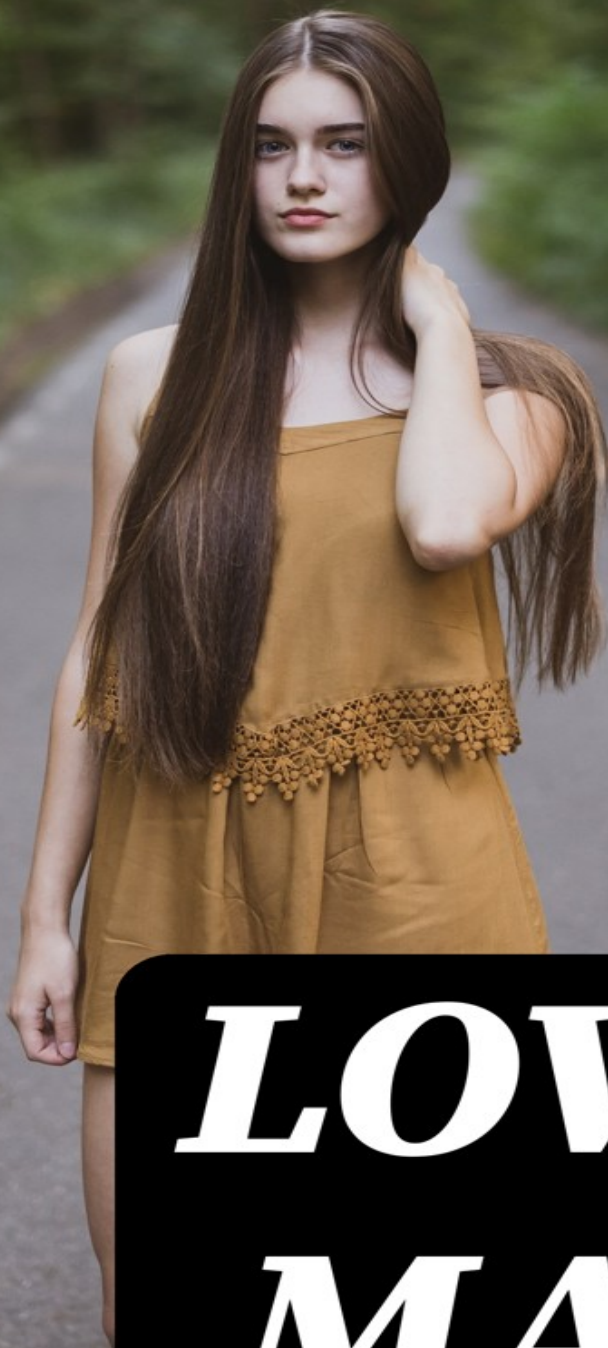


***ALICE
HEGAN RICE***



***LOVEY
MARY***

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Lovey Mary

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CHAPTER I

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A CACTUS-PLANT

For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
And hope and fear, ...
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,—
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is.
BROWNING'S "A Death in the Desert."



Everything about Lovey Mary was a contradiction, from her hands and feet, which seemed to have been meant for a big girl, to her high ideals and aspirations, that ought to have belonged to an amiable one. The only ingredient which might have reconciled all the conflicting elements in her chaotic little bosom was one which no one had ever taken the trouble to supply.

When Miss Bell, the matron of the home, came to receive Lovey Mary's confession of repentance, she found her at an up-stairs window making hideous faces and kicking the furniture. The depth of her repentance could always be gaged by the violence of her conduct. Miss Bell looked at her as she would have looked at one of the hieroglyphs on the Obelisk. She had been trying to decipher her for thirteen years.

Miss Bell was stout and prim, a combination which was surely never intended by nature. Her gray dress and tight linen collar and cuffs gave the uncomfortable impression of being sewed on, while her rigid black water-waves seemed irrevocably painted upon her high forehead. She was a routinist; she believed in system, she believed in order, and she believed that godliness was akin to cleanliness. When she found an exception to a rule she regarded the exception in the light of an error. As she stood, brush in hand, before Lovey Mary, she thought for the hundredth time that the child was an exception.

“Stand up,” she said firmly but not unkindly. “I thought you had too much sense to do your hair that way. Come back to the bath-room, and I will arrange it properly.”

Lovey Mary gave a farewell kick at the wall before she followed Miss Bell. One side of her head was covered with tight black ringlets, and the other bristled with curl-papers.

“When I was a little girl,” said Miss Bell, running the wet comb ruthlessly through the treasured curls, “the smoother my hair was the better I liked it. I used to brush it down with soap and water to make it stay.”

Lovey Mary looked at the water-waves and sighed.

“If you’re ugly you never can get married with anybody, can you, Miss Bell?” she asked in a spirit of earnest inquiry.

Miss Bell’s back became stiffer, if possible, than before.

“Marriage isn’t the only thing in the world. The homelier you are the better chance you have of being good. Now the Lord meant you to be plain”—assisting Providence by drawing the braids so tight that the girl’s eyebrows were

elevated with the strain. "If he had meant you to have curls he would have given them to you."



" 'Now the Lord meant you to be plain.' "

"Well, didn't he want me to have a mother and father?" burst forth Lovey Mary, indignantly, "or clothes, or money, or nothing? Can't I ever get nothing at all 'cause I wasn't started out with nothing?"

Miss Bell was too shocked to reply. She gave a final brush to the sleek, wet head and turned sorrowfully away. Lovey Mary ran after her and caught her hand.

“I’m sorry,” she cried impulsively. “I want to be good. Please—please—”

Miss Bell drew her hand away coldly. “You needn’t go to Sabbath-school this morning,” she said in an injured tone; “you can stay here and think over what you have said. I am not angry with you. I never allow myself to get angry. I don’t understand, that’s all. You are such a good girl about some things and so unreasonable about others. With a good home, good clothes, and kind treatment, what else could a girl want?”

Receiving no answer to this inquiry, Miss Bell adjusted her cuffs and departed with the conviction that she had done all that was possible to throw light upon a dark subject.

Lovey Mary, left alone, shed bitter tears on her clean gingham dress. Thirteen years ought to reconcile a person even to gingham dresses with white china buttons down the back, and round straw hats bought at wholesale. But Lovey Mary’s rebellion of spirit was something that time only served to increase. It had started with Kate Rider, who used to pinch her, and laugh at her, and tell the other girls to “get on to her curves.” Curves had signified something dreadful to Lovey Mary; she would have experienced real relief could she have known that she did not possess any. It was not Kate Rider, however, who was causing the present tears; she had left the home two years before, and her name was not allowed to be mentioned even in whispers.

Neither was it rebellion against the work that had cast Lovey Mary into such depths of gloom; fourteen beds had been made, fourteen heads had been combed, and fourteen wriggling little bodies had been cheerfully buttoned into starchy blue gingham exactly like her own.

Something deeper and more mysterious was fermenting in her soul—something that made her long passionately for the beautiful things of life, for love and sympathy and happiness; something that made her want to be good, yet tempted her constantly to rebel against her environs. It was just the world-old spirit that makes the veriest little weed struggle through a chink in the rock and reach upward toward the sun.

“What’s the matter with your hair, Lovey Mary? It looks so funny,” asked a small girl, coming up the steps.

“If anybody asts you, tell ‘em you don’t know,” snapped Lovey Mary.

“Well, Miss Bell says for you to come down to the office,” said the other, unabashed. “There ’s a lady down there—a lady and a baby. Me and Susie peeked in. Miss Bell made the lady cry; she made her wipe the powders off her compleshun.”

“And she sent for me?” asked Lovey Mary, incredulously. Such a ripple in the still waters of the home was sufficient to interest the most disconsolate.

“Yes; and me and Susie ’s going to peek some more.”

Lovey Mary dried her tears and hurried down to the office. As she stood at the door she heard a girl’s excited voice protesting and begging, and Miss Bell’s placid tones attempting to calm her. They paused as she entered.

“Mary,” said Miss Bell, “you remember Kate Rider. She has brought her child for us to take care of for a while. Have you room for him in your division?”

As Lovey Mary looked at the gaily dressed girl on the sofa, her animosity rekindled. It was not Kate’s bold black eyes that stirred her wrath, nor the hard red lips that recalled the taunts of other days: it was the sight of the auburn curls gathered in tantalizing profusion under the brim of the showy hat.

“Mary, answer my question!” said Miss Bell, sharply.

With an involuntary shudder of repugnance Lovey Mary drew her gaze from Kate and murmured, “Yes, ’m.”

“Then you can take the baby with you,” continued Miss Bell, motioning to the sleeping child. “But wait a moment. I think I will put Jennie at the head of your division and let you have entire charge of this little boy. He is only a year old, Kate tells me, so will need constant attention.”

Lovey Mary was about to protest, when Kate broke in:

“Oh, say, Miss Bell, please get some other girl! Tommy never would like Lovey. He ’s just like me: if people ain’t pretty, he don’t have no use for ’em.”

“That will do, Kate,” said Miss Bell, coldly. “It is only pity for the child that makes me take him at all. You have forfeited all claim upon our sympathy or patience. Mary, take the baby up-stairs and care for him until I come.”

Lovey Mary, hot with rebellion, picked him up and went out of the room. At the door she stumbled against two little girls who were listening at the keyhole.

Up-stairs in the long dormitory it was very quiet. The children had been marched away to Sunday-school, and

only Lovey Mary and the sleeping baby were on the second floor. The girl sat beside the little white bed and hated the world as far as she knew it: she hated Kate for adding this last insult to the old score; she hated Miss Bell for putting this new burden on her unwilling shoulders; she hated the burden itself, lying there before her so serene and unconcerned; and most of all she hated herself.

“I wisht I was dead!” she cried passionately. “The harder I try to be good the meaner I get. Everybody blames me, and ever’body makes fun of me. Ugly old face, and ugly old hands, and straight old rat-tail hair! It ain’t no wonder that nobody loves me. I just wisht I was dead!”

The sunshine came through the window and made a big white patch on the bare floor, but Lovey Mary sat in the shadow and disturbed the Sunday quiet by her heavy sobbing.

At noon, when the children returned, the noise of their arrival woke Tommy. He opened his round eyes on a strange world, and began to cry lustily. One child after another tried to pacify him, but each friendly advance increased his terror.

“Leave him be!” cried Lovey Mary. “Them hats is enough to skeer him into fits.” She picked him up, and with the knack born of experience soothed and comforted him. The baby hid his face on her shoulder and held her tight. She could feel the sobs that still shook the small body, and his tears were on her cheek.

“Never mind,” she said. “I ain’t a-going to let ’em hurt you. I’m going to take care of you. Don’t cry any more. Look!”

She stretched forth her long, unshapely hand and made grotesque snatches at the sunshine that poured in through the window. Tommy hesitated and was lost; a smile struggled to the surface, then broke through the tears.

“Look! He’s laughing!” cried Lovey Mary, gleefully. “He’s laughing ’cause I ketched a sunbeam for him!”

Then she bent impulsively and kissed the little red lips so close to her own.