

## BETTER THAN GOLD

Better than gold, a cheerful heart  
That hope to others can impart,  
And at reverse can decide  
To travel on the sunny side.  
To some this truth need not be told  
A cheerful heart is better than gold.

Better than gold, a conscience cleared  
From guilty stains—by sin unseared;  
Where'er this treasure doth possess  
Can earthly troubles soon repress.  
And with boldness say, behold,  
A conscience clear is better than gold!

Better than gold of the purest kind,  
Is a healthful state of body and mind;  
If gold were better, and health could buy,  
The rich would live and the poor would die.  
By sages of old—'twas often told  
That health is better by far than gold.

A. MACFIE.

Chatham, Ont.

## AN OLD MAID'S CONFESSION.

By "ISIDORE."

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## PROLOGUE.

I am not an old maid from choice; oh, dear no! Not that I think that an old maid's lot is so very hard. It may have its tribulations, but, on the other hand, it surely has its compensations. It may have lost that which makes up the full sweetness of life, but it still possesses, as in my own case, a measure of joys which has rounded existence with an enduring light.

I wish to tell my readers how I became an old maid. Had I followed inclination I would not have had any story to narrate. Without taking any merit to myself for being over-righteous, I still thank God that I had inward strength to follow duty. In this retrospection of the past, no dim regrets arise in my soul to cloud it. Hopefully and cheerfully, resigning myself to the inevitable, I follow the beacon star of what I considered was right in the days that are no more; hopefully and cheerfully I recount the experience of those days, brightened with the light of that star, in the narrative that I am about to unfold.

## CHAPTER I.

## EARLY RECOLLECTIONS.

At a very early age my sister Flora and I were left orphans, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Dagmar. My sister was four years younger than myself. Among the bright pictures evoked from the shadowy past my sister's image is the brightest of them all. Flora was an airy, winsome, captivating, small-featured little brunette, with laughing, sunny, grey eyes. I—but what need to describe myself?—I was her opposite in form, features, and disposition. I dare say I may seem unlovely now to most people, but there was a time when I had no occasion to be ashamed of my looks. Pardon an old maid's vanity; it has nearly gone. If the little that is left should accidentally disclose itself in these pages, temper, O reader! your smile with kindness, instead of derision. My sister, being my especial charge, was my pet. When my grandmother rebuked her for misconduct I would take her part, and then, nestling in my lap, she would shower on me a wealth of childish affection. Hers was an odd, changeable, capricious, whimsical nature, full of strange impulses, and unaccountable freaks. Of course, these often led her into mischief, and it was my privilege always to excuse and exculpate her. My devotion would not allow her to be spoken harshly to, or blamed, and so I bore the brunt of her misconduct, and coaxed and fondled her to a temporary repentance. How could I let a word of pain alight in the heart of my darling! The past has bequeathed no sweeter gift to me than the thought that in my abiding love for her I could shield her from even a cross word.

My grandmother was an magnificent type of a hardy, austere, unbending old age. Her image arises before me now, as I write, the picture of a tall, grandly-developed woman of sixty-five, rigidly severe in her rules of life, untiringly industrious, unyielding in her high-minded notions of what she considered was right, rigorous as to discipline, staunch as to principles, and yet kind-hearted and thoughtful-minded to us orphans. If her nature lacked anything, it was a certain element of womanly tenderness—that tenderness which comes when it chides, and yields when it wishes to exact, and which yet can make young hearts unfold their love. My sister, never quite understanding, only feared her. I, on the contrary, mingled a certain affection with my respect. The reader, therefore, can comprehend why I was my grandmother's favourite.

My earliest remembrance carries me back to our prim, simple, and yet bright home—a secluded house, situated in its own grounds—a pretty, rustic place, flanked by a little wood, which belonged to it—a house overgrown with woodbine, ivy, and clematis, and the porch of which was covered by roses, intermingled with passion-flowers. There was an old, gaunt oak tree and a few spreading chestnuts at its rear, and in the front an exquisite lawn, skirted in summer time with the gayest and loveliest of flowers. It was a dear, old, quiet place, which had been made ruggedly beautiful and quaintly picturesque with leafy beauty, by the kindly

hand of time; and yet when in after years, in a critical mood, I used to think of my old home, there seemed, so to speak, to be an indefinable air of studious exactness and of a too well ordered regularity about the garden and house, and especially about the inside surroundings of the latter. The eye seemed to long for freer spaces, and a more careless method in the garden walks and in the home adornments. All this seemed due to the precise and fastidious; genius of my grandmother, who ordered and planned everything. The world where she might have lived and moved in ought to have been a place where there were no angles, crooked paths, or irregular turnings—a world where nothing was wrong, and nought could go amiss or contrary to one's hopes. Alas! for us all, such a world does not exist, except in the fairy-land of a poet's dreams. Of course, there was the weird old oak tree, with its wavy, luxuriant leafage spreading before us. When resting on the seat around it, I used to teach Flora her lessons, and watch her playing with her doll; the glinting sun-rays flashing through the mass of foliage, would seem to circle my darling's forehead with a golden halo, or bring out in beautiful relief her joyous face, over which smiles would play as bright and evanescent as the sunbeams themselves. I remember on one occasion Flora, in her fun, compared the great, gnarled, rugged trunk of the tree to grandmother, till I had to check her for her odd fancy. And then my admonishment having brought tears to her eyes, I had to pacify her with a fairy story about a giant tree that never grew old, but always preserved its knotted strength as a boon for good children, imparting its hardihood to them, and afterwards shielding them from the storms of every-day life.

Our childhood and school-days passed tranquilly, with nothing that calls forth special mention to break their calm monotony. When we were very young our grandmother was our instructress; as we grew older we attended a very nice school in the village, kept by the curate's wife. Mrs. Dagmar did not keep much company, consequently we had no opportunity of making any close girlish friendships; and even the few acquaintances we had, did not impress me strongly enough at the time, so as to incline me to recall them now, excepting a certain person whom I shall mention presently. Nothing of any moment occurred to ruffle the tranquillity of our childhood and girlhood. We grew and thrived apace. My calm, self-reliant nature had its chief happiness in the self-satisfaction that my sister clung to me for protecting love, and that I could find often in her dreamy, fanciful thoughts a solace from my own more dignified and logical ones. And then I never tired of my grandmother's conversation, which entirely lacked the wearying garrulity of old age, and, instead, teemed with that rare wisdom emanating from a studious knowledge of books, and more especially of that more wonderful book of the world, wherein she had lived so long.

At last a change came upon the happy monotony of our existences, and which to a certain extent altered their tenor.

## CHAPTER II.

## A LETTER.

I had often heard my grandmother speak of Mrs. Dufresne, one of her old schoolmates, with whom I knew she had frequently corresponded.

One summer afternoon, as we were seated under the oak tree, the postman handed a letter to Mrs. Dagmar. I remember it bore the French postmark, and as she scanned its contents I noticed an unusual expression of surprise and pleasure on her face. "Such news, girls," said the old lady, growing quite animated as she spoke.

"Something very good has happened, has it not? You do look so pleased," said Flora, whose joyous eagerness seemed also to infect my demure self.

"My old school-fellow at last is coming to England; and what is better still," said my grandmother, "she intends for a while to stop with us."

"That is pleasant news. Only fancy, Agnes, actually a visitor at Oak Tree House!"

"I can hardly believe it," again broke in Flora, jumping up from her low seat, and kissing me, as if she wished a confirmation of her welcome intelligence in my responsive kiss.

"But this is not all," continued the old lady, "Mrs. Dufresne is not coming alone. She intends to bring her son Frank with her, so that we shall have two visitors at Oak Tree House."

"Better still," said Flora, "the more the merrier."

"And now, girls," continued Mrs. Dagmar, "I mean to tell you all about this dear old friend of mine, so please pay attention."

Of course I was just as delighted as Flora at the news, and felt an interest already in the expected guests; but it was not my nature to betray either surprise or satisfaction, and yet, how well I remember that sunny afternoon, under our memorable tree, with its interlacing foliage just stirred by the faint, warm wind; with what pleasurable eagerness I listened to my grandmother's recital!

"Many years ago, long before you were born, my dears," commenced the old lady, "Mrs. Dufresne and myself were girls together at the same school. I need not tell you how we became fast and intimate friends. The growth of affection between school-girls is not always permanent, but in this case it was. I liked her chiefly because she was not a favourite with the

rest of the school. Whether there was anything in her manner to justify this dislike, I cannot say; anyhow, I never discovered it. To me she was the impersonation of all that was excellent in a companion and friend, and with me, and with no one else, she shared all her girlish confidences. Well, after leaving school, we separated, as her parents lived at a distance from mine, but we have still corresponded regularly. Being rather an attractive girl, she had many admirers. Her parents kept a good deal of company, amongst whom there were many well-to-do young men, and it is, therefore, not to be wondered at that Fanny Wilmot had a good many eligible offers of marriage. But my friend, who I must say was inclined to be critical, refused them all. At last I heard that a French gentleman, of the name of Dufresne, had made her an offer, but that Fanny's parents had discountenanced the match, as it seemed he had no particular calling in life, and had not the means to maintain a wife comfortably. I always had given Fanny credit for more than a share of common-sense—need I tell you, girls, that her common-sense forsook her entirely when, despite her parents' warnings, and my counsel, she privately engaged herself to this Frenchman. I paid her a visit about this time, and happening to meet her suitor, I frankly told her I did not like him. Not that his lack of wealth prejudiced him in my eyes—not at all—but there was nothing about him calculated to make his way in life. He was a creature of desultory aims, of impossible plans, and erratic purposes. Granted that he had a pleasing exterior, light blue eyes, and curly, auburn hair—I, for one, never liked his inane smile and simpering talk. But my influence with Fanny stood in this instance for nought, and, as usual, her parents' opposition only strengthened her determination. It was the old story over again—Fanny made the fatal mistake of marrying without any one's consent—she was of age, and accordingly did as she liked. One fine day she eloped with this simpering good-for-nothing, to whom she had pledged her faith. They went on the Continent, and for a time I did not hear from my friend; then her letters, written at irregular intervals, became scant, careless, and vague. After a while, a note with a black border startled me with the intelligence of her husband's death. I never knew, and I never shall know, the extent of her sufferings, privations, and trials. Not only poverty and its attendant woes haunted her married life, but her husband proved himself a gambler and drunkard as well. I do not think she would have ever informed me again of her whereabouts, had not a relation of her husband pitied her penniless position, and left her enough to live on, so that she could apprise me of this only gleam of sunshine upon her sorrowing widowhood. Too proud to receive help from me, or any one else, I was so glad she was placed beyond the reach of poverty. Since the time I speak of she has been abroad, chiefly for the sake of Frank's education; and so, at last, after many, many years, I have persuaded them to pay me a visit. I wonder how she is, and how she looks!"

After this recital, my grandmother wiped her spectacles, and we girls talked about the expected visitors the rest of the day, framing all sorts of mental pictures of them, wondering how they would look, whether the two old ladies would be demonstratively affectionate, and above all—as was only natural—what sort of young man Frank Dufresne would prove himself to be.

In our old-fashioned house there were two bedrooms at the rear, especially reserved for visitors. These opened out on a verandah, from which could be discerned the pleasant wood in the distance, and the weird old oak tree, whose wide-spreading, far-reaching branches seemed as if they would fain lovingly grasp the balcony railings. These apartments, of course, were to be apportioned to our guests. How well I can remember the trouble we took to renovate and make them bright! Old coverings were removed, the furniture was polished; ornaments, fetched from all sorts of imaginable nooks about the house, were placed on the mantelpieces, the daintiest toilet-covers and the whitest of snowy-white hangings and coverlets suddenly made their appearance; and we girls put the final touches to it all, by placing everywhere some of the choicest flowers that our garden could produce.

How well I remember the delight of expectancy that took possession of us at that time! We could not set about our allotted tasks with our usual ease; we did not move about the house as was our wont. A sense of coming change over our monotonous days set our hearts fluttering, until, in the vague eagerness of expectancy, we almost grew uneasy and impatient.

The long-expected day at last arrived. How well I remember what a stately picture my grandmother made as she walked into the room and seated herself by the window, attired in a black satin dress, brocaded with large flowers, with her deep lace collar fastened by an antique emerald and diamond brooch—an heirloom of the family, and only worn on state occasions—wearing her white lace cap, through which peeped the folds of her snowy hair! And how charming Flora looked, dressed in pure white, with her waving mass of jet curls, and wondering eyes that always seemed to sparkle with fun or mischief! How vividly I can remember that summer's afternoon, the air full of warmth, our hearts full of gladness!

I think Flora's quick ears first detected the faint rumble of the distant carriage, and Flora's

sharp eyes first hailed the approach of our visitors. They drove up to the door and alighted, and my grandmother welcomed them with a demonstrative eagerness quite delightful to behold. All her youthful ardour seemed suddenly to come back, as she embraced Mrs. Dufresne, calling her by all the pet names in the vocabulary. "Are you quite certain you have not left the rug in the carriage, and where are my shawls?" said Mrs. Dufresne, whose voice, addressed to Frank, had a plaintive harshness, as if her cares had sharpened it.

Frank having satisfied his mother that the articles in question were safe, Flora and I, who had as yet kept somewhat in the rear, now came forward and were formally introduced to the visitors.

The impression they made on me then, in the hurry of my first introduction, is the impression I have of them now, as I write, after the lapse of many years. In every way mother and son presented a marked contrast, being just as dissimilar as two people of opposite sexes and ages could by any possibility be. Mrs. Dufresne was short in stature, with attenuated features, cold, sharp eyes, and compressed, thin lips. Her glance seemed to have a critical light in it, as if she only surveyed you to find fault; her voice had a querulous dissonance, which gradually subsided into a drawl; while her manner was either unpleasantly fussy or decorously constrained. I felt a sense of antagonism when first I pressed her hand and met her cold stare; I felt that sense now stealing over me, deepened by the years that have sped. Even in the gentler thoughts that sweep over me as I trace these lines, I still cannot overcome the dislike I felt for Mrs. Dufresne.

Through the mists of years the figure of this woman's son arises before me, clad in all its sunny attractiveness, as a perfect contrast to his mother. I cannot describe wherein lay the essence of this attractiveness. To particularise or analyse his appearance is beyond the reach of my woman's pen. What if he had even, regular features, cast in the Grecian mould; the brightest of frank, blue eyes; the high, intellectual forehead; and the most winning smile that ever lit well-shaped lips; and, moreover, that his figure was faultless in its symmetrical proportions? What of this? These characteristics and attributes may belong to thousands of young men whom we pass or meet with in life, and ignore. I am certain that if he had been plain instead of a fine-featured, handsome man, that I still would have at once recognised and felt the charm of his winning presence. Striving to analyse this something now, in the silent calm of my old age, when my soul has freed itself from the wild hopes and uneasy desires that once possessed it, I find that Frank Dufresne's wonderful attractiveness must have consisted in the radiance of a happy, hopeful, kindly spirit, that saw the best and made the best of everybody and everything, and in the quick-witted intelligence of a mind brightened with the refining influence of good books and clever companionship. After our first introduction we separated, and met again over the tea-table. Of course, Frank was the presiding genius there; he amused us all with an account of his journeying, remembering everything of interest, and with the keenest possible sense of the ludicrous, narrating each droll adventure, with all the humorous vivacity that characterised him. We all abandoned ourselves to the joyful influence of that mirth-abiding hour. My grandmother lost her impressive sedateness, and Flora's always sunny face was re-animated with a still brighter radiance. Mrs. Dufresne kept out of sight during the evening. Wrapped in a very highly-coloured Indian shawl, which did not at all match her complexion, she dived complacently in a corner of the room. I think I was more animated than Flora that evening. But without being meretriciously disposed like her, my nature was more evenly genial. My sister was subject to sudden transitions of moods; without being ever petulant, she was often sad.

On this eventful night, whilst I was doing my very best to play one of Mendelssohn's tenderest "songs without words" to our listening guests, my darling interrupted me, and her dear face, as she did so, wore a particularly grave expression. "Don't you think our friends are tired, and would like to retire?" said she.

"I am not at all fatigued," answered Frank; "but I see you are accustomed to retire early. Come, mother, let us bid our friends good-night."

Before I had time to reply, Mrs. Dufresne, suddenly trying to arouse herself, went towards where my grandmother was sitting, and while her son was heartily shaking us by the hand, and amid a profusion of "good-nights" and "pleasant dreams," uttered in a sort of chorus by everybody present, my grandmother slowly escorted our guests to their rooms. Soon afterwards, my sister and I ascended the stairs to our own; and so this eventful, long-looked-for day—a day which was to mark a change in our lives—like everything hoped for on earth—came to its irrevocable end.

(To be continued.)

## Maine News.

Hop Bitters, which are advertised in our columns, are a sure cure for ague, biliousness and kidney complaints. Those who use them say they cannot be too highly recommended. Those afflicted should give them a fair trial, and will become thereby enthusiastic in the praise of their curative qualities.—Portland Ad.