

Select Tale.

HESTER M'KNIGHT;

THE OLD MAID ON THE HILL-SIDE.
A TALE FOR MATTER-OF-FACT PEOPLE.

BY CAROLINE E. FAIRFIELD.

But a woman's a woman, for a' that.

BURNS, ADAPTED.

Just back of Moss Farm there rose a high, steep hill; the base was clear, and formed a rocky pasture for herds of lowing cattle; but above, it was crowned with a dense forest of oaks and hickories and chestnuts. It was clear from undergrowth, however; and through it ran a pleasant path, which, winding down the other side of the hill, led to the village, and the old red school-house. As this forest-path was much shorter and pleasanter than the highway, which led around the base of the hill, I used, all through the spring and summer, and the pleasant days of autumn, to go this way to school; and the path, with all its way-side haunts, was consequently very familiar to me.

There was only one dwelling near it, and that was the little brown, one-storied house of Hester McKnight. It had a singular look, that little cottage, nestled half-way up the hill side, among the shrub oaks, and white birches, which covered a good part of that side of the hill. It had a broad, stone chimney, from which it was my delight, cold winter mornings, to watch the blue smoke curl thinly upward. The windows were hung with thick paper curtains, and the little vegetable garden around the house was always neat and in order. An old cow looked patiently and serenely forth from the little shed, which served for a barn, and a very well-conditioned pig usually grunted in an adjacent sty. There was not a flower or any ornamental thing around the house, except, just under the kitchen window, a tall rose-bush, which, every June, was covered with fragrant and beautiful blossoms.

I had often seen Hester, as I had passed in the morning, busy among the cabbages, or around the cow-house, or in the afternoon, sitting by her window, sewing on the shop-work from the village store, by means of which she supported herself; but my first speaking acquaintance with her commenced one sunny afternoon in September, when, upon my return from school, I encountered her on the hill, picking high blackberries.

"What beautiful berries these are, Hester!" I said, stopping to pick a handful. "I think I must fill my dinner-basket, and carry them home for tea. They are very nice, are n't they?"

"I suppose they are good, to those who love them," answered Hester, indifferently.

"But you love them, I presume, or you would not be picking them?" I returned.

"No, not very well. I am going to make jam of them, for sick folks."

"Oh, is that it?"

There was silence for a few moments; and then, bent on being sociable, I held up a little bunch of wild-flowers, which I had gathered on my way up the hill-side, and asked,

"Are n't they pretty? Don't you love flowers, Hester?"

"I like to see them growing, but never pick them. There are a great many pretty flowers around here."

"Why don't you have flowers in your garden?" "It's too much trouble to take care of them; besides, I always see enough of them growing wild, as I go down the hill to the store."

"Well, but I like to have them growing in my garden, and I like to pick them, so I can smell them. I'm just as fond of flowers as Billy."

"And who is Billy?" asked Hester, with a grave sort of smile.

"Oh, he is my canary! a beautiful fellow as ever you saw. He sings all the day; and in the summer I put chickweed and all sorts of green things around his cage,—and you ought to see how delighted he is with them!"

"And do you think he likes to be kept in a cage?"

"I don't know, indeed; I never thought of it. I want to keep him, because I love to hear him sing, and he seems very happy."

"If you were to open the cage, what do you suppose he would do?"

"Fly out, to be sure."

"Well, then, if he wants to go, why don't you let him?"

"I should n't hear him sing then."

"Well, there would be plenty more about the house, and if you would throw them out a few crumbs they would sing just as well."

"Oh! but I have so many kitties, they kill all the little birds that come around the house."

"I don't keep cats," was the sententious answer.

"You have a dog, though?"

"No."

"I am very sure I saw one here last summer."

"That was a poor sick thing that got strayed away, and came here. I kept him till he got well, and then I gave him to Joe Saunders, the boy that does chores for me."

"Oh, that was it! I knew I saw one here."

By this time I had filled my basket, and, bidding Hester good afternoon, resumed my walk.

After this, I used to call frequently to see her, and, little by little, a quiet sort of friendship grew up between us. She never potted or caressed me; never took me on her knee and kissed me; never stroked back my long curls, and called me a nice child; never gave me caudies nor sugar-plums,—but once, when she was frying doughnuts, she broke one in two, and gave me half; and once again, of her own accord—for I never thought of asking her for things—she gave me a cookie, with loaf-sugar grated over it. This was the sum total of her coaxing; and yet, child as I was, I loved her, and I felt certain of her friendship for me.

I loved to go there; it was like going to a museum, there were so many odd, old-fashioned things about the house. The chairs were old and stiff-looking; there were little wood-engravings on the walls,—an Abraham attempting the life of Isaac with a sickle; a Solomon sitting on a throne, clad in ermine, ordering the division of the disputed child; and, what I always viewed as the gem of the collection, a white marble monument, a green willow tree, and a black-robed female, the latter devoutly contemplating, through an immaculate cambric handkerchief, the touching words, "In memory of —." This latter I always regarded as a masterpiece; and somehow, I cannot tell why, I grew to associate it with Hester's strange, unsovable ways. Another thing which I took particular delight in studying, was a little box which stood upon the bureau in her bed-room, all over which little gay pictures had been pasted, by some careful, tasteful hand, which I was sure was not Hester's. I loved to look at Hester, as she went about the house, taking care of her great crook-necked squashes, or preparing little packets of garden-seeds, which she sold at the store; or as she stood in the door, feeding her chickens.

She never talked much, and, when she did speak, it was in a grave, absent-minded way, which most people would have thought dull; but, as I was never at a loss for words, and she never reproved me for talking to her, I did not feel the want of companionship.

But at last I went away to boarding-school, and saw no more of Hester for several years. When at last I returned, a "finished" young lady, I made it one of my first duties to call upon Hester. I found her still the tall, strong, upright woman whom I had formerly known; but wrinkles had gathered upon her brow, and among the straight locks of black hair, which she now put back under a coarse, economical, black-lace cap, I saw threads of silver. Hester was growing old, yet she did not seem to know it. She was in manner the same grave, busy, sententious person as of old. Yet, I think, deep down in her heart was a consciousness of those grey hairs: it might not have been an unhappy consciousness; but I think it was the which deepened the shade of seriousness upon her brow.

She greeted me in her usual calm, matter-of-fact way, and invited me to a seat as quietly as if I had been any chance visitor run in for a call; yet I felt certain that she was glad to see me. We chatted in the old way for a time, and I noticed that Hester cast occasional furtive glances at a little locket which depended from my chain; but she asked no questions. I wanted to tell her all about it, so, touching the little spring and lifting it open before her, I said,

"Isn't he good looking, Hester?"

I had fallen into her way of talking when I was with her, and used the plainest possible words. She looked at the face attentively and then replied,

"Yes, I think so. Are you to be married soon?"

"It is not precisely settled yet."

She was still looking at it fixedly, and in silence, and I saw that her eyes grew moist. Presently she rose, and, going into her bedroom, she brought out the little picture-enameled box. Sitting down by me, she fitted the key in the lock and slowly raised the lid. She took out, first, a very old-fashioned paste brooch; then two beads of flagstone paper, one blue and the other white, and curiously interlaced. Several similar trifles followed, and then came a small and old, but carefully preserved, miniature. She held it a moment in her hand, and the tear which had been gathering in her eye fell upon it. She drew out an old, faded silk pocket-

handkerchief, and, having carefully wiped it away, silently placed the miniature in my hand.

It was a fair, laughing face, with large blue eyes, and a high forehead, around which clustered many a curl of rich chestnut hair; the complexion was fresh and ruddy, and the small, half parted mouth was almost feminine in its expression of sweetness and amiability. He looked not more than twenty, and I sighed to think how long it must have been since Hester was so young.

"How you must have mourned him!" I said; for I felt instinctively that he was dead: that heart would not have changed.

"I have always mourned him, since the day he died," she added, a touch of sadness mingled with her usually grave tone. "He was very good—my Archie, and I loved him very much."

"Could you tell me the story?" I asked, timidly, half afraid to penetrate into the sanctuary of her memory-embalmed heart.

She hesitated, as if it required an effort to bring out into daylight what had been hidden in darkness for so many years; but at last she commenced.

"We were both orphaned, and friendless, and poor; but we were the dearer to each other for that. He had been apprenticed till he was twenty-one, and his master was a hard one; but I comforted him, and begged him not to run away, and he was guided by me. At last his freedom day arrived, and he was very happy. He spent it all with me, telling me how happy he was, and how very soon he should be earning money for himself; and then we would be married, and I should not go out to work any more, but stay always with him, and take care of him. He was naturally so bright and hopeful.

"He had engaged to tend a saw-mill, and the next day he commenced. He had not been in the mill three hours, when he was caught in the gearing, and had both his limbs crushed fearfully—"

She paused, as if recalling the scene.

"It was an awful sight; I thought I should faint when I saw it, but I did not. He was carried to the house of his employer, Mr. Hobson. He had no friends to care for him; so I went and watched over him day and night. The surgeon pronounced his case critical, and said that nothing but the utmost care could save him. Mrs. Hobson was a feeble woman, with six children, and the family were poor; they could do no more for us than to give us a room in their house, and there, for six long weeks, I nursed him. He was all I had in the world. How could I have him die? He was better at last; the doctor said he would live, but must be a cripple for life. I was happy; all the world was brighter, since Archie was to live. I had prayed only for that, and that was granted me. You do not know, Bessie, what a blessed boon life is. You never will know, till one you love lies in the very gates of death, and is only given back to you at last, bereft of all that makes life beautiful. Had he been deaf and dumb, and blind, so there had been been life left in that warm heart, which I knew beat only for me, I should have been happy. His voice, his smiles, his answering looks of love, all were left me; I was thrice blest.

"I worked and paid his board, and he learned to make baskets, and earned enough for all his other wants. It was such joy to me to go there, to the little brown house where he lived, and see him sitting in the sunshine, singing merrily, and weaving his baskets, or cutting out toys with his knife, or making little fancy boxes to sell to the young people. He made this box, and these little tributes for me; he was very fond of pretty things.

"But it pained him that I had to work so hard for him; it shamed him, too, to see others, his former mates, making costly presents to their sweethearts, and he, he said, was only a burden to me. God knows I was happier in doing for him than if I had been Queen of the Indies. But I thought it would be better if I was his wife, and we could live somewhere away from those who knew us. I had an aunt living in this village. She is dead now. I came to her to ask advice. While I was here I saw this cottage; it was just the home I wanted, so I worked and saved, and bought it. I would not hire it, lest sometime I might be taken sick, or die, and then Archie would be turned out of his home. It was years before it was accomplished; but it came, at length, the happy day when I could call it mine.

"Then I furnished it very plainly, much as you see it now; but I did my best, and I knew Archie would be satisfied. I had to come over here once more before we were married, and I thought it would be so pleasant to bring Archie and let him look at our little home; it would please him, I thought, and make him feel more as if it was his own. So I hired a horse and carriage, an old, gentle horse, and an easy chaise, and drove him over here. It was ten miles—a long ride—but it was a pleasant spring day, just such a one as he loved,

and I thought he could bear it; and so he did, bravely, poor fellow.

"I drove as near as I could to the house, and then I tied the horse to the bushes, and lifted the thin, light form from the carriage, and with one arm around him for support, we walked up the little path. We went over the house; it took us some time, you see, and he was better pleased even than I had hoped. Then together we planted the rose-bush which grows under the window; he was like you, Bessie, fond of flowers, and the rose was a pet one, which I had given him when he was first lamed. We were to be married the next week, and Archie would bring it first, so that when we came again it should be there to welcome us. It would seem more like home, he said. When that was finished, we sat down together under the old oak by the door. Archie had been very cheerful till then; but as we sat there, my arm still around his waist, for he was weary, he laid his head upon my bosom, and looking up into my face, he said—

"Hester, I cannot make it seem that this is to be our real, own home; that you and I are to live here together and comfort each other all through life. I do not know how I could live to be so happy. I think something will happen."

"Oh, Bessie! you don't know what a cold shudder ran through my heart as he spoke. I held him closer to me, as if I could not, would not lose him; but I grew calm and tried to cheer him, and he was soon talking hopefully again, planning out the pleasant life which seemed to lie before us.—Poor as we were, with not a dollar we could call our own, save what was in this little, old house, we could not have been happier in that half hour, if the wealth of the world had been ours."

Hester paused, a tear rolled down her cheek, and her voice trembled as she continued—

"The sun grew low, and I locked the house, and gave the key to him; he would not take it at first; but I told him it was his, all his, we should never have had it, if it had not been for him, and at last he put into his pocket, looking up to me with one of his hopeful, grateful glances, as he did so. I helped him into the old chaise, and drove slowly homeward.

"It was past sundown, and I was beginning to hasten, lest Archie might take cold in the damp evening air, when, just as we were descending a narrow hill-road, a carriage and a span of fiery horses, driven by two roystering youths, whom I well knew, and whose cruel jeers had often sorely wounded Archie's tender heart, came dashing furiously on behind us. They strove to pass us, but the wheels locked, the chaise was upset, and my poor Archie was thrown out. The heartless creatures passed on, with a loud, reckless laugh, and left me alone to raise Archie, half-stunned, from the ground, to lift him to the righted carriage, and to drive home, four miles, over a wild and lonely road.

"How I lived out those hours, I do not know; the next three days seem like a horrid nightmare to me; yet I know that I watched ceaselessly over his low couch, and staunched the blood which oozed from his pale, parted lips; and I know how, at last, upon the very day, the very hour, when he was to have been my own—all, all my own—he raised his pale face to my bosom, and breathed out his last breath calmly there.

"Bessie, I was more a widow than many a one who wears weeds until her dying day. I staid only to see him buried, and then I came here, and here I have lived every day since, and here, please God, I will die.

"They told me I might prosecute those two young men, and recover damages. As if I could take the price of my Archie's blood in my hands! No; I will toil like a slave, before I will touch such money. Let them go; they will have their doom hereafter!"

I had leaned my head upon my hand, and was weeping, but Hester's eyes were tearless.

"I don't know why I have told you this," she said. "Never before, in twenty long years, has the story passed my lips; but when I saw the happy glance with which your eye rested on the face of your beloved, I wanted you to know that there are hearts to whom such happiness as you have promised yourself, such a life of love and devotion as seems to lie before you, has never been granted; and yet, Bessie, you never will be as happy as I have been, for it is not in you, to toil and strive, as I have toiled and striven, for the one you love. Some think your fate a happier one; but there is joy in such self-sacrifice, that few hearts taste in this life. Bessie, remember this—it is the love which willingly, joyfully, nails self to the cross, and freely pours out its life-blood for the beloved one, which yields the richest draughts of happiness here, and which will endure throughout eternity."