

beautiful child, whose eyes were like stars and whose little face was radiant with the smile of innocence.

'Oh, Sister Brenda, what a lovely child!' I cried. 'How you must love her!'

'I do love her, and because I love her I have offered her to the love of His heart. My sweet little niece!'

I had heard Sister Brenda speak of the joy of such love before, and I had felt my heart burn with the fire of her words. I understood that she was going to pray that beautiful child into the convent, and I remarked:

'She is too little to know anything about it. What if she objects when she grows up?'

'Much will happen before then, my dear. But until she does grow up I will pray, always pray, and the rest is in God's hands.'

'I don't think her father and mother will thank you for taking that lovely girl from them.'

'They are true Catholic Christians. They value the boon of a religious call from God more than any earthly alliance. She will be dearer to them than the whole world. She will be the household angel, standing at God's throne invoking blessings in life and in death. Oh, the beautiful grace!'

Sister Brenda's face glowed as she uttered the words, a living example of the truth of them, and then she disappeared behind the cloister door, leaving me longing to be a nun for at least a whole hour.

\*

The years of my school life passed. My graduation day came, and with tearful eyes I said good-bye to Sister Brenda and my alma mater and stepped out from the rose-arched gateway into the wide, wide world.

In my heart of hearts I heard a divine voice whispering: 'I have chosen you; you have not chosen Me.' But I put aside the music of that voice; feverishly I said: 'Not yet. Let me wait a while. The world is beautiful; I am young. Let me enjoy the pleasant things you have given to us, Lord. In a year or two—' And so I ignored the gracious invitation, and slowly its grace was withdrawn. I enjoyed my new freedom. Every one said I was supremely happy; at least, I ought to be. But I knew better.

One thing remained—my love for Sister Brenda and the thought of her beautiful life. She wrote to me, reminding me of my aspirations to a perfect life, but I never heeded her gentle questioning. At last the subject was dropped. The memories of my convent life faded into a sweet misty dream. I never returned to my alma mater, and as for the incident of the picture, it passed as completely out of my mind as if it had never happened.

π

Years went by. I had been for the third or fourth time in Europe. This time I spent three months there, restlessly moving from place to place with my sister and a party. I studiously avoided convents and nuns, and it was hard to do so, for they are ubiquitous. One day, in Rome, I was visiting the shrines in St. Peter's, and paused at the Capello del Coro, where the canons were chanting the Divine Office. The sound brought back the long lines of nuns in the convent chapel of my school days. I left hurriedly.

In Venice I loved to wander through the dim twilight of San Marco, over the mosaic pavement, or kneel before the miraculous crucifix. In Paris I haunted the little chapel of Notre Dame des Victoires or Mont Martre on the high hill overlooking the great city. There, where the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is perpetual, I seemed to find a sort of peace.

My friends began to think me somewhat diffident, but they loved me and bore with my moods. I remember kneeling in the Jesuit Church in Gardiner street, Dublin, with my head buried in my hands, when a soft touch on my shoulder made me start, and I saw a noble-looking Jesuit at my side.

'Are you in trouble, my child?' he said gently.

'No, indeed, Father,' I said hastily—and falsely. 'I am an American, and a visit to a beautiful church always makes me homesick.'

'Oh, if that is all—well, God bless you!' and, with an incredulous look at my hot face, he smiled and passed on.

'Oh, why did I not tell him?' I said to myself. 'Tell him I was resisting God's call; that I was ignoring my vocation through cowardice. He would have helped me to be strong.' And thus I flung away my last grace.

I came home and enjoyed (?) life. I denied myself nothing I craved. And then sorrow came. I saw mother, father, and a dear brother laid in the grave. I saw my sisters and brother

marry and depart from the old home. Suitors came. None of them pleased me. What wonder, when I had repulsed a Divine Bridegroom? I never gave sign of my hidden pain. The world thought me the most fortunate of mortals, and I held my head up bravely before it.

One day I determined to pay a visit to my old school home. I had not been there for years—not since my graduation. What would Sister Brenda say—she who knew I had rejected God's undeniable invitation? Would she welcome me?

But I went, and my heart throbbed with joy as I passed up the long avenue and sprang from the carriage at the front door.

It was early afternoon, and the long line of purple mountains eastward lay dreamily against the horizon as of old—stately, eternal, changeless. The sun sparkled on the fountain where the gold fish flashed and the birds were drinking and splashing. The flower-beds were glowing. A beautiful old rounded chestnut tree which stood alone, and was the pride of the institution, was there, more beautiful than ever, with its rustic seats inviting me to the quiet dreams I so often had in the long ago. Nothing was changed—nothing but myself. I stood a moment, with misty eyes, on the broad steps. The portress was a stranger, but she saw the familiar graduating cross of the academy around my neck, and welcomed me with a smile.

'I know you are an old pupil, and you are welcome. Come in, dear' (thus the nuns talk). 'You are just in time for the ceremony,' she whispered. 'Every one is in the chapel.' And she led me in and gave me a seat.

The chapel! How my heart throbbed as I knelt in the sacred place, so dear of old, so holy now. The organ was pealing, and the nuns were singing with their pure, rich voices. The altar was aglow with lights and beautiful with white lilies. The long lines of stalls were filled with black-veiled religious in their white festival cloaks. In the centre of the nave, near the altar, knelt a girlish figure robed like a bride. Her filmy veil was caught with orange blossoms, and her satiny gown of creamy white swept over the carpeted pavement of the choir. She rose as I gazed, and amid the music of the chanted psalm, and conducted by two nuns, softly moved down the aisle, passed me and disappeared. I looked at her face. It was beautiful, with a spiritual loveliness hard to describe. Her dark eyes were lowered, her cheeks were flushed, and an expression of angelic happiness lingered on her features.

'I wonder who she is?' I murmured, as I bent my head and tried to keep back the tears.

Soon she returned, the bride's dress laid aside forever, and the black robe and white veil of the novice enveloping her slender form. She was even more radiant than before, and the holy light of God's love shone from her face. Peace, content, joy and happiness spread their white light around her, and I knelt and envied her from the core of my heart.

The ceremony was over. The breath of incense lingered in the chapel, rising softly in misty clouds, stained by the hues of the pictured windows. I stayed there, full of emotion and tears. How the memories of years came back, and how the scroll of the past unrolled before me!

A light touch aroused me, and I left the chapel. At the door was my dear Sister Brenda, her sweet face aglow with joy. The lines that time brings to other faces were not on hers. Her smiling eyes were alight, like stars, and her voice was the same sweet music.

'My dear child! Welcome, a thousand times welcome!'

'Oh, my dear Sister Brenda,' I cried, 'how happy I am to see you again!'

'And I to find you in the chapel,' she added.

'Oh, Sister,' I said, 'who is the lovely novice that has made my heart ache to be in her place?'

'Do you not know?' asked Sister Brenda joyously. 'It is my niece, the little child whose picture I laid on the altar seventeen years ago. Why, you were in the chapel that day. Don't you remember? She has been faithful to God's call. She has given Him her sweet young life in its freshness. She is ineffably happy. Surely you remember the photograph of the lovely child? And do you recall all you said? I do, dear.'

Like a flash that reveals the darkened landscape in a storm, the incident came back. The long years rolled away. I was a schoolgirl in that chapel, and the scene was before me. I could only murmur brokenly, 'Dear Sister Brenda! Dear Sister Brenda! How powerful are your prayers! God has heard you through all these years, and there is no resistance to grace. He has granted your petition, because she was faithful. Oh, if I had been so. Will you tell me her name?'