

The Storyteller.

STANMORE GRANGE.

'THIS, M. le Cure, must be my farewell visit, I fear, for I am seriously thinking of turning my face towards England's shores once more.'

The good Cure tapped his snuff-box preparatory to opening it, and before replying helped himself to a liberal pinch of its contents.

'Well, my good young friend,' he said, 'much as I shall regret your absence, I think your decision a wise one. When looking at you I often say to myself—*sotto voce*, you know—"Why stand you here all the day idle?"'

'Come now, Monsieur, don't be too hard,' protested the young man; 'have I not ever hoped that some day or other you would hold out to me the possibility of aspiring to better and holier things?'

The Cure closed his snuff-box with a sharp click. 'No need, my dear boy, to open up that question again. I think I have already told you very emphatically that among the many graces bestowed upon you by Almighty God, He has not seen fit to include that of a vocation to the religious life nor the holy priesthood; you have, however, many duties in another state of life to fulfil. It is now three years since you came of age, and what have you done? Your estate is left entirely in the hands of your agent; are you sure that he administers justice and kindness to all those over whom he has control, or, on the other hand, may he not be using the means within his reach to serve only his own ends and purposes?'

Cecil Stanmore's handsome face bore an expression of gravity as he listened.

'You are right, Monsieur,' he said; 'I have been a very foolish young man indeed. Though I never intended to shirk my duty, I see I have been very remiss, but I will endeavor now to make reparation to the best of my ability.'

'Have you seen the new statue of St. Anthony just erected in the church?' asked the Cure.

'No, Monsieur, I have only just returned from Bruges, where I have been staying for a couple of weeks,' replied Cecil.

'Well, then, my dear son, this is, as I am sure you already know, the Feast of St. Anthony; go now and pray to him. I have heard he is a powerful advocate "to find the right partner" for those who ask him, and I wish you would also say a prayer for the soul of the generous benefactor who gave the statue.'

Cecil Stanmore reverently knelt with bowed head to receive the good priest's blessing, and a tear dimmed the Cure's eye as he warmly shook his young friend's hand.

The Cure stood where his young friend left him, gazing into space. It was a novelty for the busy priest to indulge in day dreams, but at that precise moment he was oblivious of his surroundings—his memory had flown back to thirteen years before when he first knew Cecil, a bright and happy little boy of eleven.

At that time the good Cure, broken down in health from excessive and unremitting labor in a large and scattered parish lying on the outskirts of the old Belgian capital, was compelled to abandon his arduous duties for a while in order to regain the strength that had been so severely strained and shattered. Gladly, therefore, had he availed himself of the proffered tutorship of Cecil Stanmore; it was just the thing he wanted.

Cecil was a somewhat delicate boy, having just recovered from a serious illness, and being an only child there was no care his parents would not bestow and lavish upon him. He was deemed too delicate, for a time at least, to rough it at school with other boys. His parents, therefore, thought themselves happy and privileged in securing the services of the good Cure. The Cure had his own method of imparting knowledge; he almost discarded books. Nature was the book from which he chose to draw his lessons, and skillfully and cleverly he explained to his pupil the wonders that are written on the gigantic pages of the great universe around us.

Cecil thus pleasantly and easily acquired knowledge; he and the Cure would sometimes make little journeys together across the briny deep, and occasional sojourns on Brittany's sunny coast soon proved of inestimable benefit to both tutor and pupil; it brought the rosy tint of health to the boy's cheek and renewed strength and vigor to the priest's shattered constitution, and after a lapse of two years he returned in sound and perfect health to take up once more the work that lay so near to his priestly heart—that of ministering to the spiritual wants of his much beloved flock. But in those two years there had sprung up a tender affection and deep attachment between master and pupil.

Cecil Stanmore made his devotions before the Blessed Sacrament and then turned his attention to the newly erected statue of St. Anthony, the aspect of which pleased his artistic eye and devotional mind immensely; it represented the saint in his usual posture, holding in one hand the white lily of purity and in the other a book on which stood the Infant Jesus caressing the saint with infinite tenderness. Cecil thought he had never seen a more devotional or life-like statue.

He knelt on, heedless of the flight of time, though he scarcely gave utterance to vocal prayer. His mind reverted to the years that were irretrievably past and gone. He blamed himself for shirking duties that had been laid upon him, but there should be an end to it now he resolved, and he would in real earnest take up the responsibilities of life. In his bereavement and loneliness his heart yearned more than ever for the sympathy of his old friend the Cure of St. Etienne, whom he ever regarded as his 'friend, philosopher, and guide.' He now clung to him with still greater affection; he was the one link between the desolate present and the happy, joyous past.

The trustees appointed an agent to look after the estate during Cecil's minority, and the young man returned to the Continent to continue the studies that had been interrupted by his parents' deaths. Time went on and at last he came of age, but still he lingered, shrinking from the thought of returning to his once happy home.

To be the heir and sole possessor of Stanmore Grange and all the rich, broad acres appertaining thereto was a position calculated to make many a young man swell with pride, but pride and pomposity had no share in Cecil's composition.

How long Cecil knelt there before St. Anthony's statue reviewing the past and making generous resolutions for the future he knew not, so absorbed was he in his own reflections. He thought he was alone, but in this he was mistaken.

He was aroused at last from his reverie by the movement of a figure draped in deep mourning. It was a young girl who had knelt there long in deep and silent prayer. She rose to go now, however, but before doing so approached the statue to light up a votive candle.

Cecil's eyes followed her movements, and artist that he was he could not fail to be struck with the rare beauty of her countenance—so sweet, so pure, so gentle. But as he stole a second glance he perceived sorrow and suffering were evidently depicted on the fair young face; the flickering light from the candle revealed a large, bright tear glistening like a diamond on the dark, long lashes.

Margaret Seager, after paying this last tribute to St. Anthony in the church she loved so well, tried to stifle the sob that rose like a lump in her throat. When would she stand again within the precincts of that sacred edifice, she wondered? Never again, perhaps! With anguish she thought of the dear remains of him who beneath the soft, freshly-disturbed turf was sleeping his last sleep.

Overcome with a sense of her loneliness and her loss, she hastily quitted the church without perceiving she had dropped her rosary. It caught, however, Cecil's quick eye, and he stooped to pick it up, intending to follow the retreating figure, but his artistic appreciation and love of the beautiful arrested his progress and made him pause for a moment to admire its exquisite beauty and workmanship. It was the finest specimen he had ever seen—mother-of-pearl beads most elaborately mounted in elegantly-wrought silver.

He hurried then to overtake the young lady, but, alas! he was too late. Just as he reached the church door she had entered a carriage and was being driven rapidly away.

Suppressing an exclamation of annoyance Cecil placed the rosary in his pocket; the only thing then to be done was to hand it to the Cure. Doubtless he could easily restore it to the owner.

Once more he presented himself in the Cure's presence.

'This, Monsieur,' he said, drawing forth the rosary, 'was dropped in the church by une jeune demoiselle. I have brought it to you that you may return it to her.'

In a moment the priest recognised the rosary.

'*Quel dommage!*' he exclaimed, putting his hand up to his forehead and slowly allowing it to travel across his bald head, '*la pauvre petite!* How grieved she will be.'

'But, Monsieur, surely it will be an easy matter to return it to her the next time she comes to church?'

'*Non, mon garçon,*' replied the Cure, 'she has started for Ostend, and to-morrow she intends crossing over to England. Well, I must send it through the post now; but meanwhile I know how sorry she will be thinking she has lost it.'

'She seemed to be in deep mourning,' said Cecil, interested enough to try and glean a little further information.

'Yes, indeed, poor child! She has passed through the crucible of suffering. Left an orphan when a mere baby, she was adopted by her aunt and uncle-in-law who, being childless, bestowed upon her the wealth of their deep affection. They lived in Brussels a portion of every year, so they had become great friends of mine. About a year ago Monsieur had the misfortune to lose his good wife; he and his niece sought to find solace in their sorrow by travelling. After journeying around they had settled down here again, when unfortunately Mr. Oldham was taken ill and died suddenly. But there the trouble did not end; no will was found, and the whole of his property, which he intended leaving to his adopted daughter, was claimed by a cousin (of whom he had known very little and cared for still less) as being the next of kin; the poor girl is consequently left without means, for being his wife's niece only, she inherits nothing according to law, but I trust St. Anthony will now befriend her.'

'What a sad history,' said Cecil sympathetically, 'and what will the poor young lady do now I wonder?'

'Oh, she is brave, so brave!' said the Cure; 'she is quite crushed, it is true, at the death of her adopted parents, but as for the monetary loss, she does not seem to mind that at all. Her intention is to seek a situation in the teaching line, for she is highly accomplished; with that object she has returned to England to stay with a friend while she looks out for a position that will suit her. Let me see, I have her address about me, I think. Voila! here it is—care of Mrs. Lamoureux—'

'Surely not living at 13, South Parade, H—,' broke in Cecil excitedly.

'Exactly,' said the Cure, looking up in surprise. 'Do you know her?'

'Why, she is no other than my respected godmother,' replied Cecil; 'she has only recently settled in H—, and, as you already know, that is the nearest town to Stanmore Grange, and it was my intention to ride over and see her on my return. If you like, Monsieur, I will keep the rosary, and when I go home I will call on Mrs. Lamoureux without delay.'

'Very good, my young friend, that is a very satisfactory arrangement,' said the Cure, feeling relieved of a responsibility, and with a few more adieux Cecil departed.

Gathering together his belongings, he started on the following day for Bruges, where he was detained by business a little longer.