

Kathie's Murillo

A STORY FOR MOTHERS.

By ERIE WATERS

"**W**ILL you come—to please me, Kathie? We would rather stay at home, of course; but it seems a little selfish, does it not, dear, to disappoint mother on her birthday, when she so loves to gather us all together?"

Harry spoke pleadingly to his delicate wife. That something had well-nigh broken her heart one could see at a glance.

"Please do not ask me, Harry. It would be too hard—too hard—to see the other children. We had him—our baby—last year," and the bereaved mother pressed her handkerchief to her eyes as she struggled to control herself. "Your mother is a saint, Harry. I wish I were like her. She seems to stand between two worlds—a hand stretched out to each. She says, 'There are more on the other side,' and yet she is so cheerful and happy with us here."

"Never mind, dear; I am sorry I spoke. Mother will understand."

Stifling a sigh, the young man, who sadly missed his little son, tried to cheer his wife, knowing that she had exerted herself to breakfast with him. "Kathie," he said, as he started for his office, "will you go into the drawing-room presently? You will find something that I wanted to give you in our happy days. Promise, dear, that it will not make you morbid, or melancholy. If it does, away it goes, as an extra birthday-gift to mother."

He was gone. The door closed behind him. Kathie watched him from her couch drawn close to the bay-window. He looked back, as he did every morning, lifted his hat and waved farewell in his own bright, manly way; then moved on briskly, swinging an arm as he turned the corner.

Harry Wentworth kept much of his cheerfulness for his wife and friends. He could forget, and concentrate his keen intellect on business matters. But no one knew of the first moments in the office, when he closed the door, opened the roll-top desk and looked at the picture of the little boy he had idolised; for whom he had built high hopes; for whom he was preparing a place in the world. On this particular morning his thoughts dwelt on his wife. The sudden death of their child a year ago had proved so great a shock that it had left her an invalid. Constant brooding was causing deep anxiety to her friends. They seemed powerless to arouse her; there was danger of chronic melancholy.

In leaving her alone with his gift, Harry was trying an almost dangerous experiment. Entering the drawing-room, Kathie closed the door and stood breathless and tremulous. On the wall, where the light fell clearly—in a rich and appropriate setting—hung an exquisite painting—Murillo's Madonna and Child, copied, as she divined, by one of the greatest modern painters. As she gazed, she was moved by many and strong emotions. "My little child! My little child!" she cried, as she saw the perfect likeness. She held out empty, aching arms to the Babe, upheld by the calm, patient Madonna.

Worn out at last, she sank into the easy chair that Harry had placed in front of the picture. The Child seemed to follow her with sorrowful eyes; to look reproachfully, patiently, lovingly. The painting was one that had held a powerful attraction for Kathie when on a visit to Italy. A photograph had helped to recall it, but could not convey the beauty of colour. It had—in their happy days—been Harry's dream to give her something as near the original as genius and money could compass. Wealth was coming slowly, but at some sacrifice he had obtained a copy. It had come, the pity of it, as with many choice blessings, too late. His gift so long planned, might only serve to re-open the flood-gates of her misery, for their little son had been singularly like the Infant in Murillo's great painting. On opening the box, the picture had made so strong an impression on Harry that he dared to hope it would bring comfort and healing to his wife.

Naturally unselfish and merry of heart, Kathie had reached a point where conscience and care for others began to stir afresh. As she looked at the Baby-face, it seemed almost alive,—her own little one come back. She realised afresh all the goodness of her husband; all his patience and his strivings to conquer his own grief. The Baby-eyes seemed to plead for him too. The longer she looked the more tenderly and soothingly did the spell of truth and beauty work upon her.

It was a crisis in her mental and religious life. The very sensitiveness of her nature; her vivid, poetic imagination had made the disaster greater, when the child, upon whom she was lavishing mother-love, was suddenly snatched from her. Now the enormity of her selfishness—for so she deemed a very natural grief—came before her. She had felt, with many a mourner, that part of the wealth of love that still went out to her child was thrust back upon herself. In this moment of revelation, with the Madonna's calm eyes upon her, she read the lesson. She need not give away her baby's share (Oh, no!); but the God-given love should go out to those who needed it. Mind and memory worked vividly this morning. She recalled a legend, long since forgotten, of a widowed mother, seeking her child in Heavenly fields, who came upon a band of children:—

"Brightly on their golden heads their golden crowns were glancing—Child Jesus led them playing."

The mother—so the story ran—found her own dear one left far behind the others. The child cried sadly: "Oh mother, little mother mine, behind the rest I tarry, For see how heavy with your tears the pitcher I must carry;

If you had ceased to weep for me when Jesus went a-maying, I should have been among the blest with little Jesus playing."

And thus, picture and legend and Kathie's own sweet nature worked together for her good. When she met her husband on his return, the light of a great resolution shone on her face. Something of the Madonna's patience and calmness was bringing stillness to the quivering lips. When she drew him to the picture; when she thanked him, with her face hidden on his breast—murmuring words of contrition and tenderness—Harry felt a great anxiety lifted, and knew that his gift, and a painter's power had done their work.

The next week was a busy one for Kathie. Gifts were prepared for many children. She went into humble homes, carrying personal sympathy to happy mothers, rejoicing with them, and taking their little ones into her arms. But nature had to be reckoned with, and, at intervals, the now willing spirit was arrested by weakness, and violent headaches.

The birthday of her mother-in-law drew near. With renewed unselfishness, she determined to go with her husband and share in the celebration of the most important anniversary in the Lawrence family, when young and old gathered gladly. It was a double celebration, being the birthday also, of little Benny, one of the grandchildren.



MURILLO'S MADONNA