

* * The Story Page * *

An Answer to Prayer.

By E. M. N.

Miss Townsend prepared herself for an afternoon of solid comfort.

Was it because she was tired, she wondered, and therefore nervous, that one persistent and disagreeable thought kept obtruding itself between her consciousness and pleasant themes?

The open pages before her failed to banish from her mind the face of a little child, a face pinched, wistful, shadowed by a look of anxiety quite out of keeping with its infantile features and innocent eyes.

"I do believe," soliloquized Miss Townsend, in deep disgust, "there will be no peace for me till I go and call upon those people."

"If I were a good woman," thought Miss Townsend, "I should want to go. If I were a little worse I should read here in peace. Being neither bad nor good, I suppose I shall go—and hate to."

With a last longing look at the fire, and a stifled sigh for the cup of tea, Miss Townsend plodded out into the storm.

The little girl whose face had proved so haunting was a new pupil in Miss Townsend's sewing class. The public school building in which, by special favor of the board, this class was held, stood in a thronged and very poor quarter of the city. The winter was proving a hard one, with the work of many factories, crafts and shops intermittent, slack or utterly at a standstill.

The child, Annie McMullin, lived in a rear house, separated by a long yard from the dwellings which faced the street. Its look of sometime thrift surprised Miss Townsend, for the extreme poverty of the child's dress had led the visitor to expect the third floor back of a tenement. This house harbored evidently but one family. Shrubs had been planted in the door yard. On the little porch stood forlorn flower boxes heaped high with snow. At the windows hung lace curtains, which, as every parish visitor knows, made a line of demarcation between the abject and the thrift poor.

There came to the door, in response to a third and emphatic knock, a tall, haggard man. He was unshaven, though not unwashed.

His frayed and faded coat was buttoned high, to conceal the absence of linen. The expression in his eyes, hunted and fierce, belied the good line of brow, mouth and chin.

"Mr. McMullin?" she said.

"That's my name," replied the man, with sombre looks.

"Perhaps you have heard of me from your little Annie," ventured the small woman in conciliatory accents. "I am her sewing teacher, Miss Townsend. I wished to meet Annie's father and mother. I like to know the parents of all my little people."

The man held the door wide, inviting his visitor to enter. His civility of manner and refinement of speech accorded ill with his rough and wretched appearance.

The little parlor wherein he made his visitor sit down had evidently been furnished in some period of prosperity. It boasted the plush-covered furniture, the crayon portraits in flamboyant silver frames, the album and the melodeon which together furnish the company room according to the heart's desire of the mechanic's wife. But everything showed the lack of a woman's tidying hand.

Where was the wife? The wife, it appeared was sick. The man had filled an excellent position at good wages till latter summer. Then his "boss" had closed the business.

Times were bad and it seemed impossible to find another job. The man had walked the streets seeking one, day after day. The wife had tried to help by going out to wash and char. She had been long unused to such continuous work and it has overtaken her strength. Then, one bitter day, coming home very tired and poorly clad, she had caught cold. She lay now on a dingy and confused bed in an inner room, and the eyes of the visitor saw that there lay a very sick woman.

There was a little coarse food in the house. There was no fire, no fuel and no money. And in the heart of that haggard, fierce-eyed man, there was despair.

"They say," said he, "that God hears prayer. Haven't I prayed morning, noon and night, night and morning? 'Tisn't luxuries we want. It's food for my children. Just as nice children as any man ever had. It's a bit of comfort for my wife that's work-

ed so hard and been so good to me. It's work to pay my rent and put some clothes upon my back. Look at me! The rags I'm in! Who'll take a man looking like me? I pray and pray in the night when I can't sleep for thinking of my trouble. Then I get up early and tramp and tramp, and always it's the same answer: "Nothing for you."

The visitor realized with bitter longing that she had no word of spiritual comfort to offer. The problem of prayer haunted her own thoughts, must be answered. One's own feet, she thought, must be firmly planted on the rock of faith before one can reach down to draw up the souls sinking into despair. The little blue-eyed Annie, just in from school was despatched with a tin pail, a note and a quarter to fetch some strong broth from a diet kitchen hard by. There were some old blankets at home, Miss Townsend remembered, which could be sent down this evening by the furnace man, to make the woman's bed more comfortable.

The Associated Charities in a case like this could and must give coat. The little woman bethought herself of a noble charity which sent nurses in cases of emergency to the homes of the sick poor. She herself ordered in a basket full of such groceries as could be prepared by a bewildered man and a child. By the time she reached home she was too sad and too tired to care for dinner or books. Her heart was filled with a sense of her impotence to offer that spiritual comfort for which a racked soul had cried out to her in vain.

If Miss Townsend could not answer the questionings of the man's perplexed soul, she could and did find him various jobs in and around her own house, rugs to be beaten, windows to be cleaned, snow to be shovelled and the cellar to be white washed. She could "fill him up," as she expressed it, in her own kitchen and send him home with broth or jelly or fresh eggs for the sick wife. She could make such aprons of strong, pretty gingham to cover the children's rags and make them neat for school. She could beg for the man a suit of clothes in which he might sally forth respectable to seek a job. And she could and did harass the much enduring secretary until at last, to her intense relief, a permanent job of the Associated Charities and importune her friends was found.

But though she had been unable, as she felt, to carry spiritual light into the home of her proteges, "I really do believe," she said, "I have been a kind of Mascot to them, after all."

The wife was well. Taken in time, her sickness had proved no more than a sharp attack of bronchitis; "but I really think," said the nurse with unprofessional frankness, "we have just saved her from pneumonia."

The man's work was proving permanent and he had twice been judged worth an increase of salary.

The house took on a look of humble comfort. Mrs. McMullin, freed from alien wash-tubs by her man's steady job, wrought cleanliness and order where once had been a grimy chaos. Little Annie's dimples reappeared and the window boxes bloomed again.

When Mrs. McMullin, out of a full heart, spoke gratitude to her visitor, famine and fear had vanished as completely from the hearth as had the snow from the springtime world without.

"And my man says," pursued Mrs. McMullin, whose thanks had been poured forth with Irish fluency and fervor. "I've been sorry ever since," says he, "for my wicked words that first day. I was half wild with the trouble, and the starvation or I'd never 'a' said them things," says he. "Now I know that there was use in my prayin', ma'am," says he, "for the good God sent us you."

Miss Townsend murmured something—she could never remember what. There flashed into her soul a light sought through many a sacred ceremonial in vain. And as she walked home through the mean and swarming streets, the light was with her still.

"God sent us you."

She recalled the day when she listened to bitter doubts. Could she ever doubt again? In doing the will of God her eyes had been opened even as Christ said.—Churchman.

"As One Whom His Mother Comforteth."

Grace Pear Bronaugh.

"If she can only get some sleep," the doctor said, "it will do her more good than medicine. And she must be persuaded to eat something—she needs it."

"I know," said her sister, "but she takes no interest in anything. As for sleeping, she has been awake so long I suppose it has become a sort of habit with her. And then she is grieving so."

"She has not slept for a week," said the husband. "Before the baby died she would let no one nurse him but herself."

His own face bore traces of many sleepless nights, and there was a speechless anxiety in his weary eyes. He had lost his first and only child, a boy of six months, must he lose his young wife, too?

"Alice," he said to his sister-in-law when the doc-

tor had gone, "what child is that crying next door? It sounds like poor little Tom, and it is breaking Mary's heart to hear it. Can not the windows be closed, or something?"

"I suppose so," Alice replied, "but it would make the house so hot and Mary can not sleep without air, that is certain. Besides, I doubt if it would do any good, the walls are so thin, and the baby cries so hard. It is impossible to shut the sound out."

"But whose child is it?" said the husband. "Mrs. Carroll has no baby, has she?"

"No," Alice said, "it is her brother's baby. She took it three days ago, the same day little Tom died. The father and mother were both killed in a railroad accident. It is very sad."

"But not like this," said the husband, brokenly.

"You and Mary have each other," said the girl, making a pitiful attempt to comfort him.

"How long shall I have her if this keep up! Listen to that!"

A series of baby shrieks ending in a sobbing wail was what they heard. The neighboring house was in close proximity to their own, and it seemed impossible to shut out that cry.

"That baby cries because it is sick, or hungry, I believe it is hungry," said Alice. "Mrs. Carroll says it does not digest its food and it hardly sleeps at all. It needs its mother, poor thing."

Robert went up to see if Mary was sleeping, though he knew she could not sleep, with that constant cry in her ears.

"Darling," he said, "you must try to lie down and rest a little. Let me stay and read to you."

She allowed him to lead her to the bed and she lay down.

"Where shall I read, dear?" he asked her.

"Anything," she said. "Read where the Book is open. Perhaps God may have a message for me, to comfort me."

The Book was opened at the sixty-sixth chapter of Isaiah. He read, "As one whom his mother comforteth so will I comfort you."

"O Robert," Mary cried, "I can not bear it!"

He kissed the quivering lips and talked to her about the love of God. When she was calmer she whispered, "Perhaps God did mean that for a message to me."

Mary Moreland lay in her room on the afternoon of the fourth day following the one on which her baby died. She knew that she ought, for her health's sake, to sleep, that her husband was very anxious about her, but how could she sleep? If she dozed for an instant it was only to dream that a little figure lay beside her, its warm mouth against her breast, its soft fingers clasping her own.

Down in the yard adjoining she could see the portly form of Mrs. Carroll, swinging the baby in the hammock, under the apple tree. She could see the little dark head rolling from side to side as the hammock swung to and fro.

"She is swinging it too hard," murmured Mary.

Mrs. Carroll had never had any children of her own. Her heart was kind enough, but her hands were unskillful. She produced a nursing bottle which the baby refused. She forced the baby to swallow, and when it choked she snatched it up and pounded it violently upon the back.

Mary could bear it no longer. She crept down the stairs and out of the house. No one intercepted her. Alice was busy in the kitchen, Robert had gone down town to get a sleeping potion.

"Mrs. Carroll," she said, leaning over the fence, "please bring me that baby."

Mrs. Carroll made an awkward attempt to cover the baby with the blanket, under the impression that the sight of it might make poor Mrs. Moreland "worse."

"Bring it here," said Mary, "and let me look at it."

Mrs. Carroll brought the baby to the fence. It was a pretty baby, with appealing blue eyes, its hair was dark like little Tom's, and it was just as big as he had been, and Mary's heart leapt as she looked at it.

"You poor soul," cried Mrs. Carroll, "how sick you do look. It is too bad. What troubles there are in this world!"

Mary stretched her arms over the fence and took the child. The little thing smiled and laid its cheek against her dress. She clasped it close and in an instant its cries were stilled.

"Well, of all things! If he ain't a nursing!" exclaimed Mrs. Carroll.

For a long time Mary did not speak. Her face was pale, but she did not look unhappy, even though this baby reminded her so strangely of little Tom.

"Come on over and sit down," said Mrs. Carroll, with her hand upon the gate.

"No," said Mary, "I will not come now, thank you, but I wish I could take the baby in the house with me. O Mrs. Carroll, let me take him, let me keep him, let me have him! See how he clings to me, see what comfort he is taking! Surely you do not need him, and he will be a great care to you. If I take him, it may save his life. Oh, I pray that you will let me have him!"

"Do you really want him, Mrs. Carroll, welcome, for I have hands."

"Want him?"

him. Is he mine?"

"Sure, he is."

Carroll.

"Has Mary?"

later.

"I think she had better go."

"If only that."

"Never fear."

not trouble

asleep."

When Robert

ly repress an

dreaming? It

strangely like

Mary's arm, it

just as he had

motherless child

asleep.

"As one who

ert, reverently.

The B

"I wouldn't

to Florence.

Florence, who

ash berries than

"Oh, mamma,"

them crack."

"But I know

more pleasure,"

to the house.

a small basket.

you can find,"

something plea

Florence took

the tiny orange

about the trees

"Is that enou

full.

Her mother c

per. "That wi

"What are

asked, curiously

Bul mamma

my secret," she

Now, mamma

so Florence sile

as the tree sho

One gray day

next morning

world, for ever

trees looked like

"This is a g

Florence, forget

"Yes, a berry

mamma said,

mountain ash b

"But they are

claimed in surpr

"Not for you,

giving her a bay

cloak and scatter

you will soon h

So Florence r

fuls of berries

orange balls da

crust! Then mar

Sure enough,

first one, and t

were gathered o

ence's berries.

Florence clapp

cried. "I mean

—Christian Adv

THE CAT A

Our Tabby, th

unmixed with j

alligator, was i

she acquired the

at every chance

liberately cuffi

retire with a sh

ed a duty. Th

little alligator h

insults, and thi

flushed; and, w

scrambled after

it viciously. T

started on a re

over chairs and

desperately to b

enied Tabby, w

none the worse f

ly extended jaws

Tabby treated t

spect.