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## JESSIE'S CHOICE.

A TALE FOUNDED ON FACT.

"The good Jesus has already made up for you. Look at this, father," said Mary, placing the crucifix before the dying man's eyes. "Look at this. Could he have done more for us? He shed the last drop of His blood for you. There is nothing left for Him to give you but Himself, and He is coming on His way to give you that rich blessing."

A flush of ecstatic joy crimsoned the face of the dying penitent, and he raised his hands and tearful eyes to heaven.

Mary prayed with all her might. She saw a shadow resting on the pallid features; the flush had died away. She knew that death was very, very near, and she trembled with the dread that he should pass away without his first and last Communion.

"The flowers, Mary,—the flowers! Jessie will be late."

"Hush, dear father. Do not think of Jessie now; think of none but God. He is coming soon."

"I am not worthy," sighed he; "I am all covered with sin."

"Offer to God the sinless and loving Heart of His blessed Mother," whispered Mary, "and beg of her to present you to her Son, for He is coming very soon."

A deep silence succeeded,—a silence unbroken by words; but listening Angels stood there waiting the coming of their great King. And they heard rich music ascending from the two human hearts close by, and songs of joy swelling the chorus before the Angels of God in heaven.

### CHAPTER V.

Jessie had arrived in time to have the first choice of a number of small bouquets. The flowers were yet wet with the morning dew, and she laid them tenderly in her little basket, and hurried homeward. Scarcely had she left the market, when a heavy hand grasped her shoulder, and turning, she grew sick with fright; for it was the thin man from the Circus who held her, and smiled his own grim smile down upon his victim.

"Don't scream, my dear, but come along quietly; I want to show you the beautiful place that gentleman lives in that has those pretty children."

"Loose me, sir! loose me!" cried Jessie, struggling to free herself. "My grandfather is dying. Loose me, and let me go home."

A light spring cart came rattling over the street, and stopped at the place where Jessie was imprisoned in the iron grasp of her enemy. She felt herself raised from the ground, then seated she knew not where, only the painful grasp was not so tight, and a strange voice hissed behind her, "We must drive for our lives; her uncle is close after us." She heard the crack of a whip, and felt the plunging vehicle bear her away with a speed that paralyzed her. At length she opened her eyes. Houses had disappeared, and there was a church in the distance. The rising sun gilded the cross on its roof till it shone like burnished gold.

"Save me! save me!" she cried; and so agonized was the scream that the thin man ground his teeth with rage, and laid his hand on her mouth.

A dark figure, half-crossed the street. She saw a hand stretched out, and the driver rein in his horse. It was a policeman.

"What are you doing to that girl?" he asked with his hand on the reins.

"We are taking her home to her mother," said the thin man. "She left her home yesterday, with a lot more to come here and see the fair. She's been wandering about all night, pretty dear. Ain't we glad we've found you at last, my chicken; and won't your poor mother be pleased? We are in a hurry, you see, my friend; for we left her poor mother in a fit."

"Oh, good man," cried poor Jessie, "don't believe this wicked creature. I have no mother and my dear grandfather is dying, and this man is stealing me from my home. Oh, save me! mercy! mercy! Oh, don't go away! Mercy! mercy!" and again the wild shriek was echoed on all sides.

It was heard by one who hurried down the aisle of the little church, bearing in his silver crosse, the Saviour of all who cry to Him for mercy. The good priest, turned pale as the shriek rung in his ears, for its tone of agony chilled the blood in his veins. A moment, and he was out in the street, hastening to the cart where the child stood with outstretched arms, and face livid with fright.

"Here's a gentleman," said the policeman; "you can't move on till I've spoken to him."

And the gentleman came forward and laid his hand on the horse, and asked Jessie why she screamed so fearfully.

"Oh, if you please, kind sir, these men have stolen me from the market; they want to make a ballet-dancer. Oh, take me from them! Oh, do, please, help me."

Both the men here swore the men was crazy with fright, because she had been lost and out all night; that they were sent by Mrs. Brown, of No. 6, Park Street, Dean Valley; to scour the town for her lost child; that they had found her in the market, where she had picked up a few flowers.

"It isn't true! it isn't true!" cried the poor child. "Oh, pray, don't leave me, sir."

"I won't leave you, my poor child, until I understand the story better. The policeman will also stay; and when we know the truth, we will both do our duty."

The two men became very furious; but they were silenced immediately.

"How came you to be out so early, my child, and alone?"

"Oh, sir, my grandfather is dying; and this morning, he wanted flowers, because—because—oh, dear, I mustn't tell you why."

"Why not tell me? and am I not your friend?"

"Oh, yes; but you wouldn't understand. You would think me crazy, because you're not a Catholic."

"I am indeed a Catholic," said the good Father, now more interested than before.

Jessie uttered a cry of joy, and exclaimed, "Then, my grandfather wants flowers, because the Blessed Jesus is coming to him this morning."

"What is your grandfather's name?" asked the priest.

"He is called Samuel Brink," and lodges at No. 9 Queen's Court."

"These men ought to be taken into custody," said Jessie's friend; "I know her grandfather, and am now on my way to her home. Come with me, my child."

The thin man released his hold, and Jessie, with an agility which surprised and amused the good priest, sprang from the cart, and clung to the folds of his ample cloak.

"Give me your hand, my child, said he; but do not speak to me until we get to your home."

"Have you what my grandfather is waiting for?" asked Jessie, her whole form trembling with awe and reverence.

"I have," answered her protector; "and that is why we must keep silence."

Jessie timidly withdrew her hand, and removing the lid from her basket, carried it with the flowers exposed; their sweet perfume scenting the air as they hurried on.

The kind Heart of our loving Lord noted the graceful act of the poor orphan; and showered its most precious graces on her future path through life.

The cart and its occupants were "marked" by the policeman; but they owed their escape from custody to his religious principles, for he had an unwholesome dread of Popery, and his sympathy with the child died out the instant she explained her morning's errand.

The priest and his charge had turned the corner leading to the market, when they encountered Sam, his head bare, and his face streaming with perspiration. His coat was thrown open, and his naked chest heaved convulsively. The instant his eye fell on Jessie he rushed towards her, and grasping her arm, asked what had happened to her.

"Hu-h, Uncle Sam!" said Jessie, falling a little behind the priest. "I am quite safe now. This gentleman is the priest. Will you run home before us, and tell what we are coming?"

Sam's gratitude to Jessie's protector, knew no bounds. Under a rough and uncouth exterior he possessed a warmth of affection and a delicacy of feeling that justly endeared him to his family. Out of that circle, little was known of him beyond the fact that he worked hard to support a sick father, and was tenderly devoted to his wife and a little niece, who was seldom seen from under his protection. Those who employed him invariably found him punctual and honest; but he refused companionship with new acquaintances, especially if they belonged to the class of strolling players. He had been married three years. He chose his wife for the gentleness of her manners, and the busy, industrious habits he had noticed in her. And not once since their union had she vexed or disappointed him. He first met her at the death-bed of his sister-in-law—Jessie's mother—who was mortally injured by a fall from a rope lofty feet above the ground; a weak strand gave way, and the vibration of the cord precipitated her and her husband to the yawning depth below. He was killed on the spot. She survived a week, and was carefully attended, till her death, by the under-nurse of a country hospital. The nurse was Mary, and Sam never could forget her tender care and patient labors for his dying sister. Mary had been well instructed in her religion by a good mother; but hers was a "Protestant place," and though

engaged there two years, she never once had heard the Holy Mass or received the Holy Sacraments. She kept hidden in her little room a small oratory, and many and frequent were her tearful prayers that God would open some other home to her, where she could serve Him as her holy religion required. And when Sam vowed he never would prevent her going to the chapel, nor laugh, nor scoff at anything which she held sacred, she believed his words, and married him. Had Sam followed the council the good priest gave him on his wedding-day, he would have been a better and a happier man; but a stupid shyness kept him from the church, and he held the shabbiness of his clothes responsible for his neglected soul. When Mary proposed to him that she should nurse his aged parents, and take the charge of Jessie, and not break up their poor itinerant home, his heart overflowed with love for her, and he fell at her feet and almost worshipped her. It was Mary's savings that had purchased a decent van, and a license to hawk such goods as she possessed. So the circus and mountebanks were given up, and an honest means of subsistence adopted. For years they had lived in no other home. The van was furnished with all that was absolutely necessary for their daily wants. It contained a small stove to cook their food, two beds and a hammock, chests of crockery and cooking utensils, a table, and a bench fixed to the side of the van. During the day their goods were displayed outside the vehicle. The brooms, mops, baskets, &c., hung in conspicuous places from the pegs near the roof. They travelled from village to village, passing through cities, and towns on their way, and furnishing small shops with every variety of goods at trade price. But times grew harder and harder, and food was getting more and more expensive; and Sam at last insisted that they should try the circus once more, and if that failed the horse and van must be sold, and a temporary shelter sought for in the workhouse.

Mary reluctantly consented; for the old man was dying, and they were unable to buy common necessities. We have seen the result of the first day's trial. Jessie inherited her parents' talent for acrobat performance, and with a little of the professional training would be able to accomplish unprecedented feats on the tight-rope. The thin man at the Circus, with the eye of a connoisseur, had discovered her merits, and determined to secure her as the future "prima donna" of a city opera. He succeeded in extorting from Sam an unwilling consent, for which he was to pay £50 if the scheme of running off with her succeeded, and she could be induced to make an apprenticeship of five years.

### CHAPTER VI.

The clock struck seven. Mary rose from her knees, and wiped away the perspiration from the dying face. The livid lips were parted, and the labored breathing was becoming fainter, and at intervals interrupted by the awful death rattle; the hands were clasped, but motionless; the power had died in every limb, and left them white and cold; but the heart throbbled on, as if it could not cease to be, but waited and kept the soul imprisoned until it could take wing with One to guide its passage through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. There was a world of love and patient longing in those glassy eyes as they turned to the half-opened door and encountered the mild but anxious countenance of the good priest. Mary lit the candles. Jessie filled the vases with the sweet flowers. Sam knelt, and prayed with all his soul. But the sick man,—ah, we must veil the rest. God grant to us in our dying hour such precious moments as those which closed the life of the fervent penitent Samuel Brink. The priest remained till the last sigh was drawn; but his heart echoed the song of exulting Angels, while his lips pronounced the "De Profundis" and "Litany for the Dead"—"Strange, there were no tears in Jessie's eyes when the cold face was covered, but a radiant smile upon her lips. Jessie's gift of faith was deeper than her natural love; and her soul had soared above the death bed and the narrow room, and was listening for the happy welcome, "Come, ye blessed," &c.

The priest spoke seriously, and in a whisper, to Mary, and with a shade of sorrow on his face; but it soon passed off, for Mary, with tearful eyes, had made a promise that her neglected duties should be resumed immediately; and Sam, still upon his knees, bitterly reproached himself for being the cause of Mary's negligence, and joined his promise to hers that not one night should pass before he had made his peace with God.

"I think," said the priest, "you had better take the child to her new home to-day; she can be of no use here, and from what you said to me yesterday I fear she is not safe until the town-fair is over. You had better remove her at once, while the Sisters are prepared to receive her."

"I will take her this afternoon, Reverend

Father," said Mary, drying her tears; "but I can never thank you enough for your charity to her and to us all."

"I shall accept your good resolutions for thanks," said the priest, smiling; "they are made at a very solemn time, and God will be angry if they are broken."

"They shall not be broken," said Sam, rising from his knees; "I ought to have had more sense than to go on living in this careless way, when death is sure to come at last. I never saw any one die afore, sir. It must be an awful sight to see a bad man die. I hope in God, sir, I may never come to that."

"It is in your own power, my good man, to die as happily as your poor father. Thank God, such deaths as his are the poor priest's consolation. I will say Mass for him at nine o'clock this morning."

"There is time," said Mary, "for me to do the last I can for poor father. I will, then, come and hear that Mass; and if you can afford a little time after your breakfast, I should like to begin my confession."

"I will do what you wish, my poor child; but I must hurry back now. God bless you all," he said, as Mary fell on her knees; and lifting the arch, he hurried homeward.

Mary went into the next room, and found the old woman still fast asleep. I won't wake her yet, thought Mary; she is worn out with fatigue and anxiety. I will wait until she wakes, and break the news gently."

"Mary, just come here," whispered Sam from the open door.

Mary obeyed, and Sam pointed to the kneeling form of the child.

"What is she doing?" he whispered; "is she asleep with her eyes open? Do go and speak to her. I'm afeared to touch her."

The child was kneeling motionless; she had not stirred since her grandfather had received the Holy Viaticum; she saw nothing, she heard nothing, of what was passing around her. Her bright eyes seemed to gaze on vacancy, and her glowing lips to hold communion with the unseen presence of Angels.

"Jessie," said Mary, placing her hand on the child's head, "what are you looking at?"

Jessie started to her feet, and burying her face in her aunt's apron, burst into tears.

"Oh, aunt," she sobbed, "I wish you was like grandfather. I do so want our Blessed Lord to come to me like that, and take me with Him where my grandfather is gone! Oh, aunt, there's nothing good nor beautiful in this world except the Blessed Sacrament!"

Mary dried the child's tears, and comforted her as best she could.

"Did you hear what the priest said you were to do, Jessie?"

"No, aunt; do tell me."

"You are to go to school to-day; and, Jessie, now mind what I am going to say to you, for perhaps it's the last time you can ever have a word of advice from your Aunt Mary."

"Are you, too, going to Heaven?" asked Jessie, nestling closer to her aunt's embrace.

"Not yet, Jessie; I am not so good as your grandfather. But when you are in the convent you will be in better hands than mine, and in a few weeks it will be your turn to teach me; for you will soon learn what I shall never have the chance of knowing. But what I want to say is this, never breathe to any child in that place that you have been a little circus dancer. They will ask you how you lost your parents. Tell them they were killed by a fall, and say no more.—Never breathe a word of the wild life you have led. And if they laugh at your ignorance and vulgar manners, bear it, my darling Jessie, for the love of the Blessed Sacrament."

"I will, aunt; I will, indeed. I'd be glad to bear something for that!"

"I have told the priest that I had you baptized as soon as I knew, and that you had been once to the chapel with me. But there is one thing, Jessie, that I want you to understand well before you leave us. You have never seen me approach the Holy Sacraments, and you have seen me stay from Mass on Sundays without a proper reason. All this was very bad example for me to give you. I was doing very wrong, and I ought to have known better."

"Oh, aunt," said Jessie, "I am so sorry you are in such trouble; I never knew you did wrong. You have always taught me to love and fear God, and hate sin, and say my prayers.—And you promised that, some day you would send me to school and have me taught."

"Yes, I did," said Mary; "but I might have done more for you. And now that father is gone, and you are leaving us, I feel such a weight of sin upon me because I neglected helping your poor souls when I had the opportunity. But Sam and I will turn over a new leaf to-day; won't we, Sam?"

"Yes, indeed," answered Sam. "We must all die some day, and there's no time like the present for trying to prepare for that great day."

"Sam," said Mary, "while I am at Mass, will you go to an undertaker's about poor father? I think we can bury him without the parish help, with what you got last night. Poor, poor, father," sobbed Mary, uncovering the pale, cold face; "I did so hope to keep you with us a few years longer; but I would not stand between your soul and the good God. And all I could say for you was, God's holy will be done! You did your duty, father dear, as far as you had light to know it. And perhaps it was all through my neglect and bad example that you lived so long outside the one true Church? God rest your soul in peace to-day, and grant us all a happy death."

"Amen," said Sam, kissing the marble brow, and lifting Jessie to gaze upon the silent face.

"Aunt Mary, will you please to put those flowers in grandfather's hand?"

"I will, my darling," said Mary; "but I must first get some good neighbor to help me to arrange him properly on his poor bed. Will you stay here with uncle, and say your Rosary for his dear soul? If mother wakes before I return, Sam, do you break the news very gently, her poor head is so weak. I don't know how she will take it; I am afraid it will be the death of her."

"Mother will hear it better than you think," said Sam; "it's what she's been expecting a long time now, and she's grown so childish lately that she will hardly understand her loss. Don't stay away long, Mary. Remember, you said you would go to the nine o'clock Mass."

"I shall only stay away until I can get a woman to come back with me. Take care of Jessie, and don't let her out of your sight."

### CHAPTER VII.

Jessie Brink and her aunt stood in the hall of the large Orphanage at Lilydell. It was evening, and the sounds of laughter and merriment, accompanied by the lively tread of many little feet, informed the strangers that it was the children's play time. The gas burned brightly in the hall, and Jessie stood entranced before a large white image of the Virgin Mother and her Divine Child. In her simplicity she fancied that the Sacred Infant smiled a loving welcome, and that His raised fingers were blessing her in an especial manner. There were flowers at His feet; and Jessie's mind instantly reverted to her morning's errand, and the danger she had so lately escaped.

"O Blessed Jesus!" she said, clasping her hands, "if it hadn't been for you in the Blessed Sacrament, instead of being here in this holy place, I should be miserable in that bad man's house."

There was a jingling sound in the corridor, accompanied by the hushed tread of a quick footstep. Mary had never seen a nun, and she started when she beheld the pale face, shrouded with linen white as snow, and half concealed by a drooping veil of black crape.

"Are you the person sent by Father Hubert?" asked the nun in a low voice, and with a pleasant smile upon her countenance.

"Yes, ma'am," said Mary, curtsying to the ground; "and I have brought my niece, if it wouldn't be inconvenient for you to take her in to-night."

The nun held out her hand to Jessie, who timidly approached, and placed her own within that of the Sister.

"You are not afraid of me, my child? I shall be very kind to you, and love you very much, if you are good."

Jessie raised her eyes to the nun's face, and smiled through her tears.

"Father Hubert told me the child's history," said the nun to Mary; "he is most interested in her, and wishes her to be brought up for respectable service, rather than for any trade or business."

Mary's voice was choked with emotion, and she strove in vain to thank the nun for her kindness to her niece.

"I know what you would say, my good woman," said the nun, as she observed Mary's quivering lip and tearful eyes. "I am sure you are full of gratitude to God for the many blessings He has given you lately. The conversion and death of your father-in-law will be a subject of deep thankfulness for the remainder of your life; and we must all pray that you and your husband may have the grace of perseverance in the good path you have chosen. This dear child will pray fervently for you in her new and happy home. Will you not, my dear?"

"Yes, ma'am, I will," was all that Jessie could say; and she flung herself into the arms of her aunt.

The parting was a scene which brought tears to the nun's eyes, and she turned to the image of our Lady, and commended them both to her maternal love and pity.

"Aunt," said Jessie, struggling to keep down the tide of grief, "I didn't think it would be so hard to bid you good by. I'm afraid I won't