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AN OLD MAID'S MONOLOGUE.

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(From the Catholic Telegraph)

CHAPTER I.

To night, Christmas eve, two letters have been brought me by the mail; two letters which make me raise my heart to Heaven in thankfulness for my darling's happiness and carry me back to a Christmas-eve many, many years ago.

Perhaps the story of what has happened between this Christmas eve and the one recalled (but that is not the word, for I seldom forget it) by these two precious letters may not prove uninteresting, if those who read it will have patience with an old woman's garrulity and let me tell it my own way.

I am, what people call in a derisive sort of pity, an old maid, and have settled down into my state of life with resignation and a species of satisfaction, when I look around me and see what failures most of the marriages I have witnessed have turned out to be. Not all, thank heaven! not all, by any means, but so many that it is appalling.

Women seem to think that life was given them to be spent in powdering and hair-kunking and trying the effect of this ribbon or that silk upon their made-up complexions. Having satisfied themselves upon this important point they sally forth to conquer or die.

And conquer they generally do; there is always some masculinity weak enough to be caught by a pretty face, or one that looks pretty after the hour or two spent before the glass, and in fatigued enough not to look deeper than the pink and white complexion, in languishing or sparkling eyes, as the case may be. Then he rushes into matrimony on the strength of this infatuation and then comes the tug of war!

Perhaps he has a limited salary; is a book-keeper or clerk with the confidence of his employers and likely to rise if he continues to give satisfaction.

His salary was quite a comfortable support for himself; he felt quite well off and was able to lay something by and make a handsome present to his sisters every little while, and was enjoying life to the utmost, being young enough not to think of any change for five, six or eight years to come.

But the pink and white complexion wanted a home, she caught him and she will not let him go. He finds his salary is a mere drop in the bucket and the savings of the past three or four years all go in one and still the cry, like the horse-leecher's daughter's, is 'more.' And if the 'more' is not forthcoming, how my lady's temper shows itself! And so the many years drag on, the children come and must be provided for on a scale of elegance totally incompatible for a poor clerk's wife.

Everything must be sacrificed to 'looks;' how would this or that look? is the question always asked the only one considered.

If the husband keeps quiet and his purse strings open, all is smooth; but let him presume to remonstrate! If there is time to think of his comfort after everything else is attended to in the way of appearances, well and good, if there is not—why, let him take care of himself. His business prospects suffer, for how can he do his duty there, so harassed at home.

My picture is not overdrawn, there are many and many just such cases. Now I ask you, where is the love? Has it survived to this day or did it die a natural death? For the pink and white complexion and the wavy hair were what it fed on, and when it found they were all falsehood and show, could it live?

Can the man, weak but honest love what he took for a natural woman after he finds she is only a lay figure with the addition of a fearful temper unless the most expensive material is put on her shoulders.

No; there is no love in such a case, after the first glamour is off and stern reality stares him in the face! All those demonstrations before the world go for what they are worth to those who can look behind the scenes.

But there is another kind of marriage. Don't think, girls, that I lay the blame all on your shoulders! There is many and many a woman goes to do her husband with the full wish and intent to her duty and to fulfill her marriage vow to the letter; many a one pours out the full measure of her heart's love at his feet, and for what? To meet after the first novelty is worn off, with carelessness and neglect, coldness and indifference, the heaviest burden for a loving nature to bear. Better be high tempered and irritable, cross and unmanageable at times, so there is a compensation for it in tender words and thoughtful attentions that show her he is all right at the bottom. And the cares of the house and the children are left to her, he little thinking, so his meals are properly cooked and the little

ones are not allowed to disturb his after-dinner nap.

And there is a third marriage—of the kind that are made in Heaven. Where the husband and wife go hand in hand down the vale of life bearing each other's burdens and doubling each other's joys; and of this kind I think my two letters tell me.

You had almost forgotten my letters, hadn't you? And you will be surprised to know that I am going to tell a love story, after such a preamble, but it is so—my story is a genuine love story; whether you can find a moral to it, I don't know; I hope you can.

But I must begin a new chapter; it would never do to begin a story at the end of one—besides, those who do not want to read this can skip it and begin fresh on the next.

CHAPTER II.

Five and thirty years ago to day, two young school girls bid each other farewell after three years of close intimacy such as only seen at a boarding school.

Five and thirty years! Estelle Landry was twenty, I was eighteen. We had been dear friends, but now she was going home, to her father's sick, perhaps dying bed, and I was to remain at our valley home, as we loved to call it, till the next June, and then the world was to open its wide arms to me too.

We had had many plans for those bright June days that were to close our school life, but of course they were all at an end; Estelle would not return. And living so far apart, as in Bayou la Fourche, in Louisiana, and I in Ohio, it was not likely we would meet soon again. So we spent the last hours with our arms wrapped round each other and eyes far from dry.

And in that last talk we made many promises, some that were never to be fulfilled and others that were forgotten. But we each promised the other in case of trouble and needed assistance to go to each other if possible. A foolish promise it would have seemed had any one heard it, but it was not foolish to us nor did it prove foolish in the end. We parted; the next June I left school and began life. I had heard from Estelle frequently since she left; her father died soon after she reached home and she and her mother still lived on the plantation.

We corresponded for several years without meeting, then Estelle's mother died, and two years afterward she came North a bride. I can never forget how proud and happy she was.

They were going to Saratoga and Newport to spend the summer and wanted me to go with them. But care and anxiety kept me at home; my mother had died in my childhood, and now my father's health seemed failing and I could not think of leaving him and he would not leave home.

They stayed with me a week and we renewed, if it needed renewing, our old love and our old promises. But I could not, somehow or other like Estelle's husband. He was extremely handsome, but there was a hardness and coldness about him that would seem cruelty to a nature so warm and impulsive as hers. He was a perfect gentleman and never forgot to perform all those 'petit soins' that could show his devotion, but they were done in a mechanical sort of way that would have set me crazy.

Estelle did not notice it, or did not seem to. She would throw her arms around his neck and kiss him twenty times a day and call him all sorts of pet names and it all reminded me of a rock on the sea shore with the waves throwing themselves against it.

They went home by sea and I did not see them again.

Five years, no six years passed, and in that time I had heard from Estelle of the birth of a daughter; before this her letters had still been full of Etienne and his perfections, but after the little Estelle Marie was born she seemed to take up all her mother's thoughts, for the husband and father was never spoken of.

Gradually, too, the letters grew full of sadness, there were no more outbursts of love and pride in her husband and baby—there was little about them; but sad longings for rest from weariness and pain and deep and bitter heartache spoken to every line. Not that she said anything that might lead me to think she was unhappy, it was the spirit of her letters that revealed it to me.—After a while they ceased altogether.

In these six years I had had my own troubles. My father died; and there was another death too, but for which I would not have been as I am, and perhaps this story would not have been told.

My father died and I was alone. We had lived in the country nearly all my life and I still remained in the old homestead with the old servants.

My life was a very quiet one, I took no part in society except as I was forced to and I tried to do all the good in my power but it was not much.

Life for me had lost all charms outside of this, and the hour spent before the altar of the little church grew to be the most peaceful and happiest in my day.

For six months I had not heard from Estelle and I was troubled as to the reason. It was Christmas eve, and I sat before the blazing wood fire in my father's library thinking of our parting fourteen years ago that day, and how many changes had gone on around me in that time, when the door bell rang furiously. I listened and presently there was a noise in the hall and I heard a voice say:

'I can find her!'

Then the library door was opened and the ghost of my poor Estelle stood there, holding a little girl of four years by the hand.

She staggered rather than walked into the room and sank on the hearth rug before the fire. I had risen, but my feet seemed rooted to the spot and I could not move.

She made me no formal greeting, nor did I give her a welcome in words, I only remember that we sat on the rug clasped in each other's arms and cried while the little girl stood by in mute amazement.

After a while I understood what brought her. The story of suffering and abuse and dishonor, I will not repeat. She had stood everything as long as she could for her child's sake, but at last matters became so that she could not in self-respect endure any longer.

She left her home while her husband was away taking passage for New York, but to avoid being traced she left the vessel at Savannah and made her way to me by rail. She did not know what power her husband had to claim her, neither did I, but I did not think much about anything but making the poor thing comfortable.

I had often been despondent and sad, feeling as if every one had their appointed task but me—that upon me was laid the heaviest cross a mortal can bear—that of 'waiting;' of seeing others go on the road of life, assisting or assisted while I plodded on with no one to lead a helping hand, few to say a cheering word—that I was outside of all natural or cheering interest. It was a miserable state of mind to fall into and if I could feel so at thirty-two what would be my state at forty?

So now I had my task like the others and indulged no longer morbid fancies.

Weeks passed and no word came of Estelle's husband, and gradually the fear that had possessed me at first of seeing him walk in and demand her, began to wear off, and I did not tremble like an aspen leaf if a carriage made its appearance on the road or drove in at the gate.

The winter had been unusually severe with heavy snow storms that drifted in places six and eight feet deep, rendering the roads almost impassable; in consequence we were not much troubled with visitors, nor were we able to leave the house much.

Thus the winter months passed, but they left their mark on the frail frame of my poor friend, and she sank before spring into a consumptive state.

Little Estelle and I were sworn friends; she was a gentle, delicate child, very like her mother, and she fancied me from the very first, so we had no trouble at all. When the early spring came Estelle had an invalid's longing for the fresh green woods and the wild flowers that began to star their mossy carpets.

One day the balmy breath of the awakening vegetation moved my poor friend out, and little Estelle went with her; my duties, fortunately, or I should say by a kind dispensation of Providence, kept me at home that day, or I would have gone too.

They had hardly disappeared through the back garden which bordered on the woods when the door bell rang and I heard a man's voice ask for Miss Felton. In a moment I knew it had come. What I had so dreaded was at hand! In the few moments I lingered before going into the parlor I debated whether I should rush out and tell Estelle, for I could not trust any one to do it—or should I decline seeing him!

In Estelle's nervous state I did not know what a sudden communication of such a nature might lead to, and if I refused to see him might he not repeat his visit at a less propitious time, or might he not suspect something from my refusal?

All this passed through my mind like lightning, and I decided to see him and get the interview over as soon as possible: and breathing a heartfelt prayer that Estelle might not see him I went into the parlor.

He was changed much since I had seen him before; he looked older than the time warranted and there were strong marks of dissipation on his handsome features.

As I entered the room he strode over to me and without any other greeting said: 'I am searching for my wife and child and have come to you to help me.' He spoke

fiercely and glared at me from under his heavy eye brows.

'You will be disappointed, sir, I can not help you to find them,' I replied quite fiercely, for I was angry at his manner, and in that feeling lost my dread of him.

'You mean you do not know where they are?'

'I mean that I can not help you to find them; if you come penitent and humble for your great crime, then—'

He interrupted me with a coarse laugh; 'Penitent and humble! I like that! I tell you what, madam, I will have back my wife and child cost what it will, and when I get her back I'll show her what it is to run away from her lawful husband.'

He shook with passion and I began to feel very nervous, thinking I heard Estelle's childish laughter, and yet afraid to listen for fear he would see my divided attention and divine what I was so anxious to conceal.

'I will not help you,' was all I could say.

'Yes, I'll get her back and the money she robbed me of—did you know she took quite a nice little sum with her—some six or seven thousand?'

'I knew that, fortunately, her property was all settled on herself,' I replied.

'Yes, but I hold the plantation, and that she shall never have unless she comes back to me. Again I ask you if you know where she is—is she in this house?'

How my heart beat and how thankful I was he put the question in that form. Though I fear I should have told a lie, pure and simple, to save her what I knew would have killed her. How ever, I was saved the temptation, and answered quietly,

'No, she is not in this house—and I will be much obliged if you will leave it,' I replied, rising from my chair. (May I be forgiven the prevarication of the first part of my answer.)

'This is your Northern hospitality, is it?' he asked with a sneer.

'No gentleman, Northern or Southern, would have acted as you have done, sir—therefore I feel at perfect liberty to request you to leave my house.'

'And you refuse to tell me where I will find my wife?'

'I do, sir.'

'Then take care, Madam, or you will find your tongue by the aid of the law,' and he actually shook his clenched fist in my face.

'I may find my tongue in that case in a way that will make you suffer; and now, sir, be gone, or I will call my men servants and have you put out!' I was fairly roused and walked across the room to the bell rope.

He saw I was in earnest and stood up.

'Very well, madam, you shall hear from me again.'

Without further words he strode out of the house and I saw him mount his horse, ride down the avenue and disappear down the road at a fierce gallop.

Then I began to cry and I believe I fainted, or came very near it, but I did not call any one and was myself again when Estelle and her mother came back.

'Mother tells me you had a visitor,' said my poor friend when she saw me.

'Yes,' I replied, as steadily as I could, 'a man on business—he did not stay long.'

She took no further notice of the event, nor did I ever tell her who my visitor was.

But it was long before I overcame my nervous dread of a repetition of the visit, and the old terror returned whenever I saw a carriage or horseman turn into the avenue.

The pleasant summer months passed and little Estelle revelled in the freedom of the woods and lawn. She was a lovely, bright, joyous child, and her devotion to her mother was most touching, subduing her light step to a fairy footfall, and speaking almost in a whisper if she thought her mother needed quiet, and then with wonderful and delicate tuition seemed to know when her childish joy and gaiety would soothe and please her.

She only once or twice asked if they were going back to papa, and when I asked her if she wanted to go to him, she would draw back with a painful shrinking and a frightened look in her eyes and cry, 'no, no.'

My poor friend enjoyed as she could the balmy summer air, but the disease, had fatal hold of her and she knew her days were numbered.

Beyond her childish intuition that something was always making poor mamma sick, Estelle had no idea of the blow hanging over her, and it was touching in the extreme to see mother and child together. The mother clinging to her little one as her last earthly solace, and Estelle, subduing, as I said before, her childish gaiety of spirit to suit that mother's mood. The kind pastor of the little country church near was our most frequent visitor, and his visits were a source of the greatest comfort to the invalid.

'I leave my darling, under God, in your and Father O'Brien's hands,' said the invalid to me one day. 'You will not desert her I know, and I can not leave her in better care.'

'I promised her I would treat her as if she was my own, but I tried to cheer her by saying I hoped she would yet be spared many years.'

'No, no,' she replied with a sad shake of her head, 'my weary pilgrimage is almost over; under the other circumstances I believe I would have gone crazy at the thought of leaving Estelle, but now half the bitterness is taken away—you will be her second mother, and, Oh Ellen, save her from her father at all risks! Promise me that—never, never let him get her in his power!' a violent fit of coughing checked her, utterance and I tried to soothe her, and begged her not to talk any more on a subject that distressed her so.

But I must Ellen, I must; what little of my property that is left I have of course left to her. You know my own property was settled on myself, but before—before he threw off the cloak entirely he captived me into signing away into his hands by far the greater portion of it—the plantation and some ten or twelve thousand besides—that she will never see, but what I brought with me in railroad bonds as you know will be a nice little income for her—Oh my darling, my darling, had I but known! she covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

The tears seemed to relieve her and gradually she grew composed, and when Estelle came in from her play she found her mother sleeping quietly.

A few months after, when the leaves were changing to crimson and gold and the air was hazy and chilly with the breath of the coming winter, the soul of my poor friend winged its flight from earth and its bitter sorrows to the bosom of her God; there to find the mercy and rest that man denied her.

Father O'Brien was with her to the end, and she died holding Estelle in her arms in a last passionate embrace.

The grief of the child was not an outbreak of sorrow, such as her years would warrant, but a steady subdued brooding grief that was pitiful in one so young. Time seemed to do no good and I feared the influence of the quiet country life on her nature. So I left my old home about Christmas time and I took a room in a boarding house in town. The change had a good effect on Estelle, and there being a little girl in the house about her own age with whom she formed quite a friendship, I soon had the satisfaction of hearing my darling laugh like her old self once more and seeing her sweet face recover its old joyous look to a degree, it did not lose all the shadow cast upon it by her mother's death for a long long time.

The papers announced Estelle's death, and as a means of the news reaching her husband I requested the New Orleans papers to copy. After that I expected a visit from him but he never came. Of course the law would give him Estelle if he chose to claim her, and I dreaded his finding out her whereabouts, but my trouble on that score was unnecessary; we were never annoyed by word or act of his.

In the summer we went back to our country home and my darling grew happy in renewing her friendship with the dog and horses and chickens and ducks.

I bought a shetland pony for her, and Joe, my man of all work, took great pleasure in teaching her how to ride; she was an apt scholar, and after a few weeks could manage her pony quite fearlessly and went almost always with me for riding was a pleasure I had not given up. During the bright summer I did not trouble Estelle with lessons; Father O'Brien gave her religious instruction and she went to his Sunday school with the neighboring children who were mostly Germans and not by any means companionable for her; she looked like a little queen among them, with her small head covered with its black curls, and her bright black eyes roving hither and yon with every new thought of the growing mind.

In the winter again we went to the city; it was a great break up of the habits I had formed since I had lost my father, and I did not like it, but I know in the end it was good for me and prevented my growing morbid and selfish as my natural temperament would undoubtedly have led me to grow had I been left to brood by myself. I had no chance to linger in moody solitude on the roadway of life watching others take the lead of me and go on their way leaving me on one side and out of the way. I had a young life intrusted to my care and I must push it and my own along with the rest. The winter months found us in the city and I devoted myself to Estelle's education. The system of boarding schools, even under the care of religious orders where every attention was bestowed on the physical, mental and moral condition of the pupils and I knew they were perfectly safe in every respect, I always was opposed to. I could not