

A Complete Story

When Mary Was Left Alone

(By FLORENCE D. GILMORE, in the *Irish Catholic*.)

Mary sank into her seat, glad that there were few passengers in the Pullman, and none seated near her. Resolutely she dried the tears streaming down her cheeks, took her ticket from her purse with an air of grim determination, then opened the magazine she had brought with her. All to no purpose. She could not see the letters for the tears that filled her eyes. The conductor came, and her lips trembled and her voice quavered as she answered his stereotyped remark about the weather.

Again she tried to read, but succeeding no better than at first, closed her magazine and surrendered herself to her dreary thoughts.

"I shall be all alone," she repeated to herself. "I ought to be glad—and I am—a little. Julia is happy, a vocation is a stupendous grace; but—she was my 'baby.' She was only three years old when mother left her to my care. She has been so dear and sweet; she was all I had left! I wish I had not promised to go see her when she takes the veil. I don't know how I can."

Again she furtively wiped away her tears. Turning to the window she looked over the flat, treeless country through which they were passing, making an effort to be interested. In a few minutes she forgot the landscape and was saying to herself:

"Seventeen years. How long they were in passing, though they seem like a swift dream now! What a child I was to have been left to care for the others."

She stared vacantly at the corn field and broken fences; at the lazy, muddy streams and bare bushes, thinking not of them but of a scene in the past. She saw herself seated in the big, sombre library a few weeks after her mother's sudden death—a frail girl dressed in black. Near her stood her brother Charles, two years older, "the flower of the flock." It had been arranged that he should go to the American college at Rome to study for the priesthood. He had planned to leave home two weeks from the very day their mother died—how well Mary remembered.

"You must go, Charles," she had insisted. "Don't think of me or of the children. John will soon be old enough to help. He is fourteen now, and our money is securely invested; all I shall have to do will be to spend it." She remembered she tried to smile as she added, "I shall not find that hard to do."

Charles still remained troubled and undecided. So she urged further: with all her kindness and advice." Charles had laughed at this. He well knew how Aunt Charlotte loved to dispense her wealth of advice.

"Phil will always be a good friend, too, and a wise one, although he is young," she continued earnestly, having entire confidence in the grave, kindly man, her brother's friend, who was proving himself a tower of strength to them all in their time of trouble. After much further discussion and hesita-

tion Charles finally decided that there was no reason why he should not go at once to the seminary. Even now Mary shrank from the remembrance of the desolate weeks following his departure. She had written him brave, bright letters; had tried to laugh with the children, to smile before Aunt Charlotte, and not to let Phil see how hard was the daily struggle. She could never forget her lively old aunt's officious goodness at that time, nor the unobtrusive kindness of her brother's friend.

Then, by slow degrees, life became easier. No later days had ever been so hard, unless during that one dreadful year, when John, a man grown disappointing all their hopes, had given himself up to dissipation, so that his death, repentant, loving, and at peace with God, had left only thankfulness.

The little girls had become women in seventeen years. Laura married, and went West to live, and now Julia was gone to devote her life, with all its fair promise, to the only Spouse perfect enough for the love of her childlike but beautiful soul.

"So I am all alone, and 33 years old," murmured Mary. "It never occurred to me before; I am no longer young. I had no youth. The dear cares that absorbed it are gone now. What shall I do with my idle hands, my empty life? I could not be a religious; I have no vocation. No one has ever thought of loving me—though I—I—" Mary looked out of the window again. Then she opened her magazine for the third time with a deep sigh.

It was dusk when she reached Chisholm. She hailed a cab, shuddering at the prospect of going alone into her empty home and spending the evening amid its silences, to her so eloquent of the sighs and laughter of other days.

Almost tearfully she looked towards the house as the cab approached it. A faint smile illumined her face for the first time that day. There were lights upstairs and down, and pressed close against the pane of a window was faithful old Jane's red face. When Mary reached the door it stood wide open. Jane was there to help her off with her wraps, and to pelt her with questions about everything except the one subject nearest both their hearts. The old servant was entirely unconscious of the tell-tale tears making their way down her cheeks.

"Supper's ready, Miss Mary," she said, after the first mild bustle had subsided.

"Supper!" repeated Mary.

"Yes. You didn't have it on the train, did you?"

"No," Mary answered, "I forgot about it. I suppose it is past the time."

"It's well on to eight o'clock," Jane rejoined, leading the way to the dining-room, where a bouquet of roses ornamented the table on which a bountiful repast was temptingly spread.

"Oh, Janel!" Mary exclaimed, her face brightening a little.

Jane was all smiles. "Mr. Phil brought you the flowers, and he himself bought those oranges, because there was no fruit in the house. Your Aunt Charlotte left this box of candy for you and said she'd come early to-morrow morning to see you." Jane paused.

"Oh, yes," she aded, after a little consideration, "I found some letters and a magazine in the mail-box. I put them on your desk—and I was to tell you Mr. Phil said that he'd drop in during the evening if he can get away from some meeting he has to go to."

Feeling more cheerful than she would have believed possible an hour before, Mary ate her supper. Jane hovered about the table chattering incessantly, but never referring to Julia or the occurrences of the day although she was eager to hear whatever was to be told. Mary understood her kindness and was grateful. She tried to lead up to the subject herself, but her courage failed her, and she quickly changed the course of the conversation, declining to wait until the following morning to tell Jane the last news of Julia.

Supper finished, Mary went into the library, carrying with her the vase of roses. She stood at the window looking out on the slumbering garden, wondering how she could support the bare new life confronting her. Minute after minute passed and still she stood there. The hour was one of the dreariest of her whole life. Two lovers passed, arm-in-arm, then an old man and woman whom she knew. They had celebrated their golden wedding the week before. Two boys, brothers, ran down the street, followed at some little distance by their father, mother, and three little sisters. Mary saw them all—and she was alone! There was nothing to look forward to, no one to plan for; and she was but thirty-three years old!

She did not notice the clang of the door bell, but hearing footsteps presently, she turned quickly to find Phil entering the room. Forcing a smile, she welcomed him.

"Thank you very much for the flowers," she said—in spite of herself her words were tremulous—"you are always thoughtful. It was like you to come to-night."

"I knew you would be lonely," he said, sympathetically.

"I—I'll have to become accustomed to that," Mary faltered; and was sorry as soon as the words were uttered.

They sat down, and a long silence followed. Mary tried to think of something commonplace to say, but could not. Phil tried to remember some interesting news to tell her, but the sight of her piteous, pale face struck him dumb. When he spoke it was to say what had been in his mind a long time though he had not thought to utter it for many a day.

"I have always hoped, Mary, that if it ever came to this"—

He broke off, and bending over her, continued softly:

"The children were always first with you—I understand that. But they are gone now. You are alone—I have loved you long, and tenderly. I had not meant to trouble you