

"LONG AGO."

AN OLD WOMAN'S STORY.

BY FAY LARKIN.

IT was just such a summer as this. The same intense heat reigned, while the whole earth grew languid under its sway. Why do I say "such a summer as this," when both the summer and the dream are already things of the past?

We—my father, mother, and I—lived in a seaport town as flourishing as it was beautiful. Strangers, who were envious of its prosperity, in which they had no share, used to call it "rotten at the core," as if they were speaking of a beautiful peach or apple that presented a fair outside only to cover the inward lack of sweetness.

Yet this town of ours, my beautiful Southampton, whose every walk is, to me, pregnant with happy thoughts and memories, was fair in reality as in seeming. Knowing that I shall never go back to it, I can yet look longingly upon its remembrances as children do upon the toys for whose use they have grown too old.

Sometimes I wonder if when I die "Southampton" will be found written upon my heart, as the native place of an ancient king was, according to mythology, found engraved upon his very soul.

Well do I remember its High-street, its parks, its avenue, its Common, and above all its waters. Shall I ever forget the girlish joy with which I used to pull my little boat over its blueness to Marchwood or Hythe, with an exultant gladness such as can never dawn into my life again. Will the recollections of my first essays in equestrianism fade away? the leafy woods of Chilworth, the steep hill of Woodmill leading into Litterne, the old arch of Upper Bassett, or the quiet sunny slopes of St. Cross ever be forgotten? Never! A reverie of untold sweetness falls over me like a mantle when I think of my girlhood's happy days. Of the school in which I passed my dreamy youth, the old playground, first at Totton, then at Shirley, yet all ruled by the same hand. I see the croquet lawn, the allotted gardens we individually cultivated, the targets of red and blue towards which we winged our arrows, and I am a girl again—a child counting her daily task—a bird set free from her duties—then I ask myself, did I really live in this "long ago"? Did I once touch the harp of youth as other children? Was there ever a melody of sweet sounds in my life as in that of others? I bow my head as the answer comes, while the tears trickle through my poor thin fingers like rain. I hold them up to the light, and as I do so I thank God that with the years that go by they grow more transparent, more feeble. Sometimes I ask myself will God in His "for ever," let in any of the dark shadows of the past? Yet my wondering question stays itself upon the promise, "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away." So I grow calm as the comfort comes into my heart, because all the former things are "passed away."

"Long ago." Is it a dream, or was I once really a child? Did I dance the happy hours away as I watch other children do now? God of my sorrows! hast Thou swept away all such hallowed recollections? Shall I never look upon those golden moments again?

Aye, I have it. The dream is with me now. I stand again upon the threshold of my girlish life.

My John, do you remember our courting days? In the spirit land do you ever see a face that dimly foreshadows what mine shall be when I rejoin you, or do you look down through the pure portals of azure to see a wizened bride such as I now am? For as life itself passes over me the traces of its travail are left upon my face and brow, the finger-marks of the sore trials through which all do pass.

When I was little more than a child my mother died, so, as soon as my school days were over, I began the duties of housekeeper to my father, and even now, after all these years, people smile at the almost worshipful adoration with which I mention his name, but he was worthy of it! Yet I have stood at his open grave, and said "Good bye" to him, as we bid farewell to the purest and dearest of all the earthly gifts with which God crowns us. When he was put away beneath the sod, when the birds chanted the burial dirge over his new tomb, I said, "No greater sorrow than this can darken my life; henceforth I am invulnerable to all earth's

woes. One anguish has, like Pharaoh's lean kine, swallowed up the rest."

After the settlement of affairs, just enough money remained to keep me from actual want. Moreover, I was engaged to be married.

In this last sentence the gist of my story is hidden. In one of the prettiest suburbs of our town a beautiful little chapel nestled amidst the dark foliage of the ever-swaying pine trees, and underneath its roof I was to have been united in the bonds of holy matrimony to one Douglas Macdonald.

Without the slightest tremor I now write his name, without one throb of compunction over the revelation of this secret of my first love. My dream was of short duration, and in the "long ago" of which I write, this vision is scarcely worthy of a place.

My father was reputedly a wealthy man, while I was his only and petted daughter, the heiress of his accumulated riches and the recipient of all his love. I picture even now the affectionate love with which he used to look at me; hear again his tender tones; feel his soft kisses upon my cheek and brow; then a dense unfathomable mystery of darkness sweeps over the picture, and I am orphaned.

Even in the direst extremity of my sorrow the remembrance of Douglas's love came like Gilad's balm to heal my soul, as I pondered the dying words of my father, "Thank God, you possess another love than mine."

Three little words will tell the whole subsequent history of that first wild mad love of mine—He was false! Over the "long ago" the mist of years is falling, or I could not so calmly write of the anguish of spirit supervening. A very little change is necessary to open a woman's eyes to the fact that her lover is growing faithless to her, yet knowing the difference he evinced in his behaviour I yet clung with despairing tenacity to the vague thought that I could yet be all in all to Douglas, once again, even as I fondly imagined I had been in former days! Accustomed from earliest childhood to every luxury which wealth could buy, it was no light penance for me to bear the wants and deprivations of comparative poverty; yet even this sunk into insignificance as I became fully aware that with the loss of riches my deprivations did not end. I could have staked my life on his honour, yet if I had done so mine would have been the loss! The universal admiration which I had been wont to command as the hostess of my father's house soon fell away, and the stabbing pang of my quondam friends' desertion touched the one vulnerable spot in my heart. Some one has said that "we are but children of a larger growth, crying for the moon because she is out of reach." Thus I stretched out imploring hands for the good now so unattainable, bitterly condemning the fickleness of fortune in robbing me upon every side. My life of serene, joyous happiness was over, so I gathered my forces together to meet the coming storm! A few weeks and its fiercest beatings were past. My home sold, and I fairly launched upon the open sea of life, a butt for its pitiless beatings and its wildest lashings.

When, for the last time, I stood in the old porch at home, looking round upon the fertile fields with their shady trees and tall grass, their pleasant nooks and countless beauties, my heart failed me, until in this supreme moment of desolation I felt almost as if "the pains of death had gat hold upon me," it was such a total surrendering of the old life for the new. In the deep well of memory the knowledge of that secret anguish lies. Sometimes I lift the stone to look down into its depths, unseen by any save God's eye alone, until the veil is drawn aside in His own cloudless light.

The long note of sorrow has died into silence, while the softened glow of the after-splendour touches it into a thing too tender to cause even the shedding of a solitary tear.

The gold and red were in the western clouds, tinting the rich evening sky with a radiant transitory beauty, when I bade a long farewell to the phantasies and dreams of my youth, to the home whose very walls were fair as Eden's fairy palaces to the heart that loved them. My love—whom I had thought so true and brave—my father, my home—all vanished.

You will blame me for the deeds that followed; yet let your censure be just. As a woman would plead with her child, so I plead with you to judge me by the deep loneliness of humanity as well as with your lofty sense of rectitude.

Twelve months after my father's death I again became engaged, this time to a man true as steel, grand as your concep-