

## TROY HERALD.

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## "I Came to Ask—"

(From Harper's Bazar.)

Two pretty, old-fashioned cottages standing near each other on a secluded tree-shaded country road, separated by a little meadow, which from the birth of Spring to the death of Autumn rejoiced in waving green grasses and white daisies and yellow dandelions, and after that wore a robe woven of snow-flakes as fair and pure as when they fell from the skies, until old Winter, to whom the robe belonged, hearing the returning birds ask for the violets, gathered it about him and vanished again.

In one of them, the larger, in front of which was a neatly kept lawn, and at the back a small hot-house and miniature vegetable garden, lived Miles Guernsey and his man Mike, the one an old bachelor, the other, as he described himself, "a widdy man, thanks to the Lord that sint her rest."

In the other—Rose Cottage, they called it, for in rose-time it was completely surrounded by roses; they filled the space in front and clambered over the porch and up the sides of the house—had lived a quiet elderly couple for many years, until about a month before my story (if it may be dignified by that title) begins, when they went to heaven on the very same day, as they had often prayed to, loving old souls, and left Rose Cottage waiting for new tenants.

"Just as I'd got comfortably settled," grumbled Miles Guernsey, "to be all upset again! Other old men and women live till they're a hundred. Why couldn't these have done so, instead of dying at the early age of eighty? And there's no knowing who'll take the cottage. Somebody with cats, dogs and babies, I've no doubt—three kinds of animals I detect."

"Thru' fur ye, boss," said Mike, with an ominous shake of the head.

There was something else Mr. Guernsey insisted he detected, and that was an old maid. "A man," he used to say, "don't need smiles and kisses and pet names and children hanging around him to keep him sweet, but a woman does. Of course some of the poor things can't help their forlorn state; the men don't propose, or they do and run away, or their parents cut up rough, or they have invalid relations to take care of. I'm very sorry for them; they have my heartiest sympathy, but, all the same, I don't like 'em."

And so when Mike came one lovely June morning to tell his master the cottage was rented, adding, with a shy grin, "An' shure it's a owld maid an' her mother," Mr. Guernsey said something of which he ought to have been ashamed, and which, for that reason, I sha'n't set down, and then went on sarcastically, "And now we'll have all sorts of 'sweet, cunning pets,' I suppose; but if any of them come near my premises," furiously, "I'll poison 'em, drown 'em, wring their necks. Do you hear, Mike?"

"Faith I do," said Mike, grimly.

"I've lived here ten years," resumed the master, "in peace and quiet, driven here by an old maid in the first place, and it will be hard indeed if I am driven away by another. With a piano or guitar, no doubt?"

"Aither that last or a fiddle, Sur," said Mike. "I sor the gurril a carryin' it in yesterday in its own nate little coffin."

"She'll play and sing from morning till night, out of time and tune, and I shall be obliged to close all the doors and suffocate."

"Anyhow," suggested Mike, "there can't be no babies."

"Thank Heaven for that!" said Mr. Guernsey, fervently; "though I don't know but what the guitar's worse. You can scare young children by making faces at 'em. When do they move in, Mike?"

"To-morrow, Sur," said Mike. "Och, but it's dreadful!"

"We'll go a-fishing, Mike. Be ready to-morrow at daybreak, and we'll stay away a week. I never could bear the noise women make when

they're putting a house to rights, as they call it; and if I can't stand it after we come back, why, I'll pull up stakes and go for good, that's all."

"Yis, Sur," said Mike.

When Miles Guernsey and his man returned from the fishing excursion, Miss Osborne and Miss Osborne's mother and Miss Osborne's maid of all work were installed in Rose Cottage, and, sure enough, the first sounds that greeted the ears of the fishermen were the pleasant tinkling of the guitar and an equally pleasant voice singing an old-fashioned love-song, not out of time, however, and decidedly in tune.

And the very next day a small dog, after sniffing curiously about on the outside for awhile, squeezed himself nearly flat, and, crawling under the front gate, frisked gayly over the tiny lawn, and from thence up to the porch, where sat the lawn's owner reading the newspaper.

The intruder was a bright-eyed little terrier, slightly lame in one of his hind legs, and he proceeded to caper about the old bachelor as though in him he recognized an early but long lost friend.

"Mike!" shouted Mr. Guernsey.

"Sur!" shouted Mike, running out with a potato in one hand and a knife in the other.

"Remove this dog."

"Remove it is, sur," said Mike, dropping both knife and potato.

But "this dog" clearly objected to being removed. He skipped nimbly around, barking all the time in a "what larks!" manner; darted under the garden chairs; got entangled in a woodbine that was climbing to the porch, and tore it down; seized the knife Mike had dropped in his mouth, and made off with it; and the "widdy man," making after him, slipped on the treacherous potato and came down with a whack.

"This thing must be stopped at once!" exclaimed Mr. Guernsey, setting his broad-brimmed hat firmly upon his head and grasping his cane. Out of his own gate he marched in the most dignified style along the path, through the rose-crowded garden, to the door of Rose Cottage. "I want to see your mistress," he said to the black-eyed maid servant who answered his ring.

"Which?" answered the girl.

"What?" retorted Mr. Guernsey.

"Oh! I thought p'raps you didn't know the old lady's laid up with the rheumatiz; got cold moving. Will Miss Osborne do?"

"Anybody," said Miles, walking into the parlor, as she threw open the door. Evidently Miss Osborne was extremely fond of roses. The white muslin curtains were looped back with sprays of half-opened ones; a vase filled with them stood on the center table; on the hearth lay shells from which they peeped, and a vine that ran up the window outside had been coaxed through a broken pane, and hung, heavy with sweet white buds, over the picture of a handsome young man in the dress of a clergyman. The guitar leaned against the arm of a cozy old-fashioned crimson sofa; a hanging shelf of books occupied one corner of the room; a mirror, whose tarnished frame was almost hidden by a pretty arrangement of autumn leaves, hung in the other.

"Humph! she's got some taste," said the old bachelor to himself, and began, without knowing why, to wish he were at home; in fact, was meditating an inglorious retreat, when the old maid entered the room. Tall, graceful, with chestnut-brown hair parted simply over a frank unwrinkled brow, and gathered into a silken net at the back of her head; honest gray-blue eyes that looked full at you; arched eye-brows two shades darker than the hair; small, straight nose; cheeks a little faded, but still throwing out pink roses on occasion; lovely mouth, with the faintest suggestion of a shadow at the corners, which was instantly lost in a sunshiny smile.

"Our neighbor, Mr. Guernsey, I believe?" she said in a remarkably pleasant voice.

"Yes," replied Mr. Guernsey, blushing violently (the idea of it! an old bachelor, forty-five his last birthday, blushing because an old maid looked at him!) and having uttered this monosyllable, he dropped his hat and put his cane through the crown of it as he stooped to pick it up again. The hat in his hand once more, he went on, "I've called to see if you—that is, your mother—I mean both of you, of course—in fact," with sudden inspiration, "I came to ask if you would like some trout; just out of the water yesterday."

"Oh! thank you; you're very kind," said Miss Osborne, a little surprised in her voice, and a puzzled expression in her eyes; and at that moment Mike's rough tones broke in from outside:

"I've got him, boss, an' the devil's own time I've had to catch him. He-dad, he's the liveliest lame dog I ever mit in me loife, an' he's pult down the other vine an'—"

"Good day," hurriedly said "the boss," flying before the old maid's questioning looks, and spinning off the stoop with such impetus as to almost knock down his faithful retainer. Shut up, you idiot!" he said in a coarse whisper. "Drop that dog and go home and fasten the vines up again."

"Howly Moses!" ejaculated Mike, as he disappeared in a hurry; "is it mad he is?"

"Oh, dear," exclaimed the old maid, raising her pretty hands and eye-brows as she caught sight of the "fine little fellow's" dirty paws and drooping tail, "he's been in some mischief, I'm sure he has; I saw your man. What has he been doing, Mr. Guernsey? In the kindness of your heart you're screening him, I know you are. Oh, wait! Wait! if you wer'n't lame I'd whelp you. I picked him up in the street one day, Mr. Guernsey," (the pink roses were in full bloom now) "where some wicked boys had left him after breaking his leg, and took him home and nursed him well again, and the poor thing became so attached to me I couldn't bear to leave him behind when we left the city."

"Of course not," said Mr. Guernsey, adding, and rather irrelevantly, "I don't wonder at it. Good morning." And so the acquaintance began.

"What a fool I've been!" said Miles, as once more on his own porch, he picked up his newspaper again; "but, bless me, who'd want to hurt a lame dog?"

A week passed away, during which Mr. Guernsey only caught occasional glimpses of his fair neighbor, as she came out into the garden among the roses, with a plain straw hat shading her face and tied with a bit of blue ribbon under her chin. "I always liked blue ribbon," the old bachelor sighed. "She used to wear it." "She" was the young girl he had loved some twenty years ago, and from whom he had been separated by the machinations of his father and her old maiden aunt.

All was calm and serene, when one morning Mike burst into the library where his master sat and gasped out, "Thin lamb chops, sir, the delicate thing once I want for your dinner, they're gone, and the burrid's most frightened to death, sur, an' no lise—or may I niver shpake another wurrid—than fourteen kittens in the wood shed, an' all on account of Miss Osborne's cat, the thafe uv the wurrid."

"This certainly must be stopped at once," said Mr. Guernsey. "Give me my hat, Mike;" and away he went, growling angrier and angrier at every step. His lamb chops! and no more to be had until to-morrow good gracious! And fourteen kittens, gracious goodness! to say nothing of the canary in a fit, perhaps its power of song seared away forever!

He actually banged the gate of the garden of roses; but his anger, which was up to "butter melts" at least, fell to "zero" when he entered the pretty parlor. There sat the old maid in a low rocking-chair, idly swaying to and fro, dressed in a loose flowing white wrapper without a ruffle or puff, with a golden-hearted daisy in her hair and another at her throat, and by her side stood the lean, lank cat with a squalling kitten hanging from its mouth. "Poor Mary Ann!" she was saying; "but where, oh, where are the other—" when she

raised her kind eyes and met the not at all hostile gaze of the old bachelor. "Glad to see you again, Mr. Guernsey," she said, in her frank voice, rising and holding out her hand. "Mother is much better, thank you," in answer to some rather indistinct query on the subject. "Run away with your kitten," to the cat. Not a very handsome cat, is she, Mr. Guernsey? Poor thing she came to our door one cruel cold night last winter, half starved, and with the tips of her poor ears frozen off. I took her in, warmed and fed her, and she would not go away again. To tell the truth, I didn't try very hard to make her, and I couldn't bear to desert her, when we came here, any more than I could wait. He and she, odd as it may seem, are very fond of each other. But one bad habit, I am sorry to say, I can't break her of, or hav'n't as yet, a result of her early vagabond life in the streets: she steals." Then suddenly noticing a queer expression on the face of her listener, she continued, eagerly, "I hope she hasn't been annoying you in any way?"

Straight into those still child-like eyes did Miles Guernsey look and say deliberately, "Oh no, not at all. I came to ask if you—that is (growing a little incoherent), your mother, of course I mean both of you, would like a fresh cucumber or two and some green peas (with a dash of pride) I am ahead of all the neighbors." He meant the peas were.

"A thousand thanks," said Miss Osborne.

"Nine hundred and ninety-nine too many," said Miles, actually smiling at her. "Good day." And when he reappeared in the study, he had a daisy in his button-hole.

Mike came out of the dining room, where he had been soothing the canary with a crisp lettuce leaf. "Well, sur?" said he.

"Hang the bird's cage where the cat can't reach it, lock up the chops after this, and drown thirteen of the kittens," quietly said Mr. Guernsey.

"Mad, is it?" Mike soliloquized.

"He's madder nor fifty batters."

"Good heavens! what man in his sober senses," Miles Guernsey asked himself, "would hurt a frozen-eared cat?"

Summer passed away, carrying with her the fragrant roses and thousands of other beautiful flowers; autumn in richly tinted rustling garments, gathered the gold and brown and crimson leaves to her bosom, and bade the earth farewell; winter came and flung down snow-flakes upon and hung glittering icicles from the roof of the cottages and the naked branches of the trees, and the neighbors had only met a dozen times. But in that dozen times Miles Guernsey had managed to learn (principally from the old lady, a delicate, sweet-faced woman, from whom the daughter had inherited her pleasant eyes) that the picture of the handsome young man in the parlor was the portrait of Rosa's lover, who had died fifteen years before in a foreign land, where he had gone for his health. "Rosa was well-nigh broken hearted at first," said the old lady; "but time has softened her grief, and now she can speak of him as calmly as she can of the darling little sister who died when she was a child."

From the same source he learned that Rosa's father had been a speculator, unlucky in all his speculations, and that when, his last great disappointment breaking his heart, he departed this life, there was very little left for his widow and children. "Robert, my only son," said the old lady, "helps us all he can, but lately he has married a sweet girl, who has patiently waited for him five long years, and now Rosa and I will have to live more economically than ever, if that be possible. But, dear me, how I do run on, and how Rosa would scold me if she knew it! but you are so kind and sympathetic, Mr. Guernsey, that, short as our acquaintance has been, I almost regard you as one of the family. Rosa, I should like Mr. Guernsey to hear that new song."

"And would Mr. Guernsey like to hear it?" Rosa asks.

"How can you ask me?" says the old bachelor. "I am always pleased to hear you sing." By which remark you will perceive he had become cu-

turely reconciled to the guitar. It was the evening of Christmas-day. Miles Guernsey sat alone in his parlor, thought on his brow and a pipe in his mouth, when Mike entered with a dainty rose-perfumed three-cornered note.

"From the owld maid, sur," said he. "Miss Osborne, you mean," said his master, sternly. "Don't call her an old maid again."

"Would Mr. Guernsey"—so the note ran—"give Mrs. and Miss Osborne the pleasure of his company this Christmas evening? Brother Robert and his wife have come down from the city, and there would be a little music, a little supper, and what."

"Wait, and I'll write an answer," said Mr. Guernsey. And while Mike waited, he began to talk again. "Sure ye heard the news, sur? the village is full uv it. They say she oughtn't 'a done it; that it's incur-agin' wickedness an'—"

"Who the dickens are you talking about?" asked his master, turning impatiently around, pen in hand.

"The owld—I mean Miss Osborne, sur," answered Mike.

"And pray what shouldn't she have done?"

"Taken Bessie West's baby?" Go on this moment, Mike, or I'll brain you with the poker."

"Well, you see, sur," Mike, thus admonished, went on glibly enough, "ye know that unfortunate story about Bessie West, the purty sewin'-gurril?"

"Yes, yes—Heaven knows I do. Not a woman's tongue within ten miles, except one, but has wagged about it."

"Well, sur, last night she died, an' she sint for the owld—I mane Miss Osborne. For she was frightened uv the other women, they'd been so hard to her—bad 'cess to 'em!—an' half uv 'em wid childher uv their own, an' knowin' what they're comin' to; an' the owld—I mane Miss Osborne, what—"

"Of course she did," interrupted his master. "Go on."

"An' she prayed wid the poor thing an' closed her eyes; an' whin she came away she fetched the young wun wid her, an' they do say she's agoin' to 'dopt it, an' they'll niver shpake to her agin'."

"Which would be a very great pity," said the old bachelor, with emphasis, and rather a diabolical grin.

"Yis, sur. An' now I suppose we'll be after movin', sur, for it only naded the baby to make it complete: owld—I mane Miss Osborne, cats, dogs, an' babies."

"Get me my great-coat" was the only reply he received. "I'll answer the note personally." And the great-coat on, away started Miles Guernsey for Rose Cottage once more.

"Bedad," said Mike, with an intoxicated wink, "it's me self knew he wouldn't shant the baby."

Miss Osborne's parlor was that night, if possible, brighter and cheerier than it was on the summer day the old bachelor first entered it. Instead of roses, Christmas greens dotted back the curtains, enwreathed the pictures, and drooped from vases and shells, and right over the tall wax candle burning on the center table hung a bunch of mistletoe (sent with kindly greetings and a real English plum-pudding from some kinsfolk across the sea), its waxen berries gleaming like clouded pearls among its slender green leaves. Miss Osborne had evidently not expected her guest so soon, for she sat before the glowing grate fire with Bessie West's baby on her knees, its small pink toes held out toward the welcome warmth, and itself cooling and glowing after the fashion peculiar to extreme youth.

How lovely she looked, with a spray of holly in her hair, a tender light in her eyes, and the loose sleeves of her dark silk dress falling back from her shapely white arms, as she held the child with motherly grace, and softly sang a dreamy nursery rhyme! Miles Guernsey thought of a beautiful Madonna he had seen in Rome as he looked earnestly at her, a moment before she became aware of his presence. (The black-eyed

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