

## NANCY PRETTY.

## I.

**N**OT only was the body of Nancy sick; her heart was sick as well. She could not reason it out; she was too young. She could only cry, the whimpering cry of a child lost in misery. The hour was late. She had waited and waited but her shiftless mother did not return.

Too well she knew in what condition she would return. It had always been the same. When there was money there was drink and little food. When there was no money there was a sullen sobriety and less food. Worse still, Peter too was absent. Indeed, Nancy was quite alone. She had lain down on the bundle of rags which was her bed. Her home was a single apartment in a back land off the Garscube Road. Every saleable stick had gone long ago. No clock ticked on the mantel-shelf; no kettle bubbled on the hob. There was no hob really, just a hole where a grate once had been.

“Peter!” the little voice called—“Peter—Peter—chee-chee-chee!” Then a silence, then a sob. Peter was a big ginger cat, and the close companion of Nancy. But Peter, like Nancy’s mother, was given to disappearing. He had not been home for three nights. What nights! They had seemed like an eternity.

Time and again she had gone to the close-mouth and through the backgreens (greens, forsooth, where never a blade of grass was known to grow)—no Peter! “What if he never comes back?” she kept asking her-

self. She remembered how, on several occasions, she had endeavoured to run away. It was always the thought of Peter that brought her back. To stroke him, to feel his warm body against hers, to hear him singing thrums—was the height of bliss for Nancy.

The Halligans, next *close*, had a cat too, but it was not like Peter; it was always slinking about. But Nelly Halligan was nice. They were chums, and it was Nelly who was the means of opening Nancy's eyes to beauty. Twice they had broken bounds; once when they went away together on a canal boat. Wonderful! They had to walk home, and she was thrashed for being late. It was worth it. She had seen the green fields and the trees, and she had gathered primroses. Her mother called them trash, and threw them out of the window.

The second time was even more wonderful. It was a pilgrimage to Nelly's grandmother. She lived in one of the *scheme* houses at Maryhill. There Nancy saw, for the first time in her life, a white bed. How any one could go to sleep on it she did not know. Granny Halligan turned the cover down. The sheets were like snow. Nancy tried to hide her grimy feet behind a stool. Granny saw her. "Come on, my lassie," she said, "and I'll let you see my bath." Snowy white again! Granny turned the hot water on. "Put off your things and jump in!" she said. Afterwards Nancy saw herself in a mirror. She blushed. "What will the neighbours say?" she thought, "they'll think I'm trying to swank it." But she kept her body clean from that day.

"Oh dear me, will Peter never come back?" There was acute pain at her heart now. It came to her mind that some one had told her once of a cat being run

over by a steam road-roller. The thought made her sick. In desperation she screamed, wild piercing screams. "Peter! Peter!"

"What's the matter, Nancy?" The voice was soft and kind. She looked up. Strange! She was in a white bed, snowy white, and at her bedside was a nurse. Then she remembered—scarlet fever—hospital. "Dreaming again," said the nurse, "take this drink and lie down quiet like a good girl!" She happed Nancy up and tucked the blankets in.

## II.

The doctor was the nicest man in the world. Of that Nancy was certain. He called her Nancy Pretty, and often stroked her cheek. Once he had rubbed his own cheek against hers. It was rough, but it was lovely. Every one was lovely, the sister, the nurses, her wee chums in the ward; even Kitty in the next cot, who made funny faces and put out her tongue at the nurse when her back was turned. She remembered lying awake the first morning and thinking she was in heaven. A bed to herself, spotless, and a night-gown, and a toothbrush. Some of the other girls didn't like the castor oil; she didn't care. Nurse told her she was the only one in the ward who could take it without making a face.

At the side of her cot there was a cupboard, all her own. The other girls got parcels and letters and things every day. Nothing ever came for Nancy. Her cupboard, however, was always filled—apples, oranges, dates, bananas, sweeties, everything. The others saw to that.

When she was convalescent she was made *postman*, and given the distribution of parcels and letters. At other times she mothered the little ones and put them to sleep with a song she heard the *Hallelujahs* sing—"Happy Day, Happy Day." She liked the tune. Happy day truly—flowers, toys, picture-books, games, dolls, and her skin so soft and pink.

One day a letter came for her; it had a stamp too. It made Nancy very happy, and very sad. It was a funny wee letter. It read:—

*Dear Nancy Pretty,*

*In a few days you will be going home. This is for to let you know that we all love you very very much.*

*The Doctor.*

The doctor was always doing funny things. One day he came in with a false nose. She put the letter under her pillow, and, hiding her face in the bed-clothes, cried far into the night.

Next morning she showed it to the sister. She was sorry for that, for the sister caught her in such a strange way, and held her, and hugged her so tight that she could scarcely breathe. Nancy often felt the same fierce love with babies, afraid she might kill them.

The time was drawing on. She had two sorrows now, conflicting sorrows, ever present—the thought of going home, and Peter. Peter she wanted, but home—oh the heaviness of her heart! She cried and cried. She saw them coming for her. She tried to rise and hide under the cot, but she could not move. She had never known such terror. The ambulance man was clutching at her. She shrieked.

“Whatna row is that to be kicking up? Is it dreaming ye are? Better shut up and no’ keep folk aff their sleep!”

The voice was too familiar. She opened her eyes, and remembered. She was home, had come home last night. Peter was there, on the kitchen floor, washing his face. He had just come in. He sprang into bed, purring with joy.

She drew him to her bosom, and wept.