

yer honour, that's the history of Mervyn Court. an' no wan livin' knows more about it nor I towld ye.

It was the day before New Year's Eve. In an old disused room on the highest storey of Mervyn Court Gladys was busily engaged rummaging among the contents of the dusty, cobweb-covered boxes and chests which had lain there for many a long year. The object of her search was a piece of fur with which to trim a warm crimson jacket for Rachael Bray, the half-witted woman of whom Pat Donohoe had spoken. The winter was a severe one, and the poor creature suffered a good deal from the cold, so Gladys was preparing the jacket as a New Year's gift, which she knew would be the more acceptable, as it gratified Rachael's childish love of bright colours. The search did not seem successful, for after repeated divings into the motley heap which was piled on the floor, Gladys exclaimed in an impatient, vexed tone of voice:

'I have rummaged these old boxes a thousand times, and I might as well have spared myself the trouble. This bit of beaver must do, although I'm sure it is all moth-eaten. I thought I could find an old chinchilla muff of Aunt Letty's, but it seems to have vanished. Oh, you old thing, I'd give anything to know what you contain; if I only had the key I would soon find out.'

This last remark was addressed to an old brass-bound chest which stood in the corner, and was the only one undisturbed by Gladys in her search. As long as the young girl remembered, and she was but four years old when brought to the Court, that old chest had been standing in the same corner.

Many a time in the days of her merry childhood, when running about the silent, lonely house, she made her way to the lumber-room, and jumping upon the old chest kicked her little heels merrily against its solid sides. Even in those days its contents were the object of much speculation and curiosity on the part of Gladys, and as she grew older her desire to solve the mystery grew stronger. Her youthful imagination pictured the old chest as a fairy storehouse of all sorts of wonderful things, if she could only open it.

Long years before Gladys was born that old trunk was locked and placed in the corner where it stood, with strict orders from Miss Letty that no one was ever to disturb it. The old lady kept the key in some unknown place, and no one, not even Gladys, her spoiled pet and darling, had ever got the least hint as to the contents of the mysterious chest.

'Listen, my young people,' said Aunt Letty, as she sat, that evening, round the fire with Gladys and Rex.

'To-morrow will be New Year's Eve, and this year we have made no preparation for marking the passing away of the last hours of the old year. I am very sorry, for never since these walls were built has this happened before, except, indeed, on one occasion.' The old lady paused and sighed deeply.

'It is true, dear children, that you have never known anything here but the simplest pleasures, but still, you know, we always made some change from the daily round at Christmas and the New Year. This year, I need not tell you, has pressed heavily upon us; we cannot afford any outlay, and without money nothing can be done in the way of merry-making. The thought that Christmas Day passed away like any other day saddened me very much, and so I have made up my mind that our Gladys, at least, shall have a little pleasure, and to-morrow evening she shall open the old trunk here in this room.'

If Miss Mervyn had announced that the heavens would fall Gladys and Rex could not have looked more astonished.

But the girl's astonishment soon changed to wild delight. She kissed and hugged the old lady in the exuberance of her gratitude, thereby considerably deranging her cap.

'How sweet of you, Aunt Letty!' Oh, how sweet of you! That is really the only pleasure I wished for; there could be nothing in the world nicer. Only think, Rex,' she added, turning to him, 'we may open the old chest and see what it has held all these years. I shall scarcely sleep a wink to-night. Rex, why don't you thank Aunt Letty? You are just as curious as I am about the old chest, but you wouldn't admit it for the world.'

'Oh, children, that will do,' cried Aunt Letty nervously. 'I am quite satisfied with your thanks; it is very good of you, dears, to be so pleased with the trifling pleasure a poor old woman can give you.'

New Year's Eve dawned cold and clear. A thick mantle of snow covered the earth, and pendant icicles adorned every branch.

The sitting-room, which the inmates of Mervyn Court had redeemed from the general desolation, looked cosy and bright, not alone in the glow of the ruddy firelight, but in the still brighter glow reflected from the young and happy faces gathered there. Gladys, brimming over with expectant delight, was radiant.

'Look, Rex,' she cried, 'look how the firelight is shining this evening on Lady Geraldine's portrait. One would think she was smiling at us. How sweet and lovely she must have been!'

'Very lovely,' replied Rex, 'and you are very like her.'

'You dreadful hypocrite, do you think that I believe a word—'

A clattering noise interrupted Gladys.

'The chest, the chest,' she cried, flying across the room to open the door.

Miss Mervyn came in, followed by two men carrying the chest, at last removed from its long abiding place.

'Here, here, on the hearth,' said Gladys, and the young men laid down their burthen, received each a half-crown as a New Year's gift, and departed highly pleased.

'Now, my Gladys,' said Aunt Letty, 'as I know your patience and curiosity are on the rack I shall let you open the old chest,' and she handed the girl the key.

Gladys's fingers were trembling so that it was only after some time and with Rex's help that she was able to turn the key in the lock.

Slowly she raised the lid and a faint perfume floated upwards. Gladys removed some sheets of tissue paper and there lay revealed a dress of pale blue brocade, dulled and faded, the bodice trimmed with costly pearl embroidery and rare old lace, a pearl necklace, a chaplet of pearls for the hair, an ivory fan exquisitely painted—all, all dimmed, yellowed with age.

Dead silence fell on the little group as they stood round these faded relics of the past. At last Gladys raised her eyes to Lady Geraldine's picture, and Miss Mervyn, interpreting the glance, answered it.

'Yes, child, that is the dress Lady Geraldine wore when her portrait was painted. The last time I saw her in it was that dreadful night 30 years ago,' and Aunt Letty's eyes filled with tears and she shuddered at the remembrance of the long-past horror, 'when poor Geraldine, half dazed with grief, went away from us. I packed this dress, which she wore on that unlucky night, with some old letters and a diary in which the poor girl had recorded her boundless love for him who was gone, into this old trunk, and as I could not bear the idea of strangers' hands ever touching these things, I had the chest put away in the corner of the lumber-room, and it has not been opened since. To-day I have dragged these poor relics of the past into the light again; but we here all love and honour her memory. My poor Geraldine, my lovely bird, yours was a sad fate.'

Carried away by these memories so vividly recalled, the old lady fell into a reverie, and seemed quite oblivious of those around her. Putting her finger to her lip to enjoin silence on Rex, Gladys slipped quietly out of the room.

Suddenly Miss Mervyn started and cried out half in wonder, half in fear. There beneath the portrait stood Lady Geraldine herself. Could the dead come back? For a moment Miss Letty thought she was dreaming, until Gladys with a merry laugh dispelled the illusion.

'Do you think I am a ghost, Auntie?'

It was indeed Gladys, who in her ill-fated kins-woman's dress so marvellously resembled her as to startle not only Miss Mervyn but also Rex.

'Child, child! you are really—'

Aunt Letty was interrupted by another and still stranger apparition at the door. It was that of a woman whose tall form was slightly bent and wasted to a shadow.

'Why, Rachel, how is it you have come to see us this evening? you generally avoid the house,' said Miss Mervyn in a kind voice.

'As I was passing I looked through the window and saw that my Lady Geraldine is here, and I came in to ask her if she wanted me to-night,' and the poor wasted figure dropped a low curtsy to Gladys.

'How strange! I think this is the first time since she lost her reason that Rachel has uttered her mistress's name. The sight of Gladys in that dress must have stirred up her memory.'

'Your ladyship will not walk on the terrace to-night with Sir Reginald,' said the mad-woman.

'For Heaven's sake do not disturb her train of thought! Perhaps we may glean something, if not all, from her, for if there is one on earth who can reveal the truth it is this woman, says Miss Mervyn, trembling with excitement.

'Where is Sir Reginald?' asked Rex suddenly, in a stern voice.

The old woman turned on him angrily.

'Who are you that want to tear my secret from me?'

'I will do you no harm,' rejoined Rex soothingly; 'you can tell me everything.'

'But not before her,' and Rachel's voice sank to a whisper as she pointed to Gladys.

In obedience to a sign from Aunt Letty, Gladys, pale and trembling, slipped behind a portière, whence she could, unseen, hear all that passed.

'Where is Sir Reginald?' repeated Rex, who was so overcome as to be obliged to lean against an armchair.

'At the bottom of the old well under the sun dial. I saw him fall in, and then all was dark before me—and before him too. Ha, ha!'

The listeners' hearts throbbled wildly, and for a moment or two Rex felt unnerved. With a great effort he regained composure, and fixing a stern gaze on Rachel addressed her again.

'Speak on. How did he fall in?'

'It was night. Outside the moon hid herself in dark clouds and wouldn't look at the earth. My Lady had written a note to Sir Reginald telling him she loved him and would marry him. She trusted me with all her secrets, and what she didn't tell me I found out by reading her letters. My Lady had another lover at Mervyn Court who wanted to marry her too, but she hated him. That night, it was New Year's Eve, she gave me two letters, one for the man she loved and the other a scornful refusal to the man who pursued her with his love. That day I was raging with Sir Reginald because he had abused the Jews—my people. To punish him, I put the note with my Lady's bitter words in the envelope addressed to him and kept back her loving words.

'When Sir Reginald read the letter he grew pale as death and clenched his hands, and then, without a word, he dashed down the small secret staircase that led from his room to the garden. I called to him but he did not mind me, but ran blindly down towards the lake. I was frightened at what I had done, and I followed him, but suddenly he disappeared before my eyes. That minute I knew what had happened, but my tongue was paralysed with terror. He had gone headlong into the old well, that dreadful well, which is so deep and black that people say the devil comes up through it when he comes on earth, and there he lies at the bottom of it. What a funny grave for a lord of Mervyn, isn't it?' And the mad woman burst into a wild fit of laughter and then fell unconscious on the floor.

That was a sleepless night for the inmates of Mervyn Court. Rachel's story had thrilled her listeners and set their hearts wildly