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"Truth Versus Fiction."

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By Miss C. M. Sedgwick.

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[p. 1]

"Are you writing for the December number of the Columbian Magazine?" asked a certain dear friend of mine, who came into my room just as I was sitting down to my desk yesterday.

"Yes, I shall begin this morning, if you do not prevent me."

"Don't flare up, my dear; I have no intention of preventing or hindering you. Have you a subject?"

"Yes; I was thinking of founding a little story upon the remarkable exploit of our village amazons the other day, but if you have anything better to suggest, my alms-basket is at your feet; I shall be grateful to you for any aid to my invention."

"I do not expect your gratitude. I know there are no people more tenacious of the old proverb, 'many hands spoil the broth,' than you writers. I was about—very modestly—to make a suggestion. You are going to write a story for the magazine; the country is drugged with stories."

"No more of that, 'if you love me, Hal.'"

My friend proceeded: "Suppose you abandon fiction for once."

"Why—my story is founded on fact."

"Rather a small foundation," interposed one of those fair young amazons, whose brave deeds I would fain have illustrated. "Your foundations are like city lots; so narrow that you are compelled to run your structure far up into the air."

"I have, at least, one advantage," I replied. "This sort of structure does not betray its want of solidity."

"Perhaps not," resumed my friend, "but the unreality weakens the impression; so soon as an article is found to be 'a leetle mixed,' to borrow our Western friend's expression, the adulterating matter violates the whole. But to come to the point, it seems to me that at this closing and solemn season of the year, it would be well to intersperse the stories of a magazine with something better adapted to the December of our lives."

“But will our public take broth and biscuit, when all sorts of piquant preparations are got up for them by the cunning *artistes* of such works?”

“Try them. The late Mathew Carey, himself a doer of good, proposed that records of virtue in private life should be made. Such records might do something in this imitative world to stimulate the zeal of profitable emulation, or at least to awaken our confidence and hope in humanity. Pardon me if I repeat that however strong the assurance may be of a fact foundation, there is always uncertainty attached to a fictitious narrative. I speak for myself; on my mind there is all the difference in the effect of a real and an imaginary character that there is in the landscape of this morning—distinct, clear and defined in this brilliant sunshine—and that of yesterday, exaggerated and dimmed by the floating mist.”

I sighed over my craft, but I could not but acknowledge that there was justice in my friend’s criticism. My thoughts turned to those tenants of our new made graves to whom he had alluded; persons of no eventful history nor very marked character, but whose example, for that very reason, might better harmonize with general experience. They were hidden in their lowly estate and, like the lakes deep set in the bosom of our hills, they were a serene mirror of Heaven. And now that with the leafy veil that shrouded these, their natural types, their veil of life has fallen, it is fitting

[p. 2]

that the beam of their pure lives should extend beyond the very narrow limit of their mortal career.

The brilliant examples of those eminent men and women, whose biographies are trumpeted through the world, are not adapted to the every day’s wants of a medium condition. What have the wives of our American citizens, or those of our village artizans and country farmers, in common with Madame de Stael, Madame de Genlis, the mistresses of Louis Fourteenth, or even the “eminent women of England?”

Our home productions are better suited for our home market, and we believe there are women in our towns and villages whose domestic, unconscious virtues, not elicited or set off by uncommon circumstances, would be far more edifying to the million than the blazonry of great real names, or the possible perfection of imaginary characters. But the true story must be told, and this remains to be done by some master hand. Our humbler task is to record a few traits in the characters of two of our village maidens who have fallen with the falling year.

Harriet Gale was known among her own set as a quiet, kind-hearted, industrious girl, who performed her duties well and said nothing about them. They were to her the allotted work of life and she did them cheerfully, without any apparent thought of difficulty in the task or merit in its accomplishment. Two or three years since she was invited to live with a sister who was well established somewhere in the vast West.

She found a happy and exciting home there and was delighted with her improved condition. It must be confessed that our emigrants from New England, in their earnest struggle for the good things of this life, sometimes forget the commandment, “Honor thy father and thy mother.” Their thoughts are on their fair fresh fields, standing thick with corn, and they do not,

like Joseph, remember the old man whom they may have left straitened at home. Our friend Harriet did remember him. Her father is aged, and hearing that her presence and filial ministry were becoming important to him, she did not hesitate for a moment to sacrifice her agreeable position to his comfort and, “true to the kindred points of Heaven and home,” she returned to him.

There is too little sympathy between youth and age; it is difficult to make activity and repose harmonize. The stream of love and care, sacrifice and benefaction, naturally runs down from parent to child, and to this order of nature the parent’s love is generally adequate. But when, as sometimes toward the close of life, the stream is to be turned and the child is to minister to the parent, the exigence requires an extraordinary virtue in both. The child’s mid-day must be somewhat dimmed, if not obscured—the parent’s chill twilight must be warmed and brightened—each must conform to the other.

“I thought it a privilege,” said Harriet to me, when first I made her acquaintance a few weeks before her death, “to come home and do what I could for father.”

“Father is always kind and always cheerful--he never lets anything worry him, come what will, and he has had enough to make other men disappointed and fractious--poor old man! I am afraid he will miss me! I said to him this morning, father, I don’t know who will keep your accounts and mend your pens when I am gone.”

“He did not answer me. He could not; but he will give up. I know he will—he is used to it!”

Here was no exaggeration of her importance—no selfish or egotistic fear that she should be forgotten.

Harriet had a step-mother, a name that is for the most part a signal for the revolt of the affections—a relation that enlists all the mean jealousies, selfishnesses and asperities that beset domestic life, and in truth is so involved in difficulties that few seem to think it worth while to struggle against its tendencies.

“It seems,” said Miss Gale to me, with a sweet smile, “when mother (her step-mother) enters into that door as if an angel entered my room. She has made this room seem to me like the gates of Paradise. I have many kind hands to smooth my pillow, but there is no hand like mother’s!”

I would abstain from the published praise of living worth, but I cannot forbear saying that there must have been an equal fidelity in both parties to make this happiness. God’s servants are the only true alchemists—they alone turn the baser metals to gold.

There are few of the relations of life that produce the happiness of which He who “set the solitary in families” has made them capable. How many barrels or half tilled fields are there in domestic life. We cease to wonder at the abuses of the conjugal relation—that relation most beset with difficulties and most liable to abuse—when we see parents and children, brothers and sisters, fail to reap the golden harvest of which their Heavenly Father has sown their fields at broad cast.

I saw Harriet Gale when she was fast sinking away with consumption. She was so cheerful and manifested so hearty an interest in all the village concerns, that I took it for granted that, like many persons in that disease, she was deluded as to its progress, and I was taken by surprise when our kind village dress-maker having sent her word she was prevented coming to watch with her, by some fancy dresses which must be finished for a fancy ball to be given on the next evening (the 4th of July), she said, "Well, I don't envy them; death

[3]

looks pleasanter to me than life ever did. I have enjoyed living too!" she added, with a sweet smile.

How few there are who on such an occasion would not have indulged in some lamentation over the frivolity of the world, in which, alas! for poor human nature, a drop of pharisaical self-complacency would have mingled. Harriet Gale's pure spirit was like those healthy atmospheres that disinfect whatever they embrace.

It was on the same eve of our festival of independence that, raising her feeble head and looking through the window at the stars, she said, "It is a clear night and I think we shall have a pleasant day to-morrow. I hope so, for it is a pity to have so many people disappointed."

Such cheerful and gentle sympathies are rarely felt in the midst of suffering (Miss Gale's was extreme at this time), and they are therefore more impressive than strong and bold, expressions of religious triumph.

She used no threadbare phrases to express her feelings, nor seemed for a moment to think there was anything unusual about them. Her face and tones were uniformly quiet and cheerful. She said to me with her habitual and never to be forgotten smile, "My happiest hours have been in this room!"

"But you have suffered here extremely," I replied.

"Yes," she answered, "but god is good, and if it were better that I should be removed with less suffering, I certainly should be."

Harriet Gale had been from her early youth a member of the Methodist church; and her familiar friends looked upon her death but as the fitting conclusion to the Christian fidelity of her life.

Those strangers who were admitted to the privilege of seeing her in the last extremity, for the first time, saw how it was that the sting of death was taken away, and heard, mingling with her sweet tones, '*It is I--be not afraid.*'

'The Lord taketh pleasure in his people. He will beautify the meek with salvation.'

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It is but two Sundays since the body of another of these meek servants of their Lord was reverently borne into our beautiful little church and set down before the chancel, while her pastor interpreted the occasion to our hearts and held before us the instruction of her life and the consolation of her death.

She had endured a life-time of invalidism by bending like a reed before the relentless blast. For many years she had supported herself and contributed to the support of her family with her needle, and by doing, that worst paid of all labor, plain sewing. To “stitch, stitch, stitch,” was the business of her life, and it was done with such fidelity and completeness that her employers became her friends. She never brought reproach or self-reproach upon herself by unpunctuality. Her work when done was well done; so well that I believe it would be difficult to estimate the amount of comfort she has produced by her humble ministry. No seam of hers ripped, no button came off, no string was wanting. Thus a world of petty vexation was saved—a world of that chafing and fretting that makes up so much of the friction of life.

She was free from an infirmity very common among our people who, while they sell their services, soothe their pride, wounded by the implied inferiority, by telling you, with no thought of abating the money compensation but making a little more than the thing is worth, that they will do it to oblige you. Thus ‘to accommodate you’ you are permitted to board in a family at the highest price going, you have the ‘privilege’ of hiring a horse, or buying a turkey, or purely to oblige you, your sewing is done. Our friend was quite above this sort of cant. She wanted employment and she was grateful for it, and so the relation between her and her employer had its reciprocal blessing.

She knew the value of her moderate gains. They secured to her independence and gave a comfortable aspect to her family. Some years ago the price of sewing in our village was considerably advanced and it was recommended to her to raise her prices. “No,” she said, “I am quite satisfied with the provision my good God has made for me.”

Her pale face and attenuated form told the story of her life of bodily suffering, but that pale face was lighted up with contentment, patience, and cheerfulness, so that to her seemed already accomplished the promise to the faithful, ‘They shall be like Him for they shall see Him as He is.’ She saw her Father in her God.

Not long before her death a subscription paper was offered to her for money to adorn our burial place. She cheerfully rose on her bed and wrote her name for the last time, saying, “It is pleasant for me to think that I shall be laid to rest in that beautiful place.”

Her life so gradually and gently faded away that neither she nor her friends were aware of the diminution of her light till it was nearly extinct. Then, when a loving and devoted sister told her she had not many hours to live, she asked to be left for a little while to herself. And when that sacred communion, which words could but imperfectly have interpreted, was over, she sang with a low but sustained voice a part of the hymn beginning

Could I but read my title clear  
To mansions in the skies.

“How beautiful it is to die,” she said, and while the words were passing from her lips her soul

[p. 4]

realized its holy vision and passed from the dead body to eternal life.

So lived with sweet patience and so died with sublime faith our village seamstress--  
Harriet Greenleaf.

“Around thy earthly tomb let roses rise, an everlasting Spring, in memory of that  
delightful fragrance which was once from thy mild manners quietly exhaled.”