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# Miss Witterly's China

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## MISS WITTERLY'S CHINA.\*



N the windy corner of one of the quietest streets of Montreal there stood, some few years back, an old stone house which had for many years been known as the family residence of the Witterlys. This mansion, though once a very desirable abode indeed, presented, at the time of which I write, an appearance of desertion and decay which told of fallen fortunes. The great drawing rooms were dismantled and deserted, their unshaded windows staring blankly at the street; weeds grew unrebuked on the gravel walk and through the crevices in the broad stone steps. The high chimneys had given forth no smoke for many a day, and the wide fireplaces yawned cold and empty. It was a house to sadden your face and lower your voice with dim forebodings, and make you vaguely speculate on the multitude of sealed histories laid up within its walls.

But the place was not quite so deserted as a casual glance would imply; a few rooms to the eastern side were still bright with life and occupation, and in these few rooms, the only habitable spots in the old house, the eldest Miss Witterly lived alone. She was always called "the eldest Miss Witterly" more by habit than necessity,

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as her younger sister had long been dead and, by many, her very existence forgotten. Miss Witterly had never married; no one knew why, for, in her day, she had been both beautiful and accomplished, and suitors were not lacking. People could well remember her as the belle of many a brilliant gathering, when the old house, now so dreary and desolate, rang with the music of merry laughter, and echoed the tread of youthful feet. She had been wealthy too, until her father's mania for speculation swept away his fortune and his illspent life together, leaving her nothing but a small annuity and residence in the old home secured until her death.

Miss Witterly was a lady of refined tastes and a generous heart, for her mother, who had been a well-born English lady with plenty of money at her command, had spared no expense that her daughters should receive that culture and education which she considered necessary to their station in life. She died in happy ignorance of the coming crash, and her last words were, "Let Elizabeth finish her course by a year's experience in Europe." If this dear lady had one fault, or let us say peculiarity, it was an inordinate craze for valuable china. She had spent a small fortune on the gratification of this hobby, and at her death willed it all, together with the carved rosewood cabinet, to her "most beloved daughter Elizabeth Witterly." This legacy alone of all the beautiful house furnishings remained in the mansion of the Witterlys, and of all the happy

family one alone was left in the old home—the eldest Miss Witterly.

On a cold snowy evening late in December she was sitting alone by the tiny parlor grate. The fire crackled smartly and shed a rich glow over her sweet old face, hiding a wrinkle here, and softening a sharp line there, giving back to the faded eyes their brightness and to the slender figure the grace of its lost youth. It shone lovingly, too, on the worn silk dress, a relic of bygone splendor, and fell with a gentle caress on the long white hands clasped loosely on its folds. Darting into the dusky corners of the room it shed a spell of beauty over the hard, commonplace objects which were all her fallen fortunes could afford. The little plated tea-tray shone like gold, the varnished table seemed rich old mahogany, and the creton curtains on the bookcase real damask. But where the dancing light lingered longest and most lovingly was on the rosewood cabinet where Miss Witterly's china stood—that matchless china which made many a connoisseur sigh with envy. Rich and rare and delicate, it was out of place with everything in the room except Miss Witterly and the soft firelight. The three seemed to suit each other and lend to all the rest an air of refinement and beauty. Miss Witterly loved this china with all her sorrowing heart—it was all she had to love. It was the only thing in her life with which she seemed in keeping. The delicate cups, the curious plates, the wonderful little cream-jugs and sugar-bowls were an hourly joy to her,

almost the only joy she had. There stood on the mantel-piece above her head a china shepherdess and a hideous grinning Chinese mandarin, which were her special friends. They were not as valuable as the rest of the collection, but their mistress loved them for themselves, not for their value in bank notes. This evening they all seemed especially dear to her, for she had been showing them to a young friend of hers, the son of her father's old partner, and his eager appreciation had encouraged her to speak of her mother and of her youth until now, as she sat alone, the dusky room seemed full of memories, the unforgotten ghosts of the past. The grate fire seemed to know all this, and so burned clearly and quietly, never roaring up the chimney as it often did, or driving clouds of smoke into the room as the wind came whistling down. Gradually under this cheering influence the shadowy ghosts which had invaded Miss Witterly's heart faded away, and as thoughts more relative to the present crowded upon her mind, the rocking-chair became more agitated and she fell into that habit common to solitary people of putting them into words.

"I have not done much good in my life," said Miss Witterly dreamily, "the opportunity never seems to have come. True, I make coverlids for the poor people, but that's not much when all the wardrobes up-stairs are so full of old clothes which piece so nicely. I knit stockings, too, but its only a pleasant occupation for my leisure

moments. Once when I was young I thought I would do such great things, but my youth has slipped from me like a garment, and my strength has never been used in Christ's service. What will I say when my Master asks me of my stewardship? What will I do—my time is nearly spent now—I have no strength, no money, no influence—all these I had and used—for myself. Nothing is left—”

“Oh, yes,” said the Chinese mandarin from the mantel-piece, “there is the china.” Miss Witterly started violently, not so much because the ugly little china figure seemed suddenly endowed with speech (she had grown to love all her china so much that nothing seemed impossible from them) but because of the monstrous idea presented to her. “The china is left,” continued the mandarin, winking horribly, “it is worth a nice little sum, too—quite enough to educate a missionary, say for China. I remember,” continued he with another wink at the china shepherdess, who was listening attentively, “when I was first made out there, hearing an Englishman say that if the Christian people at home did their duty China would be completely evangelized in a few years. He was especially hot about the British government forcing the opium trade, and warmly condemned the people who spent their money on useless luxuries while their fellowmen were dying. A Chinese life isn't worth much in China, you know,” bending a bright eye on Miss Witterly, “but it is worth every bit as much as

an Englishman's in Heaven. And my! don't they die fast over there, thousands a day, with no funerals for their bodies and no regrets for their souls. As I was saying," relapsing again into indifference, "you m-i-g-h-t sell your china—though, of course, I know you won't."

Miss Witterly lay back in her chair spell-bound—her china, her mother's legacy, her beautiful, greatly loved china—"Why, it is part of my life," she gasped.

"Just so," put in the Chinese mandarin, "weren't you saying just now that you wished that you had spent *all* your life in doing good—then why not spend part of it?"

"It's old," she faltered, "very old, who would buy such old china?—but to me it is absolutely priceless."

"The china is valuable, very valuable; they don't make anything like it now-a-days," said the shepherdess in rather a piqued tone, and then more gently, as if she realized, being a woman, the struggle in her mistress' heart, "As to it's being priceless to you, if it is, then the sacrifice would be priceless to the God who does not reckon gifts by their value in the money market, but by their value to the human heart which gives them." Miss Witterly sat as one in a dream. The room was full of ghosts again, ghosts of past opportunities, of wasted wealth, of misused strength—ghosts of long-forgotten hopes, dead aspirations and yearnings after higher things which had never borne fruit in deeds. The fire-

light danced on the china cabinet, her precious china—the only thing in her narrow world which she really loved—and the bitter conflict went on in her heart. Part of a verse from her morning Bible reading rang in her ears with great persistency, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” Was it possible she had been worshipping this dear idol all these years?—had she kept back from the Lord His due?—could it be that she loved her china better than her Christ? And with that last question the way seemed easier—she loved her china and had said truly that it was priceless to her, but Christ was more, and in that moment the one little door in her heart where He had been patiently waiting was opened and her Heavenly Guest went in to abide forever. Her thoughts became more tranquil after that, and she dreamed of the other city which she must soon reach—of its beauty, of its freedom from care, of its peace and restfulness, and of the King in His glory, the mighty King whose kingdom her sacrifice would help to bring and who would not fail to have a smile for her, even for her. So thinking, she dropped into a calm, sweet sleep with a smile on her lips which belied or rather glorified the tear stains on her face.

When she awoke the fire had died away and the room was bitterly cold. The faint dawn of morning, stealing through the eastern window, showed her the Chinese mandarin and the pretty shepherdess still and inanimate as they had always been before the wonderful events of last

night, and fell coldly on the china cabinet standing in its wonted place. Miss Witterly arose and called her small attendant to light the fire. She moved stiffly, and felt older by many years than she had the night before, but happier too and better. The cold had crept into every aching bone, but nothing could dampen the joy of her heart. Breakfast over (or rather a pretence at one, for she could not eat) she brought from the lumber-room a great willow-basket and a roll of cotton wool. The small maid stared, but being well-trained asked no questions, and presently left the room. Then did Miss Witterly perform in silence and alone the great work of her life. Slowly piece by piece the precious china hid its exquisite coloring in the soft wool, dear little jugs and cups and plates which her hands had dusted every morning for so many years—one by one until all were gone, even to the Chinese mandarin. Then with trembling hand she donned bonnet and cloak and, calling a cab, carried the basket tenderly down herself and drove away.

When she returned an hour or two later the willow basket was empty, and that night the Rev. Mr. R—— received an anonymous gift to be used for the cause of Chinese missions which caused him to feel very thankful and to wonder very much—such gifts not being as common as they might be.

That night Miss Witterly sat alone but not lonely. The cabinet was gone, with all its precious freight, but Miss Witterly was not lonely.

There was a Presence there. She was so happy that she did not mind that her limbs ached and her throat throbbed with pain and her voice grew faint and husky ; but Jane, her faithful attendant, did, and at last by repeated entreaties persuaded her mistress to take a hot drink and lie down on the sofa. Miss Witterly thought it delightful to be so carefully tended. She had never before realized how kind Jane was.

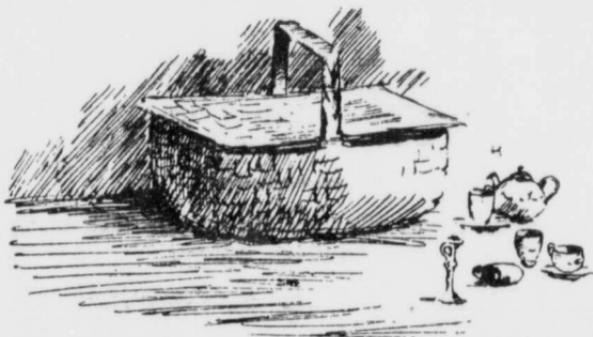
“I have had such a blessed day,” she said, looking at the place where the Chinese mandarin had been, “everybody is so kind to me.” With a smile on her face she lay watching the fire while the long shadows crept up the room, and through the unshaded window the wintry stars gleamed brightly. She was so tired, and it was so pleasant there she thought sleep might come more readily than upstairs, so Jane threw more coals on the grate, and with many a misgiving left her mistress comfortably settled for the night.

“I never thought it could seem like home with the china gone,” thought Miss Witterly, “but it never seemed so homelike or so near that heavenly home as to-night. Truly He has not left me comfortless, He has come to me.”

In the morning Miss Witterly was ill—very ill, and for days her life trembled in the balance, but in the end grim death was beaten back and conquered, and a new world seemed open before her. Such a lovely world too—so full of kind faces, sympathetic words, and loving acts. Miss Witterly had never realized before how many

friends she had, or how good they were, or how much they loved her. She would never forget it again, though. And when full health returned what a world of usefulness, service and happiness! —it seemed just wonderful how much she could do of all that wanted doing. In the Mission Chapel the worst class of irrepressible street arabs grew almost quiet under the influence of her calm voice and gentle smile, and when she descended, basket in hand, to the poorer streets of the city (streets she had hardly known to exist before), the people loved her face all the better for the shabby bonnet which enclosed it. Even the china cabinet was soon filled with the books and papers pertaining to her own particular "Scripture Class" of girls which met there in the long winter evenings, and Jane was astonished every day to see her mistress so busy and happy.

So Miss Witterly found how it was possible, even though poor in this world's goods, to serve God in the person of His "little ones," and found it to her own lasting peace and future reward.



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