

THE SNOW-FILLED NEST.

BY ROSE TERRY COOKE.

It swings upon the leafless tree,
By stormy winds blown to and fro;
Deserted, lonely, sad to see,
And full of cruel snow.

In summer's noon the leaves above
Made dewy shelter from the heat;
The nest was full of life and love:
Ah, life and love are sweet!

The tender brooding of the day,
The silent, peaceful dreams of night,
The joys that patience overpay,
The cry of young delight.

The song that through the branches rings,
The nestling crowd with eager eyes,
The flutter soft of untired wings,
The flight of glad surprise:—

All, all are gone! I know not where;
And still upon the cold gray tree,
Lonely, and tossed by every air,
That snow-filled nest I see.

I, too, had once a place of rest,
Where life, and love, and peace were mine—
Even as the wild birds build their nest,
When skies and summer shine.

But winter came, the leaves were dead;
The mother bird was first to go,
The nestlings from my sight have fled:
The nest is full of snow.

—St. Nicholas for March.

A FLOWER IN THE CELL.

Five years of silent imprisonment had passed over Alice Walsley—years of daily and hourly change and excitement for the outer world. Five years in solitary confinement are only one day of dreary monotony repeated one thousand eight hundred and twenty-five times.

Take a starving beggar from the street, and seat him at your table, and tell him that he shall have food and money if he will turn his plate downward, and return it face upward, one thousand eight hundred and twenty-five times—and the hungry wretch will drop from exhaustion before half the turnings are done, and will run from your house with curses. The solitary prisoner turns the same number of days with harrowing weariness a thousand times multiplied in five years. The days and nights of those years had passed like a black and white vibration over Alice Walsley's life. They had brought little change to the outward eye; and the inward change was only a settlement of the elements of doubt and disbelief and despair into a solid deposit in her heart.

No friends had visited her. When her mother died, there was left no living relative. She had no love nor attraction beyond her cell—beyond her own soul. Every tie worth keeping had then been torn asunder. Some lesser bonds she since had unloosed herself. Why should any happy thing be united to one so forlorn and wretched?

For God's pleasure she was undergoing this torture—so they told her. She had neither sinned nor rebelled. She had been given life, and she had grown to love it—but when the summer of her life had come, she was drenched with affliction and wrong, which she had not earned, of the cause of which she was as innocent as her babe, murdered before her eyes. Her heart, hope, love, truth, had been flung down and trampled in the dust.

The alms of prayer that were doled out by the usual Scripture-readers, had long since been carried passed her door. They regarded her as hopelessly lost. She never spoke her dissent; but they could see that she did not hear them, that she did not believe them. So they left her to herself.

One day a man sat in the governor's office with a large book before him, in which he had been carefully reading a page, on which the governor, standing by his side, had placed his index finger.

"It is a remarkable case," said the governor; "and she certainly is not insane."

"She was not a criminal by association?" asked the visitor, closing the book. He was a powerfully built, dark-faced man, with a foreign air, and a deep voice. The studied respect of the governor proved him to be a person of importance. It was Mr. Tryville, who had recently arrived in London, and who was visiting the prisons, with authority from the Ministry itself.

"No," said the governor; "she was a villain's girl, wife of a sea-captain. Here, at page 42, we find the police reports—see, only one short entry. The police didn't know her."

"She has never defended herself, nor reproached others?" asked Mr. Tryville.

"Never," answered the governor. "She has never spoken about herself."

"It is very strange and very sad," said Mr. Tryville to the governor. And to himself he murmured, "She must have suffered fearful wrong."

Soon after, in company with the governor, he passed along the corridor, and stopped at Alice Walsley's cell. The warden opened the door. Mr. Tryville did not look at the prisoner, but walked across the cell, as if observing the window bars, upon which he laid his hand.

"The iron is covered with rust," he said to the governor. "The windows of this range certainly need repainting."

Then, apparently looking around in the same practical way, Mr. Tryville remained, perhaps, a minute in the cell. He had scarcely turned his eyes on the prisoner; yet the mute intensity of her face had sunk into his heart.

"She has been terribly wronged," he repeated to himself, as he left the prison. "God help her! she is very young to be so calm."

When Mr. Tryville emerged from the prison arch, he walked rapidly along the river toward Westminster. He was in deep thought. He proceeded a little distance, then stopped, and looked down on the turbid stream, as if undecided. This was unlike the usual calm deliberateness of his conduct. He was evidently perplexed and troubled. After pausing a while, he looked at his watch, and then retraced his steps, passed Millbank, and walked on in the direction of Chelsea.

It was an old habit of his to solve difficult questions as he walked; and he selected a quiet suburb, with streets leading into the country roads.

In the streets, there was nothing very noticeable about the man, except his athletic stride and deeply bronzed face. He might be classed by the passing observer as a naval officer who had served many years in Southern latitudes, or as a foreign captain. His dress had something of the sailor about its style and cloth. But it is the inner man who interests us: let us follow the burden of his thought.

"Remorse does not end in this calmness, unless the prisoner be insane. Her mind is clear; she is not melancholy; she is self-possessed and firm. Her health has not suffered. Yet, she has abandoned belief in man's truth, and God's mercy. She does not claim that she is innocent; she makes no defence and no charge; she accepts her punishment without a complaint. These are not the symptoms of remorse or guilt. She has abandoned prayer; she deliberately shuts out the past and the future. Yet she is in all other respects obedient, industrious and kind. There is only one explanation of these contradictions—she is innocent, and she has suffered terrible wrong."

Mr. Tryville did not return to his house till late in the evening. He had walked for hours; and, as he went, he had unravelled, with infinite patience, the psychological network that had troubled him. He had come to a decision.

Two days after his visit to the prison, Alice Walsley sat in her cell, sewing tirelessly. The morning had opened like all the other mornings of her imprisonment; there was nothing new nothing to suggest a new train of thought.

Some one who walked along the corridor about ten o'clock had seemed to hesitate a moment at the cell, and then had passed on. The governor, she thought, who had glanced through the watch-grate.

In the wall of every cell there was a minute hole, about two inches square on the exterior, cut in the solid stone. The opening which grew wide towards the interior of the cell, was in the shape of a wedge. A warden outside could see a large part of the cell, while the prisoner could only see the eye of the warden. As the officers wore woollen slippers, they could observe the prisoners without being heard or seen.

At this opening, Alice Walsley thought, the governor had stopped as he passed, and had looked into her cell. It was not unusual.

A few minutes later she paused in her work, almost impatiently, and tried to put away from her an unwelcome thought. After a short pause she renewed her sewing, working rapidly for a few minutes; and then she laid the coarse cloth aside, and buried her face in her hands.

She was thinking of her old life, of her old self; she had tried to escape from it, but could not. For years she had separated the past and the present until she had actually come to think of herself as two beings—one who had been happy, and who was dead—the other, living, but separated from all the world—alone, with neither memories nor hopes, neither past nor future.

Yet to-day, without apparent cause, the two selves had drawn together—the happy Alice had come beseechingly to the unhappy one.

For an hour she remained motionless, her face bowed in her hands. Then she raised her head, but she did not renew her work. She stood up, and walked across the cell, and re-crossed it, in the rapid way of restless prisoners; but on the second passage, she stood still with a bewildered air. Her eye had caught a gleam of bright color in the opening of the watch-grate. There was a flower in her cell!

She trembled as she reached her hand to take it. She did not try to recover her dispassionate calmness. She took it in her hand, and raised it to her lips slowly, and kissed it. It was a sweet rosebud, with two young leaves. She had not seen a flower nor heard a bird sing since she left her own little garden.

This tender thing had stolen inside her guard. Its sweet fragrance, before she knew of its presence, had carried her mind back to the happy days of her girlhood. She kept the flower to her lips, kissing it. She fed her wistful eyes on its beauty. She had been so long without emotion, she had so carefully repressed the first promptings of imagination, that her heart had become thirsty unto death for some lovely or lovable thing. This sweet young flower took for her all forms of beauty. As she gazed on it, her soul drank in its delicious breath, like soft and sensuous music; its perfect coloring filled her with still another delight; its youth, its form, its promise, the rich green of the two leaves, its exquisite completeness, made a very symphony for the desolate heart.

Two hours passed, and still she fondled the precious gift. She had not once thought of how the flower had come into her cell.

"You are pleased at last, Number Four," said a female warden, who had been looking into Alice's cell.

Number Four raised her eyes from the flower, and looked silently at her answer. For the first time in five years, the warden saw that her eyes were flooded with tears.

She did not see any more that day, and, strange to say, the officer took no heed of her idleness. There was a change in her face, a look of unrest, of strangeness, of timidity.

When first she looked upon the flower, a well had burst up in her heart, and she could not stop its flood. In one hour it had swept away all her barriers, had swamped her repression, had driven out the hopeless and defiant second self, and had carried into her cell the wronged, unhappy but human and loving heart of the true Alice Walsley.

She was herself. She feared to think it, but she knew it must be so. When the warden spoke to her now, she shrank from the tone. Yesterday, it would have passed her like the harsh wind, unheeded.

That night, unlike all the nights of her imprisonment, she did not lie down and sleep as soon as the lights were extinguished. With the little flower in her hand, she sat on her low bedside in the still darkness, feeling through her nature the returning rush of her young life's sympathy with the world.

The touch of the rosebud in her hand thrilled her with tenderness. She made no attempts to shut out the corroding memories. They flooded her heart, and she drank them in as a parched field drinks the drenching rain.

Toward mid-night the moon rose above the city, silver-white in a black-blue sky, lovelier than ever she had seen it, Alice thought, as she looked through the bars of her window. She stood upon her low bed, opened the window, and looked up. At that moment her heart was touched with a loving thought of her dead mother. Her arms rested on the window-ledge, and her hands were raised before her holding between them the little flower, as she might have held a peace-offering to a king.

Softly as the manna falls upon the desert, or dew upon the wildflower, descended on the afflicted heart the grace of God's love and mercy. The eyes that looked from above on that white face upturned amid the gloom of the prison, beheld the eyes brimmed with tears, the lips quivering with profound emotion, and the whole face radiant with faith and sorrow and prayer.

"O, thank God!" she whispered, her weeping eyes resting on the beautiful deep sky: "thank God for this little flower! O, mother, hear me in heaven, and pray for me, that God may forgive me for doubting and denying His love!"

With streaming eyes she sank upon her knees by the bed-side, and poured her full heart in passionate prayer. And, as she prayed, kneeling on the stones of her cell, with bowed head, the beautiful moon had risen high in the vault of night, and its radiance flooded the cell, as if God's blessing were made manifest in the lovely light, that was only broken by the dark reflection of the window bars, falling upon the mourner in the shape of a cross. It was long past midnight when she lay down to rest.

But next day Alice began her monotonous toil as on all previous days. She was restless, unhappy; her face was stained with weeping in the long vigil of the night. But her heart had changed with the brief rest she had taken. She began her day without prayer. Her mind had moved too long in one deep groove, to allow its direction to be changed without laborious effort.

The little flower that had touched her heart so deeply the day before, lay upon the low shelf of her cell. Alice took it up with a movement of the lips that would have been a sad smile but for the emptiness of her poor heart. "It grew in its garden, and loved its sweet life," she thought; "and when the sun was brightest the selfish hand approached and tore it from its stem, to throw it next day into the street per haps."

Then flashed for the first time, into her mind the question:—Who had placed the flower in her cell? Had she been unjust—and had the hand that pulled this flower been moved by kindness, and kindness to her?

The thought troubled her, and she became timid and impressionable again. Who had brought her this flower? Whoever had done so was a friend, and pitied her. Else why—but perhaps every prisoner in the ward had also received a flower. Her heart closed and her lips became firm at the thought.

A few moments later, she pulled the signal-wire of her cell, which moved a red board outside the door, so that it stood at right angles from the wall. This brought the warden, to know what was wanted. The door was opened, and the warden, a woman with a severe face but a kind eye, stood in the entrance. Alice had the flower in her hand.

"Have all the prisoners received flowers like this?" she inquired with a steady voice.

"No," said the warden.

In five years, this was the first question "Number Four" had ever asked.

"Why was given to me?" she asked, her voice losing its firmness, and her eyes filling with tears.

"I don't know," said the warden.

This was true: the hand that had dropped the flower into the watch-grate had done so unseen. The warden only knew that orders had been received from the governor that "Number Four" was not to be disturbed, nor the flower taken away.

The door closed again, and Alice raised the flower to her lips and kissed it.

Some one had pitied her, had thought of her. She was not alone in the world. This reflection

she could not drive away. She sat down to her work; but she could not see the cloth—her eyes were blurred with tears, her hands trembled. At last she rose, and pressed her open hands to her streaming eyes, and then sank on her knees beside her bed, and sobbed convulsively.

How long she remained so she did not know, but she felt a hand laid softly on her head, and heard her name called in a low voice,—

"Alice!"

A woman had entered the cell, and was kneeling beside her.

Alice raised her head, and let her eyes rest on a face as beautiful as an angel's, a face as white as if it were a prisoner's, but calm and sweet and sympathetic in every feature; and round the lovely face Alice saw a strange, white band, that made it look like a face in a picture.

It was a Sister of Mercy she had seen before when she worked in the hospital; she remembered she had seen her once sit up all night bathing the brow of a sick girl, dying of fever. This thought came clearly to her mind as she looked at Sister Cecilia's face, and saw the unselfishness and devotion of her life in her pure look.

"Alice," said Sister Cecilia, "why do you grieve so deeply! tell me why you are so unhappy—tell me dear, and I will try to make you happier, or I will grieve with you."

Alice felt her whole self-command deserting her, and her heart melting at the kindness of the voice and words.

"Turn to me, and trust me, dear," said Sister Cecilia; "tell me why you weep so bitterly. I know you are innocent of crime, Alice; I never believed you guilty. And now I have come to bring you comfort."

Sister Cecilia had got one arm around Alice, and, as she spoke, with the other hand she raised the tearful face and kissed it. Then the flood-gates of Alice's affliction burst, and she wept as if her heart were breaking.

Sister Cecilia waited till the storm of sorrow had exhausted itself, only murmuring little soothing words all the time; and patting the sufferer's hand and cheek softly.

"Now, dear," she said at length, "as we are kneeling, let us pray for a little strength and grace, and then you shall tell me why you grieve."

Sister Cecilia, taking Alice's hands between her own, raised them a little, and then she raised her eyes, with a sweet smile on her face, as if she were carrying a lost soul to the angels; and in a voice as simple as a child's, and as trustful, said the Lord's Prayer, Alice repeating the words after her.

Never before had the meaning of the wonderful prayer of prayers entered Alice's soul. Every sentence was full of warmth and comfort and strength. The words that sank deepest were these,—she repeated them afterwards with the same mysterious effect,—*Thy will be done on heart as it is in heaven.* She did not know why these words were the best, but they were.

"Now, Alice," said Sister Cecilia, rising cheerfully, when the prayer was done, "we are going to bathe our faces, and go on with our sewing, and having a long talk." Alice obeyed, or rather she followed the example. Sister Cecilia's unaffected manner had won her so completely that she felt a return of her girlish companionship. All other teachers of religion whom Alice had seen in the prison had come to her with unsympathetic formality and professional airs of sanctity, which repelled her.

Half an hour later, Alice was quietly sewing, while Sister Cecilia sat on the pallet and talked, and drew Alice into a chat. She made no reference to the grief of the morning. The cases in the hospital, the penitence of poor sick prisoners, the impenitence of others, the gratitude and the selfishness and the many other phases of character that came under her daily observation—these were the topics of the little Sister's conversation.

"Why, I might as well be a prisoner, too," she said smiling, and making Alice smile; "I have been in the hospital seven years. I was there two years before you came. You see I am as white as a prisoner."

"Yes," said Alice, looking sadly at her; "it is not right. Why do you not grieve as they do?"

"Why?" answered Sister Cecilia, gayly, "because I am not a criminal, perhaps. I am like you, Alice; I have less reason to grieve than the other poor things."

Alice had never seen it in this light before, and she could not help smiling at the philosophy of the little Sister. But she was affected by it very deeply.

"If you had remained in the hospital, Alice," said the Nun, "you would have been as much a Sister of Mercy as I am. Do you know, I was very sorry when you left the hospital."

Every word she said, somehow, touched Alice in a tender place. Was the wise little Nun choosing her words? At any rate, it was well and kindly done.

When she kissed Alice, and pulled the signal-wire to go out, her smile filled the cell and Alice's heart with brightness. She promised to come and see her every day till the ship sailed; and then they would be together all the day.

"Are you going to Australia?" asked Alice, in amazement.

"Certainly," said Sister Cecilia, with a smile of mock surprise. "Why, those poor children couldn't get along without me—fifty of them. Now, I'm very glad I shall have you to help me, Alice. We'll have plenty to do, never fear."

She was leaving the cell—the Warden had opened the door—when Alice timidly touched