My Sister Kate.

By Mary S. Hancock.

All her light curling hair was gathered into heavy coils on her head, but a few tendrils had escaped, and wreathed in low clusters on her forehead, while her bright eyes looked fearlessly into their faces and gave back smile for smile. She had taken off her cloak and hat and hung them up behind her, for the room often became hot and stifling, and she could not stand that. When I saw her, she was singing while the girls worked. She had taught them to sew, taught them with the gentlest patience in the world, I know, and had succeeded. Kate was a rare one for training, be sure of that.

Her head was high in the air, and the glorious tones of her voice filled the room, ringing out over the atmosphere all laden with frivolity and sin as it might be, and she sang on and on unwearingly, until many of the girls were quietly wiping away the tears that rose unbidden to their eyes, of which they would have been heartily ashamed outside.

When they were more than usually on the rampage, or the warpath, Kate would stand forth and call out:

"Girls, I am going to sing."

It was enough. Every strong-armed young woman, by virtue of her strength, bore down upon her neighbors and carried the day by force of arms; then a great silence would fall upon the place, and Kate's voice would reign supreme. I tell you—sister of mine though she may be—I shall not soon forget the impression she made upon me when I heard her.

They tell me she had other auditors sometimes, of whom she knew nothing. I heard, for instance, how one night a gang of carousers from a public house near by came along joyously to make a swoop upon the damsels and upset the decorum of the assembly. But when they neared the door Kate was singing.

The lads gathered round the half-open doorway:

Not a man of them dare venture inside. As for their bravado, it died away in harmless smoke—they stood and gazed and stared. Some slunk away; they had heard enough.

Others remained to the end, and sighed when her songs were over.

But no one ever thought of disturbing Kate after that.

Once or twice I met the vicar near the turning to the schoolroom, and bowed as I passed him. He returned the greeting, and pursued the open road. I never connected him with Kate's work. It was Clara De Grey Stranton herself who startled me.

"What a gift your sister has!" she remarked. "And what a peculiar girl she is! She will not come here, and yet she sings by the hour to those half-civilized girls in St. Anne's Lane. It is for the sake of the old vicar, no doubt."

CHAPTER III.

The dear girl tossed her pretty little head, with those tightly crimped curlets that I knew so well as she said these words, and I stood aghast.

"No, Clara, my darling," I murmured softly, my arm stealing round her waist. "No, Clara, my beloved. Kate has no liking for old men. Kate is useful to me; she has her brother's interests at heart, her brother's welfare. These demand all her time, and all attention. She has no eyes for elderly gentlemen."

"And young ones have none for her," retorted my betrothed quickly. "But oh, Edwin, must she always live with us?—I mean—I mean——" Here the dear girl buried her head on my shoulder, and was overcome by her feelings for a few seconds, while I endeavored to calm her agitated emotions.

"The subject of Kate," I began in my most clerical tones; "the subject of my sister's residence here is unfortunately beyond my control. My parents seem to consider that their business. But when—when we arrange matters, darling"—(here I dropped the cleric and became human)—"then I will take the reins into my own hands and Kate can return home once more." This pacified Clara, I am sure I do not know why. I never can understand how it is that marriage generally causes such upsets in families. We are told that a man must "cleave" to his wife; but why that should mean that he should deliberately set himself, in so many cases, dead against his own friends and relatives, is really beyond my comprehension.

However, Clara is not in that position as yet, so she was taking time by the forelock, so to say, in the attitude she was assuming toward Kate. My sister was a very decided convenience to me, one I declined to part with until I had the opportunity of replacing her. So, while I tenderly appeased Clara, I still held my own way with regard to Kate, upon whom I intended to keep a strict watch in future.

My vicar was said by the numerous widows and spinsters who attended our church to be singularly handsome. I did not share that opinion; but old maids are peculiarly sensitive to looks on the part of their clergy, and not too discriminating either.

It is true that he carefully abstained from more than the merest passing acquaintance with them, never presenting himself at any of the little tea drinkings which were so common among us, and never by any chance putting in an appearance at Mrs. De Grey Stranton's, even when a big "spread" was under way.

Mrs. De Grey Stranton liked a "little party." She aired her best china and her antique electro-plate on those occasions, for which the household was in purgatory for a whole week, while Gemima's tears were frequent, and her grimminess greater than usual during the mysterious processes of preparation. It would have gratified Mrs. De Grey Stranton if she could have enticed the vicar to grace her tea-table and eat her cakes.

But it was not to be. He was blessed—or cursed, which you prefer—with a digestion, and hence was "obliged to live carefully," an expression which I have since learned to believe was a pious fib invented to save appearances.

The Vicar's abstention was not my loss. It was distinctly my gain. If he had a digestion, I had no qualms about mine. Three-and-twenty is a glorious age. A man has the digestion of an ostrich and the vigor of a Hercules—or ought to have, if he be managed properly. And I was in my element at our local tea drinkings. It is, even now, a part of my parochial duty which I understand to perfection and enjoy, and in those early days of my work it was just exactly what I delighted in. Perhaps I should not have enjoyed these gatherings so much had my vicar been there. In the tender years of a curate's life he does not hunger and thirst for his vicar's bodily presence wherever he appears. He likes to float before the popular gaze by himself, to pirouette, as it were, upon a platform all by himself, and to display his new "clericals" unabashed by other priestly presence. The girls admire him unrestrainedly, and he is able to exhibit himself to more purpose in his superior's absence.

Kate, too, kept aloof from these social gatherings. Kate had plenty on her hands with the babies and the old men and the rough girls. I took care that she had something to do; occupation, as I have said before, is good for young women of Kate's age.

But, after Clara's remark, I kept a sharper lookout at home.

"Mrs. Malony," said I to my landlady the very next morning, "did any one call last evening?" "Nivir a blissid sowl," was the instant reply. "The blissid young lady, yer riv'rence's sisther, whom the saints presarve! she was alone hersilf all the night; an' me sittin' by the kitchen foire th' whole toime whativir." Mrs. Malony is a great talker, so I did not hear half she said. I have reason to believe she did not tell the truth; and if I had only seen her five minutes later in her kitchen I should have been quite sure of the fact, for this is what she did, I was told long afterward. She flung herself down on her low chair in front of the fire, and, tossing the corner of her huge white apron over her head, gave vent to a series of chuckles and laughs that scared her niece who lived with her.

(To be Continued.)

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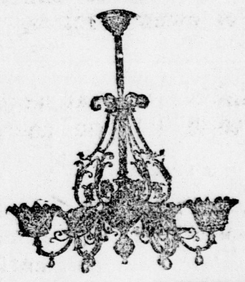

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