

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

NAN'S MISSION.

By Asgam.

In the dining-room of a small self-contained cottage in a suburb of Glasgow there sat a sad group of people. They had just returned from the funeral of a little girl; and the father and mother of the child weariest for the relatives who sat with them to go away, that the might be left alone to chafe their sorrow. For seven summers James Martin and his wife had their home brightened by the sound of a little voice, within was now still. Annie—or "wee Nan," as they called her—was their only child, and their hearts had been bound up in the little maiden. They could not realise that the child who had been running about in her merry way one short week ago was gone from them forever. A few days' suffering from diphtheria, then the dark-winged Reaper came and did his work, and two hearts were left lonely and sad.

With a few words of sympathy, which but ill conveyed the depth of feeling for the parents in their bereavement, the group of relatives, one by one, took their departure, till there was only James Martin's bachelor brother left. Wee Nan had been very fond of her Uncle Alick, who spent many an hour "playing at hor-oo" with the child. There was always some little parcel in the pocket of her uncle's coat, which Nan knew was for her. If Nan had been asked "Who gave you this toy?" and "Who gave you that one?" the invariable reply would have been "Uncle Alick." Many a scolding Nan's mother gave the child's uncle for bringing toys and sweetmeats, but of no purpose.

"You will spoil wee Nan, Alick," said her mother on Saturday, as the little girl was busy opening a mechanical toy. "You are making her that she just looks at your pocket whenever you come."

"Nonsense! Nan is not so easily spoiled. I will come next week without a parcel and you will see that Nan won't mind."

Accordingly the following Saturday Uncle Alick arrived without the customary gift, but it made no difference to Nan, who enjoyed her game at horses with her uncle all afternoon. But when the child was going away to her bed there was whispering of secrets between Uncle Alick and her, and the next week brought two parcels in the pocket instead of one, so Nan's mother saw it was useless to remonstrate with the indulgent uncle.

"Just a week to day since I was galloping round the table with wee Nan," said Alick Martin sadly, as he thought on the blank the child's death made in the home.

"Don't speak of her, Alick. I cannot bear it. Why was Nan sent into the world at all? Why—why did—" but sobs broke from the sorrowful father and drowned his words.

"Who was that strange-looking man who laid the blue 'forget-me-nots' on the grave when the others had gone back to the carriages?" asked Alick Martin, anxious to divert the parent's attention.

"That was poor Geordie, a tramp, in whom wee Nan was greatly interested. I spoke to him as he was turning away from the grave, but the poor fellow could not control himself. He is going away North next week, back to his mother, whom he has not seen for eight years. I told him to come before then, and we would give him a photo of wee Nan, and he tried to thank me through his tears. I could scarcely have believed the child had such an influence over him as it would appear."

"How did Nan get to know him?" asked Uncle Alick, with interest.

"It is more than a year ago now since Nan first spoke to him, replied Mrs. Martin. "I was out with my little girl one afternoon, and at the end of Cross-gate Road we passed a man sitting on the grass apparently suffering from toothache. He was holding his cheek, and rooking to and fro, as if in agony of pain. Before I could say a word Nan had left my side, and, going over to where the poor man sat she said:—'Big man, have you toothache?'"

"Get out of this, child," said the fellow coarsely, as he gave wee Nan a push. I called her to come to me, but Nan paid no heed.

"Big man," she said, as she knelt on the ground beside him and put her little hand on his arm. 'Big man, my daddy is a dentist and can make you better. Come home with us. He pulls out all naughty teeth that give pain! so come and we will make you better.'

"Get off, child," said the man; but he removed his hand from covering his face, and took a good look at wee Nan. The man was very dirty, and had a strong smell of drink, so I tried to get Nan to come home; but my wee girl started to cry, and stroked the man's dirty hands sympathetically, saying:—'I'm so sorry for you, poor man; I'm very very vexed.'

"Nan," I said, 'come away home now.' "Mummy," said the child, looking at me reproachfully, 'why don't you tell the big man to come with us?'"

"I stepped forward and spoke to the man. He was a powerfully built fellow, but it was quite evident that drink was ruining a good constitution, and it was pitiful to look on the man's features, such traces they bore of evil living. The end of it all was that the man came along with us, and wee Nan dragged him triumphantly to her father's surgery."

"Yes," interrupted Nan's father, "I can picture the child leading the big powerful man into my room, saying in excited tones:—'Daddy, daddy, take out big man's bad tooth, and make him quite better and happy!' and the little pleading face looked so sweet with the rosy cheeks that the crisp air and excitement had given her. As I kissed Nan, she whispered:—'Do it very quick, daddy,' and shouted at the door:—'Please don't cry, big man; daddy is very gentle, and will not hurt much.' When I made preparations for extracting the offending tooth from the sufferer, the man said:—'I have no money, sir, to pay you. It was little missie brought me here. I told him that there would be no charge and that the extraction would only cost him a few moments' pain. But the poor fellow had been suffering so badly from the tooth he would have borne any pain to get rid of it. When I opened the door a few minutes later to let the man away, wee Nan was sitting outside of it."

"Big man, did daddy take out the naughty tooth? I listened, but I never heard you cry," she said.

The man smiled as wee Nan uttered the words, and he assured her he would feel better than he had done for weeks past, now that the cause of trouble had been removed.

"Big man," said Nan, 'put that muffer round your mouth to keep the cold away. I asked mummy for it.'

"I do not need it, missie," said the man, as he made for the door; but Nan followed him, insisting that he would put it on, which he did at last to please her.

"And, big man, can I speak to you when I meet you on the road?" asked the child, as he was leaving the doorstep. I could see the big coarse fellow brush away a tear as he answered the child

and hurried off. And from that day wee Nan saw him regularly when out for her walk.

"Yes," said Nan's mother, "many a time Nan rushed from my side to dart up some avenue or drive in pursuit of her friend."

"What did the fellow do for a livelihood?" asked Alick Martin of his sister-in-law.

"Poor Geordie did any odd job that came his way, from cleaning windows or cutting grass to clearing snow from the doorsteps and pavements or selling boot laces and buttons. A clever handy man, if he would have kept sober; but when Geordie made a few shillings at the grass cutting or window cleaning then he turned up for some weeks, and when he turned up again it would be selling laces, and looking woefully shabby—in rags almost. After one of those disappearances wee Nan asked Geordie where he had been for such a long time."

"Away making merry with some pals who had not seen me for long, he replied—

"What is pals—or are they people?" asked wee Nan.

"A pal is a good friend, missie, said Geordie."

"But why do you look so sad and miserable after you have been making merry with good friends—with pals?" asked Nan.

"Maybe my pals are not very good friends to me, missie; they tempt me to spend all my money foolishly."

"Buying fal-de-rais, do you mean?" asked Nan, innocently.

"What is fal-de-rais, missie?"

"Ribbons and laces," replied Nan, quickly, 'I heard mummy tell Mary Ann one day, that she was spending her money foolishly when she bought fal-de-rais for wearing at her neck every time she got her wages.'

"I spend my money more foolishly than Mary Ann," said Geordie sadly.

"What do you buy?" inquired Nan. But I called the child to come into the house before Geordie could reply. Wee Nan came and sat at the window, watching him splitting wood in the garden for some time, and then she asked me why 'Big Man' looked so miserable and unhappy. I was busy at the time, and, without thinking much about the child's questions, I replied that it was perhaps because he had no mother to look after him. Wee Nan must have pondered over the matter in her little mind, for about a week later, when Geordie was shovelling some coal into the back cellar, she asked to get out to speak to him.

"Big man," she said, 'have you no mother to love you?' Geordie gave a start at the suddenness with which the question was put to him.

"Yes, missie," he said, 'I have a mother, but—but—but—

"Perhaps she does not love you and care for you the way my mammy does me," suggested Nan timidly.

"Yes, missie, she loved your big man too much and too well, and he, in return, broke her heart by his conduct; and, to escape her reproachful eyes, he went off and left her one day more than seven years ago without a word of farewell."

"Oh, big man, how could you?" said Nan, with her eyes full of tears.

"You may well ask the question, missie," said Geordie in a shaky voice, 'but it's done now and I have my punishment for she was the only soul that ever cared what happened to me. I threw away her love, and must bear the consequences."

"Perhaps she still loves you, big man," said Nan, after sitting for a few minutes silent.