

# Mary Jane Kinnaird



The little girl looked round the circle of her brothers and sisters. Their faces all reflected the flickering of the coal fire, and their eyes seemed to dance with the light from it. There were six in the family, and she was the youngest of them all by several years. It was Christmas time, and they had gathered at their grandparents where they could spend some time together. Sir Gerard Noel and Lady Barham loved their grandchildren dearly.

'It's very sad,' Mary Jane said. 'You can all remember Papa and Mama and I can't remember them at all.'

Her oldest sister turned in her direction.

'I was very upset when they died,' she said. 'And I remember feeling especially sad for you because I knew you wouldn't have any memories of them.'

'Tell me about them,' the child pleaded. 'Then I can imagine that I knew them.'

Mary Jane's oldest sister took charge.

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'Let's go round the circle and tell something that we remember about our parents. You start,' she said, to her brother.

'Papa was a banker,' the lad said.

'And he always wore very smart clothes,' said the next along.

'Mama was gentle and kind,' Mary Jane's sister added.

'And she was quite a serious person,' commented her brother.

'Mama was very kind,' the oldest sister said. 'In fact, Mary Jane, although you don't remember her, you are really very like Mama. You are gentle and kind and serious. So despite not knowing her at all, there is something of Mama in you.'

That night Mary Jane went to bed happier than she had felt for some time because over the weeks that had gone before, she had thought a lot about not knowing her parents.

'The holiday's over now, I'm afraid,' said Miss Holloway. 'And I think we should start today with your piano lesson.'

Mary Jane smiled at her governess. She had played the piano for her brothers and sisters many times over the holiday and had learned a new tune. Sitting down at the piano, she began to play. Miss Holloway's eyes opened wide, then a smile played on her face.

'Who taught you that tune?' she asked.

'My brother William,' the child said. 'He said it would be a nice surprise for you.'

'He was quite right,' laughed Miss Holloway. 'And I would really enjoy hearing it over again.'

Happy that she had pleased her governess, Mary Jane settled back at the piano and began to play. Mary Jane's brother, who had taught her the tune, came into the room as his little sister played.

'Well done, Twinkle,' he said, clapping at her performance.

The little girl's face broke into a wide smile. Her older brothers and sisters may have had homes and families of their own but there was something special about their times together at Grandma and Grandpa's. It was Mary Jane's home and she loved it, but she loved it even more when all the family was there... and she adored William, even if he did call her that awful pet name!

'I suggest you write your thank-you letters this afternoon,' Miss Holloway said, as they finished the morning's school work. 'You have one to write to your godmother and one to your uncle.'

Although Mary was a clever child, she neither read nor wrote quickly. So the writing of two thank-you letters took some time. After she had finished telling her godmother how much she liked the gift she

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had sent her, there was still a lot of empty paper on the page. As she thought what else she could say, an idea came to her mind and she wrote it down before it escaped.

'I hope that whenever you call, I shall be able to say my catechism (Bible questions and answers) perfectly.'

Then, signing her name, she folded the paper, glad that the job was done.

'She really does like learning her catechism,' Miss Holloway thought, as she checked the letter for spelling mistakes. 'Young though Mary Jane is, I think she is a Christian.'

By the time Mary Jane was 15 years old, she had begun to keep a diary. And her diary shows that she thought a lot about what it meant to be a Christian.

'December 3, 1831 - This week I've not prayed nearly enough for other people! One night I was very unkind and I've let little things annoy me. Every day when we've had family prayers, my mind has wandered all over the place. And I've wasted a lot of time too.'

'December 10, 1831 - I think that pride is my biggest sin and it shows itself in so many ways. Sometimes I feel so unthankful and discontented. And often I forget about God.'

'December 17, 1831 - The Bible says we should copy Jesus, and I hardly do that at all. He was so kind, and I'm only kind to

people I really like.'

But if anyone else had read Mary Jane's diary they might have thought she was being very hard on herself, for the teenager was kind and gentle, and really did seem to try to live the kind of life a young Christian person should live.

'I think it is time we bought you some new dresses,' Lady Barham told her youngest granddaughter.

Mary Jane looked at herself in the mirror.

'This dress is fine,' she said. 'And my other dresses will do another year too. I've not grown quickly this last while.'

Lady Barham sat down and looked at the girl.

'I still think you need new dresses. These ones may still fit you, but they don't fit the fashion. You don't want to look old-fashioned at your age surely!'

Although she didn't care at all about fashion, Mary Jane agreed to go to her grandmother's dressmaker. But she found it difficult to endure an afternoon of looking at cloth that didn't interest her, deciding on styles she couldn't care less about, and being pinned and tucked into boredom. It was with the greatest relief that the fitting was done, and she could put on her old blue dress and go home. By the time her new

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dresses were delivered she had forgotten all about them.

'I don't know what we'll do with Mary Jane,' Lady Barham commented to her husband, 'she just doesn't care about the things most girls her age are interested in. I often wonder what she will do with her life.'

When Mary Jane was 21 years old, she went to live with her uncle, Rev Baptist Noel. She loved sitting at the table and listening to him talk. Fancy dresses didn't matter in his home, there were much more interesting things for a girl to be thinking about.

'I visited a rookery in St Giles today,' Uncle Noel told her one day.

'Tell me about it,' Mary Jane said. 'I want to know how poor people really live.'

Uncle Noel looked at his niece and knew she was telling the truth. He sat down beside her on the window seat and told her what he had seen.

'I suppose rookeries get their name because they are very tall and narrow buildings, although it's hard to imagine anything less like a tree covered with rooks' nests. The one I visited today had over 300 people living in it, and every one of them desperately poor. Sometimes several families live in one room. I heard of one small room where five families lived, one family in each corner and another in the middle of the room. When someone asked

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how they managed, the husband of one of the corner families said that it had been fine until the family in the middle of the room took in a lodger. The poverty is terrible,' he concluded, 'but what is worse is that hardly any person in the rookery I visited knows that Jesus can save their souls.'

'Is that why you helped to start the London City Mission two years ago?' Mary Jane asked.

Uncle Noel looked at the serious girl at his side. 'Yes,' he said. 'That's why I hope that the London City Mission will be a great success. They will employ ordinary people rather than ministers to go out to the ordinary people of London.'

'I'll pray for the missionaries,' promised Mary Jane.

And Uncle Noel knew that she would.

In 1841, just four years after she had moved to her uncle's home, Mary Jane founded an organization of her own. It was the St John's Training School for Domestic Servants. As each girl came for training, Mary Jane took down her details and kept a record of the work she did. And she continued to do that for many years, until over 1000 young women had passed through her training school.

Not only that, she used a lot of her own money to fund the training as well as raising

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funds from her friends. Even when she married the Honourable Arthur Kinnaird, when she was 26 years old, her interest in helping people continued.

Over the years that followed, Mary Jane tried to interest her friends in the things that interested her and not fashions that she could never be bothered with. She sent out invitations for tea and discussion, and the discussions were on serious topics.

Her invitation for one Wednesday in May 1848, listed that afternoon's topics as:

1. Christian education - especially for ragged and poor children.
2. The problems of British colonies.
3. How to improve conditions for the people of London.
4. How to spread the good news of Jesus in Europe.

The following Wednesday her friends were invited to discuss:

1. Education.
2. Emigration.
3. Young men in towns.
4. Problems of people living in the countryside.

Having tea with Mary Jane Kinnaird could be hard work!



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Because she could not remember her mother, when Mary Jane's children were born she worked hard at being a good mother.

'I know the fashion is only to see your children for a short time before they go to bed,' she told her husband, 'but I won't have that in our home. They can come into my room anytime without knocking.'

Sir Arthur looked rather shocked.

'You'll never have any peace,' he said. 'They'll run in and out all day.'

Mary Jane smiled. 'I hope they do.'

Lady Kinnaird was the kind of mother she would have wished to have herself. Whatever she was doing, her children were welcome. Every night she prayed with them as they went to bed, whatever was going on in the house and no matter what important people were staying. Even as her children grew older they were constantly in her thoughts and prayers. Amazingly, when her son went off to boarding school, she wrote a letter to him every single day!

During the Crimean War, in 1854-55, Lady Kinnaird became aware of a problem and set out to do something about it.

'I hear that soldiers injured in the Crimea are not receiving the care they need, and many are dying unnecessarily,' she told her friends.

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'I know,' one agreed. 'What they need are trained nurses to go out there and help.'

'But where would we find trained nurses?' asked the other.

'We wouldn't find them anywhere,' said Lady Kinnaird. 'We'd train them here in London then send them out when they know what they are doing.'

A building was found and a home opened where young women in training would live. That was when Florence Nightingale became involved, and the two women worked together from then on.

'It's all very well training nurses for the Crimea,' Mary Jane said to her husband. 'But what will happen when the war is over?'

'I suppose they'll go home to their families,' he suggested, though he was sure that was not what his wife had in mind.

'Young women will still need to come to London to train as nurses or to work,' Lady Kinnaird thought aloud, 'and we could provide a home where they could live simply and safely, like the nurses' home.'

'Talk it over with your friends,' said Sir Arthur. 'See what they think.'

Lady Kinnaird wrote to several friends the following day - as she still read and wrote slowly it took most of the afternoon - and invited them for tea and discussion. The topic was to be 'providing a home for young

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women who come to London for training or employment.'

A small organisation was founded which soon joined with another and became the Young Women's Christian Association. Lady Kinnaird was president. The YWCA (as it was soon called) was not an instant success. Those who believed in it had to work hard to make it work. But it did work, and over the years homes were opened in other cities as well as London. Mary Jane Kinnaird didn't live to see it, but eventually the YWCA spread to many different countries, and provided homes for hundreds of thousands of young women who had to move to cities to study or work.

'I've just heard the most awful news,' Lady Kinnaird told her daughter. 'There have been some terrible murders in Whitechapel in London. I know I'm dying and can't do anything to help keep the girls of Whitechapel safe, but you could open a home for them.'

Mary Jane was right, she was dying. Even in the last few days of her life she encouraged her daughter to take over from where she left off. So when Lady Mary Jane Kinnaird died and went home to Jesus, her work on earth went on. A place of safety was opened in Whitechapel. It was called the Kinnaird Rooms.

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### **Fact File: The Crimean War.**

This war was fought on the Crimean peninsula, which is in the Black Sea between Turkey and Russia. The war is well known for the unnecessary loss of life caused by lack of organisation. The troops were sent out without adequate food, equipment or medical supplies. When the nurses arrived in the Crimea, they found that the hospital had no medicine, bandages or cleaning materials. The work of the nurses who went out made a huge difference to how injured soldiers were cared for.



**Keynote:** Mary Jane was well off and could have spent her time thinking about things like dresses and parties. However, she was very concerned for the welfare of the poor. She didn't stop helping when the crisis of the Crimean War was over: she was willing to carry on the work afterwards. It is important to try to help people and to do it all the time, even when it is hard and there is no one to praise us for doing it.

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**Think:** Although Mary Jane was very busy trying to help all sorts of people, she did not forget her own family. She was always willing to see her children, no matter what she was doing, and she wrote to her son at boarding school every day. Do you think that he always wrote back? She would have been very pleased if he had. Think about ways in which you can show kindness and affection to those who try to help you, and make sure that you don't take them for granted.



**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank you for being willing to make sacrifices and to suffer so that you can save people from their sins. Thank you for helping those whom important people usually ignored. Please teach me not to be selfish and help me to do all that I can to help others. Amen.