

"LITTLE MISS PENNY."

By ELEANOR C. SALTMER.



Do look at that queer little creature," whispered a girl to her companion as they sauntered arm-in-arm along the platform of a railway station rudely quizzing the passers-by. "Isn't she a figure of fun, my!"

Her friend glanced round, and her eyes fell upon a quaint, small figure whose style of dress was certainly

provocative of a smile, for she seemed to have gathered all the colours of the rainbow into her attire without blending them as the hues of that glorious arch are blended. She was lingering near the bookstall, and carried a roll of music in her hand.

"Don't you know who that is, Lottie? Why, it is little Miss Penny, the music-teacher, who lives in Minerva Terrace, and, my word, but she is got up smart! Going to a garden-party maybe!"

And the two silly girls spoke and tittered so audibly that the person on whose appearance they were indulging their comments, turned and cast upon them a look of mild inquiry out of her faded blue eyes. Her colourless face wore a deprecatory, apology-for-being-anywhere sort of expression that was pathetic, and if you broke into a smile one moment at her expense, you felt commiseration for her in the next. Care is so often hidden behind a jaunty exterior, and we brush elbows heedlessly with more tragedies than were ever woven into fiction for our amusement on the stage, in our daily journeyings through life.

"She's a bit dotty, poor thing, don't you know, and is as poor as a church mouse, and, proud, there, I don't know what she's got to be proud of, neither!"

Whereupon the girls shook out their own smart skirts, tossed their be-feathered hats and passed on with much pleased self-consciousness. Meanwhile Miss Penny lingered at the bookstall, turned over some of the papers with the tips of her cotton gloves, a world too big for her, read the notice boards and finally walked away without purchasing anything. She never did buy a newspaper, or a periodical, she could not afford it, so she gleaned all the news she could from the stalls in this way, paying the railway station a daily visit for that purpose, not liking to be behind the times in her acquaintance with what was going on in the busy world around her. Nobody was one whit the worse, and she felt herself a great deal the gainer.

Miss Penny's general style and appearance was shabby-genteel to a degree; she could not help it, poor thing, for circumstances had long been against her, but she did the best she could and followed the fashions as far as was convenient with the length of her purse, which pleasant little day-dreams sometimes distended far beyond its normal proportions into a size

calculated to be beneficial to others besides herself, for Miss Penny had a trick of self-effacement and self-forgetfulness were ordinary mortals do not often attain unto.

Rumour had it that she was "a bit dotty," so the phrase went, which might be translated to mean that she was eccentric, or that those considered best qualified to judge would not so far commit themselves as to give an opinion upon her fitness to make a will and dispose of her property, if she had any.

But rumour is an idle jade, she goes about tittle-tattling, and her veracity is not to be relied on. The most that need be said of the little woman's eccentricities is that they arose out of a harmless pride and self-respect based on happier conditions of life in the past. Miss Penny's great-grandfather had been a clergyman who had held a living worth £120 a year, while not quite so remotely in the background there stood other figures to lean comfortably on, namely, her great-uncle, who had been a merchant-captain between the Far East and London ports, a country doctor and a musician. The medical practitioner had been her maternal grandfather, and the musician her own parent. Thus the liberal professions had been well represented in her family, so Miss Penny felt she had some right to pride of birth and ancestry, and this prompted her to make the best of things when they were very bad, even if in so doing she made herself appear slightly ridiculous.

Her father the musician, however, had been unhappy in more ways than one. Fortune had been unfriendly to him, and he had been unfriendly to himself. When the wife, who had striven hard for years to make him keep his life consistent with the loftiness of his art, failed and died, her daughter took up the struggle and endeavoured to do her duty in the same spirit but with even less success, so that when the musician at last followed the course of nature and left Miss Penny alone, the struggle became, for a time, easier, she having inherited the love of his art without his detracting failings; and when one is subtracted from two, that which is left is not so difficult to maintain.

But Miss Penny was not a genius, and as she grew in years she found it hard to keep pace with the requirements of the age, which is an age of progress with a very high standard of excellence indeed. She had to reduce her terms and retire from the first floor of her modest lodgings to the second pair back; but even then, and practising the strictest economy, she could hardly earn sufficient to keep herself in anything like the most moderate comfort. For herself she did not mind, but she had notions, which she would not relinquish for the world, about the duty of loving your neighbour as yourself, and how was that to be done without giving help where it was wanted? So she had her little charities and considered it no self-denial to go without a meal if she could provide one for somebody hungrier than herself. It was tithe, she told herself, which she owed to the Father who gave her all.

It was the matter of dress that tried her most, for rent and the daily wants so crowded on the hoped-for margin as to leave what another woman would turn up her nose at as a poor provision for gloves. Miss Penny was particular about her personal appearance; she liked to look smart and she had an eye for colour, indulging in the theory that, where music sat enthroned, the sister art must keep her company. Perhaps if her power to spend had kept pace with her tastes, she would have astonished the world. As it was, she had

a private *magasin de nouveautés* to which she resorted when occasion demanded.

This *magasin* consisted of a large box containing the dress properties of one or two generations ago, heirlooms of fashion as one might say, and they had proved an unfailing spring from whence to draw for the supply of her needs. Being clever in the use of her needle, it was but to turn and twist, alter and remodel till she had adapted a costume to the requirements of the fashion prevalent for the time being, and when she had so turned one out, her pale eyes would grow bright with satisfaction. Then, sporting cotton gloves much too long in the fingers, for Miss Penny never could find a pair to fit her small thin hands, and a piece of music delicately rolled up to carry out with her, for, this she made a point of doing, it looked professional, she would sally forth for her daily perusals at the railway station. The clerk at the bookstall knew Miss Penny and was not blind to her little weaknesses, so he good-naturedly placed in her way many tit-bits of news he thought she might like to become acquainted with.

But the reader has not been introduced to Miss Penny's abode. She lived as has been said on the second pair back of a small house belonging to Minerva Terrace, a quiet row in a quiet street off the main thoroughfare. She had two rooms furnished with all that she could save, when the old home was broken up long ago, and her dearest possession among the odd assortment collected then was her piano, old-fashioned like everything else. It stood stiff and tall like a prim old maid, with a faded drawn silk front, and it had very yellow keys on which Miss Penny thrummed daily, conscientiously running up and down her scales, thus persuading herself that she was "keeping up her playing." The practising was so gentle it could give annoyance to no one. She was wont to take a pride in the age of her furniture. It was so ancient, dating its descent through so many generations that it seemed to cast an additional lustre over her own well-preserved gentility.

"Your money-made genteel folks of yesterday cannot boast of a chair like this—at least one hundred years old!" she would say as she let herself down comfortably yet withal carefully into its quaintly cushioned depths, after a tedious day's teaching at ten shillings a quarter for twelve lessons, and pouring out her tea from a cracked and venerable china tea-pot that had seen good service in the days of the merchant captain. Miss Penny's bedroom was ever so tiny a closet opening out from her sitting-room. She could barely turn round in it, but she made it suffice for her needs, and thanks to its small compass was enabled to convert her big treasure chest into an ottoman for the parlour. Miss Penny was attached to her rooms; she had lived in them now for so many years surrounded by the *lures* and *penates* of her old home, and she dreaded the thought that some day, through stress of circumstances, she might have to leave them for inferior lodgings, a third pair back, perhaps, with only a view across the tiled roofs and between the obstructing chimneys of other houses.

Over the mantel-piece was slung a telescope on which her eyes would often fall with affectionate regret; but it was not a relic of the family past, only of her own, for Miss Penny had once indulged in a romance, but its story had long ago become a secret of the sea, and the telescope was the only token left to remind her faithful heart that it had once existed, that she had had the chance which cruel fate had