the tree-lined street. The little dressmaker, crossing the road at right angles, met her at the corner.

'Good-morning,' she said, timidly. 'Going to Mass?'

A gleam of sharp humor came into Miss Mary's eyes, and her thin lips twitched, where else would she be going at this time of a Sunday morning. Then she frowned coldly, and her old face hardened. Miss Mary had a feeling of enmity towards the little dressmaker, and even her sense of humor would not let her unbend for an instant.

'Good morning,' she said. 'Yes, I'm going, to Mass.'

The little dressmaker fell into step beside her. 'I'm going, too,' she said. 'It's a real pleasant day, isn't it?'

Very much the same scene had been enacted on this very corner every Sunday morning, rain, hail, or shine, for fifteen years now—ever since the little dressmaker had first come to Sayre and hung up her shingle on a cottage not far from the house into which Hank and Miss Mary had moved but a year or two before her coming. From her front window she could see Miss Mary leave her gate, and there, as Miss Mary suspected, the little dressmaker stood Sunday after Sunday, gloved and bonneted, waiting for Miss Mary's appearance, when she had just time to meet her at the corner. Miss Mary had been frankly surprised that first Sunday morning; she had never dreamed that Kittie Klein would come to Sayre. She held her tongue, too, when the little dressmaker told Miss Mary and her neighbors, simply and in a few words, that she had come to Sayre to settle down. Beyond these brief Sunday morning walks, Miss Mary purposely saw nothing of the dressmaker. Someone found out that they had both come from the same home town. The village gossips tried to find out more about it, but somehow the most curious did not get at the truth.

And the truth was very pretty. When Hank was young and full of life and God-love, before his mother's death, he and the little dressmaker had been sweethearts. She was not the little dressmaker then, but care-free Kittie Klein, the daughter of a neighboring farmer, and as beautiful a girl as the country held. It was in the days before Hank had taken to a railroad's precarious existence. He was the only son of his mother, and he was a good son, for whom the farm life and Christian obedience and love for Kittie Klein made

up the sum of a very happy life. The years passed in sunshine, and the light storms of youth; the crops prospered and brought rich returns, and Kittie Klein began to make her wedding-clothes. Antoinette, Miss Mary's oldest sister, had married and gone to live in the city. They were glad that she was happy—and it made more room for the coming of Hank's wife. They got a new team and new farming implements, and Miss Mary and her mother bought new parlor furniture. Those were sunny days, and Hank's spirits ran high.

And then troubles came, as sometimes happens, not singly, but in battalions. Ever afterwards Miss Mary turned from the memory of those days with bitter tears. Little Cassie, the youngest and best beloved of their home ones, sickened and died that spring. The doctors could do nothing to keep her on earth, and there were those who said that she was too good to live. Her loss was a blow to them all, and the widowed mother drooped. She was ill, too, during the summer, and the doctor's bills multiplied. That season a long period of drought was followed by incessant rains, and the crops were well-nigh ruined. Some of the cattle were visited with distemper, and died. Little wrinkles of trouble crept into Hank's face, and, never a patient fellow, he railed at their increasing ill-fortunes. The farm had to be mortgaged. The widow bowed her head to God's will and went out into the kitchen and the dairy and the farmyard with Miss Mary—a thing she had not done in years. Hank, grown suddenly sober and preoccupied, repeated his nightly Rosary with less and less fervor. Hank had to disturb him a matter more potent—to him—than the farm. He and Miss Kittie were to have been married that spring, but he had had to put it off. Miss Kittie, vivacious and self-willed as she was, was vexed. She pouted and sulked and flirted with former lovers. Hank's heart was sore.

Until this time Hank had never touched liquor, and he had always been a good, practical Catholic. No one can blame Miss Mary because she laid his fall from grace at Kittie Klein's feet.

It was one Saturday night that he had taken Kittie to a sleigh-ride. It was late when he got home—so late that Miss Mary had fallen to sleep on the lounge while waiting for him, and if her eyes had not been half closed when she let him in, she might have noticed how wild and white was his face. He went upstairs without a word, and Miss Mary could hear him pacing up and down his room as she sank to slumber.

Sunday morning dawned clear and crisp, and Miss Mary and her mother were dressed and had breakfast laid, but no Hank came downstairs. At ten o'clock the horses were not harnessed—Miss Mary had gone out and fed them—and Mass was said five miles away. His mother went upstairs with a slow tread. Hank lay in bed with his eyes closed, his head pillowed on his arms. She called him, gently first, then sharply when he did not answer. He opened his eyes and looked at her.

'Do you know what time it is?' she asked.

'Yes,' he said. 'It's after ten.'

The widow's eyes opened wide with surprise. 'Would you be late for Mass?' she cried.

'I don't care,' he said sullenly, 'I'm not going.'

The widow walked with a cane. She stood and stared at her son for one speechless second. Then she thumped her cane upon the floor.

'Get up!' she thundered. 'Whatever the cause of this madness, you shall go to Mass while I live!'

Hank got up and harnessed the horses and drove with them to Mass. Next day Kittie Klein went away on a visit, and on Tuesday Hank went on the first drunk of his life. Would to God that it had been the last!

Things went headlong to ruin then, despite his mother's and Miss Mary's efforts to keep up. When, in a month, a repentant and a sobered Kittie came home to reclaim her lover, it was too late. That last quarrel had been the bitterest thing of Hank's life. He had run away from the scene of his unhappiness and was tramping the country 'looking for a job.' The railroad invariably gets these rambling ones, and Hank became a switchman in the yards at Sayre.

The following year the mortgage was foreclosed, and the widow died. Kittie Klein was there when she died. In spite of the coldness and disapproval with which they treated her, Kittie clung to these relatives of her lost lover. Hank had not reached her dying bed. Her fading old eyes sought bravely to outstare death until he should come. The priest stood by, the last Sacraments having been administered, reverently reading the prayers for the dying. The widow's face was calm but for that one straining; she was ready and glad to meet her Maker. 'Her breath became more labored, and death