


AUNT HILDA'S PORTFOLIO.

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Who Was Aunt Hilda?



It is quite time to answer so pertinent a question. I remember her principally as the friend of my mother. In appearance, she was tall, and slight of figure, the expression of her face would have been severe, but that a pair of kindly, attentive blue eyes belied all suspicion that she was of a morose nature. She was naturally impetuous, and accustomed to arrive at a conclusion by the briefest possible measure; but submission to a rule of life had tempered much of her abruptness; at the time of her death she had passed her seventieth birthday. She was a native of the city of Dublin. Left a widow at the age of nineteen, she fled from associations that reminded her too painfully of happiness so rudely interrupted. For some years she lived in Paris, and, when time, aided by religion, had brought a degree of tranquillity to her troubled soul, she became an active worker in many of the charitable societies of that wonderful city wherein are found, dwelling side by side, the pious and impious. I made her acquaintance one Sunday afternoon, when we were both visiting the charitable institution that owed its existence to her indomitable zeal. She found me an exile from home, and her womanly heart yearned to befriend me. "I remember well, my dear," she said, "when I, too, was a stranger in Paris. I had just lost my husband, whom I loved to idolatry, God forgive me. I was on the verge of madness. Oh! it was dreadful! It was a long time before I could look calmly on the face of my baby boy; he was born one month after his father's death. But all that is long past," she said, as with an effort she detached herself from the gloomy memories of the past. "My son has now a lovely wife, and an interesting family. My home is with them, but I keep myself

free to go and come. They would spoil me if I remained permanently with them. I must 'work while it is yet day.' These little ones need me here; this day-nursery is my pet scheme, and I hope to see it securely founded before I am deprived of activity. I noticed that you were a stranger and a mother, and felt attracted towards you. If I can be of service to you at any time, seek me here. Your mother and I were classmates at Rathfarnham Convent."

Thus began a friendship with one from whom I had learned much. She was very sympathetic, although quick to discriminate between the real and the fancied miseries of those who sought her advice or compassion. Ten years after our first meeting she came to New York. Death had claimed her son; his wife and children needed her not. The day-nursery had grown to wonderful proportions; she had given it to the care of a religious order; she yearned for a life free from responsibility, in which she might reserve some quiet hours wherein to prepare for Eternity. Our city attracted her, especially because in one of its many religious houses lived the sister of that husband so fondly loved in that cherished long ago, which now returned to memory, renewing its claim, as the years advance, like the impressions made with some of those wonderful chemicals, and which remain indelible when the characters traced by a later hand have been erased. Near us Aunt Hilda led the life of a widow indeed, her only distractions—the poor—and the work of the Tabernacle Society. Wonderful is that mysterious attraction that reveals to each other congenial souls. My mother was delighted that her instinct had not misled her when she prophesied that "Hilda and Judith were made for each other." They had much in common; both were interested in young people. Many of our girl friends took pleasure in presenting the young men of their circle to Aunt Hilda, sometimes through eagerness for her opinion, but oftener still impatient that her judgment might approve their own fancy. Among these was Ethna Bryce, the only child of a widowed mother. Mrs. Bryce was a dainty, gentle creature, who, as "pretty Miss Eastace, of Norfolk," had received much homage. She was married when quite young to an elderly army officer, to whom at the time she felt very kindly.