

THE OLDEST FRIEND.

BY LOUISE CHANDLER MOULTON.

Oh, life, my life! 'tis many a year since we took hands together, and came through the morn. When thou an' I day and I were newly born— And fair the future looks, and glad and free, A year ago as now as we stood in the thorn. And full of joys that could not be outworn: And time was measureless for thee and me.

Long have we fared together, thou and I: Then hast grown dearer, as old friends must grow; Small wonder if I dread to say good-bye. When our long pact is over, and I go To enter strange, new worlds beyond the sky. With Death, thy rival, to whom none saith "No."

—*Harper's Magazine.*

PRECIOUS POLL.

BY ALMA E. M'KEE.

CHAPTER I.

"There, just so; a little more to the right, perhaps. It does seem as though that window affords me more satisfaction, as regards light and sun, than either of the others. Do sit down now, Mehitable; it makes me nervous to see you on your feet so much."

"Oh, auntie," in a soft, sweet voice, "don't worry about me. I am doing nicely, I assure you. But I'm afraid you are not nearly so well to-day, are you? You look paler than usual."

"No, niece. I am not quite as well to-day as yesterday; for, do you know, I worry so much about your future. Here we are eating up our small income, inch by inch, and when that is gone we must of necessity starve. That servant is not worth her salt. I fear I shall be obliged to discharge her; and Marion is so thoughtless. What need has she—a poor girl—wasting her money and time in such foolishness as drawing and painting and nonsense?" And Aunt Cynthia Crowell looked the picture of vexation.

"Oh, auntie, I trust we are not quite so destitute as that. Why, that gold pin of mine would sell for something, I dare say, if it should come to that extremity; and, besides, there is a man around paying quite a price for all species of birds for his museum, and I thought that that old parrot of yours, auntie—"

"Mehitable Ryder! Do you dare to intimate such a cruel, utterly monstrous, proposal as that to me? My darling Poll, that I have had since my babyhood? That I have taught to talk and walk and blink at me, and who shows more real affection for me, accordingly, than either of my nieces? No! I shall keep her until she dies, and then have her stuffed. I fear it will not be long until that occurs, for she seems to be drooping of late. Don't you notice it, Mehitable?"

A smothered laugh, followed by a forced cough from behind the heavy folds of damask, screening one of the windows, drove the similar inclination from the lips of Hettie, as it sounded too derivative when proceeding from those of another; and, forcing the smile from her lips, she said, abruptly:

"Aunt Cynthia, this is a lovely day. May we not (that is, Marion and I) give you a turn or two under the laurels, in your invalid chair? Please say yes, auntie."

"Well, niece, I suppose I may as well submit at once, or stand the chance of being teased out of my senses. But make sure that you wrap me up good. Marion! Marion! where are you? Put away those fol-de-rols, and come immediately to assist your cousin; you always was lazy. I shall leave my precious Poll to Mehitable; see if I don't," she muttered under her breath.

Marion appeared in an incredibly short space of time, judging that she was not visibly near before her aunt's call, and at once took up her station by the side of Hettie.

"Are you easy, Aunt Cynthia?" kindly inquired Hettie, as she was being propped on the thick green grass.

"Well, I shouldn't wonder," answered that eccentric individual, leaning back comfortably in her well-cushioned chair. "But, I say, who is that insolent-looking young man staring in here? I wonder if he ever saw me before, or is it you he's conferring so much honor on. Marion? I have half a mind to ask him, the impudent fellow."

"Oh, aunt, please, please, do not; indeed, he is not impudent," exclaimed poor Hettie, coloring to the roots of her bright golden curls, while mortification looked from her pretty blue eyes. "He is admiring our flower-beds; don't you see that he is moving away now?"

"Yes, and it's high time he did, too; after making such big eyes at you and scraping and bowing like a conceited monkey that he is. Why didn't you cut him, Mehitable? What is he to you?"

"What is he to me, aunt? I love him, and have promised some time in the future to marry him!" exclaimed Hettie, her face now pale with apprehension.

"Indeed!" scornfully. "Well, niece, I must say, you have taken the reins into your own hands entirely, you and he. Never come near the old woman to ask consent or leave, but ignore my advice altogether. Now, let me tell you plainly, Mehitable, you are not of age, as yet, and with my consent you'll never marry that brazen dog! Dye hear that?" and, the irate old lady turned full round in her chair, that she might better view the effect of her words. "And I may say, right here, that I do not admire your taste in the least."

And she laughed a hard, discordant laugh as she watched his retreating figure, almost out of sight.

"Had we not better go in now, aunt?" asked Hettie, anxious to fly to her own chamber and solitude.

"Oh, yes; anything to be agreeable. I am sure I don't care! But it appears to me you tire of this beautiful landscape and bright sunshine remarkably soon to-day. However, let us go in!"

They entered the house and the invalid room, assisted Cynthia to bed, then sat down, Hettie at some lace work, Marion with her drawing material. Very soon the aunt, apparently, slept peacefully; at least she snored "horribly," as Marion termed it.

"Yes!" responded Marion, "I have a letter or two, to write."

"What do you think put aunt out so to-day?" asked Marion.

"Oh, I'm sure I don't know; except it was that she heard you snickered be-

hind the curtain, and deemed it unkind. But then she is sick, and that is reason enough. I dare say I should be no better in her place." And tender-hearted Hettie flushed with sympathy for her queer old aunt.

"Well, by the way, Het, I admire your pluck and candor exceedingly. How ever did you have courage to acknowledge your acquaintance with that 'conceited monkey?'" asked Marion, laughing merrily.

Hettie colored a little indignantly, as she answered:

"I meant to have told aunt long ago. I advised Gordon to leave all to me, as I, perhaps, might gain her consent best, understanding her nature as I do."

"I presume I ought to congratulate you, coz; but the fact is, I think you are too good for such as he. I always considered Gordon Lyle a perfect dupe; and he has nothing to buy bread with, let alone a place of shelter and such comforts as you have always been accustomed to!" exclaimed Marion, positively.

"I did not suppose, for an instant, that you could look with favor upon any more than the one of the male sex!" exclaimed Hettie, somewhat sarcastically. "If Val Merrivale is more than reputed wealthy, I shall be very much mistaken." And Hettie felt as though she had sent that arrow home.

"Well, we will not quarrel, Het; but I like Algernon Sydney's little finger better than Gordon Lyle's whole body, to use a familiar saying; and if love was not blind, as it is in your case, you would have said 'yes,' instead of 'no,' to him a month or two ago, when he laid his honest heart at your shrine."

"You are getting more eloquent as you progress, fair coz; but I'm sorry it is all lost on me. Every person in this civilized age has a right to his own opinion. I claim that privilege as mine, therefore, and yield up very willingly to you the marrying the bear for the sake of his den," laughingly responded Hettie. "I will visit you in your palace, and after that, if you are not too far above me, you may come to my hovel. Now is not that fair?"

"Yes, perfectly. And I shall not envy you your precious poll-parrot, either, I promise you. You may keep feathers and all," and the fun-loving Marion laughed as though she enjoyed the joke at her cousin's expense.

"What do you mean, girls, by such hoydenish proceedings?" came in sharp, shrill tones from the curtained alcove. "Loop back this curtain, and drop forever those vile slang phrases. How many times have I cautioned you, not to use them, and how will people think I have brought you up? No credit at all; no, none! You may leave the room, both of you, if you choose. The sun is declining, and I should like a short time alone, to think, ere you ring for lights." Marion, only too glad to be dismissed from her aunt's vigilant eye, fled precipitately from the room, singing as she went, "Come, haste to the wedding," looking teasingly at her cousin's more leisurely gait, over her shoulder; and said, as they reached the hall below, "Come out on the balcony, Het, and we will watch the glorious sun decline, as aunt expresses it."

And while the two cousins are thus employed, we will return again to the sick room, and learn the mind of Aunt Cynthia, if possible, as she sits, propped up with pillows, her old, withered hands fondling the plumage of her pet—her parrot. "So it was Gordon Lyle! How neatly I found out all about him! Cynthia Crowell, you were always called clever! And now to ascertain whether your niece or her prospects is the object of his visits. Let me see! Yes, I have a brilliant idea, too. Well see how it will work. Patience, Cynthia, you are worth two dead women yet."

The note was from Gordon Lyle, and ran thus:

MISS RYDER—MY DEAR HETTIE: I scarcely know how to begin. I esteem you very highly; nay, love you as a brother loves a sister, but fear I have made a mistake in asking you to marry me, under the circumstances. In fact, I care for some one else, and thought it the more honorable way to write to you at once. I hope you will not mind this much, but, rather, think of me as one not worthy of your true, loving heart. Yours, regrettably, GORDON LYLE.

"The faithless—"

"Stay, Marion. Perhaps, after all, I have been very fortunate to escape him. This note saves me the trouble of acquainting him with my promise to the dead. How I dreaded it! It seemed so hard to give him up. But now, I do not know but my love for him may turn to contempt. That note is cruel, heartless in the extreme."

The funeral over, the will was read, which bequeathed to Mehitable Ryder Precious Poll, and the house and lot to Marion Gray, a few articles of well-worn clothing to her servant, and the vast property was disposed of.

A few days after the events recorded, the following conversation took place between Marion and Hettie Ryder:

"Indeed! I think I may guess where, without any trouble. I believe you're rather sweet in that quarter; and depend upon it, she's a treasure!"

"Yes, if that meddlesome old woman was not in the way. By George, she's a tartar!"

"I'm not much acquainted with the aunt, but know the young ladies well. In fact, Lyle, if you desire to know, I think more of one of them than is really good for me, for it is not returned."

"You foolish girl to ask such a ridiculous question!" exclaimed Marion, while her eyes filled with tears. "Of course, this home is as much yours as mine; mine just as long as either, or both of us remain single," said the noble girl.

"But how am I to reach his perch? I never was good at climbing! A ring at the door! Who can it be? May?"

"A gentleman to see Miss Ryder!" announced the girl at the same moment.

"Show him up, Jane; I will receive him in my boudoir."

"Ah! Mr. Sydney; glad to see you!" Hettie was heard to say, in her clear, dulcet tones. "As it is you, an old friend, would you think it presumptuous in me if I requested you to assist me a little?"

"Most certainly not, Miss Ryder. Shall be only too glad to serve you."

"Please step this way."

"Ah, Miss Marion, you're as blooming as ever. I came in to help to cast away some of the recent gloom, if possible," he said, real sympathy in his look and tone. "How lonely you two must be."

"Yes, we have been since the death of our aunt," candidly avowed Marion,

"Do not deceive yourself, Gordon Lyle," his companion said, his lip curling with scorn. "I, myself, was mourning this morning, and Miss Crowell was mourning over the loss of her pet parrot. 'But, after all,' she said, 'it is well, perhaps, poor Poll died first, as I shall now see that she is properly stuffed, and that her glass eyes are made to look natural, for she is the legacy that I am to leave my dear niece Mehitable! All of the remainder shall go to Marion!' So, you see—why, what is the matter, Lyle? Are you ill?" And sure enough, his teeth were chattering, his eyes glaring at his companion, as though he had gone suddenly demented, and his face was fairly livid.

"Well, by the way, Het, I admire your pluck and candor exceedingly. How ever did you have courage to acknowledge your acquaintance with that 'conceited monkey?'" asked Marion, laughing merrily.

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"Oh, nothing, Al; except the oppressive heat. Great Scott, but it's hot! I believe I'll make for my boarding house. Good-bye, old fellow!"

"Good-bye, Lyle! take care of yourself!" and the two friends so much unlike parted.

"Well, of all things, that beats me!" soliloquized Algernon Sydney, making his way leisurely toward his hotel. "I did not suppose Gordon Lyle was one of that sort, to marry a woman for the sake of her money. No, hum! Wonders will never cease in this world. I wonder if my news had anything to do with his sudden illness. I wish I was in his place, though, as regards Miss Hettie; what a lucky dog he is."

And having arrived at his destination his thoughts turned into another channel.

CHAPTER III.

CONCLUSION.

Three days after the opening of our story, so uncertain is the disease called consumption, Aunt Cynthia was taken much worse. She ordered her lawyer to be sent for without delay. And the parrot which she had been very particular about, and which was placed in the most conspicuous place in the room (perched on the high mantel-shelf in range with her own bed, where she could feast her eyes on it constantly), looked down from its lofty perch with those wonderful glass eyes, "which seemed to blink and wink," the old lady said, "with its accustomed

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"The soundreul!" ejaculated Algernon Sydney, angrily. "How dare—"

"Sh—, Hettie is coming back!" exclaimed Marion, raising a warning finger.

With a much lighter heart than he had had for many a day, he sped up the ladder, and soon had his hands on the parrot. But, oh, horrible to relate! In reaching to seize a light, what was his amazement to find it leaden instead of feathered, and, being totally unprepared, it slipped from his grasp and fell, with a loud crash, to the floor!

"Oh!" exclaimed the two young ladies, with clasped hands, while the gentleman began to apologize and call himself stupid, awkward, etc. Hettie stooped to pick up Precious Poll, when the stuffing fell out in the form of pure solid gold.

A year from that time a double wedding was performed in the little chapel near by, when two happy couples were united—Mr. and Mrs. Sydney and Mr. and Mrs. Merrivale. But Hettie

sympathized with Marion, who had

"Oh, anything, auntie!" replied the sobbing Hettie.

"It will be harder than you think for, I fear, niece, so prepare. Promise me, on this, my death-bed, that you will never marry Gordon Lyle."

"Oh, auntie, is it really necessary? Must I sacrifice my love—?"

"Enough, Mehitable! If you wish to see me die happy you will not hesitate. It is for your own good, believe me. He is not worthy your pure love, and some day you may remember my words. I am going, niece! Be quiet—"

"Oh, yes, auntie, I promise!" said the poor girl, chokingly; "only bless me before you leave me."

The dying woman placed her hand on the bowed head of the weeping girl, and, in faint, quavering tones, said: "Bless you, my darling Mehitable! May God be good to—"

Her breath grew fainter, and she was no more.

The next day as Hettie and Marion were making some preparations for the funeral, a note was brought by the postboy for Miss Ryder. Wonderingly Hettie opened it, read it, then, with pale face and flashing eyes, mechanically handed it to Marion.

"Read that!" she said.

"Did I not read him aright? The wretch!" exclaimed Marion, angrily.

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