

MARIE'S HOME: OR, A GLIMPSE OF THE PAST

CHAPTER I

FIFTEEN!

A BRILLIANT day in June, the sun shining, the morning air already laden with warm breath of roses and of new-mown hay. The sun had been up for hours though it was still early, and he was touching with golden light the curious red-tiled gables of an old house—so old that people used to come for miles round to see it, and to fancy, as they gazed on it and walked round the old-fashioned garden full of sweet-scented flowers, that they were back in the days of Good Queen Bess.

There was a terrace-walk, its stone balustrade gray with age, and leading to it were steps worn by the feet of many generations. Below there was a yew-tree walk of softest grass; the trees which bordered it were cut into most curious shapes of people and of animals; and a marble sundial, round which carved figures of the hours were dancing, stood at its further end.

The sun in his travels went peeping through a latticed window whose casement stood open, and fell upon the face of little Marie Hamilton, who opened her eyes and jumped up quickly.

“Just the right sort of day for a birthday,” she said, running to the window and looking out upon the garden all ablaze with flowers, where the birds were singing their sweetest songs.

She was soon ready, and, leaving her room, she ran quietly along the corridor and down the old oak staircase. In the hall she paused. The door was open, the sunlight was pouring in, and glancing on old portraits that adorned the walls.

Marie looked round her thoughtfully, then moved on a few paces until she stood beneath the picture of a little girl in the dress of a hundred years ago. The cap was of soft muslin, the petticoat of pink satin, quilted, the body of muslin crossed in front and tied behind. Long mittens, clocked stockings, and high-heeled shoes completed the costume, which looked as if made on purpose for a fancy ball. But it was not on these that the eye of the beholder was wont to rest. The greatest charm of the picture was in its face, which, though not regularly beautiful, was strangely sweet. The mouth was smiling and happy, but in the soft dark eyes there was a tremulous wistful expression, telling of sorrow long since felt and forgotten.

There was a likeness between the two faces, that seemed in the vivid sunlight to be gazing at one another; and the resemblance increased as Marie's look grew soft and tender, and she gave a sigh as though some sad thought were troub-

ling her little head. As she was about to turn away, her mother's hand was laid lightly on her shoulder.

"Up already, my child?" said Mrs. Hamilton. "A happy birthday to you!"

"Oh, Mother!" replied Marie, her face breaking into smiles, "who could sleep on such a morning? I was just going to the stables to see my new pony; you know Father said I was not to see him till this morning. I was crossing the hall when I caught sight of my great-grandmother, and the sunshine made her look so natural that I stopped and began to wonder how she felt on her fifteenth birthday. It is so delightful to be fifteen! I wonder if she was as happy as I am today."

Mrs. Hamilton smiled. "Be as good as she was, my Marie, and you are certain to be happy, and to make others happy too. Here," she went on, "is my present—it fits in with your thoughts; so just look at it, and tell me what you think of it before you go."

So saying she placed a large book in Marie's hand. It was pretty to look at, for the outer cover was of velvet, on which Mrs. Hamilton had worked her little girl's monogram in gold thread; but below the velvet cover there was a curious old binding and a much-worn clasp. Marie opened it, and found that the pages, which were yellow with age, were covered with writing, still distinct, though a little dimmed by time. On the first leaf was written, "Marie de Grandville Hamilton," and beneath, "My dear Father gave me this book on my fifteenth birthday, the 4th day of January,

the Year of our Lord 1793." Marie, much perplexed, looked at her mother, who smiled and said:

"This is a journal kept by your great-grandmother during the year 1793. Your grandfather gave it to me when I was married; and, knowing how fond you are of hearing our old family stories, I thought you could not have a present you would like better than this on your fifteenth birthday."

Marie's eyes sparkled. "It is the most delightful thing I could have had. A thousand thanks, dearest Mother!"

"Well, child, be off now and see your pony. After breakfast you can, if you like, spend the morning with your book in the Yew-tree Walk; that will keep you fresh for your hay-making party this evening."

The pony standing in his comfortable stall was found to be the very picture of perfection—the loveliest little beauty in the world, as he turned his soft eyes on his new mistress, and bent his neck to her caressing hand. Marie was in raptures; everything was too delightful, she said.

It seemed dreadful to waste time over breakfast on such a morning and on such a day; so after hugging and thanking her father, and swallowing a glass of milk to please her mother, she stole away with her treasure to the Yew-tree Walk, where she had dreamt more than one dream of her great-grandmother.

We will look over her shoulder and read with her a story of the past, written "long time ago."

CHAPTER II

THE JOURNAL

JANUARY 4th—I am fifteen today. My dear father called me into the Oak Parlour last evening, and gave me this book. He says he thinks I am old enough now to begin to keep a journal; it seems a little difficult to know how this ought to be done, but my father says if I write quite simply about everything that goes on it will soon become easy. After all, no one will look at my journal, it is for myself alone, so I shall treat it as a friend and tell it all my secrets.

Certainly it is not very often that anything does happen to us now, but there was a time when each day brought with it events so strange and dreadful that the memory of them is written upon my heart and can never be effaced.

I think that, as Father says a journal is meant to be the record of one's life, I might begin by a description of all that happened to us four years ago; especially as nothing so wonderful is

ever likely to take place again. I was quite a little girl, only eleven, when we left our dear home, but every scene through which we passed is framed in my mind like a picture.

I suppose first of all I ought to describe everybody: by everybody I mean all those I love best—my father, my mother, and my only brother Louis, who is three years younger than I am. It is impossible to write much about my father, because when I think of him my heart feels too full for words; indeed it seems to me that in all the world there is no one else so noble and so good.

I can remember that four years ago Mother looked quite young and beautiful. Beautiful she will always seem to me, but she is sadly changed now. Her hair is touched with gray, and she is very frail, with a sad look in her eyes, as though she were haunted by the sorrows of the past. She never complains, however, and she lives for us and for the poor people in the village, who adore her, and who come to her in all their troubles. Her chief anxiety is about Louis, my darling brother. He is very handsome, and we are all proud of his great blue eyes and his golden curls and grand air. He is very delicate, being subject to strange fits of unconsciousness if suddenly alarmed or startled, which leave him weak and suffering for days. This trouble too came from the events of which I must now write, for how could any story of our lives be complete without an account of them?

In looking back I seem to feel again the soft air of one beautiful September afternoon, when

I suppose I must have escaped from Nurse, for I remember finding myself alone in the Yew-tree Walk, where the beauty of everything and the happiness of living suddenly came upon me. I think it must have been because of all that happened on this wonderful day that I am able to recall my feelings so clearly. I can remember looking at our dear home with an affection I had never felt before, as I stood watching the sunbeams glancing on each gabled roof. From these my eyes wandered to the garden, which was lying in full sunshine, all ablaze with autumn flowers, while the stone lions on the steps which lead to the terrace were in deep shadow. Then I looked up at our yew-trees that are cut into curious shapes, and in which Father takes great pride. The one representing a lady in a hooped petticoat had just been freshly clipped, and appeared so natural that I remember pitying it from the bottom of my heart for having to stand there always. At this moment I remembered that Nurse might be wondering what had become of me, and I turned to look at the sundial that stands at the further end of the walk. I then saw that my father and mother were sitting on a stone seat beside it, and were so deep in conversation that they had not observed me. I can remember everything about them, even how they were dressed. Father wore a coat of crimson silk, with soft lace ruffles, and Mother's hair was powdered. She had on her pink satin gown, and she looked just as she does in her picture that hangs in the hall. It did not surprise me to see them so gaily attired, as I knew they had received

some grand gentlemen from foreign parts that day at dinner. What did astonish me was to see the eager way in which Father was talking to Mother and holding her hand. I stood still gazing at them for a few moments, until I saw Mother turn away her head and burst into tears. I had never seen dear Mother so distressed before, and for a second I could not move. My heart ached in sympathy with her, and I was just going to run to her and throw my arms round her neck, when I recollected myself. I felt, in my childish fashion, that I was intruding upon a scene that was not meant for me, and I crept silently away. As I crossed the garden all the beauty seemed to have gone out of the day, and I felt afraid. What I feared I could not have told, but I thought it must indeed be something very dreadful that could make Mother cry. I longed to be with Nurse and Louis, and I was hastening up the great staircase, which is the shortest way to the nursery, when I was met by Grandmother's maid, who told me she had been looking for me everywhere, as her lady wished to see me. She would not suffer me to go to Nurse to be made tidy, but hastily removing my hood and smoothing my hair, she bade me come at once.

Dear Grandmother was in the Oak Parlour. I wish I could make a picture of her sitting there in her high-backed chair, with her silver hair and her soft lace cap, and her hands lying folded in her lap; for though her spinning-wheel was near her she had pushed it a little aside. Her face was quite calm, but I fancied she looked strangely at me as I made my curtsy, and she

bade me come and take a seat beside her. For a few moments she was silent, then she spoke, and I can recall every word as if it were yesterday instead of four years ago.

“Marie,” she said, “I have some solemn words to speak to you today. Your father has at length decided to take you all away to France. It will be a long and toilsome journey, and, by what folks say, strange events are taking place on the other side of the water; but, child, your father knows best, and though it grieves me sore that you should go, I must not repine.”

My breath was almost taken away by these words.

“Go away to France, Grandmother?” I repeated.

“I forgot, my child, that you have as yet heard nothing,” she answered. “You know, however, that your father’s father was a French Noble, who was most unjustly banished from his country, and that, on coming to England, his mother’s native land, he took her name of Hamilton and has always lived in this house.”

“Yes, Grandmother,” I said, when she paused.

She then went on to tell me that the present King of France had heard my father’s story, and had sent to bid him return to France and the court, and to resume his father’s title and take possession of his estates.

“It will be a hard parting, Marie,” she said after a moment’s silence, “but the Lord knows best. Try to be a comfort to your mother, my child. Whatever happens—and I fear much you are going among a strange heathenish people—do your duty, and fear God.”

Grandmother spoke very solemnly. I felt inclined to cry, but I only whispered that I would try to do as she bade me, and, as she leaned forward to kiss me, the door opened and my father entered, leading my mother by the hand. They did not see me, I think, for they walked straight to Grandmother and knelt down before her.

“Mother, give us your blessing,” they said, and she bowed her head and answered as she touched them with trembling hands, “The Lord bless you, my children, and bring you back in peace.”

Then I stole away unnoticed, and went quickly to our own part of the house, but I paused outside the nursery. I could scarcely take in what I had heard. We were actually going away, and to France! the country of which I had so often heard my father speak, and whose strange tongue he loved to teach me. I now remembered how much less I had been with my mother than was usual during the past few weeks; also that there had been a great deal of mysterious coming and going, and that Nurse had been cross when I asked her about a mounted messenger I had seen coming up the avenue. This reminded me of my long absence from the nursery, and I quickly opened the door and went in. Louis was standing looking out of the window, and Nurse was spinning at her wheel. Nurse did not speak when I entered, but I saw that her eyes were red as if she had been crying. Louis ran to me and begged me to tell him what was the matter and why everyone was weeping. I put my arms round his neck and told him all I knew, but when Nurse broke in angrily, saying that her

lady whom she had nursed in her arms, and her mistress Marie, and her master Louis, were to be taken away to a wicked country where they worshiped idols, and spoke bad words of the King, and ate abominable things, he grew frightened, and ran from me to her. I reminded her that France was our father's country, but she would not be silenced; and when Louis clung to her, saying if we went she must come too, she shook her head and said she was too old to change and to go among those fine godless folk. My mother's French maid was to go with us, she said, while she must bide at home and pray that the Lord might preserve us.

Upon this we all fell to weeping together, until Nurse remembered that it was our bedtime and dried her eyes. She got us our posset for supper with her own hands, but I, at least, had no heart to eat. Grandmother's words kept ringing in my ears; I felt as if I had suddenly become quite old with a serious duty before me, and I remember saying over and over to myself, "I must try to comfort Mother," until I fell asleep.

Then I dreamt that I stood again alone in the Yew-tree Walk, and that as I gazed at the figure of the lady, she suddenly stepped down and stood beside me. I saw that she was dressed not in leaves but in green satin, and that she had small bright eyes. She laughed at my surprise and said, "Silly child! silly child! you pity me! Ah! life is not all good, and it is quiet here. But you will see, you will see." She laughed again and laid her finger on her lips, then, bending forward and touching me, she whispered in my ear, "You

must be a brave child if you would help your mother." There followed a rustling noise, and all the strange figures in the Yew-tree Walk began to laugh softly in a curious fashion which sounded like the murmuring of leaves. I thought I was in an enchanted place, and I was struggling in vain to move when I felt someone kiss me. I looked up, and found that I was in my own bed, with Mother bending over me.

"My darling, what is the matter?" she whispered as I opened my eyes.

"Nothing, nothing," I said eagerly, remembering I must not trouble her, but help her; "but Mother, I want to be a comfort to you."

Mother smiled. "My Marie has always been a comfort to me," she said, bidding me lie still, and saying that she would sit with me till I slept. After this I was not afraid or unhappy any more, for I thought that wherever we went she and our father would always be with us, therefore what could there be to fear?