

AUNT MARY.

Since sketching character is the mode, I too take up my pencil, not to make you laugh, though peradventure it may be--to get you to sleep.

I am now a tolerably old gentleman--an old bachelor, moreover--and, what is more to the point, an unpretending and sober-minded one. Lest, however, any of the ladies should take exceptions against me in the very outset, I will merely remark, en passant, that a man can sometimes become an old bachelor because he has too much heart as well as too little.

Years ago--before any of my readers were born--I was a little good-for-nought of a boy, of precisely that unlucky kind who are always in every body's way, and always in mischief. I had, to watch over my uprearing, a father and mother, and a whole army of older brothers and sisters. My relatives bore a very great resemblance to other human beings, neither good angels nor the opposite class, but, as mathematicians say, "in the mean proportion."

As I have before insinuated, I was a sort of family scape-grace among them, and one on whose head all the domestic trespasses were regularly visited, either by real, actual desert or by imputation.

For this order of things, there was, I confess, a very solid and serious

foundation, in the constitution of my mind. Whether I was born under some cross-eyed planet, or whether I was fairy-smitten in my cradle, certain it is that I was, from the dawn of existence, a sort of "Murad the Unlucky;" an out-of-time, out-of-place, out-of-form sort of a boy, with whom nothing prospered.

Who always left open doors in cold weather? It was Henry. Who was sure to upset his coffee cup at breakfast, or to knock over his tumbler at dinner, or to prostrate saltcellar, pepper box, and mustard pot, if he only happened to move his arm? Why, Henry. Who was plate breaker general for the family? It was Henry. Who tangled mamma's silks and cottons, and tore up the last newspaper for papa, or threw down old Ph[oe]be's clothes horse, with all her clean ironing thereupon? Why, Henry.

Now all this was no "malice prepense" in me, for I solemnly believe that I was the best-natured boy in the world; but something was the matter with the attraction of cohesion, or the attraction of gravitation--with the general dispensation of matter around me--that, let me do what I would, things would fall down, and break, or be torn and damaged, if I only came near them; and my unluckiness in any matter seemed in exact proportion to my carefulness.

If any body in the room with me had a headache, or any kind of nervous irritability, which made it particularly necessary for others to be quiet, and if I was in an especial desire unto the same, I was sure, while stepping around on tiptoe, to fall headlong over a chair, which

would give an introductory push to the shovel, which would fall upon the tongs, which would animate the poker, and all together would set in action two or three sticks of wood, and down they would come together, with just that hearty, sociable sort of racket, which showed that they were disposed to make as much of the opportunity as possible.

In the same manner, every thing that came into my hand, or was at all connected with me, was sure to lose by it. If I rejoiced in a clean apron in the morning, I was sure to make a full-length prostration thereupon on my way to school, and come home nothing better, but rather worse. If I was sent on an errand, I was sure either to lose my money in going, or my purchases in returning; and on these occasions my mother would often comfort me with the reflection, that it was well that my ears were fastened to my head, or I should lose them too. Of course, I was a fair mark for the exhortatory powers, not only of my parents, but of all my aunts, uncles, and cousins, to the third and fourth generation, who ceased not to reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine.

All this would have been very well if nature had not gifted me with a very unnecessary and uncomfortable capacity of feeling, which, like a refined ear for music, is undesirable, because, in this world, one meets with discord ninety-nine times where it meets with harmony once. Much, therefore, as I furnished occasion to be scolded at, I never became used to scolding, so that I was just as much galled by it the forty-first time as the first. There was no such thing as philosophy

in me: I had just that unreasonable heart which is not conformed unto the nature of things, neither indeed can be. I was timid, and shrinking, and proud; I was nothing to any one around me but an awkward, unlucky boy; nothing to my parents but one of half a dozen children, whose faces were to be washed and stockings mended on Saturday afternoon. If I was very sick, I had medicine and the doctor; if I was a little sick, I was exhorted unto patience; and if I was sick at heart, I was left to prescribe for myself.

Now, all this was very well: what should a child need but meat, and drink, and room to play, and a school to teach him reading and writing, and somebody to take care of him when sick? Certainly, nothing.

But the feelings of grown-up children exist in the mind of little ones oftener than is supposed; and I had, even at this early day, the same keen sense of all that touched the heart wrong; the same longing for something which should touch it aright; the same discontent, with latent, matter-of-course affection, and the same craving for sympathy, which has been the unprofitable fashion of this world in all ages. And no human being possessing such constitutionals has a better chance of being made unhappy by them than the backward, uninteresting, wrong-doing child. We can all sympathize, to some extent, with men and women; but how few can go back to the sympathies of childhood; can understand the desolate insignificance of not being one of the grown-up people; of being sent to bed, to be out of the way in the evening, and to school, to be out of the way in the morning; of manifold similar

grievances and distresses, which the child has no elocution to set forth, and the grown person no imagination to conceive.

When I was seven years old, I was told one morning, with considerable domestic acclamation, that Aunt Mary was coming to make us a visit; and so, when the carriage that brought her stopped at our door, I pulled off my dirty apron, and ran in among the crowd of brothers and sisters to see what was coming. I shall not describe her first appearance, for, as I think of her, I begin to grow somewhat sentimental, in spite of my spectacles, and might, perhaps, talk a little nonsense.

Perhaps every man, whether married or unmarried, who has lived to the age of fifty or thereabouts, has seen some woman who, in his mind, is the woman, in distinction from all others. She may not have been a relative; she may not have been a wife; she may simply have shone on him from afar; she may be remembered in the distance of years as a star that is set, as music that is hushed, as beauty and loveliness faded forever; but remembered she is with interest, with fervor, with enthusiasm; with all that heart can feel, and more than words can tell.

To me there has been but one such, and that is she whom I describe. "Was she beautiful?" you ask. I also will ask you one question: "If an angel from heaven should dwell in human form, and animate any human face, would not that face be lovely? It might not be beautiful, but would it not be lovely?" She was not beautiful except after this fashion.

How well I remember her, as she used sometimes to sit thinking, with her head resting on her hand, her face mild and placid, with a quiet October sunshine in her blue eyes, and an ever-present smile over her whole countenance. I remember the sudden sweetness of look when any one spoke to her; the prompt attention, the quick comprehension of things before you uttered them, the obliging readiness to leave for you whatever she was doing.

To those who mistake occasional pensiveness for melancholy, it might seem strange to say that my Aunt Mary was always happy. Yet she was so. Her spirits never rose to buoyancy, and never sunk to despondency. I know that it is an article in the sentimental confession of faith that such a character cannot be interesting. For this impression there is some ground. The placidity of a medium commonplace mind is uninteresting, but the placidity of a strong and well-governed one borders on the sublime. Mutability of emotion characterizes inferior orders of being; but He who combines all interest, all excitement, all perfection, is "the same yesterday, to-day, and forever." And if there be any thing sublime in the idea of an almighty mind, in perfect peace itself, and, therefore, at leisure to bestow all its energies on the wants of others, there is at least a reflection of the same sublimity in the character of that human being who has so quieted and governed the world within, that nothing is left to absorb sympathy or distract attention from those around.

Such a woman was my Aunt Mary. Her placidity was not so much the result

of temperament as of choice. She had every susceptibility of suffering incident to the noblest and most delicate construction of mind; but they had been so directed, that, instead of concentrating thought on self, they had prepared her to understand and feel for others.

She was, beyond all things else, a sympathetic person, and her character, like the green in a landscape, was less remarkable for what it was in itself than for its perfect and beautiful harmony with all the coloring and shading around it.

Other women have had talents, others have been good; but no woman that ever I knew possessed goodness and talent in union with such an intuitive perception of feelings, and such a faculty of instantaneous adaptation to them. The most troublesome thing in this world is to be condemned to the society of a person who can never understand any thing you say unless you say the whole of it, making your commas and periods as you go along; and the most desirable thing in the world is to live with a person who saves you all the trouble of talking, by knowing just what you mean before you begin to speak.

Something of this kind of talent I began to feel, to my great relief, when Aunt Mary came into the family. I remember the very first evening, as she sat by the hearth, surrounded by all the family, her eye glanced on me with an expression that let me know she saw me; and when the clock struck eight, and my mother proclaimed that it was my bedtime, my countenance fell as I moved sorrowfully from the back of her rocking

chair, and thought how many beautiful stories Aunt Mary would tell after I was gone to bed. She turned towards me with such a look of real understanding, such an evident insight into the case, that I went into banishment with a lighter heart than ever I did before. How very contrary is the obstinate estimate of the heart to the rational estimate of worldly wisdom! Are there not some who can remember when one word, one look, or even the withholding of a word, has drawn their heart more to a person than all the substantial favors in the world? By ordinary acceptance, substantial kindness respects the necessities of animal existence; while those wants which are peculiar to mind, and will exist with it forever, by equally correct classification, are designated as sentimental ones, the supply of which, though it will excite more gratitude in fact, ought not to in theory. Before Aunt Mary had lived with us a month, I loved her beyond any body in the world; and a utilitarian would have been amused in ciphering out the amount of favors which produced this result. It was a look--a word--a smile: it was that she seemed pleased with my new kite; that she rejoiced with me when I learned to spin a top; that she alone seemed to estimate my proficiency in playing ball and marbles; that she never looked at all vexed when I upset her workbox upon the floor; that she received all my awkward gallantry and mal-adroit helpfulness as if it had been in the best taste in the world; that when she was sick, she insisted on letting me wait on her, though I made my customary havoc among the pitchers and tumblers of her room, and displayed, through my zeal to please, a more than ordinary share of insufficiency for the station. She also was the only person that ever I conversed with, and I used to wonder how any



body who could talk all about matters and things with grown-up persons could talk so sensibly about marbles, and hoops, and skates, and all sorts of little-boy matters; and I will say, by the by, that the same sort of speculation has often occurred to the minds of older people in connection with her. She knew the value of varied information in making a woman, not a pedant, but a sympathetic, companionable being; and such she was to almost every class of mind.

She had, too, the faculty of drawing others up to her level in conversation, so that I would often find myself going on in most profound style while talking with her, and would wonder, when I was through, whether I was really a little boy still.

When she had enlightened us many months, the time came for her to take leave, and she besought my mother to give me to her for company. All the family wondered what she could find to like in Henry; but if she did like me, it was no matter, and so was the case disposed of.

From that time I lived with her--and there are some persons who can make the word live signify much more than it commonly does--and she wrought on my character all those miracles which benevolent genius can work. She quieted my heart, directed my feelings, unfolded my mind, and educated me, not harshly or by force, but as the blessed sunshine educates the flower, into full and perfect life; and when all that was mortal of her died to this world, her words and deeds of unutterable love shed a twilight around her memory that will fade only in the

brightness of heaven.