

The Silence of Gwynneth.

IN TWO INSTALLMENTS.

CHAPTER I.

The Reverend Clarence Sterne was beginning to feel at home in his new pulpit, and to recognize the majority of faces he was looking at.

He had been vicar of St. Cuthbert's for nearly three months, and his parishioners were growing accustomed to the strangely striking countenance of their incumbent. Sometimes the strongly marked face looked like the index of a lost soul in its haggard melancholy, which was not peaceful enough for sadness, but looked more like remorse.

At other times, the vicar's low and musical laugh rang out as light-heartedly as though he had never known a care.

His eyes, looking like burning lamps hidden far in his head under dark, arched brows, roamed over the faces upturned in expectation of the sermon to follow the text he had just given out—

"Lock unto the hills!"

And while he preached, on that particular Sunday evening in mid-July, he involuntarily watched the progress of the sunlight slanting through the large west window, and tinting the attentive faces.

Presently a rich red ray rested on a bowed girlish head.

There was no upturned face here.

All the preacher could see of the countenance was a singularly set, drawn expression about the compressed mouth; nothing else was visible, but a straight delicate nose.

Was the girl in trouble, or only in anger?

If the former, the young vicar was ready with sympathy; if the latter with pity.

"We do not look up enough," the low, earnest voice filled the church easily, so clear were its tones; "when trouble comes we retire into ourselves too often, instead of looking 'unto the hills from whence cometh our help.'"

Yet, how gladly we would have the help that is always ready, always waiting for our acceptance. It should only prove help to endurance, is not that worth having? But it is more than that; it is a very present help in need that is promised us. Oh, my friends, look up!"

With a start, the girl he had noticed raised her head as these words fell on her ears.

Dark eyes, raging with resentment and fear, met the vicar's, which were bent on her at the moment.

He saw then the pallor and anguish of the childish face—which, yet, was not childish.

Her look of suffering haunted him when he had finished his sermon.

"I should like to speak to her; to comfort her, if possible," he said to himself, as the service over, he returned to the vestry with the choir, and, after dismissing them, took off his surplice, and re-entered the fast-emptying church.

He walked down the north aisle in quest of the girl, but she had already left her seat.

He was too late!

Well, it could not be helped.

He went on to the porch, where he spoke to one and another of his congregation, who had news to give him of themselves and their belongings, or who wanted a word of advice. Then, when all had gone, and the organist was locking up his organ, the vicar slowly returned to the vestry by way of the south aisle.

His head was bowed now; the smile, with which he had dismissed his last parishioner, had died, and a look of deepest woe had possession of the deepest eyes and full curiously moulded lips.

A slight rustle, as of a woman's garments, made him glance around, and his face grew interested once more, for, apparently trying to hide behind a pillar, was the girl he had sought.

He stepped towards her, laying a detaining hand on her shoulder, as she would have escaped.

"Don't run away, child," he said, gently, in the tone he kept for the little ones of his flock. "Why were you trying to hide? You might have been locked in, you know?"

"That was what I wanted—what I hoped! Please let me stay! I'll not do any harm I cannot—cannot go home again!"

"Why not?"

He kept all surprise out of his voice and manner, putting the question as quietly as though the request to be locked up all night alone in a dark church were an ordinary and reasonable one for a girl—almost a child—to make to him.

"Why not?" he repeated, as she remained silent, standing before him with down-

cast eyes

"I can't tell you. I am very unhappy—very wicked; but I shall be worse if I go home."

"What have you done that has made you so unhappy?"

"I can't tell you," she said again. "You will know, if you care to—everyone will know to-morrow, and then it will be worse than ever."

"Child, tell me your sin!"

Clarence had taken her hand, and he drew her to his side as he seated himself.

"Don't be afraid, tell me all, and I may be able to help you."

"No; I can't tell you. Please don't trouble about me. When you know what it is you will see that I am not worth troubling about. I—I did it because I was so unhappy."

"At least you will tell me your name?"

"Yes; I am Gwynneth Naylor."

She raised her head rather defiantly, but it drooped again when she saw that a man—the sexton—stood not far off, waiting to lock up the church and go home.

The vicar noticed him, too, and called out to him—

"Don't wait, Raggs; I'll leave the keys at your house as I pass."

The man vanished, glad to be released, and seeing nothing unusual in Mr. Sterne's prolonged conversation with a member of his congregation; interviews in the church after service were of frequent occurrence at St. Cuthbert's.

"You live in Church Road," said Clarence, "number twenty, I think, is it not?"

But I do not remember to have seen you before."

"I generally go to St. Matthew's, but to-night the others went for a walk, so I thought I would come here."

"I don't quite understand. Do you mean that you don't accompany your mother?"

"She never wants me, she has Maude and Edmund. I am only her step-daughter, you know."

The hasty interruption gave the first clue to the meaning of the girl's evident trouble the pain in her voice and the flash of resentment in her eyes told more than she guessed.

Evidently, thought Clarence pitifully, the poor child was, or thought herself neglected by her step mother, who, perhaps, showed an unwise preference for her own children; and Gwynneth had, theretofore, done something to widen the breach between them.

He talked to her gently and kindly trying to win her confidence; reluctant to confess to himself how uneasy he felt at this being withdrawn, for there was a something about Clarence Sterne which invited confidence, not only from women and children, but from strong and erring men.

What could this young creature have done that she should keep to herself while it was easy to see how she suffered from the remembrance of her fault; and in anticipation of the result?

Clarence owned himself completely baffled, though he was not relieved, in a measure, when he succeeded in making her promise to go home, and had persuaded her to accept his escort thither.

He saw the pain in her face increase to positive anguish when, on turning into Church Road, she recognized her step mother and sister coming towards them from the other end.

"It is mother and Maude," she said hastily. "Do you mind walking a little faster? I want to get in before we meet them."

On reaching number 20, she wished him good bye hastily, and ran into the house.

Clarence walked on until he met Mrs. Naylor and her daughter.

"How do you do, Mr. Sterne? Did I see Gwynneth with you? I hope I was mistaken, for she certainly left you very brusquely, not to say rudely."

"Nothing of the kind I assure you Mrs. Naylor. Miss Gwynneth is not feeling well. I took the liberty of walking home with her, for her appearance gave me real uneasiness."

She has been in very bad temper all day," said Gwynneth's step mother; "there is nothing else the matter with her."

"Was she at St. Cuthbert's this evening?" inquired Maude. "How like her to go, when she knew we were not going! She rarely accompanies us anywhere."

Maude was a pretty blonde, vivacious and smiling.

Clarence mentally compared her careless happy face with the white, suffering one of her young step sister.

"Will you come in, Mr. Sterne?"

Mrs. Naylor's portly figure filled the gateway of No. 20, and her well preserved features smiled amiably on the young vicar.

"I mustn't, thanks. I have to visit a sick parishioner, who is expecting me. I will call to-morrow, if you are likely to be at home. I want another talk with Miss Gwynneth."

"Come, by all means. If you can say or do anything to improve the child's horrible temper, you will earn my everlasting gratitude. I am always wishing she was more like her sister."

Maude, dear!"

Clarence liked the tone and manner with which Maude uttered her quiet little expostulation.

"It's all very well, Maude, to try and stop me. I hold my tongue about Gwynneth to other people; but Mr. Sterne is different."

"You look on me as a spiritual doctor, Mrs. Naylor? Quite right, too. I accept the charge of your little girl's case, and

will do what I can to cure her."

"I only hope it hasn't gone on too long to admit of a cure," said Mrs. Naylor, doubtfully. "She is not the child you seem to think her, Mr. Sterne. She has long passed her seventeenth birthday."

"The advantage we physicians of the soul have over our brethren of the body, Mrs. Naylor, is that no illness is past curing by the remedies we offer. The only thing necessary is willingness on the part of the patient to be cured. Here comes your son, I think. I recognize him from having seen him with you in church; but he hasn't been to-day."

"No, poor boy. Now, he is ill, if you like. His head has ached badly all day. Edmund, Mr. Sterne has been talking about Gwynneth. He is going to try and cure her of her wretched temper."

"Oh, do leave the child alone!" Young Naylor spoke impatiently, as his fingers momentarily touched, rather than clasped, those held out to him by Clarence in greeting.

"I am tired of hearing Gwynneth grumbled at. She's not so bad, when all is said and done."

"It's like you to defend her my dear boy. But how pale and tired you look! Go in and lie down a bit, and we must not keep Mr. Sterne any longer."

Clarence shook his head as he went on his way.

He did not like the look of things at all, and he promised himself to visit the Naylor's at an inconveniently early hour on the following day.

CHAPTER II.

"Come in, Mr. Sterne, please. Something terrible has happened, about Gwynneth. I am afraid it will kill mother."

Maude Naylor was no longer the smiling, careless girl of yesterday; her fair face was white and troubled, and her blue eyes were full of dread.

"What is it?" asked Clarence, briefly, following her into the small drawing-room, which in spite of the perfect taste evidenced by the arrangement of all it contained spoke of a more than limited income.

"Gwynneth has been arrested for stealing!" Maude spoke with a painful catch in her breath.

"She took a Bank of England note for ten pounds from Edmund's desk at the office on Saturday. She had gone there with a message from mother to Mr. Barnes, Edmund's employer. He is mother's trustee, you know. Edmund went to Mr. Barnes' room to give the message, and while he was gone, Gwynneth took the note, which had been given to Edmund to pay some ground rents with."

Gwynneth changed the note at Hunter's, the draper, buying a pair of gloves, which she gave me as a birthday present yesterday. We can't find that she bought anything else, though the money has all disappeared. She says it is spent and that she only took it to show mother how wicked she really could be. She has often declared she would do something dreadful when mother has scolded her."

"This is something more than dreadful; it means ruin. Mr. Barnes already hints at Edmund's leaving his office; and I don't suppose Mrs. Macdonald will let me teach her children any longer. But I am more anxious about mother than anything else. She goes from one fainting-fit to another, and Doctor Philips looks quite grave."

"I am more sorry than I can tell, you, Miss Naylor," said Clarence, in his gentlest manner. "I saw last evening that your sister was in trouble, and I did all I could to win her confidence; but she refused to say what had occurred. Is it quite certain she took the note?"

"Quite, unfortunately. Edmund missed it directly she had left the office, and, thinking she had done it for fun, he followed her, in time to see her come out of Hunter's. When he asked her for the note, she said she had changed it, and referred him to Hunter's cashier. Still thinking it all a joke, and knowing Hunter's people well, he went in, and casually inquired if Gwynneth had been there, and then he found it was true."

"He kept it to himself, puzzled at her behaviour, until he came home to dinner, and then, it seems, she vowed she had done it on purpose to show mother what she could do. Not liking to worry mother, and, knowing well enough that she could not afford to replace the note, even if she had so much money by her, Edmund told Mr. Barnes instead, and asked to be allowed to refund the amount out of his salary; but Gwynneth is no favourite with Mr. Barnes, and he said, at once, that he should prosecute. You may guess what a terrible day poor Edmund spent yesterday—no wonder he suffered from head-

ache."

"And yet he defended your sister when Mrs. Naylor complained of her temper."

"He always defends her, though they quarrel sometimes between themselves."

"This is very terrible—very, very terrible. What has reduced your sister to such a deplorable state of mind, Miss Naylor? She is so young to have brought trouble on you all."

"I don't think it is all her fault—her temper. I mean; though she is always very difficult to get on with. But mother—poor dear!—has always shown Gwynneth that she has not forgiven her for quarrelling with Aunt Gertrude. Aunt Gertrude is mother's aunt; she lives at Chelsea."

When Gwynneth was three years old, Aunt Gertrude's only daughter died, leaving a girl of Gwynneth's age, and Aunt Gertrude's mother to let her have Gwynneth as a companion for little Edith, promising to educate her, and provide for her future. Gwynneth's father had just died, and mother found herself much poorer than she had expected, so she was tempted to let her go."

"All went well for some years, though from time to time, Aunt Gertrude wrote complaining of Gwynneth's temper, but saying that she hoped to break her spirit. I cannot help thinking that gentleness might have succeeded better than harshness though I ought not to judge my elders I suppose. At any rate harshness failed, and poor Gwynneth came home in disgrace on her twelfth birthday."

"An invitation had been sent for both children to go to a large party; Aunt Gertrude excepted for Edith, but Gwynneth for some childish naughtiness by saying she should not go. A few days after the invitations arrived the children's birthdays occurred, the one following the other, and as usual, both were to be kept on the same day. Edith's present from Aunt Gertrude was a pretty frock intended for the party; but Gwynneth had nothing at all, which, I think, was carrying punishment rather too far."

"Evidently she thought so, for during the morning Edith, running upstairs to have another look at her frock found it all cut into little pieces, and strewn over the floor of her room. Aunt Gertrude refused to have anything more to do with Gwynneth after that. She sent her home at once and mother has never forgiven either of them."

"Poor child! Poor little bad-tempered unloved Gwynneth!" The pity in the man's face outweighed all condemnation he might feel for either of the actors in the sad little drama. "What do you imagine will become of your sister if they send her to prison, Miss Naylor?"

Maude shook her head despairingly.

"I am sure I don't know. In her short intervals of consciousness mother declares she will not have her home again."

The vicar's face grew as stern as his name; but he did not speak his thought to Mrs. Naylor's daughter.

Holding out his hand, he said, kindly—

"You will want to return to your mother. I will come in again by-and-by to ask how she is. Will you believe in my sincere sympathy, and depend upon me to help you in any way that is possible?"

"Thank you. It is good of you not to shun us in our disgrace as other people will. I wish I had been kinder to Gwynneth—perhaps this would never have happened if someone had shown her a little love; but it seemed so natural to ignore her, poor child!"

"Poor child, indeed!" echoed Clarence. "Now she has taken a downward step, it will require a vast amount of love to reclaim her. Be careful you do not refuse to give it when the opportunity comes."

"You may be sure I will not."

Maude took her streaming eyes and sorrowful heart to her mother's bedside, and Clarence Sterne let himself out of the house, going straight to the police station to ascertain if, by any chance, Gwynneth was to be brought before the magistrates that day.

He found the case was then on, and he entered the court, anxious to let the poor child see that at least one friend and sympathizer in her trouble was present.

He recognized Mr. Barnes' hard, accusing features, and laid to himself, that he did not envy him his future reflections if the young girl should be imprisoned for her theft.

Pity filled his heart at sight of Edmund's shamed, white face.

But something more like anger than pity seized him when he met Gwynneth's despairing, yet still defiant, eyes—anger against those who had helped to warp the

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