

CHOICE LITERATURE.

TWO OLD LOVERS.

Leyden was emphatically a village of cottages, and each of them built after one of two patterns; either the front door was on the right side, in the corner of a little piazza extending a third of the length of the house, with the main roof jutting over it, or the piazza stretched across the front, and the door was in the centre.

The cottages were uniformly painted white, and had blind sofa bright spring green colour. There was a little flower garden in front of each; the beds were laid out artistically in triangles, hearts, and rounds, edged with box; boys'-love, sweet-williams, and pinks were the fashionable and prevailing flowers.

There was a general air of cheerful though humble prosperity about the place, which it owed, and indeed its very existence also, to the three old weather-beaten boot and shoe factories which arose stanchly and importantly in the very midst of the natty little white cottages.

Years before, when one Hiram Strong put up his three factories for the manufacture of the rough shoe which the working-man of America wears, he hardly thought he was also gaining for himself the honour of founding Leyden. He chose the site for his buildings mainly because they would be easily accessible to the railway which stretched to the city, sixty miles distant. At first the workmen came on the cars from the neighbouring towns, but after a while they became tired of that, and one after another built for himself a cottage, and established his family and his household belongings near the scene of his daily labours. So gradually Leyden grew. A built his cottage like C, and B built his like D. They painted them white, and hung the green blinds, and laid out their flower beds in front and their vegetable beds at the back. By-and-by came a church and a store and a post-office to pass, and Leyden was a full-fledged town.

That was a long time ago. The shoe factories had long passed out of the hands of Hiram Strong's heirs; he himself was only a memory on the earth. The business was not quite as wide awake and vigorous as when in its first youth; it droned a little now; there was not quite so much bustle and hurry as formerly. The factories were never lighted up of an evening on account of overwork, and the workmen found plenty of time for pleasant and salutary gossip over their cutting and pegging. But this did not detract in the least from the general cheerfulness and prosperity of Leyden. The inhabitants still had all the work they needed to supply the means necessary for their small comforts, and they were contented. They too had begun to drone a little like the factories. "As slow as Leyden," was the saying amongst the faster-going towns adjoining theirs. Every morning at seven the old men, young men, and boys in their calico shirt sleeves, their faces a little pale—perhaps from their indoor life—filed unquestioningly out of the back doors of the white cottages, treading still deeper the well-worn foot-paths stretching around the sides of the houses, and entered the factories. They were great ugly wooden buildings, with wings which they had grown in their youth jutting clumsily from their lumbering shoulders. Their outer walls were black and grimy, streaked and splashed and patched with red paint in every variety of shade, accordingly as the original hue was tempered with smoke or the beatings of the storms of many years.

The men worked peacefully and evenly in the shoe shops all day, and the women staid at home and kept the little white cottages tidy, cooked the meals, and washed the cloths, and did the sewing. For recreation the men sat on the piazza in front of Baker's store of an evening, and gossiped or discussed politics; and the women talked over their neighbours' fences, or took their sewing into their neighbours' of an afternoon.

People died in Leyden as elsewhere, and here and there was a little white cottage whose narrow foot-path leading round to its back door its master would never tread again.

In one of these lived Widow Martha Brewster and her daughter Maria. Their cottage was one of those which had its piazza across the front. Every summer they trained morning-glories over it, and planted their little garden with the flower seeds popular in Leyden. There was not a cottage in the whole place whose surroundings were neater and gayer than theirs, for all that they were only two women, and two old women at that; for Widow Martha Brewster was in the neighbourhood of eighty, and her daughter Maria Brewster, nearly sixty. The two had lived alone since Jacob Brewster died and stopped going to the factory, some fifteen years ago. He had left them this particular white cottage, and a snug little sum in the savings bank besides, for the whole Brewster family had worked and economized all their long lives. The women had corded boots at home, while the man had worked in the shop, and never spent a cent without thinking of it over night.

Leyden folks all thought that David Emmons would marry Maria Brewster when her father died. "David can rent his house, and go to live with Maria and her mother," said they, with an affectionate readiness to arrange matters for them. But he did not. Every Sunday night, at eight o'clock punctually, the form of David Emmons, arrayed in his best cloths, with his stiff white dickey, and a nose-peg in his button-hole, was seen to advance up the road toward Maria Brewster's, as he had been seen to advance every Sunday night for the last twenty-five years' but that was all. He manifested not the slightest intention of carrying out people's judicious plans for his welfare and Maria's.

She did not seem to pine with hope deferred; people could not honestly think, there was any occasion to pity her for her lover's tardiness. A cheerier woman never lived. She was literally bubbling over with jollity. Round-faced and blackeyed, with a funny little bounce on her whole body when she walked, she was the merry feature of the whole place.

Her mother was now too feeble, but Maria still corded boots for the factories as of old. David Emmons, who was quite sixty, worked in them, as he had from his youth. He

was a slender, mild-faced old man, with a fringe of gray, yellow beard around his chin; his head was quite bald. Years ago he had been handsome, they said, but somehow people had always laughed at him a little, although they all liked him. "The slowest of all the slow Leydenites," outsiders called him, and even the "slow Leydenites" poked fun at this exaggeration of themselves. It was an old and well-worn remark that it took David Emmons an hour to go courting, and that he was always obliged to leave his own home at seven in order to reach Maria's at eight, and there was a standing joke that the meeting-house passed him one morning on his way to the shop.

David heard the chaffing of course: there is very little delicacy in matters of this kind among country people: but he took it all in good part. He would laugh at himself with the rest, but there was something touching in his deprecatory way of saying sometimes, "Well, I don't know how 'tis, but it don't seem to be in my natur' to do any other way. I suppose I was born without the faculty of gittin' along quick in this world. You'll have to git behind an' push me a leetle, I reckon."

He owned his little cottage, which was one of the kind which had the piazza on the right side. He lived entirely alone. There was a half-acre or so of land beside his house, which he used for a vegetable garden. After and before shop hours, in the dewy evenings and mornings, he dug and weeded assiduously between the green ranks of corn and beans. If David Emmons was slow, his vegetables were not. None of the gardens in Leyden surpassed his in luxuriant growth. His corn tasselled out and his potato patch was white with blossoms as soon as anybody's.

He was almost a vegetarian in his diet; the products of his garden spot were his staple articles of food. Early in the morning would the gentle old bachelor set his pot of green things boiling, and dine gratefully at noon, like mild Robert Herrick, on pulse and herbs. His garden supplied also his sweetheart and her mother with all the vegetables they could use. Many times in the course of a week could David have been seen slowly moving toward the Brewster cottage with a basket on his arm, well stocked with the materials for an innocent and delicious repast.

But Maria was not to be outdone by her old lover in kindly deeds. Not a Saturday but a goodly share of her weekly baking was deposited, neatly covered with a white crash towel, on David's little kitchen table. The surreptitious air with which the back-door key was taken from its hiding-place (which she well knew) under the kitchen blinds the door unlocked and entered, and the good things deposited, was charming, although highly ineffectual. "There goes Maria with David's baking," said the women, peering out of their windows as she bounced, rather more gently and cautiously than usual, down the street. And David himself knew well the ministering angel to whom these benefits were due when he lifted the towel and discovered with tearful eyes the brown loaves and flaky pies—the proofs of his Maria's love and culinary skill.

Amongst the younger and more irreverent portions of the community there was considerable speculation as to the mode of courtship of these old lovers of twenty-five years' standing. Was there ever a kiss, a tender clasp of the hand, those usual expressions of affection between sweethearts?

Some of the more daring spirits had even gone so far as to commit the manifest impropriety of peeping in Maria's parlour windows; but they had only seen David sitting quiet and prim on the slippery horse-hair sofa, and Maria by the table, rocking slowly in her little cane-seated rocker. Did Maria ever leave her rocker and sit on that slippery horse-hair sofa by David's side? They never knew; but she never did. There was something laughable, and at the same time rather pathetic, about Maria and David's courtship. All the outward appurtenances of "keeping company" were as rigidly observed as they had been twenty-five years ago, when David Emmons first cast his mild blue eyes shyly and lovingly on red-cheeked, quick-spoken Maria Brewster. Every Sunday evening, in the winter, there was a fine kindled in the parlour, the parlour-lamp was lit at dusk all the year round, and Maria's mother retired early, that the young people might "sit up." The "sitting up" was no very formidable affair now, whatever it might have been in the first stages of the courtship. The need of sleep over-balanced sentiment in those old lovers, and by ten o'clock at the latest Maria's lamp was out, and David had wended his solitary way to his own home.

Leyden people had a great curiosity to know if David had ever actually popped the question to Maria, or if his natural slowness was at fault in this as in other things. Their curiosity had been long exercised in vain, but Widow Brewster, as she waxed older, grew loquacious, and one day told a neighbour, who had dropped in in her daughter's absence, that "David had never reely come to the p'int. She supposed he would some time; for her part, she thought he had better; but then, after all, she knowed Maria didn't care, and maybe 'twas jest as well as 'twas, only sometimes she was afeard she should never live to see the weddin', if they wasn't spry." Then there had been hints concerning a certain pearl-coloured silk which Maria, having a good chance to get at a bargain, had purchased some twenty years ago, when she thought, from sundry remarks, that David was coming to the point; and it was further intimated that the silk had been privately made up ten years since, when Maria had again surmised that the point was about being reached. The neighbour went home in a state of great delight, having by skilful manoeuvring actually obtained a glimpse of the pearl-coloured silk.

It was perfectly true that Maria did not lay David's tardiness in putting the important question very much to heart. She was too cheerful, too busy, and too much interested in her daily duties to fret much about anything. There was never at any time much of the sentimental element in her composition, and her feeling for David was eminently practical in its nature. She, although the woman, had the stronger character of the two, and there was something rather mother-like than lover-like in her affection for him. It was through the protecting care which chiefly characterized her love that the only pain to her came from their long courtship and postponement of marriage. It was true that, years ago, when

David had led her to think, from certain hesitating words spoken at parting one Sunday night, that he would certainly ask the momentous question soon, her heart had gone into a happy flutter. She had bought the pearl-coloured silk then.

Years after, her heart had fluttered again, but a little less wildly this time. David almost asked her another Sunday night. Then she had made up the pearl-coloured silk. She used to go and look at it fondly and admiringly from time to time; once in a while she would try it on and survey herself in the glass, and imagine herself David's bride—a faded bride, but a happy and a beloved one.

She looked at the dress occasionally now, but a little sadly, as the conviction was forcing itself upon her more and more that she should never wear it. But the sadness was always more for David's sake than her own. She saw him growing an old man, and the lonely uncared-for life that he led filled her heart with tender pity and sorrow for him. She did not confine her kind offices to the Saturday baking. Every week his little house was tidied and set to rights, and his mending looked after.

Once, on a Sunday night, when she spied a rip in his coat that had grown long from the want of womanly fingers constantly at hand, she had a good cry after he had left and gone into her room. There was something more pitiful to her, something that touched her heart more deeply, in that rip in her lover's Sunday coat than in all her long years of waiting.

As the years went on it was sometimes with a sad heart that Maria stood and watched the poor lonely old figure moving slower than ever down the street to his lonely home; but the heart was sad for him always, and never for herself. She used to wonder at him a little sometimes, though always with the most loyal tenderness, that he should choose to lead the solitary, cheerless life that he did, to go back to his dark, voiceless home, when he might be so sheltered and cared for in his old age. She firmly believed that it was only owing to her lover's incorrigible slowness, in this as in everything else. She never doubted for an instant that he loved her. Some women might have tried hastening matters a little themselves, but Maria, with the delicacy which is sometimes more inherent in a steady, practical nature like hers than in a more ardent one, would have lost her self-respect forever if she had done such a thing.

So she lived cheerfully along, corded her boots, though her fingers were getting stiff, humoured her mother, who was getting feebler and more childish every year, and did the best she could for her poor foolish old lover.

When David was seventy, and she sixty-eight, she gave away the pearl-coloured silk to a cousin's daughter who was going to be married. The girl was young and pretty and happy, but she was poor, and the silk would make over into a grander wedding dress for her than she could hope to obtain in any other way.

Poor old Maria smoothed the lustrous folds fondly with her withered hands before sending it away, and cried a little, with a patient pity for David and herself. But when a tear splashed directly on to the shining surface of the silk, she stopped crying at once, and her sorrowful expression changed into one of careful scrutiny as she wiped the salt drop away with her handkerchief, and held the dress up to the light to be sure that it was not spotted. A practical nature like Maria's is sometimes a great boon to its possessor. It is doubtful if anything else can dry a tear as quickly.

Somehow Maria always felt a little differently toward David after she had given away her wedding dress. There had always been a little tinge of consciousness in her manner toward him, a little reserve and caution before people. But after the wedding dress had gone, all question of marriage had disappeared so entirely from her mind that the delicate considerations born of it vanished. She was uncommonly hale and hearty for a woman of her age; there was apparently much more than two years' difference between her and her lover. It was not only the Saturday's bread and pie that she carried now and deposited on David's little kitchen table, but openly and boldly, not caring who should see her, many a warm dinner. Every day, after her own housework was done, David's house was set to rights. He should have all the comforts he needed in his last years, she determined. That they were his last years was evident. He coughed, and now walked so slowly from feebleness and weakness that it was a matter of doubt to observers whether he could reach Maria Brewster's before Monday evening.

One Sunday night he staid a little longer than usual—the clock struck ten before he started. Then he rose, and said, as he had done every Sunday evening for so many years, "Well, Maria, I guess it's about time for me to be goin'."

She helped him on with his coat, and tied on his tippet. Contrary to his usual habit, he stood in the door and hesitated a minute: there seemed to be something he wanted to say.

"Maria."

"Well, David?"

"I'm gittin' to be an old man, you know, an' I've allus been slow-goin': I couldn't seem to help it. There has been a good many things I haven't got around to." The old cracked voice quavered painfully.

"Yes, I know, David, all about it; you couldn't help it. I wouldn't worry a bit about it if I were you."

"You don't lay up anything agin me, Maria?"

"No, David."

"Good-night, Maria."

"Good-night, David. I will fetch you over some boiled dinner to-morrow."

She held the lamp at the door till the patient, tottering old figure was out of sight. She had to wipe the tears from her spectacles in order to see to read her Bible, when she went in.

Next morning she was hurrying up her house-work to go over to David's—somehow she felt a little anxious about him this morning—when there came a loud knock at her door. When she opened it, a boy stood there, panting for breath; he was David's next neighbour's son.

"Mr. Emmons is sick," he said, "an' wants you. I was goin' for milk, when he rapped on the window. Father an'