

MARYGRESLEY
AND
AN EDITOR'S TALES.

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MARY GRESLEY.



MARY GRESLEY.

WE have known many prettier girls than Mary Gresley, and many handsomer women—but we never knew girl or woman gifted with a face which in supplication was more suasive, in grief more sad, in mirth more merry. It was a face that compelled sympathy, and it did so with the conviction on the mind of the sympathiser that the girl was altogether unconscious of her own power. In her intercourse with us there was, alas! much more of sorrow than of mirth, and we may truly say that in her sufferings we suffered; but still there came to us from our intercourse with her much of delight mingled with the sorrow; and that delight arose, partly no doubt from her woman's charms, from the bright eye, the beseeching mouth, the soft little hand, and the feminine grace of her unpretending garments; but chiefly, we think, from the extreme humanity of the girl. She had little, indeed none, of that which the world calls society, but yet she was pre-eminently social. Her troubles were very heavy, but she was making ever an unconscious effort to throw them aside, and to be jocund in spite of their weight. She would even laugh at them, and at herself as bearing them. She was a little fair-haired creature, with broad brow and small nose and dimpled chin, with no brightness of complexion, no luxuriance of hair, no swelling glory of bust and shoulders; but with a pair of eyes which, as they looked at you, would be gemmed always either with a tear or with some spark of laughter, and with a mouth in the corners of which was ever lurking some little spark of humour, unless when some unspoken prayer seemed to be hanging on her lips. Of woman's vanity she

had absolutely none. Of her corporeal self, as having charms to rivet man's love, she thought no more than does a dog. It was a fault with her that she lacked that quality of womanhood. To be loved was to her all the world; unconscious desire for the admiration of men was as strong in her as in other women; and her instinct taught her, as such instincts do teach all women, that such love and admiration was to be the fruit of what feminine gifts she possessed; but the gifts on which she depended,—depending on them without thinking on the matter,—were her softness, her trust, her woman's weakness, and that power of supplicating by her eye without putting her petition into words which was absolutely irresistible. Where is the man of fifty, who in the course of his life has not learned to love some woman simply because it has come in his way to help her, and to be good to her in her struggles? And if added to that source of affection there be brightness, some spark of humour, social gifts, and a strong flavour of that which we have ventured to call humanity, such love may become almost a passion without the addition of much real beauty.

But in thus talking of love we must guard ourselves somewhat from miscomprehension. In love with Mary Gresley, after the common sense of the word, we never were, nor would it have become us to be so. Had such a state of being unfortunately befallen us, we certainly should be silent on the subject. We were married and old; she was very young, and engaged to be married, always talking to us of her engagement as a thing fixed as the stars. She looked upon us, no doubt,—after she had ceased to regard us simply in our editorial capacity,—as a subsidiary old uncle whom Providence had supplied to her, in order that, if it were possible, the troubles of her life might be somewhat eased by assistance to her from that special quarter. We regarded her first almost as a

child, and then as a young woman to whom we owed that sort of protecting care which a graybeard should ever be ready to give to the weakness of feminine adolescence. Nevertheless we were in love with her, and we think such a state of love to be a wholesome and natural condition. We might, indeed, have loved her grandmother,—but the love would have been very different. Had circumstances brought us into connection with her grandmother, we hope we should have done our duty, and had that old lady been our friend we should, we trust, have done it with alacrity. But in our intercourse with Mary Gresley there was more than that. She charmed us. We learned to love the hue of that dark gray stuff frock which she seemed always to wear. When she would sit in the low arm-chair opposite to us, looking up into our eyes as we spoke to her words which must often have stabbed her little heart, we were wont to caress her with that inward undemonstrative embrace that one spirit is able to confer upon another. We thought of her constantly, perplexing our mind for her succour. We forgave all her faults. We exaggerated her virtues. We exerted ourselves for her with a zeal that was perhaps fatuous. Though we attempted sometimes to look black at her, telling her that our time was too precious to be wasted in conversation with her, she soon learned to know how welcome she was to us. Her glove,—which, by-the-bye, was never tattered, though she was very poor,—was an object of regard to us. Her grandmother's gloves would have been as unacceptable to us as any other morsel of old kid or cotton. Our heart bled for her. Now the heart may suffer much for the sorrows of a male friend, but it may hardly for such be said to bleed. We loved her, in short, as we should not have loved her, but that she was young and gentle, and could smile,—and, above all, but that she looked at us with those bright, beseeching, tear-laden eyes.

Sterne, in his latter days, when very near his end, wrote passionate love-letters to various women, and has been called hard names by Thackeray,—not for writing them, but because he thus showed himself to be incapable of that sincerity which should have bound him to one love. We do not ourselves much admire the sentimentalism of Sterne, finding the expression of it to be mawkish, and thinking that too often he misses the pathos for which he strives from a want of appreciation on his own part of that which is really vigorous in language and touching in sentiment. But we think that Thackeray has been somewhat wrong in throwing that blame on Sterne's heart which should have been attributed to his taste. The love which he declared when he was old and sick and dying,—a worn-out wreck of a man,—disgusts us, not because it was felt, or not felt, but because it was told;—and told as though the teller meant to offer more than that warmth of sympathy which woman's strength and woman's weakness combined will ever produce in the hearts of certain men. This is a sympathy with which neither age, nor crutches, nor matrimony, nor position of any sort need consider itself to be incompatible. It is unreasoning, and perhaps irrational. It gives to outward form and grace that which only inward merit can deserve. It is very dangerous because, unless watched, it leads to words which express that which is not intended. But, though it may be controlled, it cannot be killed. He, who is of his nature open to such impression, will feel it while breath remains to him. It was that which destroyed the character and happiness of Swift, and which made Sterne contemptible. We do not doubt that such unreasoning sympathy, exacted by feminine attraction, was always strong in Johnson's heart;—but Johnson was strong all over, and could guard himself equally from misconduct and from ridicule. Such sympathy with women, such incapability of withstanding the

feminine magnet, was very strong with Goethe,—who could guard himself from ridicule, but not from misconduct. To us the child of whom we are speaking—for she was so then—was ever a child. But she bore in her hand the power of that magnet, and we admit that the needle within our bosom was swayed by it. Her story,—such as we have to tell it,—was as follows.

Mary Gresley, at the time when we first knew her, was eighteen years old, and was the daughter of a medical practitioner, who had lived and died in a small town in one of the northern counties. For facility in telling our story we will call that town Cornboro. Dr. Gresley, as he seemed to have been called, though without proper claim to the title, had been a diligent man, and fairly successful,—except in this, that he died before he had been able to provide for those whom he left behind him. The widow still had her own modest fortune, amounting to some eighty pounds a year; and that, with the furniture of her house, was her whole wealth, when she found herself thus left with the weight of the world upon her shoulders. There was one other daughter older than Mary, whom we never saw, but who was always mentioned as poor Fanny. There had been no sons, and the family consisted of the mother and the two girls. Mary had been only fifteen when her father died, and up to that time had been regarded quite as a child by all who had known her. Mrs. Gresley, in the hour of her need, did as widows do in such cases. She sought advice from her clergyman and neighbours, and was counselled to take a lodger into her house. No lodger could be found so fitting as the curate, and when Mary was seventeen years old she and the curate were engaged to be married. The curate paid thirty pounds a year for his lodgings, and on this, with their own little income, the widow and her two daughters had managed to live. The engagement was

known to them all as soon as it had been known to Mary. The love-making, indeed, had gone on beneath the eyes of the mother. There had been not only no deceit, no privacy, no separate interests, but, as far as we ever knew, no question as to prudence in the making of the engagement. The two young people had been brought together, had loved each other, as was so natural, and had become engaged as a matter of course. It was an event as easy to be foretold, or at least as easy to be believed, as the pairing of two birds. From what we heard of this curate, the Rev. Arthur Donne,—for we never saw him,—we fancy that he was a simple, pious, commonplace young man, imbued with a strong idea that in being made a priest he had been invested with a nobility and with some special capacity beyond that of other men, slight in body, weak in health, but honest, true, and warm-hearted. Then, the engagement having been completed, there arose the question of matrimony. The salary of the curate was a hundred a year. The whole income of the vicar, an old man, was, after payment made to his curate, two hundred a year. Could the curate, in such circumstances, afford to take to himself a penniless wife of seventeen? Mrs. Gresley was willing that the marriage should take place, and that they should all do as best they might on their joint income. The vicar's wife, who seems to have been a strong-minded, sage, though somewhat hard woman, took Mary aside, and told her that such a thing must not be. There would come, she said, children, and destitution, and ruin. She knew perhaps more than Mary knew when Mary told us her story, sitting opposite to us in the low arm-chair. It was the advice of the vicar's wife that the engagement should be broken off; but that, if the breaking-off of the engagement were impossible, there should be an indefinite period of waiting. Such engagements cannot be broken off. Young hearts will not consent to be thus torn asunder. The vicar's wife was too

strong for them to get themselves married in her teeth, and the period of indefinite waiting was commenced.

And now for a moment we will go further back among Mary's youthful days. Child as she seemed to be, she had in very early years taken a pen in her hand. The reader need hardly be told that had not such been the case there would not have arisen any cause for friendship between her and us. We are telling an Editor's tale, and it was in our editorial capacity that Mary first came to us. Well;—in her earliest attempts, in her very young days, she wrote—Heaven knows what; poetry first, no doubt; then, God help her, a tragedy; after that, when the curate-influence first commenced, tales for the conversion of the ungodly;—and at last, before her engagement was a fact, having tried her wing at fiction, in the form of those false little dialogues between Tom the Saint and Bob the Sinner, she had completed a novel in one volume. She was then seventeen, was engaged to be married, and had completed her novel! Passing her in the street you would almost have taken her for a child to whom you might give an orange.

Hitherto her work had come from ambition,—or from a feeling of restless piety inspired by the curate. Now there arose in her young mind the question whether such talent as she possessed might not be turned to account for ways and means, and used to shorten, perhaps absolutely to annihilate, that uncertain period of waiting. The first novel was seen by “a man of letters” in her neighbourhood, who pronounced it to be very clever;—not indeed fit as yet for publication, faulty in grammar, faulty even in spelling,—how I loved the tear that shone in her eye as she confessed this delinquency!—faulty of course in construction, and faulty in character;—but still clever. The man of letters had told her that she must begin again.

Unfortunate man of letters in having thrust upon him so terrible a task! In such circumstances what is the candid, honest, soft-hearted man of letters to do? “Go, girl, and mend your stockings. Learn to make a pie. If you work hard, it may be that some day your intellect will suffice to you to read a book and understand it. For the writing of a book that shall either interest or instruct a brother human being many gifts are required. Have you just reason to believe that they have been given to you?” That is what the candid, honest man of letters says who is not soft-hearted;—and in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it will probably be the truth. The soft-hearted man of letters remembers that this special case submitted to him may be the hundredth; and, unless the blotted manuscript is conclusive against such possibility, he reconciles it to his conscience to tune his counsel to that hope. Who can say that he is wrong? Unless such evidence be conclusive, who can venture to declare that this aspirant may not be the one who shall succeed? Who in such emergency does not remember the day in which he also was one of the hundred of whom the ninety-and-nine must fail;—and will not remember also the many convictions on his own mind that he certainly would not be the one appointed? The man of letters in the neighbourhood of Cornboro to whom poor Mary’s manuscript was shown was not sufficiently hard-hearted to make any strong attempt to deter her. He made no reference to the easy stockings, or the wholesome pie,—pointed out the manifest faults which he saw, and added, we do not doubt with much more energy than he threw into his words of censure,—his comfortable assurance that there was great promise in the work. Mary Gresley that evening burned the manuscript, and began another, with the dictionary close at her elbow.

Then, during her work, there occurred two circumstances which brought upon her,—and, indeed, upon the household to which she belonged,—intense sorrow and greatly-increased trouble. The first of these applied more especially to herself. The Rev. Arthur Donne did not approve of novels,—of other novels than those dialogues between Tom and Bob, of the falsehood of which he was unconscious,—and expressed a desire that the writing of them should be abandoned. How far the lover went in his attempt to enforce obedience we, of course, could not know; but he pronounced the edict, and the edict, though not obeyed, created tribulation. Then there came forth another edict which had to be obeyed,—an edict from the probable successor of the late Dr. Gresley,—ordering the poor curate to seek employment in some clime more congenial to his state of health than that in which he was then living. He was told that his throat and lungs and general apparatus for living and preaching were not strong enough for those hyperborean regions, and that he must seek a southern climate. He did do so, and, before I became acquainted with Mary, had transferred his services to a small town in Dorsetshire. The engagement, of course, was to be as valid as ever, though matrimony must be postponed, more indefinitely even than heretofore. But if Mary could write novels and sell them, then how glorious would it be to follow her lover into Dorsetshire! The Rev. Arthur Donne went, and the curate who came in his place was a married man, wanting a house, and not lodgings. So Mary Gresley persevered with her second novel, and completed it before she was eighteen.

The literary friend in the neighbourhood,—to the chance of whose acquaintance I was indebted for my subsequent friendship with Mary Gresley,—found this work to be a great improvement

on the first. He was an elderly man, who had been engaged nearly all his life in the conduct of a scientific and agricultural periodical, and was the last man whom I should have taken as a sound critic on works of fiction;—but with spelling, grammatical construction, and the composition of sentences he was acquainted; and he assured Mary that her progress had been great. Should she burn that second story? she asked him. She would if he so recommended, and begin another the next day. Such was not his advice.

“I have a friend in London,” said he, “who has to do with such things, and you shall go to him. I will give you a letter.” He gave her the fatal letter, and she came to us.

She came up to town with her novel; but not only with her novel, for she brought her mother with her. So great was her eloquence, so excellent her suasive power either with her tongue or by that look of supplication in her face, that she induced her mother to abandon her home in Cornboro, and trust herself to London lodgings. The house was let furnished to the new curate, and when I first heard of the Gresleys they were living on the second floor in a small street near to the Euston Square station. Poor Fanny, as she was called, was left in some humble home at Cornboro, and Mary travelled up to try her fortune in the great city. When we came to know her well we expressed our doubts as to the wisdom of such a step. Yes; the vicar’s wife had been strong against the move. Mary confessed as much. That lady had spoken most forcible words, had uttered terrible predictions, had told sundry truths. But Mary had prevailed, and the journey was made, and the lodgings were taken.

We can now come to the day on which we first saw her. She did not write, but came direct to us with her manuscript in her hand.

“A young woman, Sir, wants to see you,” said the clerk, in that tone to which we were so well accustomed, and which indicated the dislike which he had learned from us to the reception of unknown visitors.

“Young woman! What young woman?”

“Well, Sir; she is a very young woman;—quite a girl like.”

“I suppose she has got a name. Who sent her? I cannot see any young woman without knowing why. What does she want?”

“Got a manuscript in her hand, Sir.”

“I’ve no doubt she has, and a ton of manuscripts in drawers and cupboards. Tell her to write. I won’t see any woman, young or old, without knowing who she is.”

The man retired, and soon returned with an envelope belonging to the office, on which was written, “Miss Mary Gresley, late of Cornboro.” He also brought me a note from “the man of letters” down in Yorkshire. “Of what sort is she?” I asked, looking at the introduction.

“She aint amiss as to looks,” said the clerk; “and she’s modest-like.” Now certainly it is the fact that all female literary aspirants are not “modest-like.” We read our friend’s letter through, while poor Mary was standing at the counter below. How eagerly should we have run to greet her, to save her from the gaze of the public, to welcome her at least with a chair and the warmth of our editorial fire, had we guessed then what were her qualities! It was not long before she knew the way up to our sanctum without any clerk to show her, and not long before we knew well the sound of that low but not timid knock at our door made always with the handle of the

parasol, with which her advent was heralded. We will confess that there was always music to our ears in that light tap from the little round wooden knob. The man of letters in Yorkshire, whom we had known well for many years, had been never known to us with intimacy. We had bought with him and sold with him, had talked with him, and perhaps, walked with him; but he was not one with whom we had eaten, or drunk, or prayed. A dull, well-instructed, honest man he was, fond of his money, and, as we had thought, as unlikely as any man to be waked to enthusiasm by the ambitious dreams of a young girl. But Mary had been potent even over him, and he had written to me, saying that Miss Gresley was a young lady of exceeding promise, in respect of whom he had a strong presentiment that she would rise, if not to eminence, at least to a good position as a writer. "But she is very young," he added. Having read this letter, we at last desired our clerk to send the lady up.

We remember her step as she came to the door, timid enough then,—hesitating, but yet with an assumed lightness as though she was determined to show us that she was not ashamed of what she was doing. She had on her head a light straw hat, such as then was very unusual in London,—and is not now, we believe, commonly worn in the streets of the metropolis by ladies who believe themselves to know what they are about. But it was a hat, worn upon her head, and not a straw plate done up with ribbons, and reaching down the incline of the forehead as far as the top of the nose. And she was dressed in a gray stuff frock, with a little black band round her waist. As far as our memory goes, we never saw her in any other dress, or with other hat or bonnet on her head. "And what can we do for you,—Miss Gresley?" we said, standing up and holding the literary gentleman's letter in our hand. We had

almost said, "my dear," seeing her youth and remembering our own age. We were afterwards glad that we had not so addressed her; though it came before long that we did call her "my dear,"—in quite another spirit.

She recoiled a little from the tone of our voice, but recovered herself at once. "Mr. —— thinks that you can do something for me. I have written a novel, and I have brought it to you."

"You are very young, are you not, to have written a novel?"

"I am young," she said, "but perhaps older than you think. I am eighteen." Then for the first time there came into her eye that gleam of a merry humour which never was allowed to dwell there long, but which was so alluring when it showed itself.

"That is a ripe age," we said laughing, and then we bade her seat herself. At once we began to pour forth that long and dull and ugly lesson which is so common to our life, in which we tried to explain to our unwilling pupil that of all respectable professions for young women literature is the most uncertain, the most heart-breaking, and the most dangerous. "You hear of the few who are remunerated," we said; "but you hear nothing of the thousands that fail."

"It is so noble!" she replied.

"But so hopeless."

"There are those who succeed."

"Yes, indeed. Even in a lottery one must gain the prize; but they who trust to lotteries break their hearts."

“But literature is not a lottery. If I am fit, I shall succeed. Mr. ——— thinks I may succeed.” Many more words of wisdom we spoke to her, and well do we remember her reply when we had run all our line off the reel, and had completed our sermon. “I shall go on all the same,” she said. “I shall try, and try again,—and again.”

Her power over us, to a certain extent, was soon established. Of course we promised to read the MS., and turned it over, no doubt with an anxious countenance, to see of what kind was the writing. There is a feminine scrawl of a nature so terrible that the task of reading it becomes worse than the treadmill. “I know I can write well,—though I am not quite sure about the spelling,” said Mary, as she observed the glance of our eyes. She spoke truly. The writing was good, though the erasures and alterations were very numerous. And then the story was intended to fill only one volume. “I will copy it for you if you wish it,” said Mary. “Though there are so many scratchings out, it has been copied once.” We would not for worlds have given her such labour, and then we promised to read the tale. We forget how it was brought about, but she told us at that interview that her mother had obtained leave from the pastrycook round the corner to sit there waiting till Mary should rejoin her. “I thought it would be trouble enough for you to have one of us here,” she said with her little laugh when I asked her why she had not brought her mother on with her. I own that I felt that she had been wise; and when I told her that if she would call on me again that day week I would then have read at any rate so much of her work as would enable me to give her my opinion, I did not invite her to bring her mother with her. I knew that I could talk more freely to the girl without the mother’s presence. Even when you are past fifty, and intend only to preach a sermon, you do not wish to have a mother present.

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