

"AN OLD NUISANCE."

Mind I quote these three words. They are none of mine. Only, thinking over three or four appropriate titles, I chose the one I use as being the oddest; and I always had a fancy for odd things. And now for my story.

On what my aunt (by marriage) and her family founded their claims to aristocracy I never could discover. My uncle had been a merchant, it is true, and one of considerable prominence in his day, I have been told, and so had been his father before him, and his father's father before that. That his business in his most prosperous time was intimately connected with China is impressed upon my mind (I became an inmate of his house when I was about six years of age, in consequence of the death of both my parents within a week of each other, leaving me with no means of support, and no other relative) by the fact that every first of June saw bright new matting laid on our floors, to remain there until cold weather came again, and that our mantels and what-nots were decorated with many pretty, dainty little porcelain cups, thin as eggshells—rarities in those days, but in these plenty and cheap enough.

Now, according to what I have learned on the subject, real Simon Pure aristocrats look down upon trade even on the grandest scale, and never have anything to do with it further than once in a while marrying one of its sons or daughters who have come into possession of millions enough to offset the honor.

However, our family (I venture to include myself, none of my cousins being within hearing) assumed all the airs of the old country.

Eleanor, our second, wore a look of deep indignation for several days after a manly, clever, good-looking fellow, the brother of one of her old schoolmates, with a comfortable income, but who was junior partner of a firm keeping a retail store on Sixth Avenue, proposed for her hand.

"The presumption of the man!" she exclaimed, raising her arched eyebrows in astonishment, and curling her full red upper lip in scorn: "to imagine for a moment that because I honored him with my company to the opera two or three times, I would marry him! If his business had been wholesale, it would have been bad enough; fancy a person who sells pins and needles by the paper, and lace by the yard! Never! I would sooner die first."

Minerva, our fourth, was equally horror-stricken at the effrontery of a young book-keeper whom her brother Laurence had introduced into the family circle—a rare thing for one of her brothers to do, for, like all other men, as far as my limited experience goes, they scarcely ever thought their companions to be good enough to be the companions of their sisters—when he ventured to express his admiration for her. The young man soon after succeeded to a very handsome property, and became a great swell—"a perfect too-too," as I believe the fashionable way of expressing it now is—a kind of being after Minerva's own heart; but she was never invited to ride behind his fast horses, and what was much worse, never again asked to take the head of his table.

And in like manner the graceful and enthusiastic professor of music, the stout good-natured proprietor of the extensive iron-works ("wholesale and retail") on the next block, the young artist, who has risen to wealth and fame, and sundry others, all falling short of the aristocratic standard set up by our family, were snubbed by my lady cousins, aided by their brothers, and not wholly unassisted by their mother. I never had, at the time this story commences, being then in my eighteenth year, a chance to snub any one; for lacking the personal attractions of my relatives, as well as their "high-toned" natures—truth to tell, having decidedly democratic tendencies—I was kept in the background of all occasions.

Let it be remarked in passing that Eleanor eventually married, when rather an old girl, a widower in the milk business—very wholesale, however—the father of four children. At the same time Minerva, a few years younger, decided to become the wife of an elderly bachelor, something or other in a shoe manufactory. But they held their heads as high as ever, and declared they had sacrificed themselves for the family, uncle having failed for the second time—through no fault of his own, dear old man—a few months before the double wedding.

That their "sacrifice" was for the good of the family I don't deny; but there still were left at home to be taken care of after their departure three old maids, a young one, and two helpless young men, who having been brought up to do nothing, did it to perfection.

After the failure, uncle got a situation as superintendent of one of the many departments in the large establishment of the gentleman who sold "pins and needles by the paper, and lace by the yard" (he was now head of the firm, and had a pretty, lady-like wife and two pretty children), and we dismissed one of our servants, and moved into a much smaller house.

But in spite of all our efforts at economy our income proved vastly inadequate to our expenses, and this was the cause of so much bewailing and bemoaning that our house seemed to be bereft of all gladness and sunshine. And one evening, after Ethel, our youngest daughter, had burst into tears because aunt had declared it would be impossible to have ice-cream, meringues, wine jellies, and similar dainties every day for dessert, for the two sufficient reasons that we couldn't afford them and our present cook couldn't make them, I ventured to suggest to the weeping damsel that if she found life positively unbearable without the above-mentioned luxuries (all the Egberts, by-the-by, were extravagantly fond of good things to eat), she might knit and crochet some of the worsted articles she was in the habit of making so artistically for herself, and sell them to—Mr. Lee, uncle's employer, I was about to say, when I was interrupted by a shrill shriek.

"Work for a store!" she cried. "I'd starve first."

"You wretched girl!" added my aunt. "How dare you even think of such a thing? Ethel, my darling, calm yourself."

"It is not enough that strangers should presume upon our poverty," joined in Cleante, also frowning upon me, "but one bound to us by ties of blood, though it must be confessed more alien than many a stranger would be, must advance ideas that shock and wound us. Imagine!—turning to her brother Roland, who lay on the only lounge in the room, complacently regarding himself in the mirror on the opposite wall—that impertinent Mrs. Bradshaw coming here this morning, with the air of doing a kindness, too, to offer me a position in her academy!"

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Roland, springing to his feet—and the cause must be a mighty one that brings Roland to his feet. "One of my sisters a teacher! Great heavens!" and he went stamping about the room in the new suit of clothes aunt had just paid for by parting with her handsome pearl ring.

"Whatever is done, we can do nothing," sobbed Ethel.

"Of course not," replied Roland, grandly; "the women of our family never work."

I thought to myself, "Nor the men neither, except poor old uncle, who is fagging at a desk from morning until night."

"But our income must be increased," said Alethea, looking up from her novel, and joining in the conversation for the first time. Alethea was our eldest, and still wore her hair in the fashion of her youth, a loose curl dangling over each cheek-bone, being fully persuaded that no other fashion was half so graceful or becoming.

"Discharge the chamber-maid," proposed Ethel, "and let Dorothea (I am Dorothea) do her work. It is about all she is fit for. She never had a bit of fine feeling or style about her."

"No, she never had; she always would bite her bread," sighed my aunt, "and she has seemed sadly out of place among my children. She comes of a working race, and her ideas and tastes all smack of trade—trade—trade." I discovered in after years that my aunt's grandmother on the maternal side made a fortune out of tobacco.

"But discharging the chamber-maid won't help very much," said Alethea.

"It will not," agreed Roland. "What is saved thereby will no more than find me in the little extras no society man can do without."

"Dear! dear!" aunt took up the burden again, "could I have foreseen that your father would have come down in this way, I never would have married him. I really don't know what is to be done, unless we emigrate to some country place where we are unknown, and where it don't matter how we live."

"The country!" screamed her children in chorus. "But death at once."

I can't imagine where I got the courage to do so after my late sharp rebuffs, but at this moment I blurted out something that had been in my mind for several weeks: "Why could not Alethea and Ethel room together, and Alethea's room, which is the pleasantest in the house, be let to a lodger—one who would—"

But here I paused abruptly. Alethea had fainted in the arms of my aunt, who, glancing at me over the top of her eldest daughter's head, commanded me in her deepest tone (aunt has rather a bass voice) to "leave the room—instantly."

But in a short time, during which things had been getting worse and worse, and we had been reduced to rice puddings for dessert on weekdays and apple tarts on Sundays, I was allowed to prepare an advertisement for the morning's paper in which was offered to "an elderly gentleman, who must have excellent references, a fine room in the house of a family of refinement, who had never before taken a lodger, for the privilege of occupying which he would be expected to pay a liberal equivalent."

I disapproved highly of the wording of this call for help, but my aunt and cousins insisted upon its being couched in these very terms; and so I was com-

pelled to yield, inwardly convinced that it would bring no reply.

But it did. The very afternoon of the morning it appeared, a carriage with a trunk strapped on behind drove up to our door. An old gentleman got out, hobbled up our steps, and rang our door-bell.

"You must see him, Dorothea," said my aunt, leaving the parlor, followed by a train of her children. "It is your affair altogether. I will have nothing to do with it."

"We none of us will have anything to do with it," chimed in my cousins. "We were not born with the souls of lodging-house keepers;" and away they sailed as I opened the door to the second—a little louder than the first—ring of the caller. He was a short, slightly formed old gentleman, with big bright black eyes, bushy white eyebrows, and a long white mustache and beard.

"You have a room to let?" he asked.

"I have," I answered, ushering him into the parlor, where he glanced keenly around, and then as keenly into my face, while he announced in a decisive tone: "I have come to take it. My luggage is at the door. Be so kind as to tell me where to direct the man to carry it."

"But"—I began, in a hesitating way, utterly confused by the stranger's brusque, not to say high-handed, manner.

"But me no buts," quoted the old gentleman. "I am Amos Griffin, lately from England, where I have been living for the last twenty years. Since I landed in New York, a month ago to-day, I have been boarding at the St. Nicholas. But where's your mother?"

I hastened to assure him that I was empowered to negotiate with him.

"Ah, indeed! Well, then, I'll go on, though it strikes me that you are rather young for the business. You have never taken a lodger before. I am glad of it, for reasons which it is not necessary to explain. You want a liberal equivalent for your fine room; I am prepared to give it. That leaves only one thing to be arranged. I should like my breakfast at eight precisely every morning."

"But we did not propose to give breakfast."

"I know you didn't; but I'll give you another liberal equivalent for it. You can't be very well off, or you wouldn't take a lodger; and the more liberal equivalents you can get from him, the better. Will you be kind enough to show me to my room?"

"Yes, sir," I replied, meekly, completely succumbing to the big black eyes, and strong will-power of the frail-looking old man, and totally forgetting to ask for the "references" insisted upon in the advertisement. Whereupon he stepped to the front door, and beckoned to the man outside, who, taking the trunk upon his back, followed him, as he followed me, to the second story front room.

"Ah," said our lodger, as he entered it, "this is not bad—not at all bad."

And it wasn't. As I have said before, it was the pleasantest room in the house, and I had arranged it as prettily as I could with the means at my command. Fortunately these included a number of nice engravings and vases, and a capacious bamboo chair with a crimson cushion, and footstool of like color. And the fragrance of the honeysuckles that stole in at the window from the balcony, and the two or three sunbeams that had found their way through the half-closed blinds, and danced in triumph on the wall, and the half-dozen gaily bound books (mine) on the mantel, and the ivy growing from a red pot on the bracket in one corner, all combined to make the room a pleasant place indeed.

Mr. Griffin had been our lodger exactly two years, during which I had prepared and superintended the serving of his breakfasts, and taken entire charge of his room, "as well as though I had been brought up to that sort of thing," as my cousin Cleante remarked, and the rest of the family, with the exception of uncle, who became quite friendly with him, had only met him some dozen times—at which times they assumed their most dignified dignity—when he was taken sick.

"It's an old complaint, which will carry me off some time," said he to me; "but I hope not this time. Anyhow, Little Honesty" (a name he had given me from the first—I hope I deserved it), "live or die, I intend to remain here. Nowhere else could I be as comfortable. You must engage an extra servant, and you and she together must nurse me. I should certainly die of a professional. By-the-by, who is your family physician?"

I told him.

"If I am not better, send for him to-morrow. I am going out now—only a few steps," meeting my look of surprise. "I want to see my lawyer, and I shan't take to my bed for several days yet."

That afternoon, taking care not to repeat the old gentleman's exact words but putting his remarks in the form of a request to be allowed to remain, I stated the case to the family.

"Going to be ill?" exclaimed Alethea. "Dear me! how disagreeable!"

"I'm sure I don't want him to stay;

he might die here," said my aunt, who had the utmost horror of death.

"He's an old nuisance, anyhow," proclaimed Ethel, "and always has been, and I blush that any relative of mine should have degraded herself so far as to become his servant-maid."

Here I will mention that my cousin Roland, a month or so before this, had married a young lady with a large fortune, and out of this fortune he generously proposed to make the family a liberal yearly allowance, besides which came many gifts from the married sisters whose husbands had prospered, and, and thereupon been obliged by their wives to share their prosperity with us, that we might live at least, as Minerva expressed it, "with elegant economy." And so we were not entirely dependent upon our lodger for desserts and several other things.

But to go back. "He is not an old nuisance," said I indignantly. "He is a kind-hearted old man, and I'm very fond of him."

"Good gracious!"

"Yes, Miss Ethel, I went on, I repeat it, I am very fond of him. And if my aunt will allow me—I am sure my uncle will—I will take all the extra care resulting from his sickness upon myself, and no one shall be annoyed in the least. After living beneath our roof for two years, and contributing so bountifully to our comforts—you needn't glare at me, Cleante; he has, for I am quite certain no one else would have paid us so liberally—it would be the basest ingratitude, not to say cruelty, to send him among strangers now that most needs care and kindness."

"Are you quite through, Miss Reynolds?" asked my aunt, sarcastically. "I had no idea you were so eloquent, never having heard you preach before. But of one thing I am determined: you shall not call in our doctor to your patient. He is a perfect aristocrat, and has no idea we keep a lodger, and I do not wish him to know it."

"There's a young saw-bones a few doors below," drawled my youngest gentleman cousin, who resented my waiting upon any one but himself; "he'll do for your fine old—nuisance."

That very evening Mr. Griffin had a bad turn, and I sent for the "young saw-bones a few doors below" in great haste. He proved to be a doctor Rice, a frank-looking, brown-haired, gray-eyed, broad-browed young man, with gentle voice quick, light step. And the old gentleman, taking a great fancy to him, decided on retaining him—a decision that relieved me greatly, bearing in mind as I did my aunt's embargo in regard to our family physician.

And from that time for three months, although very seldom confined to his bed, our lodger never had a well day. At the end of the three months, however, he began to mend slowly, and at the end of two more was on his feet again. And then he told me he had made up his mind to return to England. "I am sorry, very sorry, to part with you," I replied. "But it is right that you should go."

"Well said, Little Honesty. And now let's begin to pack," said he.

Dr. Rice and I went with the old gentleman to the steamer that was to carry him away, and waved a last farewell to him—in the midst of a crowd also waving last farewells—from the pier, as the vessel slowly moved out into the stream; and then we returned to our respective homes with his final good-by.

Mine I read in the privacy of my own room at first; and when I had partly recovered from my astonishment and delight, I flew down stairs, called the family together, and read it to them. It was as follows:

"DEAR LITTLE HONESTY.—Had I died which I didn't, thanks under God to you and Dr. Rice—I should have left each of my dear young friends ten thousand dollars in my will. But having lived, I am going to do a much pleasanter thing—I am going to give them the ten thousand at once. My lawyer will see you both to-morrow."

AMOS GRIFFIN.

"P. S.—I have also left a slight bequest to Miss Ethel Egbert. She will find it on the lower shelf of the closet in the room I occupied when I was her cousin Dorothea's lodger."

Ethel for once forgot her graceful, gliding step. She started hastily for the stairs, but her youngest brother was before her, and she was fain to turn back again as he slid down the baluster, and landed in our midst with something in his arms.

It was a large framed photograph of Amos Griffin, with a card attached bearing these words, "An excellent picture of 'An Old Nuisance.'"

I married Dr. Rice.

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