

'I do not know—poor Miss Erminie, they call her. But I saw nothing poor about her. Her place is as antiquated as herself, but it has its charms and is irreproachably neat.'

'Poor Miss Erminie!' repeated Mr. Ledyard. Jack Severne looked up quickly, wondering if his ears deceived him. Was there not an odd note in his employer's voice—a grating harshness? 'Some typical, countryish old maid, I'll be bound.'

'No,' said Severne gravely, 'she isn't that.'

'I—I'd like to see her,' said Mr. Ledyard.

'Oh, father—you're not interested in old ivory, or in old-fashioned paintings,' cried Olive teasingly. 'You know what you said when that dealer wanted to sell you—'

'A genuine Van Dyck—yes, I know,' said Mr. Ledyard grimly. 'Probably Mr. Severne's discovery is to be classed with that painting.'

'A forgery? Oh, no,' said Severne laughingly. 'I assure you she is real. Not that I think you will see anything in the little old lady, but there seemed such—well, she looks as if she has had a history, and human nature is always intensely interesting to me.'

'You may find a new type, Mr. Severne,' said Olive eagerly. 'Won't that be delightful! It is possible, too—how often it happens—'

'Nonsense, nonsense!' put in Mr. Ledyard gruffly. 'The life of a little old maid in a God-forsaken village! Types, indeed! You won't find any types worth studying in L—, Mr. Severne.'

Jack shrugged his shoulders.

'On that point we cannot agree,' he said. 'This is precisely where we will be able to find them.'

He was a little surprised the next day to find that Mr. Ledyard was ready to accompany him and Olive on his visit to the little old maid's. In fact, he would much rather the gentleman stayed at home, for Olive and he were approaching that state of appreciation in which two are company and three a crowd. If Mr. Ledyard noted the growing attachment between them he did not say anything in disapproval. Jack Severne was not rich, by any manner of means, but he was clever and well-connected, and Mr. Ledyard knew he would not seek to win Olive unless he could offer her as many advantages as her father possessed.

Poor Miss Erminie, the day previous, had been agreeably impressed by the fair-haired, bright-eyed, handsome young fellow who had spoken to her so courteously, and asked her permission to remain indoors a few minutes to escape from the blinding heat. He had utterly ignored her reticence, and kept up a fire of conversation—so pleasantly worded and so free from idle curiosity or desire to pry into her affairs that she felt herself thawing under his geniality.

It was with a distinct sense of pleasure that she looked up from her low rocker and saw his smiling face enter her curious little shop the next morning. He beamed upon her as if she were an old friend.

'I was describing your place to my friends,' he said, 'and I told them how kind you were to me. They have come to see you too—you won't mind, will you, or consider it a liberty?'

Miss Erminie, in her quaint gown, dropped a quaint curtsy—which somehow did not seem a bit ridiculous, but part of her.

'Indeed not,' she said, in her slow, drawling, Southern voice. 'If you can find anything to interest you in—'

She lifted her eyes. Mr. Ledyard stood at the door, holding it open, his eyes riveted upon the creamy old face under the snow-white hair. Miss Erminie was no longer a young girl—she had outgrown the timidity of youth. Now the habitual softness went out of her eyes; the hard lines about her mouth grew harder, and into her pale cheeks there stole a tinge of pink—like the flush of a rose. She met Mr. Ledyard's glance but an instant before she turned her head away—prim, precise as ever, with an added coldness and haughtiness that robbed her of the delicate prettiness of which Jack Severne had spoken.

Mr. Ledyard withdrew immediately, and went down to the gate and out into the road. He was painfully white and his nerves were greatly shaken—so shaken that he had to stand under the shelter of the oak at the gate and rest against it. After a little, and without waiting for his daughter and Jack Severne, he moved slowly in the direction of his home. Strange as it may seem, a peculiar friendship sprang up between Olive and Jack and the little old maid. They were earnest young people, good young people, and devout Catholics. Olive, in particular, was filled with great pity for the lonely woman, who was spending her declining years in such isolation, who had neither friend nor foe, neither love nor dislike. Of whom no one knew enough to care, and for whom no one exist-

ted. Jack Severne was too busy to pay many visits to the curious cottage, but Olive went often, and began to feel, too, after a short while, that her attentions were not unappreciated. But Miss Erminie said nothing of her past or present, would not dwell on her future. She was well-read—indeed, clever. She could entertain if she chose, and once in a great while she did choose, to Olive's great delight.

The first inkling Olive got into her past came about by merest chance. Two religious passing through L— on a house visitation, collecting for their orphan asylum, stopped at the quaint shop. Olive chanced to be inside, and lifted her sweet young face with a charming smile of welcome.

'Why, how do you do, Sisters?' she said, 'with the gentle familiarity we children of one Mother are permitted toward each other—and then she noticed the small black satchel. 'Collecting? You have been to my father—Mr. Ledyard? At the old Wakely place, you know. You have not passed him by?'

'Oh, no,' said the older nun, smiling into the earnest face. 'He has been most kind—we are very grateful.'

Olive turned the contents of her purse into the little bag, and waved the nun's thanks aside. Miss Erminie stood, a straight little figure, at the end of her tiny showcase. The Sister looked at her an instant—she wore a most forbidding expression, and then, with something like a sigh, turned away. Olive glanced with some surprise at the little old maid.

'Aren't you—a Catholic?' she asked. 'I thought—I imagined—'

'I was once,' said Miss Erminie, shortly. 'They come here often. I will have nothing to do with them, still they come. They think, perhaps, that in the end I will go back—go back.' She clasped her fingers together tightly. 'I'll never go back—never, never, never!' she said. 'I've lived without God almost forty years—I'll live the rest of my life without Him.'

'Oh, Miss Erminie, Miss Erminie!' said Olive, in a pained voice. 'How terrible, how horrible! What will you say to God when He sends for you? My father, too! He is exactly as you are—he will not go to church, he will not go to Mass or to confession. And he, like you, is growing old. Growing old! And without God! Sometimes the thought almost breaks my heart.'

Miss Erminie looked at her keenly. There were tears in the young girl's eyes and her voice trembled.

'Your father is a Catholic?'

'Yes—but only in name, not in deed,' said the girl mournfully. 'He has never practised his religious duties—no, not since I can remember, although he promised my mother that he would see I was trained and brought up a good Catholic. Miss Erminie, that is my greatest sorrow—something which I cannot dwell on. What is it that keeps people otherwise so good from conforming to God's will?'

Miss Erminie did not speak at once—but her eyes were fastened searchingly on the young girl. Then, turning aside, she said very quietly:

'Do you know why your father bought the Wakely mansion?'

'The Wakely mansion—our home? No,' said Olive, surprised, for she had not expected so quick a change of subject. 'It was offered to him by some agent, I think.'

'Do you like L—? Does he?'

'I do—very much. It seems a homelike sort of place; to me a restful place.'

'And your father?'

'He must like it or he would not stay here. He is wealthy enough to leave if he wanted to, and yet—'

'And yet?'

'I do not think my father is very happy,' said the girl. 'There is something—a shadow—which I have never seen until he came here. No, I am sure he is not happy, and I pray often that it may be his conscience troubling him, and that in a short while his faith—'

She paused, shocked into silence by a laugh which seemed almost eerie-like on the lips of the little old maid.

'His conscience!—' she said. 'Oh, my dear young lady, his conscience! Some men are born without hearts or consciences or principles. Some men—' She paused at the expression on Olive's face. 'Pardon me. Our conversation seemed to lead me back to a past that I had thought forgotten. I will not betray myself again—or trouble you.'

'Miss Erminie—indeed, it is no trouble,' said the girl. 'And if only you would let me talk sometimes of my father and his utter neglect of religion! Somehow I can not feel that you are like—like that. You are so gentle and quiet—no, I will not believe it.'