

Allen James Lane

# Sister Dolorosa, and Posthumous Fame



James Allen

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### PREFACE TO BRITISH EDITION

The Author is glad to know that a British Edition of his Kentucky Tales is to be brought out by Mr. David Douglas of Edinburgh.

Generations ago his mother's ancestors came from Scotland and Ireland; generations ago his father's came from England. Toward the three countries his attention was fondly turned in early life; and the interest then begotten has been but fostered since.

It is with peculiar pleasure, therefore, that he now avails himself of the chance to ride hither and thither through these lands in his own conveyance – albeit the vehicle, a little book, may turn out a slow coach.

*James Lane Allen.*

Christmas Eve,  
Lexington, Kentucky, 1891.

## SISTER DOLOROSA

### I

When Sister Dolorosa had reached the summit of a low hill on her way to the convent, she turned and stood for a while looking backward. The landscape stretched away in a rude, unlovely expanse of grey fields, shaded in places by brown stubble, and in others lightened by pale, thin corn – the stunted reward of necessitous husbandry. This way and that ran wavering lines of low fences, some worm-eaten, others rotting beneath over-clambering wild-rose and blackberry. About the horizon masses of dense and rugged woods burned with sombre fires as the westering sun smote them from top to underbrush. Forth from the edge of one a few long-horned cattle, with lowered heads, wound meekly homeward to the scant milking. The path they followed led towards the middle background of the picture, where the weather-stained and sagging roof of a farmhouse rose above the tops of aged cedars. Some of the branches, broken by the sleet and snow of winters, trailed their burdens from the thinned and desolated crests – as sometimes the highest hopes of the mind, after being beaten down by the tempests of the world, droop around it as memories of once transcendent aspirations.

Where she stood in the dead autumn fields few sounds broke in upon the pervasive hush of the declining day. Only a cricket, under the warm clod near by, shrilled sturdily with cheerful forethought of drowsy hearthstones; only a lamb, timid of separation from the fold, called anxiously in the valley beyond the crest of the opposite hill; only the summoning whistle of a quail came sweet and clear from the depths of a neighbouring thicket. Through all the air floated that spirit of vast loneliness which at seasons seems to steal like a human mood over the breast of the great earth and leave her estranged from her transitory children. At such an hour the heart takes wing for home, if any home it have; or when, if homeless, it feels the quick stir of that yearning for the evening fireside with its half-circle of trusted faces, young and old, and its bonds of love and marriage, those deepest, most enchanting realities to the earthly imagination. The very landscape, barren and dead, but framing the simple picture of a home, spoke to the beholder the everlasting poetry of the race.

But Sister Dolorosa, standing on the brow of the hill whence the whole picture could be seen, yet saw nothing of it. Out of the western sky there streamed an indescribable splendour of many-hued light, and far into the depths of this celestial splendour her steadfast eyes were gazing.

She seemed caught up to some august height of holy meditation. Her motionless figure was so lightly poised that her feet, just visible beneath the hem of her heavy black dress, appeared all but rising from the dust of the pathway; her pure and gentle face was upturned, so that the dark veil fell away from her neck and shoulders; her lips were slightly parted; her breath came and went so imperceptibly that her hands did not appear to rise and fall as they clasped the cross to her bosom. Exquisite hands they were – most exquisite – gleaming as white as lilies against the raven blackness of her dress; and with startling fitness of posture, the longest finger of the right hand pointed like a marble index straight towards a richly-embroidered symbol over her left breast – the mournful symbol of a crimson heart pierced by a crimson spear. Whether attracted by the lily-white hands or by the red symbol, a butterfly, which had been flitting hither and thither in search of the gay races of the summer gone, now began to hover nearer, and finally lighted unseen upon the glowing spot. Then, as if disappointed not to find it the bosom of some rose, or lacking hope and strength for further quest – there it rested, slowly fanning with its white wings the tortured emblem of the divine despair.

Lower sank the sun, deeper and more wide-spread the splendour of the sky, more rapt and radiant the expression of her face. A painter of the angelic school, seeing her standing thus, might have named the scene the transfiguration of angelic womanhood. What but heavenly images should she be gazing on; or where was she in spirit but flown out of the earthly autumn fields and gone away

to sainted vespers in the cloud-built realm of her own fantasies? Perhaps she was now entering yon vast cathedral of the skies, whose white spires touched the blue eternity; or toiling devoutly up yon grey mount of Calvary, with its blackened crucifix falling from the summit.

Standing thus towards the close of the day, Sister Dolorosa had not yet passed out of that ideal time which is the clear white dawn of life. She was still within the dim, half-awakened region of womanhood, whose changing mists are beautiful illusions, whose shadows about the horizon are the mysteries of poetic feeling, whose purpling east is the palette of the imagination, and whose upspringing skylark is blithe aspiration that has not yet felt the weight of the clod it soars within. Before her still was the full morning of reality and the burden of the mid-day hours.

But if the history of any human soul could be perfectly known, who would wish to describe this passage from the dawn of the ideal to the morning of the real – this transition from life as it is imagined through hopes and dreams to life as it is known through action and submission? It is then that within the country of the soul occur events too vast, melancholy, and irreversible to be compared to anything less than the downfall of splendid dynasties, or the decay of an august religion. It is then that there leave us for ever bright, aerial spirits of the fancy, separation from whom is like grief for the death of the beloved.

The moment of this transition had come in the life of Sister Dolorosa, and unconsciously she was taking her last look at the gorgeous western clouds from the hill-tops of her chaste life of dreams.

A flock of frightened doves sped hurtling low over her head, and put an end to her reverie. Pressing the rosary to her lips, she turned and walked on towards the convent, not far away. The little footpath across the fields was well trodden and familiar, running as it did between the convent and the farmhouse behind her, in which lived old Ezra and Martha Cross; and as she followed its windings, her thoughts, as is likely to be true of the thoughts of nuns, came home from the clouds to the humblest concerns of the earth, and she began to recall certain incidents of the visit from which she was returning.

The aged pair were well known to the Sisters. Their daughters had been educated at the convent; and, although these were married and scattered now, the tie then formed had since become more close through their age and loneliness. Of late word had come to the Mother Superior that old Martha was especially ailing, and Sister Dolorosa had several times been sent on visits of sympathy. For reasons better to be understood later on, these visits had had upon her the effect of an April shower on a thirsting rose. Her missions of mercy to the aged couple over, for a while the white taper of ideal consecration to the Church always burned in her bosom with clearer, steadier lustre, as though lit afresh from the Light eternal. But to-day she could not escape the conviction that these visits were becoming a source of disquietude; for the old couple, forgetting the restrictions which her vows put upon her very thoughts, had spoken of things which it was trying for her to hear – love-making, marriage, and children. In vain had she tried to turn away from the proffered share in such parental confidences. The old mother had even read aloud a letter from her eldest son, telling them of his approaching marriage, and detailing the hope and despair of his wooing. With burning cheeks and downcast eyes Sister Dolorosa had listened till the close and then risen and quickly left the house.

The recollection of this returned to her now as she pursued her way along the footpath which descended into the valley; and there came to her, she knew not whence or why, a piercing sense of her own separation from all but the Divine love. The cold beauty of unfallen spirituality which had made her august as she stood on the hill-top died away, and her face assumed a tenderer, more appealing loveliness, as there crept over it, like a shadow over snow, that shy melancholy under which those women dwell who have renounced the great drama of the heart. She resolved to lay her trouble before the Mother Superior to-night, and ask that some other Sister be sent hereafter in her stead. And yet this resolution gave her no peace, but a throb of painful renunciation; and since she was used to the most scrupulous examination of her conscience, to detect the least presence of evil, she grew so disturbed by this state of her heart that she quite forgot the windings of the pathway along the edge of

a field of corn, and was painfully startled when a wounded bird, lying on the ground a few feet in front of her, flapped its wings in a struggle to rise. Love and sympathy were the strongest principles of her nature, and with a little outcry she bent over and took it up; but scarce had she done so, when, with a final struggle, it died in her hand. A single drop of blood oozed out and stood on its burnished breast.

She studied it – delicate throat, silken wings, wounded bosom – in the helpless way of a woman, unwilling to put it down and leave it, yet more unwilling to take it away. Many a time, perhaps, she had watched this very one flying to and fro among its fellows in the convent elms. Strange that any one should be hunting in these fields, and she looked quickly this way and that. Then, with a surprised movement of the hands that caused her to drop the bird at her feet, Sister Dolorosa discovered, standing half hidden in the edge of the pale yellow corn a few yards ahead, wearing a hunting-dress, and leaning on the muzzle of his gun, a young man who was steadfastly regarding her. For an instant they stood looking each into the other's face, taken so unprepared as to lose all sense of convention. Their meeting was as unforeseen as another far overhead, where two white clouds, long shepherded aimlessly and from opposite directions across the boundless pastures by the unreasoning winds, touched and melted into one. Then Sister Dolorosa, the first to regain self-possession, gathered her black veil closely about her face, and advancing with an easy, rapid step, bowed low with downcast eyes as she passed him, and hurried on towards the convent.

She had not gone far before she resolved to say nothing about the gossip to which she had listened. Of late the Mother Superior had seemed worn with secret care and touched with solicitude regarding her. Would it be kind to make this greater by complaining like a weak child of a trivial annoyance? She took her conscience proudly to task for ever having been disturbed by anything so unworthy. And as for this meeting in the field, even to mention that would be to give it a certain significance, whereas it had none whatever. A stranger had merely crossed her path a moment and then gone his way. She would forget the occurrence herself as soon as she could recover from her physical agitation.

## II

The Convent of the Stricken Heart is situated in that region of Kentucky which early became the great field of Catholic immigration. It was established in the first years of the present century, when mild Dominicans, starving Trappists, and fiery Jesuits hastened into the green wildernesses of the West with the hope of turning them into religious vineyards. Then, accordingly, derived from such sources as the impassioned fervour of Italy, the cold, monotonous endurance of Flanders, and the dying sorrows of ecclesiastical France, there sprang up this new flower of faith, unlike any that ever bloomed in pious Christendom. From the meagrest beginning, the order has slowly grown rich and powerful, so that it now has branches in many States, as far as the shores of the Pacific Ocean.

The convent is situated in a retired region of country, remote from any village or rural highway. The very peace of the blue skies seems to descend upon it. Around the walls great elms stand like tranquil sentinels, or at a greater distance drop their shadows on the velvet verdure of the artificial lawns. Here, when the sun is hot, some white-veiled novice may be seen pacing soft-footed and slow, while she fixes her sad eyes upon pictures drawn from the literature of the Dark Ages, or fights the first battle with her young heart, which would beguile her to heaven by more jocund pathways. Drawn by the tranquillity of this retreat – its trees and flowers and dews – all singing-birds of the region come here to build and brood. No other sounds than their pure cadencies disturb the echoless air except the simple hymns around the altar, the vesper bell, the roll of the organ, the deep chords of the piano, or the thrum of the harp. It may happen, indeed, that some one of the Sisters, climbing to the observatory to scan the horizon of her secluded world, will catch the faint echoes of a young ploughman in a distant field lustily singing of the honest passion in his heart, or hear the shouts of happy harvesters as they move across the yellow plains. The population scattered around the convent domain are largely of the Catholic faith, and from all directions the country is threaded by footpaths that lead to the church as a common shrine. It was along one of these that Sister Dolorosa, as has been said, hastened homeward through the falling twilight.

When she reached the convent, instead of seeking the Mother Superior as heretofore with news from old Martha, she stole into the shadowy church and knelt for a long time in wordless prayer – wordless, because no petition that she could frame appeared inborn and quieting. An unaccountable remorse gnawed the heart out of language. Her spirit seemed parched, her will was deadened as by a blow. Trained to the most rigorous introspection, she entered within herself and penetrated to the deepest recesses of her mind to ascertain the cause. The bright flame of her conscience thus employed was like the turning of a sunbeam into a darkened chamber to reveal the presence of a floating grain of dust. But nothing could be discovered. It was the undiscovered that rebuked her as it often rebukes us all – the undiscovered evil that has not yet linked itself to conscious transgression. At last she rose with a sigh, and, dejected, left the church.

Later, the Mother Superior, noiselessly entering her room, found her sitting at the open window, her hands crossed on the sill, her eyes turned outward into the darkness.

"Child, child," she said hurriedly, "how uneasy you have made me! Why are you so late returning?"

"I went to the church when I came back, Mother," replied Sister Dolorosa, in a voice singularly low and composed. "I must have returned nearly an hour ago."

"But even then it was late."

"Yes, Mother; I stopped on the way back to look at the sunset. The clouds looked like cathedrals. And then old Martha kept me. You know it is difficult to get away from old Martha."

The Mother Superior laughed slightly, as though her anxiety had been removed. She was a woman of commanding presence, with a face full of dignity and sweetness, but furrowed by lines of difficult resignation.

"Yes; I know," she answered. "Old Martha's tongue is like a terrestrial globe; the whole world is mapped out on it, and a little movement of it will show you a continent. How is her rheumatism?"

"She said it was no worse," replied Sister Dolorosa absently.

The Mother Superior laughed again. "Then it must be better. Rheumatism is always either better or worse."

"Yes, Mother."

This time the tone caught the Mother Superior's ear. "You seem tired. Was the walk too long?"

"I enjoyed the walk, Mother. I do not feel tired."

They had been sitting on opposite sides of the room. The Mother Superior now crossed, and, laying her hand softly on Sister Dolorosa's head, pressed it backward and looked fondly down into the upturned eyes.

"Something troubles you. What has happened?"

There is a tone that goes straight to the heart of women in trouble. If there are tears hidden, they gather in the eyes. If there is any confidence to give, it is given then.

A tremor, like that of a child with an unspent sob, passed across Sister Dolorosa's lips, but her eyes were tearless.

"Nothing has happened, Mother. I do not know why, but I feel disturbed and unhappy." This was the only confidence that she had to give.

The Mother Superior passed her hand slowly across the brow, white and smooth like satin. Then she sat down, and as Sister Dolorosa slipped to the floor beside her she drew the young head to her lap and folded her aged hands upon it. What passionate, barren loves haunt the hearts of women in convents! Between these two there existed a tenderness more touching than the natural love of mother and child.

"You must not expect to know at all times," she said, with grave gentleness. "To be troubled without any visible cause is one of the mysteries of our nature. As you grow older you will understand this better. We are forced to live in conscious possession of all faculties, all feelings, whether or not there are outward events to match them. Therefore you must expect to have anxiety within when your life is really at peace without; to have moments of despair when no failure threatens; to have your heart wrung with sympathy when no object of sorrow is nigh; to be spent with the need of loving when there is no earthly thing to receive your love. This is part of woman's life, and of all women, especially those who, like you, must live, not to stifle the tender, beautiful forces of nature, but to ennoble and unite them into one divine passion. Do not think, therefore, to escape these hours of heaviness and pain. No saint ever walked this earth without them. Perhaps the lesson to be gained is this: that we may feel things before they happen, so that if they do happen we shall be disciplined to bear them."

The voice of the Mother Superior had become low and meditative; and, though resting on the bowed head, her eyes seemed fixed on events long past. After the silence of a few moments she continued in a brighter tone —

"But, my child, I know the reason of *your* unhappiness. I have warned you that excessive ardour would leave you overwrought and nervous; that you were being carried too far by your ideals. You live too much in your sympathies and your imagination. Patience, my little St. Theresa! No saint was ever made in a day, and it has taken all the centuries of the Church to produce its martyrs. Only think that your life is but begun; there will be time enough to accomplish everything. I have been watching, and I know. This is why I send *you* to old Martha. I want you to have the rest, the exercise, the air of the fields. Go again to-morrow, and take her the ointment. I found it while you were gone to-day. It has been in the Church for centuries, and you know this bottle came from blessed Loretto in Italy. It may do her some good. And, for the next few days, less reading and study."

"Mother!" Sister Dolorosa spoke as though she had not been listening. "What would become of me if I should ever — if any evil should ever befall me?"

The Mother Superior stretched her hands out over the head on her knees as some great, fierce, old, grey eagle, scarred and strong with the storms of life, might make a movement to shield its imperilled young. The tone in which Sister Dolorosa had spoken startled her as the discovered edge of a precipice. It was so quiet, so abrupt, so terrifying with its suggestion of an abyss. For a moment she prayed silently and intensely.

"Heaven mercifully shield you from harm!" she then said, in an awestricken whisper. "But, timid lamb, what harm can come to you?"

Sister Dolorosa suddenly rose and stood before the Mother Superior.

"I mean," she said, with her eyes on the floor and her voice scarcely audible – "I mean – if I should ever fail, would you cast me out?"

"My child! – Sister! – Sister Dolorosa! – Cast you out!"

The Mother Superior started up and folded her arms about the slight dark figure, which at once seemed to be standing aloof with infinite loneliness. For some time she sought to overcome this difficult, singular mood.

"And now, my daughter," she murmured at last, "go to sleep and forget these foolish fears. I am near you!" There seemed to be a fortress of sacred protection and defiance in these words; but the next instant her head was bowed, her upward-pointing finger raised in the air, and in a tone of humble self-correction she added: "Nay, not I; the Sleepless guards you! Good-night."

Sister Dolorosa lifted her head from the strong shoulder and turned her eyes, now luminous, upon the troubled face.

"Forgive me, Mother!" she said, in a voice of scornful resolution. "Never – never again will I disturb you with such weakness as I have shown to-night. I *know* that no evil can befall me! Forgive me, Mother. Good-night."

While she sleeps learn her history. Pauline Cambron was descended from one of those sixty Catholic families of Maryland that formed a league in 1785 for the purpose of emigrating to Kentucky without the rending of social ties or separation from the rites of their ancestral faith. Since then the Kentucky branch of the Cambrons has always maintained friendly relations with the Maryland branch, which is now represented by one of the wealthy and cultivated families of Baltimore. On one side the descent is French; and, as far back as this can be traced, there runs a tradition that some of the most beautiful of its women became barefoot Carmelite nuns in the various monasteries of France or on some storm-swept island of the Mediterranean Sea.

The first of the Kentucky Cambrons settled in that part of the State in which, nearly a hundred years later, lived the last generation of them – the parents of Pauline. Of these she was the only child, so that upon her marriage depended the perpetuation of the Kentucky family. It gives to the Protestant mind a startling insight into the possibilities of a woman's life and destiny in Kentucky to learn the nature of the literature by which her sensitive and imaginative character was from the first impressed. This literature covers a field wholly unknown to the ordinary student of Kentucky history. It is not to be found in well-known works, but in the letters, reminiscences, and lives of foreign priests, and in the kindling and heroic accounts of the establishment of Catholic missions. It abounds in such stories as those of a black friar fatally thrown from a wild horse in the pathless wilderness; of a grey friar torn to pieces by a saw-mill; of a starving white friar stretched out to die under the green canopy of an oak; of priests swimming half-frozen rivers with the sacred vestments in their teeth; of priests hewing logs for a hut in which to celebrate the mass; of priests crossing and recrossing the Atlantic and traversing Italy and Belgium and France for money and pictures and books; of devoted women laying the foundation of powerful convents in half-ruined log-cabins, shivering on beds of straw sprinkled on the ground, driven by poverty to search in the wild woods for dyes with which to give to their motley worldly apparel the hue of the cloister, and dying at last, to be laid away in pitiless burial without coffin or shroud.

Such incidents were to her the more impressive since happening in part in the region where lay the Cambron estate; and while very young she was herself repeatedly taken to visit the scenes of early religious tragedies. Often, too, around the fireside there was proud reference to the convent life of old France and to the saintly zeal of the Carmelites; and once she went with her parents to Baltimore and witnessed the taking of the veil by a cousin of hers – a scene that afterwards burned before her conscience as a lamp before a shrine.

Is it strange if under such influences, living in a country place with few associates, reading in her father's library books that were to be had on the legends of the monastic orders and the lives of the saints – is it strange if to the young Pauline Cambron this world before long seemed little else than the battle-field of the Church, the ideal man in it a monk, the ideal woman a nun, the human heart a solemn sacrifice to Heaven, and human life a vast, sad pilgrimage to the shrine eternal?

Among the places which had always appealed to her imagination as one of the heroic sites of Kentucky history was the Convent of the Stricken Heart, not far away. Whenever she came hither she seemed to be treading on sacred ground. Happening to visit it one summer day before her education was completed, she asked to be sent hither for the years that remained. When these were past, here, with the difficult consent of her parents, who saw thus perish the last hope of the perpetuation of the family, she took the white veil. Here at last she hid herself beneath the black. Her whole character at this stage of its unfolding may be understood from the name she assumed – Sister Dolorosa. With this name she wished not merely to extinguish her worldly personality, but to clothe herself with a lifelong expression of her sympathy with the sorrows of the world. By this act she believed that she would attain a change of nature so complete that the black veil of Sister Dolorosa would cover as in a funeral urn the ashes which had once been the heart of Pauline Cambron. And thus her conventual life began.

But for those beings to whom the span on the summer-evening cloud is as nothing compared with that fond arch of beauty which it is a necessity of their nature to hang as a bow of promise above every beloved hope – for such dreamers the sadness of life lies in the dissipation of mystery and the disillusion of truth. When she had been a member of the order long enough to see things as they were, Sister Dolorosa found herself living in a large, plain, comfortable brick convent, situated in a retired and homely region of Southern Kentucky. Around her were plain nuns with the invincible contrariety of feminine temperament. Before her were plain duties. Built up around her were plain restrictions. She had rushed with outstretched arms towards poetic mysteries, and clasped prosaic reality.

As soon as the lambent flame of her spirit had burned over this new life, as a fire before a strong wind rushes across a plain, she one day surveyed it with that sense of reality which sometimes visits the imaginative with such appalling vividness. Was it upon this dreary waste that her soul was to play out its drama of ideal womanhood?

She answered the question in the only way possible to such a nature as hers. She divided her life in twain. Half, with perfect loyalty, she gave out to duty; the other, with equal loyalty, she stifled within. But perhaps this is no uncommon lot – this unmating of the forces of the mind, as though one of two singing-birds should be released to fly forth under the sky, while the other – the nobler singer – is kept voiceless in a darkened chamber.

But the Sisters of the Stricken Heart are not cloistered nuns. Their chief vow is to go forth into the world to teach. Scarcely had Sister Dolorosa been intrusted with work of this kind before she conceived an aspiration to become a great teacher of history or literature, and obtained permission to spend extra hours in the convent library on a wider range of sacred reading. Here began a second era in her life. Books became the avenues along which she escaped from her present into an illimitable world. Her imagination, beginning to pine, now took wing and soared back to the remote, the splendid, the imperial, the august. Her sympathies, finding nothing around her to fix upon, were borne afar like winged seed and rooted on the colossal ruins of the centuries. Her passion for beauty fed on holy art. She lived at the full flood of life again.

If in time revulsion came, she would live a shy, exquisite, hidden life of poetry in which she herself played the historic rôles. Now she would become a powerful abbess of old, ruling over a hundred nuns in an impregnable cloister. To the gates, stretched on a litter, wounded to death, they bore a young knight of the Cross. She had the gates opened. She went forth and bent over him; heard his dying message; at his request drew the plighted ring from his finger to send to another land. How beautiful he was! How many masses – how many, many masses – she had celebrated for the peace of his soul! Now she was St. Agatha, tortured by the proconsul; now she lay faint and cold in an underground cell, and was visited by Thomas à Kempis, who read to her long passages from the *Imitation*. Or she would tire of the past, and making herself an actor in her own future, in a brief hour live out the fancied drama of all her crowded years.

But whatever part she took in this dream existence and beautiful passion-play of the soul, nothing attracted her but the perfect. For the commonplace she felt a guileless scorn.

Thus for some time these unmated lives went on – the fixed outward life of duty, and the ever-wandering inner life of love. In mid-winter, walking across the shining fields, you have come to some little frost-locked stream. How mute and motionless! You set foot upon it, the ice is broken, and beneath is musical running water. Thus under the chaste rigid numbness of convent existence the heart of Sister Dolorosa murmured unheard and hurried away unseen to plains made warm and green by her imagination. But the old may survive upon memories; the young cannot thrive upon hope. Love, long reaching outward in vain, returns to the heart as self-pity. Sympathies, if not supported by close realities, fall in upon themselves like the walls of a ruined house. At last, therefore, even the hidden life of Sister Dolorosa grew weary of the future and the past, and came home to the present.

The ardour of her studies and the rigour of her duties combined – but more than either that wearing away of the body by a restless mind – had begun to affect her health. Both were relaxed, and she was required to spend as much time as possible in the garden of the convent. It was like lifting a child that has become worn out with artificial playthings to an open window to see the flowers. With inexpressible relief she turned from mediæval books to living nature; and her beautiful imagination, that last of all faculties to fail a human being in an unhappy lot, now began to bind nature to her with fellowships which quieted the need of human association. She had long been used to feign correspondences with the fathers of the Church; she now established intimacies with dumb companions, and poured out her heart to them in confidence.

The distant woods slowly clothing themselves in green; the faint perfume of the wild rose, running riot over some rotting fence; the majestic clouds about the sunset; the moon dying in the spectral skies; the silken rustling of doves' wings parting the soft foliage of the sentinel elms; landscapes of frost on her window-pane; crumbs in winter for the sparrows on the sill; violets under the leaves in the convent garden; myrtle on the graves of the nuns – such objects as these became the means by which her imprisoned life was released. On the sensuous beauty of the world she spent the chaste ravishments of her virginal heart. Her love descended on all things as in the night the dew fills and bends down the cups of the flowers.

A few of these confidences – written on slips of paper, and no sooner written than cast aside – are given here. They are addressed severally to a white violet, an English sparrow, and a butterfly.

"I have taken the black veil, but thou wearest the white, and thou dwellest in dim cloisters of green leaves – in the domed and many-pillared little shrines that line the dusty roadside, or seem more fitly built in the depths of holy woodlands. How often have I drawn near with timid steps, and, opening the doors of thy tiny oratories, found thee bending at thy silent prayers – bending so low that thy lips touched the earth, while the slow wind rang thine Angelus! Wast thou blooming anywhere near when He came into the wood of the thorn and the olive? Didst thou press thy cool face against His bruised feet? Had I been thou, I would have bloomed at the foot of the Cross, and fed His failing lungs with my last breath. Time never destroys thee, little sister, or stains thy whiteness; and thou wilt

be bending at thy prayers among the green graves on the twilight hillside ages after I who lie below have finished mine. Pray for me then, pray for thine erring sister, thou pure-souled violet!"

"How cold thou art! Shall I take thee in and warm thee on my bosom? Ah, no! For I know who thou art! Not a bird, but a little brown mendicant friar, begging barefoot in the snow. And thou livest in a cell under the convent eaves opposite my window. What ugly feet thou hast, little Father! And the thorns are on thy toes instead of about thy brow. That is a bad sign for a saint. I saw thee in a brawl the other day with a mendicant brother of thine order, and thou drovest him from roof to roof and from icy twig to twig, screaming and wrangling in a way to bring reproach upon the Church. Thou shouldst learn to defend a thesis more gently. Who is it that visits thy cell so often? A penitent to confess? And dost thou shrive her freely? I'd never confess to thee, thou cross little Father! Thou'dst have no mercy on me if I sinned, as sin I must since human I am. The good God is very good to thee that He keeps thee from sinning while He leaves me to do wrong. Ah, if it were but natural for me to be perfect! But that, little Father, is my idea of heaven. In heaven it will be natural for me to be perfect. I'll feed thee no longer than the winter lasts, for then thou'lt be a monk no longer, but a bird again. And canst thou tell me why? Because, when the winter is gone, thou'lt find a mate, and wert thou a monk thou'dst have none. For thou knowest perfectly well, little Father, that monks do not wed."

"No fitting emblem of my soul art thou, fragile Psyche, mute and perishable lover of the gorgeous earth. For my soul has no summer, and there is no earthly object of beauty that it may fly to and rest upon as thou upon the beckoning buds. It is winter where I live. All things are cold and white, and my soul flies only above fresh fields of flowerless snow. But no blast can chill its wings, no mire bedraggle, or rude touch fray. I often wonder whether thou art mute, or the divine framework of winged melodies. Thy very wings are shaped like harps for the winds to play upon. So, too, my soul is silent never, though none can hear its music. Dost thou know that I am held in exile in this world that I inhabit? And dost thou know the flower that I fly ever towards and cannot reach? It is the white flower of eternal perfection that blooms and waits for the soul in Paradise. Upon that flower I shall some day rest my wings as thou foldedst thine on a faultless rose."

Harmonising with this growing passion for the beauty of the world – a passion that marked her approach to riper womanhood – was the care she took of her person. The coarse, flowing habit of the order gave no hint of the curves and symmetry of the snow-white figure throbbing with eager life within; but it could not conceal an air of refinement and movements of the most delicate grace. There was likewise a suggestion of artistic study in the arrangement of her veil, and the sacred symbol on her bosom was embroidered with touches of elaboration.

It was when she had grown weary of books, of the imaginary drama of her life, and the loveliness of Nature, that Sister Dolorosa was sent by the Mother Superior on those visits of sympathy to old Martha Cross; and it was during her return from one of them that there befell her that adventure which she had deemed too slight to mention.

### III

Her outward history was that night made known to Gordon Helm by old Martha Cross. When Sister Dolorosa passed him he followed her at a distance until she entered the convent gates. It caused him subtle pain to think what harm might be lurking to ensnare her innocence. But subtler pain shot through him as he turned away, leaving her housed within that inaccessible fold.

Who was she, and from what mission returning alone at such an hour across those darkening fields? He had just come to the edge of the corn and started to follow up the path in quest of shelter for the night, when he had caught sight of her on the near hill-top, outlined with startling distinctness against the jasper sky and bathed in a tremulous sea of lovely light. He had held his breath as she advanced towards him. He had watched the play of emotions in her face as she paused a few yards off, and her surprise at the discovery of him – the timid start; the rounding of the fawn-like eyes; the vermeil tint overspreading the transparent purity of her skin: her whole nature disturbed like a wind-shaken anemone. All this he now remembered as he returned along the footpath. It brought him to the door of the farm-house, where he arranged to pass the night.

"You are a stranger in this part of the country," said the old housewife an hour later.

When he came in she had excused herself from rising from her chair by the chimney-side; but from that moment her eyes had followed him – those eyes of the old which follow the forms of the young with such despairing memories. By the chimney-side sat old Ezra, powerful, stupid, tired, silently smoking, and taking little notice of the others. Hardly a chill was in the air, but for her sake a log blazed in the cavernous fireplace and threw its flickering light over the guest who sat in front.

He possessed unusual physical beauty – of the type sometimes found in the men of those Kentucky families that have descended with little admixture from English stock; body and limbs less than athletic, but formed for strength and symmetry; hair brown, thick, and slightly curling over the forehead and above the ears; complexion blond, but mellowed into rich tints from sun and open air; eyes of dark grey-blue, beneath brows low and firm; a moustache golden-brown, thick, and curling above lips red and sensuous; a neck round and full, and bearing aloft a head well poised and moulded. The irresistible effect of his appearance was an impression of simple joyousness in life. There seemed to be stored up in him the warmth of the sunshine of his land; the gentleness of its fields; the kindness of its landscapes. And he was young – so young! To study him was to see that he was ripe to throw himself heedless into tragedy; and that for him, not once, but nightly, Endymion fell asleep to be kissed in his dreams by encircling love.

"You are a stranger in this part of the country," said the old housewife, observing the elegance of his hunting-dress and his manner of high breeding.

"Yes; I have never been in this part of Kentucky before." He paused; but seeing that some account of himself was silently waited for, and as though wishing at once to despatch the subject, he added: "I am from the blue-grass region, about a hundred miles northward of here. A party of us were on our way further south to hunt. On the train we fell in with a gentleman who told us he thought there were a good many birds around here, and I was chosen to stop over to ascertain. We might like to try this neighbourhood as we return, so I left my things at the station and struck out across the country this afternoon. I have heard birds in several directions, but had no dog. However, I shot a few hoves in a cornfield."

"There are plenty of birds close around here, but most of them stay on the land that is owned by the Sisters, and they don't like to have it hunted over. All the land between here and the convent belongs to them except the little that's mine." This was said somewhat dryly by the old man, who knocked the ashes off his pipe without looking up.

"I am sorry to have trespassed; but I was not expecting to find a convent out in the country, although I believe I have heard that there is an abbey of Trappist monks somewhere down here."

"Yes; the abbey is not far from here."

"It seems strange to me. I can hardly believe I am in Kentucky," he said musingly, and a solemn look came over his face as his thoughts went back to the sunset scene.

The old housewife's keen eyes pierced to his secret mood.

"You ought to go there."

"Do they receive visitors at the convent?" he asked quickly.

"Certainly; the Sisters are very glad to have strangers visit the place. It's a pity you hadn't come sooner. One of the Sisters was here this afternoon, and you might have spoken to her about it."

This intelligence threw him into silence, and again her eyes fed upon his firelit face with inappeasable hunger. She was one of those women, to be met with the world over and in any station, who are remarkable for a love of youth and the world, which age, sickness, and isolation but deepen rather than subdue; and his sudden presence at her fireside was more than grateful. Not satisfied with what he had told, she led the talk back to the blue-grass country, and got from him other facts of his life, asking questions in regard to the features of that more fertile and beautiful land. In return she sketched the history of her own region, and dwelt upon its differences of soil, people, and religion – chiefly the last. It was while she spoke of the Order of the Stricken Heart that he asked a question he had long reserved.

"Do you know the history of any of these Sisters?"

"I know the history of all of them who are from Kentucky. I have known Sister Dolorosa since she was a child."

"Sister Dolorosa!" The name pierced him like a spear.

"The nun who was here to-day is called Sister Dolorosa. Her real name was Pauline Cambron."

The fire died away. The old man left the room on some pretext and did not return. The story that followed was told with many details not given here – traced up from parentage and childhood with that fine tracery of the feminine mind which is like intricate embroidery, and which leaves the finished story wrought out on the mind like a complete design, with every point fastened to the sympathies.

As soon as she had finished he rose quickly from a desire to be alone. So well had the story been knit to his mind that he felt it an irritation, a binding pain. He was bidding her good-night when she caught his hand. Something in his mere temperament drew women towards him.

"Are you married?" she asked, looking into his eyes in the way with which those who are married sometimes exchange confidences.

He looked quickly away, and his face flushed a little fiercely.

"I am not married," he replied, withdrawing his hand.

She threw it from her with a gesture of mock, pleased impatience; and when he had left the room, she sat for a while over the ashes.

"If she were not a nun – " then she laughed and made her difficult way to her bed. But in the room above he sat down to think.

Was this, then, not romance, but life in his own State? Vaguely he had always known that further south in Kentucky a different element of population had settled, and extended into the New World that mighty cord of ecclesiastical influence which of old had braided every European civilisation into an iron tissue of faith. But this knowledge had never touched his imagination. In his own land there were no rural Catholic churches, much less convents, and even among the Catholic congregations of the neighbouring towns he had not many acquaintances and fewer friends.

To descend as a gay bird of passage, therefore, upon these secluded, sombre fields, and find himself in the neighbourhood of a powerful Order – to learn that a girl, beautiful, accomplished, of wealth and high social position, had of her own choice buried herself for life within its bosom – gave him a startling insight into Kentucky history as it was forming in his own time. Moreover – and this touched him especially – it gave him a deeper insight into the possibilities of woman's nature; for a certain narrowness of view regarding the true mission of woman in the world belonged to him as a

result of education. In the conservative Kentucky society by which he had been largely moulded the opinion prevailed that woman fulfilled her destiny when she married well and adorned a home. All beauty, all accomplishments, all virtues and graces, were but means for attaining this end.

As for himself, he came of a stock which throughout the generations of Kentucky life, and back of these along the English ancestry, had stood for the home; a race of men with the fireside traits: sweet-tempered, patient, and brave; well-formed and handsome; cherishing towards women a sense of chivalry; protecting them fiercely and tenderly; loving them romantically and quickly for the sake of beauty; marrying early, and sometimes at least holding towards their wives such faith, that these had no more to fear from all other women in the world than from all other men.

Descended from such a stock and moulded by the social ideals of his region, Helm naturally stood for the home himself. And yet there was a difference. In a sense he was a product of the new Kentucky. His infancy had been rocked on the chasm of the Civil War; his childhood spent amid its ruins; his youth ruled by two contending spirits – discord and peace: and earliest manhood had come to him only in the morning of the new era. It was because the path of his life had thus run between light and shade that his nature was joyous and grave; only joy claimed him entirely as yet, while gravity asserted itself merely in the form of sympathy with anything that suffered, and a certain seriousness touching his own responsibility in life.

Reflecting on this responsibility while his manhood was yet forming, he felt the need of his becoming a better, broader type of man, matching the better, broader age. His father was about his model of a gentleman; but he should be false to the admitted progress of the times were he not an improvement on his father. And since his father had, as judged by the ideals of the old social order, been a blameless gentleman of the rural blue-grass kind, with farm, spacious homestead, slaves, leisure, and a library, – to all of which, except the slaves, he would himself succeed upon his father's death – his dream of duty took the form of becoming a rural blue-grass gentleman of the newer type, reviving the best traditions of the past, but putting into his relations with his fellow-creatures an added sense of helpfulness, a broader sense of justice, and a certain energy of leadership in all things that made for a purer, higher human life. It will thus be seen that he took seriously not only himself, but the reputation of his State; for he loved it, people and land, with broad, sensitive tenderness, and never sought or planned for his future apart from civil and social ends.

It was perhaps a characteristic of him as a product of the period that he had a mind for looking at his life somewhat abstractedly and with a certain thought-out plan; for this disposition of mind naturally belongs to an era when society is trembling upon the brink of new activities and forced to the discovery of new ideals. But he cherished no religious passion, being committed by inheritance to a mild, unquestioning, undeviating Protestantism. His religion was more in his conduct than in his prayers, and he tried to live its precepts instead of following them from afar. Still, his make was far from heroic. He had many faults; but it is less important to learn what these were than to know that, as far as he was aware of their existence, he was ashamed of them, and tried to overcome them.

Such, in brief, were Pauline Cambron and Gordon Helm: coming from separate regions of Kentucky, descended from unlike pasts, moulded by different influences, striving towards ends in life far apart and hostile. And being thus, at last they slept that night.

When she had been left alone, and had begun to prepare herself for bed, across her mind passed and repassed certain words of the Mother Superior, stilling her spirit like the waving of a wand of peace: "To be troubled without any visible cause is one of the mysteries of our nature." True, before she fell asleep there rose all at once a singularly clear recollection of that silent meeting in the fields; but her prayers fell thick and fast upon it like flakes of snow, until it was chastely buried from the eye of conscience; and when she slept, two tears, slowly loosened from her brain by some repentant dream, could alone have told that there had been trouble behind her peaceful eyes.

## IV

Sister Dolorosa was returning from her visit to old Martha on the following afternoon. When she awoke that morning she resolutely put away all thought of what had happened the evening before. She prayed oftener than usual that day. She went about all duties with unwonted fervour. When she set out in the afternoon, and reached the spot in the fields where the meeting had taken place, it was inevitable that a nature sensitive and secluded like hers should be visited by some question touching who he was and whither he had gone; for it did not even occur to her that he would ever cross her path again. Soon she reached old Martha's; and then – a crippled toad with a subtle tongue had squatted for an hour at the ear of Eve, and Eve, beguiled, had listened. And now she was again returning across the fields homeward. Homeward?

Early that afternoon Helm had walked across the country to the station, some two miles off, to change his dress, with the view of going to the convent the next day. As he came back he followed the course which he had taken the day before, and this brought him into the same footpath across the fields.

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