

Whatever may have been their reasons they were very happy over them; happy in their housework; their patchwork, their cats, their garden; their church, their nephews, and themselves; and three busier, kinder, happier people, it would be hard to find. They kept no servant, and their wants were few. Miss Sarah, a most excellent manager, and the eldest of the three; kept the keys in a little old-fashioned basket by her side, and looked to the provisions with a careful mind; Miss Mattie (properly Matilda) did all the fine ironing and such light work as her rather delicate health would permit; while Miss Jessie, the youngest and prettiest, did a little of everything, and was all day and every day the sunshine of the house.

At the time our story opens they were engaged in knitting winter socks for Tom, though it was early September, and discussing a new departure. Actually a new departure in a town where nothing very new had happened in many years! For the first time in the history of their church its young people were to have a society of their own. Now let me mention here that the Miss Mitchells considered themselves young; their hearts had not grown old as the years passed by; their sympathies, energies, and interests were all fresh and young still, and longing for new outlets of work. It never occurred to them, therefore, that this new society was not for them. They longed to see it prove a success, they considered it, as Miss Jessie said, 'a good thing,' but with the retiring timidity natural to them they thought it best 'not to be too precipitate.'

'We were talking about the new society, Tom,' said Miss Mattie, in explanation to that young gentleman, as, with an air of exhaustion supposed to be the effect of excessive overwork, he sank into the easiest rocking-chair, and began to fan himself with the fluffy tail of the tabby-cat, caught by the neck for that purpose. The sisters never would believe that lifting a cat by the neck would not injure it mortally, and a slight discussion resulted, in which Tom was implored in moving terms to remember that cats had feelings, and he with equal warmth demonstrated that if a cat's feelings were hurt it would squeal. 'Not if it's half-choked, poor thing,' said Miss Sarah.

'So it's the Y.P.S.C.E. that you consider a good thing,' said Tom, after this little difficulty had been satisfactorily arranged; 'then, as I had the pleasure of remarking through the window, why don't you "push it along"?' There are some in the church who object to it; you might do the young people a good turn by advocating their cause.'

'Their cause?' cried Miss Jessie, in bewilderment.

'You speak as if we had nothing to do with it, Tom,' explained Miss Mattie; 'of course, if, as we think, the movement is a good one, we intend to identify ourselves with it before long.' Tom stopped fanning himself and gave vent to a long, low, whistle, which Miss Sarah was won't to say went through her head like a two-edged gimlet, whatever that tool may be.

'Are you really going to join, aunties?' said he, 'why, it is for—at least—at least—that is—I mean' (getting very red and finishing tamely) 'it's rather a new thing—but then,' irrelevantly, as if following out his own thoughts, 'you are as young as anyone I know, a good sight younger than some.'

'Young?' exclaimed Miss Sarah, looking at Miss Jessie.

'Young?' echoed Miss Jessie, looking at Miss Sarah.

'Young?' said Miss Mattie, with a gasp, looking at them both.

Tom felt ashamed of himself. His conscience troubled him. Here were these three dear old ladies who didn't know what it was to grow old, and he was the first to shake their confidence in perpetual youth. He hastened to repair the blunder with merry words, an easy matter when the wish on both sides was the same, and when he left them a half-hour later they were deep in happy plans for the future of the Young People's Society.

'If any of those girls hurt my aunts' feelings, and slight them because their hair is gray,' said Tom to himself as he hurried home. 'I—I—if they were boys I'd knock them down.'

The organizers of the New Salem Congregational Young People's Society had a fair field and every favor; the few grumblers were soon silenced, if not convinced, and the work went forward rapidly. The first meeting was to be held on a Monday night, and all who had any intention of joining were asked to attend. The little old maids were all alive with pleasure and anticipation, and Tom shut his teeth and swore vengeance on anyone who would dare to dampen their enjoyment.

Behold them then, all smiles and bows and flutters, setting off to the Monday night meeting, with Tom stalking along behind as rear-guard. 'Will we be expected to say something the very first night?' asked Miss Jessie, with a nervous shiver. 'We will be expected to do nothing but join,' said Miss Sarah, decidedly, as she clutched her hymn-book tightly to hide the shaking of her hand, and lowered her voice to a piercing whisper as they mounted the church steps. At the door their pastor was waiting to shake hands.

'Oh, Miss Mitchell,' said he, cordially, 'you have come to wish our young people Godspeed in their new venture—you are just in time—they are starting the first hymn.'

'We intend to join,' said Miss Mitchell simply; 'we feel that the time for systematic effort of the young people has fully come.'

'Oh—ah—yes,' replied the pastor, a little taken aback; 'we are very glad; you will find seats up near the organ.'

It was a splendid meeting, and promised a most hopeful future for the society. The need, object, and aims of the organization were fully explained and discussed, the unfounded prejudice against it as a movement broken down and its usefulness exalted. I doubt if there was one in the meeting who did not feel that it was the dawning of fresh life for the church—the birth of a new force in the bosom of the old. No one was asked to sign the pledge that night, but all were provided with copies for home study that their decision might be careful and prayerful. The Miss Mitchells were a trifle disappointed at this. They longed to sign the cards at once and feel themselves members; as it was, they nearly missed getting them at all, for no one thought of the 'three old maids' wanting to join! The meeting broke up without anything occurring to mar their happiness, and Tom, considering the danger passed, relaxed his vigilance so far as to linger behind at the close for a private chat with his chum.

As they waited for him outside in the cool darkness, the hearts of the three sisters were full of thankful gladness for the new impetus given to the Lord's work. The crowd of merry young people streamed past them as they stood there in the shadow, their clear voices echoing through the still night. One voice was especially distinct, perhaps because of a certain note of sharpness. It came from a gaily dressed young lady, who with her escort, was leaning

against the doorway, in the full glare of the stream of light.

'It will not prove all they expect it will,' she was saying, with a little toss of her head; 'the pledge is just dreadful, no one could ever keep it—just imagine promising to be present at every meeting whether you wanted to or not—that's going too far, I think.'

Miss Sarah looked quickly at Miss Jessie, who, understanding her with ready sympathy, whispered, 'There is one, we must help.'

'Oh,' went on the girl, with a little laugh, 'there are saints enough in the church to keep it up, no doubt, but there won't be much room left for anyone else—why just imagine who is going to join—the three old maids, the Mitchells! Why, the youngest must be fifty, if she's a day, and, yet, they call it a "Young People's Society"—if they are young people, why, I must be an infant, that's all, and the society's no place for me. Bertha Watson says she won't join either if the old people are going to have the run of it—they've had their day—let them step aside now and make room for others.' So spoke Miss Mabel Stirling, the young lady of the gay dress and the hard heart. Perhaps she didn't just mean all she said; for she happened to be in a bad temper; certainly she spoke only for herself and two or three others out of the whole society, but all this did not tend to soften the effect of her words upon her hearers. The three old ladies were struck literally dumb with astonishment. They did not try to argue the question with themselves, or reflect that Miss Sterling's opinion could be of no possible importance to them; the bitterness of her words struck home to their hearts, and they felt what she had called them—old, old and tired, and quite removed from the crowd of fresh young faces they had thought to join.

'We won't wait for Tom to-night,' said Miss Mattie, after a minute, 'we are quite—old enough to take care of ourselves.'

So alone and silent they turned homeward. If you had watched them you would have noticed that their steps were slower and their heads not held so lightly as usual—the burden of a new found age was lying heavily upon them. Miss Sarah, thinking of her once glossy black hair, reflected that it would soon be almost white, and sighed heavily. Long ago somebody had said that her hair was very beautiful. Miss Mattie's eyes were dimmer than usual that night, for she stumbled over a stone, and fixing her spectacles more firmly thought it was high time she was getting stronger ones; while Miss Jessie felt her face stealthily with a shaking hand, and wondered how many furrows the years had ploughed across the once smooth forehead.

Nothing was said between them on the subject of their disillusion until they gathered for family worship. The portion chosen was the first part of the twenty-first chapter of Revelation, and it happened to be Miss Sarah's turn to read. When she came to the words, 'Behold I make all things new,' she paused, for her firm voice was trembling sadly.

'Sisters,' said she, closing the book gently, 'we shall be young once more—then.'

'After all,' spoke up Miss Jessie, bravely, though tears glittered in her bright eyes, 'it is not so very terrible to be old—when it's only for a little while, and we were young once, we have that to remember. As she said, we have had our day of youth, and though our hairs may be gray and our eyes dim still our hearts are young, and we know that though "man looketh on the outward appearance, God looketh on the heart."

'You are right, sister,' said Miss Mattie, with a brighter face. 'It is the body that is growing old, and we can't blame the young