

The Storyteller

A MOTHER'S GRIEF.

The Sister of Charity bent over and smoothed the tangled hair of the dying woman. 'If it were not for the child! the child!' the feeble voice wailed.

'Do not distress yourself, Mrs. Bentley,' the Sister said with soothing tenderness. 'God will provide for little Alice. You are very, very weak, and you must try to be resigned.'

The two-year-old girl in the Sister's arms looked up in wonder at the gentle face. 'Mamma! Mamma!' she lisped, the rosy lips beginning to tremble and the tears gathering in the blue eyes. Sister Gertrude laid the curly head on her shoulder. 'Poor mamma is tired, Alice. You must not cry and wake up poor mamma.' The dying woman stretched out her hands for the child and the Sister laid the little one beside her mother.

'Sister Gertrude,' Mrs. Bentley said, 'help me to say, "God's will be done." It is so hard—so hard—to leave her all alone in the world.' The fluttering hands rested on Alice's head and the dim eyes dwelt with unspeakable tenderness on the child. The room was very still. A light came over the face of the dying mother. 'Thy will be done! Thy will be done!' she whispered; and in the fainting whisper the struggling soul was freed.

After a few moments in prayer, Sister Gertrude lifted the child in her arms and went to inform the occupants of the house of the death of Mrs. Bentley. Then, with little Alice, she returned to her community.

Sister Gertrude had soothed the dying anguish of the poor mother with the thought of God's providence over the orphan child; but her own mind could not see just then what form that providence would take. Her sisterhood, the only one in the town, had no orphanage, and had quite a struggle to maintain their establishment by teaching. The only provision that seemed possible was to send the child to a distant city. Commending her helpless little charge to the Mother of Sorrows, Sister Gertrude began to help the school children with their Christmas preparations.

Not having many members in the little community, the care of Alice fell upon Sister Gertrude, and the baby sat at her feet, on the platform, while she taught in the classroom. Many wonderful stories the school girls told little Alice of all that Santa Claus would bring her; and he would be sure to bring them, because they had all told him.

In a very handsome home in the same city, a young woman was bending over the dead form of her baby. But six months before her husband had died; and to the anguished heart it seemed past all endurance that death should rob her of her only child.

'It is too much! Too much!' she told herself, sitting in a stony, tearless grief beside her dead. She turned a deaf ear to all words of comfort. 'There is no sorrow like mine. Husband and child so soon taken. I cannot, I will not be consoled.' She sat for hours beside the little coffin, torturing her poor heart with the picture of baby's loveliness so striking in death. 'She was so beautiful—my Alice—my one treasure, too beautiful to die.' When a motherly old neighbor tried to make her think of the child's blessed safety, she cried out that her whole life would have been devoted to her darling's happiness.

'But, Mrs. Fletcher, how do you know that you could have made her happy? Now you know she is safe with God and no sorrow can ever reach her.'

But it was all in vain; and after the child had been laid at rest, Mrs. Fletcher's neighbors and friends shook their heads ominously over her condition. She shut herself away from every one.

Weeks passed, bringing the merry Christmas preparations, but no hint of their gracious message reached the solitary, uncomfited mother in her stately, desolate home.

'She must be roused and interested, or this settled melancholy will prove disastrous,' the doctor told Mrs. Fletcher's friends when they discussed the case. 'I only wish I knew how to rouse her interest,' he said, musingly. 'She refuses to see any visitors. I believe she would refuse to see me only I walk right in, because I cannot let her grieve herself to death. She will not read or take exercise. She just sits and broods all day long over the death of her child. I feel like scolding her only she looks too forlorn to take any notice of my scolding.'

As the weather grew colder the question of clothing little Alice began to be a serious problem to Sister Gertrude. The school girls had contributed some articles of wearing apparel, but as they were nearly all the children of working people, they did not have very plentiful wardrobes. One day, Jennie Moore, one of the larger girls, said wistfully to Sister Gertrude: 'It seems such a pity, Sister, that our little Alice cannot have some of the fine clothes that belonged to Alice Fletcher. She was just the same age and she was always dressed like a little princess. I wonder what her mother did with all her beautiful clothes?'

'Is Mrs. Fletcher a Catholic, Jennie?' asked the Sister.

'Yes, Sister, she is. That is, she used to go to church; but now she never goes out at all. She will not see anybody, and sits alone all the time in her room.'

'Poor thing!' said the Sister. 'How strange that she will not seek the only true consolation. It does seem a pity, as you say, Jennie, that the clothing that could be of so much service to our poor living child is lying useless.'

After Jennie had gone home Sister Gertrude kept thinking of poor, desolate Mrs. Fletcher. Then she recalled the death of Mrs. Bentley and the anguish it had been to her to think of leaving little Alice alone in the world. A thought came to the Sister. Suppose she should take Alice to Mrs. Fletcher and ask her to give the orphan a few of the plainest of the dead child's dresses. It seemed almost a daring thing to the gentle Sister, but her courage rose the more she thought of the plan.

'It may help her to see that there are other sorrows in the world. I will tell her of poor Mrs. Bentley's death and her distress at leaving Alice alone and friendless and her act of resignation to God's will, at the last.'

So when the class duties were over, Sister Gertrude prepared Alice for a walk. The little one was delighted; and the Sister dressed her very carefully. She brushed out the silky blonde curls and tied them with a bit of bright ribbon that a school girl had given little Alice. The pretty, eager face was a picture, winsome enough to touch any heart, as the blue eyes sparkled in delightful anticipation of the outing with Sister Gertrude. Together they walked through the business thoroughfares and out to the broad sweeping avenue, where stood the handsome home of Mrs. Fletcher. Sister Gertrude began to feel some what abashed and nervous as she rang the door bell. The tall, formal butler looked surprised as he opened the door.

'Is Mrs. Fletcher at home and can I see her?'

'She is at home, Sister,' the man replied, very respectfully, 'but I do not think you can see her. She has refused to see any visitors at all since her baby died.'

'So I have heard,' Sister Gertrude replied, but—her courage rising again—'I will detain her but a very short while.'

The butler opened the door, looking doubtful. His orders were very strict, but he could not find it in his heart to refuse the good Sister. As they entered the hall he caught sight of the child clinging to the Sister's dress.

'I am afraid, Sister,' he said, hesitatingly, 'that if Mrs. Fletcher will see you, it would never do for her to see the child.' He stood and looked greatly puzzled. 'You know she cannot get over the death of her baby; and it was just about like this one; and—dear me!' he said with a start, 'the child is for all the world like our little baby.'

Sister Gertrude was greatly disappointed. She had dressed Alice so carefully, making the most she could of her baby beauty, in the hope that it would incline Mrs. Fletcher's heart to generosity.

'If Mrs. Fletcher will see you, Sister, I can take the child to the housekeeper's room till you are ready to go,' the butler said, reaching out his hand to little Alice, but the child clung to the Sister and began to cry.

'Well, never mind then,' he said, hurriedly. 'Hush, little girl, don't cry. I am not going to take you. I wouldn't for the world that Mrs. Fletcher should hear a child's voice, just now, anyhow,' he said to himself, 'there is no chance of her seeing them.' Then aloud, 'Sit down, Sister,' opening the door of the handsome parlor. 'I will go and ask Mrs. Fletcher if she will see you.'

Awaiting his return Sister Gertrude gazed around the beautifully-appointed room. How strangely cold and silent the house seemed. So stately and so handsome and so unlike a home. Accustomed to the merry voices of children, the cheering patter of little feet, the Sister wondered at the chilling silence of the house.

'Some one to see me, Roberts?' Mrs. Fletcher turned to the butler. 'You know I have told you I cannot see anyone.'

'But, madam, this is a Sister of Charity, and she said that she wanted to see you particularly.'

'Well, ask her for her message. I will do anything I can, but, wearily, I cannot see anyone.'

Roberts still stood at the door. 'The Sister said she would only detain you a very short while. You know, madam,' he said, hesitatingly, 'Mr. Fletcher was always so glad to have the Sister come to see him when he was sick.'

Mrs. Fletcher started. True, she remembered the last days of her husband's life and how the visits of the Sisters seemed to comfort him.

'Well, Roberts,' she said, sinking back in her chair, 'just ask the Sister to come up here.'

Mrs. Fletcher sat quite still a moment. The butler's words had brought back that terrible blow, the loss of her husband. And then when her bleeding heart had leant with idolising love upon her only child, she too had been taken. What was life to her after all but a succession of harrowing pictures, memories that pained her cruelly with every thought and a weary vista of a hopeless future?

A timid knock came to the door. 'Come in!' said Mrs. Fletcher, and Sister Gertrude entered with little Alice. The lady had risen to receive them, and as her eyes fell upon the child she stood as if rooted to the spot.

'You are very kind to receive me, Mrs. Fletcher,' a soft voice was saying, 'and I thank you very much, for I have heard how greatly you have suffered.'