

Clifton, almost sternly, to his wife, who was at the opposite side of the room.

"Does she look like a miserable victim?" asked his wife, glancing at her child, who wore the excited and heroic look of a daughter, as she felt she was, about to save her father.

Her father looked at her, and though but half convinced, was forced to be satisfied.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ALMOST AN OLD MAID.

"THIRTY years old to-day!" repeated Esther Hastings, musingly, as she sat alone in her quiet chamber. "Thirty years old! I am indeed, as I have overheard my pupils call me, an old maid. But why should I shrink from the title?" She went on, thinking half aloud, "Though the duties of wife and mother may not be mine, yet I may fill a place in society equally noble."

The vision of Aunt Mary rose before her, pure and holy, dispensing joy wherever she went, soothing the sad, and rejoicing with those who rejoice. "Help me, oh Father!" she murmured, "to take cheerfully, like her, the path destined for me, that when death comes, I may receive the welcome, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

She rose from her seat, by the open window, and standing before the mirror, began to arrange her abundant brown hair, which the wind had tossed, somewhat rudely displacing it.

Time had not made any ravages on Esther's smooth cheek; it had but added beauty to her noble and cheerful countenance. Decision, tempered by gen-

teness, shone in her quiet smile, and she turned away, half smiling, as she found no old-maidish signs, after close scrutiny.

A tap at the door, and little Emma, Margaret's oldest child, a sweet little girl of eight summers, handed her a letter and a little box, on opening which she found a golden locket, containing the daguerreotypes of Emma and her little brother Herbert.

"My birthday present to you, dear aunt Esther," said Emma, as she received many a warm embrace from her aunt.

Esther now seated herself to read her letter; it was from Maria.

"I was thinking of you, this evening, my dear Esther," it read, "and thought, that since my heart was with you, my pen should make it known to you; for I feared that you were not spiritual enough to feel its presence, or at least to interpret its language, without assistance. It is the anniversary of my wedding-day, my friend; and as I sat here alone (for little Charlie has gone to bed, and his father is attending a public temperance meeting) I thought of the time of my happy deliverance in the hour of temptation, when you, dearest Esther, were my good angel. Tears, but blissful ones, fill my eyes, as I contrast that hour with the happy one when Charles, proud and triumphant, claimed me as his wife. How different now the confidence that I repose in him, from the trembling fear which I should have felt, though I would hardly own it to myself, with which I should have placed my hap-

piness in his keeping. And how different my feelings in that hour when my father gave me, with his blessing, to my husband, from those when I seemed to hear his curse, and to see the look of sad reproach and betrayed confidence with which he regarded me. Charles, too, has never ceased to thank you, for so clearly placing the right before him, and I know often reëchoes my fervent 'God bless you!' Oh, Esther my heart is full to overflowing, when I see the paternal love which my father lavishes upon Charles, and the respectful tenderness which he gives in return.

"But enough of myself, for I forget that I may weary you. You ask me, 'What of Virginia?' I meet her but seldom, as she is very much in society, and I remain as I ever was, a stay-at-home body. We meet occasionally at parties, where Virginia is always radiant as ever, her gay laugh as musical, and her flashes of wit as brilliant, as in her palmiest days. She is, as she always was, extremely fascinating. Her husband idolizes her, and she seems perfectly happy. I said that I saw her but seldom; but she came here a few days ago. I had Charlie in my arms, the dear little fellow, and Virginia took him, caressing him fondly. As she gave him back to me she sighed, saying, 'I almost envy you your treasure.' You know she is childless; her only child died when only a year old. Poor Virginia! thought I, there is one bitter drop in your cup of happiness; I hope not enough to destroy its entire sweetness.

"I suppose you have heard that Mr. Templeton has returned from Europe. Poor Emily! she is buried in

a foreign land. The sunny skies of Italy, where she sought health again, shine on her grave. Mr. Templeton has brought home his two children; poor little motherless things, how I pity them. I clasped little Charlie close to my heart, when I heard of Emily's death, and felt, in some sort, the agony of her parting moments, from the pang that struck me, as I thought of my own dear child left thus desolate.

"I had a call last week from Captain Sidney and his wife. She is a very lovely woman; that is, lovely in manners and disposition, though she is quite plain. Her delicate health is, I presume, the cause of the premature decay of her beauty. I am afraid poor Captain Sidney will not have her long; he seems to watch over her with the most ardent devotion.

"But I hear my husband's step; so good-bye for to-night, and may God bless you, is the prayer of your friend,
 MARIA WALDRON."

A postscript, in a firm, manly hand, was added by Charles, urging her to visit them, and sending his love, which he said his wife had strangely forgotten to enclose.

With a light and happy heart, Esther hastened along to her school that morning; and never had life seemed more beautiful, or full of promise, than on the morning that ushered her into the era of old maidenhood.

"You seem very happy, my child," said Mrs. Wilton, looking at Esther's calm face, as she sat upon the piazza that surrounded her adopted father's house,

while the beams of the setting sun shed a glow over the landscape.

"Yes," replied Margaret, who sat near, her boy leaning upon her knee; "I think Esther has the philosopher's stone, which transmutes everything into gold. I wish you would give me your wonderful secret."

"I can, very easily," answered Esther, as she smoothed the curls of her little niece Emma, who sat by her side. "It is the simple thing of faith in God, trusting his love, and seeing his hand in every event of life, whether glad or sorrowful. Would that you, dear Margaret, were a partaker of my joys."

"You do have a wonderful facility in pressing everything into the service of enforcing your peculiar views," replied Margaret, with a smile; though her lip quivered, and she turned away to conceal the tears which rose to her eyes.

"There's father!" cried out Herbert; and Margaret hastened down the shaded walk to meet her husband, accompanied by her children.

Esther and Mrs. Wilton looked with fond affection upon the noble pair, as they came slowly up the winding road; Horace McIntyre's arm encircling his beautiful wife, while the children, skipping playfully along, talked of the events of the day.

"One thing only thou lackest," thought Esther, and her heart rose in prayer, that this greatest gift might be bestowed on her loved ones.

Mr. Wilton was soon seen hurrying up the same road, the same ever busy, restless look in his fine eyes,

and on his wrinkled brow. Ten years had made but little change in the hurried, energetic business man, neither had Time laid his hand heavily on the invalid, Mrs. Wilton; but her step was slower, her thin and wasted form thinner, and she was passing away, though, so gradually did she draw nearer to the spirit land, that the anxious eyes of affection scarce heeded it.

A few days passed much as usual. Horace had nearly finished the business which had brought him to Newton, and their family were soon to return to their quiet home in Vermont.

"A letter for you, my dear," said Mr. Wilton, as he came up to Esther, tossing one into her lap.

She was sitting alone in the large sitting-room, and, approaching the window, read it by the dim twilight.

Mr. Wilton had left the room, and it was fortunate for Esther, for tears, which she could not restrain, fell on the open letter. It was from Mr. Templeton, asking her to become his wife. The manly, ardent words brought so near to her the presence of her noble friend, that it seemed as if she heard his deep voice, repeating words which fell on her heart like dew. She calmed herself, and, ordering lights to the library, replied to him, bidding him come to her.

Many were the congratulations which she received from her friends, when her engagement was made known.

Mr. Templeton soon answered her summons, and urged no delay in their approaching nuptials; and not many weeks had passed, when Esther resigned her

place as teacher, for the narrower but delightful sphere of home.

Aunt Mary's sweet face and warm welcome met her in her new abode; for she said she did not wish to enter a dreary and desolate home.

Flowers, the inseparable companions of aunt Mary, shed their fragrance in every room of her dwelling; and the children threw their arms around their new mother's neck, and pressed their dewy lips to hers, with no horror of step-mothers before their eyes.

Aunt Mary did not tarry long; for, though her mother slept long since in her narrow resting-place, she was as much needed as ever in her brother's home; but the sunshine which she always bore with her seemed to linger even after her good-bye was spoken: and as Esther, the night after her departure, stole quietly into the sleeping-room of her children, where the cool evening breeze tossed the hair of the sleepers, she fell on her knees by their bedside, praying for guidance from on high, to so lead them that they might meet their angel-mother in heaven.

"My cup of happiness is full," she murmured; "help me, oh Father, never to forget from whose hand I receive it."

THE END.

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