

'I am one of your flock, Father.'

He led the priest through the dining-room into a large sun-parlor that flanked the entire south side of the house. All day long the warm rays from heaven poured through the glass, bathing every nook and corner with their radiance. At present an April sun flooded the room, and fell upon the wan spectre of a once beautiful girl reclining in a steamer chair. In her smouldered nothing more than the cinders of life. On each cheek was the hectic glow of consumption.

'Father Thorne, this is my sister, Nellie.'

A hand more like an apparition than human flesh was led to the priest.

'We heard of your arrival, Father,' Miss Rockwell said, 'but brother was away. Otherwise he would have called.'

The young man drew up a chair for the priest, then sat beside his sister.

'Calling is my duty,' Father Thorne replied, 'but my time has been occupied adjusting the internal affairs of the parish.'

'I trust you will like Grayson,' Miss Rockwell ventured, smiling at him.

Unwilling to commit himself, the priest replied, 'It is a vast change from city life.'

Young Rockwell laughed heartily. 'You will become accustomed to our quiet mode of living. Then you will have no desire to leave.'

'Perhaps,' Father Thorne said. 'Time alone will tell.'

Jim made a quick gesture and said half in earnest, half in humor: 'Away with your cities and their gay rushing life; their clamor and jangle. In the country man finds peace and rest and quiet; with nature and his God.'

'True, true,' Father Thorne exclaimed, 'but I love the whirr of sound and I have found God amid the throngs of bustling humanity.'

'Still,' continued the young philosopher, 'in your modern Babylon deceit stalks the street, and graft stares at you from every corner. All is tinsel and glitter, and the more trappings a man has the farther he thinks he is above his brothers. While here all are on a common ground. You will find nature unalloyed, and perfect tranquillity which is the first step to happiness.'

The visitor looked at brother and sister. Joy akin to perfect bliss shone in Miss Rockwell's eyes as she gazed fondly at her handsome, exuberant brother. All his words and gestures seemed to thrill her, and his attitude of contentment filled her with a feeling of pleasure she could not conceal. What a truly devoted pair, mused the priest. And in truth they were, for a love akin to the angelic sealed soul to soul. Father Thorne recalled his scattered thoughts to the subject in hand.

'You have a grim conception of the city,' he replied, answering Rockwell's denunciation. 'I never viewed it from that angle. Its din and roar always spoke to me of activity and progress. What you would call a modern Babylon, I would name a mill fed by human grist, where wheat and chaff are flung in the hopper together. It was my duty to separate the good from the bad; preserve the former and endeavour to save the latter from the burning.'

The two young people watched him closely, and his eyes glowed as he continued:

'Often times, when the hoarse-throated whistles announced the quitting hour, I would mingle with the crowds surging from shops and factories. Friendly nods, hostile looks, and suspicious glances met my gaze, and I would think of the immense amount of work to be done in such a vineyard. Encourage the strong, support the weak, overcome suspicion and crush hostility. There was work, and I loved it.'

Father Thorne's animated countenance confirmed his words. Rockwell's brow wrinkled as if with unspoken pain and his eyes were pools of unfathomable trouble. He shot a glance at his sister and the look disappeared.

'Well, Father,' he cried, 'when the din lessens and the bird-songs fill your ears, you will never wish to leave us.'

He took his sister's hand in his. A flush mounted her cheeks like the maiden blush of spring. Her eyes, swimming with happiness, met her brother's.

'And, Jim, you will be Father Thorne's guide. You know,' she continued, turning to the priest, 'these hills breathe history and the legends of ancient days. Brother knows them all. He will be your guide. I know you will enjoy it.'

The priest smiled vaguely, but his troublesome thoughts he hid in the inmost chamber of his mind.

'I will be delighted to explore these hills. It will be a pleasant introduction to Grayson.'

Before the visit ended, the three had become fast friends. As the priest drove over the hills, he could not efface the image of Rockwell and his sister from his memory.

During the following week, Jim Rockwell and Father Thorne were constant companions during their leisure hours. There were fishing trips to the mountain brooks; an exploration of Indian Gorge; and journeys to all the historic and legendary spots of which Grayson boasted. On these jaunts the two discussed literature, art, philosophy, or some current topic that vexed society. Thus the rosy days slipped into eternity.

Sitting upon the brow of a hill late one afternoon, Rockwell asked his companion:

'Do you like Grayson or is the city's call as strong as ever?'

Father Thorne shot an inquiring glance at him.

'A tree deeply rooted is not easily transplanted,' the priest said, gazing wistfully toward the distant peaks beyond which lay the busy metropolis.

The gray mists of the evening clung to the wooded heights and poured into the valley like filmy clouds. The sun struggled vainly to shoot its rays through the vapory blanket and, failing, sank disheartened behind the towering pines. The priest continued speaking, as if to himself.

'I was happy in the city because I had plenty of work I liked. My energetic nature will not be contented with Grayson. I have decided to return.'

He smiled knowingly as he thought of the unfinished letter to his Bishop.

'You will like it here,' Rockwell said enthusiastically, 'if you give it a better trial.'

With glowing words he spoke of the beauties of nature, the happiness, the content to be obtained on these cloud-reaching hills. With a hearty laugh and a wave of his hand the vigorous Rockwell banished fame, ambitions, and the outside world.

A chilly evening blast reminded them of the lateness of the hour. They quit the hill; the priest quiet and thoughtful; his younger companion gay and happy.

During the succeeding days, thoughts of the unfinished letter sat brooding on Father Thorne's spirit like an ugly thing of ill omen. He had not seen Rockwell since their conversation on the hill. The priest had been busy unravelling the tangled affairs of the parish and his out-mission. Rumor said that the young man's sister was in a critical condition. This was denied. In spite of his good intentions, Father Thorne had no chance to call. During this entire morning he had remained faithfully at his desk, working on the parish books. Now he had completed his task. With a sigh he replaced the registers in a safe.

'All is settled and everything is in order for some one to step in and take charge. Now for the resignation.'

He took the unfinished letter from beneath his blotter. Coolly and calmly he set about finishing it.

'Grayson, N.Y., April—

'The Right Rev. Francis Donan, D.D.

'Your Lordship,—At your word I came to Grayson and assumed charge of Our Lady of the Hills. I have straightened the tangled affairs of this parish and, now that I have completed the work, I find it impossible to remain longer. I sigh for the city; for a larger field of activity. You promised me a change if this proved unsatisfactory. I find it so and anxiously await my removal.—I remain,

'Your humble servant in Christ,

'James Thorne.'

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