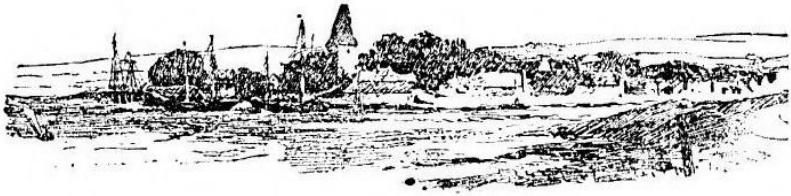


COUSIN MARY

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT



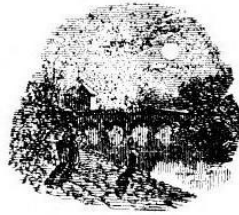
“BY-AND-BY IT CAME TO PASS THAT THESE TWO MET... IN THE COTTAGES”

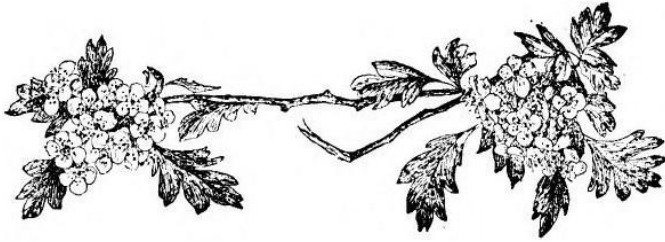


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COUSIN MARY.

CHAPTER I.

ONLY MARY.

THE Prescotts of Horton had been a powerful family in their day. Their house still was more in accordance with their past greatness than with the mediocrity of their fortune at the period of their history which has first to be indicated to the reader. They were no longer in the first rank in their county, but had settled down by degrees without any great fall, into the position of ordinary squires: that is to say, their fall had happened a hundred and fifty years before, in the time of that unhappy attempt to subvert the government established by the Revolution, which is known as the "Fifteen." The Prescott of that period had joined the rebellion, if rebellion it could be called, and had escaped with his life at its disastrous conclusion. His son had secured a portion of the family belongings, but never had been able to regain the wealth or the position of his forefathers; and since then the family had remained humble but proud, thinking a great deal of themselves, but not thought quite so much of by their neighbours—a family not clever, nor any way distinguished, yet furnishing its quota of stout soldiers and respectable clergymen, with now and then a lawyer or two, to the service of the state.

The elder brother, the Squire, had been generally a dullish, goodish sort of man, doing his duty fairly well, fairly kind to his younger brothers and sisters, keeping up the ancestral house as well as he could on means not great enough for any splendour, and giving more or less a home to the scattered members of his family. The great advantage of those much abused laws of primogeniture,

entail, or whatever else they may be which fix the succession in one member of a family, is this—that they are far more apt to keep up a central point, a family home, than any other arrangement yet discovered. When all share alike, no one has any particular claim upon the others, and ancestral homes, like all other primitive regulations for preserving the sacred nucleus of the family, cease to be.

The younger Prescott brothers went off to seek their fortunes in every generation; the elder always kept up the house. It depended upon his character, and perhaps still more on that of his wife, whether this home was or was not a kindly one, but still it was always there; a possible shelter in all circumstances, a perpetual court of appeal against the injustices of the world.

I have not space enough here to describe the old house, which was much too great for the income and pretensions of the present occupant. It was a great house, partly Elizabethan, with additions in later days, with two great wings, in one of which was a fine portrait gallery, while the other contained the show apartments of the house, a suite of rooms which were quite worthy to have been occupied by a king, though fact compels us to add that royalty had made but a very slight use of them. King Charles, in one of his hasty rides in the midst of his troubled career, had paused to eat a morsel in the hall, and to wash his royal hands in a dressing-room. This was all, but it was something, and the rooms were beautiful with their faded furniture and heavy old hangings and tapestries, and chairs covered with embroidered work. All this was very much faded, and kept with difficulty from falling to pieces; but it was very imposing, and strangers came from all quarters to see the house. The pictures in the gallery were all portraits now, though it was a tradition that there had once been several old Masters which

were sold in the troubles, but of which the frames still remained, blankly filled up by pieces of old brocade, in themselves a sight to see. Some even of the portraits, especially those which had been painted by famous masters, had disappeared too, so that the importance of the gallery in point of art was small.

These remains of glory past were separate from the living part of the house. They were kept in order, and shown to strangers, a point of family pride which every Prescott held to be essential. But the existing Prescotts lived in the centre part of the house, which was too large for them, with its great hall and the other beautiful rooms, so airy and spacious, which were the creation of a generation which did not fear expense and loved space. The fine wainscoted room which was used as the dining-room in modern days, accommodated thirty people easily at dinner, whereas the Prescotts numbered but six, and seldom had company. The drawing-room was still larger, with noble broad bay windows, each as big as a modern room. To furnish all this, it may be supposed, was no trifle; and the furniture was shabby; what was old, faded; what was new, not half good enough for the natural splendour of the place. Nevertheless, new and old together harmonised somehow by mere use and wont, and the general appearance was that of a mingled humility and pride, like the character of the family, which thought such great things of itself and yet was able to do only little things and occupy a small position in the world.

This family consisted of six persons, as has been said—the Squire and his wife; the eldest son, who was very far from clever, who was, indeed, sometimes considered to be “not all there,” a mild, long young man, with an elongated, melancholy visage, not unlike that of the tragic monarch whose passing visit had given a

historical association to the house. His name was not a romantic one; it was plain John, according to the habit of the house. He was very mild in all his tastes; good so far as a person, so neutral-tinted could be called good; kind, disturbing nobody, ready to do almost anything that was asked of him, so long as it was asked with due regard to his dignity—but as thoroughly aware of his importance as a Prescott, and the eldest son, as if he had possessed all the brains of the house. Then there were two sisters, no longer very young, but who had not yet renounced the *rôle* of youth, and who were always called “the girls,” according to general family usage.

Last of all was Percival, the soldier, the youngest, the prodigal, the spendthrift, the clever one, the beloved of the house. All these names do not mean that there was anything bad about Percy—quite the reverse. His gaiety made the house bright, his laugh rang through all the great rooms and woke cheerful echoes. Money trickled through his fingers he could not tell how, but he did no particular harm with it. The worst was that he was generally away from home with his regiment, and when he came home, though it was a delight to look forward to, and did everybody good, Mr. Prescott was always awfully conscious that for this happiness there would certainly be a good deal to pay. “That is all very well, my dear,” he would say to his wife, “so long as I live: but when John is master poor Percy will find out the difference.” “Ah, John!” Mrs. Prescott would answer, with a sigh, wondering in her heart who John’s wife would be, thinking what a good thing it would be if he were not to marry, feeling sure that whoever married him would be the future ruler of Horton. That was the danger that lay in her gallant Percy’s way.

This accounts for five people, and I have said there were six. The last was only Mary. The other members of the family would

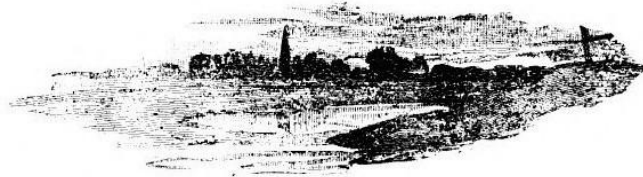
have thought it quite unnecessary to give any further description of her. She was the one who did all manner of little errands in the house, and little offices. She arranged the flowers; if Anna wanted something upstairs it was Mary who ran to fetch it; if Sophie left anything in the garden, or on one of the tables in the hall, Mary always knew where to find it. She fetched Mr. Prescott the newspaper he had left about, and found her aunt's spectacles, and got John his hat, which he always forgot when he was going out. When Percy was at home she did all sorts of commissions for him; even the old housekeeper gave her messages and things to carry. "Just put this in the drawing-room, Miss Mary, my dear," or, "Will you take these books to Miss Anna?" was what Mrs. Beesly said half-a-dozen times a day. They meant no harm whatever, and did not oppress her, or ill-use her, or neglect her, or do any of the things which are supposed to be done to a little dependent orphan in her uncle's house. Perhaps they may have been said to have neglected her, but not of any evil intent.

They meant no harm; she was only Mary: there was no particular reason that anybody knew of for thinking of her, or putting anybody out of their way on her account. She was a child in the opinion of all the others, even of "the girls." She was not included in that term. She was not even advanced to the rank of one of the girls. She was only Mary. She had never been whipped, or scolded, or put in dark closets, or set to hard tasks all her life. It is true that Anna's and Sophie's old dresses were very often "made down" for her: but that would have happened all the same had she been Anna's and Sophie's sister. Her life was happy enough; she had a share of everything that was going; and it never had occurred to her that she should be made of any particular account.

In her own mind, as well as in the conviction of the whole household, she was only Mary. She was a quiet little thing, but always cheerful, ready to talk when any one wanted to talk, or to play her little pieces when asked for them, or to be silent like a little mouse when there was no need for such vanities. She took herself as easily as the others took her, making no sort of pretension. Nor did she feel wronged, or offended, or slighted, as some might have done. She was only Mary, not Miss Prescott of Horton, as both the girls were. She was not even a Prescott, only a sister's daughter, an unconsidered trifle in the feminine line. Her whole life was pitched in this minor key, but it was not at all an unhappy little life at her age, for she was barely twenty. It had not yet begun to matter very much that she was a first object to nobody. As a matter of fact, everything was perfectly natural about her, and she had never found that things might be brighter, or that she really had any aspiration after a more individual life.

She had an uncle at the Rectory as well as at the Hall, but there were no young people in the clerical house. This was how things stood with the Prescotts and Mary Burnet, when the new curate arrived, of whom Uncle Hugh at the Rectory had heard so very good an account. Uncle Hugh was a very conscientious clergyman. He liked to keep the parish in thoroughly good working order, but if truth must be told he preferred that some one else should do the work for him. He had the very best recommendations with the new curate. He was hard-working, he was moderate, not too much of a ritualist, and yet a very good Churchman, and a man who socially took nothing upon him; a retiring, modest young man. The Rector was most fortunate in getting a curate like Mr. Asquith, everybody said.





CHAPTER II. ONLY THE CURATE.

A CURATE is a very useful member of the Church militant. He is the stuff out of which all its more dignified functionaries are made; and he does a great deal of the hard work, with a very limited proportion of the pay. But notwithstanding all this, he has a great deal to put up with in the way of snubs from his superiors, and indifference from the public, who accept his services often without prizing them very much. He has compensation in his youth, which makes him acceptable to the younger and fairer portion of the flock, and in his hopes of better things, as well as, no doubt, to leave pleasantries apart, in the satisfaction of performing important duties, and doing the sacred work to which he has dedicated himself.

Mr. Asquith, the new curate at Horton, had, however, but few of the compensations. There was a very small number of young ladies in the parish, and he was a young man who did not give himself to croquet or archery, or any of the gentle games then in vogue; for the period of which I speak was before the invention of lawn tennis. To none of these things did he incline. He was ready to tramp along the country roads in dust or in mud to carry consolation to any poor sick-bed. He was never tired with

examining schools, catechizing children, conducting little cottage services; for those were the days when a high ritual was unusual, and daily prayers were rare in the churches. He would even interest himself in the village cricket, if need was, though awkwardly, and not in a way which impressed the rustic eleven. As for the minor organisations of the parish, the savings-banks, the clothing clubs, the lending library, they had no existence until he came.

The Rector frankly thought them quiet unnecessary; and Mrs. Prescott was of opinion that to set them a-going was a dangerous thing, and might put such a burden upon the next curate who should succeed Mr. Asquith as that problematical individual might not care to bear; and of course, she added, nobody could expect the Rector himself to be charged with the fatigue of keeping all these new-fangled institutions up.

Mr. Asquith paid little attention to these remonstrances. So long as he had permission to do what he thought right, even if it were only a formal permission, he was satisfied: and he went on working among his poor people, with the greatest indifference to any of those solaces, in the way of society and the making of friends, which are generally supposed to sweeten the lot of his class. He said "Bother!" when he was told that he was expected to be on certain occasions a guest at the Rectory; and he said "What a bore!" when he was invited to dine at the Hall. None of these delights tempted him. When John Prescott called on him, as in duty bound, he found the curate busy among calculations, planning out one of those village charities which were wanting in Horton, and rather abstracted and preoccupied—dull, John said, who was himself the dullest of men.

“I said we might perhaps let him have a day’s thooting now and again,” said John, who lisped a little.

“And what did he say to that?” said Anna; for indeed the girls were rather interested, and wanted to know what sort of person the new curate was.

“He thook his head,” said John; “and so he did when I asked if he was fond of croquet. And then I thaid, was he musical?”

“I hope he is musical,” said Sophie, “a violin would be such an addition. What did he say when you asked him that?”

“He thook his head again,” answered John.

“Oh, what a horrid man!”

“No, he’s not a horrid man; he’s a good fellow; but he’th dull—he’th dull,” said John, with emphasis; it was when he wanted to be emphatic that he lisped most. And as John was very dull himself, the sisters concluded, not unreasonably, that the man in whom he discovered that quality must be dull indeed.

Mary, who was in the room, listened with some curiosity, too, though she took no part in the conversation; and she was much amused to think that in the world, and even in the parish, there could thus be a duller man than John. Not that she was contemptuous of John for his dulness. She liked him almost the best of the family. He was tiresome, to be sure; if you were thrown upon him for society, it would not be cheerful society; but then you were never thrown upon John—there was always somebody else to talk, and show a little interest. And that he was tiresome was the worst that could be said of him. He never forced his dulness upon any one, as some do. He never wanted to be talked to, or amused,

or taken any notice of. His temper was as even, and the grey atmosphere about him as tranquil as heart could desire. He was not clever, but he never gave any trouble, and he could even be very kind when it came into his head.

“Ah, well,” said Sophie, “it cannot be helped. A new man might have been an acquisition. He might have taught us some of the new rules for croquet, or he might have played a new instrument, or he might have sung. But it’s clear, from what John says, that he’s only the curate, and there’s nothing more to say.”

“I suppose,” said Anna, “he must be asked to dinner all the same.”

But though they did this only as a matter of duty, they would all have been extremely astonished, not to say offended, had they known that he said “What a bore!” on receiving the invitation. He was at that moment very much occupied about all the new things that he was setting up, altogether indifferent to the consideration that the next curate might not be of his way of thinking and might feel it a burden. Mr. Asquith, however, never spoke of the possibility of a change, but seemed to think that there never would be any other curate. He looked as though he meant to go on forever bringing all his schemes to perfection. The Rector could only afford to give him £100 a year and the use of the cottage in which the curates always lived, with the very barest furniture—merely what was necessary. But Mr. Asquith did not seem to think either of the small stipend or the bare lodgings; he seemed only to think of the work which he made so unnecessarily hard for himself. And presently he was so absorbed in this work, and found so many things to do, and set so many things going which nobody but himself took any interest in, that he fell almost out of the

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