

A ROMANCE OF MIDDLE AGE.

"Sabrina, I think I ought to tell you something that has been weighing on my mind for some time. If you will go into the garden, I will follow you presently." And the speaker, Miss Elizabeth Power, slipped out of the room with unusual and, as her sister thought, most indecorous haste.

Miss Sabrina and Miss Elizabeth Power were old maiden ladies. I use the word "old" to express an air of gentle antiquity which clung to them, telling not of old age, but of old ideas, old customs, and old courtesies.

Though Miss Sabrina was only fifty-three, and Miss Elizabeth but forty, both sisters seemed to belong to some past generation. They had no place among the hurrying men and women of the present day. Sunnybank Cottage and the garden which surrounded it possessed an atmosphere of tranquillity that can only exist where peace and simplicity have their dwelling. It was truly "an old garden" into which Miss Sabrina walked that evening with slow and dignified steps, that expressed tacit disapproval of her sister's more hurried gait.

A hedge of honeysuckle flanked one side of the garden, and the other side was protected from the curious eyes of passers-by, by a high ivy-clad wall. Miss Sabrina could remember the time when the trees that now stood higher than the house itself had been young saplings; but that was long ago. Dark-eyed pansies, old-fashioned stocks, pinks and poppies—these and other flowers filled the irregular beds; and daisies sprinkled the oblong plot of grass that lay in front of the porch.

The garden was situated on the side of a hill. Below it lay the village. Gray and peaceful it looked, nestling at the feet of the great hills that sloped down to it on every side, shutting it in from the world. Purple and gray they rose, one slope above another, till they were lost among the clouds. Only to the west they broke slightly, leaving an open space, through which glimmered the waters of the distant lake, Graymore. And the evening sun shone with a splendour of crimson and gold, filling the gap with its amber glory.

It was on a June evening that Miss Sabrina stood by the laburnum tree awaiting the coming of her sister. She had a peaceful face, straight-featured, and pale as ivory. Her gray hair was parted smoothly over a calm brow, and she wore a lace cap with mauve ribbons. As she stood with her hands folded in front of her, an atmosphere of restfulness seemed to emanate from her whole personality—not the repose of one who has never struggled, but such peace as only comes after many a hard battle fought and won.

Ever since her parents' death and the marriage of her second sister, Miss Sabrina had lived with her sister Elizabeth, and never until that evening had there been the shadow of a concealment between the sisters. Miss Elizabeth's simple thoughts and wishes had been ever laid at her sister's feet in perfect confidence; and Miss Sabrina had been worthy of the trust. And now, to find that Elizabeth had been concealing something, and, from her manner, evidently something important, caused her a sharper pang than she would have cared to own. She stealthily brushed away a tear as she turned to meet her sister.

Demurely raising her black silk gown, Miss Elizabeth crossed the gravel path, and walked over with slow mincing steps to where her sister stood, thereby offering a silent apology for her recent undignified conduct. There was something charmingly incongruous about the little lady that it would be hard to account for, unless, perhaps, it was caused by the youthfulness of her face and the antiquity of her costume. Certainly the two side-curls of glossy brown hair looked out of place beside her fresh cheeks, and the sombre gown in its stern simplicity seemed unsuited to her slender figure. I have never seen girl or woman since with a more ingenuous countenance; and probably any girl in her teens nowadays knows more of the world than that dainty lady knew at forty. That night, Miss Elizabeth's eyes were a trifle cast down as she met her sister's glance of perplexed inquiry.

"What a beautiful evening it is—is it not, Sabrina?" she remarked, somewhat irrelevantly, as dark clouds were rising up around the sun. "Shall we walk about, or would you rather sit down?"

"Thank you, sister. I prefer to be seated. I shall then be able to pay more attention to what you have to tell me," answered Miss Sabrina, sternly bringing her sister to the point.

"Very well," assented the other, with a little sigh. So together they walked to the summerhouse, which stood in a shady cor-

ner, and in silence they seated themselves on two garden chairs.

"Well Elizabeth?" said Miss Sabrina, in rather chilly tones, after a few moments' silence.

"Yes—yes, dear Sabrina—only, do not hurry me," pleaded her sister nervously. "You see, Sabrina, I really could not tell you before, for I might have been making a mistake, and that would have put me in a most distressing position; but to-day I really felt there was no longer any doubt of it, because he"—Then realising that she was talking rather incoherently, she stopped, and with a blush, turned to pick one of the white roses that had stolen in at the tiny lattice window. Pathos and comedy were closely allied in the love confidences of this elderly maiden; but Miss Sabrina did not see anything amusing in her sister's words. Her nature was one in which lay much tenderness, but it was concealed beneath a certain coldness of manner that a stranger might have shrunk from. But those who really knew her understood. It was in no winning tones that she begged her sister to be more explicit.

"Yes, Sabrina; I will try," responded Miss Elizabeth obediently. "Well, for some time I have fancied that Dr. Meadows has"—

"Has what, Elizabeth?" inquired Sabrina sharply.

"Well, sister, has—been very kind to me."

"Oh"—precise and prolonged. "He has also been very kind to me, Elizabeth; but I do not find that his kindness weighs on my mind." She was determined that her sister should speak plainly, however hard she might find it.

"No, of course not," and Miss Elizabeth laughed nervously. "But, dear Sabrina, I fancy, in fact I may almost say I know, that his kindness to me is a little different. He is so remarkably kind. To-day, I was coming up from the village, and I met him just at the corner of Birtle Lane. He turned and walked up beside me, and actually persisted in carrying my basket, Sabrina."

"How overpoweringly kind!" said Miss Sabrina sarcastically. "Anything more?"

"Yes, yes. I am coming to it, if you will only give me a little time," implored her sister. "As I was saying, he carried my basket; and, Sabrina, he made me take his arm. I really was not sure whether it was proper in the daytime and all the neighbours about; but I could not refuse. When we got to the top of the hill, he asked me if I would go for a little stroll in the wood.—I was afraid you might not approve," she added timidly, hearing a dissatisfied cough from Sabrina; "but, you know, I could not say, 'Thank you; I am afraid Sabrina might not like it,' though it would have been quite true: so what could I do?"

Miss Sabrina vouchsafed no answer; so Miss Elizabeth hurried on. "So, when we had been walking a little time, he said we would sit down for a little. If you remember, Sabrina—but I hardly think you will—I had pinned a pink in my brooch. Well, Dr. Meadows asked me if I would give it to him, 'Oh, yes, Dr. Meadows,' I said, 'If you care for it; but you know you have plenty of the same kind in your own garden.'—'Yes,' he said; 'but I should like this one particularly, Miss Elizabeth; and really, Sabrina, he looked quite handsome, and you know he is not strictly good-looking. So I unpinned it and handed it to him; and—I am afraid it was dreadfully improper—but he held my hand and said, 'Miss Elizabeth—Elizabeth!'"

"Was that all?" inquired Sabrina, still coldly.

"Yes, it was; because just then Mr. and Mrs. Birkett came into sight, and of course we got up; and as they were behind us all the way home, Dr. Meadows had no chance of finishing what he was going to say."

"Did Mr. and Mrs. Birkett walk so closely behind you that Dr. Meadows could not continue his conversation?" said Sabrina, still determined not to see what her sister was driving at.

"No, no, Sabrina," expostulated the little lady; "but he could hardly say anything very confidential when they were looking on; and I really do think"—tremulously—"that he was going to say something very important."

"In fact, Elizabeth, you think that Dr. Meadows was going to make you an offer of marriage?"

"Well, Sabrina, I really do." "Then let me tell you, Elizabeth," said Miss Sabrina, rising from her chair and standing before her sister, "I believe you to be entirely mistaken. In the first place, Dr. Meadows has only been a widower for three years; further, he is a man of the world, and extremely rich—all of which facts make it improbable, nay, impossible that he should dream of marrying a compara-

tively poor old maid." Miss Sabrina threw a cruel emphasis on the last three words, and Elizabeth cowered beneath the dread sentence.

The pain we willingly inflict for the sake of another's welfare cuts the giver more than the receiver, and there is no part more hard to play than that of an earthly providence.

With tears quivering on her eyelashes, Miss Elizabeth looked up piteously. "But, Sabrina, what else could he mean?"

"Nothing else. The mistake you made was in thinking he meant anything at all. I ask you if you candidly think you have enough attractions to warrant such a supposition?"

"Well, Sabrina, I used to be considered pretty," sobbed Miss Elizabeth.

"Pretty at twenty does not mean pretty at forty, Elizabeth. Believe me, you are mistaken, and be thankful that you did not commit yourself in any way."

Bitter as Miss Sabrina's task was, she would finish it without flinching, though at that moment she could have gathered up her little sister in her arms and wept over her.

"Then, Sabrina, do you think that we had better give up our acquaintance with him?"

"No, no, Elizabeth—nothing of the sort. He has been a very good friend to us, and I should not like to lose his friendship. All you have to do is to be a little reserved and distant with him. Men are like bees, sister; they fly from one blossom to another, sucking a little honey here and there; and if they do settle on any particular flower, you may be sure it will be a gorgeous one. Always remember that, my dear, and never allow yourself to be led again into such meaningless sentimentalism."

"I suppose you are right, Sabrina. I will try to think no more about it, if you will only assure me that you do not think I led him on to say more than he meant. I could not bear to be thought immodest," faltered Miss Elizabeth.

"No, sister," replied Miss Power while a rare and tender smile softened her whole face, "I do not think anything of the sort. I only think you have made a mistake—a thing we are all apt to do, my dear. Let us say no more about it." And she walked slowly down the path and into the house, stopping to look down into the valley, where the blue reeks of smoke rose up through the still air.

"Cruel only to be kind." The words rang in her ears, but they brought little consolation to her heart, and the remembrance of her sister's tear-stained face followed her into her cool bedroom with its dimity hangings.

When Miss Elizabeth was left alone, she crushed the rose she had plucked and let it fall to the ground. Her hopes, her late-begotten romance, the dreams of home-life and happiness, so natural to every true woman—all these were at an end. She was no heroine, only a simple old maid; yet, sitting there in the gathering twilight, weeping softly over the wreck of her rosy dreams, she made a picture of infinite pathos, terribly real in its calm resignation and absence of all youthful passion and rebellion.

An hour or two later, the sisters sat at their usual game of piquet in the old-fashioned parlour, with its high-backed chairs and sombre sideboard. No sign betrayed their recent painful conversation; but it was a secret relief to each when Miss Elizabeth won the game with a "carteblanche."

"How unusual!" said Miss Sabrina, rather warily as she laid the pack in the old fern-covered box. "Not a single coloured card!"

"No," responded Miss Elizabeth sadly—"not a single coloured card, Sabrina."

For a minute or two the sisters sat without speaking.

"How hard life is!" thought Miss Sabrina; and "How hard life is!" thought Miss Elizabeth.

"I will have my cocoa in my bedroom, Elizabeth," remarked Miss Sabrina after a pause, during which the clock ticked peacefully on the mantel-shelf. "Good-night, my dear; you can have your supper here, or in your bedroom too, whichever you prefer;" and kissing her sister's cheek, she left the room.

When Miss Elizabeth heard the door of Sabrina's bedroom click to, she rose, put out the lamp, and with a parting stroke of unconscious pussy, she, too, went to her bedroom.

Neither sister had any supper, but each thought of the other comfortably sipping her cocoa in "deshabille."

"Most annoying, most annoying," muttered good Dr. Meadows as he closed the wicket gate after Miss Elizabeth Power and walked down the quiet lane. He was a massive-looking man, about forty-five, with iron-gray hair, and a square, clean-shaven chin. Like most north-country men, he was slow to form likes and dislikes; but when a

feeling once took possession of him, it clung to him with great tenacity. Ever since the first few months after the death of his first wife he had watched Miss Elizabeth with increasing solicitude. His first marriage, late in life, had been an unsatisfactory one. Like many men whom necessity has kept hard at the grindstone during early manhood, prohibiting all thoughts of marriage for the time, he had been at thirty-nine very susceptible to woman's charms, and falling in love with a London belle, whose finances were scarcely sufficient to supply her in gaieties and trinkets, had married, fondly believing in the disinterestedness of his wife's affection, never dreaming that his hardly-earned "ducats" could have any intrinsic value in her eyes. But he woke from his dream of love to find his wife extravagant, rapacious for gaiety, and utterly unsuited to settle down to comfortable domestic life as the wife of a country doctor. But no one ever guessed the shadow that darkened his life. To outward eyes he was a kind affectionate husband; and Clara Meadows had no reason to complain of his inconsiderateness or tyranny. The absence of that loving homage which sanctifies marriage did not affect her, and she was quite content while her whims were gratified without interference on her husband's part.

When, three years after their marriage, his wife was killed in a railway accident, Dr. Meadows could not pretend to feel any passionate grief or remorse. He simply laid the past aside quietly; and when Miss Elizabeth's gentle personality began to fill his thoughts, he held it no slight to his dead wife, between himself and whom there had never been any deep and lasting attachment. He was not a bold man, or one that would ride over any obstacle without hesitation, and he had waited till all seemed smooth for his suit. To have made up his mind to an actual declaration of his feelings meant a great moral and mental effort; and as he walked home on that June afternoon, the relaxation that follows on the heels of any effort began to make itself felt. He was almost thankful that he had been spared the ordeal, for his was no fiery passion of youth, eager to secure the beloved object, but the steady flame of mature affection, that can wait without the fever-heats of delayed happiness. Doubts came over him as he sat in his study that evening.

"I have no attractions," he thought, "Why should I imagine that any woman can care for me now? Ought I to try to turn the current of that calm life? If, in seeking love, I lose friendship, I shall indeed have made a fatal mistake." So he pondered over the long churchwarden that was his only companion during the long evenings. At last he came to the conclusion that the matter should be decided by Miss Elizabeth's manner to him at their next meeting.

"If," he thought, "she receives me kindly and with some little embarrassment, which I may reasonably expect, should she feel able to return affection, I shall conclude all is well, for she cannot now fail to have understood my feelings towards her, and I will then speak more plainly. But if she treats me with any assumption of reserve or coldness, I shall simply let the matter drop, and cling all the more closely to our pleasant friendship."

I believe in the bottom of his heart Dr. Meadows had a secret conviction that Miss Elizabeth would not be averse to his suit, for his eyes wandered round the room with an expression of serene satisfaction, and he smoothed the rumpled antimacassar on the sofa thinking, I feel sure, of the little hands that loved so well to straighten all disorder and smooth away all pain and sorrow.

CHAPTER II.

The next morning nothing unusual marked the conduct of either of the Miss Powers. Miss Sabrina was calmly dignified, as was her wont; and if Miss Elizabeth's cheeks were a shade paler than usual her laugh was ever on her lips, and her spirits seemed even brighter than usual. That pride of ours which bids us don the mask of mirth was strong in her. Sabrina should never guess the impression that Dr. Meadows' conduct had made upon her foolish old heart! While the sisters were sitting at breakfast, Bridget, their one domestic, brought in a foreign-looking letter. Chloë, their married sister, was living in Marseilles with her husband, M. Cervay, a French architect, who was superintending the building of a large theatre there; and her weekly letters were looked forward to with great pleasure by both sisters, though Miss Sabrina had an inborn horror of France and everything French. The very word suggested something highly improper and objectionable, in her opinion.