

Choice Literature.

AN OLD MAID'S SECRET.

Miss Mary Jones was an old maid. What causes had led to that result it boots not here to say, but the fact remains that she was a spinster of the mature age of sixty years. But "mature" was never the right word to apply to Miss Mary. She seemed always immature. From her teens she had been docile, pliant and easily led, and now at sixty she still seemed hardly grown-up. She was still pretty, even dainty, to look at. Her snow-white hair was arranged as dainty as it had been at sixteen, and she blushed as readily now as then.

Miss Mary Jones lived in a dowdy London suburb, with only one servant, older than herself—Betsy Mills. Miss Mary was so report said, the daughter of a sea-captain, and had been "brought up for a lady," but nobody knew much more of her than this. Betsy Mills was close, and Miss Mary was not given to gossip, but as the local parlance went, "kept herself to herself."

The two women lived in one of those ugly little four-roomed, semi-detached "villa residences" which abound in unashamedly suburban, with an uninviting-looking strip of lawn and oyster-shells in front, and an equally unpleasant slug-ridden plot behind. But Miss Mary, who was fond of gardening, had trained a pretty yellow jessamine over the rickety porch and she liked the oyster-shells because "they reminded her of the sea." Betsy Mills, a hard-featured, tall old woman, as lean as a scarecrow, though she was as hard as adamant to everyone else, rarely spoke other than sofly to her mistress. She humoured her fads, respected her weaknesses and never scolded her except when necessary. "Miss Mary," she always called her, with almost a tender inflection in her voice, and hence the neighbours also never spoke of her as anything else than "Miss Mary."

Miss Mary was charitable to a fault. Her house was a very refuge of the destitute. To it flocked all the beggars and impostors in the neighbourhood, sure of relief. No tale was too feeble, no story too disjoined to impose upon this tender-hearted old lady. Betsy, who saw through everything, and who was made of material as stern as Miss Mary's was soft regarded herself as a shield interposed by heaven to protect her mistress, who would otherwise long ago have flung her whole substance to a crowd of greedy beggars. But even she could not prevent Miss Mary's continual raids upon the scanty larder.

"Ye'd leave nothing at all for yerself," she grumbled, "if I didn't look after yer like a mother, and be forever at yer back."

Miss Mary paid no attention to these gibes. As long as she had anything in her larder she would share it, let Betsy say what she would; and Betsy loved her too well to seriously remonstrate. So the crowd of beggars kept on coming till hardly a day passed without seeing some recipient of Miss Mary's bounty.

Sometimes it was a man—Betsy perfectly hated men—an "out of work," tracking in dirty feet all over the place; sometimes an aged female in rusty black, describing herself as "a relative and scion of the late Duke of Wellington," smelling horribly of gin, who would persist in staying through two whole meals, and giving Miss Mary more than enough of her company, scion though she were. Or, as if this were not enough, Miss Mary would occasionally pick up lost children whom she found crying in the streets and bring them alone, to Betsy's indignation and her own confusion; for they would generally sit crying after the manner of lost children, and refuse to eat, until called for by their parents. Through this same charitable officiousness, Miss Mary once found herself in the position of nearly having a parish baby saddled upon her altogether, but this Betsy refused to allow, putting her foot down firmly for once. "She ain't nothing but a baby herself, bless yer, sir," she informed the police sergeant on that memorable occasion. But the fact was Miss Mary had a softer heart even than

usual where children were concerned. All the children ran after her gladly—her very name suggested to them toffee and other sticky joys. Tramps used systematically to invent large families as a claim on her compassion; for Miss Mary's was a large-hearted charity that did not criticise.

"O, Betsy!" she said, hurrying up to her "mentor" with tears in her eyes, "here's a poor woman come to the door with matches. She's got a drunken husband and sixteen children—one of them a triplet—all of tender age."

"Sixteen, has she? Ah! that's one thing they can all 'ave," grumbled Betsy, unmoved, as she wended her way upstairs with her broom.

There was a diplomacy in Betsy's departure. If Miss Mary would give away the poor contents of the larder again, let her not be there to see. A set of greedy, grasping wretches! Mutinous, she seized the broom with vigor and began to sweep her mistress's bedroom. It was a plain, unpretending little room enough, everything neat but very old, the paint worn off everything, but scrupulously tidy and old-maidish, with a sort of character of its own that bore no relation to Mrs. Pantoon. The bed, covered with a scanty blue cotton quilt, and hung over it an antique engraving of Raphael's "St. Catherine." In the small book-case were a worn Testament, and the poems of Tennyson and of Byron, a faded blue satin marker inside the latter; while on the mantelpiece were curious Indian shells, such as children love to listen to, and a photograph, yellow with age, of a handsome young fellow in naval uniform. Over this was pinned a bunch of white everlasting.

Betsy took up the photograph and dusted it tenderly, laying it back with a sigh. She guessed her mistress's romance of by-gone years, and, though she herself had no sympathy with such things, yet, by a strange concentration of ideas, this knowledge made her more than ever tender with Miss Mary now. "Poor soul! poor soul!" she murmured to herself, as faint sounds proceeded from the kitchen, and Miss Mary's kind voice alternated with profuse thanks from the mother of the sixteen infants and the triplet.

Yes, Miss Mary had a romance—a tenderly cherished, well-nurtured romance, which was at once her delight and her woe, and which grew but stronger as the years wore on. At twenty she had loved a sailor-lad, a handsome young naval lieutenant, who had gone out to the West Indies and had never returned. There had been a sort of tacit engagement; at any rate Miss Mary had given away her whole heart—so much so that she never had any of it to spare for the suitors who came after. Stories, indeed, reached her from time to time about her love. People said he had been wild. Some even hinted that he had deserted her. Miss Mary, in her fond loyalty, refused to believe these tales, and clung, with a quivering lip, to the idea of his early death.

"Or if he be wandering about the world somewhere," she said once, in a burst of unwonted confidence to Betsy, "he may perhaps come back one day."

"Why, you wouldn't know him after all these years, even if he was alive," said Betsy.

"Know him? of course I should," said Miss Mary. "He will find me in the old place—he will know where to come; so, dear Betsy, leave the door always open."

But this Betsy firmly declined to do. She was "not going to risk having her wits frightened out of her by thieves," she declared, "whatever Miss Mary might say or do." So she drew the line at the garden gate, and always left that unfastened. If this ill-advised proceeding gave tramps admittance into the tool-house or coal-cellar, why, what matter! "They was Miss Mary's coals; she might do as she liked." Sometimes poor old ladies would use the coal-cellar as a kind of casual ward, and condescend to spend a night there, leaving the remains of their breakfasts and a few of their rags as presents behind them. Betsy bore it all uncomplainingly, knowing what "Miss Mary's trouble" had been.

"It was a mercy," she thought to her-

self, "that it didn't take her in no other way."

But to Miss Mary herself the "trouble," in course of years, became almost a joy. It faded from a blood-red intensity to a roseate afterglow. She hugged herself, so to speak, with the recollection of what had been. Her youthful lover became brighter, fairer, dearer even than ever he had been in the far-away reality. She envied not the lot of other women, with husbands, babies, grown up sons. Their life-partners were commonplace compared with hers, glorified into the regions of romance, "orb'd into the perfect star" of forty years ago.

"He was brave, handsome, chivalrous," she would say to herself, mentally comparing her lover of former years with Mrs. Brown's burly coal merchant or Mrs. Minn's drunken boor.

And as for other women's babies, their charms also paled by contrast with Miss Mary's "dream-children." The fond maternal feeling that is the basis of every true woman's life found its echo even here, and the little old lady's imaginary darlings helped to make her days less empty. My boy Claude would have been just twenty-five, my daughter Emmeline just twenty, and how like her father! she would murmur, when in the glimmering twilight she would imagine these treasures beside her in the land of what "might have been." But Miss Mary's elation was all for the solitude of her own heart. Like her namesake of old she hid all these things. Only Betsy knew or guessed at a quarter of her poor old mistress's fancies.

Time wore on and it seemed as if nothing would occur to disturb the even tenor of the two solitary women's ways—that they would go down to the grave in an uneventful and peaceful silence. But Fate willed otherwise. One night—it was in early autumn—Miss Mary was aroused at nine o'clock by a loud knocking at the outer door. It was Sunday night and she was alone in the house. The faithful Betsy had gone to her Primitive Methodists, and Miss Mary, who had been ailing of late with a cough, had not attended her usual Sunday evening service at church. The loud knocking startled her, as we said—she was a nervous soul—and she opened the door timidly. A rough looking man stood there, his gaunt figure showing black against the moonlight.

"For God's sake hide me here for a few minutes," he pleaded hoarsely, "till the police have gone by. Let me in or by heaven, I may as well throw up the game."

Miss Mary's heart thumped loudly. The police! For all her charitableness, she had drawn the line hitherto at thieves. The man's face was white, and she heard a clattering of feet down the road—probably the police. Betsy, the guardian angel, was out of the way—humanity, as usual, won over prudence—Miss Mary opened the door.

"You may lie on those rugs in the kitchen," she said to him, kindly, "and tomorrow I will bring you some breakfast if you will go away early before my servant gets up."

The man murmured incoherent thanks. Miss Mary, being nervous, forbore to look at him, and retired to her own apartments, not without some qualms of conscience. Betsy, who came in later, with the latch-key from chapel, suspected nothing, but Miss Mary's evil fate willed that, towards the small hours of the morning, she should wake up hungry. Being a frail, timid old lady, she slept lightly, and now, remembering that the biscuits were down stairs on the dining-room sideboard, she wandered down stairs in search of them. She had forgotten for the moment all about her last night's visitor, and slipped down as noiselessly as a mouse. But what was her horror to see by the faint morning light, at the half-open dining-room door, a figure moving? Miss Mary, as she stifled a little shriek, recognized the man she had befriended. He was holding her silver teapot up to the light and inspecting it carefully—the same silver teapot bought by its poor owner during her brief period of happiness, forty years ago. She had

invested her savings in it, prior to her expected marriage.

"What, would you rob me?" thought Miss Mary, and her heart waxed fierce.

Rob her, who had so long befriended the needy and destitute! But, like Bishop Myriel with his silver candlesticks, her anger was of short duration. She would let the man go. Probably he needed the silver more than she and so strange are the workings of the human mind, that she remembered, even in that moment of fear, how her mother had always said that brown fourpenny teapots made the best tea.

She was still standing as if spellbound, afraid to move, when the man happened to turn his head, and the light fell full on to his face. It was only an old man's face, worn, gaunt, surrounded by grizzled hair and beard, and marked by sin and crime, with something, perhaps, as many criminals' faces have, that seemed to recall better days:

"In the morning light his face for a moment seemed to assume once more the forms of its earlier manhood."

Miss Mary looked, looked again, and, like Phineus of old with the Medusa's head she seemed to turn to stone. Then her legs tottered under her, the dawn became black before her eyes, and she fell down on the rickety stairs in a dead faint.

Betsy, coming cautiously down stairs a few hours later, and preparing to scold her mistress for forgetting to fasten the shutters, nearly tripped over a little fragile, shriveled heap, cold and unconscious, wrapped in its well-known darned dressing gown.

Miss Mary recovered with Betsy's loving care. Her visitor of last night had made himself scarce, and, whether startled by the noise of Miss Mary's fall, or by a few rays of lingering grace in his own conscience, had left the precious silver teapot. So, beyond saying that she had had a fright last night, and being reprimanded for not putting the teapot away, nothing further, to all appearance at least, resulted to Miss Mary.

But the bright old lady faded and became older from that day. Her step sounded less alert, her voice less brisk. The children in the streets scarcely recognized their benefactress: she seemed to have lost the joy of life. Betsy was in despair: she alternately coaxed and scolded her darling.

"Do you want to die," she complained, "and leave yer poor old Betsy? You can 'ave the kitchen brimful of tramps, my sweet, if you'll only git well an' laugh again."

Miss Mary looked at her sadly. "No, Betsy," she said, "don't want me to live. I'm sorry to leave you, dear, but it seems as if something had gone here," pointing to her heart with a pathetic gesture. "Something seems to have snapped inside me. Life doesn't seem the same to me any more now. I don't know how it is."

Miss Mary did not know, but it had only happened to her as it happens to many. She had lost her romance—the love story which had been the life of her life was gone—

It had for so long been a part of her entwined with her very being, that, like the ivy parasite with the oak, it had involved in its destruction the life beneath it.

Miss Mary sickened and died, the local physician said of languor. Not even old Betsy Mills, who mourned for her more than the children and the beggars themselves could have guessed at another reason.—Cassell's Magazine.

If your cup seems too bitter, if your burden seems too heavy, remember that the wounded hand is holding the cup, and that He who carries the cross is helping you to bear the burden.

Nearness of life to the Saviour will necessarily involve greatness of love to Him. As nearness to the sun increases the temperature of the various planets, so near and intimate communication with Jesus raises the heat of the soul's affection towards Him.—Spurgeon.