

Christmas Supplement

THE BRITISH WHIG

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No Room in The Inn.

ISTAND by the frosted window. The red light of early morning is breaking serenely among the billows of pearly clouds over the cold sea. The frost crystals on the panes gleam, and every crystal is a star.

The world is still. The white streets do not yet move with the long shadowy processions of the day. I love the stillness. It was so when the Advent angels sang of the birth of our Peace in the silence of the march of time.

On the hills in the east the great towers of the hospital for unhappy minds gleam like a crown. I love to see them rise in the widening light, and especially when the bells in the crystal air ring in the green festival of the Nativity. Beautiful are the Christmas bells of hospitals—the hotels of God. But that hospital! It rose out of a sympathetic vision of the Virgin Mother as she stood before the inn and was turned away. "There was no room for them in the inn."

It is a strange story, reader, that I have to tell you, but its most remarkable incidents are true, and its lesson has ever haunted me since I first heard it in my boyhood. I have often thought that I would write it out. There were a few stories that I used to hear in my old New England home that were parables of life, and whose meaning has always followed me. This is one of them.

I can see it still in memory, that little red cottage with but one room, under the hill. There were iron bars across the single window, and the door was always shut. Some called it the mad house and some Gadara. There were many such houses in New England a hundred years ago, and a few may still be seen on old farms; for long before Pinel's beautiful mission had begun to fill the world with its influence good hearts had sought ways of being merciful to the insane.

In early New England days people who became dangerous to themselves or to the community by reason of disordered intellects were chained to some oak post or beam in the great family kitchen. In the same provincial times the little family mad-house began to be seen here and there near certain great farm-houses upon the country roads. This strange cottage hospital usually stood a little apart from the farm-house, so that the cries and irresponsible monologues of the unhappy inmates might not be heard by the family and their friends. The iron-grated window made by the blacksmith usually faced the sun and pleasant trees and prospects, and sometimes the faithful house dog's kennel was placed near the barred door, and the howl of the dog mingled at night with the helpless human cries. Insanity was not uncommon a hundred years ago in the farming communities of the old New England States, and the victims were most often found to be patient, hard working, care-taking, sympathizing wives and mothers. The thoughtful traveller looked pitifully from the open stage window on a homestead with a cottage hospital in its airy yard or field, and prayed to be delivered from loss of himself after the manner of the poor inmate there.

It has gone now, that cottage of sorrow under the bowery hill; but there are some pieces that stamp indelible photographs upon the mental vision, and I see it still. It stood on the edge of a great meadow, where timothy, clover, and daisies waved in summer like a floral sea, where bobolinks toppled in the broad June sunshine, and over which barn-swallows skimmed on iridescent wings in the long twilights of the hills. The cool orchard rose behind in on the hill, a region of birds, balsam, and blooms in the May-time, and of idle people about the quaint cider-mill in the fall. At the breathless summer mid-days, when the sunlight was a living splendor, the ospreys wheeled and screamed in the clear sky over the prosperous farmstead. Beyond the meadow was the family graveyard, a little piece of ground enclosed by a mossy wall, where were slate-colored stones, some of them new, with clearly chiselled death's heads, and some mossy and zigzaggy amid sunken graves and briars.

The farm house was ample, with open doors and windows in summer. The dairy-house joined it, and in its portico well-scoured milk-pans used to dry in the sun. It was called "The Esquire's"—Squire Martin. Mayne Martin had lived there for eighty years. His son John now occupied it. It was for John's wife, Mary Martin, that the little cottage hospital had to be built.

I used to look curiously upon the house of sorrow amid all these scenes of prosperity as I passed it on my way to the country school. It was called "Mary's room." I had often seen an uncertain face at the grated window, and one day I said to my seatmate: "Let us go some day when the folks are not home and

me!" Her thin face changed again. "Little boy—I cannot help it: I ain't myself—go away—I shall fly at ye."

A dreadful look settled in her face—a look as of something or somebody else. I hurried away to the road. I could not sleep that night, and I have often seen that face in dreams and in the imaginations of sleepless nights since then.

The son of the old Esquire John Martin, died of an epidemic—"autumn fever," as typhoid fever was then called. He was still a young man. His poor wife was never told of it, but she died of emaciation not long afterward, and both were carried to the family graveyard, where all of the old families are gathered at last, in the silent farm household of love-consecrated ground.

John Martin was not a clear-sighted

stood open to orphans, wayfarers, and to all in need of human pity and sympathy. "My house is not my own," said one of these gray Friends; it is Heaven's. I have no right to close my doors on any one. All I have is the Master's, as free as the earth, the sky, and the air."

It was to a Quaker wife called Rachel, a woman with a serene face and consecrated heart, that little Mary Martin, of her own choice, went for sympathy and shelter. And here she found a mother who was as true to her best interests as her own mother could have been.

But Mary was a strange child. Her conduct put to a severe test even the well-disciplined heart of Rachel. She would run away and hide for days in a barn loft or in the woods, and when severely reprimanded, would declare that she could not

good to thee? I do not understand. Am I not good to thee? Could your own mother do more than I try to do?"

"No, mother; you are good. I think that you are as good as God." Rachel started, with uplifted hands. "But it relieves me here." The girl lifted her white hands to her head and pressed them against her forehead in the region of memory and ideality. "Mother, there are times when my brain burns; and then—oh, mother—"

"What, my poor child?"

"I can't remember."

"Is that why thee staid out nights?"

"Yes, mother. I forgot. And when it all came to me I was so confused I hated to come home again and find you sorry. It was all like a dream."

"Oh, Mary—"

"Mary, there is one cure for thee."

"Cure? Oh, mother, what? I will do anything."

"It is self-control in thy youth. It is to make self-control a life-habit. When these wishes to do a thing about which thou art doubtful, say, 'No' to thyself. In this way, child, thou canst come to possess thyself, and this strength will shield thee in time of temptation, and thou wilt impart it to thy children."

"Children! Oh, mother, such as I ought never to marry!"

"But thou art becoming a very beautiful girl, Mary. The experience of love will come, and it will be sweet to thee, and thou wilt follow it."

"But I ought not to follow it, ought I?"

"Yes, if thou wilt gain the habit of perfect self-control. Such a loving heart as thine would make a home happy if thou wilt but learn to govern thyself. A right purpose becomes at last a habit of life, the habit of life a character, and character is heredity and destiny. If thou wilt follow my will for two years, I think I can change in thee thy dangerous tendencies of life. Wilt thou, Mary?"

"Heaven knows I will try. I often long to become nothing. It is so difficult, but"—she again pressed her hand upon the region of memory and ideality—"I will do anything. You will ask God?"

But, poor girl! Mother Rachel fell sick and died. The plain Quaker procession carried her body away to the little cemetery, and stood around her grave in silence. Mary heard the clod fall from the sexton's spade. A new home now awaited her. It was with an aunt, a good Episcopal gentlewoman of some means, who lived in the suburbs of a coast city.

A new home brought a nearly complete change in the strange life of Mary Martin. The past seemed to vanish from her mind her childhood among the hills, her mother's unhappy years, and pious Rachel's care and counsels.

"I do not like to think of the life I led there," she said one day to her aunt, in answer to some question. "I only wish my childhood may become oblivion."

She grew very beautiful in person, and very brilliant in mind. All things in life seemed clearer to her than to others. She became a social leader among the young, and was everywhere admired. She was sent to a select school, and easily led her classes. She was fond of poetry, music, and art, and seemed equal to the mastery of every polite accomplishment. She was active as a member of the little Episcopal parish, and her devotion to the work of the society entirely won the heart of her aunt, who lived chiefly for the Church. She was gifted with a voice for music, and saw the relation of music to the hearts of the people, and became a member of the choir and the local choral society. Every festival for charity found in her a sympathetic soul, an angel of good-will and good works. Only once did her old mental malady seem to master her. It was on the Easter morning that she was confirmed as a member of the Church. The good Bishop, standing amid the Ascension lilies as the organ was playing low, asked her to give him her full name. Her mind went from her. She stood before him dumb for a time, and then pressed her hand on her forehead and said:

"I cannot—oh, I cannot recollect!"

The incident passed without much comment as a mere matter of mental confusion. The solemn words were said, and the anthem pealed out, and when she went forth into the April air the birds were singing, and her heart seemed very happy.

So passed three brilliant years. She was twenty now, and the most beautiful and accomplished girl in the prosperous seaport suburb. The doors of society were all open to her, and amid these attentions several lovers came into her experience, but none of them made any deep impression on her affections.

She was as lovely in life as in person. Her accomplishments were at the disposal of any who desired them for any life-cheering purpose; her heart was sympathetic to sickness, suffering, and to every form of distress and sorrow. The poor girls of the parish sought her for their Sunday teacher, and sent her birthday and holiday gifts. Wherever she went she found the world what she made it by her sympathy—full of sunshine, happiness, smiles and good-will. No one envied her; she felt so much for others and was so forgetful of self that her heart seemed to live in other hearts and her life in other lives, and she formed a kinship of soul with all who came under her influence.

There was in the choir which she led a delightful singer whose name was Owen Marlowe. He was a thoughtful, reserved young man, gentlemanly and intellectual, of a fine face, and everywhere esteemed for his personal worth. Mary Martin met him regularly at the choir rehearsals, and she came to know that he was singularly devoted to his poor invalid mother, and his devotion and his modest reserve and conscientious singing awakened in her heart a strong admiration for him, which kindled into love. He returned her affection, each acknowledged the affinity, and each was supremely happy in the new relation. The world became a new creation to them; the sun, flowers, birds—all things were new; life seemed to open to them its golden doors. Mary



half exposed. She looked and saw my young, half terrified face, and rose and came slowly, with halting steps, to the window. There was something in her eyes that I can never analyze or explain. It seemed as though some other soul than her own were looking through them. She was calm for a short time, and looked pleased and kindly, then her eyelids began to move rapidly, and her eyes to kindle with a strange fire, and she said,

"Little boy—little boy." I started back, but presently put my face to the grating again. I shall never forget the pathos of her words. "You do pity me, don't you?"

I answered "Yes" with trembling lips. "Yes, Mary, I am sorry for you."

"Heaven bless those who pity such as

man like his father, the Esquire, and he left an estate involved in debt, and this had to be sold. The neighbors long remembered the old country auction, or venue (venue, it was called) when the old Esquire's effects were offered for sale by the auctioneer and "bid" away.

The hapless couple left one child, a little girl named Mary—Mary Martin. She was a strange girl from her childhood, and her history was a wonder-tale of the old New England housewives of fifty years ago. New England has few Christmas stories, but this was one of the few, and it often caused the tears of charity to flow by the holiday fires of the windy coasts and hills.

In the old neighborhood of "The Esquire's" lived several families of Quakers, and the doors of their hospitable homes

help doing as she did. Several times she had been found going at nightfall up to the tree tops, meaning to spend the night with the birds. She loved to be alone in the woods among streams embedded in cowlslips, hunting lady's-slippers, or making herself an unwelcome visitor to nests of jays or meadow-larks.

"Mary," said Rachel, one day, after the girl had returned from one of her wanderings, "what does make thee act so?"

"I can't help it, mother; indeed I can't. It relieves me to wander in the open air."

"Relieves you? How, child? Explain it all to me. I do not want to be hard. I wish to do just right by thee, Mary. I do love thee with all thy strange ways. How does it relieve thee to wander

"Mother, trouble dwells in houses. Out-of-doors is God's house. Its roof is gold. The sun shines over it by day, and stars at night, and the clouds sail by like angels' carriages. I have seen the angels in them. I can see angels sometimes, can't you? They do not cast a shadow. I shall not cast a shadow after the death comes and takes away my mask, and I go away. I sometimes long for the time when I shall not cast a shadow. I do now. You feel my shadow?"

The words were strange. Rachel gazed on the girl with a face full of anxiety and apprehension. "Child, thou art not like other people. Thy thoughts are not natural; they are like waking dreams. Thou dost not see angels. Thy mind is disordered."

The girl sat with staring eyes.

