

OLD LADY MARY.
A STORY OF THE SEEN AND THE
UNSEEN.

By Margaret O. (Wilson) Oliphant

I

She was very old, and therefore it was very hard for her to make up her mind to die. I am aware that this is not at all the general view, but that it is believed, as old age must be near death, that it prepares the soul for that inevitable event. It is not so, however, in many cases. In youth we are still so near the unseen out of which we came, that death is rather pathetic than tragic,—a thing that touches all hearts, but to which, in many cases, the young hero accommodates himself sweetly and courageously. And amid the storms and burdens of middle life there are many times when we would fain push open the door that stands ajar, and behind which there is ease for all our pains, or at least rest, if nothing more. But age, which has gone through both these phases, is apt, out of long custom and habit, to regard the matter from a different view. All things that are violent have passed out of its life,—no more strong emotions, such as rend the heart; no great labors, bringing after them the weariness which is unto death; but the calm of an existence which is enough for its needs, which affords the moderate amount of comfort and pleasure for which its being is now adapted, and of which there seems no reason that there should ever be any end. To passion, to joy, to anguish, an end must come; but mere gentle living, determined by a framework of gentle rules and habits—why should that ever be ended? When a soul has got to this retirement and is content in it, it becomes very hard to die; hard to accept the necessity of dying, and to accustom one's self to the idea, and still harder to consent to carry it out.

The woman who is the subject of the following narrative was in this position. She had lived through almost everything that is to be found in life. She had been beautiful in her youth, and had enjoyed all the triumphs of beauty; had been intoxicated with flattery, and triumphant in conquest, and mad with jealousy and the bitterness of defeat when it became evident that her day was over. She had never been a bad woman, or false, or unkind; but she had thrown herself with all her heart into those different stages of being, and had suffered as much as she enjoyed, according to the unflinching usage of life. Many a day during these storms and victories, when things went against her, when delights did not satisfy her, she had thrown out a cry into the wide air of the universe and wished to die. And then she had come to the higher table-land of life, and had borne all the spites of fortune,—had been poor and rich, and happy and sorrowful; had lost and won a hundred times over; had sat at feasts, and kneeled by deathbeds, and followed her best-beloved to the grave, often, often crying out to God above to liberate her, to make an end of her anguish, for that her strength was exhausted and she could bear no more. But she had borne it and lived through all; and now had arrived at a time when all strong sensations are over, when the soul is no longer either triumphant or miserable, and when life itself, and comfort and ease, and the warmth of the sun, and of the fireside, and the mild beauty of home were enough for her, and she required no more. That is, she required very little more, a useful routine of hours and rules, a play of reflected emotion, a pleasant exercise of faculty, making her feel herself still capable of the best things in life—of interest in her fellow-creatures, kindness to them, and a little gentle intellectual occupation, with books and men around. She had not forgotten anything in her life,—not the excitements and delights of her beauty, nor love, nor grief, nor the higher levels she had touched in

her day. She did not forget the dark day when her first-born was laid in the grave, nor that triumphant and brilliant climax of her life when every one pointed to her as the mother of a hero. All these things were like pictures hung in the secret chambers of her mind, to which she could go back in silent moments, in the twilight seated by the fire, or in the balmy afternoon, when languor and sweet thoughts are over the world. Sometimes at such moments there would be heard from her a faint sob, called forth, it was quite as likely, by the recollection of the triumph as by that of the deathbed. With these pictures to go back upon at her will she was never dull, but saw herself moving through the various scenes of her life with a continual sympathy, feeling for herself in all her troubles,—sometimes approving, sometimes judging that woman who had been so pretty, so happy, so miserable, and had gone through everything that life can go through. How much that is, looking back upon it!—passages so hard that the wonder was how she could survive them; pangs so terrible that the heart would seem at its last gasp, but yet would revive and go on.

Besides these, however, she had many mild pleasures. She had a pretty house full of things which formed a graceful *entourage* suitable, as she felt, for such a woman as she was, and in which she took pleasure for their own beauty,—soft chairs and couches, a fireplace and lights which were the perfection of tempered warmth and illumination. She had a carriage, very comfortable and easy, in which, when the weather was suitable, she went out; and a pretty garden and lawns, in which, when she preferred staying at home, she could have her little walk, or sit out under the trees. She had books in plenty, and all the newspapers, and everything that was needful to keep her within the reflection of the busy life which she no longer cared to encounter in her own person. The post rarely

brought her painful letters; for all those impassioned interests which bring pain had died out, and the sorrows of others, when they were communicated to her, gave her a luxurious sense of sympathy, yet exemption. She was sorry for them; but such catastrophes could touch her no more: and often she had pleasant letters, which afforded her something to talk and think about, and discuss as if it concerned her,—and yet did not concern her,—business which could not hurt her if it failed, which would please her if it succeeded. Her letters, her papers, her books, each coming at its appointed hour, were all instruments of pleasure. She came down-stairs at a certain hour, which she kept to as if it had been of the utmost importance, although it was of no importance at all: she took just so much good wine, so many cups of tea. Her repasts were as regular as clockwork—never too late, never too early. Her whole life went on velvet, rolling smoothly along, without jar or interruption, blameless, pleasant, kind. People talked of her old age as a model of old age, with no bitterness or sourness in it. And, indeed, why should she have been sour or bitter? It suited her far better to be kind. She was in reality kind to everybody, liking to see pleasant faces about her. The poor had no reason to complain of her; her servants were very comfortable; and the one person in her house who was nearer to her own level, who was her companion and most important minister, was very comfortable too. This was a young woman about twenty, a very distant relation, with "no claim," everybody said, upon her kind mistress and friend,—the daughter of a distant cousin. How very few think anything at all of such a tie! but Lady Mary had taken her young namesake when she was a child, and she had grown up as it were at her godmother's footstool, in the conviction that the measured existence of the old was the rule of life, and that her own trifling personality counted for nothing, or next to nothing, in its steady

progress. Her name was Mary too—always called "little Mary" as having once been little, and not yet very much in the matter of size. She was one of the pleasantest things to look at of all the pretty things in Lady Mary's rooms, and she had the most sheltered, peaceful, and pleasant life that could be conceived. The only little thorn in her pillow was, that whereas in the novels, of which she read a great many, the heroines all go and pay visits and have adventures, she had none, but lived constantly at home. There was something much more serious in her life, had she known, which was that she had nothing, and no power of doing anything for herself; that she had all her life been accustomed to a modest luxury which would make poverty very hard to her; and that Lady Mary was over eighty, and had made no will. If she did not make any will, her property would all go to her grandson, who was so rich already that her fortune would be but as a drop in the ocean to him; or to some great-grandchildren of whom she knew very little,—the descendants of a daughter long ago dead who had married an Austrian, and who were therefore foreigners both in birth and name. That she should provide for little Mary was therefore a thing which nature demanded, and which would hurt nobody. She had said so often; but she deferred the doing of it as a thing for which there was no hurry. For why should she die? There seemed no reason or need for it. So long as she lived, nothing could be more sure, more happy and serene, than little Mary's life; and why should she die? She did not perhaps put this into words; but the meaning of her smile, and the manner in which she put aside every suggestion about the chances of the hereafter away from her, said it more clearly than words. It was not that she had any superstitious fear about the making of a will. When the doctor or the vicar or her man of business, the only persons who ever talked to her on the subject, ventured periodically to refer to it, she

assented pleasantly,—yes, certainly, she must do it—some time or other.

"It is a very simple thing to do," the lawyer said. "I will save you all trouble; nothing but your signature will be wanted—and that you give every day."

"Oh, I should think nothing of the trouble!" she said.

"And it would liberate your mind from all care, and leave you free to think of things more important still," said the clergyman.

"I think I am very free of care," she replied.

Then the doctor added bluntly, "And you will not die an hour the sooner for having made your will."

"Die!" said Lady Mary, surprised. And then she added, with a smile, "I hope you don't think so little of me as to believe I would be kept back by that?"

These gentlemen all consulted together in despair, and asked each other what should be done. They thought her an egotist—a cold-hearted old woman, holding at arm's length any idea of the inevitable. And so she did; but not because she was cold-hearted,—because she was so accustomed to living, and had survived so many calamities, and gone on so long—so long; and because everything was so comfortably arranged about her—all her little habits so firmly established, as if nothing could interfere with them. To think of the day arriving which should begin with some other formula than that of her maid's entrance drawing aside the curtains, lighting the cheerful fire, bringing her a report of the weather; and then the little tray, resplendent with snowy linen and shining silver and china, with its bouquet of violets or a rose in the

season, the newspaper carefully dried and cut, the letters,—every detail was so perfect, so unchanging, regular as the morning. It seemed impossible that it should come to an end. And then when she came downstairs, there were all the little articles upon her table always ready to her hand; a certain number of things to do, each at the appointed hour; the slender refreshments it was necessary for her to take, in which there was a little exquisite variety—but never any change in the fact that at eleven and at three and so forth something had to be taken. Had a woman wanted to abandon the peaceful life which was thus supported and carried on, the very framework itself would have resisted. It was impossible (almost) to contemplate the idea that at a given moment the whole machinery must stop. She was neither without heart nor without religion, but on the contrary a good woman, to whom many gentle thoughts had been given at various portions of her career. But the occasion seemed to have passed for that as well as other kinds of emotion. The mere fact of living was enough for her. The little exertion which it was well she was required to make produced a pleasant weariness. It was a duty much enforced upon her by all around her, that she should do nothing which would exhaust or fatigue. "I don't want you to think," even the doctor would say; "you have done enough of thinking in your time." And this she accepted with great composure of spirit. She had thought and felt and done much in her day; but now everything of the kind was over. There was no need for her to fatigue herself; and day followed day, all warm and sheltered and pleasant. People died, it is true, now and then, out of doors; but they were mostly young people, whose death might have been prevented had proper care been taken,—who were seized with violent maladies, or caught sudden infections, or were cut down by accident; all which things seemed natural. Her own contemporaries were very few, and they were like herself—living

on in something of the same way. At eighty-five all people under seventy are young; and one's contemporaries are very, very few.

Nevertheless these men did disturb her a little about her will. She had made more than one will in the former days during her active life; but all those to whom she had bequeathed her possessions were dead. She had survived them all, and inherited from many of them; which had been a hard thing in its time. One day the lawyer had been more than ordinarily pressing. He had told her stories of men who had died intestate, and left trouble and penury behind them to those whom they would have most wished to preserve from all trouble. It would not have become Mr. Furnival to say brutally to Lady Mary, "This is how you will leave your godchild when you die." But he told her story after story, many of them piteous enough.

"People think it is so troublesome a business," he said, "when it is nothing at all—the most easy matter in the world. We are getting so much less particular nowadays about formalities. So long as the testator's intentions are made quite apparent—that is the chief matter, and a very bad thing for us lawyers."

"I dare say," said Lady Mary, "it is unpleasant for a man to think of himself as 'the testator.' It is a very abstract title, when you come to think of it."

"Pooh!" said Mr. Furnival, who had no sense of humor.

"But if this great business is so very simple," she went on, "one could do it, no doubt, for one's self?"

"Many people do, but it is never advisable," said the lawyer. "You will say it is natural for me to tell you that. When they do, it should

be as simple as possible. I give all my real property, or my personal property, or my share in so-and-so, or my jewels, or so forth, to—whoever it may be. The fewer words the better,—so that nobody may be able to read between the lines, you know,—and the signature attested by two witnesses; but they must not be witnesses that have any interest; that is, that have anything left to them by the document they witness."

Lady Mary put up her hand defensively, with a laugh. It was still a most delicate hand, like ivory, a little yellowed with age, but fine, the veins standing out a little upon it, the finger-tips still pink. "You speak," she said, "as if you expected me to take the law in my own hands. No, no, my old friend; never fear, you shall have the doing of it."

"Whenever you please, my dear lady—whenever you please. Such a thing cannot be done an hour too soon. Shall I take your instructions now?"

Lady Mary laughed, and said, "You were always a very keen man for business. I remember your father used to say, Robert would never neglect an opening."

"No," he said, with a peculiar look. "I have always looked after my six-and-eightpences; and in that case it is true, the pounds take care of themselves."

"Very good care," said Lady Mary; and then she bade her young companion bring that book she had been reading, where there was something she wanted to show Mr. Furnival. "It is only a case in a novel, but I am sure it is bad law; give me your opinion," she said.

He was obliged to be civil, very civil. Nobody is rude to the Lady Marys of life; and besides, she was old enough to have an additional right to every courtesy. But while he sat over the novel, and tried with unnecessary vehemence to make her see what very bad law it was, and glanced from her smiling attention to the innocent sweetness of the girl beside her, who was her loving attendant, the good man's heart was sore. He said many hard things of her in his own mind as he went away.

"She will die," he said bitterly. "She will go off in a moment when nobody is looking for it, and that poor child will be left destitute."

It was all he could do not to go back and take her by her fragile old shoulders and force her to sign and seal at once. But then he knew very well that as soon as he found himself in her presence, he would of necessity be obliged to subdue his impatience, and be once more civil, very civil, and try to suggest and insinuate the duty which he dared not force upon her. And it was very clear that till she pleased she would take no hint. He supposed it must be that strange reluctance to part with their power which is said to be common to old people, or else that horror of death, and determination to keep it at arm's length, which is also common. Thus he did as spectators are so apt to do, he forced a meaning and motive into what had no motive at all, and imagined Lady Mary, the kindest of women, to be of purpose and intention risking the future of the girl whom she had brought up, and whom she loved,—not with passion, indeed, or anxiety, but with tender benevolence; a theory which was as false as anything could be.

That evening in her room, Lady Mary, in a very cheerful mood, sat by a little bright unnecessary fire, with her writing-book before her, waiting till she should be sleepy. It was the only point in which she

was a little hard upon her maid, who in every other respect was the best-treated of servants. Lady Mary, as it happened, had often no inclination for bed till the night was far advanced. She slept little, as is common enough at her age. She was in her warm wadded dressing-gown, an article in which she still showed certain traces (which were indeed visible in all she wore) of her ancient beauty, with her white hair becomingly arranged under a cap of cambric and lace. At the last moment, when she had been ready to step into bed, she had changed her mind, and told Jervis that she would write a letter or two first. And she had written her letters, but still felt no inclination to sleep. Then there fluttered across her memory somehow the conversation she had held with Mr. Furnival in the morning. It would be amusing, she thought, to cheat him out of some of those six-and-eightpences he pretended to think so much of. It would be still more amusing, next time the subject of her will was recurred to, to give his arm a little tap with her fan, and say, "Oh, that is all settled, months ago." She laughed to herself at this, and took out a fresh sheet of paper. It was a little jest that pleased her.

"Do you think there is any one up yet, Jervis, except you and me?" she said to the maid. Jervis hesitated a little, and then said that she believed Mr. Brown had not gone to bed yet; for he had been going over the cellar, and was making up his accounts. Jervis was so explanatory that her mistress divined what was meant. "I suppose I have been spoiling sport, keeping you here," she said good-humoredly; for it was well known that Miss Jervis and Mr. Brown were engaged, and that they were only waiting (everybody knew but Lady Mary, who never suspected it) the death of their mistress, to set up a lodging-house in Jermyn Street, where they fully intended to make their fortune. "Then go," Lady Mary said, "and

call Brown. I have a little business paper to write, and you must both witness my signature." She laughed to herself a little as she said this, thinking how she would steel a march on Mr. Furnival. "I give, and bequeath," she said to herself playfully, after Jervis had hurried away. She fully intended to leave both of these good servants something, but then she recollected that people who are interested in a will cannot sign as witnesses. "What does it matter?" she said to herself gayly; "If it ever should be wanted, Mary would see to that." Accordingly she dashed off, in her pretty, old-fashioned handwriting, which was very angular and pointed, as was the fashion in her day, and still very clear, though slightly tremulous, a few lines, in which, remembering playfully Mr. Furnival's recommendation of "few words," she left to little Mary all she possessed, adding, by the prompting of that recollection about the witnesses, "She will take care of the servants." It filled one side only of the large sheet of notepaper, which was what Lady Mary habitually used. Brown, introduced timidly by Jervis, and a little overawed by the solemnity of the bedchamber, came in and painted solidly his large signature after the spidery lines of his mistress. She had folded down the paper, so that neither saw what it was.

"Now I will go to bed," Lady Mary said, when Brown had left the room.

"And Jervis, you must go to bed too."

"Yes, my lady," said Jervis.

"I don't approve of courtship at this hour."

"No, my lady," Jervis replied, deprecating and disappointed.

"Why cannot he tell his tale in daylight?"

"Oh, my lady, there's no tale to tell," cried the maid. "We are not of the gossiping sort, my lady, neither me nor Mr. Brown." Lady Mary laughed, and watched while the candles were put out, the fire made a pleasant flicker in the room,—it was autumn and still warm, and it was "for company" and cheerfulness that the little fire was lit; she liked to see it dancing and flickering upon the walls,—and then closed her eyes amid an exquisite softness of comfort and luxury, life itself bearing her up as softly, filling up all the crevices as warmly, as the downy pillow upon which she rested her still beautiful old head.

If she had died that night! The little sheet of paper that meant so much lay openly, innocently, in her writing-book, along with the letters she had written, and looking of as little importance as they. There was nobody in the world who grudged old Lady Mary one of those pretty placid days of hers. Brown and Jervis, if they were sometimes a little impatient, consoled each other that they were both sure of something in her will, and that in the mean time it was a very good place. And all the rest would have been very well content that Lady Mary should live forever. But how wonderfully it would have simplified everything, and how much trouble and pain it would have saved to everybody, herself included, could she have died that night!

But naturally, there was no question of dying on that night. When she was about to go downstairs, next day, Lady Mary, giving her letters to be posted, saw the paper she had forgotten lying beside them. She had forgotten all about it, but the sight of it made her smile. She folded it up and put it in an envelope while Jervis went down-stairs with the letters; and then, to carry out her joke, she

looked round her to see where she would put it. There was an old Italian cabinet in the room, with a secret drawer, which it was a little difficult to open,—almost impossible for any one who did not know the secret. Lady Mary looked round her, smiled, hesitated a little, and then walked across the room and put the envelope in the secret drawer. She was still fumbling with it when Jervis came back; but there was no connection in Jervis's mind, then or ever after, between the paper she had signed and this old cabinet, which was one of the old lady's toys. She arranged Lady Mary's shawl, which had dropped off her shoulders a little in her unusual activity, and took up her book and her favorite cushion, and all the little paraphernalia that moved with her, and gave her lady her arm to go down-stairs; where little Mary had placed her chair just at the right angle, and arranged the little table, on which there were so many little necessaries and conveniences, and was standing smiling, the prettiest object of all, the climax of the gentle luxury and pleasantness, to receive her godmother, who had been her providence all her life.

But what a pity! oh, what a pity, that she had not died that night!

II.

Life went on after this without any change. There was never any change in that delightful house; and if it was years, or months, or even days, the youngest of its inhabitants could scarcely tell, and Lady Mary could not tell at all. This was one of her little imperfections,—a little mist which hung, like the lace about her head, over her memory. She could not remember how time went, or that there was any difference between one day and another. There were Sundays, it was true, which made a kind of gentle measure of the progress of time; but she said, with a smile, that she thought it was always Sunday—they came so close upon each other. And time flew on gentle wings, that made no sound and left no reminders. She had her little ailments like anybody, but in reality less than anybody, seeing there was nothing to fret her, nothing to disturb the even tenor of her days. Still there were times when she took a little cold, or got a chill, in spite of all precautions, as she went from one room to another. She came to be one of the marvels of the time,—an old lady who had seen everybody worth seeing for generations back; who remembered as distinctly as if they had happened yesterday, great events that had taken place before the present age began at all, before the great statesmen of our time were born; and in full possession of all her faculties, as everybody said, her mind as clear as ever, her intelligence as active, reading everything, interested in everything, and still beautiful, in extreme old age. Everybody about her, and in particular all the people who helped to keep the thorns from her path, and felt themselves to have a hand in her preservation, were proud of Lady Mary and she was perhaps a little, a very little, delightfully,

charmingly, proud of herself. The doctor, beguiled by professional vanity, feeling what a feather she was in his cap, quite confident that she would reach her hundredth birthday, and with an ecstatic hope that even, by grace of his admirable treatment and her own beautiful constitution, she might (almost) solve the problem and live forever, gave up troubling about the will which at a former period he had taken so much interest in. "What is the use?" he said; "she will see us all out." And the vicar, though he did not give in to this, was overawed by the old lady, who knew everything that could be taught her, and to whom it seemed an impertinence to utter commonplaces about duty, or even to suggest subjects of thought. Mr. Furnival was the only man who did not cease his representations, and whose anxiety about the young Mary, who was so blooming and sweet in the shadow of the old, did not decrease. But the recollection of the bit of paper in the secret drawer of the cabinet, fortified his old client against all his attacks. She had intended it only as a jest, with which some day or other to confound him, and show how much wiser she was than he supposed. It became quite a pleasant subject of thought to her, at which she laughed to herself. Some day, when she had a suitable moment, she would order him to come with all his formalities, and then produce her bit of paper, and turn the laugh against him. But oddly, the very existence of that little document kept her indifferent even to the laugh. It was too much trouble; she only smiled at him, and took no more notice, amused to think how astonished he would be,—when, if ever, he found it out.

It happened, however, that one day in the early winter the wind changed when Lady Mary was out for her drive; at least they all vowed the wind changed. It was in the south, that genial quarter, when she set out, but turned about in some uncomfortable way,

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