

Three years sped by all too quickly for Geraldine, and the time arrived at last when she had to return to her aunt's house, to take her place in the world. Sad indeed was the leave-taking to both nuns and pupil, and with tear-bedewed cheeks Geraldine turned her back on the convent walls that had given her such kindly shelter.

Repugnant to her was the life upon which she was about to enter. She had seen but little of her aunt, and that little did not tend to impress her favourably, but deep down in her heart she treasured a secret that brought strength and comfort to her much-tried spirit. During her peaceful sojourn at St. Mary's the will of God had been made manifest to her; she had found the pearl of great price, and, like the merchant in the Gospel, she resolved to sell all that she might buy it. To serve God in the person of His poor was Geraldine's earnest desire, and gladly would she have entered upon the religious life and proceeded at once to Nazareth House, H—, where her father's cousin was Superioress; but it was pointed out to her that plainly it was her duty to spend at least a time with her aunt in accordance with her mother's dying wish.

Nearly three years Geraldine passed under her aunt's roof before the interview already recounted took place. She had suffered much during those years—more than most girls in her place would. Mrs. Wentworth was rejoiced to see her rooms filled once more with bright and animated guests, although it was a bitter pill to swallow when she recollected that it was on Geraldine's account that her visitors so readily accepted her invitations; but still anything was better than the ennui of being thrown on the slender resources of her own mind for any form of diversion. The giddy vortex was her natural element as much as it was the aversion of her niece, who was compelled through necessity to mix in the gay assemblages, for she was yielding and obedient to her aunt's wishes in all things save when they clashed with duty and conscience.

When Arthur Fareham began to show marked attention to Geraldine Mrs. Wentworth commenced at once to erect castles in the air according to her own fancy. Such a connection would have given her a firm footing in the very best society, and thus have satisfied the longing desire of her heart, but Geraldine's course of conduct upset all these worldly-wise projects, hence her wrath against her was in proportion to the disappointment she felt at being compelled to relinquish her cherished scheme.

Long after midnight Geraldine still knelt on in speechless prayer. She perceived the time had arrived when she could sever her connection with the frivolities which her soul loathed, and having received her aunt's angry dismissal, what further need had she to stay? On the morrow, therefore, she would take her departure, and with this resolution she retired to rest and calmly fell asleep.

Next morning, at an early hour, Geraldine wended her way to the church, and after offering up a short but fervent prayer, sought for an interview with Father X—, her confessor and prudent advisor. To him she recounted what had taken place the night before, her aunt's anger at what she termed her obstinacy, and the resolution she had formed to start that very day for Nazareth House.

The good priest lent an attentive ear to all she had to say, and prayed within his heart that God would direct all things according to His holy will. He feared that Geraldine was acting too hastily, leaving too abruptly, but she assured him that she had weighed the matter well—it was evident her aunt wished to rid herself of her presence since she would not acquiesce in her wishes. Only the day before she had received a letter from the Mother Superioress saying how she longed and prayed for the time to arrive when she could open her arms to receive her, and bidding her to hasten without delay when the appointed hour should come.

Knelling for the good priest's blessing, Geraldine repaired to the church to prepare herself for the devout reception of the Sacraments.

After Mass she knelt for the last time at Our Lady's altar and poured forth her whole soul in prayer, asking that dear Mother to watch over and guide her in all her ways.

With eyes brimful of tears, Geraldine's gaze lingered in fond farewell on the church she loved so well, the sanctuary and altar rails where she had so often received the Bread of Life, the altar of Our Lady, the statues of the Saints, where she had knelt and implored their help and protection; the bright, steady lamp of the sanctuary, which had soothed her troubled soul when, weary of the vanity and emptiness of her aunt's frivolities, she had sought solace and comfort in the peace of the sanctuary.

Hurrying back to the house that was to be her home no longer, Geraldine partook of a slight breakfast, gathered together her belongings, and wrote a note to her aunt thanking her for all she had done for her during the years she had spent under her roof, and asking her forgiveness for her opposition to her wishes, adding that she was bound to choose the state of life that had been so clearly pointed out to her as being the manifest will of God.

With a kindly spoken farewell to the servants, who were devoted to her, Geraldine set forth on her journey to begin her new life, where crosses and trials must necessarily await her; but her heart was full of peace and joy, for did she not know that she was walking in the footsteps of that Divine Master Who had trod the rugged hill before her, but Who had said that His yoke was sweet and His burden light.

She was warmly received by the Rev. Mother, and Geraldine repaired at once to the convent chapel, where, throwing herself on her knees before the Prisoner of Love, and with eyes fixed on the tabernacle door, 'At last!' she exclaimed, 'at last!'

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Time went on, and at the end of thirty years Geraldine, or Sister Anastasia, as she was called in religion, was as active and zealous in all her deeds of charity as the first day she received the novice's veil. Time had left but few traces on her countenance

save to mature the sweetness of its expression. She had been away to make her novitiate, and after making her profession returned to Nazareth House to carry on her work of charity—at one time soothing the dying, smoothing the pillow of the aged and feeble, or listening with a patient ear to some wayward child's complaint. With both young and old she was always the consoling angel, the bearer of comfort.

During all those years not one word had ever reached her from Mrs. Wentworth. For the first decade of years she had annually written to her aunt, but as her letters were invariably returned unopened she at last, by the Superioress's advice, ceased to write, but she did not forget the worldly woman in her frequent prayers; her petitions she felt must be heard, and grace in time would touch the stony heart.

CHAPTER II.

All Eastshire was in a panic; the people were wild and frantic. The great banking company of Wentworth, Baxter and Co. had failed, and ruin, utter and complete, stared numerous families in the face. Many people from the height of affluence had to endure the lowest depths of poverty. No greater sufferer was there in this dire distress than the proud rich woman who was so wedded to her wealth and the things of this world. After the panic had subsided, Sister Anastasia wrote an affectionate letter of condolence to her aunt, to which the lawyer replied, saying no one knew anything of Mrs. Wentworth's whereabouts. After the dreadful smash had come she seemed to be turned to stone, and it was difficult to obtain access to her; but after they managed to make her understand that she was completely and utterly ruined, that everything must be surrendered—her house, furniture, and all her belongings—her state of desperation was terrible to behold. However, the next day she had disappeared, leaving no trace whatever of her destination or her whereabouts. Inquiries had been made, but all to no purpose. All endeavours to find the missing lady had proved futile.

Sister Anastasia was horrified and grief-stricken at such terrible news of her poor aunt, who was now advanced in years, but she put more confidence than ever in God's powerful protection.

She redoubled her prayers and offered up all her mortifications for the sole end that her aunt might be brought back even at the eleventh hour, to her Saviour's feet. She had learnt well the lesson how to watch, pray, and wait.

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'Sister Anastasia.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'I want you to undertake the night duty in the infirmary.'

Sister Anastasia's face brightened—nothing did she like better than keeping the midnight vigil. The still hours of the night she loved to devote to prayer; the exterior calmness corresponded to the peace that reigned within her; and when her meditations were interrupted by the moanings of some poor patient Sister Anastasia would cheerfully leave the heights of contemplation to attend to the poor sufferer.

'There is no immediate danger, I fancy,' continued Rev. Mother, 'but the female inmate admitted the day before yesterday has become very feverish and restless. She had slept out under an archway a night or two and got thoroughly wet; this morning I thought it advisable to have her removed to the infirmary. I leave her now in your charge.'

'I will attend to her, Mother,' cheerfully answered Sister Anastasia. With a smile Rev. Mother withdrew, knowing full well that she left her patient in competent hands.

Half an hour afterwards Sister Anastasia was standing by the bedside of the suffering woman. With bated breath and glowing eyes she gazed on the face of the sufferer. Surely those features, shrivelled and wrinkled though they were, were strangely familiar to her; and as she looked with ever-increasing wonder, the dry, parched lips parted and murmured the name 'Geraldine!' All lingering doubt now vanished from Sister Anastasia's mind; she knew it was her aunt who lay on the bed before her, and, sinking on her knees, she cried: 'At last, O my God, Thou hast heard my prayer!'

For three days Mrs. Wentworth's life hung in the balance.

There was a fierce struggle between life and death, and then came a long, refreshing sleep that would prolong for a while, the doctor said, the feeble flicker of life that was soon to be extinguished for ever. Waking up at last, she gazed questioningly around, and seeing Sister Anastasia hasten at once to the bedside, a faint smile broke over the pinched and suffering face.

'I knew you would be here, Geraldine,' she whispered. 'I have been dreaming of you, oh! so much!'

With fast-flowing tears Sister Anastasia gently pressed the withered hand and kissed the fevered brow, and after administering a refreshing draught the patient calmly fell asleep. She slightly improved, but Sister Anastasia could plainly perceive how near she was to the end of her earthly career. She spoke but little, but she seemed almost happy and content as she lay and watched the gentle ministrations of her niece, who with greater confidence prayed more than ever.

'Geraldine,' said the feeble voice one day, 'I want to speak to you.'

In a moment Sister Anastasia was at her aunt's side, who, putting up her feeble arms and drawing her niece down towards her whispered softly in her ear. As Sister Anastasia listened with bated breath her colour came and went, then, throwing herself on her knees, she wept tears of joy and thankfulness. In what a wonderful manner God had heard her prayers for her aunt's conversion! She wished now to become a Catholic! When Sister Anastasia had overcome her emotion she withdrew, and, going in search of Father A——, requested him to visit her aunt. After three days' instruction the good priest deemed it advisable to receive Mrs. Wentworth into the Church, as he feared the dissolution was near at hand.