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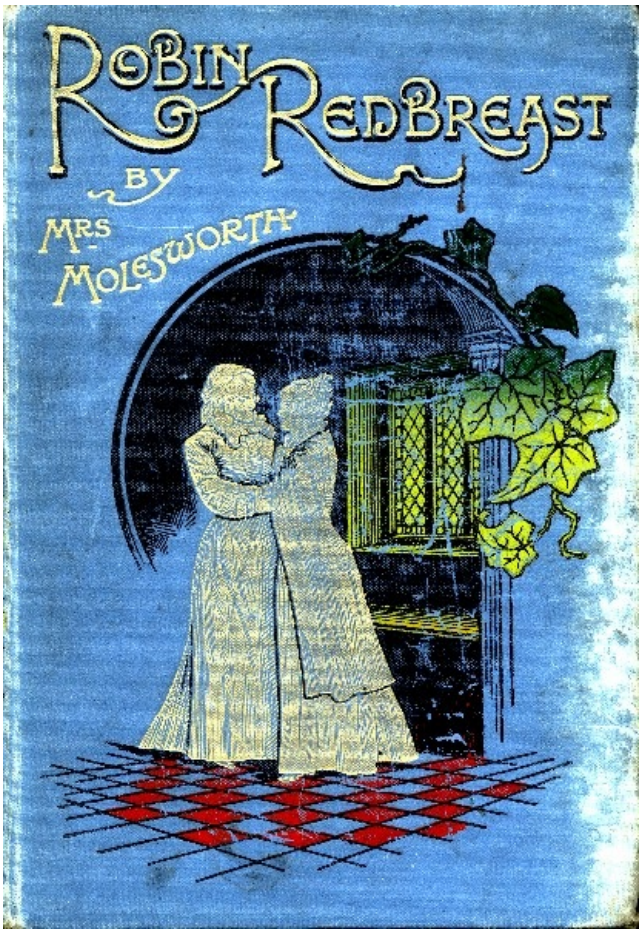

The old lady tapped her stick impatiently on the hard gravel.

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ROBIN REDBREAST

A STORY FOR GIRLS

BY

MRS MOLESWORTH

AUTHOR OF 'CARROTS;' 'THE PALACE IN THE GARDEN;' 'A CHARGE FULFILLED;' 'IMOGEN;' 'THE BEWITCHED LAMP,' etc.

WITH SIX ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROBERT BARNES

W. & R. CHAMBERS, LIMITED
LONDON AND EDINBURGH

A good old country lodge, half hid with blooms
Of honeyed green, and quaint with straggling rooms.

LEIGH HUNT.

Give me simplicity, that I may know Thy ways,
Know them and practise them.

GEORGE HERBERT.

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ROBIN REDBREAST.

[Pg 7]

CHAPTER I.

THE HOUSE IN THE LANE.

It stood not very far from the corner—the corner where the lane turned off from the high-road. And it suited its name, or its name suited it. It was such a pretty, cosy-looking house, much larger really than it seemed at the first glance, for it spread out wonderfully at the back.

It was red too—the out-jutting front, where the deep porch was, looking specially red, in contrast with the wings, which were entirely covered with ivy, while this centre was kept clear of any creepers. And high up, almost in the roof, two curious round windows, which caught and reflected the sunset glow—for the front was due west—over the top of the wall, itself so ivy grown that it seemed more like a hedge, might easily have been taken as representing two bright, watchful eyes. For these windows were, or always looked as if they were, spotlessly clean and shining.

'What a quaint name! how uncommon and picturesque!' people used to say the first time they saw the house and heard what it was called. I don't know if it will spoil the prettiness and the [Pg 8] quaintness if I reveal its real origin. Not so *very* long ago, the old house was a queer, rambling inn, and its sign was the redbreasted bird himself; somewhere up in the attics, the ancient board that used to swing and creak of a windy night, was still hidden—it may perhaps be there to this day! And somebody (it does not matter who, for it was not any somebody that has to do with this story) took a fancy to the house—fast growing dilapidated, and in danger of sinking from a respectable old inn into a very undesirable public-house, for the coaches had left off running, and the old traffic was all at an end—and bought it just in time to save it from such degradation.

This somebody repaired and restored it to a certain extent, and then sold it again. The new owner enlarged and improved it, and built the high wall which now looked so venerable; for already this was many, many years ago. The present owner of Robin Redbreast was the daughter of this gentleman—or nobleman rather—and she had lived in it ever since the death of her husband, fully twenty years ago.

She was an old woman now. Her name was Lady Myrtle Goodacre. The Goodacres, her husband's family, belonged to a distant county, and when *her* Mr Goodacre died, her connection with his part of the country seemed to cease, for she had no children, and her thoughts turned to the neighbourhood of her own old home, and the pretty quaint house not very far from it, which had been left her by her father, the late earl. And thither she came. But she was not exactly a sociable old lady, and few of the Thetford people knew her. So that there grew to be a slight flavour of mystery about Robin Redbreast.

The lane was about three-quarters of a mile from the little town of Thetford. Not that it was a little town in its own estimation; like many small things, it thought itself decidedly important. It [Pg 9] was a pleasant, healthy place, and of late years it had wakened up a good deal in some directions, of which education was one, so that several families with boys and girls in want of schooling came and settled there. For the grammar-school was now prospering under an excellent and energetic head-master, and there was talk of a high-school for girls.

But this latter institution was still in the clouds or the air, and so far, the girls of Thetford families had to content themselves with the teaching to be obtained at two steady-going, somewhat old-fashioned private schools, of which the respective heads were, oddly enough, the Misses Scarlett and the Misses Green. There were three Misses Scarlett and two Misses Green (I fear they were more often described as 'The Miss Scarletts' and 'The Miss Greens'), and all five were ladies of most estimable character.

There was no rivalry between the two schools. Each had and held its own place and line. Ivy Lodge and Brook Bank were perfectly distinct, so distinct that neither trod on the other's toes. The former, that presided over by the Scarlett sisters, was recognisedly for the daughters of the Thetford upper ten thousand; Brook Bank existed for the little maidens belonging to the shopkeepers and small farmers of and near the town. Nowadays a high-school would ignore such distinctions and absorb them all—whether for better or worse is a matter of opinion. But as things were, I don't think any harm came from the division of classes; thanks in great measure,

very probably, to the good sense and feeling of the heads of the two schools. On the rare occasions on which the Misses Scarlett met the Misses Green—at great parish entertainments or fancy fairs—the latter gave precedence to the former with ready and smiling deference, sure to [Pg 10] be graciously acknowledged by old white-haired Miss Scarlett with a kindly hand-shake or 'Many thanks, Miss Green;' the younger sisters following suit. For the Scarletts were well-born, much better born, indeed, than some of their pupils, and the Greens had got themselves educated with difficulty, and in their present position were higher on the social ladder than any of their progenitors had ever been—higher socially and more successful practically than they themselves had in past days dared to hope to be. Financially speaking, it was well known in Thetford that the Greens had made a much better thing of their school than the Scarletts. The Scarletts were inclined to be too liberal and too generous. Their boarders were in many instances the children of former friends or connections, who found it convenient to trade upon such ties when the questions and difficulties of education arose, and to suggest that *their* daughters might be taken on a different footing.

In a side-street running out of the market-place stood a few well-built, old, red-brick houses, which were considered among the 'best' residences in Thetford. No two of them were exactly alike: some were nearly twice as large as the others; one was high and narrow, its neighbour short and broad. They were only alike in this, that they all opened straight on to the wide pavement, and had walled-in, sunny gardens at the back.

In one of the smaller of these houses—a prim, thin-looking house, too tall for its breadth—lived a maiden lady, well known by some of the Thetford folk, not indeed *unknown* to any, for she had made her home in the town for many years. Her name was Miss Mildmay, or to be quite correct, [Pg 11] Miss Alison Mildmay. For the actual Miss Mildmay was her niece, a very young girl whom you will hear more about presently.

Miss Alison Mildmay was a very old friend of the Misses Scarlett.

At Number 9 Market Square Place—that was the name of the short row of houses I have described—some six months or so before the date at which I think this story may really be said to begin, there had been an arrival one evening.

It was late October: the days were drawing in; it was almost dark when the fly from the two-miles-off railway station—I should have explained that there was no station at Thetford; the inhabitants had petitioned against the railway coming near them, and now their children had to suffer the inconvenience of this shortsightedness as best they might—drew up at Miss Mildmay's door, and out of it stepped four people—three children, and a young man scarcely more than a boy. There were two girls, looking about twelve and fourteen, a little fellow of six or seven, and the young man.

They were all in mourning, and they were all very silent, though in the momentary delay before the door was opened, the eldest member of the party found time to whisper to the girls a word or two of encouragement.

'Try to be cheery, darlings,' he said. 'There's nothing to be afraid of, you know.'

'I'm not afraid, Uncle Marmy,' replied the elder; 'I'm only *awfully* dull. If—oh, if Francie and I were old enough for you to be going to take us out to papa and mamma. Oh, if only'——

'Hush,' whispered Uncle Marmy. He looked young to be an uncle, younger still to be, as he was, a [Pg 12] full-fledged lieutenant in the 200th. 'Hush, dear,' as the door opened.

Miss Mildmay was at home—it would have been strange had she not been so, considering that she had known for quite a week the exact day and hour at which her guests were expected. But it would have seemed less strange and more natural had she been there in the hall, hurrying forward to meet them, instead of waiting, to all appearance calmly enough, in the long bare drawing-room, into which the parlour-maid at once ushered them. She was a small woman, neat and pleasing in appearance, and her manner was sufficiently cordial as she came forward; though the reverse of demonstrative, it was dry rather than cold.

'You are very punctual,' she said as she kissed the children and shook hands with their young escort, saying as she did so, 'Mr Denison, I presume?'

'Yes,' he replied; adding in a cheerful tone, 'it is a case of introducing ourselves all round. You have never seen my—"our" I may say—nieces and nephew before?'

'No,' said Miss Mildmay. 'I am a very, an exceedingly busy person, and I rarely leave home, and never have visitors. So, though my brother's children have been so many years in England, they might have been as many more without our meeting, but for—these unforeseen circumstances.'

It seemed as if some less vague expression had been on her lips, but glancing round, she had caught sight of a tremulous flutter amidst the black garments of the two girls seated beside her—the elder stretching out her hand to clasp her sister's. Miss Alison Mildmay dreaded 'scenes' of all things; possibly, too, she felt conscious that her words sounded harsh. For she added quickly, 'Of course, I don't count these young folk as visitors. I hope they will very soon feel quite at home [Pg 13] here, and no doubt we shall fall into each other's ways nicely.'

The little speech cost her an effort; but she was rewarded for it. Marmaduke Denison could not restrain an audible sigh of relief.

'Thank you,' he said, with what sounded almost exaggerated fervour, 'thank you so much. It is—it has been very good of you to—to arrange as you have done. I assure you my sister and Mildmay appreciate it thoroughly.'

A shade of stiffness returned again to her manner.

'I quite understand my brother,' she said coldly. And though Uncle Marmy was too deeply in earnest to mind the snub, he wished he had answered less effusively.

'Do you think Eugene is like his father?' he said quietly, drawing forward the little fellow, who had been standing somewhat in the background.

The aunt's face softened again. And truly the boy was a pleasant object for her eyes to rest upon. He was very fair as to hair and complexion, though his eyes were dark and wistful; he was an extremely pretty child.

'Yes,' she said more cordially than she had yet spoken. 'He is like Frank, but he has his mother's eyes.'

Again the feeling of relief stole over the young man.

'She can't be so cold as she seems,' he reflected. 'I fancy I could get on with her, and I daresay Francie and Eugene will. It is Jacinth I am anxious about.' And he glanced at the elder girl, as the thought passed through his mind. So far neither she nor her sister had spoken. Jacinth sat there with a grave, almost expressionless face, her lips compressed in a way which her uncle knew well. And suddenly he became aware of a curious thing. It almost made him smile. This was an undoubted resemblance between his elder niece and her aunt! [Pg 14]

'I wonder how that will work,' he thought. 'I wonder if it is only superficial or if it goes deeper? If so, I hope poor Jass will have a wider life than has evidently fallen to the lot of this good lady.' And then, as it struck him that they were all sitting silent in most constrained discomfort, he thrust aside his reflections and forced his attention to return to the present.

'Perhaps I had better be looking up my quarters at the inn,' he said, rising. 'I found I could get up to town practically almost as early by the morning's express as by a night train. So if you will allow me, Miss Mildmay, I will look in first thing to-morrow for another glimpse of these little people.'

'But you will return to dine—at least not to dine, but—well, call it high tea or supper, whichever you like,' said his hostess, cordially. 'Unless, of course, you prefer'——

Marmaduke stood irresolute. He was desperately afraid of annoying Miss Mildmay.

'Oh no, of course not,' he began, 'but I'm'——

A sudden impulse seized Jacinth. She felt as if she must do something—if she sat still a moment longer she would burst into tears. She sprang to her feet and caught her uncle's arm. 'Oh, *do* come back, Marmy,' she said. 'You don't know.—Aunt Alison, do say he must.'

'Of course he must,' said Miss Mildmay. 'I am not going out this evening as I usually do. I have given myself a holiday in honour of your arrival, so pray come back as soon as you have ordered your room at the *Swan*, Mr Denison,' And Marmaduke smilingly consented.

This little incident seemed to have thawed them all. [Pg 15]

'I will show you your rooms now,' said Miss Mildmay, when, the young man had gone. 'You two girls are to be together of course, and Eugene's little room is on the next floor.'

Eugene, who was following with his sister Frances, whose hand he held, here squeezed it while he looked up in her face with anxiety.

'Never mind,' she whispered. 'It's quite a little house compared to granny's, Eugene. You can't be far away. Very likely you'll be just overhead, and so if you want us in the night you can knock on the floor.'

This seemed to satisfy the child, and the sight of his room, which though small was bright and cheerful, went still further to reassure him.

'It will be nice to have a room of my own,' he said bravely. 'At granny's I slept in the night nursery with nurse.'

'But you're a big boy now, you know,' said Jacinth, hastily, as if afraid of her aunt thinking him babyish.

'Yes, of course,' agreed Miss Mildmay. 'I cannot promise you that you will find everything here the same as at your poor grandmother's. You always called her your grandmother, I suppose,' she went on, turning to Jacinth, 'though she was not really any blood relation.'

The girl's lip quivered, but she controlled herself. 'We—we never thought about that,' she said. 'And then, of course, she was Uncle Manny's own mother, and we are so *very* fond of him.'

'Ah! he seems a nice young fellow, but so very young, and Mrs Denison was quite elderly. But she was more than middle-aged when she married, of course,' said Miss Mildmay.

There was a slight, almost indescribable tone of condescension or disparagement in her voice, the reason of which I will explain. Both the girls were conscious of it, but it affected them in different ways. [Pg 16]

'Ye—es,' began Jacinth, hesitatingly, 'I know'——

But Frances here broke in eagerly.

'You are not explaining it properly to Aunt Alison, Jacinth. You know you're not. It wasn't only or principally for Uncle Marmy's sake that we loved dear granny. She was as sweet and good to us as she could be, and I'd have loved her awfully if she hadn't been—been any relation—at all;' but here the little girl ignominiously burst into tears.

Miss Mildmay the elder glanced at her with scant sympathy.

'I suppose she is over-tired, poor child,' she said to Jacinth. 'I will leave you to take off your things. Come down as soon as you can; you will feel better when you have had something to eat;' and she turned to go. They were standing in the girls' own room. But at the door she paused a moment. 'Shall I send up Phebe?' she said. 'That is the young girl I have engaged to wait upon you three. No, perhaps,' as her eyes fell on the still weeping Frances, 'it would be better to wait a little. Just take off your outdoor things. The trunks will be brought up while we are at tea, and then Phebe can begin to unpack.'

She was scarcely out of hearing when Jacinth turned upon her sister. 'I'm ashamed of you, Frances,' she said. 'Crying and sobbing like that, when you can see Aunt Alison isn't the sort of person to have any patience with silliness! Such a beginning to have made! And it isn't as if it was really about—about poor granny.' Here it must be owned her voice faltered. 'It was just that you were vexed with me.' [Pg 17]

'Well, and if I was,' replied Frances, drying her eyes and swallowing down her sobs. 'I don't like you to speak coldly of granny, for you did love her in your heart, I know, dearly. Aunt Alison looks down upon her, just because she wasn't quite—no, she *was* quite a lady—but because she wasn't at all grand. And there's some excuse for her, because she didn't know her. But for us it would be *too* horrid, when she was so good to us, even all those years she was so suffering and feeble. And then, for Uncle Manny's sake too.'

'There now,' said Jacinth, not sorry to turn aside the reproach which conscience told her she had merited. 'You are saying the very thing you blamed me for—but truly, Francie, I didn't mean anything not nice to dear granny. I felt that Aunt Alison couldn't *understand* what she was; and—and—it was no use seeming to take up the cudgels for our other relations the moment we came.'

There was something in this, and no doubt a reluctance to discuss their grandmother with a stranger, and a prejudiced stranger, had mingled with Jacinth's desire to propitiate her aunt. So the sisters kissed and made friends, and when a few minutes afterwards they went down-stairs, and Mr Denison made his appearance again, the traces of tears had all but vanished from Frances's fair face.

The two girls had been five years in England, little Eugene three; and during all these years, owing to exceptional circumstances and unlucky coincidences, they had never seen their parents. Nor was there any prospect of their doing so for three or four years to come. All this time had been spent under the care of their mother's step-mother, Mrs Denison, whose recent death had thrown them again, in a sense, on the world, and the best Colonel Mildmay could arrange for [Pg 18] them was the somewhat unwilling guardianship of his elder sister Alison. She was an honourable and well-meaning woman, who had found her own sphere in active good works among the poor of Thetford. But she did not understand or care for children, and the charge of her nieces and nephew she only accepted as a duty.

'I will do my best,' she wrote to the parents in India, 'but I dare not promise that it will be all you could wish. Still there are undoubtedly advantages here, in the way of schools, and the place is healthy. I will give what time I can to the children, but I cannot give up all my present responsibilities and occupations. You would not expect it. I fear the children may find my rules strict, for—owing to Mrs Denison's long ill-health and peculiarly gentle character—I think it scarcely to be expected that they are not somewhat spoilt.'

She was right. It scarcely *was* to be expected. It was marvellous that the girls and their little brother were not more 'spoilt.' Mrs Denison adored them, and could see no fault in them. Nor was she in any sense a clever or strong-minded woman. Of inferior birth to her late husband—the daughter of merely the village doctor—she had married him when she was nearly forty, making the kindest of stepmothers to his only child, now Mrs Mildmay; loving her in no sense less devotedly than she loved her own son, Marmaduke, the child of Mr Denison's old age—the Uncle Marmy, who was more like an elder brother than an uncle to the little trio sent home to his mother's care.

But Mrs Denison was so essentially *good*, so single-minded and truthful, that her influence, even her too great unselfishness for their sake, had not radically injured her grandchildren. Her death had been preceded by a slow and gradual decline—none of those about her suspected the extent [Pg 19] of the sufferings she hid so resolutely under a calm and cheerful exterior—and the end came gently with no bitterness or shock. Even to Marmaduke, though he loved her devotedly, she had seemed more like a grandmother than a mother, and her gradual enforced withdrawal from the

family life had prepared him and the girls for what had to be.

Perhaps the full realisation of their loss only came home to them, when the question of where they were all to go was decided by a letter from Colonel Mildmay, telling of his arrangement with his sister, and by Marmaduke's receiving orders to start almost at once for India.

'I'm glad they didn't come before,' he said. 'If only I could take you all out with me;' for his regiment was that of his brother-in-law.

'Yes indeed—if only!' said Jacinth, as she said again that first evening at Thetford.

Stannesley, the Denisons' old home, was to be let. Though not a very large place, it was expensive to keep up, and Marmaduke was somewhat short of ready money, and not as yet ambitious of the quiet life of a country squire. His father had been easy-going, his mother no specially endowed woman of business; things had suffered, and rents had gone down. It would need some years' economy before the young man could retire to live in the old liberal way. But he did not mind; the world was before him, and he loved his profession.

That first evening in Market Square Place passed on the whole more cheerfully than might have been expected. Miss Mildmay was practically kind—more self-denying than her guests realised, for out of consideration for them, she had renounced attendance that evening at a committee meeting of which she was the ruling spirit, and those who knew her well would have seen that to [Pg 20] sit for two or three hours 'with her hands before her,' in her drawing-room, made her feel sadly like a fish out of water.

But the four new-comers were too preoccupied to observe her restlessness; the younger ones were tired too, and anxious for them to feel as cheerful as possible the next day, their uncle left early, advising Miss Mildmay to send them all off to bed.

'I am not leaving till twelve o'clock after all,' he said, 'so, if you have no objection I'll call in about half-past ten, and take these three young people a walk. I'd like to see something of Thetford: its looks so pretty.'

It was something to look forward to—another glimpse of the dear kind boyish face. And with the thought of the next morning's walk together, in their mind, the girls went to bed, and got up in good time for their aunt's early breakfast, trying to look and feel as cheerful as they could.

Marmaduke was more than punctual. It was barely ten o'clock when he rang at the door and came in briskly, saying it was such a lovely day he had thought it a pity to lose any of it.

It could not be anything but a sad walk, though they all tried to pretend it was not, and Uncle Marmy talked very fast and made all sorts of jokes, which Jacinth and Frances saw through, though they made Eugene laugh.

'Thetford's a very pretty place, really,' said Jacinth. 'There are lovely walks on every side, I should think. Do you suppose we shall go walks with the girls at our school, Uncle Marmy, or by ourselves with Phebe?'

'By yourselves, I should think. You are only to be at school till one o'clock,' he replied. [Pg 21]

'Oh, that will be much nicer,' said both the girls; 'we shall explore the neighbourhood. Oh what a pretty lane!' for they were just then passing Robin Redbreast corner. 'Do let us go down it a little way, uncle,' added Frances, 'I see what looks like a gate into a garden.'

And a moment or two later, the four stood, breathless with admiration, in front of the great gates in the high ivy-covered wall I have described.

The clear spring sunshine was falling brightly on the quaint old house; what of the garden could be seen was exquisitely neat and trim; Robin Redbreast was looking charming.

'What a *delicious* old house!' said Jacinth. 'I wonder who lives here?' and she gave a little sigh. 'Now, Uncle Marmy, wouldn't it be perfectly lovely if papa's time was out, and he and mamma had come home and we were all going to live here—just *fancy*!'

'It's awfully pretty,' said Marmaduke, 'but when your father's time's up I want you all to come back to live at Stannesley with me.'

Jacinth laughed.

'No, that wouldn't do,' she said. 'You'd be getting married. No, it would be much the nicest for us to live here and you at Stannesley, and for us to pay each other lovely visits. Of course we'd always be together at Christmas and times like that. And your wife must be very, *very* nice—like a sort of elder sister to us, you know, and'——

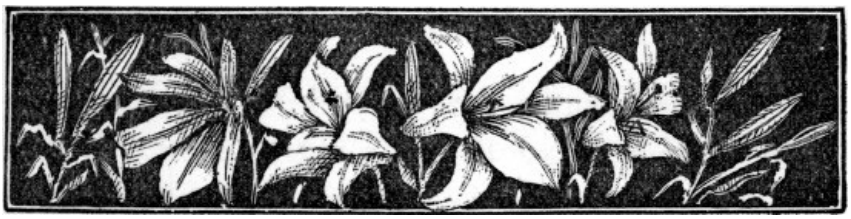
'My darlings,' said poor Marmy, to whom it had suddenly occurred to look at his watch, 'time's up—or just about it. We must hurry back.'

'Let's say good-bye here,' said Frances. 'Let's kiss you here, darling uncle, not before Aunt Alison in her drawing-room. And, oh, I *will* try not to cry.' [Pg 22]

So it came to pass that almost their first memory of their new home was associated for the three children with Robin Redbreast, the old house in the lane. Often as they passed it, it always brought back to them Uncle Marmy's sunburnt face and kind eyes, and again they seemed to

hear his 'Good-bye, my darlings, good-bye,' which he strove hard to utter without letting them hear the break in his usually hearty and cheery voice.

Half-an-hour later he was gone.



[Pg 23]

CHAPTER II.

THE OLD LADY.

It was six months now since the arrival at the house in Market Square Place. Mr Denison had been long with the regiment at——No, it does not specially matter where it was in India. The sisters got letters from him, as well as from their mother, by almost every mail, and in each he repeated the same thing—that he had never in his life found himself a person of so much consequence as Colonel and Mrs Mildmay considered him, seeing that he could give them direct news and description of their three children. And on their side, this seemed to make their parents more real and to draw them nearer to Jacinth and Frances, increasing more and more the intense longing for their return.

It is autumn, a pleasant season in this part of the country—really pleasanter perhaps, though one is reluctant to allow it, than the lovely, fascinating, capriciously joyous spring—and it is a Friday. Jacinth and Frances Mildmay are walking home from school, carrying their little bag of books. For Saturday is a whole holiday—no going to school that is to say—so, naturally, some lessons must be learnt at home for Monday.

'Aren't you glad to think to-morrow's Saturday, Jass?' said Frances. 'If only Aunt Alison would let us stay in bed half-an-hour later on Saturday mornings, it *would* be nice.'

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'You lazy little thing!' said Jacinth, 'no, I don't think it would be nice at all. I'd rather get up even earlier than usual on a holiday, and feel we have the whole long day before us. It's one of the things I admire Aunt Alison for—that she's so punctual and regular; we'd *never* have been in time at school every morning, Francie, if our home had still been at poor granny's.'

'I don't like you to say "poor" granny,' said Frances, rather irritably. 'Say "dear" granny. And Jacinth, whether it's true or not that in some ways we were rather spoilt and—and—not methodical and all that, at Stannesley, I wish you'd *never* say it to Aunt Alison. She's quite ready enough to be down on all the ways there.'

'If ever I've said anything of the kind,' said Jacinth, 'it's only been as a sort of excuse for *you*; for you know, Frances, you were dreadfully unpunctual and careless in little ways when we first came, though I do think you're getting better.'

'Much obliged,' said Frances, rather snappishly, for she was a quick-tempered girl. 'It's no thanks to Aunt Alison if I am. It's simply that I see it is right to try and be more careful, and—partly too for your sake, Jass. But it isn't for love of Aunt Alison. I don't love her. I'd have—what wouldn't I have done for granny or Uncle Marmy?—they loved us and Aunt Alison doesn't. She's good, in one way I daresay she's very good, but it's all duty. Why, just think how she leaves us to ourselves, once she's ordered our meals and told us what we are to do. Evening after evening we're alone. *That*'s not loving us.'

'I think you should be very glad indeed that she trusts us,' said Jacinth. 'It's much better as it is than to have her fussing after us out of duty, as you say. It would be very uncomfortable for us to feel that she was always thinking we interrupted all the things she has to do. She told me a while ago that it was the greatest possible relief to her to find she *could* trust us, and that having us interfered with her life much less than she expected.'

[Pg 25]

'Oh, *I* don't want any more of her,' said Frances hastily. 'Don't think that. But you must allow it's scarcely like having a home; sometimes I really think I would rather be boarders at school, do you know, Jass? It would be a good deal jollier. Don't you think so?'

'No, indeed,' said Jacinth, very decidedly. 'I certainly wouldn't like it at all. School's all very well

for lessons, but I should hate to be so tied up. I like being independent. Of course Aunt Alison knows we're to be trusted, but if we were at school we should have to ask leave for every single thing we wanted to do. And think of poor little Eugene without us.'

'Oh, it was only an idea,' said Frances. 'I didn't really mean it seriously. But I like some of the girls very much, especially the Harpers; don't you like the Harpers exceedingly, Jass? I've liked school itself ever so much better since the two younger ones came. Of course Camilla Harper wasn't much good to us, as she was quite one of the biggest ones. But I think they're all nice. I *love* Bessie and Margaret.'

'Yes,' her sister agreed. 'I think they're very nice. But they're rather babyish; you see they've always lived at home, and never had to depend on themselves at all. I think they're not at all rich.'

'That makes them all the nicer, *I* think,' said Frances. 'I don't know if it's always the way, but it certainly is at school—the richest girls aren't nearly as nice as some of the others.' [Pg 26]

'Oh, that's nonsense,' said Jacinth. 'It may just happen that some of those we know to be richer are—well, rather commoner—but you can't make any rule about it.'

'I wish Aunt Alison would let us ask the Harpers to tea, sometimes,' said Frances. 'I'm almost sure Miss Scarlett would let them come.'

'But I'm *more* sure that Aunt Alison wouldn't like anything of the kind,' said Jacinth, and even she sighed a little. 'So it's no use thinking of it. I hope you're prepared for a good long walk this afternoon, Francie. It's a lovely day, and we've been so little out lately. We needn't do our lessons till to-morrow. Ah, there's Eugene!' as at that moment the boy came flying down the street to meet them. 'How have you got on to-day, old man?' she said, fondly. 'Would you like to go a good long walk this afternoon?'

Eugene went to a small boys' school, a few doors only from his aunt's. He was certainly the least to be pitied in the children's somewhat lonely life, for his sisters were devoted to him, and their affection made up to him for the absence of other love. Yet this sounds too severe on Miss Mildmay, who in her own undemonstrative way *did* love her nephew and nieces. But she had mapped out her life on lines independent of home ties, and she had not the breadth and nobility of nature to recognise that the charge unexpectedly laid upon her was as much a heaven-sent mission as the labours among the poor, which she fulfilled with such devotion and enthusiastic self-denial. Her 'duty,' her dry duty, she performed to the children, but it never entered her mind or imagination that more than this could, under the circumstances, be demanded of her. [Pg 27]

'Oh yes,' Eugene replied. 'I'm game for as many miles as you girls, any way.'

His sisters burst out laughing. Their seven-years' old brother was developing fast.

'Where shall we go to, then?' said Jacinth, as they rang at their own door. 'I hope Phebe will be "game" too, Eugene, for we can't go without her, and she doesn't love very long walks.'

But Phebe proved to be in an unusually enterprising mood. She was a very good-natured girl, honest and well-principled, her only important fault being laziness, which her young charges did their best to conceal from Miss Mildmay.

'Aunt Alison would *certainly* send her away, if she knew how late Phebe sometimes calls us in the morning,' Jacinth used to say. 'There's nothing that would vex her more than laziness, and it is very tiresome. But then, very likely, she'd get us some prim maid that would be ill-natured and crabbed, and perhaps not *really* as good as Phebe.'

So, though they shook the terrors of a probable dismissal over the delinquent's head, they made no further complaint. And every time Phebe had been specially in fault, she was so exceedingly penitent that she almost persuaded her young mistresses as well as herself that it would never happen again.

She had been very late that Friday morning, and in consequence was now doubly on the alert. Not only did she profess herself equal to walking ten miles if the young ladies wished it, but she undertook to carry Master Eugene pick-a-back, should he feel tired, a proposal which did not find favour in Master Eugene's eyes, though her next suggestion that she should escort the party to a lovely wood they had not yet visited, 'round by Aldersmere' was received with acclamations. [Pg 28]

'We've always wanted to go along the Aldersmere road,' said Frances. 'You remember, Jass, we went a tiny bit up it that morning—that first morning with dear old Marmy.'

'Yes,' said Jacinth, with a sigh, 'that first and last day.'

'Is it the way along by Uncle Marmy's gates?' asked Eugene.

Phebe did not understand him, but Jacinth explained.

'He means past that lovely old house, Robin Redbreast, you know,' she said.

'We could come home by that lane; we can get into it by the other end and come out at Robin Redbreast corner on to the high-road,' said Phebe; 'it's a very pretty way indeed, though it's a long walk,' her voice sounding rather doleful.

'Phebe's thinking better of it,' said Frances laughing. 'Ah well, if you don't want to go a long walk, you'd better tell Aunt Alison that you can't stand the hard work here—so late in bed, and up so *dreadfully* early in the morning.'

The maid's face flushed scarlet.

'Miss Frances!' she began reproachfully.

Jacinth looked annoyed. In spite of her defence of her aunt's system and her own love of independence and self-confidence, she did feel conscious that the three of them were left in some ways too much to themselves: her sister's tone was not quite what a young lady's should be in speaking to a servant.

'Frances,' she said. 'I think it's very bad taste to joke about serious things, and being too late nearly every morning is a serious thing.'

'I wasn't joking,' Frances replied. [Pg 29]

'Well, say no more about it. We'd better start if we're going to. Phebe, do you think there's any chance of cook's giving us some cake, or even some bread-and-butter, to take with us?'

Phebe shook her head.

'I'm afraid not, Miss Jacinth,' she replied. 'She'd only complain to Miss Mildmay; it's best not to ask.'

'And I really can't afford any more pennies for buns,' said Jacinth. 'We must trust to getting a good tea when we come home.'

'Will Aunt Alison be in for tea?' said Frances. 'Oh no—it's Friday. I forgot,' with a distinct note of satisfaction in her voice.

'So there'll be nobody to say we're greedy if we do eat a great lot,' said Eugene, with satisfaction still less disguised.

Friday was one of Miss Alison Mildmay's busiest days, as she went out immediately after breakfast and did not return till the children were about going to bed. They had had dinner by themselves, and were now in the little room, half schoolroom, half nursery, appropriated to their use, on the same floor as the sisters' bedroom.

'Do let us go,' said Jacinth, impatiently, 'and don't even talk of being greedy, Eugene; it's not nice.'

Notwithstanding these little elements of discord before they started, the walk turned out a great success. It was a delicious day, to begin with, and lovely autumn weather is no doubt more soothing in its effect on both old and young than that of any other season. The little party stepped out bravely; the four miles to Aldersmere seemed only half the real distance, and the place itself, when they reached it, would have rewarded a much greater amount of exertion. [Pg 30]

It was a little lake, lying in a hollow; the trees, from which came its name, growing almost into the water. There was a curious charm about the intense loneliness of the place, none the less that it was not actually very far removed from the haunts of men. The pool was said in the neighbourhood to be exceedingly deep, and the dark still water looked mysterious enough to be so; but then this is said of every pond or lake of romantic appearance in all parts of the country, just as every tumble-down ruin or gloomy deserted house is sure to have the name of being haunted.

At one side there was a little clearing and a tempting stretch of velvety-looking grass, disfigured, however, by blackened patches where gipsy-fires, amateur or professional, had recently been lighted.

'It would be a jolly place for a picnic,' said Frances. 'I wonder if it's picnickers who've been here, or gipsies.'

'Real gipsies choose opener places generally,' said Jacinth. 'Still this would be a very cosy place in hot weather, but I suspect it's only been picnics. Let's remember it for next summer, Francie, and try to coax Aunt Alison to let us bring our dinner or at least our tea with us one nice hot day.'

'It wouldn't be much fun all by ourselves,' said Frances. 'If we could ask the Harpers to come too some holiday, *that* would be fun.'

'Oh how you tease about the Harpers!' replied Jacinth impatiently. 'I daresay you'll have quarrelled with them long before next summer, as you did with the Beckinghams.'

'Jacinth, it's very unkind of you to say that,' said Frances, indignantly. 'I *didn't* quarrel with the Beckinghams, only you wouldn't have had me stand Priscilla saying that papa and mamma can't care for us much if they leave us all these years without troubling to come home to see us.' [Pg 31]

'It was very impertinent,' said the elder sister, 'but I think you make friends too quickly. You told Priscilla Beckingham our whole history almost the first day we were at school. None of the girls would say such a thing as that to *me*.'

Frances was on the brink of a still more indignant reply, when Phebe—one of whose best points

was a very sweet temper, which made her always ready to avert a storm if she could—broke in, just in time.

'Miss Jacinth,' she said, 'I think we should be turning towards home. We've been here longer than you'd think, and Master Eugene will be getting tired.'

'I'm not a bit tired,' said the little boy, 'but I'll tell you what I am, or what I'm going to be, and that's awfully nungry. Talking of bringing our dinner or tea out with us next summer has put it into my head. If even I'd a bit of bread, I'd eat it.'

'Come on, then,' said Jacinth, encouragingly, 'the sooner we go, the sooner we'll be home. And we can have tea the minute we get in, can't we, Phebe, even if it's not quite five o'clock.'

'Certainly, miss, I don't think there'll be any difficulty about that,' said Phebe, who was pretty well persuaded in her own mind that it would be quite the orthodox tea-time before they could reach Market Square Place.

The first part of the way was pleasant walking, even though they were beginning to be just a little tired, for it was over level ground; but the next two miles were stiffer, for they were almost entirely up-hill, which had naturally made the outstart down-hill, an easy commencement of the expedition. [Pg 32]

Eugene was soon rather done up, though he would not hear of Phebe's carrying him.

'If it wasn't so climby, I wouldn't mind,' he said, 'but my legs does get so tired of always shortening themselves up.'

'Never mind, Master Eugene,' said the maid; 'we'll be at the back end of the Redbreast Lane, directly, and after that, there's no more climbing.'

'And once there we shall be less than a mile from home,' said Jacinth. 'Oh Francie, do you remember how nice it was at Stannesley with the old donkey, whenever we were going a long walk?'

'And granny watching for us at home with tea in her own sitting-room for a treat, and those *exquisite* little scones,' said Frances. 'Oh don't speak of it.'

'No, please don't,' said Eugene, 'for it makes me nungrier and nungrier. And—I'm afraid I'm beginning to be *firsty* too, and that's worser than being nungry. It always says so in shipwreck stories. They read us one at school the other day, and it said so.'

'Eugene, how silly you are!' said Frances, 'as if your feeling a little hungry and a tiny atom thirsty could compare with dreadful sufferings like sailors have.'

'And really, Eugene, considering you're past seven, you should try to speak better,' added Jacinth. 'I hope you don't say "nungry and firsty" at school. How they must laugh at you!'

'They don't then,' said the little boy, 'and they don't need to. I'm very pertickler at school, and I always say 'ungry and wursty properly. But it's a great trouble to remember, and I like a rest from being pertickler at home. You needn't be so cross. Why, there's a boy at school, older than me, who calls the sun the "fun"—he does really.' [Pg 33]

'Well, I know papa and mamma would like you to speak well,' said Jacinth, 'so you should try for their sake. "Ungry" is worse than "nungry"; you mustn't get into the way of dropping your "h's," whatever you do. That matters more than baby talking; it's *vulgar*.'

'It's very unkind of you to call me vulgar,' said Eugene, in a very plaintive voice, 'and I'll tell you what, Jass, I'm getting *so* fir—wursty, I mean, that I just can't go all the way back wifout a drink.'

Jacinth and Frances looked about them in despair; Eugene was a very good little fellow generally, but he was rather delicate and nervous, and notwithstanding the dignity of his seven years, they knew by experience that once he was fairly started on a fit of crying, it was far from easy to predict when it would be over. They were now in the long lane known as Robin Redbreast Lane, or the Redbreast Lane; another quarter of a mile at most would bring them out on to the high-road, where they were at no great distance from Thetford.

'I'm afraid it's been too long a walk for him,' said Jacinth. 'It's such a pity, for it's so good for him to have a nice country walk, now that he goes to school every day.'

'I'm not tired,' said Eugene, 'I'm only firsty now; I can wait for being nungry till tea-time, quite well, but I must have somefin to drink.'

'Is there any cottage along this lane, that we could ask for a glass of water at?' Jacinth inquired of Phebe. [Pg 34]

But the girl shook her head.

'There's no cottage nor house of any kind between this and the high-road, except the Robin Redbreast itself,' said she. 'And that's not a place where one could ask for a glass of water even. The old lady's very stiff in her ways, and the servants are just the same.'

'Oh no,' said Jacinth, 'of course it wouldn't do to ask for anything at a *gentleman's* house. You must just bear it, Eugene dear, and perhaps we'll pass some cottage when we leave the lane;

though I'm not very fond of drinking water at any cottage—one's never sure of its being good.'

'There's the drinking fountain just outside the town; I daresay Master Eugene can get along till we come to that,' said Phebe, encouragingly.

And for a few moments nothing more was heard of the little boy's woes. He plodded along silently, till just as they were approaching 'Uncle Marmy's gate' as they called it, he burst out again.

'I *must* have a drink, Jass. I tell you I must. Let me go and ask for one at this house. It wouldn't be naughty. I *can't* go any furder.'

The girls hesitated. It went very much against the grain with them—with Jacinth especially—to let the boy go up to the front door of this strange house to ask for the boon of even a glass of water. And yet it wouldn't do to let him go to the back-door, 'as if we were beggars,' said Frances.

'Would it be better to send Phebe? Well, perhaps that would be best. Phebe, will you go with Master Eugene—to the front door? But Eugene, you are really very tiresome,' said the elder girl.

'I *must* have a drink, Jacinth. It's not my fault. I can't help being firsty,' said the boy, in his doleful tone. 'If you say I mustn't, I'll *try* to bear it, but'—— [Pg 35]

At this moment an unexpected turn was given to the state of affairs by the gate, a few feet in front of them, being pushed open, to allow some one to come out.

The sound interrupted the children's discussion; they all looked towards the gate.

The 'some one' was an elderly, more correctly speaking, perhaps, an old lady. She was not *very* tall, but she was thin, and, considering her years, wonderfully erect. As she stood there at the gate, her thick black silk skirt trailing a little, a large fleecy white shawl thrown round her head and shoulders—her bright dark eyes glancing out all the darker and brighter from the contrast with her snowy hair and draperies—she looked both striking and stately. Not a person to take liberties with, assuredly.

Phebe shook in her shoes. As I have said, there was a considerable amount of awe felt in Thetford for the somewhat mysterious inhabitant of Robin Redbreast, and Phebe was a Thetford girl.

As for the young Mildmays, they stood motionless, not overawed, but both impressed and startled, gazing at the unexpected apparition in a way which Jacinth afterwards hoped to herself had not seemed like ill-bred staring.

But the lady was looking at them too. She had a stick in her hand—a polished black-wood stick, with a gold knob at the top—and for the first moment or two she stood as if leaning on it. Then she raised it with a little gesture, as if inviting them to come nearer.

'What was that name I heard you say just now?' she began. 'I heard you from the other side of my garden-wall. I have quick ears, though I am old.' [Pg 36]

The mention of ears was unfortunate. Somehow it recalled the story of Red Riding-hood and her grandmother to Eugene; tired and excited already, he grew perfectly white and caught hold of his elder sister's dress. And for a moment or two the presence of mind of the whole party seemed to have deserted them. No one spoke.

The old lady tapped her stick impatiently on the hard gravel.

'Don't you understand me?' she said. 'You were talking fast enough just now. The little boy was complaining of being thirsty. I think it was he that said the—the name. What is the matter with him? does he think I am going to eat him?'

This last was addressed to Frances, now standing a little in front of the others, partly with an instinct of coming between the terrified little boy and those keen, searching eyes.

'My brother is very tired—and very thirsty,' she said. 'It was he that was speaking, and I daresay he said our names. Mine is Frances, but my sister's is Jacinth. Perhaps you heard that name: it is very uncommon.'

'Jacinth!' repeated the old lady, '*Jacinth!*'

Her voice sounded far away and dreamy. A queer feeling came over the two girls, as if by a strange chance they had strayed unawares into some secret chamber, some long-closed deserted house; or as if a vague momentary glimpse into some long-ago story, some old romance, of the distant past had been suddenly opened to them.

They could not themselves have put this feeling into words; it came to them, I think, in the subtle way in which sometimes we are conscious of the unexpressed emotions and sensations of those near us. Nevertheless they stood silent, surprised and almost awe-struck. Then the old lady seemed to rouse herself: with a little effort she came back into the present, as it were. [Pg 37]

'Yes,' she said, 'that was the name I heard. Are you Jacinth?' she went on, addressing the elder girl, and as she fixed her eyes on Jacinth, a little tremor passed over her. 'I think,' she whispered to herself, but the children caught the words, 'I think—I wonder if it is fancy—I almost think I see a likeness.'

Jacinth was tall and well grown for her age. She was not *pretty*—not as pretty as fair, fluffy-haired Frances—but there was promise of more than prettiness in her almost severely regular features, and her colouring when one examined her carefully, was good too. Her hair a rich dark brown, of a shade one hardly does justice to at the first careless glance; her complexion healthily pale, with a tinge of sun-burning, perhaps a few freckles; her eyes clear, strong, hazel eyes, with long softening lashes. The whole was spoilt by a want of light—of the sunshine one loves to see in a young face—the expression was too grave and impassive; there was the suggestion of future hardness, unless time should mellow instead of stiffening and accentuating the already somewhat rigid lines.

It must have been this expression, more than any actual resemblance in feature, which had made Marmaduke Denison smile to himself at the curious likeness which had struck him between Jacinth and her Aunt Alison.

The girl looked up in the old lady's face, and something—the oddity of the whole situation, some indefinite sympathy which unconsciously sought for an outlet—made her smile. Jacinth's smile was charming. Already to her thin young face it gave the roundness and bloom it wanted—every feature softened and the clear observant eyes grew sweet. [Pg 38]

A faint flush—the mere suggestion of colour which in the aged often denotes intense emotion—rose to Lady Myrtle Goodacre's face, as she met Jacinth's smile. She scarcely waited for the girl's reply to her question.

'Yes,' she went on, 'it must be. I cannot be mistaken. My dear,' she added, 'I want to ask you several things, but this poor little fellow is tired—and thirsty, didn't you say? Will you come in for a moment or two? Not farther than the porch, if you prefer; perhaps you are in haste to get home, and I must see you again.'

She turned and walked quickly back towards the house—the door of which stood open—along the straight smooth gravel path leading from the gate; the children following her, without seeming quite to know why, and Phebe bringing up the rear with a face which looked as if she were doubting whether they were about to enter an ogre's castle or a white cats' palace.

'Miss Jacinth, Miss Frances,' she panted in vague remonstrance. But they took no notice.

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CHAPTER III.

TWO JACINTHS.

The porch was almost like a room. It had cushioned seats all round, a rustic table at one side, and stained glass, tiny-paned windows. The old lady hurried through it, looking back over her shoulder to say, 'Sit down for a minute or two. I will order some milk for the little boy,' and nothing loth, the children did so, though in silence.

Then Eugene glanced round in triumph.

'There now,' he said, 'you see I was right. She doesn't mind a bit. I shouldn't wonder if she brought us out cakes too.'

'*Hush*,' said Frances, 'you needn't talk like that, Eugene. You were as frightened as anything when she first came out. And how can you be so greedy?'

'Hush,' said Jacinth in her turn, and still more authoritatively. 'Don't you hear? she's coming back.'

The door standing slightly ajar was pushed open more widely, disclosing a trim-looking maid, carrying a tray with a large glass jug full of milk, and—joyful sight!—a plate of small brown crisp-looking cakes. Eugene's eyes glistened, though, poor little chap, it was more at the sight of the milk than the cakes, for he was very thirsty indeed. But he sat still, to outward appearance patiently enough, for just behind the maid came the old lady again, looking quite eager and excited, a bright spot of colour on each cheek. [Pg 40]

'Put the tray on the little table,' she said. 'Yes, that will do. You need not stay;' and the trim maid

disappeared again.

Lady Myrtle poured out a glass of milk and gave it to Eugene.

'Your sisters will excuse my attending to you first, I am sure,' she said. 'You are very thirsty, I know.—Now, will you two have some milk and some cake?' she went on, turning to Jacinth and Frances.

Jacinth felt half inclined to refuse, but something in the old lady's manner made it difficult to do so. She did not seem accustomed to have even her suggestions disregarded, and her invitation was more like a command.

'After your brother has finished his milk,' their hostess went on, 'perhaps he would like to walk about the garden a little with your maid, or if he is tired, there is a nice arbour over there in the corner. I want to speak to you two a little. I have some questions to ask you, but I want you to understand that I will not invite you to come in till you have got leave from—from your parents or your guardians. When I was a child I would not have entered any stranger's house without leave, and I approve of strict ways of bringing up children.'

The girls listened respectfully, making a little sign of assent. But Eugene's whole attention had been given to the milk and cakes. Now that his thirst was satisfied, he began to think about others, and for the first time found his voice.

'Mayn't Phebe have some milk and cake, too, please?' he said. 'We've been a drefful long walk. I'm sure Phebe's firsty too.' [Pg 41]

Phebe blushed scarlet, but in spite of her terror, her good manners—and she was a specially good-mannered girl—did not forsake her.

'Master Eugene, my dear,' she said quietly. 'You forget I am not a little young gentleman like you. —If I might take his glass and plate to the arbour, my lady, he would be very happy, and out of the way.'

Lady Myrtle smiled benignly. She liked 'tact.'

'Certainly, my good girl,' she said, 'and take a glass and some cakes for yourself too.—That is a nice-mannered girl,' she added to Jacinth and Frances. 'She is both modest and sensible.'

'Yes,' said Jacinth, 'we like her very much. Aunt Alison got her for us before we came here.'

Lady Myrtle's face grew grave.

'Is Aunt Alison the relation you live with?' she asked. 'Is her name Mrs Alison? And where and with whom did you live before? Have you no parents? I am not asking out of curiosity, but because I think you must be related to a very dear friend of mine—now dead.' Here her breath seemed to catch her voice. 'I may be mistaken, but I do not think so.'

'Our parents are in India,' said Jacinth. 'Our father is Colonel Mildmay, and Aunt Alison is his sister. Alison is her first name. We have only lived with her since our—grandmother, Mrs Denison, died.'

'*Denison!*' repeated Lady Myrtle, 'I was sure of it. But *Mrs* Denison? I cannot understand it. Are you not making a mistake, my dear? Are you sure that your grandmother was *Mrs* Denison? Was she not'—— [Pg 42]

'Mrs Denison was only our *step*-grandmother,' interrupted Jacinth, eagerly. Frances could not blame her now for explaining this! 'She was very good to us, but—she wasn't our own grandmother. *She* died before we were born. She was mamma's mother, and I am called after her. She was Lady Jacinth Denison, and'——

'I knew it,' exclaimed the old lady. 'And her name before she was married was'——

Jacinth hesitated a little. It is sometimes rather confusing to remember relations so far back.

'I know,' said Frances; 'it was More'——but here she too stopped.

'Moreland?' said Lady Myrtle.

The girls' faces cleared. Yes, that was it.

'But the Christian name—"Jacinth"—satisfied me,' said the old lady. 'The name, and your face, my dear,' to Jacinth herself. 'Thank you, for answering my questions. Perhaps I must not keep you any longer to-day, but I will write to your aunt—Miss Mildmay—Miss Alison Mildmay—I think I have heard of her at Thetford—and ask her to allow you to come to see me again very soon. If I keep you longer just now, she may be uneasy.'

'Oh no,' said Frances, 'she won't be at home when we get back. It's one of the days she's out all day—till after we're in bed, generally.'

'Dear me!' said Lady Myrtle, 'she must be a very busy person.'

'Yes,' said Jacinth, 'she is. She is very, *very* useful, I know. And one couldn't have expected her to give up all the things she'd been at so many years, all of a sudden, when we came. We don't mind, except that it seems a little lonely sometimes; but—I don't think Aunt Alison cares much for [Pg 43]

children or girls like us. She says she's got out of the way of it. But she's quite kind.'

'You have a governess, I suppose?' asked Lady Myrtle.

'No,' said Jacinth, 'we go every day but Saturday to Miss Scarlett's school.'

She coloured a little as she said it, for she had an instinct that 'school' for girls was hardly one of the things that her hostess had been accustomed to in *her* youth, and notwithstanding Jacinth's decision of character, she was apt to be much influenced by the opinions and even prejudices of those about her. But still she knew that Miss Scarlett's was really a somewhat exceptional school.

'To Miss Scarlett's,' repeated Lady Myrtle. 'I have heard of it. I believe it is very nice, but still—I prefer home education. But perhaps I should not say so. No doubt your parents and guardians have acted for the best. I should like you to tell Miss Alison Mildmay all I have asked you, and I will write to her. And in the meantime, that she may not think me too eccentric an old woman, pray tell her that I was—that your own grandmother—I like you to call her that—Lady Jacinth Moreland, afterwards Lady Jacinth Denison, and I, were the—yes, the very dearest of friends when we were young. It is possible that Miss Alison Mildmay may have heard my name from your mother. I think your mother—what is her name—"Eugenia," oh yes, I remember—I think your mother must have heard of me even in her childhood. My unmarried name was Harper, "Myrtle Harper;" your grandmother and I first took to each other, I think, because we had such uncommon names.'

'Harper!' exclaimed Frances eagerly, 'there are some—what is it, Jacinth?—I mean Bessie and Margar'——

[Pg 44]

'We must go,' said Jacinth, getting up, as she spoke. 'Frances, will you call Eugene? and'—turning to her hostess, 'thank you *very* much for being so kind. And oh, if you will ask Aunt Alison to let us come again, it would be such a pleasure.'

She raised her beautiful eyes to Lady Myrtle's face. A mist came over the keen bright old pair gazing at her in return. Partly perhaps to conceal this sudden emotion, Lady Myrtle stooped—for, tall though Jacinth was for her age, she was shorter than her grandmother's old friend—and kissed the soft up-turned cheek. 'My dear, you are *so* like her—my Jacinth, sometimes,' she murmured, 'that it is almost too much for me.'

Then a practical thought struck her.

'You have not told me your address at Thetford,' she said. 'I had better have it, though no doubt Miss Alison Mildmay is well known in the place.'

Jacinth gave it.

'Number 9, Market Square Place,' she said.

'Oh, I know where it is—a row of rather nice quaint old houses. Still, you must feel rather cooped up there sometimes, after Stannesley; was not that the Denisons' place? I was there once.'

'We miss the grounds, and—yes, we miss a good many things,' said Jacinth simply.

'Then I hope that Robin Redbreast will make up to you for some of them,' said Lady Myrtle. 'You know the name of my funny old house, I daresay?'

'Oh yes,' said Francis, who had just rejoined them with Eugene and Phebe, 'we heard it the very first day. And we've always thought it lovely—both the house and the name. And we always pass by this way when we can, because of the gates. We call them 'Uncle Marmy's gates,' for it was here we said good-bye to him—good-bye *properly*, I mean.'

[Pg 45]

'Kissing, and trying not to cry,' added Eugene, by way of explanation.

Lady Myrtle seemed a little startled.

'Uncle Marmy!' she repeated, 'that was your grandfather's name. I thought your mother was an only child.'

'Yes,' said Jacinth, 'Uncle Marmaduke is not our real—not our full uncle. He is mamma's half-brother only.'

'Oh,' exclaimed the old lady, 'now I understand.'

'But we love him just as much—*quite* as much as if he was our whole uncle,' said Frances, eagerly. 'He's perfectly—oh, he's as nice as he can *possibly* be.'

Lady Myrtle smiled, and gave a little pat to Frances's shining tangle of curly hair.

'Good-bye then, my dears, for to-day,' she said.

But she stood at the gate looking after them till they reached the corner of the lane, when some happy impulse made Jacinth—undemonstrative Jacinth—turn round and kiss her hand to the solitary old figure.

'She's like a sort of a grandmother to us,' said Eugene. 'What a good thing,' with extreme self-complacency, 'I made you go in!—what a good thing I was'—after a great effort—'wursty!'

But Jacinth's face was slightly clouded. She drew Frances a little apart from the others.

'Frances,' she said severely, 'you must have more sense. How could you begin about those girls at school?' Lady Myrtle, if she does notice us, won't want to hear all the chatter and gossip of Miss Scarlett's. And it's such a common sort of thing, the moment you hear a name, to start up and say "Oh, *I* know somebody called that," and then go on about your somebodies that no one wants to hear anything of.' [Pg 46]

Frances looked rather ashamed. She was barely two years younger than her sister, but on almost every subject—on questions of good manners and propriety above all—Jacinth's verdict was always accepted by her as infallible, though whence Jacinth had derived her knowledge on such points it would have been difficult to say. No one could have been less a woman of the world than the late Mrs Denison; indeed, the much misused but really sweet old word 'homely' might have been applied to her in its conventional sense without unkindly severity. And no life could have been simpler, though from that very fact not without a certain dignity of its own, than the family life at Stannesley, which was in reality the only training these girls had ever known.

'I'm very sorry, Jass,' said the younger sister, penitently. 'It was only—it did seem funny that her name was Harper, when I am so fond of Bessie and Marg'——

'I'm getting tired of your always talking of them,' said Jacinth. 'I daresay they're nice enough'——

'And they're *quite* ladies,' interposed Frances, 'though they are so very poor.'

'I wouldn't look down on them for *that*; I should think you might know me better,' said Jacinth. 'We're not at all rich ourselves, though I suppose papa and mamma seem so in India with all the parties and things they're obliged to have. And I never said the girls weren't "quite ladies," as you say. But I know how it will end: in a little while you won't like Bessie and Margaret any better than Prissy Beckingham. You fly at people so at first.'

'I don't think it will be that way this time,' said Frances in a tone of quiet conviction. 'There's something *different* about the Harpers.' [Pg 47]

'It isn't a very uncommon name,' said Jacinth. 'There are all sorts of Harpers. Why, at Stannesley, the village schoolmaster's wife was called Harper before she married, I remember. And then Lord Elvedon's family name is Harper.'

They had drawn nearer to the other two by this time, and Phebe overheard the last words.

'If you please, Miss Jacinth, that is Lady Myrtle's family. Her father was Lord Elvedon, two or three back, and the Lord Elvedon now is a nephew or a cousin's son to her, though they never come near the place; it's been let ever since I can remember.'

'I wonder if she was brought up at Elvedon,' said Frances. 'It must seem rather sad to her, if she was there when she was a little girl, to have no one belonging to her there now.'

Altogether the adventure—and a real adventure it was—gave them plenty to think of and to talk about all the way home and after they got there. Eugene forgot his fatigue, and chattered briskly about the goodness of the little brown cakes, till he got a snub from Jacinth about being so greedy. His appetite, however, did not seem to have suffered, and he was quite ready to do justice to the tea waiting for them at home, though not without some allusions to Lady Myrtle's delicious cakes, and wishes that Aunt Alison would sometimes give them 'a change from bread and butter.'

For one of Miss Mildmay's fixed ideas about children was that they could not be brought up too plainly.

'We do have a change sometimes,' said Jacinth. 'We always have golden syrup on Saturdays and jam on Sundays, and you know we've had buns two or three times on birthdays.' [Pg 48]

'Other children have buns and cakes far oftener than us,' said Eugene. 'Like we used to at Stannesley.'

'It was quite different there,' said Jacinth; 'a big country-house and baking at home.'

'*Everything* was nice at Stannesley,' said Frances with a sigh. 'Granny and Uncle Marmy really loved us; that makes the difference.'

'Aunt Alison loves us in her way,' said Jacinth. 'Everybody can't be the same. I think you're getting into a very bad habit of grumbling, Frances. And this afternoon you really should be pleased. For I shouldn't at all wonder if Lady Myrtle often asks us to go to see her, and that would be a treat and a change. But what you say about poor granny and Uncle Marmy reminds me to say something. You really needn't fly up so on the defensive every time I name them; you did it again to-day, and I'm sure Lady Myrtle must have thought it very queer, just as if I'——

But this second reproof for her behaviour at Robin Redbreast did not find Frances as meek as the former one, which, in deference to Jacinth's superior knowledge on such subjects, she had felt she perhaps deserved.

'I will "fly up" as you call it,' she interrupted angrily, 'when you talk in that cold measured way about dear granny and Uncle Marmy, as if you were almost ashamed of them. For one thing I can't bear you to say "poor" granny; it's not right. She was a sort of a saint, and I'm quite sure

that now she's'——But here Frances burst into tears.

Jacinth felt sorry, but annoyed and irritated also. She blamed herself for having begun any private talk of the kind before Eugene and Phebe; for, as sometimes happened when they had [Pg 49] come in late, Phebe was having tea with them this evening. And she felt conscious also of deserving, to a certain extent, her sister's blame. But Jacinth had a good deal of self-control.

'I cannot understand,' she said quietly, though the colour rose to her cheeks—'I cannot understand how you can think such things of me—as if I—as if anybody could have loved *them* more than I did; as if'——But here the tears rose to her own eyes.

Frances was at once melted.

'I didn't mean *that*,' she said. 'I know you did. I wouldn't love *you* if I didn't know it. But it's your manner; you seem in such a hurry always to explain that granny wasn't our own grandmother.'

'I don't think that's fair,' said Jacinth. 'How could I possibly have helped explaining about it when it is *only* because of our own grandmother that Lady Myrtle cares anything at all about us. And I wasn't in a hurry to explain; don't you remember that Lady Myrtle kept asking if we were sure our grandmother was only *Mrs*?'

Yes, that had been so, but still the slightly hurt feeling which Jacinth's tone about the dear Stannesley people had more than once given Frances still remained, and she might have said more, had not her sister prevented her doing so.

'Anyway,' she said, 'we need not say any more about it just now.'

After tea they got out their lesson-books, anxious to do all they could, so as to wake on Saturday morning with the delightful sensation of a real whole holiday. But their long walk, perhaps the excitement of their adventure, had tired them. Lessons, with Frances especially, seemed more difficult than usual, and after a good many yawns and not a few groans, she decided that it was [Pg 50] no use to attempt anything calling for a 'clear head' that evening.

'I'll just copy out my dictation and exercises,' she said, 'and do all the fresh learning to-morrow morning. Won't you do so too, Jass, for there are two or three things we can learn together?'

'Very well,' said Jacinth, though with a little sigh, 'perhaps it would be better.'

It was not only that she was tired—her head was full of Robin Redbreast and its owner, and all manner of fancies and castles in the air were crowding upon her. It was really so romantic, she thought; it was not silly to picture to herself the delightful possibilities of the future.

'Suppose Lady Myrtle really gets very fond of us'—she said 'us,' but '*me*' would perhaps have been more correct, and after all this was scarcely unnatural, as it was she who had specially recalled the Jacinth Moreland of her enthusiastic youthful affection to the old lady—'supposing she in a sort of way adopted us—or me'—for Jacinth was not selfish in the common acceptation of the word, though self-important and fond of ruling, 'what happiness it might bring us! She doesn't seem to have any relations, and she must be very well off. Supposing she took us to live with her, and treated us just like her own children, I wonder if mamma wouldn't come home then, and papa too perhaps. For of course, if they knew we were going to be well off, papa wouldn't worry so about staying out in India his full time and all that. How I should *love* to be the one to be able to do everything for them all.'

Still it would not do to begin speculating on what might happen in the far future when—Jacinth felt shocked when she realised that, in picturing herself as Lady Myrtle's possible heir, she was [Pg 51] anticipating the old lady's death; yet she certainly could not 'fit in' the idea of their all living together at Robin Redbreast with its present châtelaine. And she laughed at her own absurdity.

'Papa is so independent,' she reflected. 'Even if *mamma* had a lot of money, I don't believe he'd be satisfied without working as hard as ever. And of course he loves his profession.'

Then she determined not to be silly, and to think no more about it. But her dreams that night were very fantastic and rosy-hued. She awoke in the morning from a vision of a wonderful room of which the walls were painted all over with robins, which suddenly burst out singing her name, 'Jacinth, Jacinth,' to find that Frances was awake and calling to her.

'Oh Francie, I was having *such* an interesting dream,' she said. 'I wish you hadn't awakened me: I can't remember what was dreams and what wasn't,' she went on sleepily. 'Did we really go inside Uncle Marmy's gates, and see?'——

'Of course we did,' said Frances, 'and I've got such a good thought. Don't you think we might go that way again to-day and take mamma's last photograph with us? Lady Myrtle would be sure to like to see it, and we needn't ask for her, you know. And it would keep her from forgetting us, and anyway we might walk round the garden, I should think.'

'No,' said Jacinth, 'we can't do anything like that without Aunt Alison's leave, and of course we can't ask for leave unless Lady Myrtle writes to Aunt Alison. And there's no telling if she will. She may be one of those whimsical old people that mean to do a thing, and then think better of it and do nothing.' [Pg 52]

Frances's face fell.

'Oh, I do hope not,' she said. 'Somehow I don't *think* she's that sort of old lady.'

Nor in her heart did Jacinth. The expression of her misgivings had been as much or more to damp or check herself as Frances. For she was startled to find how wildly she had been indulging in building air-castles. Few, if any, even of those she had spent her life among, knew Jacinth Mildmay thoroughly, or had any suspicion of the impressionableness, the almost fantastic imagination, hidden under her quiet, almost cold exterior. But to some extent she knew herself better than is often the case at her age. She was well aware that she needed strict holding in hand; she sometimes even went too far in judging as contemptible weaknesses, feelings and impulses which were full of good.

But as regards the fancies which since yesterday had been so absorbing her, she was in the right. Even apparently harmless hopes and wishes dependent on the caprice, or, if carried where they *may* lead to, contingent on the life or death of others, are better checked at once. Indulgence in such can do no good, and *may* do harm.

They had not seen their aunt the night before. And her manner was somewhat 'carried' and preoccupied when she kissed the girls as they entered the dining-room, where she was already seated at the table waiting to read prayers.

A slight misgiving came over Jacinth. She glanced at the sideboard where the morning letters were always placed. Yes, one or two torn wrappers were lying there: evidently the letters had come and been opened. For Miss Alison Mildmay was, as Frances expressed it, 'a *dreadfully* early getter-up,' and had always an hour or more to herself before the younger members of the household appeared. [Pg 53]

I am afraid Jacinth's attention that morning was rather distracted. She sat glancing at her aunt's profile, cold and almost hard, as she was accustomed to see it, but with just now the addition of some irritable lines about the forehead which were certainly not *always* there.

'Something has vexed her, I am certain,' said Jacinth to herself. 'I do wonder if it has anything to do with Lady Myrtle. Oh dear, if she has written so as to vex Aunt Alison, and we get blamed for it, and everything is spoilt!'

[Pg 54]

CHAPTER IV.

A LETTER AND A DISCUSSION.

'Were you very late last night, Aunt Alison? Are you tired?'

The questions came from Frances, who had noticed the unusual silence at the breakfast-table—not that they were ever very loquacious, for Eugene had his meals up-stairs and he was the chatterbox of the party—but without any of her sister's fears or misgivings. So that she looked up at her aunt in happy freedom from any self-conscious embarrassment.

'I was not later than I am usually on Fridays,' said Miss Mildmay. 'No, thank you, I am not tired. Will you have some more tea, Jacinth?'

'Yes, please,' said the elder girl. She was growing more and more nervous, and yet her anxiety to know if Lady Myrtle really had written already made her remain near her aunt as long as possible.

Miss Mildmay had apparently finished her own breakfast, for after handing Jacinth her cup, she took up a little pile of letters which lay beside her, and drew out one, which she unfolded and glanced at with a peculiar expression on her face.

'Have you—have you nothing to tell me—no message to give me?' she said at last, still fingering the letter. [Pg 55]

She spoke to both girls, but it seemed to Jacinth as if her words were more specially addressed to her, and she started, while a flush rose to her face. And suddenly she remembered—or realised rather—that Lady Myrtle *had* given them a message for their aunt; though, oddly enough, in spite of her thoughts having been so much absorbed with the adventure of the day before, it had never once occurred to her during that silent breakfast that she should have spoken of it to her aunt—should, in fact, have related all that had passed. There had been no reason for her not doing so—the old lady had specially desired it—it was only that her strong impression that Miss Mildmay had something to say to them had made her wait.

'Of course,' she exclaimed nervously. 'I really don't know what we've been thinking of *not* to tell you. For we *have* a message for you.—Frances, why didn't you remind me?'

Frances stared. It was seldom her way to take the initiative, she was so accustomed to follow Jacinth's lead; and just now she had been quite contentedly waiting to speak of their visit to Robin Redbreast till her sister saw fit to do so.

'I—I didn't know. I thought'——began Frances confusedly.

Miss Mildmay turned upon her sharply.

'Have you been planning together not to speak of this—this curious affair to me?' she said. 'I don't pretend not to know all about it. I do,' and she touched the letter, 'by this, but I must say I think I should not have heard of it *first* from a stranger. There is one thing I cannot and will not stand, I warn you, girls, and that is any approach to want of candour.' [Pg 56]

'Aunt Alison,' exclaimed Jacinth in hot indignation, 'how can you? Did you not hear me ask Frances why she had not reminded me to tell you?'

'No, I cannot understand that,' said her aunt, still coldly. 'It is quite impossible that you had *forgotten* about it, when it only happened'——She glanced at the letter and hesitated. 'When was it, it happened?'

'Only yesterday,' said Jacinth quietly. 'No, *of course*, I hadn't forgotten. But I had forgotten that I had a message for you that I should have given immediately I saw you. That I *had* forgotten, and if you don't believe me, I can't help it.'

Her voice choked, and the tears rushed to her eyes, though with a strong effort she kept them from falling.

Frances glanced at her, her face working with sympathy.

Miss Mildmay seemed perplexed.

'Only yesterday!' she said. 'I don't see how I have got this letter so quickly. I thought it was at least the day before.'

'No,' said Frances, 'it was only yesterday. We went a long walk in the afternoon, and of course we didn't see you till this morning. We couldn't have told you till just now, and I thought—I think—I thought Jass was waiting to speak to you alone after breakfast.'

'It wasn't that,' said Jacinth. 'If you want to know exactly why I didn't begin about it at breakfast, Aunt Alison, it was because I had a sort of idea or fancy that you had heard already from Lady Myrtle. I thought you looked just a little annoyed, and I kept expecting you to say something about it, and then, of course, I would have told you everything there was to tell.' [Pg 57]

Miss Alison Mildmay was severe, but she was not distrustful or suspicious, and the candour of the two girls was unmistakable.

'I am sorry,' she said, 'to have judged you unfairly. Tell me the whole story now, and then I will read you what this eccentric old lady says.'

She smiled a little.

'That was just what she said you'd call her,' broke in Frances. 'But she said her letter would make you understand.'

'Oh yes, of course it does, to a certain extent,' replied her aunt. Then her eyes fell on the envelope—'Miss Alison Mildmay.'

'Considering I have lived twenty years at Thetford,' she said, rather bitterly, 'I think it, to say the least, unnecessary to address me like this, though of course I don't deny that it is, strictly speaking, correct.'

Jacinth glanced at it.

'I am sure'—she began. 'You don't think *I* had anything to do with it?'

'Oh no, I don't suppose you ever thought of it. But Lady Myrtle Goodacre has never seen fit to call upon me, so it is all of a piece. I really must not waste any more time, however; I have a dozen things waiting for me to do. You say it was yesterday afternoon?'

'Yes,' said Jacinth. 'We went a long walk—to Aldersmere, and coming back, Eugene was tired and very thirsty, and he begged us to let him ask for a drink just as we were getting near Robin

Redbreast, and the old lady heard us talking over the wall'——

'And she heard Jass's name,' interrupted Frances, 'and'—— [Pg 58]

'Let Jacinth tell it, if you please, Frances,' said Miss Mildmay.

So Jacinth took up the story again, and related all that had happened.

Her aunt listened attentively, her face softened.

'I don't think I need read you what Lady Myrtle has written, after all,' she said, when Jacinth had finished speaking. 'I understand it well enough, and I have no doubt your father and mother would like you to go to Robin Redbreast now and then; of course, not to any extreme, or so as to interfere with your lessons or regular ways.'

'Does Lady Myrtle ask you to go to see her too?' inquired Jacinth, half timidly.

'Oh dear, no,' replied Miss Mildmay: 'she is straightforward enough. She does not pretend to want to make *my* acquaintance, and after all why should she? She has had plenty of time to do so if she had wished it during all these years; and honestly,' and here again she smiled quite naturally, 'I don't want to know her. I have no time for fresh acquaintances. And her interest in you children, Jacinth especially, has nothing to do with our side. It is entirely connected with the Morelands.'

'I wonder how she and our grandmother came to be such friends,' said Jacinth. 'Lady Myrtle's old home was near here, and the Morelands didn't belong to this neighbourhood.'

'No, but the Elvedons have another place in the north near your grandmother's old home,' said Miss Mildmay, who was very well posted up in such matters. 'They have never lived all the year round at Elvedon, I fancy, and now of course it is let.'

'Lady Myrtle's name used to be Harper, she told us,' said Frances, who never cared to be very long left out of the conversation, 'and there are some girls called Harper at our school. But Jacinth says it's quite a common name.' [Pg 59]

'No, Frances, I didn't say that,' said Jacinth. 'I said it wasn't an *un*common name; that sounds quite different.'

'Possibly the Harpers at Miss Scarlett's may be some connection—distant, probably—of the Elvedons,' said Miss Mildmay, carelessly. 'But of course it is not, as Jacinth says, an uncommon name.'

But her remark set Frances's imagination to work.

'They are very, *very* nice girls—the nicest at the school,' she said. 'Their names are Bessie and Margaret. If you could only see them, Aunt Alison! I do *so* wish you would let us ask them to tea some Saturday.'

'Nonsense, child,' said Miss Mildmay, impatiently. 'I cannot begin things of that kind, as you might understand. You have companionship at school, and when you are at home you must be content with your own society. Now you must leave me: I have to see the cook, and I have made myself late already.'

'Frances,' said Jacinth on their way up-stairs to their own little sitting-room, 'I do think you are the *silliest* girl I ever knew. Just after all that discussion—and I can tell you I was shaking in my shoes for ever so long—just when it had ended so well, you must go and vex Aunt Alison by wanting to have the Harpers here at tea. I think you are absurd about those girls, as you always are about new friends. *I* don't want them here at tea, or at anything.'

'Well, I do, then, or rather I did,' said Frances doggedly. 'That's just all the difference. No girls have as dull a life as we have.' [Pg 60]

'It's a very silly time for you to begin complaining, just when we have a chance of some amusement and change,' said Jacinth. 'I'm almost sure Lady Myrtle will ask us to spend the day, or something like that, very soon.'

'I don't want to go. It's you she cares for, and you may keep her to yourself,' said Frances, waxing more and more cross. 'I wish I was a boarder at school. I'd like it far better than being always scolded by you.'

It was not often that Frances so rebelled, or that their small squabbles went so nearly the length of a quarrel. But this morning there seemed disturbance in the air; and to add to it, when Frances had finished her English lessons, and was about to begin her French translation, she found, to her dismay, that she had forgotten to bring an important book home with her.

'What *shall* I do?' she exclaimed, forgetting, in her distress, the unfriendly state of feeling between herself and her sister. 'I really must have it, or I shall miss all my marks in the French class, and you know, Jacinth, I had set my heart on getting the prize.'

Jacinth's sympathy was aroused. She herself was in a higher class than her sister, but she was greatly interested in Frances's success. For Frances was rather a giddy little person. Till the companionship and emulation at school had roused her, she had never bestowed more attention on her lessons than was absolutely unavoidable.

'I don't know what to do,' said the elder girl after some reflection. 'I don't see how you are to get the book till Monday.'

For there was a strict rule at the school, that day-scholars were neither to go there nor to send messages from their homes, out of school hours. So that forgettings of books required for preparation, or other carelessnesses of the kind, became serious matters. [Pg 61]

'If I don't get it till I go to school on Monday, I needn't get it at all,' said Frances. 'There's no comfort in telling me that. You know the class *is* on Monday morning, so I've as good as lost my chance already, and I needn't bother about it any more. I'll never try for a prize again, I know that.'

She began to hum a tune in a would-be-indifferent, reckless way, but Jacinth knew that this was only bravado, and that it would be followed by great vexation of spirit, and she felt sorry and anxious.

'I'll tell you what, Frances,' she said at last, after sitting for some time, her head resting on her hand, her own work at a standstill for the moment—'I'll tell you what: the only plan is this—for you to go straight to Miss Scarlett herself and tell her all about your having forgotten the book, and how anxious you are about the prize. I daresay she'd let you go to your shelf and fetch it; she would see you had not broken her rule.'

It was a good idea, and Frances recognised this, but all the same she did not like it at all.

'I'd have to go to the front-door,' she said reluctantly, as she sat drumming her fingers on the table, 'and I can't go alone.'

'There's no need for you to go alone: take Phebe. Aunt Alison wouldn't mind your taking her in the morning for once. I'll help her to put away our things from the laundress, or whatever it is she's busy about. And I think you'd better go at once, Frances, if you're going.'

'Aunt Alison won't be in till dinner-time, so I can't go till after then,' said Frances. [Pg 62]

'Yes, you can,' Jacinth persisted. 'You know you can. I undertake to put it all right with Aunt Alison. Do go at once. If I have half an hour quietly to myself, I shall have finished my lessons by the time you come in—it won't take you more than half an hour—and then I can help Phebe.'

'If I could see Miss Marcia Scarlett I shouldn't mind so much,' next said Frances, still irresolutely.

Jacinth's patience began to give way.

'You are too bad, Frances,' she said. 'You are spoiling my work and losing any chance you have of getting the book. If you wait till the afternoon, most likely all the Miss Scarletts will be out or engaged, and I rather think—yes, I am sure the boarders told me that the school-books are locked up at noon on Saturday till Monday morning. Ask for Miss Marcia, if you like; you've just as good a chance of seeing her as the others. But you must decide. Are you going or not?'

Frances got up slowly from her seat and moved towards the door.

'I suppose I must,' she said in a martyrised tone. 'You do scurry one so, Jacinth.' And then when, having borne this certainly unmerited reproach in silence, Jacinth with relief heard the door close on her sister and began to hope she was going to have a little peace, it was opened again sufficiently to admit Frances's fluffy head, while she asked, in a half-grumbling, half-conciliatory tone, if she might take Eugene.

'Of course,' said Jacinth; 'a little fresh air in the morning is always good for him.'

She heard no more except, ten minutes or so later, the closing of the front-door, and the next three-quarters of an hour passed, rapidly, so absorbed was she in her own work, till the old church clock striking twelve—for St Blaise's in the Market Square was but a stone's-throw from Miss Mildmay's house—made her look up suddenly, and at that moment came a rushing of eager feet across the stone-tiled hall, quickly followed by Frances's voice in great excitement. [Pg 63]

'Jacinth, Jass!' she exclaimed, and almost before the elder girl had time to say to herself, 'I do hope nothing has gone wrong,' her sister's bright face reassured her.

Frances was like a veritable April day—gloom and sparkle, tears and laughter, succeeded each other with her as swiftly as the clouds rushing before the wind alternately veil and reveal the sun's bright face, though underneath all this fitfulness and caprice lay a sturdy foundation of principle and loyalty which circumstances, so far, had scarcely brought out, and which Jacinth certainly did not as yet realise or appreciate.

'Oh Jass,' exclaimed the little girl, 'I am so glad I went. *Such* a nice thing has happened! I saw Miss Marcia—I asked for her at the door, and she was crossing the hall; wasn't it lucky? She *was* so kind about the book, and she took me herself to the big schoolroom to fetch it. None of the girls were there—it looked so funny all empty, you can't think—they were out in the garden. And Jass, to-day they 're going to have their last out-of-doors tea for this year, you know, as it's getting cold. They have tea in the garden every fortnight all through the fine weather. And she invited *me*, Jass—just fancy! She said she was sure you wouldn't mind, as it's quite an extra thing to invite a day-scholar, you see, and'——

Here Frances was forced to take breath, and Jacinth got a chance of putting in a word. [Pg 64]

'Of course I don't mind,' she said. 'I'm very glad indeed, *very* glad for you to have a little fun. And we couldn't have gone much of a walk this afternoon, as Eugene is still tired with yesterday.'

'And you think Aunt Alison will let me go?' said Frances.

'Oh yes, I'm sure she will. If you will get on with your lessons now, Frances, so as to be able to say at dinner that you have quite finished, I will go down-stairs and watch for Aunt Alison. She will be in by one, to-day, and I'll ask her for you.'

'Oh thank you, Jass,' said Frances gratefully. 'Yes, I'll hurry up. But—Jass'——

'Well?'

Francie's face grew very grave.

'It's about my things, Jass. What do you think I should wear? I'm so afraid Aunt Alison will be vexed if I put on my best things—and of course black frocks do get spoilt if one runs about much—and yet my every-day frock is so shabby now, and—I don't want the girls to think we're never properly dressed.'

Jacinth considered. They were still in deep mourning, for Miss Mildmay's ideas on such subjects were 'old-fashioned,' and she quite recognised that the late Mrs Denison's memory should be treated with the fullest respect. But Jacinth sympathised with Frances's feelings.

'I was looking at our dark-gray frocks with Phebe the other day,' she said. 'The ones we had new just before—before our mourning. You know they were got for half-mourning because of old Sir George Mildmay's—papa's uncle's—death, and they look quite fresh and nice. I don't think you've grown much, Francie—and oh, by-the-bye, I believe there's a tuck that could be let down.' [Pg 65]

'Yes,' said Frances, 'there are little tucks—a lot—above the hem.'

'Then I'll run up and tell Phebe to get them out, yours at least. I'll explain to Aunt Alison; and if I lend you my wide black sash, I'm sure it will look quite mourning enough.'

'Oh Jass,' exclaimed Frances, '*how* good of you!'

The honour and glory of Jacinth's best black sash was almost too much for her.

'Really, I should never be cross to Jass. She is so very, very kind and unselfish,' thought the grateful little girl.

The gray frock was looked out and soon got ready. It was lying on a chair in the girls' room when Jacinth, a little before half-past one, at last heard her aunt's step in the hall, and ran forward to meet her, primed with her request.

Miss Mildmay was still in a somewhat conciliatory mood, and she listened to Jacinth's story with as much kindliness as was in her nature to show.

'Yes,' she said, 'I suppose she may as well go, though you know, my dear, I cannot encourage any schoolgirl friendships. It would be impossible for me to invite other children here, and yet I could not accept attentions for you which I could not return.'

'But this is different, being at Miss Scarlett's, where we go to school. You didn't mind our going to the breaking-up party before the midsummer holiday,' said Jacinth, trembling a little at the irresolution in her aunt's face.

'Oh, I don't mean to stop her going,' said Miss Mildmay. 'It is very nice of you to be so eager for Frances to have the little pleasure. But just warn her, if you can, not to get too intimate with the other girls. It will only cause trouble and annoyance. Frances is an impulsive little creature, but [Pg 66] she is old enough to understand that she should be discreet. The worst of any girls' school, even the best, is the chatter and gossip that go on.'

'I have often warned Frances about that kind of thing,' said Jacinth. 'The girls are all very nice and lady-like, but of course we don't see very much of them; it is not as if we were boarders. Francie is more sensible about making friends than she was at first. The only two she really likes *very* much are the Harpers—Bessie and Margaret Harper—the girls she was speaking of to you.'

'They are nice girls, I believe,' said Miss Mildmay. 'Miss Scarlett told me about them. I don't think we need discourage her friendship with them. After all, any gossip one would dislike is more probable with the other day-scholars, and you have not much to do with them, I think.'

'There are so few compared with the boarders,' said Jacinth, 'and they're all great friends together. I don't think any of them are particularly interesting. Thank you so much, Aunt Alison, for letting Frances go. I'll run and tell her, she will be so delighted.'

And so she was, delighted and grateful, so that she took in good part the little lecture Jacinth proceeded to give her in accordance with her aunt's wish.

'I *am* careful, I really am, Jass,' she maintained. 'I don't care a bit for any of the day-scholars. They are rather common just because they think they're not, and they do *so* look down on Miss Green's scholars. It's quite absurd. The only girls I really care for are the Harpers, and—well, a little for Prissy Beckingham, though she's rather silly.'

'It's the day-scholars Aunt Alison doesn't want you to be great friends with,' said Jacinth. 'In a little place like this, there's always a lot of chatter. She knows the Harpers are nice girls.' [Pg 67]

'Well, that's all I want,' said Frances, with satisfaction. 'I don't want a lot of friends. Bessie and Margaret are quite enough for me—and you, Jass. If I hadn't any one but you I should be content, especially when you're so very kind to me as you've been to-day.'

And at the appointed time, Frances made her appearance dressed for her garden party, in great spirits, very conscious of the grand effect of her sister's best black silk sash.

'And what are you going to do with yourself, Jacinth?' inquired her aunt, who happened to be crossing the hall at the moment that the two girls came running down—Frances ready to start. 'Are you and Eugene going a walk? or have you lessons to do still?'

'No, I finished them all this morning, and Eugene is tired. I don't quite know what I'm going to do,' said Jacinth.

She was not the least of a complaining nature; she had no thought of complaining just then, but as Miss Mildmay's glance fell on the young figure standing there so interested in her sister's pleasure, it struck her almost for the first time, in any thorough way, that the life with her here at Thetford was somewhat lonely for her nieces, and that it was not by any means every girl of Jacinth's age who would accommodate herself to it so contentedly.

'It is always a pity when parents and children have to be separated,' she said to herself. 'It is unnatural. It should not have to be. From the effects of such a separation in my childhood, I believe I have suffered ever since. It made me hard and unable to understand family life as I might have done.' [Pg 68]

And her tone was unusually kind and gentle when she spoke again.

'Would you care'——she began. 'I scarcely think you would, but would you care to come with me for once in a way to our girls' club? I shall be there all the afternoon giving out the lending-library books, and a good many volumes need re-covering. I could find you plenty to do, and we can have a cup of tea there.'

'Oh, I should like to come—very much,' said Jacinth, eagerly.

Miss Mildmay seemed pleased.

'Well, I think I had better make sure of you while I can have you for this one Saturday afternoon,' she said. 'In future I shall not be surprised if you spend Saturdays often with your old lady at Robin Redbreast. I have written to her, Jacinth. I am just going to post the letter.'

'Oh, thank you,' said the girl.—'Good-bye, Francie; you see I shall not be dull without you,' and the two kissed each other affectionately.

Then Frances, escorted by Phebe, set off, and Jacinth ran up-stairs to get ready for her expedition with her aunt.

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CHAPTER V.

AN OLD STORY.

That Saturday afternoon passed very pleasantly for both the sisters. Jacinth earned her aunt's commendation by her quick neat-handedness and accuracy, and a modicum of praise from Miss Mildmay meant a good deal. The little misunderstanding of the morning, ending as it had done in making the aunt, an essentially just woman, blame herself for hasty judgment, had drawn her and her elder niece closer together than had yet been the case. And no doubt there was a substratum of resemblance in their natures, deeper and more real than the curious capricious likeness which had struck Marmaduke so oddly—which was indeed perhaps but a casual coming to the surface of a real underlying similarity.

Things were turning out quite other than the young uncle in his anxiety had anticipated.

'If fate had sent me Jacinth alone,' thought Miss Mildmay, 'I rather think we should have got on

very well, and have fitted into each other's ways. There is so much more in her than in Frances. I strongly suspect, in spite of her looks, that Jacinth takes after our side of the house—she almost seems older than Eugenia in some ways—whereas Frances, I suppose, is her mother over again.'

But here she checked herself. Any implied disparagement of her sister-in-law she did not, even in her secret thoughts, intend or encourage, for Alison Mildmay was truly and firmly attached to her brother's wife, widely different though their characters were. [Pg 70]

'Frances is really only a baby,' she went on thinking. 'There's no telling as yet what she will turn out.'

Jacinth on her side was conscious of a good deal of congeniality between herself and her aunt. It was not the congeniality of affection, often all the stronger for a certain amount of intellectual dissimilarity, or differences of temperament, thus leaving scope for complementary qualities which love welds together and cements; it was scarcely even that of friendliness. It consisted in a certain satisfaction and approval of Miss Mildmay's ways of seeing and doing things. The girl felt positive pleasure in her aunt's perfect 'method;' in the clear and well-considered manner in which her time was mapped out; in the quick discrimination with which she divined what would be the right place and treatment for each girl in her club; even in the beautiful order of the book-shelves and the neat clerk-like writing of the savings-bank entries. It was all so complete and accurate, with no loose ends left about—all so perfect in its way, thought Jacinth, as she cut and folded and manipulated the brown paper entrusted to her charge for the books' new coats, rewarded by her aunt's 'Very nice—very nice indeed, my dear,' when it was time to go home, and she pointed out the neat little pile of clean tidy volumes.

Frances on her side had enjoyed herself greatly. She was the only outsider, otherwise day-scholar, at the garden tea, which fact in no way lessened her satisfaction while it increased her importance.

'I wish you were a boarder, Frances,' said Margaret Harper, the younger of her two friends, as they were walking up and down a shady path in the intervals of the games all the girls had joined in. 'Don't you? It would be so nice, and I am sure we should be great, *great* friends—you and Bessie and I.' [Pg 71]

'And not Jass?' said Frances. 'I shouldn't like to be a boarder unless Jass was too. Then, I daresay, I wouldn't mind.'

'We'd like to be friends with Jacinth too,' said Margaret, 'but Bessie and I don't think she cares very much about being great friends. She seems so much older, though she's only a year more than Bessie, isn't she?'

'She's fifteen,' said Frances. 'She is old in some ways, but still she and I do everything nearly together. She's very good to me. She's very nice about you, and I'm quite happy about having you and Bessie for my best friends, for Jacinth and Aunt Alison think you're the nicest girls here.'

Margaret coloured with pleasure, but with some shyness too.

'I'm glad they think we're nice,' she said; 'and I'm sure, if your aunt knew father and mother, they'd think we *should* be far, far better than we are, at least than I am. I don't think Bessie *could* be much better than she is. But a good many others of the girls are very nice indeed; they are none of them not nice, except that Prissy Beckingham talks too much and says rather rude things without meaning it, and Laura French certainly has a very bad temper. But she's always sorry for it afterwards. And who could be nicer than the Eves or Honor Falmouth.'

'I don't know them much; they're too big for me, you see,' said Frances. 'Of course I'd know them better if we were boarders. Do you like my gray frock, Margaret? It's the first day I've had on anything but black for such a time; it does feel so funny.' [Pg 72]

'I think it's very pretty, and you've got such a beautiful sash!' said Margaret admiringly. 'But I always think you and Jacinth are so nicely dressed, even though you've been in black all the time. Bessie and I can't have anything but very plain frocks, you know. Mother couldn't afford it, for we're not *at all* rich.'

'I don't fancy we are, either,' said Frances; 'I shouldn't think papa would stay out in India if we were. But at Stannesley, where we lived before, granny always got us very nice dresses: she used often to send to London for them. I don't believe Aunt Alison will care so much how we are dressed. Do you have an allowance for your gloves, Margaret? We do. I got a new pair yesterday, but I'm afraid they're not very good; where are they, I wonder? Oh yes, here in my pocket; there are little whity marks in the black kid already, as if they were going to split.'

She drew the gloves out, as she spoke, but with them came something else—a doubled-up, rather soiled white card.

'What's this?' said Frances, as she unfolded it. 'Oh, I declare! Just look, Margaret—it's an old Christmas card of last year. I remember one of the children gave it me at the Sunday school, and I've never had this frock on since. Isn't it strange?'

She stood looking at the card—an ordinary enough little picture of a robin on a bough, with 'Merry Christmas' in one corner—a mixture of sadness and almost reverence in her young face. 'Last Christmas' seemed so very long ago to Frances. And indeed, so much had happened since

then to change things for herself and her brother and sister, that it did naturally seem like looking back to the other side of a lifetime to recall the circumstances which then surrounded them. How well she remembered that very Sunday, the last of the old year; how they had chattered and laughed as they ran home over the frosty ground, and Uncle Marmaduke, who had just joined them, had predicted skating before the week was out! How tenderly granny had kissed them that night when they went to bed, with some little remark about the ending of the year, and how the next morning she was not well enough to get up, anxious though she was in no way to cloud or damp their enjoyment; and how the doctor had begun to come every day, and then—and then——The tears started to Frances's eyes as she seemed to live through it all again, and for a moment or two she did not speak; she forgot that Margaret was standing beside her with sympathising face. [Pg 73]

'Dear Frances,' she said, 'does it remind you of something sad? Has it to do with when you went into mourning?'

'Yes,' said Frances, 'it was soon after last Christmas that granny—our grandmother that we lived with—got ill and died, you know, Margaret. It's for her we are still in mourning.'

'And you were very fond of her, of course?' said Margaret.

'Very, *very*,' said Frances.

Then she almost seemed anxious to change the subject: she was afraid of beginning to cry, which 'before all the girls' would have certainly been ill-timed. And her glance fell on the card in her hand.

'Robin Redbreast,' she said consideringly. 'Margaret, have you ever passed that lovely old house, down the lane on the Crickthorne Road, that's called "Robin Redbreast?" The bird on the card reminded me of it just now.' [Pg 74]

'Oh yes,' said Margaret rather eagerly. 'I know it quite well. Once or twice Bessie and I have stood at the gate and looked in. Isn't it a delicious quaint old place?'

'It's perfectly beautiful,' said Frances. 'You can't think what it looks like from the inside.'

'Have you ever been inside?' questioned Margaret, evidently intensely interested. 'Do tell me about it.'

Frances glanced round, as if to make sure that no one was within hearing, partly perhaps from a feeling that Jacinth would not have liked her to go 'chattering' about their yesterday's adventure, partly from a childish love of importance and mystery.

'Is it anything you shouldn't tell me, perhaps?' said Margaret, with quick delicacy. 'Don't mind my having asked you; it wasn't—it wasn't exactly curiosity, Frances.'

And Frances, glancing at her friend, saw that her face had reddened all over. Margaret was not a pretty child, but she was very sweet-looking, with honest gray eyes and smooth brown hair. Her features were good, but the cheeks were less round than one likes to see at her age; there was a rather wistful expression about the whole face, almost suggesting premature cares and anxiety.

'Oh no, dear,' said Frances reassuringly. 'It's not that. It *was* rather queer, and you see we weren't quite sure at first how Aunt Alison was going to take it. And Jacinth is always rather down upon me for talking too much. But I know I may tell *you*, for it's quite fixed that you and Bessie are to be my best friends: it's the day-scholars that Aunt Alison doesn't want me to talk much to.'

'Yes,' agreed Margaret, 'I quite understand.' [Pg 75]

And then Frances related the whole, Margaret listening intently till almost the end.

She was in a fever, poor child, and from no selfish motive assuredly, to hear more about the mysterious house. But she restrained herself, scrupulously careful in no way to force the other's confidence. [Pg 77]

'When I said what Robin Redbreast looked like from the inside, I meant from inside the gates,' began Frances, after a moment or two's reflection. For she was scrupulously truthful. 'I've not been inside the house—not farther than the porch. But the porch is like a little room, it *is* so pretty. I'll tell you how it all was; you may tell Bessie, but not any one else, because, you see, there's quite a story about it.'

And then Frances related the whole, Margaret listening intently till almost the end, when the little narrator, stopping for a moment to take breath, after 'So you see our grandmother was her very dearest friend, and she really seemed as if she could scarcely bear to let Jacinth go, and —*isn't* it like a real story?' saw, to her surprise, that her hearer's face, instead of being rosier than usual, had now grown quite pale.

'Why, Margaret, what's the matter? You look as if I had been telling you a ghost-story, you're so white,' she exclaimed.

Margaret gave a little gasp.

'It is so strange,' she said. 'I'll tell you why it has made me feel so queer. Mine is a sort of a secret, Frances; at least when we came here to school mother told us not to talk about it. But I know I can trust you, and what you've told me makes it seem as if somehow—I don't know how to say what I mean—as if we must be a sort of relation to each other, from our people long ago having been such friends. For, do you know, Frances, Lady Myrtle Goodacre is our aunt—our great-aunt, that is to say—father's own aunt?' [Pg 78]

Frances stopped short and *almost* clapped her hands.

'There now,' she said, 'I had a feeling there was something like that. I *wish* Jacinth hadn't stopped my speaking of you, when Lady Myrtle told us her name used to be Harper.'

'Were you going to speak of us?' asked Margaret.

'Yes, it was on the very tip of my tongue. Indeed I believe I did get as far as "There are some," when Jacinth stopped me. She said afterwards that it is "common," when any one mentions a name, to say immediately, "Oh, *I* know somebody called that." I don't quite see why it should be common; it's rather interesting, I think. Still I daresay it's true that common people often do speak like that, when you come to think of it. They've always got an aunt, or a cousin, or a friend's friend called so-and-so, or living somewhere, if you mention a place.'

'I daresay they do,' said Margaret; but she seemed to be giving only half her attention. 'Frances,' she went on, 'I wonder what would have happened if you *had* spoken of us? I wonder if Lady

Myrtle would have taken any notice?'

Frances stared.

'Of course she would!' she exclaimed. 'Do you mean to say she wouldn't have taken any notice of hearing that her own grand-nieces were so near her? Why, she'——But suddenly the actual state of the case struck her. 'Do you—does she *not* know you're here?' she went on, raising her blue eyes in bewilderment to Margaret's face. 'No, I suppose she doesn't, or of course you would be asked to Robin Redbreast on holidays and all that sort of thing.'

'No,' Margaret replied, 'she doesn't know anything about us. I'm not even sure that she knows of our existence; anyway she has never heard our names, or how many of us there are, and I can't [Pg 79] believe she really understands how—how very poor we are. For she is very, very rich, you know, Frances, though she lives in that quiet way.'

'*Is* she?' said Frances. 'I do wish I had spoken of you, whether it was "common" or not.'

'She mightn't have thought that we were any relation,' said Margaret, simply. 'Harper isn't a very particular name. And you see we're not very near to the head of the family now. Lord Elvedon is only father's cousin, and they never stay near here. Father and mother see them sometimes in London, but they've got a very large family, and they're not rich—not *extra* rich themselves; for the one before this Lord Elvedon, the one who was father's uncle, you see, was very extravagant, though it was mostly his brother's fault—that was our grandfather. His name was Bernard Harper, and'——

'It's awfully interesting,' said Frances, 'but I'm afraid I'm getting rather muddled. Your *grandfather*—what was he, then, to Lady Myrtle?'

'I'll begin at the other end,' said Margaret; 'that will make it plainer. There was a Lord Elvedon who had two sons and a daughter; the daughter was Lady Myrtle. The sons were younger than the daughter, and they were both extravagant. The elder one was a weaker character than his brother, and quite led by him, and before their father died they had already wasted a lot of money, and given him a great deal of trouble, especially Bernard, the second one. So old Lord Elvedon left all he *could* to his daughter, Lady Myrtle; of course the estates and a good deal had to go with the title, but still the new Lord Elvedon was much less rich than he should have been, you see, and our grandfather—that was the son called Bernard—was really poor, and his [Pg 80] children, our father and his sisters, have always been poor. Father says a good deal will go back to the title when Lady Myrtle dies, and she is quite friends with the present Lord Elvedon, her nephew. But she couldn't bear her brother Bernard—I believe he behaved very badly to her and to all his people—and she has never taken the least notice of father, though father is really a sort of an angel;' and Margaret's eyes glistened. 'You know it is like that sometimes,' she went on; 'a bad father—and I am afraid our grandfather was a bad man, though I don't quite like saying it—sometimes has very good children.'

'But Lady Myrtle *can't* know about you all—about your father especially,' said Frances. 'I think he should write to her, or do something. Very likely she's got quite wrong ideas about him.'

'No,' said Margaret, 'she must know he is a very good man. He was in the army, you know, like your father, and he was very brave and did lots of things, but he had to leave because of a wound, when he was only a captain. When he and mother married he hoped to stay on till he became a general, and at first they weren't so badly off, for mother had some money. But a good deal of it was lost somehow.'

'I do think Lady Myrtle should be told—I really do,' said Frances, stopping short and speaking with great energy.

But Margaret only shook her head.

'She does know a good deal,' she said. 'We are sure she does, for some years ago my aunt—that's father's only sister—the other died quite young—wrote to her about us. Aunt Flora isn't badly off in a way, for she has no children, and her husband is a judge in India. But she can't do much for [Pg 81] us, and—you see it's her husband's money; it isn't as if it was a relation of *ours*.'

Frances had never thought of things in this way; she was years and years younger in mind, or rather in experience and knowledge of life, than Margaret Harper, her junior by nearly twelve months. For Margaret with her older brothers and sisters had early had to face practical difficulties and troubles, the very existence of which was unknown to her young companion.

'It's a shame—a regular shame; that's what it is!' said Frances vehemently, her face flushing with indignation, 'and something should be done.'

Just at that moment a figure came running towards them. It was Bessie, the elder of the Harper girls.

'Margaret, Frances, where have you been? what have you been doing all this time?' she exclaimed. 'We've had ever so many games, and now tea will be ready directly. What are you looking so mournful about, Margaret, and you so excited, Frances? You haven't—oh no, you couldn't have been quarrelling.'

The smile on both faces was sufficient answer—no, certainly they had not been quarrelling!

'What have you been talking about, then?' said Bessie again, and she looked at them with considerable curiosity.

Bessie was two years older than her sister. She was handsomer too, and much stronger. There was a bright, fearless, resolute look about her, very attractive and prepossessing. But she was less intellectual, less thoughtful, more joyous and confident, though tenderly and devotedly unselfish to those she loved, especially to all weak and dependent creatures. [Pg 82]

'Margaret has been telling me *such* interesting things,' began Frances eagerly.

'And Frances has been telling *me* about—about Lady Myrtle and Robin Redbreast. Just fancy, Bessie, they know her! She was a very, very old friend of their grandmother's.'

And between them the two girls soon put the elder one in possession of all they had been discussing.

Bessie Harper's bright face grew grave; she could not blame her sister and Frances, but still, on the whole, she almost wished the discovery had not been made, though 'it was bound to come some time or other, I suppose,' she reflected.

'I call it a perfect shame!' said Frances, her cheeks flaming up again. 'To think of that horrid old woman having more money than she knows what to do with, and keeping it all to herself, when it *really* belongs—a good part of it, at least—to your father.'

'No, no,' said Bessie, 'we can't say that. Our great-grandfather had a right to do what he did with his money. And if he *had* left it to our grandfather, it would all have been wasted, most likely.'

'If he had known how good *father* was going to be, he'd have left it to him, I daresay,' said Margaret.

'He couldn't have known that,' said Bessie with a merry laugh. 'Father wasn't born when he died.'

'No, but just because of that, Lady Myrtle should make up for it now,' said Frances. 'I daresay I shouldn't call her "horrid," and of course she's your aunt, and I can scarcely believe she *does* know all about you. Perhaps she never got your other aunt's letter.'

'Oh yes, she did,' said Bessie. 'She answered it by sending it back with a note saying that none of [Pg 83] the descendants of the late Bernard Harper were kith or kin of hers.'

'How wicked!' exclaimed Frances.

'No, no, it's not right to say that, Frances dear,' said both sisters. 'Father says,' Bessie went on, 'that no one knows what her brothers made her suffer, and how good she was to them, standing between them and her father, and devoting herself to them, and hoping against hope, even about our grandfather, till I suppose she *had* to give him up. It is awfully sad, and for her sake as well as ours, mother and I have often said how we wished she knew father. He would make up to her for the disappointment in her brothers.'

'Isn't Lord Elvedon nice?' asked Frances; 'that's her other nephew, isn't he?'

'Oh yes, I think he's a good sort of a man, but not clever,' said Bessie. 'Not like *father*.'

'And then our boys,' added Margaret. 'They are so good and so clever.'

Her pale little face flushed with rosy pleasure.

'How nice!' said Frances, with ready sympathy. 'How many brothers have you?'

'Two big—older than we are, and one little one of eleven. There are six of us,' Margaret replied.

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CHAPTER VI.

But just then came the sound of approaching voices.

'Bessie, Bessie, where are you? Haven't you found them? Tea's quite ready.'

And Bessie started. She had forgotten the errand on which she had come.

'Oh, we must be quick!' she said. 'That's Honor and the others calling us; I forgot how the time was going. But Frances, I must speak to you for a moment before you go. Don't forget.'

And then the three ran off to rejoin their companions.

Never had Frances enjoyed herself more, her only regret being that Jacinth was not there to share her pleasure. There was the element of novelty to add zest to the whole, and then as the 'boarders' looked upon her as in some sense their guest, they vied with each other in making much of her—for her own sake too, for Frances was a great favourite, a much greater favourite than her sister, among their companions. It is to be doubted if Frances would have enjoyed herself quite as much had Jacinth been with her. For not only did Jacinth's rather cold, stand-off manner destroy any geniality towards herself; it often acted on Frances as a sort of tacit reproach to her own overflowing spirits.

And through all the little girl's fun and merriment there ran the consciousness of the trust reposed in her by the Harpers. She was full of intense interest in their family history; it was really quite like a story in a book, she kept saying to herself, and she felt bursting with eagerness to relate it all to Jacinth. [Pg 85]

How good and delightful they must all be, Bessie and Margaret's father and mother, and brothers and sisters! It was easy to believe it, the girls were so nice themselves! How lovely it would be if, somehow, she, or Jacinth and she, could be the means of healing the family breach and introducing her relations to Lady Myrtle, so that in the end they might be restored to their lost rights. For 'rights' Frances was determined to consider them, in her vehement young judgment and hot partisanship of her friends.

'It is not fair or just!' she said to herself; 'it is shameful that they and their father should suffer for their *grandfather's* fault. But nobody could help seeing how good they are: if only Lady Myrtle knew them it would all be right. I wonder how would be the best way to tell her? Jacinth will know—she is so much cleverer than I, and then she is sure to be Lady Myrtle's favourite. I am glad she is, for in spite of what Bessie and Margaret say, I don't feel as if I could ever like that old lady.'

And her eagerness to go home and talk it all over with 'Jass,' made her, notwithstanding her enjoyment of the afternoon, scarcely sorry when one of Miss Scarlett's servants came out to tell her that her maid had called to fetch her.

She said good-bye to her companions and ran in for a moment, by old Miss Scarlett's special desire, to the drawing-room, where the ladies were sitting. They kissed her affectionately. [Pg 86]

'I've been so happy,' she said. 'We've had such beautiful games; I've not had such fun for ever so long.'

'I am so glad, my dear child,' said the eldest lady, and she smoothed the little girl's soft hair. 'You must come again and see something of your companions out of lesson hours as well as in the schoolroom.'

Frances's eyes sparkled with pleasure.

'I would like it very much,' she said.

'What is your sister about this afternoon?' said Miss Marcia. 'Perhaps she does not care so much about games and romping as you do?'

'No, she doesn't,' replied Frances, bluntly. 'This afternoon she's gone with Aunt Alison to the girls' club.'

'Very nice,' said Miss Scarlett, approvingly. 'Jacinth is a thoughtful girl and older than her years, in some ways. Is she interested already in Miss Mildmay's good works?'

The old lady was pleased to hear of any bond of sympathy likely to draw the aunt and niece together, for much as she respected Miss Mildmay, she had had strong doubts of her fitness for the charge of the girls, and considerable misgivings as to their happiness with her. And Miss Scarlett was old-fashioned, and but for her native kindliness of *heart* she might almost have been prejudiced and narrow-minded. She scarcely belonged to the present generation. Her youth had been passed in a somewhat restricted groove, where the Lady Bountiful notions of benevolent work among the poor were still predominant. Her sisters, a good many years her juniors, had to a certain extent assimilated modern ideas.

Frances hesitated. She could not bear in the least to decry her dear 'Jass,' and yet she knew that her sister had so far troubled her head very little, if at all, about her aunt's girls' club or other philanthropic undertakings. [Pg 87]

'Aunt Alison doesn't tell us much about all these things,' she said. 'To-day was the first time she

asked Jacinth to go with her, but Jass was very pleased indeed, and I'm sure she'll like to be of use.'

Miss Scarlett smiled. She was quick of perception in some ways; she understood the little girl's loyal admiration of her sister, and again she patted her fair head.

'Well,' she said, encouragingly, 'sometimes, I hope, Jacinth may like to spend a holiday afternoon with us. But tell her and your aunt from me, that if ever they are at a loss what to do with *you*, Frances, Miss Mildmay must let me know. We can manage a good run in the garden even in wintry weather, and there *are* such things as blindman's-buff and hide-and-seek in the house sometimes.'

'Thank you *very* much,' said Frances. 'I think—I would like to come sometimes on Saturdays, for, besides going with Aunt Alison, I shouldn't wonder if—I daresay Jass may have often to go'—— She stopped and hesitated, and finally blushed. 'I don't think I can explain,' she said.

'Never mind, my dear,' said Miss Marcia, coming to the rescue, with a vague idea that perhaps Jacinth had some private charities of her own in prospect which she did not wish talked about. 'Give Miss Scarlett's message to your aunt and sister, and good-bye till Monday morning.'

Frances ran off, much relieved in her mind.

'But I really must be careful how I talk,' she reflected sagely. 'I had quite forgotten that I wasn't to chatter about Lady Myrtle—except to Bessie and Margaret. Jacinth said I might really count them my friends, and that means being able to tell them anything I like. Besides, how could I have helped telling Margaret about Lady Myrtle, when she told me all the story of her being their great-aunt?' [Pg 88]

Her conscience nevertheless was not absolutely at rest, and joined to her eagerness to tell her sister all she had heard of the Harpers' family history was now a slight fear of Jacinth's considering her indiscreet, and she was so preoccupied that, as she hurried out to the hall, where Phebe was waiting, she almost ran against Bessie, who was eagerly watching for her.

'Frances,' she said, 'I must speak to you a moment. I asked Miss Linley, and she let me run in, and she said I might walk down to the gate with you.' There was rather a long drive up to the door of Ivy Lodge. 'Listen, dear; it's this. I can't bear to ask you to keep anything a secret from your aunt or your sister, but *sometimes* secrets may be right, if they concern other people and are not about anything in any way wrong. And I don't see what else to do. It is this—would you mind promising me not to tell *anybody* about Lady Myrtle Goodacre being our relation, till I have written home to mother and told her that you and Jacinth know her, and about your grandmother having been her dear friend? I am *so* afraid of doing harm, or vexing father, for though he is so good, he is—very proud, you know, and—he could not bear it to—to come round to Lady Myrtle that we were talking about her, or—thinking about her money.'

Bessie's face by this time was crimson. Frances opened her mouth as if about to speak, then shut it again, and gazed at Bessie with a variety of contradictory feelings looking out of her blue eyes. There was disappointment, strong disappointment that her wonderful schemes for bringing the Harpers and their old relative together threatened thus to be nipped in the bud; there was disappointment, too, that she was not to have the pleasure and importance of relating the story [Pg 89] 'just like one in a book' to her sister; and yet there was considerable relief, born of her recently aroused misgiving as to how Jacinth would look upon her confidences with Margaret.

Bessie meanwhile stood looking at her in undisguised anxiety.

'It doesn't matter a bit about Aunt Alison,' Frances at last blurted out. 'We're not at all bound to tell her everything; mamma knows she wouldn't understand or take the trouble to listen. And so, when we came here, mamma said we must just do the best we could. I've always told Jass everything, and we write long, *long* letters to mamma. We tell her—at least I do—everything that puzzles us, even things I can't understand about—about religion,' and here Frances grew red. 'Though that's *one* thing that's better here than at Stannesley; the Bible classes are so nice.'

'But Frances,' repeated Bessie, 'about not telling Jacinth? It is only till I write to mother and get her answer. And I'm not asking you to hide anything wrong; it's really our own family affairs.'

'I know,' said Frances. 'No, I don't think it could be wrong to promise.'

'Put it this way,' said Bessie: 'suppose you had, by some sort of accident, overheard anything about other people, you wouldn't at all think you were bound to tell Jacinth. Well, you see it was a *little* like that; Margaret shouldn't by rights have told you without asking mamma.'

'I see,' said Frances. 'Well then, Bessie, I promise not to tell anybody till you give me leave. Only, you won't count my writing it all to mamma? I write the most of my weekly letter to her on [Pg 90] Sunday, so I'd like to know, because to-morrow's Sunday, you see.'

'*Of course*,' said Bessie with the utmost heartiness, '*of course* you must write everything to your mother, just as I shall to mamma. Thank you so much, dear Francie, for understanding so well. And—and—just one other little thing—don't you think, just now, it will be better for you and Margaret not to talk about Lady Myrtle to each other? I mean if she invites you to Robin Redbreast and you go, I don't think you'd better tell Margaret. She's not very strong, and she thinks of things so, once she gets them in her head. She's different from me. I can put them right

away.'

And Bessie gave herself a little shake and stood there, all the anxiety gone out of her face, bright, fearless, and handsome as usual.

Frances, however, gave a little sigh.

'Very well,' she said, 'I won't speak about it any more to Margaret if you think I'd better not. But it's rather hard not to have any one I can tell about it, when I've been so interested.'

And Frances's face grew very doleful.

Bessie Harper looked and felt sorry for her. She knew what a warm faithful little heart she had to do with, and unaware as she was of Frances's slight fear of Jacinth's displeasure, she perhaps overestimated the trial it was to the younger sister to be debarred from giving her confidences to the elder one.

'I'm very sorry,' she said, sympathisingly. 'I really am very sorry indeed. But still I'm sure it's better for Jacinth not to know about it till I hear what mother says. You see she *may* be invited to Lady Myrtle's any day, and if anything about the Elvedons or our family was said, it would be [Pg 91] impossible for her not to feel uncomfortable and—and—not open, you know, unless she told what Margaret told you, and that might be just what father would dislike.'

'And suppose *I* go to Robin Redbreast too,' said Frances, 'what am I to do?'

'I thought you said Jacinth was the one who would go,' said Bessie.

'Oh well,' replied Frances, who had raised the difficulty partly out of half-petulant contradiction, 'I am pretty sure it will be Jass. I don't think Lady Myrtle noticed me much, and I don't want to go. I don't like her; at least I don't care about her unless she could be made nice to you. And any way she wouldn't ask *me* questions, even if by chance she did hear your name'——

'And Jacinth isn't the least likely to speak about us, as things are. So it's all right; and any way, Frances, you can write a very long letter to your mother to-morrow.'

'Yes,' the little girl agreed. 'That's better than nothing; only, just think of the weeks and weeks before I can get an answer! Whatever other troubles you have, Bessie, you *are* lucky to have your father and mother in England, and to know them. I don't know mamma for myself a bit; only by her letters, and because I just feel she *must* be very good and kind. When I was very little it seemed something like—no, perhaps you wouldn't understand'——

'I think I would,' said Bessie, who was eager to make up by every means in her power for any distress she was causing to her friend. 'Tell me.'

'I was only thinking what queer feelings children have,' said Frances. 'When I was little, before I had ever seen mamma—of course I can remember her since the time I *did* see her, five years ago, [Pg 92] and since then she has seemed real—but before that, it was only a kind of faith. Writing letters to her was a very little—don't think it's naughty of me to say it—a very little like saying our prayers. They went out, away to somewhere, to some one I'd never seen; just like, you know, when we pray.'

'Yes,' said Bessie gently, 'but the answers came.'

'I know,' replied Frances simply. 'And sometimes I think it helped to make me feel that there is something *real* in saying our prayers. But I must go.'

'And so must I,' said Bessie. 'And thank you, dear Francie.'

She kissed the little face affectionately, and then hastened back to her companions.

'I do love Frances,' she thought. 'Somehow, I don't feel as if I could ever love Jacinth quite as much. I do hope all this won't bother the poor little thing. I should make Margaret unhappy if I blamed her for having told Frances, and I scarcely see how she could have helped it. It isn't as if we were in disgrace,' and Bessie threw back her head proudly. 'We have no secrets: father's whole life and character are *grand*; and rather than have that horrid old Lady Myrtle—there, now, I'm calling her just what I told Frances she mustn't—rather than have her thinking *we* want her money, I'd—I don't know what I wouldn't do. If only'——And here poor Bessie's heroics broke down a little. There came before her a vision of 'father' with his crutch—for he had been wounded in the hip and was very lame—with the lines of suffering on his face, showing through the cheery smile which it was seldom without; and of 'mother' in her well-worn black poplin, which she used [Pg 93] to declare was 'never going to look shabby,' planning and contriving how to send the two girls, neatly and sufficiently provided for, to school, when the wonderful chance of a year at Miss Scarlett's had so unexpectedly come in their way.

Bessie's eyes filled with tears.

'I'd do anything for them,' she thought. 'I'd go to be Lady Myrtle's companion or lady's-maid or *anything*, if it would do any good. It's all very well to be "proud," but I'm afraid my pride would melt very quickly if I could see any way to help them. But I'm glad I stopped Frances talking about it; it really might have done harm. I must write a long letter to mother. I wonder if I can begin it to-night?'

Frances, escorted by Phebe, made her way home in greater silence for some minutes than was usual with her. She was revolving many things in her fluffy little head.

'Had they come in when you started to fetch me?' she inquired at last of the maid.

'Not yet, Miss Frances. Miss Mildmay gave me orders to go for you at half-past six, before she went out. But I don't think they'll be long. Late tea is ordered for half-past seven, and Miss Mildmay is never behind time on Saturday evenings.'

'I don't mind whether they're in or not—not much,' said Frances. 'I don't want any more tea. I suppose Eugene has had his?'

'Yes, Miss Frances, his tea and an egg. He was very pleased. Master Eugene does enjoy a nice boiled fresh egg. I think you'll have to go down to late tea, though, Miss Frances; perhaps Miss Mildmay wouldn't be pleased if you didn't; and perhaps'—— [Pg 94]

'Nonsense, Phebe,' said her young mistress; 'Aunt Alison doesn't care. You speak as if she was like a mamma, wanting to have us beside her always. She's had Miss Jacinth all the afternoon, and she likes her better than me. I'm sure she wouldn't care if she never saw me again. Well, no; perhaps I shouldn't say that, for she's quite kind. She was very kind about letting me go this afternoon, and sending you to take me and to fetch me, Phebe.'

'Yes, Miss Frances,' began Phebe, again with some hesitation, 'it was just that I was thinking about. If you go down to tea just as usual, nice and neat, it'll make it more likely that she will let you go again. It will show that a little change now and then will do you no harm, nor get you out of regular ways, so to say, Miss Frances.'

'Very well,' the child agreed; 'I don't care much one way or another. Oh Phebe,' she went on, brightening up again—it would have been difficult to depress Francie for long—'we had such fun this afternoon;' and she went into some particulars of the games, which Phebe listened to with great interest. 'I wish Aunt Alison would *sometimes* let us have friends to play with us. We could have beautiful "I spy" in the garden.'

'Yes, Miss Frances, so you could,' agreed Phebe.

'You see at Stannesley there were really no children, no girls any way near our age except the Vicar's daughter, and though she came to have tea with us sometimes it wasn't much pleasure—not *fun*, at least. She's a little older than Miss Jacinth, and oh, Phebe, she's so *awfully* deaf. It's almost like not hearing at all.'

'Poor young lady!' said Phebe, sympathisingly.

'Yes, isn't it sad? And so, you see, the one thing we were glad of about coming here—I was, any way—was about going to school; just what some girls wouldn't have liked. I've always wanted so [Pg 95] to have some companions, only it isn't half as much good having them if you only see them at lessons. I don't think Miss Jacinth minds. She was pleased to go to school because of learning better and finding out how much other girls know compared with us, but I don't think she minds the way I do.'

She had almost forgotten whom she was speaking to, or indeed that she was speaking aloud, and half started when Phebe replied again to this long speech.

'It's just because of that, Miss Frances,' said the girl, 'that I was thinking how nice it will be if you're invited sometimes to play with the young ladies of a holiday afternoon like to-day. And if I were you, I'd take care to show Miss Mildmay that it doesn't unsettle you, and I'd just put out of my mind about having any young ladies to come to you. It'd not suit your aunt's ways.'

'No,' said Frances, 'I suppose not. It's only really the Harpers I care about,' she added to herself. 'And now,' she went on thinking, 'with this muddle about the old lady at Robin Redbreast—if their mother doesn't want her to know about them, perhaps it's best for Jacinth not to see them much. And I'll have to forget what Margaret told me, after I've written to mamma. I want to remember it *exactly* to tell her.'

She sighed a little. Almost for the first time Frances began to realise that, even when one is possessed of the purest motives and the best intentions, life may be a complicated business. Right and wrong are not always written up before us on conspicuous finger-posts, as we fancy in childhood will be the case. There are shades and modifications, wisdom and unwisdom; apparently, though, thank God, only 'apparently,' conflicting duties, whose rival claims it is not [Pg 96] always easy to measure. And it is not till some stages later in our journey that we come to see how our own prejudices or shortsightedness or self-will are really at the root of the perplexity. For God demands no impossibilities. As has been quaintly said, 'He neither expects us to be in two places at once, nor to put twenty-five hours' work into twenty-four.'

To do what is the least agreeable to us, though far from an invariable rule, is often a safe one. Frances would have liked to run up-stairs to the nursery, and to sit down there and then to the long letter to 'mamma,' to the outpouring of confidence to the almost unknown friend she had learned to trust. But common-sense and a certain docility, which was strongly developed in her, in spite of her superficial self-assertion and blunt, even abrupt outspokenness, made her yield to Phebe's advice.

And it was a neat, composed-looking little maiden who met her aunt and sister on their return

half an hour or so later, somewhat tired and fagged by their rather tedious afternoon's work.

'I am glad you are back, my dear,' said her aunt. 'I wished afterwards I had made a point of your not keeping Phebe waiting, as I had forgotten that Eugene would be alone, and I am always afraid of any accident with the fire, or anything of that kind.'

'I did keep her waiting a little,' said Frances, honestly. 'But I've been back a good while. I've heard Eugene his Sunday lessons: he knows them quite well. And I think tea is quite ready, Aunt Alison.'

'That's right,' Miss Mildmay replied. 'You may ring for it to be brought in, while Jacinth and I take off our things.—Frances seems none the worse for her visit,' she added to her elder niece as they made their way up-stairs. 'I shall not object to her going to Ivy Lodge sometimes in this way, if it does not make her rough or hoydenish.' [Pg 97]

'I don't think there is much fear of her learning anything of that kind from the *boarders*,' said Jacinth, gratified by her aunt's confidential tone. 'I shouldn't be so sure of the day-scholars, but you know, Aunt Alison, the Miss Scarletts keep them very distinct. It is a—well,' with a little smile, 'a great compliment for Francie to be asked this way.'

'The Miss Scarletts have plenty of discrimination,' her aunt replied. 'They know that my nieces—your father's daughters—going to any school, especially a day-school, is a great compliment to that school.'

It was not often that Miss Mildmay indulged in any expression of her underlying family pride. It suited Jacinth's ideas 'down to the ground.'

'Yes, of course,' she agreed quietly. 'Still the school *is* an exceptional one. I think Frances is learning to understand some things better,' she went on. 'But of course she is *very* young for her age. At first she was far too ready to rush into bosom friendships and enthusiastic admirations and all that sort of thing. And she perfectly adores games,' with a slight intonation of contempt.

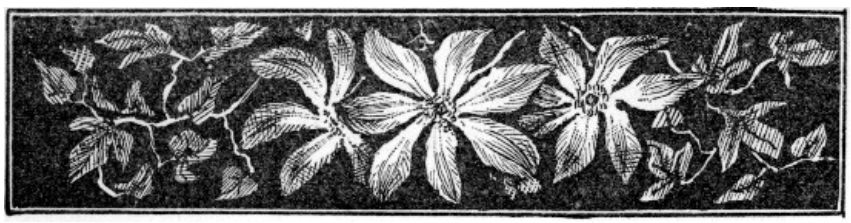
'*You* don't?' said Miss Mildmay, smiling. 'There is nothing to be ashamed of in liking games, if not allowed to go too far.'

'I think it must be born in some people,' said Jacinth. 'It isn't laziness that makes me not care for them. For I love riding and long walks and dancing. Only, somehow, I feel so much *older*.' [Pg 98]

'I can sympathise with you,' said her aunt. 'I have never been able to care for any game that ever was invented. So I have not been victimising you this afternoon, you are sure?'

'Oh indeed, no,' replied Jacinth heartily.

On the whole the domestic atmosphere in Market Square Place seemed more genial.



[Pg 99]

CHAPTER VII.

AN INVITATION.

Jacinth was quick of observation. They had not been many minutes seated at table before it struck her that Frances was unusually silent—or rather, absent and preoccupied, for the mere fact of her not speaking much in her aunt's presence was not remarkable.

She glanced at Frances once or twice inquiringly, then she tried to draw her into the conversation, but only succeeded in extracting monosyllables in reply. Still her sister did not look depressed, certainly not cross; it was much more as if her thoughts were elsewhere.

'What are you dreaming about, Frances?' said Jacinth at last with a touch of sharpness. 'Are you very tired?'

'Did you not enjoy yourself this afternoon?' asked Miss Mildmay, following suit.

Frances started, and pulled herself together.

'Oh yes,' she said, '*very* much. I never enjoyed myself more. I was only—oh, I was only thinking of things.'

'What sort of things?' asked her aunt good-humouredly. 'Had you much grave and learned discussion at Ivy Lodge?'

Frances reddened a little.

'We did talk quietly part of the time,' she said. 'We weren't playing games *all* the afternoon. I was a good while walking up and down with Margaret, and afterwards with Bessie.' [Pg 100]

Miss Mildmay glanced inquiringly at her elder niece.

'Yes,' said Jacinth, replying to the unspoken question. 'Those are the girls Frances is so fond of—the Harpers.'

'Oh yes, I remember,' said Miss Mildmay. 'Their mother is an old friend of the Scarletts, and the good souls were delighted to take the girls at'——She stopped suddenly, aware that she had been on the point of betraying a confidence, realising, too, that the subject of it was scarcely suited for her young auditors, for Frances especially. But in her slight confusion she stumbled on the very thing she was anxious to avoid, so that it required little 'putting of two and two together' for Jacinth to complete to herself, with an inward smile, her aunt's broken-off sentence. 'They are not—the Harpers, I mean—they are not at all well off, and—a large family, I fancy,' Miss Mildmay went on.

'No,' said Frances in her clear young voice, rather to her hearers' surprise, 'no, they are not *at all* rich.'

Then she started, grew crimson, and looked round in affright: had she said something she should not have said? A strange, silly, nervous feeling came over her; as if she must, in another moment, burst into tears.

'Frances,' said Jacinth, 'what are you looking so terrified about? There's no harm in what you said. It's no secret; Aunt Alison said it herself first.'

Her tone was not unkindly, though slightly sharp. But a look of relief overspread her sister's face.

'No, of course not. I'm very silly,' she murmured.

'I think you must be a little over-tired,' said Miss Mildmay vaguely. She had not specially noticed Frances's expression. 'I wonder,' she went on, 'I wonder if those Harpers are any relation to the [Pg 101] Elvedons? I can't quite remember what Miss Scarlett said about them. It was their mother she was interested in, though—not their father. If they were Elvedon Harpers, Lady Myrtle would know about them; at least'——

'Harper isn't at all an uncommon name,' interrupted Jacinth.

But Miss Mildmay did not resent the little discourtesy—her mind was pursuing its own train of thought. 'I don't know that it *would* follow that she could know anything of them,' she said. 'Some of the last generation of Harpers were sadly unsatisfactory, and I believe the old man, Lady Myrtle's father, disinherited one or more of his sons. So if you ever go to Robin Redbreast, girls, I think it would be just as well not to mention your school-fellows of the name.'

Jacinth shot a rather triumphant glance at her sister.

'It is generally better, and more well-bred, not to begin about "Are you related to the so-and-so's?" or "I have friends of your name," and remarks like that; isn't it, Aunt Alison?' she said. 'I was telling Frances so, only yesterday.'

Frances reddened again.

'Well, yes,' said Miss Mildmay. 'Still, one cannot make a hard and fast rule about such matters. It calls for a little tact.'

She was very inconsistent; who is not? Something in Jacinth's premature wisdom—almost savouring of 'worldly' wisdom—rather repelled her, careful and unimpulsive though she herself was. Then she felt annoyed with her own annoyance: it was unjust to blame the girl, when she herself had been inculcating caution. [Pg 102]

'In this case,' she added, 'I am sure it is best to keep off family affairs, you being so young and Lady Myrtle Goodacre so old; and as I know, there have been sore spots in her history.'

Then she rose from the table.

'Francie, dear, I think you had better go to bed early. You *are* looking tired,' she said kindly, and as she kissed the little girl she almost fancied—was it fancy?—that she felt a touch of dew on her cheek.

'I'm afraid I don't understand children at all,' she thought to herself, though with a little sigh. 'What in the world can Frances be crying about?'

Jacinth, once they were alone, did not spare her sister.

'I do think you are too silly,' she said. 'If you go on so oddly after having an afternoon's play, I am sure Aunt Alison won't let you go again. First you seemed half asleep, then you jumped and looked terrified for nothing at all, and now you are actually crying. What *is* the matter?'

'I didn't mean'——began Frances.

'I believe it's those girls,' continued Jacinth, working herself up to rare irritation, for as a rule she was gentle to her sister. 'They really seem to bewitch you. Are you crying because you're not a boarder at school, so that you could be always beside them?' she added ironically.

'No, of course not. I wouldn't be so silly,' said Frances, with a touch of her usual spirit.

'Then what *are* you crying about?'

Frances murmured something about 'thinking Jacinth was vexed with her.'

'Nonsense,' said Jacinth. 'You know I wasn't in the least till you got so silly. I don't understand you to-night one bit, but I will say I think it has something to do with the Harpers, and if they begin coming between you and me, Frances, I shall end by really disliking them.' [Pg 103]

'I think you dislike them already,' retorted Frances, 'and I'm sure I don't know why.'

To this Jacinth vouchsafed no reply. She would have said the accusation was not worth noticing. But yet at the bottom of her heart she knew there was something in it. A vague, ridiculous, unfounded sort of jealousy of the Harpers had begun to insinuate itself.

'I wish their name had been anything else,' she said to herself. 'I don't believe they are really any relation to Lady Myrtle—at least not anything countable. But it is so disagreeable to have the feeling of knowing anything of people who *may* be—well, rather objectionable relations of hers. Well, no; perhaps that's putting it too strong. I mean relations she doesn't want to have to do with, and I don't see why she *should* want to have to do with them. I shall take care, I know, not to speak of them to her, for it would only annoy her, and it's no business of mine. I do wish Frances hadn't taken them up so, she is so silly sometimes.'

Frances on her side began to think she had gone too far. She glanced up at Jacinth, and saw that her face was very grave.

'Jass,' she said, stealing up to her and speaking in a soft apologetic tone, 'I'm very sorry for being cross. I think I *am* rather tired, though I did so enjoy myself this afternoon. Perhaps I'd better go to bed, for I want to write most of my letter to mamma to-morrow. I want to write her a good long one this time.'

'Very well,' said Jacinth as graciously as she could. 'I'm sure I haven't meant to be cross either, Francie; but—I don't like the idea of *any one* coming between you and me.' [Pg 104]

'Of course not; nobody *could*, never,' said Frances eagerly. 'Kiss me, Jass. I really don't know what made me begin to cry; it was a mixture.'

Her voice trembled a little again. In terror of incurring Jacinth's displeasure, Frances tugged at her pocket-handkerchief. Out came, for the second time that day, the old Christmas card.

'What's that?' said Jacinth.

Frances smoothed it out and showed it her, reminding her of its history.

'I think it was that that made me feel rather—queer—this afternoon, first,' she said. 'It brought things back so.'

'Well, dear, go to bed and have a good night. And to-morrow you'll be fresh for a nice long letter to mamma in the afternoon, when we come back from the children's service; there's always plenty of time. I want to write her a long letter too.'

The letters were written, neither sister reading the other's. This was a recognised rule, and a wise one, as it kept each child more directly in touch with the absent mother, and also enabled her to judge of her children's gradually developing characters. The very way in which the same occurrence was related by each threw many an unsuspected light on the 'Jacinth' and 'Frances' she had personally so sadly little knowledge of.

And then for some days life at Number 9 Market Square Place, which had been to a certain extent enlivened or disturbed, seemed to revert again to its usual monotony. It was almost like a dream to Jacinth to recall the strange visit to the quaint old house and the unexpected confidences of Lady Myrtle Goodacre; the more so that she had at first allowed her imagination to run wild on all the possibilities thus opened up. And to Frances it was even more bewildering to remember the glimpse vouchsafed to her by her young friends into their past family history. [Pg 105]

For though they were both as affectionate and friendly as before—more so, indeed, it seemed to her—neither by word nor allusion was the Saturday's conversation referred to. Margaret had evidently promised Bessie to keep off the subject, and Frances of course could but do the same.

'Perhaps,' she thought to herself, 'they will never speak of it again to me; perhaps that is what their mother has told them she wished. But after all, it doesn't look as if this would much matter, for there is no sign that Lady Myrtle means to take any more notice of us, not even of poor Jass. I'm not surprised; any one that can be so unkind about her own relations *can't* be very nice.'

Frances was sorry for Jacinth, and a little disappointed for herself, and there had still lingered in her some dim hopes that possibly *somehow* their own acquaintance with the old lady might have been of use to her friends. Jacinth, though she said nothing, was feeling very chagrined indeed, and not a little bitter.

What could have happened to change Lady Myrtle so? Could it be that she was really very fanciful and whimsical? It scarcely seemed so, considering that she had written so promptly to Miss Mildmay, not losing even one post! And this thought suggested another explanation. Could their aunt's letter in reply have contained something to annoy the old lady? Jacinth began to be very much afraid it must be so, and it made her very vexed with Miss Mildmay, though she did not in the least suppose it had been done *intentionally*.

'Aunt Alison is perfectly straightforward,' thought the girl. 'If she meant to stop our going to [Pg 106]
Robin Redbreast, she would have said so right out. But she may have written in a stiff, stuck-up way, as if it would be a great favour to let us go, which would very likely offend Lady Myrtle. I do think she might have told me what she said.'

And but for Miss Mildmay's being particularly busy that week, and very engrossed by some unexpected difficulties which had arisen in connection with one of her benevolent works, she could scarcely have failed to notice Jacinth's extremely icy manner and unusual silence.

But on Friday morning came a thaw.

Miss Mildmay looked up with a smile—her smiles were somewhat rare, but not without a certain charm—as the girls entered the dining-room, *even* though they were too late for prayers.

'We are so sorry, Aunt Alison,' said Frances eagerly. 'We *just* got to the door in time to be too late.'

'Well, I must forgive you, for I cannot say that it often happens. And—I have something to tell you, Jacinth,' was the gracious reply.

Two things had pleased Miss Mildmay that morning: a letter with the welcome news that, thanks to her judicious management, the difficulty alluded to had been got over, and another letter from Lady Myrtle Goodacre, with a cordial invitation to her elder niece. For Miss Mildmay herself, though it was not her way to express such things, had felt a little annoyed and considerably surprised at no further communication from the owner of Robin Redbreast.

Now, however, all was cleared up. The old lady had been ill, 'otherwise,' she wrote with studied courtesy, 'she had hoped before this to have had the pleasure of calling.' But under the [Pg 107]
circumstances she felt sure that Miss Mildmay would excuse her, and in proof of this, would she allow her niece Jacinth to spend Sunday at Robin Redbreast? by which she explained that she meant from Saturday to Monday morning.

'My carriage shall call for her about noon,' wrote Lady Myrtle, 'and she shall be sent home, or straight to school, at any hour she names on Monday.'

Jacinth's eyes sparkled. This was just the sort of thing she had been hoping for, but with the self-restraint peculiar to her, unusual in one so young, she said nothing till her aunt directly addressed her, after reading aloud Lady Myrtle's note.

'Well, what do you say to it? Would you like to go?' asked Miss Mildmay.

'Very much indeed,' Jacinth replied, 'except'——And as her eyes fell on her sister she hesitated. 'I wish Frances had been invited too,' she was on the point of saying, but she changed the words into, 'I hope Frances won't be dull without me.'

'Oh no, don't think about that,' said the younger girl. 'I really and truly would not like to go; I shouldn't care about it in the least, and I am *very* glad I'm not asked.'

And Jacinth saw that Frances thoroughly meant what she said.

Before the day was over, Frances felt still more glad that she had not been included in the invitation, for as soon as morning lessons were finished, and the day-scholars were getting ready to go, Bessie Harper came running to her with a letter in her hand.

'This is for you, Frances,' she said. 'It is from my sister Camilla, who was here, you know, when [Pg 108]
you first came, for a little.'

Frances was staring at the letter in surprise.

'I scarcely knew your sister at all,' she said. 'She was so big compared with me—even with Jacinth.'

'Ah well, you will understand when you've read it. It came inside one to me,' said Bessie. 'It'll be all right when you've read it. But I must go.' And off she ran.

Frances looked again at the envelope and then deposited the letter in her pocket. She had a feeling that she would read it when she was alone, for she began to have some idea what it was about. She read it at home that afternoon. It ran as follows:

SOUTHCLIFF, *October 7th*.

MY DEAR FRANCES—I am writing to you instead of my mother, for as you and I were, though only for a short time, school-fellows, we think perhaps I can explain better what Bessie's letter makes us think necessary to say. Mother is not vexed with Margaret for what she told you, for there is nothing secret about us or our history, though there have been sad things in father's family long ago, as you know. Bessie told us of your kind feelings about us, and though I saw so little of you, I can well believe them. But with regard to our great-aunt, both my father and mother hope she will hear nothing about us. Father has long left off any thought of friendly relations with her. Of course there is no reason why our name should not be mentioned to her by yourself, or your sister, if it happened to come up in conversation; but we should be sorry for her to think we murmured about being poor, or that any of us ever thought of her as a rich relation who might help us. So we shall all be very glad indeed if you will try to forget that you know anything of us Harpers except as school-fellows who will always be pleased to count you a true friend. Mother wishes you to do just what you think best about showing this letter to your sister or not. And of course you will tell your mother anything or everything about the matter. Yours affectionately, [Pg 109]

CAMILLA HARPER.

Frances gave a sigh.

'I won't show it to Jacinth,' she thought. 'Aunt Alison said it was better for her not to speak about the Harpers to Lady Myrtle, so there's no use in saying anything about them. And it's more comfortable not to have something in your head you're not to tell. I suppose I must try to put it all out of my head, but it *would* have been nice to help to make that old aunt of theirs like them. I'll put the letter in an envelope ready addressed to mamma—that'll keep any one from touching it—and I'll send it to her in my next letter.'

But it called for some self-control not to tell it all to her sister, even at the risk of her displeasure. And Frances was conscious of a very slight feeling of relief when Jacinth, evidently in high spirits, though quiet as she always was, set off in state the next day for her visit to Robin Redbreast.

She had made up her mind to enjoy herself and to be pleased with everything, and it was not difficult to carry out this programme. Everything Lady Myrtle could think of to make her young guest feel at home had been done, and Jacinth was both quick to see this and most ready to appreciate it.

She drew a deep breath of satisfaction when she found herself seated in Lady Myrtle's comfortable brougham, which, though a trifle old-fashioned, was, like everything belonging to the Robin Redbreast establishment, thoroughly good of its kind.

'It is like being at Stannesley again,' thought Jacinth, 'only poor granny's carriage and horses, and old Simpson the coachman, weren't half so nice as all this is.' [Pg 110]

And, to confess the truth, I think a passing regret went through her that the road to her destination lay straight out from the town on the Market Square Place side, so that there was no chance of her meeting any of her school-fellows and giving them a smiling nod of recognition.

The door was opened by the neat parlour-maid, but behind her appeared—to do special honour to the young lady, no doubt—a functionary whom Jacinth had not seen before—no less a personage than Mr Thornley, Lady Myrtle's old, not to say aged butler. He came forward gently rubbing his hands, and bending with a decorous mixture of paternal solicitude and deference which Jacinth by no means objected to, though it made her inclined to smile a little.

'Miss Mildmay, I presume?'

'Miss Mildmay' was quite equal to the occasion. She bent her head graciously.

'Her ladyship is awaiting you in her boudoir, if you will have the goodness to follow me,' the old man proceeded.

They were standing in the hall. It was large—at least it seemed so in comparison with the impression given by the outside of the house, which Jacinth knew so well, and which was really cottage-like. The hall was wainscoted in oak half-way up, where the panels met a bluish-green Japanese-looking paper. A really old oriental paper it was, such as is not even nowadays to be procured in England, so thickly covered with tracery of leaves and flowers and birds and butterflies in a delightful tangle, that the underlying colour was more felt than seen. A short staircase of wide shallow steps ran up one side, disappearing apparently into the wall, and up this staircase, rather to Jacinth's surprise—for there were several doors in the hall leading, no doubt, to the principal ground-floor rooms—stepped Thornley in a gingerly manner till he [Pg 111]

reached the little landing at the top. There he threw open a door, papered like the walls so cleverly as to be invisible when closed, though it was a good-sized door—wide and high. And as soon as the girl, following behind, caught sight of the vista now revealed, she wondered no more, as she had been doing, at Lady Myrtle's choosing an up-stairs room for her boudoir.

'In a town it would be different,' Jacinth had been saying to herself, 'but in the country it's so much nicer to be able to get out into the garden at once.'

But she did not understand the peculiar architecture of Robin Redbreast. A glow of colour met her eyes, for the door in the wall opened on to a gallery, three sides of which ran round an inner hall on the ground-floor, while the fourth—that facing her—was all conservatory, and conservatory of the most perfect kind. The girl started, half-dazzled by the unexpected radiance, and drew a quick breath of satisfaction, as the butler passed along the side of the gallery and threw open a door leading in among the flowers—she, following closely, lingered a moment while the old servant passed on, partly to give him time to announce her, partly to enjoy for half an instant the fragrance and beauty around her.

Then came a voice, and a figure in the inner doorway—the figure that already seemed so familiar to her, though she had seen it but once.

'My dear child—my dear Jacinth,' and she felt two kind arms thrown round her, and the soft withered cheek of the old lady pressed against her own. 'This is delightful—to have you all to myself—my own child for the time.'

Jacinth's usually cold unimpulsive nature was strongly moved; there is always something impressive and touching in the emotion of the aged. And Lady Myrtle, one felt by instinct, was rarely demonstrative. [Pg 112]

The girl looked up in her face, and there came a slight mistiness over the hazel eyes, which her new old friend seemed to know so well—oh so well!—the sight of them carried her back half a century; and, above all, when Jacinth began to speak, she felt as if all the intervening years were a dream, and that she was again a girl herself, listening to the voice of Jacinth Moreland.

'I am so very pleased to come. I have been longing to see you again,' said her young guest. Thornley had discreetly withdrawn. 'And how lovely it is here! You don't know how I enjoy seeing flowers again like these.'

'It *is* pretty, isn't it?' said Lady Myrtle, pleased by the frank admiration. 'In cold weather I am sometimes shut up a good deal, and my garden is my great delight. So I tried to make myself a little winter garden, you see. I have had to stay up here the last few days, but I hope to go about again as usual to-morrow. And of course I shall go down to luncheon and dinner to-day. I waited to ask you to come, my dear, till I was better. I could not have let you be all by yourself in the dining-room.'

'Oh,' exclaimed Jacinth, with sudden compunction, 'I should have asked if you were better. How could I forget?'

'Why, you have not been two minutes here, my dear child. And I wrote that I was better. It was only a cold. But at my age, "only a cold" may come to be a great deal, and I have got into the way of taking care of myself, I scarcely know why; it is natural, I suppose, and after all, however alone one is, life is a gift. We must not throw it away. I am not *quite* well yet'—she had coughed more than once while speaking—'but the weather is milder again.' [Pg 113]

'Yes,' said Jacinth, 'a sort of St Martin's summer. I hope,' she added gently, 'you will let me wait upon you a little while I am here. Wouldn't you like the door shut?'

Lady Myrtle smiled. She liked the allusion to St Martin's summer; it seemed like a good omen. Was this bright young life, so strangely associated with her own youth, to bring back some spring-time to her winter?—was Jacinth to be a St Martin's summer to her?

'Thank you,' she said. 'Yes, please shut the outer door. Poor old Thornley often thinks he has closed it when he hasn't; his hands are so rheumatic. I like the door into the conservatory left open. Yes, that's right. And now come and talk to me for a few minutes before you take off your things. There is still half an hour to luncheon. Tell me what you have been doing these last few days—busy at lessons? That fair-haired little sister of yours doesn't look as if she *over*worked.'

Jacinth smiled.

'No,' she said, 'I don't think Francie *over*works, but she does very well. The being at school has really been a good thing for her, for she feels herself that she is the better for emulation.'

'And the Scarletts are gentlewomen, thorough gentlewomen,' said Lady Myrtle, musingly. 'That makes a difference. And I suppose a good many of the pupils are really nice—lady-like and refined?'

'Yes,' said Jacinth, readily. 'The boarders are all nice—some of them really as nice in every way as they can be, clever, too, and anxious to learn. I don't seem to know them quite as well as Frances does, for, somehow, I am not very quick at making friends,' and she looked up at Lady Myrtle with a slight questioning in her eyes. The confession did not sound very amiable. But the old lady nodded reassuringly. [Pg 114]

'Just as well or better that it should be so,' she said. 'Few friends and faithful has been my motto. Indeed, as for *great* friends I never had but one, and you know who that was, and I verily believe she never had any one as much to her as I was.' She sighed a little. 'Your sister is quite a child—a very nice child, I am sure, but she is not a Moreland at all. I have heard of some girls at Miss Scarlett's—let me see, who were they? What are the names of the ones you like best?'

Jacinth hesitated.

'There are the—the Eves,' she said, 'two sisters, and the Beckinghams, and Miss Falmouth. She is almost too old for us.'

But the Harpers she did not name, saying to herself that her aunt had advised her not to do so. In this she deceived herself. Miss Mildmay would never have counselled her direct avoidance of mention of the two girls whom Frances—and she herself in her heart—thought the most highly of among their companions.

Lady Myrtle caught at the last name.

'Falmouth,' she repeated. 'Yes, it must have been of her I heard. I know her aunt. Very nice people.'

Then she went on to talk a little of Jacinth's own special tastes and studies, to ask what news the girls had last had from India, how often they wrote, and so on, to all of which Jacinth replied with her usual simple directness, for she felt perfectly at ease with her hostess. And the little [Pg 115] reminiscences and allusions to the long-ago days when all the young interests of Jacinth Moreland and Myrtle Harper were shared together, with which the old lady's talk was so interspersed, in no way bored or wearied this girl of to-day, as it might have done some of her contemporaries. On the contrary, such allusions made Jacinth feel more on a level with her companion, and flattered her by showing her the confidence with which she was regarded.

'I don't suppose she would speak of those past times to *any one* but me,' thought Jacinth proudly. 'Except, of course, perhaps to mamma.'

[Pg 116]

CHAPTER VIII.

DELICATE GROUND.

The two days at Robin Redbreast passed most satisfactorily, and long before they came to an end Jacinth felt completely at home. It would have been almost impossible for her or for any girl not to feel grateful for Lady Myrtle's extreme kindness, but besides this, everything in the life suited Jacinth's peculiar character. She liked the perfect order, the completeness of the arrangements, just as—in very different surroundings—she liked and appreciated the same qualities in her aunt's sphere. Mere luxury or display would not have pleased her in the same way, and except in the one matter of flowers and all expenses connected with her garden, Lady Myrtle lived simply. The house itself, though in perfectly good taste, was decidedly plain; the furniture belonged to a severe and unluxurious date. The colouring was harmonious, but unobtrusive.

But Jacinth thought it perfection. Her own room—the one which the old lady had specially chosen for her, and which she impressed upon her she must think of as appropriated to her—was exactly what she liked. The chintz hangings—pale pink rosebuds on a white ground—the quaint spindle-legged dressing-tables and chairs, the comfortably spacious but undecorated wardrobe of dark old mahogany, the three-cornered bookcases fitted in to the angles of the walls with their [Pg 117] lozenge-paned glass doors—all was just as she liked.

'It's so beautifully *neat*,' she said to Lady Myrtle. 'I like a house to be almost primly neat. Frances says she's sure I shall be an old maid, and I daresay I shall be. I shouldn't mind, if I had a house of my own like this to live in.'

Lady Myrtle glanced at her with one of her peculiar but approving smiles.

'That is another point in common between us,' she said. 'I have always felt like you, and when—let me see, it must be fully twenty years ago now—when, for the first time I really was perfectly free to furnish a house to suit myself, you see I carried out my own ideas.'

'Oh, I thought Robin Redbreast was really old—furniture and all,' said Jacinth with a slight tone of disappointment.

'So it is,' said Lady Myrtle. 'A good deal of it was here in the house, and I had it done up—and some things I brought from Goodacre. My brother-in-law who succeeded there kindly let me choose out things of my favourite date. And they did not suit Goodacre, which is very grand and heavy, and, to my mind, ugly.'

'I know what you mean,' said Jacinth, eagerly—'enormous mirrors with huge gilt frames, and enormous gilt cornices over the window curtains, and great big patterns on the carpets. There was a house near Stannesley like that. It was interesting, something like an old palace, and grand; but I shouldn't like to live in a house of that kind.'

'No, there seems nothing personal about it. One's own little self makes no impression; you feel that you are just passing through it for the time. Elvedon was rather like that, though the present [Pg 118] tenants have managed to lighten it a good deal. But our other place—I mean my own family's place, up in the north, where I knew your dear grandmother—though not so grand, is much more homelike than Elvedon. My nephew and his wife live there when they are not in London. It is not so expensive as the place here.'

Jacinth grew a little nervous and said exactly what she did not mean to say.

'Are they not very rich, then?' and instantly blushed crimson, which Lady Myrtle took as an expression of fear lest she had been indiscreet. And she hastened to answer so as to put the girl at ease again.

'No,' she said; 'far from it. But they will be better off some day, and it has been for their good that they have not been rich hitherto. The sins of the fathers are visited on the children, as you cannot fail to see for yourself, my dear, when you come to know more of life.' Lady Myrtle sighed. 'My poor brother Elvedon was very weak and foolish, led into all kinds of wild extravagance by—by another, much, much worse than he;' and here the old lady's face hardened. 'And naturally,' she went on, 'we—my father and I—dreaded what his son might turn out. Poor Elvedon, my nephew I mean, is far from a clever man, but he is sensible and steady, and so are his two sons. So, as I was saying, some day they will be better off.'

Jacinth listened with the utmost attention. She was much gratified by her hostess's confidence, and relieved, too, that no mention had been made of any other Harper relatives.

'Bessie and Margaret are not Lord Elvedon's daughters, of course,' she said to herself, 'so it does not seem as if they were near relations; perhaps, after all, they are not relations at all. So I don't [Pg 119] see that I need bother my head about them; I might have mentioned them to Lady Myrtle among the girls at school without her noticing it, I daresay.'

'This is too old talk for you, my dear,' said the old lady, after a little silence.

'No, no indeed,' said Jacinth eagerly. 'I am so pleased you don't treat me as a child, dear Lady Myrtle. And I love to think of you and my grandmother long ago, when your families were almost relations, weren't they?'

'Yes, truly—Jacinth and I often said we loved each other more than if we had been sisters. That reminds me, my dear, that nice little sister of yours must come to see me some day soon, and the boy too, the next time you come. When shall that be?'

'Whenever you like, dear Lady Myrtle,' Jacinth replied.

'Well then, supposing you come again in a fortnight—next Saturday week, that is to say. I will send for you as before, and the two children must come with you and stay till six or seven; then I will send them home again and you will remain with me till Monday morning. I must not be selfish, otherwise I would gladly have you every week. But that would not be fair to your aunt.'

'It wouldn't matter so much for Aunt Alison,' said Jacinth; 'I really don't think she would mind. But Francie and Eugene would not like me to be away every Sunday.'

'Then let us try to make it every other,' said Lady Myrtle. 'My dearest child,' and she pressed the girl's hand, 'how I wish I could have you with me altogether. But no, that would not do—it would not be a right life for her'—she seemed as if she were speaking to herself. 'Tell me, dear,' she [Pg 120] went on, 'you do feel already *at home* at Robin Redbreast? I want you to learn to love the little place as well as its old owner—who can't be its owner for ever,' she added in a lower voice, so that less quick ears than Jacinth's would scarcely have caught the words.

'I love it already dearly,' she replied. 'For your sake first of all, of course, but for its own too. I couldn't imagine a more perfect old house than it is.'

They were walking in the garden, for the weather was mild and Lady Myrtle had been able to go to church that morning. It was Sunday and late afternoon. The long level rays of the evening sun fell on the large lawn—smooth and even as a bowling-green—along one side of which, on the broad terrace, the two were pacing up and down. Lady Myrtle stopped short, she was holding the

girl's arm, and looked up at the windows, glinting cheerily in the red glow beginning to be reflected from the sky.

'Yes,' she said, 'it really is a dear old place. And for any one who cared to fit it for a larger family there is plenty of space and convenience for extending it.'

'It seems a very good size already,' said Jacinth, 'though of course I cannot judge very well.'

'You must see it all,' said Lady Myrtle; 'the next time you come I hope I shall be quite well and able to show you all over it. No, it would scarcely need building to; but there are several rooms at the other side in rather an unfinished condition, because I really had no use for them. The last tenant was on the point of completing them when he left. He had a large family, and it was getting too small for them, but he unexpectedly came into a property elsewhere, and then my father gave me this place. There are some very nice rooms you have not seen. Have you been in [Pg 121] the one where my old pensioners come for their dinner every Saturday?'

Jacinth shook her head.

'That would make a capital billiard room,' Lady Myrtle went on, Jacinth listening to all she said with the greatest interest. 'Indeed, Robin Redbreast has everything needed for a comfortable roomy house. It is too large for me, unless I had a good many visitors. When your father and mother come from India, Jacinth, I must have you all to stay with me.'

Jacinth's eyes sparkled.

'Oh how delightful that would be!' she said. 'I have often thought how they will miss Stannesley when they come home. For it is let for a long time. And wasn't it funny, Lady Myrtle, that last morning when we were saying good-bye to Uncle Marmy at the gate, we looked in at this garden, and said how lovely it would be if papa and mamma had come home, and we were all living together in a house like this! And to think it *may* come true, if you ask us all to stay with you.'

Lady Myrtle stroked Jacinth's hand fondly.

'Yes, dear,' she said, 'it may come true, and I trust it will.'

This conversation took place, as I said, on the Sunday afternoon. Very early the next morning the brougham took Jacinth back to Market Square Place, in time for her to start for school with Frances at their usual hour.

Frances did not receive with rapturous delight the news of her invitation to Robin Redbreast.

'Must I go?' she said. 'Wouldn't it do for just Eugene to go with you, Jacinth? He would enjoy it.'

'Yes, I should,' said Eugene, 'pertickerly if we have some of those little brown cakes for tea.' [Pg 122]

'Eugene,' said Frances in a tone of disgust, 'I'm sure Lady Myrtle would not have asked you if she had known you were such a greedy little boy.'

They were in the dining-room waiting for their aunt, who, for once, was a few minutes late for dinner. Just then she came in. She greeted Jacinth pleasantly, and seemed glad to hear that she had enjoyed herself. Then she was told of the invitation for the following week, and Frances appealed to her to say she 'needn't go.' But Frances's hopes were speedily disappointed.

'Not go!' said Miss Mildmay; 'of course you must go. It would be most ungrateful to Lady Myrtle, and would, besides, put Jacinth in a very disagreeable position. You are the grand-daughter of Lady Myrtle's old friend as well as Jacinth, even though her special interest may be in Jacinth.'

'It would make me look so selfish too,' said Jacinth, who, now that she felt sure of her own place with the old lady, was far from wishing to deprive Frances of her share in the pleasures and advantages of their acquaintance with Robin Redbreast.

So Frances had to give in.

And when the day came she enjoyed the visit, on the whole, very much.

'If only,' she said to herself before starting, 'if only I could have got mamma's letter in answer to mine before going. I would have known then exactly how to do about the Harpers. Of course I can't tell stories, and *they* would never have wanted me to do that. I only hope nothing will be said about school or about anything to do with them.'

Then she tried to recall the exact words of Camilla Harper's letter, by this time two-thirds on its [Pg 123] way to India to her mother.

Jacinth said nothing at all about the Harpers in connection with Lady Myrtle, and Frances began to think her sister had forgotten all about the question of their possible relationship, which in the meantime at least the younger girl was not sorry for.

It was again a lovely day—the weather seemed to favour the visits to Robin Redbreast—even milder than the Saturday of Jacinth's first stay there. And this time, instead of the brougham, a large roomy pony carriage came to fetch them, a spring cart having already called for Jacinth's portmanteau that morning.

'How lovely!' said Frances, as she and Eugene took their seats with great satisfaction opposite

her sister and the coachman; 'I am so glad it is an open carriage. I wish Lady Myrtle would send us home in it again this evening: don't you, Eugene?'

'I'm sure her ladyship will be quite pleased to do so, miss, if you just mention that you would like it,' said the man, a staid unexceptionable old servant, though many years younger than Thornley.

'Oh well, I will. I may, mayn't I, Jass?' said Frances, her eyes sparkling with pleasure, only damped by Jacinth's grave expression. Did Jass think she was chattering too much already? High spirits were Francie's native air: it was very difficult for her to be quiet and subdued for long together. But Jacinth really loved to see Frances happy, and she knew that Lady Myrtle would feel the same.

'She thinks her such a mere child,' thought the elder girl. So she smiled reassuringly as she replied: 'Of course, dear, you can ask Lady Myrtle. I am sure she won't mind if it keeps fine; and [Pg 124] there is no sign of rain, is there?' she said turning to the coachman.

'No indeed, ma'am,' he replied. 'We shall have no rain just yet a bit.'

'It's a *perfect* day,' said Frances. 'I really sometimes think I like autumn as well as spring.'

'I have always liked it much better,' said Jacinth calmly.

Lady Myrtle was walking up and down the terrace, waiting for them. She was much better—for her, indeed, quite well—she said, and her face lighted up with pleasure as she kissed Jacinth tenderly. Then she turned to the younger ones and kissed them too.

'I must have a good look at you, Frances,' she said. 'No—you are not a Moreland, and yet—yes, there is a slight *something*—in spite of your blue eyes and shaggy hair,' and she patted Frances's head. 'And you, my boy;' and she examined Eugene in his turn. 'His eyes are more like his grandmother's; nothing approaching your eyes, Jacinth, but still they are more of the colour.'

'Eugene is very like mamma,' said Frances eagerly. 'Everybody says so.'

'And I'm called after her,' added Eugene.

'So that's quite as it should be,' said Lady Myrtle. 'And some day I hope I may have the great pleasure of comparing mamma and her boy together. Now dears, listen to my plan—would you like to go a drive this afternoon, or would you rather play about the garden and the little farm? I mean Frances and Eugene—Jacinth, of course, is quite at home here.'

The two younger ones looked at each other. [Pg 125]

'Oh please,' said Frances, 'if we may go home in the open carriage, I think that would be enough driving. And—it's so long since we've had a nice big place to run about in, and—pigs and cows, you know, like at home? Wouldn't you like that best, Eugene?'

'May we see the cows milked?' said Eugene, prudently making his conditions, 'and, oh please, if we find any eggs, *might* we take one home for breakfast to-morrow?'

Lady Myrtle looked much amused.

'I will put you under Barnes's charge,' she said. 'Barnes is the under-gardener, and whatever he lets you do will be quite right. You and I, Jacinth, will have a long drive to-morrow, as I always go to Elvedon church once a month, and to-morrow is the day. So I daresay you will manage to entertain yourself at home to-day. We can go through the houses in the afternoon.'

'Yes, thank you,' said Jacinth. 'And the house—you said you would show me all over the house, dear Lady Myrtle.'

'Of course; that will amuse Frances and Eugene too, I daresay, when they have had enough running about. Now your sister will go with you to your room to take her things off;' and as the two set off, she added playfully, 'Jacinth has a room of her very own here, you know, Frances.'

The younger girl was breathless with interest and pleasure, and the first sight of the interior of the quaint old house—above all, of the lovely conservatory, past which Jacinth took care to convoy her—impressed her as much as her sister.

'Oh Jass,' she said, when they found themselves in the pleasant, rather 'old-world-looking' bedroom, where a tiny wood-fire sparkling in the grate gave a cheery feeling of welcome as they [Pg 126] entered—'Oh Jass, isn't it like a *dream*? That we should really be here in this dear old house, treated almost as if we were Lady Myrtle's own grandchildren, and you staying here, and this called your room, and—and'——

She stopped, at a loss for words to express her feelings.

Jacinth smiled, well pleased.

'Yes,' she said, 'it really is like a fairy-tale. And'——She hesitated a little. 'You don't know, Francie, what more may not come. Do you remember our saying that morning to Marmy, how lovely it would be if some day we had a house like this for our home, and how he and we would pay visits to each other?'

Frances's face grew rather pink.

'Do you mean if,' she said, her voice growing lower and lower—'if Lady Myrtle *left* it to us, to you? I don't like, Jass, to'——

'Oh, how matter-of-fact you are!' said Jacinth impatiently; 'I don't mean anything but what I say. Lady Myrtle says she is going to invite us all—papa and mamma and us three—to stay with her when they come home, and it's a very big house, and she has no relations she cares for. It might get to be almost like our home. And Lady Myrtle is the sort of person that often speaks of getting old and—and dying. I daresay she makes plans for what she'd like to be done with her things—I know I should—though I hope she'll live twenty years, and I daresay she will, dear old thing.'

Frances would have accepted this simply enough, and after all, Jacinth felt as she said. The thought that 'some day' Robin Redbreast might be her home would be quite enough for her, and she already loved her kind old friend sincerely. But one sentence in her sister's speech startled Frances with a quick sharp stab: 'No relations that she cares for.' [Pg 127]

Somehow, in the pleasure and excitement of coming to Robin Redbreast, she had forgotten about the Harpers. Now all her old feelings of chivalry for them, and wishes that she could be the means of helping them, rushed back upon her, and she felt as if she had, in some queer way, been faithless, even though she was debarred from doing anything, debarred even from telling Jacinth all she knew. And Frances was unaccustomed to hide her feelings; her face at once grew grave and almost distressed looking.

'What is the matter, Frances?' said Jacinth. 'You are such a kill-joy. What are you looking so reproachful about?'

'I didn't mean—I'm not looking reproachful,' said Frances; 'it was only—oh, just something of my own I was thinking of.'

'Well then, I wish you would think of something cheerful, and not screw your face up as if you were going to cry. I don't want Lady Myrtle to think we've been quarrelling up here.'

Frances swallowed down a lump in her throat, which was far too apt to come there on small provocation.

'Of course Lady Myrtle would never think such a thing, or if she did, she would only think I was naughty or silly or something. She'd never dream of *you* being anything but perfect, Jass. I do like her for that,' said Frances.

'You should like her for everything. I'm sure she's as kind as she can possibly be,' said Jacinth.

'Yes,' said Frances, 'she is.'

Then they ran down-stairs again to the library, where Lady Myrtle had told them she would be. They found her improving her acquaintance with Eugene, who was chattering away in a most confiding and friendly fashion, even retailing to her his self-congratulation at having been the first cause of their making friends. [Pg 128]

'For you see if I hadn't been so fir—*wursty*,' with a great effort, 'that day, and *made* Jacinth let me ask; no,' suddenly recollecting himself, 'she didn't let me, but you heard me over the wall, Lady Myrtle; that was it, wasn't it? So it did come of me being wursty, didn't it?'

'Yes, my dear, of course it did,' the old lady replied, with a smile.

But just then the luncheon gong sounded and they all made their way into the dining-room. All went well till about half-way through the meal, when a sudden thought struck Lady Myrtle.

'Oh Jacinth, my dear,' she said, 'I was forgetting to tell you. Your young friend at school, Honor Falmouth, *is* the niece of my friend. I was writing to her husband the other day about a business matter—he is one of my trustees—and I asked the question. I thought it would interest you to hear it.'

'Yes,' said Jacinth, 'of course it does. She is a very nice girl indeed, but she is a good deal older than I. She plays beautifully, and next term she is going somewhere—to Germany, I think—for the best music lessons she can have. Did you play the harp, when you were a girl, Lady Myrtle?' she went on rather eagerly. She was vaguely anxious to change the conversation, for she had still a half-nervous fear of Frances's indiscretion should the subject of their school-fellows be entered upon.

'The harp!' repeated Lady Myrtle, half-absently; 'no, my love, I never was very musical. But your grandmother sang charmingly.' And Jacinth, believing she was launched on long-ago reminiscences, began to breathe freely, when suddenly the old lady reverted to the former topic. [Pg 129]

'How much older than you is Honor?' she inquired.

'About three years. I think she is eighteen, but I'm not quite sure,' said Jacinth.

'I was wondering,' said Lady Myrtle, 'if she would like to come to luncheon some day when you are with me. Or is there any other among your friends you care more for?'

'No,' said Jacinth, 'I think I like Honor as much as any.'

Frances was listening with the greatest interest; her mouth half-open, her knife and fork suspended in their operations. Lady Myrtle caught sight of her absorbed face and smiled.

'Have *you* any friend you would like to ask to come here some day?' she said, kindly. 'If it were summer it would be different; we might have a strawberry feast.'

Frances grew crimson, painfully crimson.

'Oh *how* silly she is!' thought Jacinth.

'Thank you,' stammered Frances. 'I—I don't know. I don't think so.'

'Come, you must think it over,' said Lady Myrtle, imagining the child was consumed with shyness. 'Who are your favourite friends, or have you any special favourites?'

'Yes,' replied Frances, in an agony, increased by the consciousness of Jacinth's eye, but fully remembering, too, that in replying truthfully she was violating no confidence; 'yes, I'm much the fondest of Bessie and Margaret, but they mightn't come. I don't think it would be any use inviting any of them, except a big one like Honor, thank you.' [Pg 130]

'Ah! well I know Miss Scarlett is strict, and rightly so, I daresay,' said the old lady. 'Who are these friends of yours—Bessie and Margaret what?'

'Bessie and Margaret Harper,' said Frances, bluntly; 'that's their name.'

A look of perplexity crossed Lady Myrtle's face. 'Harper,' she repeated. 'Bessie and Margaret Harper. No, I never heard of them. But still'——And the lines on her face seemed visibly to harden. 'Ah well, I will only ask Honor Falmouth then. You must see about it, Jacinth, and let me know when I should write to her or to Miss Scarlett.'

And then they talked of other things, Jacinth exerting herself doubly, to prevent Lady Myrtle's noticing Frances's silence and constraint. But afterwards, when they were by themselves for a moment, she took her sister to task.

'Why did you speak of the Harpers?' she said; 'and why, still worse, if you thought you shouldn't have named them, did you look so silly and ashamed as if you had done something wrong? I daresay you felt uncomfortable because, as Aunt Alison said, there have been such disagreeables in Lady Myrtle's family, and these Harpers may be some relations of hers. But—couldn't you have managed not to mention them?'

Frances looked quite as distressed as Jacinth could have expected—or more so. 'I'm sure I didn't mean to speak of them,' she said. Her meekness disarmed Jacinth.

'Well never mind,' she said reassuringly. 'I daresay Lady Myrtle didn't notice; at least, if she did, she couldn't have thought you knew anything about her family affairs. *I* don't want to hear about them; I'd rather not know what sort of relations the Harpers are, or if they're any. Don't think any more about them.' [Pg 131]

And with this, Frances had to be or to appear content. But besides the little Jacinth knew, she had her own sorer feelings. Though Bessie and Margaret had scrupulously carried out the advice, Frances could see, they had received from home, and while as affectionate as ever to her, refrained from the very slightest allusion to family affairs or even to Robin Redbreast, yet, now that her eyes were opened as it were, Frances noticed many things that had not struck her before. As the season advanced and the weather grew colder, most of the girls appeared in new and comfortably warmer garments, for Thetford stands high and is a 'bracing' place. Well-lined ulsters, fur-trimmed jackets, muffs and boas, were the order of the day. But not so for Bessie and Margaret. They wore the same somewhat threadbare serges; the same not very substantial gray tweeds on Sundays, which had done duty since they came to school; the same little black cloth jackets out-of-doors, with only the addition of a knitted 'cross-over' underneath. And one day, admiring Frances's pretty muff, and congratulating her on the immunity from chilblains it must afford, poor little Margaret confided to her impulsively that she had never possessed such a treasure in her life.

'It is one of the things I have always wished for so,' she said simply, 'though these woollen gloves that Camilla knits us are really very good.'

Then on another occasion both sisters consulted their friend on a most important matter. It was going to be mother's birthday. They *must* send her something; they had never been away from her on her birthday before, and at home one could always make something or find out what she wanted a good while before, so as to prepare. *Could* Frances think of anything? She must be used to thinking of things that could go by post because of her mother being in India; only—and here Bessie's eager face flushed a little, and Margaret's grave eyes grew graver—'you see it mustn't cost much; that's the worst of it.' [Pg 132]

Frances tried not to look too sympathising.

'I know,' she said. 'I quite understand, for of course we haven't ever much money to spend. I will try to think of something.'

And for once she thoroughly enlisted Jacinth's sympathy for her friends. Possibly, far down in Jacinth's heart, candid and loyal by nature, lay a consciousness that, notwithstanding the plausible and, to a certain extent, sound reasons for not meddling in other people's affairs, and for refraining from all 'Harper' allusions to Lady Myrtle, she was going farther than she needed in her avoidance of these girls, in her determination not to know anything about their family or

their possible connection with her old lady. Her conscience was not entirely at rest. And in a curious undefined way she was now and then grateful for Frances's ready kindness to Bessie and Margaret: it seemed a vicarious making up for the something which she felt she herself was withholding. And this little appeal touched her sympathy; so that with a good deal of tact—more tact than Frances, blunt and blundering, could have shown—she helped to suggest and carry out a really charming little birthday present, most of the materials for which she had 'by her,' lying useless, only asking to be made into something.

Never had Bessie Harper felt so ready to make a friend of the undemonstrative girl; never had Francie herself felt more drawn to her elder sister. [Pg 133]

And the little present was carefully packed and sent off; and the tender mother's letter of thanks, when it came, was read to the Mildmays as but their due, and for a while it seemed as if the friendship was to extend from a trio into a quartette!

But alas! a very few days after the cheery letter from Southcliff, Frances, spending a holiday afternoon at Ivy Lodge, as often happened, especially when Jacinth was with Lady Myrtle, found Bessie Harper pale and anxious, and Margaret's eyes suspiciously red. What was the matter?

'We didn't want to tell you about our home troubles,' said Bessie. 'I'm sure it's better not, because of—you know what. But I must tell you a little. It's—it's a letter from Camilla. Father has been so much worse lately, and they didn't want to tell us. They hoped it was only rheumatism with the cold weather. But—mother managed to get him up to London to see the great doctor, and—he gave a very bad report.'

Here Bessie's voice failed.

'He's not going to die?—oh don't say that!' burst out Frances in her heedless way.

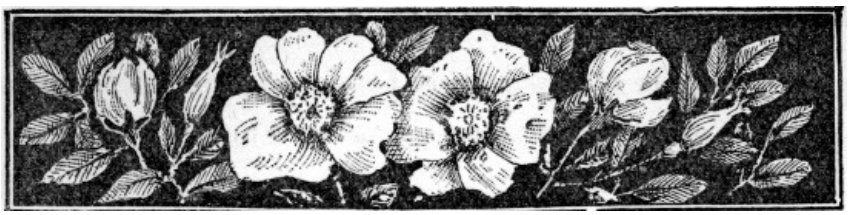
Margaret flung out her hands wildly.

'Oh Bessie,' she cried, 'is that what it really means?'

Bessie looked almost angrily at Frances.

'No, no,' she exclaimed; 'of course not. Frances, why did you say that? Margaret, you are so fanciful. Of course it is not that. It is just that the doctor says his leg is getting stiffer and stiffer, and unless something can be done—some treatment in London first, and afterwards a course of German baths—he is afraid dad must become *quite* a cripple—quite helpless. And that would be dreadful. It's bad enough when people are rich'—it was sad to hear the old sad 'refrain' of [Pg 134] poverty, from lips so young—'but when they're poor! Oh no, I can't face the thoughts of it. What would his life be if he could never get out—he is so active in spite of his lameness—if he had to lie always in his poky little room? How would darling mother bear it?'

And then brave Bessie herself broke down and fled away to the house—they were in the garden—to hide herself till she had recovered some degree of calm.



[Pg 135]

CHAPTER IX.

THE INDIAN MAIL.

Frances went home that evening feeling very unhappy and terribly full of sympathy, while painfully conscious the while that as yet she must not unburden herself to any one, not even to Jacinth, of her whole thoughts and feelings in connection with the Harpers. And in any case she could not have done so, for Jacinth was away at Robin Redbreast till Monday.

They met at school on Monday morning, but it was not till they were on their way home at dinner-time that the sisters had any opportunity of speaking to each other. Jacinth was looking almost brilliantly well, and, for her, Frances saw in a moment, in extremely good spirits. No wonder—every time she went to Lady Myrtle, the old lady showed her increasing signs of affection and goodwill: she almost hinted that she wished the girl to think of herself as in a sense adopted by her.

'Francie,' said the elder sister, when they at last found themselves alone, 'I have something so lovely to show you,' and she drew out a little velvet-covered case from her pocket. 'See—this is what dear Lady Myrtle has given me; isn't it splendid?'

The 'it' was a small and evidently valuable watch. The back was enamelled and set with diamonds, in the form of a 'J.' It was somewhat old-fashioned, enough to enhance its beauty and uncommonness, and Frances gazed at it in breathless admiration. [Pg 136]

'It was Lady Myrtle's own,' explained Jacinth. 'She told me that she and our grandmother once had a fancy—rather a silly one, I think, though I didn't say so—for having each other's initial on their things—things like this, I mean. So when somebody gave them each a watch, two the same, they exchanged them. Lady Myrtle doesn't know what became of our grandmother's, but she thinks it was lost or stolen, otherwise mother would have had it. And she has not worn this for ever so long. She says she always hoped that *some* day she'd find somebody belonging to grandmother. Oh Francie, isn't it a good thing I was called "Jacinth?"'

Frances murmured something in reply; her eyes were fixed on the watch.

'The works are first-rate—*better* than they make them now,' Jacinth continued; 'and Lady Myrtle has had it thoroughly overhauled by her own watchmaker in London, so she's sure it'll go perfectly, with any one careful; and I am careful, am I not, Francie? Lady Myrtle says she could see I was, almost the first time she spoke to me.'

'Yes,' said Frances, absently, 'I am sure you are, and I am sure Lady Myrtle thinks you almost perfect.'

But still she gazed at the watch, as if it half-mesmerised her.

'I've felt in such a hurry to tell you about it—to show it to you,' said Jacinth. 'It seemed to be burning a hole in my pocket, as they say. I did so wish I could have shown it to some of the girls, but I thought it was better not.' [Pg 137]

This last remark seemed to arouse Frances.

'Yes,' she agreed heartily, 'I think it was much better not.' Then, after a moment or two's silence, 'I wonder how much it is worth?' she went on; 'ten or twenty pounds, I daresay?'

'Ten or twenty!' repeated Jacinth; 'oh, much more than that. Forty or fifty at least, I should say.'

Frances gasped.

'What a lot of things one could do with as much money as that!' she said. 'I daresay it would be enough to—to'——

'To what?' said Jacinth, a little impatience in her tone.

'Oh—only something I was thinking of—some one who's ill and can't do what the doctor says,' replied Frances, confusedly.

Jacinth felt irritated.

'I don't understand you, Frances,' she said. 'Do you want to take away my pleasure in my watch? I've never had one before, you know, and lots of girls have watches, quite young. Of course I know the value of it would do lots of things—make some poor family quite rich for a year. But when you get a new frock of some good stuff and nicely made, I don't say to you that you might have had it of common print, run up anyhow, and spent the rest on poor people. You don't see things fairly, Frances.'

Frances recognised the sense of Jacinth's argument, but she could not explain herself.

'I didn't mean that exactly,' she said. 'I know there have to be degrees of things—rich and poor, and I suppose it's not wrong to be rich, if—if one doesn't get selfish. That isn't what I meant. I'm very pleased you've got the watch, Jass, and I wish I hadn't said that.' [Pg 138]

'I wish you hadn't too,' said her sister. 'It has taken away a good deal of my pleasure; and somehow, Frances, very often now, I don't understand you. I know you are never the least jealous, you haven't it in you, but yet you don't seem to like to see me happy. I could almost think you are what Aunt Alison would call "morbid."'

'I don't think I know what that means,' said Frances, sadly, though she had a sort of idea what Jacinth wished to express.

'Sometimes,' continued Jacinth, 'I have a feeling that other girls have come between you and me. If it could be—if I really thought it was the Harpers, though they do seem nice, I would almost hate them. One way and another, they do seem to have been the cause of a lot of worry.'

'Oh Jass, it isn't their fault—truly it isn't,' pleaded Frances, almost in tears. 'I haven't been very happy lately, but indeed it isn't that I'm changed to you. Perhaps after a while you'll understand me better. If only mamma was at home'——

'It's no good wishing for that,' replied Jacinth. 'And you are so queer, I really don't know if you'd be pleased if things did happen to make mamma come home. I was going to tell you some things,' she added mysteriously, 'but I think I'd better not.'

And, to her surprise, her hints, instead of whetting her sister's curiosity, seemed rather to alarm her.

'No,' she agreed, 'if it's anything about Lady——or, or *plans*, I'd rather not know. I hate any sort of secret.'

She said the last few words almost roughly, and Jacinth, in spite of her irritation, felt sorry for her. It was evident that poor little Frances had something on her mind. But the elder sister did not invite her confidence. [Pg 139]

'I believe it *has* to do with these girls,' she thought, 'and if it has, I don't want to know it. So Frances and I are quits; she doesn't want my secrets and I don't want hers. Honor Falmouth says it is uncertain if the Harpers will stay after Christmas. I'm sure I hope they won't. Frances would forget all about them once they were away. She is such a baby.'

But her own words had suggested some comfort to Frances. 'If only mamma were here!' she had said. And suddenly she remembered that though mamma herself could not be hoped for, a letter—a letter in answer to her own long one enclosing Camilla Harper's—would soon be due.

'It is five—no, six weeks since I sent it,' she thought joyfully. 'I must hear soon. And then I do hope mamma will say it is best to tell Jass all about it, whether Jass is vexed with me or not; and even if there's *no* chance of making Lady Myrtle kind to them, I'd far rather Jass knew all I know.'

She sighed, but there was relief in her sigh. And when in another moment she began talking cheerfully about Jacinth's visit, and all she had done at Robin Redbreast, her sister almost decided that she herself had been fanciful and exaggerated about Frances—making mountains out of molehills. Jacinth was very anxious to take this view of things; it was much more comfortable to think that the Harpers had had nothing to do with Frances's fits of depression.

'And after all,' thought Jacinth, 'why should we bother about them? As likely as not they're no relation to Lady Myrtle, or so distant that it doesn't count. And it's really not our business.' [Pg 140]

It is seldom the case that a looked-for letter—especially from a great distance—arrives when hoped for. And Frances had hoped for her mother's reply by the very first date possible.

She was not disappointed. They came—a good fat letter for her, a thinner one for Jacinth. They lay on the hall table one day when the girls came home from school; having arrived by the mid-day post, in which Thetford now rejoiced.

Frances seized her letter, her cheeks flushing with excitement.

'What a thick letter you've got this time!' said Jacinth. But Frances scarcely heard her.

'Oh, I do so hope I shall have time to read it before dinner!' she said.

'You've half—no, twenty-five minutes,' said Jacinth. 'Run and get ready first; it won't take you any time, and then you can read your letter in peace. That's what I'm going to do.'

Frances took her sister's advice, and she managed to make her appearance in the dining-room punctually, the precious letter in her pocket, its contents already digested. She was rosier than usual, and Jacinth, who knew her ways so well, could see that she was struggling to keep down her excitement. Jacinth herself was not sorry when dinner was over and she was free to talk to Frances, after answering a question or two from her aunt about their Indian news.

'Frances,' said her sister, when they found themselves in their own little sitting-room, 'mamma tells me that she has written a good deal more to you this time than to me, as there was something particular you asked her about. And she says you will tell it me all, or show me her letter.' [Pg 141]

Jacinth's brows contracted, and the lines of her delicate face hardened, but she said nothing.

Frances drew out her packet. [Pg 143]

'There's more than one letter there, surely,' said Jacinth, with some curiosity.

'Yes,' said Frances, 'there's one I sent on to mamma to read, and she's sent it back, so that you can see it now. I daresay you'll be angry with me for not having told you about it before, but I can't help it if you are. Mamma says I did the best I could; but I am so glad for you to know all about it now,' and she gave a great sigh.

Jacinth, more and more curious, took the letters which Frances gave her, and began to read them eagerly. Rather unfortunately, the first she began was Camilla Harper's, and she went to the end of it in spite of Frances's 'Oh, do read mamma's first, Jass.'

Jacinth's brows contracted, and the lines of her delicate face hardened, but she said nothing—nothing really audible, that is to say, though a murmur escaped her of, 'I knew it had something to do with them; it is too bad.'

When she had finished, she looked up at her sister.

'There is a good deal more for you to explain,' she said, coldly. 'Mamma says you will do so—not that I want to hear it. And as you have got so thoroughly in the way of having secrets from me, and now that you have friends you care for more than me, I really don't see why I need to be mixed up in this affair at all.'

'Oh Jass, dear Jass, don't speak like that,' exclaimed Frances, the ever-ready tears starting to her eyes. 'I couldn't help it. Read again what mamma says.'

'I know what she says,' Jacinth replied. 'I don't need to read it again. I am waiting for you to tell me the whole.' [Pg 144]

It was difficult, but Frances was eager to re-establish confidence with her sister. She told the whole—even how the old Christmas card in her pocket had brought up the subject of Robin Redbreast, and how Bessie had asked her to tell no one but her mother, if she could help it; then how Camilla's letter had repeated this, ending up by what had recently come to her knowledge of the increased troubles of the Harper family.

'Oh Jass,' she concluded, 'if we could help them somehow. I am so glad mamma has met that aunt of theirs—*isn't* it lucky? Perhaps she'll be able now to manage something without vexing Captain and Mrs Harper.'

Jacinth lifted her head and looked at Frances. She was paler than usual.

'I really do think you must be a sort of an idiot,' she said. 'Otherwise, I should be forced to believe you had no real family affection at all. Surely the Harpers might teach you to have *that*, however

much mischief they have made in other ways.'

Frances stared at her, dumb with perplexity.

'What *do* you mean, Jacinth?' she said at last.

Jacinth for once lost her self-control.

'Do you not care for your own father and mother to get anything good?' she said. 'Papa's life has been hard enough—so has ours—separated almost ever since we can remember from our parents. And it is all a question of money, to put it plainly, though it is horrid of you to force me to say it. Do you think papa, who is far from a young man now, stays out in that climate for pleasure—wearing himself out to be sure of his pension? And if Lady Myrtle chooses to treat *us* [Pg 145] as her relations—mamma, the daughter of her dearest friend—instead of the son of that bad, wretched brother of hers—why shouldn't she? And you would ruin everything by silly interference in behalf of people we have nothing to do with: very likely you'd do no good to *them*, and only offend her for ever with us. Do you understand *now* what I mean?'

Frances was trembling, but she would not cry.

'Mamma does not see it that way,' she said. 'She is pleased and delighted at Lady Myrtle being so kind, but she *does* care about the Harpers too. Read what she says,' and Frances hurriedly unfolded the letter again till she found the passage she wanted.

This was what Mrs Mildmay said, after expressing her sympathy with all Frances had told her, and advising her now to tell the whole to Jacinth. 'I remember vaguely about the Harper family in the old days,' she wrote. 'I know that Lady Myrtle's two brothers caused her much trouble, especially the younger, really embittering her life. But for many years I have heard nothing of her or any of the family till just now, for a curious coincidence has happened. A few days before I got your long letter, enclosing Miss Harper's, and dear Jacinth's too, telling of her invitation to Robin Redbreast, I had met a Mrs Lyle, whose husband has got an appointment here. And Mrs Lyle is Captain Harper's sister. I like her very much, and we have already made great friends. She is very frank, and devoted to her brother and his family; and when she heard of my children being at Thetford, in talking, one thing led to another, so that I really knew all you tell me—and perhaps more. It will be rather difficult for you and Jacinth—for Jassie especially—to avoid all appearance of interference, as that would do harm on both sides. But still you may find opportunities of [Pg 146] speaking warmly and admiringly of the Harper girls, whenever your school happens to be mentioned. That can do *no* harm, and may even help to pave the way for bringing about a better state of things some day. For I do feel most interested in the Harpers, and every time we meet, Mrs Lyle and I talk about them, and all the troubles they have really so nobly borne.'

Then Mrs Mildmay went on to speak of her pleasure in her children's having won Lady Myrtle's kindness, adding that she would look forward eagerly to the next letters, telling of Jacinth's visit.

'Marmy says,' she wrote, 'that it must have been a presentiment which made you all take such a fancy to that quaint old house, even though you only saw it from the outside.'

All this Frances read again boldly to her sister. Jacinth did not interrupt her, but listened in silence.

'Well,' she said, when Frances stopped, 'I told you I had read all mamma said.'

'Then why are you so angry with me?' demanded Frances bluntly. 'If I am a sort of an idiot, mamma is too.'

Jacinth did not reply.

'Mamma says you are not to attempt to interfere,' she said at last.

'I am not going to. I wouldn't do so for the Harpers' sake, much more than for Lady Myrtle's. The Harpers have trusted me, and I won't do anything they wouldn't like.'

'Well,' said Jacinth bitterly, 'you'd better write it all to mamma—all the horrid, calculating, selfish things I've said. You've got quite separated from me now, so that it really doesn't matter what you say of me.' [Pg 147]

This was too much. Frances at last dissolved into tears and flung herself upon her sister, entreating her 'not to say such things,' to believe that nobody in the world—not Bessie or Margaret or *anybody*—could ever make up to her for her own dear Jass.

'You're not selfish,' she said. 'You're far more unselfish, really, than I am. For I never think of things. I see I've never thought enough of poor papa and mamma, and how hard it's been for them in many ways, though I did say to Bessie the other day that, whatever troubles they'd had, they'd not been parted from each other the way we've been.'

'I'm glad you said that,' Jacinth condescended to say, 'just to let them see that they're not the only people in the world who have to bear things.'

'Oh, they *don't* think that,' said Frances. 'And Jass,' she went on, encouraged by her sister's softer tone, and encircling her neck fondly with her two arms as she sat, half on Jacinth's knee, half on the edge of her chair, 'I don't quite see why being sorry for the poor Harpers, and—and—wishing we could make Lady Myrtle feel so too, need make her leave off being kind to us too. That's how

mamma sees it. I am not only thinking of the Harpers, Jass; indeed, I'm not. I'm looking forward more than I can tell you to what you said—that when papa and mamma come home, Lady Myrtle is going to invite us all to stay with her. Oh, it would be lovely!' and the little girl clasped her hands together. 'All the same,' she went on, 'I don't think I want ever to go to Robin Redbreast till that time comes. I can't feel natural there, and I'm afraid of vexing you or doing harm somehow.'

'It is not in our hands—not in mine, any way,' said Jacinth quietly. 'All you have told me makes no difference to me. I am not going to meddle, and I shall not mention the Harpers at all, if I can help it.' [Pg 148]

'Not even in the way mamma says we might?' said Frances.

'No—not at all, if I can help it. I do not want to spoil the happiness of being with Lady Myrtle by bringing up disagreeable subjects. I shall tell mamma so when I write.'

Frances was silent. After all, she reflected, perhaps it did not much matter. Jacinth did not know Bessie and Margaret as *she* did, and now that her sister understood the whole—the near relationship and the whole story, perhaps it *would* be very difficult for her to come upon the subject naturally.

'Honor Falmouth says,' remarked Jacinth in a moment or two, 'that she has heard that perhaps the girls are not coming back to school after the Christmas holidays.'

'Oh,' exclaimed Frances, looking greatly troubled, 'oh, Jass, I do hope it's not true.'

'I should not be very sorry,' said Jacinth, 'except,' she added with some effort, 'except for your sake. And of course I have never said that they were not very nice girls. I know they are, only—it has been so tiresome and unlucky. I just wish we had never known them.'

'I wish sometimes we had never known Lady Myrtle,' said Frances. 'You and I have *never* been—like this—with each other before, Jass.'

'Well, we needn't quarrel about it,' said her sister. 'Let's try to keep off the subject of the Harper family. For *I* can do them no good.'

'Very well,' said Frances, though rather sadly. 'I wonder,' she went on thinking to herself—'I wonder why Bessie and Margaret are perhaps to leave school; they are getting on so well.' [Pg 149]

She was too unpractical to guess at the truth—which Jacinth had thought it useless to mention as a part of Miss Falmouth's information—that their parents could no longer afford to pay for them.

'For to be gentlepeople, as they undoubtedly are in every sense of the word,' the girl had said, 'they are really *awfully* poor. I have heard so from some people who know them at that place where they live. It is quite a little seaside place, where people who want to be quiet go for bathing in the summer. But the Harpers live there all the year round. It must be fearfully dull.'

'Yes,' Jacinth agreed, 'it can't be lively. Still, being poor isn't the only trouble in the world.'

'No,' Miss Falmouth replied, 'but I fear they have others too. Captain Harper is so delicate.'

Jacinth said no more. Honor Falmouth was a kind-hearted but not particularly thoughtful girl, and she forgot all about the Harpers in five minutes. Her visit to Robin Redbreast had never come to pass, and Jacinth did not very specially regret it. She liked best to be alone with Lady Myrtle. So the relationship of the young Harpers to the old lady had never come to Honor's knowledge, as it might perhaps have done if her attention had been drawn to Lady Myrtle by visiting at her house. And at Christmas Honor was leaving school.

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CHAPTER X.

THE HARPERS' HOME.

Southcliff was a very dull little place, especially so in winter, of course. In fine weather there is always a charm about the seaside, even on the barest and least picturesque coast. There are the endless varieties of sky panorama—the wonderful sunsets, if you are lucky enough to face seawards to the west; the constantly changing effects of light and colour reflected in the water itself. And on a wild or rugged coast, winter and stormy weather bring of course their own grand though terrible displays.

But Southcliff, despite its promising name, was tame in the extreme. The 'cliff' was so meagre

and unimposing as to suggest the suspicion of being only an artificial or semi-artificial erection; the shore had no excitement about it, not even that of quicksands. It was the 'safest' spot all along the coast; even the most suicidally disposed of small boys could *scarcely* come to mischief there. The tides went out and came in with an almost bourgeois regularity and respectability; there was no possibility of being 'surprised' by the waves; no lifeboat, because within the memory of man no vessel of any description whatever had been wrecked there; no lighthouse, no smugglers' caves of ancient fame, no possibility of adventure of any kind—'no nothing,' Bessie Harper was once heard to say, when she was very little, ''cept the sea and the sky.' [Pg 151]

A grand exception those, however, as we have said. And dull though it was, there were some people who loved the little place as their home, and were most ready to be happy in it.

It had some few distinct advantages. It was *very* healthy, and for these days very cheap. There was a good church, venerable and well cared for; the few, very few residents were all estimable and some interesting. Such as it was, take it all in all, it had seemed a very haven of refuge to Captain Harper and his wife when, some eight or ten years ago, they had pitched their tent there, after the last hopes of recovering any of Mrs Harper's lost money—hopes which for long had every now and then buoyed them up only to prove again delusive—had finally deserted them.

'At anyrate,' the wife, with her irrepressibly sanguine nature, had said, 'we have the comfort of now knowing the worst. And Colin and Bertram are started. *What* a good thing the boys were the eldest! There is only Fitz to think about, and we'll manage him somehow. For *of course* the three girls will turn out well. Look at Camilla already.'

Fitz was then about five—the youngest son, the youngest of the family excepting delicate little Margaret. He *was* 'managed,' and not badly, though a public school was an impossibility; his destination proved to be the navy, and thither at the proper age he made his way in orthodox fashion. The girls, helped by their mother, and by their father too, did their best, and it was far from a bad best. They were naturally intelligent; intensely anxious to seize all opportunities of learning, so that a stray chance of half a dozen lessons in music or French did more for them than as many years will do for most ordinary girls; they were, the two elder ones at least, wonderfully healthy in mind and body, bright-tempered, faithful, unselfish, inheriting from their father the [Pg 152] noble characteristics which in some mysterious way had in him so flourished as to oust all the reckless and contemptible qualities of the Bernard Harper who had half-broken his sister's heart, and brought down in sorrow to the grave his gray-haired father.

But alas! they had *not* known the worst, as the loving, brave-spirited wife and mother had believed. In some sense, it is true, they had not known the *best*, for the years had brought many satisfactions, many unlooked-for, though unimportant, mitigations of the poverty so hard to bear cheerfully—people had been 'very kind.' But the poverty itself had increased. There were literally unavoidable expenses for 'the boys,' if they were not to be stranded in their careers; there was an unexpected rising of the rent owing to their good landlord's sudden death by accident; there was, worst of all, the terrible strain of Captain Harper's ill-health. In itself this was sad enough for the wife and daughters who adored him: it became almost an agony when, joined to the knowledge that more money, and not so very much more, might both relieve his suffering and hold out a reasonable prospect of comparative restoration.

One operation—now some years ago—had succeeded for the time; but not being followed by the treatment at home and residence abroad prescribed, the improvement had not been lasting. Then it was that Mrs Lyle had written to her aunt, with the result that we know. Her letter was returned unopened.

Then there came a period of comparative comfort, and for two or three years the family at Hedge End (such was the not very euphonious name of the Harpers' house) took heart again, and began to be sure 'father was going to get well all of himself, after all.' And during this time some other [Pg 153] cheering things came to pass. An old acquaintance of long-ago days between Mrs Harper and the Misses Scarlett was renewed by the ladies of Ivy Lodge coming to Southcliff one Midsummer holiday-time for sea-air, and this resulted in their offering to take Camilla, then almost grown-up, and later her younger sisters, on exceptionally moderate terms. The news from and of the far-away 'boys' was regular and good. The parents began to breathe freely, and to dare to hope that they had passed the worst of their troubles.

But alas! it was only an interlude. Scarcely had Bessie and Margaret been settled at Ivy Lodge when there came anxiety about Colin—tidings of his prostration by a bad attack of fever; then, when he was able to write of his recovery, little Fitz broke his leg, and had to be brought home at the cost of much expense as well as distress to be nursed well again. And worst of all, through these many weeks a terrible suspicion was dawning on poor Captain Harper—a suspicion all too soon to be changed into a certainty—that he himself was falling back again, that the very symptoms he had been warned of were reappearing, and that unless something were done he might find himself a hopeless and complete cripple.

He kept it to himself till Fitz was all right again; then it had to be told. And the painful journey to London, which Frances heard of at school, followed, with the great doctor's terribly perplexing verdict.

What was to be done? Every conceivable suggestion was made and discussed, but so far no definite scheme had been hit upon.

It was at this juncture that the mail which brought the letter from her mother so anxiously looked [Pg 154]

for by Frances Mildmay, brought also tidings from Mrs Lyle to her relations at Southcliff.

This letter came at breakfast-time; there was no mid-day post at the little bathing-place, but it was nearer London than Thetford.

'From Aunt Flora, mother,' said Camilla, the only one besides her young brother now at home. 'I do hope it is cheerful, otherwise——No, I suppose it would not do for you to read it first before giving it to father?'

Mrs Harper shook her head. She was a slight dark-haired woman, at first sight more like her youngest daughter than the others, but with a much more hopeful expression in her eyes, and far greater firmness and determination in all the lines of her face, so that, in spite of superficial dissimilarity, Bessie Harper really resembled her mother more nearly than either Camilla, calm, gentle, by nature possibly, a little indolent, or the nervous, anxious-minded Margaret.

'No,' she replied, 'it is no use keeping anything from your father. He has got an almost magic power of finding out things. Besides, your Aunt Flora always tries to cheer him if she can. Put the letter on the tray beside his breakfast, Camilla. I will take it up myself.'

Camilla and Fitz had almost finished their meal before Mrs Harper returned.

'I do hope there's nothing wrong,' said Camilla, with the apprehensiveness which reiterated experience of ill-tidings begets in even the calmest nature.

'It can't be my having broken my leg again,' said her brother, with a not very successful attempt at a joke; 'it was horrid, but I wouldn't mind breaking the other any day if it would save father's getting worse.' [Pg 155]

But at that moment their mother came in. Her face was decidedly brighter than when she had left the room.

'Mother dear, do eat some breakfast. You'll be quite faint,' said Camilla, tenderly; 'I was nearly going after you to see if anything were the matter.'

'No dear, thank you,' replied her mother. 'Your aunt's letter is unusually interesting. Fancy! is it not a curious coincidence?—rather a pleasant one, indeed—the Lyles have just made acquaintance at this new place with Colonel and Mrs Mildmay, the parents of the two girls at Miss Scarlett's.'

Camilla looked up with a little misgiving.

'Aunt Flora is not very discreet always, mother,' she said; 'I hope she won't have confided too much to Mrs Mildmay. It might come round in some disagreeable way to—Robin Redbreast.'

'I think Mrs Mildmay must be particularly nice and sensible,' Mrs Harper replied. 'Of course your aunt has talked to her about Lady Myrtle and all the old story; it would scarcely have been in human nature, certainly not in Flora's nature, not to do so, when she found that her new friend was the daughter of Lady Jacinth Denison; but I don't see that it can do any harm. Mrs Mildmay has seen nothing of Lady Myrtle since she was a little child; it is only quite lately, as we know, that your great-aunt has come across the Mildmay girls, really by accident. Mrs Mildmay is pleased at it, for her mother's sake, but I am sure she is not a person to make any mischief. Indeed,' she added with some hesitation, 'it is just possible that indirectly it may do good. Not that your aunt suggests anything of the kind.'

Camilla's face flushed. [Pg 156]

'I should hope not, indeed,' she said indignantly; 'when you think of the insult she exposed herself and us to, that time, mother, it would be *impossible* ever to accept any help from Lady Myrtle.'

But Mrs Harper did not at once reply. Her face had grown very grave, and her eyes seemed to be looking far into things.

'I cannot quite say that,' she answered at last. 'There are times when I am afraid to say what I would not accept, for your father's sake. I feel as if I would consent to anything not wrong or sinful that could save him. And remember, we must be just. As things are, Lady Myrtle knows nothing of us except that we are poor. And there is every excuse for her deep-seated prepossessions against her brother Bernard's family. Pride must not blind our fair judgment, Camilla.'

The girl did not reply. She felt the reasonableness of her mother's argument.

'But oh,' she thought to herself, 'I should *hate* to be indebted to Lady Myrtle for any help. What would I not do—what would we all not do, rather than that!'

Her feelings might almost have been written on her face, for Fitz, who had been listening silently, though intently, to the conversation, here made a remark which might have been a remonstrance with her unspoken protest.

'There's one thing to be said,' began the boy. 'Even though it's all Lady Myrtle's by *law*, it came to her from father's own grandfather. If our grandfather had been good, his share would have been his and then father's and then ours. There's a sort of right about it. It isn't as if it was all Lady Myrtle's own in any other way—through her husband, for instance—and that she did anything for [Pg 157]

us just out of pity, because we were relations. That *would* be horrid.'

Fitz was only fifteen, but he and Margaret seemed older than their years, as is not unusual with the youngest members of a large family. Besides, all the Harpers had grown up in full knowledge of and sympathy with their parents' anxieties. Living as they did, in closest family union, it would have been all but impossible to prevent its being so, save by some forced and unnatural reticence, the evil of which would have been greater than the risk of saddening the children by premature cares.

So neither Mrs Harper nor her daughter felt the least inclined to 'snub' the boy for his observation, which contained a strong element of common-sense.

'Lady Myrtle's wealth comes *in part* from her husband,' said Mrs Harper. 'That makes one feel the more strongly that the Harper portion should to some extent return to where it is so needed. But your father has told me that the Elvedons are sure to inherit some of it, and that is quite right.'

'And,' said Camilla, with a little effort, anxious to show her mother that she did wish to be quite 'fair-judging,' 'you know, Fitz, as we have often said, if our grandfather, being what he was, had got his share, it is most improbable that any of it would have come to father. After all,' she added with an honest smile that lighted up her quiet face and made it almost as bright as Bessie's —'after all, it was better for the money to be kept together by Lady Myrtle, than for it to be thrown away and *nobody* to have any good of it. She is a generous old woman, too, in outside ways. I see her name in connection with several philanthropic institutions.' [Pg 158]

'And really good and well-managed things, your father says. She must be a wise and considerate woman,' said Mrs Harper.

'All the more pity, then, that she and father have never come together,' said Camilla with a sigh. 'She would be able to appreciate him. I never could imagine any one wiser and juster than father —though you come pretty near him sometimes, I must say, mother;' and she smiled again. 'Neither of you is ever the least bit unfair to any one, and it does take such a lot of self-control and—and—a wonderfully well-balanced mind, I suppose, to be like that.'

'I have only learned it—if I have learned it—from your father,' replied Mrs Harper. 'At your age I was dreadfully impetuous and hasty. I often wonder, dear child, how you can be so thoughtful and helpful as you are.'

Camilla's eyes sparkled with pleasure.

'Mother,' she said, 'we mustn't degenerate into a mutual admiration society. I shall tell father how we've been buttering each other up all breakfast-time. It will amuse him. I'm going to see if he will have some more tea.'

And she ran off.

By mid-day Captain Harper was established on his sofa in the little drawing-room, which his wife and daughters still strove so *very* hard to keep fresh and pretty. From this sofa, alas! especially now that winter was in the ascendant even at sheltered Southcliff, the invalid was but seldom able to move. For walking had become exceedingly painful and difficult, and so slow that even a little fresh air at the best part of the day could only be procured at the risk of chill and cold—a risk great and dangerous. And barely six months ago the tap of his crutch had been one of the [Pg 159] most familiar sounds in the little town; he had been able to walk two or three miles with perfect ease and the hearty enjoyment which his happy nature seemed to find under all circumstances. It had not proved untrue to itself even now. There was a smile on his somewhat worn face—a smile that was seen in the eyes too, as real smiles should always be—as his daughter came into the room to see that he had everything he wanted about him.

'It is really getting colder at last, father,' she said. 'At Thetford, Bessie writes, they have had some snow. And Margaret was delighted because it made her think of Christmas, and Christmas means coming home.'

'Poor old Mag!' said Captain Harper. 'Mag' was his own special name for his youngest daughter; and no one else was allowed to use it. 'Poor old Mag! I really think she's very happy at school, though—don't you, Camilla? Bessie, I knew, would be all right, but I had my misgivings about Mag. And it is in every way such a splendid chance for them. It would be'——And he hesitated.

'What, father?'

'Such a pity to break it up,' he said, 'as—we have almost come to think must be done.'

'They would be perfectly miserable to stay there, if they understood—as indeed they do now,' Camilla replied, 'that it would be only at the cost of what you *must* have, father dear.'

Her voice, though low, was very resolute. Captain Harper glanced at her half-wistfully.

'I wish you didn't all see things that way,' he said. 'You see it's this, Camilla. If I go up to London to be under Maclean for three months, it *may* set me up again to a certain point, but unless it be followed by the "kur" at the baths, and then by that other "massage" business within a year or so, [Pg 160] it would be just the old story, just what it was before, only that I am three or four years older than I was, and—certainly not stronger. So this is the question—is it *worth while*? It will be at

such a cost—stopping Bessie and Mag's schooling, wearing out your mother and you—for what will be more trying than letting this house for the spring, as must be done, and moving you girls into poky lodgings. That, at least, we have hitherto managed not to do. And then the strain on your poor mother being up alone with me in London—so dreary for her too. And at best to think that a partial, temporary cure is all we can hope for. No, my child, I cannot see that it is worth it. I am happy at home, and more than content to bear what must be, after all not so very bad. And I *may* not get worse. Do, darling, try to make your mother see it my way.'

It was not often—very, very seldom indeed—that Captain Harper talked so much or so long of himself. Now he lay back half-exhausted, his face, which had been somewhat flushed, growing paler than before.

Camilla wound her arms round him and hid her face on his shoulder.

'Father dearest,' she whispered, doing her best to hide any sign of tears in her voice, 'don't be vexed or disappointed, but I *can't* see it that way. It seems presumptuous for me to argue with you, but don't you see?—the first duty seems so clear, to do what we *can*. Surely there can be no doubt at all about that? And who knows—*something* may happen to make the rest of what is prescribed for you possible. And even if not, and if the three months in London only do a little good, at least we should all feel we had tried everything. Father dearest, if we *didn't* do it, do you [Pg 161] think mother and Bessie and I—and the boys when they hear of it, and even the two little ones—do you think we should ever again feel one moment's peace of mind? Every time you looked paler or feebler, every time we saw you give the least little wince of pain—why, I think we should go out of our minds. It would be unendurable.'

Captain Harper stroked her fair soft hair fondly.

'But, dear, suppose it doesn't do any good, or much? Suppose'—and his voice grew very low and tender—'suppose all this increased suffering and weakness is only the beginning of the end—and sometimes I cannot help thinking it would be best so—my darling, it would *have* to be endured.'

Camilla raised her tear-stained face and looked at her father bravely.

'I know,' she said quietly. 'It may be. Mother and I don't deceive ourselves, though it is no use dwelling upon terrible possibilities. But even then, don't you see the difference? We should feel that we had done our best, and—and that more was not God's will.'

'Yes,' said her father, 'I see how you mean. I suppose I should feel the same if it were about your mother or one of you.'

'And father,' Camilla went on more cheerfully, 'don't worry about the girls leaving school; it won't do them lasting harm. They have got a good start, and they are still very young. Some time or other they may have another opportunity, as I had. And Margaret is such a delicate little creature. Father, I wouldn't have said it if they had been going to stay at Thetford, but I have had my misgivings about her being fit to be so far away. I fear she is very homesick sometimes.' [Pg 162]

'Do you really think so?' said Captain Harper with a start. 'Poor little soul! If I thought so—ah dear, my home was not much, but still while my mother lived it *was* home, and oh how I remember what I suffered when I left it! Who is it that speaks of "the fiend homesickness?" The mere dread of it would reconcile me to having them back again.'

'Then I am very thankful I told you,' said the girl. 'And father, is it not nice to know that in spite of everything we girls have *not* come off badly? Bessie and Margaret took good places at once, and I did too, you know. Indeed, Miss Scarlett said that if I had thought of being a governess, she would have been very glad to have me.'

'I know,' said her father. 'Well, there is no necessity for that as yet, except for governessing the younger ones as you used to do. And if things go better with me, even if I'm only not worse, when we come home again I can take you all three for Latin and German and mathematics.'

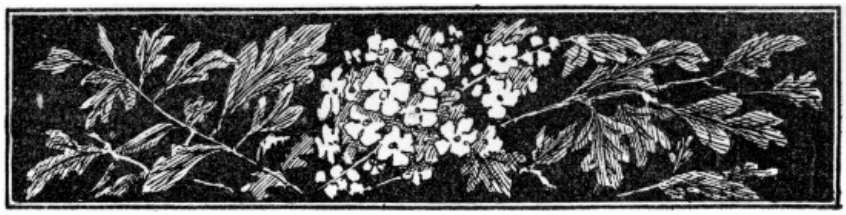
Camilla's eyes sparkled. She was so delighted to have talked him into acquiescence and hopefulness.

'We shall work so hard the three months we are by ourselves that you will be quite astonished,' she said. 'And old Mrs Newing will make us very comfortable; it's there we're to live, you know. It will really be great fun.'

So from this time the move to London was decided upon for Captain and Mrs Harper.

And when Bessie and Margaret bade their companions good-bye at the beginning of the Christmas holidays, they knew, though it had been thought best to say little about it, and the good Misses Scarlett refused to look upon it as anything but a temporary break, that it was good- [Pg 163] bye for much longer than was supposed—good-bye perhaps and not improbably for always, to Ivy Lodge and Thetford and all their friends.

Bessie felt it sorely. Little Margaret was all absorbed in the delight of going 'home' again. But both were at one in the real sorrow with which they parted from their companions, among whom no one had won a more lasting place in their affection than blunt, warm-hearted, honest Frances Mildmay.



[Pg 164]

CHAPTER XI.

GREAT NEWS.

The first Christmas at a strange place or in a new home is always full of mingled feelings. Even when the change has been a happy one, not brought about by sorrows of any kind, the old associations give a sort of melancholy to the thankfulness and joy we all wish to feel at this time. And for the young Mildmays it was more than natural that the sadness should predominate.

'Only a year ago *how* different it was!' sighed Frances, the first morning of the holidays, when there was no school to hurry off to—nothing particular to do or look forward to. 'I shall be very glad when it's time to begin lessons again.'

'I don't see why you should feel so particularly gloomy just now,' said Jacinth, not unkindly. 'Things might have been a good deal worse than they are.'

'People can always say that,' replied Frances. 'If you've got to have a leg cut off, you can say to yourself it might have been both legs. I daresay having Robin Redbreast to go to makes it much nicer for you; I suppose you'll go there a good deal during the holidays. But it doesn't make much difference to me. Lady Myrtle doesn't ask me often, and I don't want her to. I'm quite glad for you to go there, but it's not the same for me.'

And again she sighed. [Pg 165]

'What *would* make you happier, then?' asked Jacinth.

'Oh, I don't know. Nothing that could be, I suppose. Nothing will make very much difference till papa and mamma come home. There are one or two things that are making me particularly unhappy, besides the thinking it's Christmas and how changed everything is, but—I daresay it's no good speaking of them.'

'I know what one of them is,' said Jacinth. 'I can guess it: shall I tell you what it is?'

'If you like,' Frances replied.

'It's about the Harpers—Bessie and Margaret—not coming back again to school,' said her sister.

'How did you know about it?' inquired Frances. 'They didn't tell even me—not really. But I know they were very sad about their father being so much worse, and once, a few days ago, Bessie said it was almost settled they were going to let their house at that place where they live, and that their father and mother were going to be a long time in London, and of course that will cost a lot of money—the going to London, I mean. And—I could tell,' and Frances's voice sounded rather suspicious—'I could tell—by the way, they kissed me—when—when they said good-bye—I could *tell* they weren't coming back,' and here the choking down of a sob was very audible.

For a wonder Jacinth did not seem at all irritated. Truth to tell, she, too, had felt very sorry for the Harper girls—Bessie especially—and as we know, though she did not allow it to herself, her conscience was not entirely at ease about them. Something had touched her, too, in Bessie's manner when they bade each other good-bye.

'Will you kiss me, Jacinth?' Bessie had said. 'I have been so glad to know you.' [Pg 166]

'I have not felt sorry enough for them perhaps,' Jacinth had allowed to herself. 'But really, there are so many sad things in the world, one would wear one's self out with being sorry for everybody.'

'How did you know about it?' Frances repeated.

'I heard something a good while ago from Honor Falmouth; don't you remember?' said Jacinth. 'And last week she told me more, only she said they didn't want any fuss made about it. She heard it from friends. But Frances, do try and cheer up. You've been as kind—at least as

affectionate—as you could be to the Harpers. We hadn't it in our power to ask them here or anything like that. I'm sure you tried to get Aunt Alison to ask them, over and over again. And you won't do them any good by crying about their troubles, you know, dear. Perhaps they may come back to school some time or other, even if they're away next term.'

'Thank you, dear Jass,' said Frances, wiping her eyes. 'You're very kind. I'll try and not be dull.'

She would perhaps have been less grateful for Jacinth's sympathy had she understood the relief it was to her sister, notwithstanding her genuine pity for them, to know that the Harpers were not likely to be associated with them any more. Their presence at Ivy Lodge, ever since the acquaintance with Lady Myrtle—more especially since Jacinth herself had become fully informed as to the whole history—had been a perpetual irritation and almost a reproach to her. And the pertinacity with which she repeated to herself that it was not her business to take up the cudgels in the Harpers' behalf, of itself suggested a weak point somewhere—a touch of the self-excusing which tries to whiten over the unacknowledged self-blame. [Pg 167]

Now, Jacinth could afford to let herself feel sorry for Bessie and Margaret and their family—could even picture to herself ways in which some day, in some vague future, she and Frances might show kindness to their former school-fellows.

'If I were rich,' thought Jacinth, 'they're just the sort of people I'd love to be good to; of course one would have to do it very carefully, so as not to offend them.'

Frances was still looking somewhat lugubrious when the door opened and Miss Mildmay senior came in. It was not very often that their aunt paid the girls a visit in their own little sitting-room, and they both looked up with some curiosity.

'I had a letter from Lady Myrtle this morning,' she said. 'I did not want to speak about it before Eugene'—for Eugene had lately been promoted to breakfast down-stairs—'as I was not sure what you and Frances would wish about it. It is an invitation for you all—Eugene too—to spend Christmas at Robin Redbreast. Christmas *time*, I should say. Lady Myrtle invites you all three for a week, and Jacinth for a fortnight. What do you say?'

Frances said nothing, but Jacinth looked up quickly.

'I think it would be unnatural for us all to go away from you for Christmas, Aunt Alison,' she said.

Miss Mildmay smiled.

'A lonely Christmas would be nothing new to me, my dear child,' she said; but she spoke without any bitterness.

'*I'll* stay with you, Aunt Alison,' said Frances, eagerly. 'I really don't care about going to Robin Redbreast, and it's Jacinth Lady Myrtle wants. Do let me and Eugene stay here; Eugene needn't be told about it at all.'

'Thank you, my dear,' said their aunt. 'Thank you both. But—do not think me ungracious—when I [Pg 168] spoke of a lonely Christmas, I only meant that I have not been used to a family party. I am always very happy and very busy on Christmas—and I think I should be missed if I were not here. I should have told you that Lady Myrtle very kindly invites me too—for Christmas Day—but that would not suit me at all. I *must* be here in the evening, and indeed I am wanted all day; but I was trying to arrange to do less, so as to be with you three in the afternoon at least.'

'Then—to put it plainly—it would be rather a relief to you for us all to be away?' asked Jacinth.

'Well, yes—in a sense it would. That is to say, if I knew you were happy and well looked after,' said Miss Mildmay, smiling again.

'There, Francie,' said Jacinth, 'you see it is much the best thing that could have happened. And of course you and Eugene must come. I suppose we shall take Phebe, Aunt Alison?'

'Certainly, my dear.'

The mention of Phebe seemed to cheer Frances. 'I shouldn't mind so much, if Eugene and I could go walks,' she said. 'But you know, Aunt Alison, Jass *must* be a great deal with Lady Myrtle, and I shouldn't know what to do all day, and Eugene wouldn't either.'

'It'll be all right, you'll see,' said Jacinth, who, now that she was satisfied as to her aunt, felt in high spirits. 'You can go about just as you like with Phebe, and it's only for a week. I don't think I should stay more than a week, Aunt Alison?'

'I cannot say,' her aunt replied. 'I almost think you should, if Lady Myrtle wishes it. That week—the week after Christmas week—I think I could help to amuse Frances and Eugene. We shall be [Pg 169] having our children's feasts, and they could be very useful.'

'I *should* like that!' said Frances eagerly.

So all seemed satisfactory, and Miss Mildmay left them, to write her answer to Lady Myrtle. Human nature is very inconsistent. The maiden lady of a certain age could not repress a sigh as she sat down at her desk: she had not realised till now that all was changed; how she had been looking forward to something like an orthodox Christmas for once, in her prim old house—how she had been planning about the plum-puddings and cakes, even while groaning a little over the

reversal of her usual habits!

'But it is much better as it is,' she decided. 'They will be quite happy, and poor old Lady Myrtle will be less lonely than for many years. She may be a good friend to Eugenia and the children in the future. And as for me, I don't know how they would have managed without me at St Blaise's, after all.'

And the young Mildmays—Frances included—*were* very happy at Robin Redbreast.

Things settled themselves very much as Jacinth had foreseen. Under Phebe's care the two younger ones were left free to run about as they chose during such parts of the day as Jacinth found that their hostess liked to have her with herself. And the children were much more accustomed to this sort of life than if they had ever known thorough home care. For even at Stannesley Mrs Denison's age and fragile health had often made it impossible for them to be with her as much as she would have liked: they had early learned to be 'very good at amusing themselves.' [Pg 170]

On Christmas Day the large landau, quite roomy enough for half a dozen instead of four, took them all to Elvedon church, where they sat with Lady Myrtle in the square, be-curtained pew—one of those appropriated to the Court, which was kept for the lady from Robin Redbreast.

'It felt very like Stannesley,' was the verdict of the two younger ones, who had not been at Elvedon before, which seemed to please Lady Myrtle.

'Yes,' she said. 'I think you will feel more at home than if you spent the day at Thetford.'

And the prettily decorated rooms, and the old folk who came in for dinner in the servants' hall, and the roast turkey and flaming plum-pudding and snapdragon afterwards—yes, though they were only such a very small party, just they three and the old lady instead of their own granny, and no Uncle Marmy to make his jokes—still it *was* much more homelike than No. 9 Market Square Place could possibly have been. And when Frances went to bed that night, glancing with pleasure at the pretty presents so thoughtfully provided for her—a dear little gold pencil-case in a bracelet from Lady Myrtle, a pair of gloves from Aunt Alison, and a handkerchief with a red embroidered border from Jacinth and Eugene—the child felt that she had indeed a great many 'good things' to be thankful for.

'If only'——she thought. 'Oh, how I would like to think that Bessie and Margaret are happy too! I am so afraid that they are very, very sad about their father.'

Christmas Day was a Thursday. It was always considered a lucky coincidence by the young Mildmays when letters from their far-off parents reached them on the very day of any anniversary. But this year the Christmas budget only arrived the morning before Frances and Eugene were returning to Thetford. Miss Mildmay sent it on by a special messenger, knowing [Pg 171] how anxious her nieces would be to get their letters. And a mysterious allusion in the little note from her which accompanied them made Jacinth start and call out to Frances.

'Look at what Aunt Alison says, before you read your letter, Francie. What can she mean?'

This was what Jacinth pointed to: 'I have heard from your father and mother also,' wrote Miss Mildmay. 'The great piece of news will surprise you as much as it has surprised me. I shall be glad to have you back again to talk it all over.' The sisters stared at each other, their lips parted and their breath coming quickly.

Then said Jacinth at last: 'It can't be anything *wrong*, Francie. Aunt Alison never would have written of it like that, if it had been.'

'No,' said Frances, though her voice was rather tremulous; 'of course it can't be.'

'And,' continued Jacinth, 'how silly we are to sit here wondering about it, when we've only to look at our letters to know! Here goes, Francie!' and she tore open her own envelope; 'let's see which of us will get at it first.'

Frances unfastened her letter more deliberately. It was a much shorter one than Jacinth's, and she had scarcely glanced at the first few lines when she sprang from her seat with a sort of shriek.

'They're coming home, Jass! that's the secret. Oh Jass, Jass, listen: "As I may hope to see you before long, my darling, I won't attempt to write very much." That's it. Oh Jassie, sweet, they're coming home!'

Jacinth's face had grown pink, then white again, whiter than usual, as she rapidly ran through her own letter. [Pg 172]

'Yes,' she said at last, 'it's—no, it's not *quite* so good as that. Mamma's coming first: she'll be here in the spring; but papa's not coming for some months later. He's got to go somewhere for some kind of inspection, where mamma couldn't go with him, and after that, he's got six months' leave, which may or may not—I don't quite understand. Listen, Francie: "During this leave your father will have time to decide as to the future. It is possible he may have the offer of an appointment in England, which would obviate the necessity of our returning to India. But even if he has this chance, there are fors and againsts to consider: the appointment is not in some ways a very desirable one; it would oblige us to live for some, perhaps for several years in a large

manufacturing town in the north of England, and it would be very hard work for your father. Still, we might—we *should* be all together."'

Frances heaved a deep sigh of intense longing.

'Oh yes,' she said, 'that would be *everything*.'

'No, I don't see that it would be,' said Jacinth. 'I should *hate* living in a place like that; and then think of the hard work for papa. When he does come home I want him to be quite his own master, and, and—to be rather grand, you know. I should not mind his having an appointment in London, or some county thing that wouldn't give him much to do, about here perhaps. But to go and slave in some horrid dirty place where there would be no one we could speak to; that would be a come-down after the position he has had in India.'

'Oh Jass,' said Frances, 'don't let us spoil this beautiful news by thinking of anything disagreeable. Papa must know best, far better than we can. Do go on reading the letter. Mamma says I'm to ask you everything.' [Pg 173]

Jacinth's eyes returned to the sheets in her hand. Her face cleared a little.

'There's something else,' she said. 'Oh, I should like that *far* better. Listen, Frances: "Your father has also the certainty of a good—as to position and agreeableness—appointment in London; but the pay would be much, much less, so he is not taking this into consideration. So the chances are that we may have to return to India after his leave is over, and be joined by you, dear Jass, a year later; though at worst I hope we shall be settled in England before my little Francie would be ready to come out. But I don't mean to think of anything at present but the unexpected joy of seeing you all three again so soon. I am writing to your aunt, to know if she can find a little house at Thetford where we can be together. You will just have been one year with her, and I do thank her for her care of you. It all seems to have fitted in so well. When you see Lady Myrtle Goodacre, thank her again from me for her kindness to you, and tell her what a pleasure it has been to me to think of it. Tell her, too, how much I am looking forward to meeting again my mother's dearest friend."'

'You will tell Lady Myrtle at once,' said Frances.

'Yes, of course,' said Jacinth, but she spoke half absently. Her eyes were still fixed on her mother's letter.

'*I* don't see why he shouldn't even "take it into consideration,"' she repeated to herself. 'We can't be so desperately poor as all that. *I* shall take it into consideration, any way, my dear mother;' and she smiled a little. 'Yes, Frances,' she went on, looking up, and speaking more decidedly; 'of course I'll tell Lady Myrtle. I think I'll go and tell her now. I know she is alone in the boudoir. And, Francie, you may tell Eugene.' [Pg 174]

'May I?' exclaimed Frances, jumping up. 'Oh, thank you, Jass. I'm not sure,' she went on, 'I'm not sure that Eugene can feel quite so—so *wild* with happiness as I do. Oh Jass, it is almost too much. It takes my breath away.' She was running out of the room, when she looked back for a moment.

'Jass,' she began with a little hesitation, 'does mamma say anything more about Mrs Lyle, *their* aunt, you know? I wonder if she has seen her again?'

'She is sure to have seen her again. They are living close together,' said Jacinth. 'But she doesn't say anything about her in this letter. Why should she?' Jacinth's tone was growing a little acrid. 'May she not for once be taken up with our own affairs? what can be more important than all she has to tell us? I do wish, Frances, you wouldn't drag these Harpers into everything; it is really bad taste.'

Frances was not very clear as to what 'bad taste' meant, but she was very sorry to have vexed Jacinth.

'It was only,' she said, 'only that it seems as if all the happiness were coming to us, and all the troubles to them. And I was so glad mamma was sorry for them.'

'You speak as if they were our nearest relations,' said Jacinth, 'instead of being, as they are, actual strangers.'

But she was not sure if Frances heard her. She had already run off.

Jacinth followed her down-stairs more slowly. They had been sitting in the elder girl's bedroom, which, with its cheerful outlook and pleasant arrangements of writing-table and bookcases and sofa, and fire burning brightly, was rather a favourite resort of theirs in the morning, before Lady Myrtle was free from her various occupations. For she was a busy and methodical old lady. [Pg 175]

The staircase was one of the pretty features of Robin Redbreast: though a spiral one, the steps were pleasantly shallow, and every here and there it was lighted by quaintly shaped windows.

'How I love this house!' said Jacinth to herself, as she passed out round the gallery, already described, on into the conservatory, even at that mid-winter season a blaze of lovely brilliant colour. 'If—oh, if it were going to be our home some time or other, how beautiful it would be to look forward to! how delightful it would make mamma's coming back! I can't bear to think of papa's having that horrid appointment up in the north. I'd rather keep on as we are, and go out to India when I'm old enough.'

She had loitered a moment among the flowers; the door of Lady Myrtle's boudoir was slightly ajar; the old lady's ears were quick; she heard even the slight rustle of Jacinth's skirts, and called out to her.

'Is that you, dear Jacinth? Come in—I have finished my letters and accounts, and was just going to send for you.'

And as the girl hastened in, Lady Myrtle looked up with a bright smile of welcome. It was pleasant to be thus greeted: a change from Aunt Alison's calm unimpassioned placidity.

'Dear Lady Myrtle,' said Jacinth, 'I don't know how to tell you our news. We have got our Christmas letters from papa and mamma; Aunt Alison sent out a messenger on purpose with them. And Francie and I have just read them. And—what do you think?'

She sat down on a stool at Lady Myrtle's feet and looked up in her face. The old lady laid her hand fondly on the girl's soft hair. [Pg 176]

'Nothing wrong, dear; I can see by your face. What can it be? Not—it can't be that they are coming home?'

Jacinth's eyes sparkled.

'Yes, indeed,' she said; 'that's just what it is. At least it's not quite that they're coming home for good; I wish it were. But if you like, if it won't bother you, I'll read you mamma's letter.'

'Yes, do, dear,' said the old lady.

And Jacinth did so, congratulating herself on what had disappointed Frances, that there was no mention at all in this letter of the Harper family or Mrs Lyle.

Lady Myrtle listened with evidently extreme interest. When Jacinth had finished, there was a moment or two's silence. Then Lady Myrtle said quietly but decidedly: 'She must come straight here—your mother, I mean. I shall write to her myself. Don't you think that will be best? It will be the greatest satisfaction to me to see her—little Eugenia—how proud your dear grandmother was of her! A fair-haired, brown-eyed little creature. Not so like my Jacinth as you are, child. But that, one could not expect. It is not often that one sees such a likeness as yours to your grandmother. But I am so thankful to know I may hope to see your mother. Sometimes I have feared'——But here Lady Myrtle broke off without finishing her sentence. 'Jacinth, I want you to talk about it. What can I say to ensure her coming to me? I want to make her feel that it will be really like coming home?'

'Say *that* to her, dear Lady Myrtle,' Jacinth replied. 'Nothing could touch her more. And I am sure she will love to come here, at any rate for a while, at first. You see she speaks of living at Thetford till papa comes—of having a little house there and us with her. There would not be room in Aunt Alison's house, and besides, I think mamma would like to feel more independent with us three.' [Pg 177]

Jacinth sat down on a stool at Lady Myrtle's feet and looked up in her face.

'Of course. I would not at all advise her living in Market Square Place, even if there were room,' said Lady Myrtle. 'In a small house, and with your aunt being accustomed to be the authority—no, it would not do. But there would be no such difficulties here. Your mother must come to me first, and you three must be here, too, to meet her. And then, later on, if she thinks it better to take a little house—well, I shall not oppose her. I am not an unreasonable old woman, am I, my child?' [Pg 179]

'No, indeed,' said Jacinth warmly. 'And'—with a little smile—'I know mamma is very *sensible*. I can tell it by her letters, and even by what I remember of her. She is eager and hearty—sometimes Francie reminds me of her—but she is never fanciful or obstinate. It sounds impertinent of me talking like that of her, but I think you will understand. And I am sure you and mamma will suit each other.'

'I am sure we shall, dear, though, in a sense, *you* will always seem the *most* of your grandmother to me, Jacinth. You see my most vivid memory of her is about your age; it is really as if she had come back to me, sometimes.'

'I do so love you to say that,' said Jacinth.

'But I want to speak of all your mother writes,' the old lady went on. 'I—there can be no harm in my talking to you quite frankly, for I see your mother confides in you, and she is quite right to do so. Jacinth—I don't like the idea of that post, whatever it is, at Barmettle.'

Jacinth drew a deep breath of relief.

'Oh, I am so glad you think so,' she said. 'I scarcely liked to say it—it seems selfish—if it would save papa's going out again, and he has had so much of India; but it *would* be rather horrid, wouldn't it? And almost a come-down, it seems to me. The other appointment in London would be so much nicer, only living at all *nicely* in London is so dear, and the pay is smaller. Perhaps it will end after all in papa and mamma going back to India, and my joining them in two or three years.' [Pg 180]

Lady Myrtle put out her hand, and clasped Jacinth's firmly in hers.

'No, my child,' she said. 'That must not be. I think when one gets as old as I am, one may be a little selfish; that is to say, if one's selfishness does no one any harm. And your parents have had enough of India; there can be no necessity for their return there, nor for your joining them. No, I could not consent to lose you again—the one thing that has been sent to cheer me! Put all such possibilities out of your mind, my Jacinth. I will write to your mother.'

'And what shall I say to her?' asked Jacinth. 'About all you have said, I mean.'

'Refer her to me. But tell her how you are all—*we* are all—counting on her coming first to Robin Redbreast, and that then we shall be able to talk over everything. Tell her I cannot consent to giving you up; tell her, as I hope you can, that this place is beginning to feel like home to you.'

'You know I feel it so, dear Lady Myrtle,' said Jacinth simply. 'I think I have been happier here already than I have ever been anywhere else. And I am so glad this news has come while we were here. It makes it doubly delightful. And we shall remember that it came to us here—this Christmas week.'

[Pg 181]

CHAPTER XII.

'"CAMILLA" AND "MARGARET," YES.'

There was a great writing of letters during the next day or two at Robin Redbreast. And both Lady Myrtle and the children found it difficult to give their attention to anything but the absorbing subject of Mrs Mildmay's return.

And in response to a pressing invitation from the old lady, Miss Mildmay actually managed to spare or make time to come out to Robin Redbreast to 'spend the day'—that is to say, three or four hours of it, so that she and Lady Myrtle might have a talk about the plans under discussion.

The day chosen was the one in which Frances and Eugene were to return to Market Square Place. The big carriage was to take them and their aunt and Phebe home in the afternoon, leaving Jacinth for another week at Robin Redbreast.

Never had her nieces found Miss Mildmay so pleasant and almost genial. She was greatly delighted at the news of her sister-in-law's return—delighted and relieved. For it had begun to strike her rather uncomfortably that what she had undertaken was all but an impossibility. She was very conscientious, as I have said, and no self-deceiver. She saw that the girls, as they grew older, were becoming not less but more in need of sympathy and guidance in their out-of-school [Pg 182] life—sympathy and guidance which at best she felt very doubtful of being able to give them, *even* if she sacrificed all the other duties and occupations which had for so many years made her life, for their sakes. And the sacrifice would have been a very tremendous one.

The doubts and perplexities were increasing daily in her mind when there came this most welcome and little expected news, followed by the almost as welcome tidings of Lady Myrtle's eager offer of hospitality to the children's mother.

'It is very good, very, very kind and good of her,' said Miss Mildmay to herself. 'The children's making friends with her really seems to have brought good-luck. And she may be of lasting and substantial help to Frank and Eugenia. Not exactly because she is rich—Frank is far too proud to take anybody's money—but she may have interest that would be of use to him. And there would be nothing unnatural in her leaving something to Eugenia or to Jacinth. I don't suppose she means to leave everything to the Elvedons, for a good deal would have been her own share in any case, and a good deal her husband must have left her. By the bye, I have always forgotten to ask Miss Scarlett if the Harper girls she has, or had—some one said they had left—were any relation to the Elvedon family. Nice girls, evidently, but very badly off, I fancy.'

And then she forgot about the Harpers again.

But with her grateful feelings to Lady Myrtle, Miss Mildmay naturally felt that the least she could do was to clear a day for herself by working extra hard, so as to be able to spend part of it at Robin Redbreast, as the old lady much wished her to do. [Pg 183]

And she was in her happiest and most cheerful mood, and all would have gone just as Jacinth wished, but for one unfortunate allusion, which came in the first place, strange to say, from considerate, cautious Miss Alison Mildmay herself.

Lady Myrtle and her new guest had a long talk by themselves in the first place. Then Jacinth, anxiously waiting, heard the boudoir-bell ring, and a message was brought to herself asking her to join them.

'Come in, my dear child,' said her old friend; 'your aunt and I have been enjoying a good talk. It is so pleasant when such things end in people quite agreeing with each other, is it not?' she added, turning to Miss Mildmay with a smile.

Jacinth's anxious face cleared.

'Then you do think Lady Myrtle's plan best, Aunt Alison?' she said.

'I think it a delightful one, for all concerned,' said Miss Mildmay. 'I have been explaining to Lady Myrtle all my—my conflicting feelings. For much as I should like to have your mother with me, I know it would not be as comfortable as I should wish, nor should I be able to see very much of her, unless'——

'Forgive my interrupting you, my dear Miss Mildmay,' interposed Lady Myrtle; 'but I wish you would not worry yourself about all these questions, now that they are settled and done with. Eugenia shall come straight to Robin Redbreast for as long as I can get her to stay, and that will be as long as she wishes. The children, as well as Jacinth, *my* child'—and she glanced up affectionately at the young girl standing beside her—'shall be here to receive her, and you too, Miss Mildmay, if you will so far honour me. It will be about Easter probably; there are holidays [Pg 184] then, I believe, which will be all the better. And there need never be any difficulty about sending you all three to school and fetching you, even when it is not holiday time. Then if Eugenia prefers to take a little house temporarily at Thetford, I shall leave her free to do so, though I may have my private *hopes* on this matter.'

Lady Myrtle's eyes were quite sparkling, and there was a bright colour in her cheeks. It was very pleasant to see her so eager and happy. Jacinth, in spite of her aunt's repressing presence, could not help stooping down and gently kissing the soft old face.

'And to look further forward still,' Lady Myrtle continued, holding Jacinth's hand which she had possessed herself of, 'your aunt and I are of accord on another point, my child. Your father must not return to India; he has had enough of it. And your mother too.'

'Then you think he should accept'——began Jacinth.

'We will not go into particulars,' she replied, patting Jacinth's hand. 'To begin with, Colonel Mildmay has not consulted me. He must first get to know me. But—no, of course that dreadful Barmettle is out of the question. You might almost as well be all in India, as far as I am concerned, for all I should see of you. But all that is some way off still. The first thing to do is to get your mother's promise to come straight here.'

'I am sure she will,' said Jacinth. 'I don't feel any anxiety about that.'

'Nor do I,' said her aunt.

Just then the luncheon gong sounded, and they all went down-stairs in the best of spirits. In the dining-room they were joined by Frances and Eugene, who thanks to the genial influences of the morning's news, ran up to Miss Mildmay, and kissed her much more effusively than was usual with them. [Pg 185]

'How well you are both looking!' she said, and Lady Myrtle glanced round, pleased at the remark. 'I don't think his mother will recognise Eugene,' Miss Mildmay went on. 'Well, no, she could scarcely do that in any case. But I mean to say I think she will find it difficult to believe we are not cheating her altogether when she sees this great, strong, rosy fellow. He was such a poor little specimen!'

'He must have been brought home in time, however,' said Lady Myrtle. 'Ah, yes, our Indian possessions cost us dear in some ways. Though it is nothing to the old days; my people were soldiers for generations you know, so we had full experience of these difficulties. I and my brothers were born in India; my father was only captain in his regiment when he came into the Elvedon title and property unexpectedly. He would have lived to be very distinguished, I feel sure, if he had not left the army;' and she sighed a little.

'But you have distinguished relatives in the army still,' said Miss Mildmay. 'The Captain Harper who was wounded at——after his most gallant conduct. He is a relation, is he not? I heard about him from Miss Scarlett: you know his daughters were at Ivy Lodge, and'——

'Indeed!' said Lady Myrtle, and a very strange expression came into her voice—not annoyance, not even constraint—more like a sort of repressed anxiety and painful apprehensiveness. 'Indeed! No, I do not remember—what were you going to say?'

For Miss Mildmay had stopped abruptly. She was seated opposite Jacinth, and as she got to her last words, some consciousness made her glance across the table at her elder niece. In an instant she saw her mistake, and recalled her own vague warnings to the girls to avoid allusions to Lady Myrtle's family history. But she was far from cowardly, and essentially candid. And in her mind there had been no mingling of any selfish motive; nothing but the desire to prevent any possible annoyance to their kind old friend had prompted her few words of advice to the girls. And now the strange look—a look almost of restrained anger—on Jacinth's face positively startled her. [Pg 186]

'I may have been mistaken in my impression that the family in question was in any way related to you,' she said quietly. 'One should be more cautious in such matters.'

'Yes,' said Lady Myrtle, nervously, 'I think you must have been mistaken. I do not know anything of such people, and Harper is not a very uncommon name. By the way, that reminds me—was it you, my dear?' and she turned somewhat abruptly to Frances—'was it not you who once mentioned some school-fellows of the name, and afterwards something was said which removed the impression that they could possibly be Elvedon Harpers? I am confused about it.'

All this time Frances's eyes had been fixed on her plate; she had scarcely dared to breathe since her aunt's allusion. Now she looked up, bravely, though her cheeks were flaming and her heart beating as if to choke her. An inner voice seemed to tell her that the moment had come for *something* to be said—the something which even Camilla Harper in her letter had not debarred her from, which her own mother had hoped some opportunity might arise for. [Pg 187]

And in spite of Jacinth's stony face, and her aunt's evident wish to change the subject which she herself had brought on to the *tapis*, Frances spoke out.

'Yes, Lady Myrtle,' she said clearly. 'It was I that spoke about Bessie and Margaret Harper. They were at school with us then, and before that, their big sister Camilla was there. But they've left now, I'm afraid,' and her voice trembled a little. 'I think it's because their father's very ill, and it costs a lot, and they're not at all rich. They're the very nicest girls in the world; oh, they *are* so good and nice.—You said so too, Jacinth?'

Lady Myrtle's eyes turned to Jacinth.

'Yes,' the elder girl replied coldly; 'I believe they are very nice girls. But I did not know them nearly as well as you, Frances. I do not care for making friends as you do.'

'No,' said Frances, rather lamely. 'I know you don't; but still I'd like you to tell Lady Myrtle how nice they are.'

'Why should it interest Lady Myrtle to hear about your school-fellows, my dear?' said Miss Mildmay, surprised and a little annoyed by Frances's rather pertinacious manner. 'These girls are very nice, I have no doubt; indeed I recollect Miss Scarlett speaking very highly of them; but no one doubts it. I think all your school-fellows must be nice girls—not only the Harpers. And the name may be a mere coincidence. I have never heard certainly that they were of the Elvedon family.'

Lady Myrtle had not seemed to be attending to what Miss Mildmay said. She was speaking to herself.

'"Camilla,"' she murmured softly, '"Camilla" and "Margaret." Not "Bessie;" no I never heard of a Bessie, and "Margaret" is not uncommon. But "Camilla"—yes, I suppose it must be.' [Pg 188]

But just as she said this, Miss Mildmay's last words—the good lady had rather an emphatic way of speaking—rang out clearly: 'I have never heard certainly that they were of the Elvedon family.'

'That's just it,' said Frances, and by this time Lady Myrtle's attention was fully caught. 'Of course I don't mean to contradict you, Aunt Alison, but I *do* know they're the same family, and so they are relations of Lady Myrtle's. And it's not only that I like them. I'm so very sorry for them, so *very* sorry. They are all so good, and they have so very, very many troubles,' and here the irrepressible tears rose to poor Frances's eyes, and she turned her head away abruptly.

Lady Myrtle glanced at her and then at Jacinth. Jacinth's face was quiet and very grave.

'You are a very loyal friend, I see, Frances,' said the old lady; and rather to every one's surprise the words were accompanied by a little smile, and then she turned to Jacinth.

'I don't think you have ever named these—these Harpers—to me, have you, my dear?' she asked.

Jacinth looked up at once.

'No,' she said; 'I have not, and I have refrained from doing so on purpose. I—I did not think it concerned me, and you might not have liked it. I—I should be so sorry to vex you.'

The appeal in her eyes touched Lady Myrtle more than Frances's tears. And in what she said, so far as it went, Jacinth was sincere. She did shrink from any possible allusion that could annoy or upset her kind friend; and the selfish motives underlying the prejudice, almost amounting to [Pg 189] positive dislike, which she had allowed to take root in her feelings to the Harpers, she blinded herself to, or called by some other name.

Lady Myrtle was silent, but there was no resentment in her face. She only looked sad—very, very sad.

'You know these girls very much less well than Frances did,' said Miss Mildmay, whose sympathies were just now all with Jacinth. 'You see,' she went on, turning to her hostess, 'Frances has been in the habit of spending holiday afternoons at school—sometimes when you had kindly invited Jacinth here, on a Saturday, for instance.'

Lady Myrtle started a little. Her thoughts had been far away. She leaned forward and took hold of Jacinth's hand—Jacinth was sitting next to her, and the servants had left the room—and patted it affectionately.

'Of course. I know Jacinth is very, very thoughtful for me,' she said. 'And I see that you understand it, my dear Miss Mildmay. Not that I am vexed with little Frances. I like children to be children, and of all things I like a loyal friend.'

Then she at once and with evident intention, which the others were quick to read, changed the subject of conversation. On the whole, vexed though she was with Frances's persistence—'self-willed obstinacy' as she called it to herself—Jacinth felt that the dreaded crisis had passed off better than might have been expected, and in some things it was a relief. Things were on a clearer basis now.

'It was bound to come, I suppose,' she said to herself. 'Mamma seems almost as impulsive and quixotic as Frances—quite bewitched by these people. But at worst there's nothing more to tell [Pg 190] now, and Lady Myrtle appreciates my feelings if no one else does.'

Frances, on her side, though her heart was still beating tumultuously, felt glad that she had had the courage and opportunity to say what she had. But for her dread of a private reprimand from Jacinth afterwards, the little girl would on the whole have had a somewhat lightened heart about her friends. For, as she said to herself, 'Lady Myrtle had certainly not seemed angry.'

Strange to say, the anticipated reproof from Jacinth never came. It was true there was not much time for any private talk between the sisters, for Frances and Eugene went back to Market Square Place that same afternoon with their aunt. But even when, a week later, Jacinth herself rejoined them there a day or two before the reopening of Ivy Lodge school, there was no mention of the Harpers, and no allusion to what had passed at luncheon the day of Miss Mildmay's visit to Robin Redbreast.

'Can it be that Lady Myrtle is really going to be kind to them, and that she told Jacinth not to be vexed with me?' thought sanguine little Frances. She would have felt less hopeful had she known that not one word had passed between her sister and the old lady on the subject of her unknown relations. And Jacinth had simply made up her mind to think no more about them; her conscience now being, or so at least she told herself, completely at rest—the matter entirely out of her hands.

It was the easier to carry out this resolution that Bessie and Margaret's places were vacant, though no one seemed very clearly to understand why they had not returned, and the Misses Scarlett expressed the heartiest regret that they had not done so. Honor Falmouth too had left, but this had been known by anticipation to her companions for some time. And in the little world [Pg 191] of a school, as in the bigger world outside, it is not for long that the circles in the waters of daily life mark the spot of any disappearance; it has to be so, and does not necessarily imply either heartlessness or caprice. We are limited as to our powers in all directions—the more marvellous that somewhere, invisible, unsuspected, our innermost self lives on. And far down, below the surface restlessness and change, may we not hope that we shall find again the fibres of loving friendships and pure affections whose roots were deep and true, though at times it may seem that like other precious and beautiful things they were but as a dream?

Frances missed her friends sadly, the more so that not knowing their exact address, and half afraid also to do such a thing on her own responsibility, she could not write to them. But nothing depressed Frances now for very long or very deeply. She had found a panacea. All would be right soon, 'when mamma comes home.'

[Pg 192]

CHAPTER XIII.

MAMMA.

At Thetford the weeks till Easter—it came in the middle of April that year—passed quickly. It is true that every morning, when Frances scored out one of the long row of little lines she had made to represent the days till that of her mother's arrival, she could not repress a sigh at the number yet remaining. But still the time, even for her, passed quickly. For she was busy—working more steadily at her lessons than ever before, in the hope of having satisfactory progress to show—and full of the happiest anticipations. Morning and night the faithful, simple-hearted girl added to her other petitions the special one that things might be so over-ruled as to prevent the necessity of further separation.

'It can't be wrong to ask it,' she said to herself, 'for God made fathers and mothers and children to be together. It's something wrong somewhere when they can't be. And I've got a feeling that it *is* going to be like that for us now. I don't care a bit where we live—that place in the north or anywhere—if only we're with them.'

Jacinth, too, on the whole was happy in her own way. Personally, perhaps, she longed less for her mother's presence and sympathy than Frances did, for she was by nature more self-sufficing. And when one scarcely knows till one is fifteen or sixteen what it is to have a mother and a real home [Pg 193] of one's own, small wonder if the inestimable blessings of such possessions are barely realised. Then, too, Jacinth's frequent visits to Lady Myrtle, and the old lady's ever-increasing affection for and interest in her had almost filled up the voids the girl had at first felt bitterly enough in her new life. She would in many ways have been quite content for things to go on as they were for a year or two. And if she built castles in the air, it must be allowed that Lady Myrtle was to a great extent responsible for their construction.

'I can scarcely fancy feeling as if mamma were more of a mother to me than you seem now,' she said one day to her old friend.

'Nay,' Lady Myrtle replied, 'I must represent a grandmother. You really do not know what a mother feels like, dear child.'

'Well,' Jacinth went on, 'perhaps that's it. But somehow I think mamma will seem more a sort of elder sister to me. And I hope she will take it that way. We shall get on better if she does. I—I'm afraid I shouldn't be very good about giving in. You see I've never had to do it much.'

She smiled a little as she made the confession.

'I can scarcely imagine you anything but docile, my dear,' said Lady Myrtle; 'but then, of course, I know I have not seen you really tested. I fancy, however, there will be a mingling of the elder-sisterly feeling in your relations to your mother, and I hope there will be. I think she has a high opinion of your good sense and judgment, and I don't expect that she will have any cause to change her opinion.'

Jacinth sat silent for a moment or two. She seemed to be thinking deeply; her eyes were fixed on [Pg 194] the fire, where the wooden logs were throwing out brilliant gleams of varying colours, reflected on the bright brasses of the grate and fender.

'How pretty everything here always is!' she said at last. 'Even to the burning wood. Look, Lady Myrtle, it is blue and purple and even green.'

'They are old ship logs,' her friend replied. 'It is the brine in them that makes the colours.'

'Oh dear,' said Jacinth again with a little sigh, 'how I should love a pretty home. Lady Myrtle, I am afraid you will be shocked at me, but do you know I sometimes almost feel I would rather papa

and mamma went back to India next year than that we should have to go to live at that horrible dingy Barmettle.'

Lady Myrtle was not *shocked*. Still, she was too unselfish by nature herself not to be quick to check any symptoms of an opposite character in one she really cared for, glad though she was to have Jacinth's full confidence.

'I think you would bear such a trial as that, readily and cheerfully, if it were for your father and mother's good,' she said. 'And after all, where we live is not of the importance that I daresay it seems to you. Some of the truly happiest people I have ever known have been so in spite of the most uncongenial surroundings you can imagine.'

'I'm not as good as that,' said Jacinth in a melancholy voice. 'I can't bear ugly, messy places; above all, messy, untidy places make me perfectly cross and miserable.'

Lady Myrtle could not help laughing a little at her tragic tone.

'I don't see that, even if you had to live at Barmettle, your home need be ugly and untidy,' she said. [Pg 195]

'I don't know. I've been thinking a good deal about it,' Jacinth replied. 'You see, mamma will have been so long in India that she will have got out of English ways. She must be accustomed to lots of servants and to have everything done for her. I'm afraid it will be very difficult and uncomfortable.'

'But she would have you and Frances to help her,' said Lady Myrtle. 'At least—no, dear Jacinth, you really must not anticipate troubles that may never, that I trust *will* never come.'

Then she hesitated and stopped short, and seemed to be thinking deeply.

'My dearest child,' she said at last, 'you are very young, and I have a great dread of forgetting how young you are. I have too, as you know, a very great respect for parental authority. I would never take upon myself to interfere in any real way with your life, unless I had your father and mother's approval. But this I may say, so far as I can possibly influence them and the whole circumstances, you may rely upon it that this nightmare of Barmettle shall never be anything but a nightmare. Though at the same time I am most strongly of opinion that your father must *not* return to India.'

'Oh, thank you, dear Lady Myrtle, thank you a thousand times for what you say,' said Jacinth.

'It is your father's health I am thinking of too,' said the old lady. 'Your aunt feels sure that it is time for him to come home for good. He has been out there so long, and he is not a young man. He is a good deal older than your mother.'

'Yes,' Jacinth replied. 'He is fifteen years older; and mamma has always been wonderfully strong. But even for her it would be much nicer to come home now. Seventeen years is a long time, and [Pg 196] only one year and one six-months at home! Oh, I do feel so much happier since you have spoken so to me—even though it makes me rather frightened about papa. It would be terrible for his health to fail.'

'We must make him take it in time,' said Lady Myrtle cheerfully. 'I don't think there is any cause for immediate anxiety. Yes—nothing is sadder than when the head of a house breaks down prematurely.'

Her words, following upon her own, struck Jacinth curiously. What was it they made her think of? What family had she been hearing of whose father was in bad health? Ah—yes, it was these Harpers! How tiresome it was that they seemed always to be 'turning up,' as Jacinth expressed it to herself! There were scores and scores of other families in as bad trouble as they; the world was full of such cases.

'If Frances had been here,' thought Jacinth, 'she would have been certain to begin about them and their father—only annoying Lady Myrtle and doing no good. Not but that I'm very sorry for them. I hope their father is better, I'm sure.'

Alas! these two or three months had not passed so quickly or so brightly in the—no, I must not say in the Harpers' pleasant though plain old house at Southcliff, for Hedge End was let, and the three girls were living in Mrs Newing's tiny rooms in Harbour Street—the rooms where Camilla had declared they would be so cosy and comfortable, enjoying a rest from all housekeeping cares.

And as far as the material details of their life was concerned they would have been more than content, though it was a new experience to them to be even temporarily without a home; and now [Pg 197] and then Camilla and Bessie grew a little anxious about Margaret, and wondered if they were taking as good care of her as mother would have done. For the little girl looked very pale and delicate sometimes, and her appetite was fitful.

'I wonder if it is Mrs Newing's cooking,' said Camilla to her confidante, Bessie. 'At home we could always get some nice little thing; mother is so clever in that way, with father having been so long ill. But here it would be impossible to try to cook anything ourselves.'

'And whatever we do, we mustn't worry mother about Margaret,' said Bessie. 'Mother needs all the cheering possible to keep up her spirits, with dear father being so suffering still. Oh, Camilla, I *wonder* if we shall soon have better news?'

Things had not improved, even to the limited extent which was all that Captain Harper had counted upon, as rapidly as the former time that he had been an inmate of the private hospital for three months. He was weaker than then, and perhaps his intense anxiety to benefit by the effort that had in every sense cost them all so dear, was against him.

The doctors, so wrote Mrs Harper to her elder girls, now spoke of three months more, not as desirable but as a necessity. And how it was to be managed she could not see. Furthermore, to give a chance of anything approaching cure, or rather lasting improvement, the regulation visit to the German baths *must*, they now declared, be followed up by a winter in a mild, dry climate.

'Of this,' said the mother, 'we are not even *thinking*. The three more months here are all we can contemplate, and I dare not tell your father how impossible even that seems. It is out of the [Pg 198] question, as he is, to move him to an ordinary hospital where I could not be with him. I believe if we did so he would give up the struggle and quietly resign himself to leaving us.'

'Camilla, he *must* stay,' said Bessie. 'There is one thing, these people do want to keep on the house longer?'

'For two months—not three,' said Camilla, 'and we have not yet given them a decided answer.'

'Then let us take it upon ourselves *to* decide,' said Bessie. 'And we will write and tell mother that is settled. And what else *can* we do, Camilla? Father *must* stay as long as the doctors think necessary. It is the middle of March now; he has been there two months. I suppose he should stay till the middle or end of July.'

'And then go abroad,' said Camilla.

'Ah well, we scarcely can hope for that. But I think, Camilla, you should write to Aunt Flora: father will never do it, and mother would not without his leave. But *we* can. Ask her to lend us some money, whatever is strictly necessary, and tell her that *somehow* we will repay her. She is very generous, and she would never forgive us if we let father lose the last chance, for want of anything she could do.'

'But she has so little ready money,' said Camilla. 'I don't know if they are bad managers, for they have a good income, but it all seems to go.'

'Father says they cannot help it. Uncle Lyle has so much to keep up out there—entertaining and all sorts of things,' said Bessie. 'But I am sure they would manage to lend us—how much?—fifty or a hundred pounds? And Camilla, we *will* repay it. Can we not save a little on our living? I suppose we couldn't do with a room less; it would not be wholesome for Margaret. And for her [Pg 199] sake too we must not attempt still plainer food.'

'No,' said Camilla, 'I fear that is impossible. You see Margaret is so quick. She would notice in a moment if you and I eat less or at all differently from her. But—yes, perhaps the time has come when we must apply definitely to Aunt Flora. I will write by the next mail.'

'And Camilla, if we tide over this present trouble,' said Bessie, 'I think you or I must do something—something to earn money by. I am too young to be a governess yet, but I know—she almost said it to me—that Miss Scarlett would take me even now as a sort of pupil-teacher, and two years hence I think I might be a governess—to young children.'

'It may have to be,' the elder sister agreed. 'But the question is *which* of us should go. I could be a governess already, but then that stops your and Margaret's education. And, Bessie, it would be rather additionally trying to father and mother—father especially—for you to be in that kind of position at *Thetford*, the very part of the country our family comes from. And so near to Robin Redbreast too.'

Bessie reared her head. '*I* don't mind that,' she said. 'I should rather like it the better.'

'But *father*?' said Camilla gently. And brave Bessie was silent.

The letter to Mrs Lyle was written and sent. It reached her in her new Indian quarters about ten days before Mrs Mildmay started on her return home.

It was May; the charming capricious month we dream of all the year round, always believing—thanks to poets and childish remembrances rose-coloured by the lapse of time—that if the [Pg 200] weather is cold and gray and generally disappointing this year, it is quite an exception and never has been so before: it was May before the day came on which Lady Myrtle Goodacre's landau set off in state for Thetford railway station, with Jacinth, Frances, and Eugene already occupying it, and a vacant seat for Miss Alison Mildmay whom they were to call for on the way.

Frances and even Eugene were almost speechless with excitement: Jacinth, though wound up to a tremendous pitch, was too proud and too self-contained by habit to show what she was feeling.

'Lady Myrtle *hopes* you will come back with us, Aunt Alison,' she said quietly, 'at least to spend the rest of the day, as you wouldn't consent to come to stay for two or three.'

Miss Mildmay, before replying, glanced at her niece with a curious sort of admiration, not altogether free from disappointment.

'Jacinth certainly is extraordinarily self-controlled,' she thought. Very self-controlled, like very reserved people do not always entirely appreciate their own characteristics in another! But aloud she replied much in the same matter-of-fact tone.

'It is very good of her, but I would rather find my own way home from the station. I will come out to Robin Redbreast to-morrow or the day after to have a talk with your mother. She will have more than enough to occupy her to-day.'

Jacinth secretly commended her aunt's good sense, but the younger ones seemed a little sorry. They wanted everybody to be as happy as themselves.

'It isn't that you don't think there'd be room enough in the carriage, Aunt Alison, is it?' said Frances, anxiously. 'For the closed wagonette is coming too for mamma's maid and the luggage, and I wouldn't mind the least bit getting into it.' [Pg 201]

'Or I could go on the box,' suggested Eugene. 'I could *quite* squeeze in between Bailey and Fred, and I'm sure they wouldn't mind.'

'Thank you, dears,' said Miss Mildmay, more warmly than she had spoken to Jacinth; 'thank you very much. No; it is not on that account. And indeed there is plenty of room in here for Eugene extra. But I shall enjoy more, coming to-morrow or the day after, and then you must all spare me your mother for an hour or so.'

The train was late of course. There was that strange odd bit of time we all know so well—of waiting and expectancy, intensified of course in the present case by the fact that the mother they were about to meet was literally a stranger to the three children. Even Jacinth was a good deal paler than her wont, when at last the train slowly steamed into the station and drew up beside the platform where they were standing.

Would she have known her mother, she asked herself afterwards? Scarcely; there were several passengers who *might* have been *the* one. She felt almost bewildered when Aunt Alison turned from all, to hurry forward to greet a slight, girlish-looking figure—girlish in herself, though not in attire or bearing—who was gazing about her with eager eyes.

'Eugenia.'

'Alison,' and the two sisters-in-law had caught each other's hands and kissed each other before Jacinth had really taken in that this was 'mamma!' [Pg 202]

Then Miss Mildmay drew back without another word than 'Here they are! I did want to give them over to you, myself, you see,' and her usually calm voice trembled a little.

And Jacinth felt an arm thrown round her, and the words whispered into her ear, 'My darling child!' and for almost the first time in her life a choking sensation that was not pain, and a rush to her eyes of tears that were not sorrow, made her dimly conscious that she knew her own nature and its depths less fully than she had imagined.

And then in turn she fell back a little while the two younger ones, with a glad cry from Francie of 'Mamma, mamma!' and a solemn 'It's me; I'm Eugene,' from the small brother, were drawn close, close, by the arms that had not held them for so long, and kissed as they never remembered having been kissed before.

And somehow—I don't think any of them could ever clearly have told how; perhaps Mrs Mildmay's maid had a head on her shoulders and was equal to the occasion—they all found themselves in the landau again; all, that is to say, except Aunt Alison, who stood waving good-bye to them all from the curbstone, her face for once actually rosy with excitement.

'Mamma!' said Frances, and then she stopped short. 'It's too lovely, I can't speak.'

Eugene was stroking his mother's mantle. It was of soft downy material, rich in colour and texture.

'How pretty!' he said.

Jacinth glanced at it and the rest of her mother's attire, and at her mother herself. She felt proud of her, of her undeniable beauty and air of distinction—proud to present her to Lady Myrtle—and yet—— [Pg 203]

'I wonder if mamma is very much taken up with her clothes,' she thought. 'I wonder if she is extravagant. I expect I *shall* have to take a good deal upon me, as Lady Myrtle said. I suppose people in India really grow very unpractical.'

Poor Lady Myrtle! Little had she intended her words to be thus travestied.

But the reflection was not disagreeable to Jacinth, to whom a position of responsibility and management was always congenial. She took her mother's hand in hers, and smiling at Eugene replied: 'Yes indeed. What lovely fur trimming, mamma! And what a pretty bonnet! You couldn't have had that in India, surely?'

'No,' said Mrs Mildmay, smiling back at her children, 'I got one or two things in London yesterday. I thought you would like me to look nice, especially as I was going straight to Robin Redbreast. I don't believe poor dear Aunt Alison would have seen any difference if I had come

back in the same clothes I went away in all those years ago.'

'No,' agreed Frances, 'I don't believe she would.'

But Jacinth looked a little grave; she could not quite 'make out' her mother.

'Aunt Alison spends almost nothing on herself,' she said. 'She gives away every farthing she possibly can.'

'I know she does, dear. She is the most self-denying person in those ways that I have ever met,' said Mrs Mildmay heartily, though mentally hoping to herself that Jacinth was not very matter-of-fact. But Eugene was looking very solemn.

'What are you thinking of, my boy? his mother asked.

'Those clothes,' he said, 'those clothes what you went away with. They must be wored out. I was only two when you went away, mamma?' [Pg 204]

This made them all laugh, which was perhaps a good thing—a slight relief to the over-excitement which in their different ways all had been experiencing.

'Mamma,' said Frances earnestly, when the laughter had calmed down, 'I *must* tell you, I had no idea you were so pretty. I think you are the very prettiest person I ever saw.'

'So do I,' Eugene chimed in.

Mrs Mildmay could not resist kissing again the two sweet flushed faces.

'My darlings,' she said, 'I hope you will always think so, in one way, even when my hair is white and my face old and wrinkled.'

'I hope,' thought Jacinth to herself, 'I hope mamma isn't—not vain, it's such a contemptible word—but I hope she doesn't care too much for looks and outside things of that kind.'

But the very defining her thoughts startled her. She knew she had no right to begin criticising her mother in this way, and she pulled herself up.

'Mamma,' she said, and her tone was both perfectly natural and simple, and more unconstrained than Mrs Mildmay had yet heard it—'mamma, isn't it really delightful, and isn't it almost wonderful that we should be all staying with Lady Myrtle and taking you to her? Isn't it really like a fairy story?'

'It is indeed,' said Mrs Mildmay. 'It *is* wonderful. The way that she seemed to start up just when—so soon after we had lost dear granny, and in a sense our home.'

'It would have been lovely, of course, for you to come back to us anyway,' said Frances, 'but it wouldn't have been *so* lovely if we'd all been going to Aunt Alison's. It's *rather* a poky place, you know, mamma, and in India I suppose the houses are all *enormous*. I can only remember like in a dream, about very big, very white rooms.' [Pg 205]

'The last house we've had was far from *enormous*,' said her mother with a smile, 'still it was very nice. I often wished you and Jassie could have been with us there.'

'But—oh mamma, you'll never go back again,' pleaded Frances. 'We've got dear papa's coming to look forward to now, and after that—never mind *where* we live, if only we stay together.'

Mrs Mildmay smiled, though for the first time with a touch of sadness.

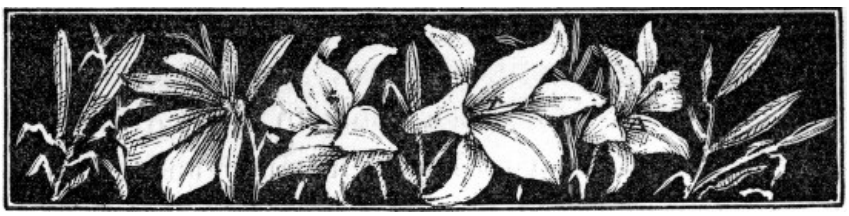
'Don't let us spoil to-day by looking forward, dear; except, as you say, to your father's coming. If he were here, everything *would* seem perfect.'

'And here's Robin Redbreast,' exclaimed Jacinth, as they turned the corner of the lane, 'and "Uncle Marmy's gates" wide open in your honour. Generally we drive in at the side. Now, mamma, take a good look. First impressions are everything, you know. Isn't *this* perfect?'

She seemed full of enthusiasm, which her mother was glad to see and quick to respond to.

'It *is* beautiful: I have never seen anything like it,' she replied warmly. 'And *could* there have been a more exquisite day?'

'And mamma, mamma,' cried Eugene, 'you know, don't you, it was all me that got friends with Lady Myrtle; me, with getting—*wursty*, that day, you know?'



[Pg 206]

CHAPTER XIV.

A COURAGEOUS PLEADER.

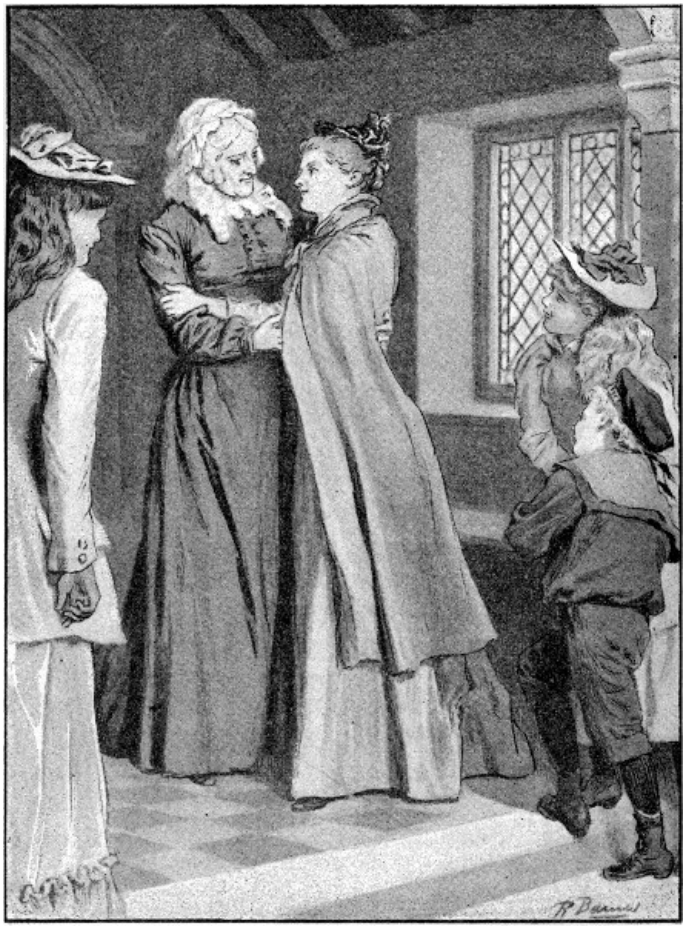
Lady Myrtle was standing in the porch. It seemed to her only fitting that she should come thus far to welcome such a guest, and something in her almost tremulously affectionate greeting touched Mrs Mildmay keenly.

'It is *so* good of you—meeting me like this,' the younger woman whispered, as she threw her arms round her old friend. 'And, oh, how delightful it is to have you and this to come to!'

'My dear, my dear,' said Lady Myrtle, 'don't thank me. Only let me see that you and your children are happy and at home with me; that is *all* I care about.'

And again she kissed the Eugenia she had not seen since her childhood.

Mrs Mildmay was very like Frances; correctly speaking, one should put it the other way, but as a new actor on the scene of this little story it is natural thus to express it. Her face had something indescribably childlike about it; her blue eyes were almost wistful, though the whole expression was bright and happy and very changeful. Yet there was plenty of 'character'—no dearth of good firm lines, with yet an entire absence of anything denoting hardness or obstinacy; the whole giving from the first candid glance an impression of extreme ingenuousness and single-mindedness. [Pg 207]



'It is so good of you, meeting me like this,' the younger woman whispered, as she threw her arms round her old friend.

'You are not like your mother,' said Lady Myrtle, when the little group had made its way into the drawing-room where tea was already waiting. 'I knew you were not. Yet something in your voice recalls her. I suppose you can *scarcely* remember her,' she went on, 'not well enough to see the really marvellous resemblance between her and my child here—my child as well as yours?' and she smiled at Jacinth who was standing by, and laid her hand affectionately on the girl's arm. [Pg 209]

'Oh yes,' Mrs Mildmay replied, 'I remember enough for that. And then I have one or two excellent portraits, besides the large one at Stannesley; at least my father always told me they were excellent. And even when Jassie was quite tiny, he saw the likeness and was delighted at it. But I —I am quite "Denison" I know, and so are Francie and Eugene. The odd thing is that Jassie is also in some ways more like the Mildmays than the two others.'

'I have never seen your husband, you know,' said Lady Myrtle. 'I can't say that the likeness to good Miss Alison Mildmay has ever struck me.'

The quaint way in which the old lady said it made them all smile a little—all, that is to say, except Jacinth. She had not altogether relished her mother's remark.

But that evening was a most happy one—perhaps the very happiest the two younger children had ever known—and one certainly to be marked with a white stone in the memory of all the five who spent it together. By a tacit agreement no uncertain or anxious questions were touched upon. Mrs Mildmay was able to give a good account of their father's health at the time of her leaving him, to the children, and made them all laugh by her account of her brother Marmaduke's description of the terrible formality of that first evening at Market Square Place. She seemed [Pg 210] gifted with a wonderful amount of fun and merriment: Jacinth caught herself laughing after a fashion which was very rare with her.

'Mamma is ever so much *younger* than I,' she said to herself when she found herself alone for the night. 'She is as charming and sweet as she can be. But I can foresee some things pretty clearly. It is a good thing I am of a different character. What would happen if we were all as impulsive and'—'childish' was the word in her thoughts, but again she felt a little startled at the length to which her criticism of her mother was going, and pulled herself up—'as impulsive as Francie, and as mamma must be by nature?'

And she fell asleep in the midst of a not unpleasing picture of herself as the wise, considerate prop of the whole family, looked up to by her parents, leant upon by Lady Myrtle, a Lady Bountiful to all within her reach, a——But here I think her imaginings probably faded into the phantasmagoria of dreams.

Mrs Mildmay had bidden her elder girl a fond good-night; then she hastened along the passage for a moment's peep into Frances's little room.

'The child will be asleep, I daresay,' she thought to herself. 'It is almost selfish of me to risk waking her. But I will be very careful, and I really cannot resist the delight of seeing them in bed, of knowing they are under the same roof again at last.'

And she stole in. It was a moonlight night. Francie had been in bed some little time, but she was not asleep. She was lying with her eyes wide open gazing out through the unshaded window, which was within her view, at the tree tops, illumined by the silvery radiance, and swaying gently [Pg 211] in the soft night breeze; her shaggy hair making a background on the pillow for her sweet, childish face. And at the faint sound her mother made on entering she started up.

'Mamma, mamma!' she cried, as Mrs Mildmay knelt down and threw her arms round the little figure. 'My own little mamma, my own, my own! to think it *is* you, to think I really and truly have you. Oh, can I *ever* be so happy again! Oh, mamma darling, I don't know *how* to thank God enough; that was what I was thinking about when you came in. No, no, you didn't wake me. I haven't been asleep.'

'My darling, my own little girl!' whispered Mrs Mildmay.

'Mamma dear,' Frances went on, after a moment's beautiful silence. 'I feel already that I can tell you *everything*. Now there's one thing; it's come into my mind again since I've been in bed; I'm afraid I forgot about it in the first *rush* of happiness, you know, but now I've remembered. Mamma, don't you think when we're awfully happy we should try to do something for other people—that God means us to? Well, it's about the Harpers. Oh, mamma, I'm afraid they are having such very bad troubles just now.'

Mrs Mildmay started a little.

'You don't mean, dear—you haven't heard anything *quite* lately, about the father, Captain Harper, have you?'

'No,' said Frances, 'I've not heard anything. Miss Falmouth was the only girl who knew about them away from school, and she has left. But you remember I wrote to you that Bessie and Margaret mightn't come back, and they haven't. And I'm *sure* it's because they've got poorer with [Pg 212] their father being so ill. Mamma, did you hear anything more from their aunt before you left?'

'Yes,' said Mrs Mildmay sadly. 'I heard a good deal. All there is to hear, indeed. A letter from the eldest daughter, Camilla Harper—the one who wrote to you—came to Mrs Lyle just before I left. She showed it to me. I am afraid it is as you say, Francie; they have very heavy troubles and anxieties indeed.'

'And *don't* you think they're good, really very good people, mamma?' asked the child eagerly.

'I think they seem quite wonderfully good,' said her mother, warmly. 'I cannot understand; I mean I can scarcely realise, how they can all be so brave and cheerful, when one thing after another—one misfortune after another—has come to try them so terribly. Yes, it almost frightens me to think of our happiness in comparison with their troubles, Francie.'

'But mamma,' and Frances hesitated. 'If we can do anything to help them? Wouldn't that make it seem *righter*? I mean as if we were meant to do it.'

'I *am* going to try,' said Mrs Mildmay. Her voice was low and quiet, but it carried assurance with it. 'Your father and I talked a great deal about it after we heard the worst of things from Mrs Lyle. And we decided that it would be only right, even at the risk of annoying or even offending Lady Myrtle. It seems "meant" as you say, Francie—the coincidences of it all—my coming straight here, and that letter reaching Mrs Lyle just before I left. So we quite made up our minds about it.'

Frances drew a deep breath of thankfulness.

'It does seem as if everything I have most wanted was going to come,' she said. [Pg 213]

Then, as her mother, after kissing her again, was turning to leave the room, telling her she really 'must go to sleep,' the little girl called her back for a moment.

'Mamma, dear,' she said. 'If you don't mind, would you please not say anything to Jass about what we've been talking of.'

Mrs Mildmay looked a little surprised.

'Why not, dear? Why should I not tell her as well as you?'

'Oh well, because Jass didn't know Bessie and Margaret nearly as well as I did, and you must have seen by her letters that she didn't care about them like me,' said Frances.

'But that does not, in one way, much signify,' replied her mother. 'Once Jacinth knows all about them she will feel as we do: your father and I do not know any of them personally. It is not as friends of ours that I would in any way plead their cause with their own near relation.'

'No, of course not,' said Frances. But still she did not seem satisfied. 'Jacinth has always been so afraid of vexing Lady Myrtle by seeming to interfere,' she said. 'And even Aunt Alison said it was better not.'

'Very likely not. You are both too young to have it in your power to do anything. Still, I am sure you have lost no opportunity of speaking highly of the girls whom you *do* think so highly of.'

'Yes,' said Frances, quietly. 'I have done that. But somehow, mamma, I have vexed Jass about it several times. I shouldn't like her to think I had "spoilt" your first evening, by beginning about the Harpers. That's what she might say.'

'I will give her no reason for being vexed with you, dear. I can understand her fear of vexing Lady Myrtle—I feel the same myself—and when I tell her, Jacinth, all about it, it will be in no way [Pg 214] mixed up with you, Francie. She will only need to understand the whole thing thoroughly to agree with us.'

And Frances fell asleep in happy confidence that 'mamma' would put it all right. How delightful it was to have her at hand to lean upon!

But Mrs Mildmay had spoken rather more confidently about Jacinth than she quite felt. Frances's words reminded her of the cold, unsympathising way in which her elder daughter had alluded in her letters to the Harpers; after knowing all that Frances had written to her mother.

'Jacinth is thoughtful and considerate beyond her years,' thought she, 'but I do trust she is no way selfish or calculating. Oh no, that is impossible. I must not be fanciful. Marmy warned me that I might find her self-contained and even self-opinionated, but that is very different from anything mean or selfish. It is sad, all the same, to know nothing of one's own child for one's self, at first hand. Whatever the poor Harpers' trials have been,' she went on, as Frances had once said to Bessie, 'at least they have been spared this terrible, unnatural separation.'

And the thought brought back to her again the task that was before her on the morrow. She was not a little nervous about it. 'But I must not delay,' she said to herself. 'If anything is to be done to help them in this present crisis, it must be at once. And I promised Mrs Lyle not to put off. I wonder when I shall have the best chance of a good talk with Lady Myrtle. Alison is coming over in the morning, she said. Naturally she is anxious to hear all about Frank. I wish it had not happened that I was obliged to begin upon a certainly *painful*, a possibly offensive topic with the dear old lady just at the very first! And when she is so very, very good to us!' [Pg 215]

But Eugenia Mildmay was not the type of woman to shrink from what she believed to be an undoubted duty because it was painful to herself, or even to others.

'Dear little Frances,' was almost her last waking thought, 'I feel as if I already understood *her* perfectly. And oh, I do hope I shall be wise and judicious with my Jassie too.'

Every trace of fatigue had vanished from Mrs Mildmay's bright face when they all met at breakfast the next morning; the 'all' including Lady Myrtle, who had now begun again to come down early, since the fine mild weather had, for the time, dispelled her chronic bronchitis. She looked round the table with a beaming face.

'It is long since I have had such a party at breakfast,' she said. 'Never before, I think, indeed, since I have been settled at Robin Redbreast, and that is a good while ago. To make it perfect we only want your husband, Eugenia, whom you know, I have never seen.'

'Well, I hope it will not be very long before you do see him; and I can assure you he is very eager to see you, dear Lady Myrtle,' replied Mrs Mildmay.

'*How* like mamma is to Frances!' thought Jacinth. It struck her even more forcibly this morning than the day before.

'Is Colonel Mildmay dark or fair? Does he resemble his sister?' inquired the old lady.

Mrs Mildmay considered.

'No; I scarcely think so,' she said. 'And yet there is a family likeness. The odd thing is, as I was saying, that though Jacinth "takes after" my mother's family so decidedly, yet she is more like the Mildmays than either Francie or Eugene.' [Pg 216]

'I don't see it, I confess,' said Lady Myrtle drily, and Mrs Mildmay caught for the first time a glimpse of the cold manner the old lady could assume if not altogether well pleased. But in less than an instant Lady Myrtle seemed herself to regret it. 'I mean to say I see no resemblance in Jacinth to Miss Alison Mildmay. Of course I cannot judge as to her having any to her father.'

'Papa has dark hair, like Jass,' said Frances. 'But he's very nice-looking.'

'The "but" doesn't sound very complimentary to me, Francie,' said Jacinth laughingly; and her mother, glancing at her, was struck by the wonderful charm of the smile that overspread her face.

'I wasn't thinking of you that way,' said Frances, bluntly. 'I was thinking of Aunt Alison.'

'Aunt Alison's not pretty,' said Eugene. 'Her's too—not smiley enough, not like mamma.'

'Eugene!' said his mother. But Eugene did not seem at all snubbed.

'*À propos* of Miss Alison Mildmay,' said Lady Myrtle, 'she is coming to see you to-day, is she not? She must be anxious to hear all about her brother.'

'Yes,' said Mrs Mildmay, 'she will be coming quite early. Jassie told us you are often busy in the morning, so I thought that would be the best time for me to be with her.'

'Jacinth knows all my ways,' said Lady Myrtle with a smile of approval. 'Yes, that will do nicely; Miss Mildmay must stay to luncheon, and then you and I, Eugenia, can drive her back. Will you drive with me this afternoon? I always enjoy a talk in a carriage along our quiet roads.' [Pg 217]

'Thank you; that will be very pleasant,' said Mrs Mildmay. And no one would have suspected the slight sinking of heart with which she said to herself that this would clearly be the best opportunity for what she had to lay before her kind hostess as to the poor Harpers.

'We begin school again on Monday,' said Frances. 'I do hope it will be fine till then. Jass, won't you stay with Eugene and me this afternoon? We do so want to get the house we are building finished so that we can have tea in it on Lady Myrtle's birthday.'

'Yes,' Mrs Mildmay interposed quickly, 'that will do very well, and to-morrow perhaps Jassie may drive with you, Lady Myrtle, and then I will invite myself to spend the afternoon with you two, shall I?'

Her quick tact, founded on sympathy, warned her of the possibility of the elder girl feeling herself thrown out of the place she had naturally come to feel as her own beside the old lady.

'And Lady Myrtle is so devoted to Jacinth too. She would miss her, even though she would not like to seem to prefer her to me,' thought the mother; and the expression in the two faces rewarded her for her consideration.

Frances had her own ideas as to her mother's intentions in connection with the proposed drive that afternoon. But she was already perfectly at rest in the delightful certainty that 'mamma would know what was best to do.' So, though deeply interested and in a sense anxious, she had no nervous misgiving as to the result of the effort which she felt sure was going to be made in behalf of her friends, and she spent the afternoon very happily with her sister and brother, [Pg 218] working at the famous house they had been allowed to build in a corner of the garden. It was very interesting, and even Jacinth, in some ways less 'grown-up' than she liked to fancy herself, found it very absorbing. By half-past four o'clock they had all worked so hard that they really began to be very tired and rather hot.

'I wish it was tea-time,' said Jacinth. 'We are all to have tea together while the holidays last. Lady Myrtle thought mamma would like it. And, of course, you and Eugene, Francie, will come in at the end of dinner as you did last night. I wonder why Lady Myrtle and mamma are so long. I suppose they've gone a long drive.'

'They started rather late,' said Frances. 'Aunt Alison was talking to Lady Myrtle a good while after the carriage was at the door. But I wonder they're not back by now. Don't you think we'd better go in now and get tidy, so as to be quite ready when they come?'

They did so. But for once Frances was the more expeditious of the two. When Mrs Mildmay entered her own room on returning from the drive, a little figure, unexceptionably neat as to hair and hands and garments, darted out from behind the window-curtains whence she had been watching the drive up to the house.

'Mamma, dear,' she exclaimed, 'don't ring for Syme. Mayn't I help you to take off your things for once? I do so want to ask you—you don't mind, do you?—*have* you been able to say anything to Lady Myrtle? I had a feeling that you meant to speak about it the very first chance you could.'

Mrs Mildmay looked a little agitated.

'Francie, dear,' she said, 'I haven't time to tell you about it just now. We must hurry down to tea. But I have done *something*, and I almost hope I have made a beginning towards more. All I can, [Pg 219]

all it would be right for me to tell you, I will. But I scarcely think I can do so to-day. Come to my room quite early to-morrow morning, half an hour or so before breakfast. As soon as we have had tea just now, I have promised to help—at least she puts it so—Lady Myrtle to write a rather difficult letter.'

'Is it to the Harpers?' half whispered Frances.

Her mother nodded.

Frances gave a sort of skip of joy.

'Oh, mamma, how lovely!' she exclaimed. 'How clever you are! I do believe everything's going to come right.'

'Don't be too hopeful, dear. But at least their *present* terrible difficulties will be a little smoothed, I trust.

And it was no use telling Frances not to be too hopeful. She seemed almost to dance as she followed her mother down-stairs, and the drawing-room at Robin Redbreast had rarely, if ever, heard brighter talk and merrier laughter than went on this afternoon round the tea-table, where Jacinth did the honours as if she were the recognised daughter of the house.

It went perhaps somewhat against the grain with her to be told, though in the kindest manner, that Lady Myrtle and Mrs Mildmay had some business letters to write in the boudoir, and must not be disturbed till post-time. But she was a sensible girl on the whole, and really glad to see the cordial understanding between her mother and the friend who seemed to her now by adoption almost a second mother. And she was without the slightest suspicion that the letters in question concerned the Harpers, of whom indeed for some time past she had almost left off thinking at all. [Pg 220]

'Possibly it's already something about the London appointment for papa,' she thought. 'Lady Myrtle is always so energetic and business-like. I daresay she would have *liked* to consult me about it, but then it would scarcely have seemed right not to make mamma the first of course.'

And she answered so pleasantly that she and Frances had a duet they wanted to practise before playing it to their mother, that Mrs Mildmay's slight instinctive misgiving as to her elder daughter's docility and reasonableness was for the time completely dispersed.

'To-morrow, you know, dear Jacinth, you are to drive with me,' said Lady Myrtle, 'while your mother is going to have Francie and Eugene all to herself.'

Perhaps the result of Mrs Mildmay's conversation with her hostess during their drive that afternoon will be best shown by one of the letters which the Robin Redbreast postbag carried off that very evening. It was addressed to Mrs Harper at a certain number in a quiet bye-street in the north-west of London, and ran thus:

ROBIN REDBREAST, THETFORD,
May 4, 187-.

MY DEAR MRS HARPER—I write to you instead of to your husband, Captain Harper, who is by birth my nephew, as I understand that he might be upset by an unexpected letter, being at present in a critical state of health. I regret that it should be so, and that your anxieties should be increased by other difficulties, and I enclose a draft on my London bankers for £500, which will, I trust, relieve you from your most pressing cares. I ask you to accept this in a kindly spirit, though from a complete stranger. It is the gift of an aged woman who is always glad to have the privilege of helping those whose difficulties may become privately known to her, as well as of responding to the many public appeals for assistance. But it is not the gift of a relative. From a certain date, now many years ago, my brother [Pg 221] Bernard Harper and all connected with him died to me as completely as though he had never existed, and I feel it only honest to put the matter in its true light at the risk of wounding not unnatural susceptibilities. I ask you also to accept my sincere good wishes for Captain Harper's restoration to health, and I remain, yours faithfully,

MYRTLE CAMILLA GOODACRE.

It was a strange letter. And strange as it was, it had been more eccentric still, but for Mrs Mildmay's strenuous efforts to soften its expressions and accentuate the real sympathy which had dictated the gift. It was a strange position altogether. The tears had risen into the old lady's bright eyes when her old friend Jacinth Moreland's daughter laid before her the sad facts of the case, and the life or death that not improbably hung upon her response. Never had good cause a better advocate. She read aloud the letter written by Camilla Harper to her aunt in India, and confided by Mrs Lyle to Mrs Mildmay; she told of Captain Harper's honourable career, and of the brave struggle made by him and his wife against the overwhelming difficulties which had come upon them through no fault—no imprudence even—of their own; she described the good promise of their children, how the sons were all already more or less 'distinguished, the daughters models of girlish excellence.'

'I quite believe it all,' the old lady calmly replied. 'It is very wonderful; there must be a good strain somewhere in the blood, and struggle and adversity are grand teachers, we are told. It is

very interesting, and I am most ready to help them in any way you advise, my dear Eugenia, or that you think would be accepted. But understand me, I would do the same if I had never heard their name till to-day. It is *not* as relations; Bernard Harper's descendants are neither kith nor kin of mine, and this must be understood.' [Pg 222]

Mrs Mildmay seemed about to speak, but hesitated.

'What is it, my dear? Do not be afraid of vexing me: do say what is in your mind,' said the old lady.

'You are so good, dear Lady Myrtle, so good and kind, that it seems impertinence for me to differ from you,' the younger woman replied. 'It was only that your words struck me curiously. *Can* we decide and alter things in that way? Our relations *are* our relations; can we, when it suits us, say they are not? Can we throw off the duties and responsibilities of relationship? Of course they vary enormously; sometimes they scarcely exist, and one can lay down no rule. But still, in the present case, it *is* because the Harpers are your relations, and yet by no fault of their own entirely alienated from you, that I have told you about them. These are solid substantial facts; we cannot undo *facts*.'

Lady Myrtle was silent. Mrs Mildmay glanced at her anxiously, very anxiously. But there was no sign of irritation in the quiet old face—only of thought, deep thought. And there was a grave softness in the usually keen eyes, as if they were reviewing far distant or far past scenes.

At last, 'Thank you, my dear, for your candour,' she said. 'Well, leave that question alone. I will help this family and at once, because it seems to me a clear duty to do so. Can you not be satisfied with this practical response to your appeal, my dear?'

'I thank you with all my heart,' said Mrs Mildmay earnestly, 'both for your generosity and for your patience with my presumption.' [Pg 223]

But she evaded a direct reply to Lady Myrtle's question, and her friend did not press her farther.

The result of this conversation we have seen in the letter with its enclosure which was posted that very evening. The former was not a source of unmitigated satisfaction to Mrs Mildmay. For Lady Myrtle insisted on the insertion of the last few lines.

It would not be honest, she maintained, to withhold the expression of her true sentiments.

So with what she *had* achieved, Mrs Mildmay was forced to be content, though there were times during the next day or two in which she asked herself if perhaps she had not done more harm than good? And times again, when with the rebound of her naturally buoyant nature, she allowed herself to hope that she had succeeded in inserting the thin edge of the wedge; in 'making,' as she had expressed it to Francie, 'a beginning towards more.'

[Pg 224]

CHAPTER XV.

LADY MYRTLE'S INTENTIONS.

And Francie, during those few days, was her mother's only confidante. Various reasons made Mrs Mildmay decide not as yet to come upon the subject with Jacinth. While still to all intents and purposes so much of a stranger to her daughter, she felt anxious to avoid all sore or fretted ground; all discussion which might lead her prematurely to judge or misjudge Jacinth. To Lady Myrtle, of course, she said nothing of this; but she suspected, as was indeed the case, that the old lady would feel no inclination to talk about the Harpers to her young companion. There were plenty of pleasanter things to talk about during the long drives on which, on most alternate

afternoons, Jacinth accompanied their hostess; there were reminiscences of the past, always interesting to the girl, awakened to fresh vividness by Mrs Mildmay's own recollections of her mother and her own childhood; there were, more engrossing still, plans for the future, when 'papa' should return and be skilfully persuaded into renouncing India. And Lady Myrtle was nearly as great at castle-in-the-air building as Jacinth herself, and though too wise to discuss as yet with any one, especially with a girl who was really, notwithstanding her precocity, little more than a child, her still immatured intentions, Jacinth was far too acute, and Lady Myrtle too open and affectionate, for her young favourite not to be well aware how much her own future occupied [Pg 225] and interested the old lady. Yet Jacinth was scarcely selfish in the common sense. She was capable, on the contrary, of great self-sacrifice for those she loved; her happy visions for days to come were by no means confined to, even though they might to a great extent revolve around, Jacinth Mildmay.

As seems often to happen when a looked-for letter, or reply to a letter, is of any peculiar importance, there was some delay in the acknowledgment of Lady Myrtle's communication by Mrs Harper. The old lady herself took it calmly enough. 'It should, as a business letter, have been replied to at once, but perhaps they are not business-like people, and are thinking it over,' was all she said.

Mrs Mildmay, on the contrary, and, so far as she understood it all, Frances, felt uneasy and perplexed. Mrs Mildmay was sorry for the Harpers to lay themselves open to the slightest appearance of disrespect or unpunctuality, and at the same time she had attacks of fear that Lady Myrtle's letter had hurt and wounded her relatives so deeply that they had decided to ignore it. Only, in that case, they would have returned the cheque.

'It is very absurd,' she said one evening to Frances. 'I don't generally "worry" about things at all, and I am quite sure I have never worried about any matter of our own as much. Except, perhaps, that time you all had scarlet fever at Stannesley, and somehow Marmy's letter missed the mail, and we were out of reach of telegraphing. Oh dear, I shall never forget that week!'

'Dear mamma,' said Francie, 'I quite know how you feel. I was so fidgety that time I sent on Camilla Harper's letter to you, though it wasn't anything like as important.' [Pg 226]

But the very next morning the mystery was explained, and quite simply.

After breakfast Lady Myrtle sent for Mrs Mildmay to her boudoir, where she always interviewed her steward and transacted her business for the day.

'I have just got this, my dear,' she said, handing a letter to her guest, 'and I knew you would be anxious to see it. The delay, you see, was accidental.'

Her tone of voice somewhat reassured Mrs Mildmay; it was calm and unruffled. Nevertheless it was not without considerable anxiety that she took the sheet of paper from the old lady's hands and began to read it. It was from Mrs Harper—a touching yet dignified letter, and the cheque was not returned. Mrs Harper began by thanking Lady Myrtle warmly for her kindness; the money she had sent seemed indeed a 'godsend' in the real sense of the word, and no secondary considerations could make her think it would be right to refuse what might—what, she trusted and almost believed, *would* save her husband's life and restore him to health—'even,' she went on to say, 'if it were *possible* after this, for us to think of you as an utter stranger, even then I would not dare to refuse this wonderful help. But at the same time you will allow us, I feel sure, to accept it as a loan, even though several years may pass before it is possible for us to repay it. Your agreeing to this will only immeasurably deepen, instead of lessening our inexpressible obligation.' The letter then went on to give a few details of her husband's condition, and the hopes and fears attendant on it. 'I am writing in my lodgings,' Mrs Harper went on, 'before going to him as usual at the hospital. So he does not yet know of this wonderful gift. And I think, as in your kind thoughtfulness you wrote to *me*, not to him, I am justified in accepting your aid without [Pg 227] consulting him, so that I may tell him it is *done*. Not that in my heart I have any misgiving as to the view he will take of my action.' And lastly came a simple explanation of the delay. Mrs Harper had been for a day or two at Southcliff, as little Margaret was not well, and the rather stupid landlady of her London lodgings had never thought of forwarding the letter, knowing she was so soon to return. This with a few earnest words of repeated thanks made the whole.

Mrs Mildmay looked up eagerly after she had finished it.

'You are pleased, dear Lady Myrtle?' she said. 'At least I mean,' and she grew a little confused, for the old lady remained rather ominously silent, 'you think it is a nice letter, don't you? It seems to me to show peculiarly good feeling and good taste, for it cannot have been an easy letter to write.'

'Oh yes, my dear, I quite agree with you,' said Lady Myrtle with just a faint touch of impatience. 'I don't see how any one could think otherwise of the letter. I am perfectly satisfied that—she,' as if she shrank from naming the old name, 'is an excellent woman; refined and cultivated, and everything she should be. And I have no doubt they are all thoroughly deserving of the high character they bear. I thank you—I really do—for having given me the opportunity of serving people who so clearly deserve help. And these cases of bravely endured, almost unsuspected poverty among the gently born appeal to one almost more than the sufferings of the recognised "poor," though, of course, it is right to help both.'

'Yes,' said Mrs Mildmay, 'I often feel it so. And it is very good of you to put things in this way,

Lady Myrtle. It takes away my qualms about having interfered,' and she smiled a little. [Pg 228]

'But, my dear, I have not done,' Lady Myrtle went on, a trifle testily, 'you must quite understand me. It is not *the very least*—no, no; quite the other way—not the very least because they are Harpers that I am glad to be of use to them. Neither this letter, nor your own arguments—nothing, my dear, will alter the facts I stated to you the other day.'

'No,' agreed Mrs Mildmay, and she could scarcely repress a little smile; 'that was what I said myself, dear Lady Myrtle; nothing *can* alter facts.'

'Your facts and mine are scarcely synonymous,' said Lady Myrtle, drily, a little annoyed with herself perhaps, for having unconsciously made use of Mrs Mildmay's own expression. But the annoyance was not deep, for in another moment she added cheerfully, 'We are quite together on one point, however, and that is in rejoicing that this help has come in time, as we may hope, to save a valuable life and much sorrow to those who cherish it. If *this* prove a fact, I think, my dear Eugenia, we may rest content.'

'Yes, indeed,' replied Mrs Mildmay, touched by her old friend's gentleness, though to herself she added, 'for the present, that is to say.'

And when to eager little Frances she related the upshot of her intervention, she did not retract her former words about having made a beginning.

'I *think*,' she said, 'I have got in the thin end of the wedge. When honest-minded people are a little shaken in anything, they try hard to persuade themselves by extra vehemence that they are not so.'

'Mamma, dear,' said Frances, 'I am beginning to believe not only that you are the best but the very cleverest woman in the world.' [Pg 229]

And Mrs Mildmay laughed the joyous laugh which was one of her charms. The success which had attended this attempt of hers so far, did seem a happy omen with which to begin again her home life.

It would be interesting here to shift the scene and follow the reception of the good news by the three anxious girls at Southcliff. It would—to me at least it would—be so pleasant to tell of the happy faces that looked at each other with questioning eyes, as if the tidings in their mother's letter were almost too good to be true. It would be gratifying to watch the progress made by Captain Harper towards the recovery of greater health and strength than had been his for so many years, but even in telling a story—and the simplest of stories—one cannot always do as one is inclined. The time has not yet come for visiting the Harpers again. I must hurry on with some necessary explanations before leaving Thetford and dear old Robin Redbreast for very different surroundings.

That spring and early summer passed on the whole very happily for Mrs Mildmay and her three children. As far as Frances and her little brother were concerned, there were, I think, no drawbacks, except the fear—not, however, a very great one—that this delightful state of things might not last if papa should be obliged to return to India. But to a great extent their mother was able to reassure them, for in every letter Colonel Mildmay wrote more and more strongly of his earnest desire to settle at home, even though his doing so should lead to some privations falling on his family.

'*Everything* would be made up for by being together,' said Frances over and over again. 'I wouldn't care if we all had to live in quite a tiny cottage; would you, Jass?' [Pg 230]

But Jacinth replied rather coldly that Frances was a silly child who didn't know what she was talking about. And Mrs Mildmay smiled, and endeavoured to prevent any approach to quarrelling, as she assured Frances that at all events they would be able to afford a comfortable house.

'I should rather think so,' said Jacinth in an authoritative and yet mysterious tone. 'I do wish, mamma, you would make Frances leave off speaking as if we were paupers.'

It is scarcely necessary to say that this conversation and others of a similar kind did not take place in Lady Myrtle's presence.

And towards the end of July, sooner than he had hoped for, Colonel Mildmay arrived. They were all still at Robin Redbreast to receive him, for on hearing how much earlier his leave was to begin than had been anticipated, Mrs Mildmay gave in to their kind hostess's earnest wish that they should remain there at least till her husband's coming.

'And as much longer as we can persuade him to stay,' Lady Myrtle added. 'He can so easily run up to town from this, as he is sure to have to be there often, about these appointments. And then it will be such a pleasure to his sister to have him near.'

'Oh yes, Thetford is as good a headquarters as we could have at present,' agreed Mrs Mildmay. 'But Thetford, dear Lady Myrtle, need not necessarily mean Robin Redbreast, you know! And it would not be difficult for us to find a nice little house there that would suit us for the time.'

'Well, well, it will be time enough to see to that when your husband is here,' replied the old lady.

And Mrs Mildmay, whose nature was not one to anticipate or dwell upon difficulties or uncertainties in the future which she could not in the present take action about, gratefully accepted her kind friend's hospitality, happy in the knowledge that her doing so really gave happiness to Lady Myrtle in return. [Pg 231]

It was very strange to have papa in person, 'as large as life or a little larger,' said Frances. For they had not pictured to themselves quite such a tall, grave, rather awe-inspiring personage as he seemed at first. And they could scarcely understand how their mother could be so entirely at ease with him; how she could even laugh at him, and tease him now and then as if she was not 'the least atom' afraid of him.

But there was plenty of fun and humour hidden in the depths of Colonel Mildmay's dark eyes; it was not altogether wanting even in his sister Alison, though the circumstances of her life had not brought out several of the qualities developed by his wider and larger experiences. And before long his children, the two younger ones especially, got to know this, and to count upon their father's ever-ready sympathy in even the more childish of their interests and amusements. And Jacinth for her part was intensely proud of her father. He suited her in every way; except that now and then a slight suspicion insinuated itself that this very grand and dignified papa of hers, affectionate and even caressing as he could be when he laid his hand on her head and smoothed her soft hair, was laughing at her a little, which did not at all suit Jacinth's princess-like ideas of herself.

Still all was very happy, very happy indeed, the sweet summer days passing only too quickly; and for some two or three weeks nothing was said about 'plans,' though Colonel Mildmay went up to town more than once to visit his doctor and the War Office. [Pg 232]

Then came an evening on which he returned from a hot day in London, fagged and rather knocked up, though with a certain expression on his face which told his watchful and observant wife that he had come to a decision, which she quietly waited to hear till he sought a good opportunity for telling it. The opportunity came later, when Lady Myrtle, a little tired by the unusual heat, had gone to her own room earlier than her wont, and the girls and Eugene had also said good-night.

'Come out into the garden, Eugenia. We can talk better there; it seems, even compared with India, such an airless night.'

'But the stars are beautiful, aren't they, Frank? I do love this place so,' said Mrs Mildmay as she seated herself on a rustic chair on the edge of the smooth bowling-green-like old lawn.

'You always find the stars—the bright spots in every sky, I think, dear,' said her husband. 'I confess I am feeling a little gloomy to-night, and yet I am glad it is decided.'

'It *is* decided, then? I thought so,' said Mrs Mildmay gently.

'Yes. It is quite certain that it would be madness for me ever to think of India again, now or years hence. So I have accepted Barmettle. I send in the formal papers to-morrow,' and he sighed a little.

'I expected it,' she said. 'I am very thankful, Frank, though you know how I sympathise with you about your having to—to—come *down* at all in position as it were.'

'Doing right can never be really coming down,' he replied. 'And it is right. The other thing in London would have been impossible, on our means, and not work enough either. And there is nothing against Barmettle; the place is healthy and cheap, and good education for Eugene, and no doubt—the two generally go together—good masters and governesses for the girls. Socially speaking, of course, there is not much to recommend the place, though there may be a few nice people there. But the girls are still very young; we must just do our best, and make as happy a home for them as we can.' [Pg 233]

'Lady Myrtle is sure often to invite them here,' said Mrs Mildmay, 'Jacinth especially. When shall we have to go there, Frank? Will it be worth while to look out for a temporary house at Thetford, as we had thought of?'

'Scarcely,' said Colonel Mildmay. This was the question—'When shall we have to go there?'—which he had been the most dreading. He was glad to have it over. 'I fear,' he went on, 'you will be rather upset at finding how soon we have to go. I, at least. You and the children can stay on here awhile if you like, as dear old Lady Myrtle is sure to want you. But I myself must be at Barmettle the end of next month.'

'And you certainly shall not go alone,' said Mrs Mildmay, brightly. 'Do you think I would trust you to choose a house and all the rest of it? If Lady Myrtle will keep Eugene and one of the girls for a week or two, I and the other child will go north with you of course, and get settled before the others join us. There is only one thing I want to ask you, Frank; don't think it is that I have the faintest idea of making you change your intention; I do not even *wish* it. But you have not actually —officially—accepted the appointment yet?'

'No, not till to-morrow,' he replied.

'Then let me ask you this: Lady Myrtle has been so very, so more than good to us, that I should

like to gratify her in every way we can. So before *actually* accepting this, I think we owe it to her to tell her about it. I know she is dying for you to take the London thing, and I would like her thoroughly to understand the reasons why you don't.' [Pg 234]

'They are very simple and unanswerable,' said Colonel Mildmay, curtly.

'Yes, but Frank, though she has never said it actually, I have suspicions that she wants to help us practically—to increase our income,' said Mrs Mildmay with some hesitation.

'My dear child, I could never consent to anything of the kind,' exclaimed Colonel Mildmay, starting up. 'Her hospitality I am most grateful for; she may even do things for the children in the future, for Jacinth, I suppose, especially, as a godmother or a very old friend might. I am not foolishly proud. If she likes to leave you or Jacinth a little remembrance in her will, it would not be unnatural. But beyond that'——

'I know, I know,' interposed his wife, hurriedly. 'Of course I feel the same. But you see, if we talk this over with her, it will both gratify her and put things for always in their proper light.'

'Very well; I will do so, then,' said Colonel Mildmay. And then he turned and looked at his wife, for there was moonlight by this time, very earnestly. 'I don't doubt you, Eugenia,' he said; 'you *know* I never could. But you agree with me entirely, my dearest, do you not? I could never accept a position of the kind. And above all, when we know that there are others—the Harpers, I mean—who *have* claims upon her. For, but for the grandfather's misconduct, he would have had a good proportion of what is now Lady Myrtle's.'

'I absolutely agree with you, Frank,' Mrs Mildmay replied. 'And my most earnest hope is that our good old friend may come to see things in the right light with regard to her own family. This very conversation which I am urging may be a means of leading her to do so.' [Pg 235]

Mrs Mildmay's courage would perhaps have failed her had she known what the 'conversation' she alluded to so lightly was really to consist of. It began by the most strenuous opposition on the old lady's side to the Barmettle plan. She had set her heart on Colonel Mildmay's accepting the post in London which was, according to her, 'the very thing to be desired for him.'

'You would be so near me,' she said. 'Any or all of you could come down at any time. Robin Redbreast would be your country home.'

Colonel Mildmay smiled gently while he thanked her, and then he reminded her of the overwhelming difference of the two appointments as regarded the 'pay.'

'But that needn't—that *would* not signify,' Lady Myrtle began, though with evident difficulty in expressing herself, while Mrs Mildmay's heart beat faster as she realised that they were approaching 'the tug of war.' 'I—you must know—it is only natural;' and with other confused expressions about Jacinth being to her 'as her own child,' 'no one of her own kith or kin except the Elvedons,' whose affairs were long ago definitely arranged, and references to her unforgotten devotion to the Jacinth of her youth, the old lady plunged into the thick of things. She had not meant to speak so soon, she said; she had wished her intentions to be *faits accomplis* before she disclosed them, but all this had upset her and she must explain.

And then she told the whole, and Colonel and Mrs Mildmay, though a little prepared for some announcement of proposed benefit to Jacinth in the future, listened in appalled and almost stunned silence to Lady Myrtle Goodacre's eccentric and, in their eyes, extravagant determination. [Pg 236]

Jacinth was to be her heir—all that she had to dispose of, and it was still a great deal, even without that portion of her wealth which, with the knowledge that the old lord would have approved of her doing so, she meant to restore to the title; even shorn of that and of some other property on the Goodacre side which she only liferented, Lady Myrtle was a rich old woman. And all she had to leave, short of legacies to certain hospitals and other benevolent institutions which she had interested herself in, all was to be Jacinth's. The only landed property was Robin Redbreast and the small farm belonging to it, but in money there would be more than enough to keep up three or four places of its size.

Mrs Mildmay's heart sank, as she listened, but so far neither she nor her husband had interrupted the speaker by word or movement. And she, gaining confidence by their silence, at last came to the final announcement.

'So you see, my dear friends, that looking upon Jacinth as I do, it is only consistent—consistent, and I may say *necessary*—that you consent to my at once arranging for a proper allowance, whatever you like to call it, being arranged for her. And this—of course you will agree with me, that this must be an amount sufficient not only for a thoroughly good education, but for her to be surrounded by everything right and fitting for the position she will be called upon to occupy, perhaps not so very long hence, for I am an old woman. And I do not want to teach or induce any selfishness or self-assertion; I have the very greatest respect for parental authority; I will tell her nothing, or only what you approve of her knowing. But you see how it affects the present position of things, and your present decision, my dear Colonel Mildmay.' [Pg 237]

Colonel Mildmay moved uneasily in his chair, but still he did not speak.

'You must see,' Lady Myrtle proceeded, 'that it would be entirely inconsistent in these

circumstances for you to bury yourself and Eugenia and the children in a dreadful place like Barmettle. You will, I feel satisfied, agree that in anticipating the future a little, as it were, and allowing me at once to—to place a certain income at your disposal—an income which I am sure Jacinth will continue when things are in her own hands—you are only acting reasonably and—justly, I may say, as well as in a manner really to earn my gratitude.'

The old lady's voice trembled ominously: this strange continued silence was beginning to rouse some apprehension. As she uttered the last word—'gratitude'—Mrs Mildmay, hitherto entirely quiescent till her husband thought well to speak, could no longer restrain herself. She leant forward and caught Lady Myrtle's hand in hers.

'My dear, most kind friend,' she said, and her own voice was tremulous, 'how can you use such an expression? *You* grateful to us! Ah, no indeed; as long as we live we shall be at a loss how to show our gratitude to you.'

'Yes indeed,' said Colonel Mildmay. 'I do not know how to express my appreciation of all your goodness. I'——

'Then you consent,' exclaimed Lady Myrtle, her bright eyes sparkling. 'You will be my children; you will let me feel that my lonely life is to have some joy before its close.'

'Indeed, indeed, all we *can* do, we shall,' said Colonel Mildmay very gently. 'You cannot ask more affection than we are most ready to give. But'——He hesitated, and the look of eager satisfaction faded out of the old lady's face. [Pg 238]

'But!' she repeated sharply. 'What "buts" can there be in so simple a matter?'

It was a distressing position. Colonel Mildmay, essentially a kind-hearted man and most averse to giving pain, felt it acutely. But he was not one to temporise. It was a case demanding the plainest speaking.

'My dear Lady Myrtle,' he said, 'if I am blunt or rough, forgive me. It is just this. I cannot agree to what I think wrong, and I could never feel it right to agree to what you propose. I am still young enough and strong enough to work for my family in my profession, and the day I began to lead an idle, or even a comparatively idle life, would see me a miserable man. If you are so good as to continue your interest in my children—Jacinth especially—by asking them to visit you sometimes, we shall be *most* grateful. If—if you like to leave Jacinth some little sum of money in your will which would help or increase any provision I can make for her, I would be foolish and ungracious in the extreme to object. But more than this—no, my dear friend, no. For—and here I must crave your pardon beforehand for what must seem impertinence and intrusion—not only have we, we Mildmays, *no* claim upon you, but—there are those who have.'

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CHAPTER XVI.

A BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT.

There was an awful pause. Such at least it seemed to poor Mrs Mildmay, who, now that she was not called upon to act for herself, and felt under the protection of her husband, dared to tremble! Then came Lady Myrtle's reply, short, cold, and decisive.

'I deny it,' she said.

Colonel Mildmay did not speak.

The old lady glanced at him. His eyes were fixed on the table beside which he was seated; he tapped it lightly with a paper-cutter which he held in his hand. And after a moment's waiting she spoke again.

'I know what you refer to,' she said. 'It would be nonsense to pretend I do not. And I can—even—understand how to you it may seem that the claim you allude to exists. But, if you have talked together about these—these people, as no doubt you have done, has not Eugenia told you what I have told her, that on a certain day my father and I shook ourselves free from the bonds which had become shackles of shame; that from that time Bernard Harper and all belonging to him ceased to be more to us than any stranger we might brush against in the street?'

Colonel Mildmay raised his head and looked at her quietly. [Pg 240]

'It could not be done; the bonds do exist and must exist,' he said. 'The great thing is that,

however cruelly they may have torn and wounded you in the past, they may now be to you a cause of happiness and satisfaction.'

But Lady Myrtle shook her head.

'I will never acknowledge even the possibility of my recognising these descendants of my former brother as anything to me,' she said. And the quietness with which she spoke was very impressive. 'I have given them assistance because I believe them to be worthy people in sore need. I may even do so again if you tell me their need continues. But that is all. I should be false to my dead father if I did otherwise.

'Still, the late Lord Elvedon—your father, I mean—looked forward to his *elder* son's children being reinstated,' Colonel Mildmay ventured to say. 'Why then, in the actual circumstances of his *younger* grandchildren being to the full as worthy and in far greater need, why treat them so differently?'

Lady Myrtle hesitated, for half a second only, but even that was something.

'My father could not have contemplated the *possibility* of Bernard's descendants being—of their wiping out his disgrace,' she said at last confusedly.

'Exactly,' Colonel Mildmay replied quickly. 'And it was only natural. But as he did *not* contemplate a state of things which has actually come to pass, how can his directions affect you with regard to these facts?'

Lady Myrtle again shook her head. She had grown very pale, but otherwise she was completely self-controlled.

'I cannot argue in that way. I do not even pretend to be logical,' she said. 'I can only repeat—so it is. So now you understand. If I did not leave that part of my property which I conscientiously [Pg 241] believe to be at my own disposal to the one I have chosen—the child who it seemed to me had been sent to brighten in some measure the loneliness of my old age;' and here her firm clear voice trembled, 'then—my will must stand as it is, and all destined for Jacinth, and in a sense for you yourselves, shall go to the two hospitals I have selected as the most worthy of help. I will have no compromises, no half measures.'

Colonel Mildmay bowed.

'Then let it be so,' he said. 'It is certainly not for me to dictate to you, dear Lady Myrtle.'

She seemed a little perplexed by his manner.

'Why should I give in to you?' she said inconsequently. 'Why should I not leave my fortune to Jacinth all the same? Why do you take for granted that I shall not do so? should she be punished for your—your obstinacy and quixotry?' and in spite of herself a smile crept over the old lady's face.

'I do not take it for granted,' said Colonel Mildmay. 'I know that you would not act towards Jacinth in such a way as to place her in opposition to her parents. I know that you respect our way of viewing the matter, however you may disagree with it.'

Lady Myrtle seemed mollified.

'You judge me rightly,' she said. 'If one feeling is stronger than another in me, it is respect for parental authority and influence. You are right. I would not so act to your child as to sow discord and disunion between her and those nearest and dearest to her after I am gone. But, let me ask you one thing—is your present decision quite irreversible?' [Pg 242]

Colonel Mildmay sat silent for a minute considering deeply.

'Yes,' he said; 'I do not see any choice. I cannot take the London appointment—to live in reality, my dear lady, on your bounty. For that is what it would be. And even if such a position had been possible for me—and I confess I cannot conceive its being so—still less possible would it be now that you know our mind as to the ultimate disposal of things, and that we have been forced to thwart your more than generous, your unprecedented goodness to us.'

'Then you will go to Barmettle?'

Colonel Mildmay bent his head.

'Ah well,' said Lady Myrtle, 'another dream vanished!'

Mrs Mildmay started up at this.

'Oh, dear Lady Myrtle, dear, dear friend,' she said, and the tears were in her eyes, 'don't speak like that. I cannot bear it. You say there can be no sort of compromise, but surely there can be of one kind; you will not, you cannot expect us to leave off looking to you and feeling to you as our best and dearest friend?'

And she threw her arms round the old lady as Francie might have done, and was not repulsed.

'You will let me have Jacinth sometimes?' whispered Lady Myrtle.

'Of course, of course; whenever you like and as much as you like,' said Mrs Mildmay eagerly.

'I will not be unreasonable,' the old lady said with one of the half-wistful smiles that were so touching. 'Even if—if everything had been going to be as I hoped, I would never have wished or expected anything which could have interfered with her home ties and duties. And I need scarcely say I will never come upon this subject that we have been discussing, with her. I will leave it entirely to you, her parents, to tell her what you think right, though I own I should like her to realise how I have been thinking of her.' [Pg 243]

'Ah well!' said Lady Myrtle, 'another dream vanished!'

'That she certainly shall,' exclaimed Mrs Mildmay impulsively. And though a moment afterwards she was tempted to murmur to herself 'at all costs,' she did not repent of her promise. 'It would not be fair to Lady Myrtle for Jacinth to be told nothing,' she reflected. 'And scarcely indeed fair to the child herself. For I cannot but believe she will see it all as we do.' [Pg 245]

So that afternoon Colonel Mildmay wrote to accept the appointment offered him up at gloomy, smoky Barmettle in the dreary north country.

'I doubt if we have done much to forward the poor Harpers' cause,' said his wife as she watched him closing and sealing the big blue official envelope.

'Very possibly not,' he replied calmly. 'But we have, I hope and believe, done *right*. And so we must not feel over much concern for the poor Harpers' future any more than for that of our own children, my dear Eugenia.'

And though Mrs Mildmay agreed with him, she was human enough, and woman enough, to sigh a little at certain visions of what might have been, which *would* intrude themselves!

'But what,' she began again after a little pause, 'what are we to say to Jacinth?'

It is to be confessed that Colonel Mildmay's reply was not quite so ready this time.

'We must consider well about that,' he said. 'Of course we must tell her soon about Barmettle. It would not be treating her fairly, for she is a remarkably sensible girl, and has behaved excellently in rather difficult circumstances. Alison's little house and odd ways must have been somewhat trying after the liberal easy-going life at Stannesley. It would not be treating Jacinth as she deserves, not to take her into our confidence as to our plans.' [Pg 246]

'And the mere mention of Barmettle will lead on to the whole,' said Mrs Mildmay. 'Frank, you must help me to put it to her wisely. I fear, though very little has been said about it, that Jassie has an intense dislike to the idea of Barmettle; and I fear still more, that in spite of Lady Myrtle's good sense and extreme wish to cause no trouble, she has somehow or other allowed some hint of her intentions to escape her.'

Colonel Mildmay looked very grave at this; graver than he had yet done.

'Jacinth is extremely quick,' he said, 'and notwithstanding her quiet undemonstrative manner I

suspect that she has a very lively imagination. But surely all she has got in her head is only childish; looking forward to long visits here and a continuance of Lady Myrtle's kindness? As regards Barmettle, I have no doubt she would prefer my taking the London appointment, but she is sensible; we only need to put it to her.'

'I hope so,' said Mrs Mildmay with a sigh. 'But the whole is so complicated: she is prejudiced against the Harpers; just the opposite of Frances.'

'That *is* unfortunate,' said Colonel Mildmay. But after a moment's silence he spoke again more cheerfully. 'We must not spoil Jacinth,' he said. 'If she has been led to cherish any brilliant hopes, the sooner she gives them up the better. I shall be sorry for her disappointment, but I am sure she is not really selfish. If she sees that you and I are happier—infinitely happier—as things are, [Pg 247] she will not take it to heart. And it may not be necessary to say much; not to enter into mercenary details, to a child like her.'

'I hope so,' said Mrs Mildmay again. But again her sigh somewhat belied her words.

The very next day brought the dreaded opportunity. Some little allusion was made to Colonel Mildmay's intention of running up to London again the following week.

'Shall you have any commissions for me, Lady Myrtle?' he said lightly.

The old lady shook her head, but without her usual smile.

'I think not, Colonel Mildmay, thank you,' she said. 'I *had* thought of asking you to see my agent about my house in Brook Street. The present tenant's lease expires nine months hence, and I must make up my mind what I am going to do.'

'I fear I am not very *au fait* of such matters,' he replied. 'But I could at least hear what the agent has to say more satisfactorily than by letter. So pray let me call; give me all your instructions. I should be more than delighted to be of any use, you must know,' he ended earnestly.

Lady Myrtle seemed pleased.

'Thank you,' she said. 'Well, yes then; I will tell you what I want to know.'

This conversation took place at luncheon. That afternoon Jacinth sought her mother in her own room.

'Mamma,' she said, 'are you busy? May I talk to you a little?'

Mrs Mildmay laid down her pen.

'I was writing to Marmy,' she said, 'but I have plenty of time. What is it, dear? I am glad to have a [Pg 248] little quiet talk together. I have been wishing for it, too.'

But Jacinth scarcely seemed to listen.

'Mamma,' she began again, somewhat irrelevantly it might have seemed. 'Brook Street isn't a *very* grand part of London, is it? At least all the houses in it are not tremendously grand, are they? I was thinking about Lady Myrtle's house. Couldn't it be arranged for *us* to be her tenants? I'm sure she would like it if she thought we would. Mightn't I say something about it to her? She likes me to say whatever I think of, but I thought—for such a thing as a *house*, perhaps I had better ask you first.'

'But, my dearest child, we don't want any house in London,' said Mrs Mildmay with a smile which she strove to make unconstrained. 'You forget, dear, the choice was never between Barmettle and *London*, but between Barmettle and India again, and'——

'But mamma,' interrupted Jacinth, 'please answer my question first. Is Brook Street very grand? Would a house there be out of the question for us, even if we—if we had one there for nothing?'

'Yes; unless we had another thousand a year at least, we could not possibly live there on our income with any comfort or consistency,' Mrs Mildmay replied quietly.

The girl's face fell.

'A thousand a year! that's a good deal,' she said. 'I had thought'——

'But why worry yourself about things that can never be, dear Jassie?' said her mother. 'We were going to tell you—even your Aunt Alison does not know yet—that it is all decided, and oh, I am so thankful that the long separation is over at last. Your father wrote yesterday to accept the [Pg 249] Barmettle appointment.'

Jacinth grew scarlet, then very, very pale.

'Mamma,' she exclaimed, and the low repression in her tone was more unnatural—more alarming, I had almost said—in one so young, than any even violent ebullition of temper. 'Mamma, it *can't* be true. You are saying it to tease me. You—you and papa would never have settled it without telling me, without consulting Lady Myrtle, after all her goodness?'

'No,' replied Mrs Mildmay, arming herself for the contest by a resolute determination not to lose her self-control, however it might be tried; 'no, though a little reflection would show you that you should have more trust in your parents, dear Jacinth; it was *not* done without consulting our kind

old friend. And however she may regret it, I *know* she respects your father's decision.'

Jacinth looked up eagerly; a reaction of hope came over her.

'Mamma,' she said breathlessly, 'believe me, I don't mean to be either disrespectful or distrustful, but did Lady Myrtle say nothing against it? Is she perhaps going to do so when—when she has thought everything over?'

'She did say everything she could; she did use the strongest arguments she had: but she could not but see that your father's *motives* were right, and so she saw it must be as he said,' replied Mrs Mildmay.

A harder look crept over Jacinth's face; the eager, almost nervous, anxiety died out of it.

'There is something about all this that I do not understand,' she said. 'Unless you and papa mean to treat me as a baby, I think I have a right to know. I think Lady Myrtle would say so.' [Pg 250]

Mrs Mildmay felt much perplexed. Any approach to diplomacy, anything but perfect candour and frankness, was so foreign to her nature, that it was difficult for her not at once to speak out and explain the whole. But then, if she did so, she might be only sowing seeds of future bitterness. It was improbable, to say the least, that Jacinth had realised in any definite way Lady Myrtle's intentions with regard to her, seeing that the old lady had not announced them to her.

'All she can know is only that Lady Myrtle meant to do *something*,' reflected Jacinth's mother. 'It would be for her happiness, and for that of us all, that she should never know more.'

Jacinth saw the trouble in her mother's face.

'Mamma,' she said, 'if you won't speak to me openly, I will ask Lady Myrtle herself.'

Mrs Mildmay flushed.

'Jassie,' she said quietly, 'you do not mean it, but your tone sounds almost like a threat—to me—to your mother?' And in spite of herself, her voice trembled a little.

But still Jacinth repeated coldly, 'I think I have a right to know.'

At that moment the door opened, and to Mrs Mildmay's immense relief her husband entered.

'What is the matter?' he asked quickly. 'Am I interrupting you?'

'On the contrary,' said his wife, 'I am very glad you have come. Jacinth is, as I half feared she would be, exceedingly upset by the news about Barmettle, and she seems to think we have not [Pg 251] treated her with the confidence she deserves.'

'You cannot feel that, when I tell you that my decision was only made yesterday,' said her father to Jacinth.

'Yes. I think you might have—have consulted me a little before making it,' the girl replied. 'It is something to me personally; to have to live at a place like that now I am nearly grown up.'

She seemed to be purposely emphasising the selfish part of her dissatisfaction out of a kind of reckless defiance.

'Do you quite understand that it was a choice between this appointment and an indefinite return to India?' said Colonel Mildmay.

'I understand that you think so. But I don't see it. There was the London thing. And even if not, I would rather have had India.'

'No, no, Jassie, don't do yourself injustice,' exclaimed her mother. 'Not when you think of the risk to your father's health.'

Jacinth hesitated.

'But there *was* a choice,' she said; and now there was a touch of timidity in her voice.

Colonel Mildmay considered; they were approaching the crucial point, and he took his resolution.

'No, Jacinth,' he said. 'To my mind, as an honourable man, there was no choice. I should have forfeited for ever my own self-respect had I agreed to Lady Myrtle's proposal.'

And then he rapidly, but clearly, put before her the substance of their old friend's intentions and wishes, and his reasons for refusing to fall in with them.

'Lady Myrtle is too good a woman to sow discord in a family,' he said, 'between a child and her [Pg 252] parents. And it was impossible for us to approve of the apportionment of her property she proposed, knowing that there exist at this very time those who *have* a claim on her, who most thoroughly deserve the restoration of what should have been theirs always; who have suffered, indeed, already only too severely for the sin and wrong-doing of another.'

Jacinth started, and the lines of her face hardened again.

'I thought it was that,' she exclaimed. 'Those people—they are at the bottom of it, then.'

'Jacinth!' said her mother.

'I beg your pardon, mamma,' said the girl quickly. 'It must sound very strange for me to speak like that; but, you don't know how I have been teased about these Harpers. And mamma, Lady Myrtle doesn't look upon them as you and papa do, so why should you expect me to do so? Do you suppose she will leave *them* anything she would have left us—me?'

'Very likely not,' said Colonel Mildmay.

'Then for everybody's sake, why not have left things as Lady Myrtle meant? I—we, I mean,' and Jacinth's face crimsoned, 'could have been good to them; it would have been better for them in the end.'

'Do you suppose they would have accepted help—money, to put it coarsely—from strangers?' said Colonel Mildmay. 'It is not *help* they should have, but actual practical restoration of what should be theirs. And even supposing our decision does them no good, can't you see, Jacinth, that anything else would be *wrong*?'

'No,' said Jacinth, 'I don't see it.'

'Then I am sorry for you,' said her father coldly.

'I know,' said Jacinth, 'that Lady Myrtle likes things one way or another. I suppose she will give us up altogether now. I suppose she will leave off caring anything about me. You think very badly of me, papa, I can see; you think me mercenary and selfish and everything horrid; but—it *wasn't* only for myself, and it isn't only because of what she was doing for us, and meant to do for us. I have got to love Lady Myrtle very much, and I shall feel dreadfully the never seeing her any more, and—and'——

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Here, not altogether to her mother's distress, Jacinth broke down and began to sob bitterly. Mrs Mildmay got up from her seat, and came close to where the girl was sitting by the table.

'My poor dear child,' she said, 'we have never thought you selfish in *that* sort of way.'

'No,' agreed her father; 'that you may believe. You have had of late too much responsibility thrown upon you, and it has given you the feeling that the whole fortunes of your family depended upon you in some sense. Be content to be a child a little longer, my Jacinth, and to trust your parents. And there is no need for you to anticipate any change with Lady Myrtle. She will care for you, and for us all, as much as ever—more perhaps; and as much time as it will be right for you to spend away from your own home, you shall have our heartiest consent to spending with her. If you can in any way give her pleasure—and I know you can—it will be the very least we can do in return for her really wonderful goodness to us.'

'I should like to see her; to be with her sometimes,' said Jacinth, whose sobs had now calmed down into quiet crying. 'But I don't want—once we go away to that place—I don't want ever to see Robin Redbreast again. Ever since'—and here she had to stop a moment—'ever since that first day when we passed it with Uncle Marmy, I have had a sort of feeling to this house—a kind of presentiment. I can't bear to think of its going to strangers, or—or people that know nothing about Lady Myrtle. And very likely, if she leaves all she has to big hospitals or something like that, very likely this place will be sold.'

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'It may be so,' said Colonel Mildmay; and he added with a smile, 'I wish for your sake I were rich enough to buy it, my poor dear child.'

So Jacinth's castles in the air were somewhat rudely destroyed. There was but one consolation to her. Lady Myrtle was even more loving than hitherto, though she said nothing about the collapse of her plans. For Mrs Mildmay gave her to understand that matters, so far as was fitting, had been explained to her elder daughter.

'Humph!' said the old lady. 'That seals *my* lips. For of course I cannot express disapproval of her parents to the child.'

But her tenderness and marked affection went some way to soothe the smarting of the girl's sore feelings.

'She understands me far better than papa and mamma do,' thought Jacinth. 'If they meant me to see everything through their eyes, they shouldn't have left me away from them all these years.'

Still a curious strain of pride in her father's stern honesty, in his utter disinterestedness, now and then mingled with her feelings of disappointment. She could not help feeling proud of him! Nevertheless the tears were many and bitter which Jacinth shed when the last night of their stay at Robin Redbreast came.

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CHAPTER XVII.

TWO DEGREES OF HONESTY.

Barmettle is not an attractive place; though like most places in this varied world it has its interests and even no doubt its charm for many of its inhabitants—its bright and happy homes, as well as its thousands of hard, if not overworked, pale-faced artisans, men and women, of many grades and classes.

And the sun can shine there sometimes; and not so many miles from the very centre of the town, you can escape from the heavy pall of smoke-filled air, into fresh and picturesque country, whose beauties, to my thinking, strike one all the more vividly from the force of contrast with the ugliness and griminess which you cannot forget are so near.

There had been some talk—when the Mildmay family first contemplated the pitching of their tent in this unknown land—there had been some talk of a house in the neighbourhood of the town, a few miles out, where a garden and a field or two would have been possible, to reconcile the children and their mother, to some extent, to the great change from all their former experiences. But Colonel Mildmay had been obliged to give up hopes of this. There were several difficulties in the way, and *the* house which sometimes at such crises turns up with such undeniable advantages as to over-ride the less immediate objections, had not offered itself. So, considering [Pg 256] the inconvenience of scanty communication between the barracks and the 'pretty' side of the outskirts, the impossibility of day-school arrangements for Eugene, and a very certain amount of loneliness and isolation, especially in the winter months, the fairly desirable house in St Wilfred's Place which *did* offer itself carried the day.

It was but five minutes' walk from Colonel Mildmay's official quarters, and conveniently near Eugene's school; it was very much in the minds of the teachers who now replaced the Misses Scarlett's institution as regarded the girls; it was not duller as to outlook and surroundings than had to be at Barmettle, for it faced St Wilfred's Church, one of the oldest and most interesting structures in the modern town, which had once been a pleasant straggling north-country village; and last, though not least, its rent was moderate.

And Mrs Mildmay, unspoilt by her long residence in the East—as full of energy and resources as when she arranged the drawing-rooms at Stannesley in her careless girlish days, and laughed merrily at her kind step-mother's old-fashioned notions—exerted herself to make the house as pretty as she possibly could.

'I am glad it is cheap,' she said to her husband, 'for we can afford to spend rather more in making it comfortable and nice, especially for Jassie.'

And Jacinth's room was all a girl could wish, and at night, when the outer world was shut off, and the dark square hall and wide quaint staircase, which had attracted the new tenants in their house-hunting, were lighted up, looking bright and cheerful with the crimson carpets and curtains which Barmettle smoke had not as yet had time to dull, Frances's expression of [Pg 257] approval, 'Really it looks so nice that you might fancy it wasn't Barmettle at all,' could scarcely be contradicted.

But Frances, like her mother, was born with the happy faculty for seeing the best side of things. It was all, naturally, much harder on Jacinth. And as Jacinth stood one morning in November looking out into the dreary street, where rain had been pouring down ever since daybreak, and was still dripping monotonously, she did feel that her lines had not of late fallen in pleasant places. Yet she was not so selfish as this sounds. She had made a struggle to see things as her parents did, and in this she had not been entirely unsuccessful, and the constant love and watchful sympathy which were now a part of her daily life, unconsciously influenced her in good and gentle ways which she scarcely realised.

Some ground she had gained. She had come to see that if her father and mother felt about the Harper family as they did, they could not have acted otherwise. And her own conscience was not, it will be remembered, entirely clear. 'Of course,' she said to herself, 'if Lady Myrtle had been left to do as she wished, I should have felt it my duty to do something for the Harpers. I'm sure I should have found some way of managing it.' But no doubt there was a kind of relief in feeling it was taken out of her hands, for Jacinth was growing gradually less confident in her own powers: for the first time in her life she was realising the delight and privilege of having others wiser than herself to whom she could look up.

'Mamma,' she said, on the morning in question, 'do you think there really are places where it rains ever so much more than at others? or is it only that we notice it more at some? I really [Pg 258] could almost think that it rains here *every* day.'

Mrs Mildmay smiled.

'No, dear, it really does not. I don't think the rainfall here is much greater than in London or at Thetford, but the heavy air and the grayness make us, as you say, notice it more. In many places where there actually is more rain than the average, the country is peculiarly bright and fresh. Think of the grass in Ireland.'

But Jacinth's thoughts were already wandering elsewhere.

'Mamma,' she began again, 'do you think we shall have to stay here for Christmas?'

'I suppose so,' replied Mrs Mildmay. 'Even if Lady Myrtle wished it—as indeed I am sure she does—it would hardly be worth while for us to go to her for only two or three days, which is all the leave your father could get. And there are a good many things we have to see to here.'

'Yes,' said Frances, 'there's the Christmas treat for the barracks children. It's never been properly done. And Miss Lettice Piers is going to invite us to their treat at St Wilfred's first, so that we may see. I'd like best to have our visits to Robin Redbreast in the summer, except that it must be rather dull for Lady Myrtle. She was so pleased to have us there last Christmas.'

'I wish we could have her here,' said Mrs Mildmay. 'But she would never be allowed to come up north in the winter.'

Jacinth sighed.

'It seems a good while since we heard from Lady Myrtle,' she said. 'I hope she's not ill. I did think she would have *tried* to get us there for Christmas.'

'I don't think she can be ill,' said Mrs Mildmay, 'for your aunt would have known it. She goes to see Lady Myrtle regularly. I shall be hearing from Alison in a day or two, however.' [Pg 259]

'Jassie,' said Frances, a moment or two later, when their mother had left the room, 'I wish you wouldn't look so melancholy. Just think what a lot of nice things have come to us, as well as the sad ones. Just fancy how we should have been ready to jump out of our skins for joy if we had known, when we left Stannesley, how soon papa and mamma would be at home with us.'

'I know,' said Jacinth. 'I do try to think of all that. But I do so dislike this gloomy place, Francie, and I think papa looks so fagged, and we have scarcely any friends we care for; the people are all so stupid, and so'——

'So what?'

'So rich,' said Jacinth, rather at a loss apparently what crime to lay at the doors of the good folk of the manufacturing town who had incurred her displeasure.

Frances laughed.

'That's not a sin,' she said. 'Lady Myrtle's rich, and so in a way, I suppose, is Uncle Marmy.'

'I mean they seem to think of it so. Once or twice, when I've paid calls with mamma, they were so fussy and show-off. You know how I mean,' said Jacinth.

'Well, there are plenty of poor too, if that would make you like Barmettle any better. Amy Piers says there are some dreadfully poor, and she says that even the ones who get very big wages don't save at all, and then if there comes a bad time—a bad time for trade, when some of the people have to be turned off: it does come like that now and then, she says, though I don't understand why—they are really starving.' [Pg 260]

'They should be taught to save, then,' said Jacinth. 'Why don't the Piers teach them? If I were the vicar, I'd preach sermons about it. If people are so silly, they must expect to suffer for it.'

'But think of the poor little children!' said Frances, whose sympathy was readier than her sister's. 'It isn't *their* fault, and they suffer the most. Amy says it's a good deal owing to the people spending so much on beer and brandy and horrid tipsifying things. I'm sure the Piers do all they possibly can, and you know how papa says that, even with all the strict rules in the army, it's awfully difficult to keep the men sober. If I were the Queen, Jass, I'd make a law against having so many public-houses; I would indeed.'

'The Queen can't make laws all by herself like that, Frances. You don't understand. If the people were taught how horrid it is to get drunk, they'd leave off wanting to buy too much beer and things like that, and then the public-houses would have to give up because they wouldn't have customers enough. That's the best way.'

'Well, I think it should be done both ways,' said Frances. 'If there weren't so many public-houses, there wouldn't be so much temptation;' and the little reformer nodded her head sagely.

Just then Mrs Mildmay re-entered the room.

'Jassie dear,' she said, 'it's Saturday morning. You have no lessons, and though it's so rainy I know you're not afraid of the weather. Frances has a cold, so she mustn't come out. Will you wrap yourself up well, and come a little way with me to help me to carry some things to Mrs Wake? She has gone to stay with her mother, you know, for a little change, but they are very poor people, and I must help them as much as I can.' [Pg 261]

Jacinth sprang to her feet eagerly.

'Oh yes, mamma,' she exclaimed, 'I should like very much to come. I'll be ready directly. I'll put on a thick jacket and my waterproof cape over that.'

And in a few minutes the mother and daughter were making their way, each laden with some parcels as well as the unavoidable umbrella, along the muddy pavement in the direction of a poorer part of the town. Mrs Wake was the wife of one of Colonel Mildmay's soldier servants; she happened to belong to a Barmettle family, which was just now very fortunate for her, as she had had a most serious illness in the barracks, and had lately been moved for greater quiet to her own old home.

'Francie and I were just talking about the poor people here,' said Jacinth. 'Amy Piers tells her about them. I shall be very glad to see one of the homes they live in.'

'It will be rather a good specimen, though they are very poor people,' said Mrs Mildmay; 'for they are thrifty and most respectable. But for many years the father has not been able to earn full wages, as he was crippled by an accident. Indeed, but for the kindness of the head of the factory where he worked, he would have been turned off altogether on a very small pension. It was true kindness to let him stay on to do what work he could, for it kept up his spirits.'

'The master must be a good man,' said Jacinth.

'I believe he is—one of the best in Barmettle,' said Mrs Mildmay. 'But here we are, Jassie,' and as she spoke she turned down a small passage, not wide enough to be called by a more important name, leading out of the already poor and narrow street they were in, and knocked at a door a few steps on. [Pg 262]

It was quickly opened. A rather gaunt and careworn, but clean and honest-looking, elderly woman stood before them. Her eyes were red with crying, but she welcomed Mrs Mildmay very civilly, though with a sort of reserve of manner which struck Jacinth as very different from the extremely hearty, though respectful, deference with which, as her grandmother's messenger, she used to be received by their own villagers at Stannesley.

'You'll be come to ask for my daughter,' said the woman. She had been a domestic servant, and had but little north-country accent. 'You're welcome, I'm sure, and she'll take it kindly. Take a seat,' and she led them into the little kitchen, tidy and clean, though encumbered with some pieces of treasured furniture decidedly too big for it. 'Yes, she's fairly—th' doctor's main content.'

'Oh,' said Mrs Mildmay, 'I am glad to hear it. I was afraid when I saw you'——But she stopped suddenly, for before she could say more the old woman had sunk into a chair, and, flinging her apron over her head, was giving way to bitter weeping. Jacinth felt both distressed and alarmed. Like her mother she had noticed the signs of tears on Mrs Burton's face.

'I am so sorry,' said Mrs Mildmay, getting up as she said the words, and standing beside the woman, she gently laid her hand on her arm. 'Is it some new trouble—your husband?'

'Nay, nay,' sobbed the poor thing. 'Burton is finely—for him, that's to say. But have ye not heard th' ill news?' and she raised her head in surprise. 'Th' measter,' and as she grew absorbed in what she had to tell, she fell back into the kind of talk she had accustomed herself to discard when with 'gentry.' 'He's gone!' and her sobs broke out again. [Pg 263]

'What! good Mr Fairfield,' said Mrs Mildmay. 'No, I had not heard it. What a loss he will be! Was it very sudden?'

And Jacinth standing by, listened eagerly to all Mrs Burton told.

He had been struck by paralysis—the kind friend of so many years—only two days before, and had never rallied. And the grief was widespread and deep. It would throw many into sorrow and anxiety too, the old woman said; for though he left two sons to succeed him, it remained to be seen if they would follow in his footsteps.

'They will be very rich; they may not care to carry on the business, of course,' said Mrs Mildmay. 'No doubt Mr Fairfield has left a large fortune.'

But Mrs Burton shook her head. It was far from the case. The business was doing well, as it deserved to do, but beyond its good prospects he left but little. And then she went on to explain why it was so; thus entering into the circumstances which had so specially endeared the dead man to his workpeople. A good many years ago, she related, when Mr Fairfield had first inherited the 'works,' a terrible accident had occurred, in which, with several others, Burton had suffered. The accident, though in those days such inquiries were less searching, had revealed a certain danger in a part of the machinery recently introduced at great expense, as a wonderful improvement. The danger was remote; it was perfectly possible no damage might ever again occur from the same cause; no pressure of any kind was put upon the master, no suggestion even, of change; his own workpeople would not have blamed him had he 'let things be.' But such was not Mr Fairfield's way of viewing a master's responsibilities. He had almost all the machinery changed, for the one alteration he deemed absolutely necessary involved others. And the outlay [Pg 264] had been something immense, especially as a run of bad years had followed it. And even when times improved again, and he began to feel his head above water, he never himself benefited by the profits as most would have done.

''Twas always summat for his people, as he called 'em, bless him. Reading-rooms, or clubs, or schools. Year in, year out, 'twas his first thought and his last. What else was he there for? he'd say, mony's the time. Ah, well; he's gone where *his* Master'll have good thought for *him*,' the old woman added quaintly, 'the master he served so faithful. For ye see, ma'am,' she went on, forgetting for the moment her grief in her earnestness, 'I take it as it's this way. There's honesty to God as well as honesty to men. None would 'a blamed Measter Fairfield if he'd let things be; no man could 'a done so. But he looked higher nor the judging o' men.'

'Yes, truly,' Mrs Mildmay heartily agreed, 'that was the secret, Mrs Burton.'

'But, oh dear, dear;' cried the poor woman, relapsing again into the tears which did her credit, 'it's mony a sore heart he'll leave behind him.'

'Mamma,' said Jacinth softly and half timidly, when a quarter of an hour or so later they were wending their way home relieved of their packages, through the muddy streets—'mamma, do you know that what she said—old Mrs Burton, I mean—about the two kinds of honesty has helped to—to make me understand better than I did before what papa felt, and you too, of course, about—about Lady Myrtle and the Harpers, you know.'

Mrs Mildmay, in spite of the rain and her umbrella, managed to give Jacinth's arm a little loving squeeze. [Pg 265]

'I am so glad, so very glad, dear,' she said.

'Mamma,' said Jacinth, again, after a little silence, in a more assured voice this time, 'if papa had been in Mr Fairfield's place, he would have done just like him, wouldn't he?'

'I am quite sure he would,' agreed her mother.

And notwithstanding the cold and the rain and the grimness of everything, I think Jacinth felt happier that day than since they had come to Barmettle.

A day or two later another little event helped to confirm Jacinth's better and truer views of her great disappointment. This was the arrival of a letter for Frances, forwarded from Thetford by their Aunt Alison.

'A letter for me!' exclaimed the little girl, when at the breakfast-table her mother handed it to her. 'Whom can it be from? I hardly ever get any letters.' But as her eye fell on the address her face flushed and brightened.

'Oh, I do believe,' she said, 'I do believe it's from Bessie—Bessie Harper. And of course she'd have to send it to Aunt Alison's; she doesn't know we've left Thetford.'

'I'm not so sure of that,' said Mrs Mildmay. 'When I wrote to Mrs Lyle some time ago, I told her we were coming to Barmettle, but very likely she did not think of sending our address to her nieces, for they have not been in the habit of writing to you or Jacinth.'

'No,' Frances replied, rather incoherently, for she was already buried in her letter, 'that's what she says. "Aunt Flora"—is that Mrs Lyle, mamma?—"Aunt Flora told us you had gone to live up in the north. I am afraid it can't be as bright and pretty there as at Thetford, but still it must be lovely to have your father and mother with you for always now. I think I can understand far better than ever what a very great trouble it must have been to you and your sister to be without [Pg 266] them all those years, for oh, we did so miss father and mother when they were in London for six months, and then in Germany. They took Margaret with them to Germany, and it did her such a lot of good. I have wanted to write to you ever so often, and so has Camilla, but mother wasn't quite sure how we could say what we wished. But now she has had another letter from Aunt Flora, and this has made her give me leave to write and tell you all our beautiful news. Just fancy, dear Francie, father is *almost* quite well. Of course he will always be lame, but he counts that nothing, and it's really not so bad nearly as it was. All he had done at the London hospital and then the German baths has turned out *so well*, and now to make it—the cure, I mean—quite lasting, we are *all*—though I write it, I can scarcely believe it—going abroad to some mild place for the winter. We have not quite fixed where; but we have let Hedge End till next May, and we shall start very soon. If you write to me, please address it to Hedge End. And now I want to say something that is rather difficult to say. What has made everything come right has been the goodness of father's aunt, Lady Myrtle Goodacre. Just when we were almost in despair, and it seemed as if nothing *could* save father, she sent mother a lot of money: she said it was a present, but *we* all count it a loan. It was enough to do everything, and more than enough, and we can never, never thank her too much. But in our hearts we all feel sure that, though you kept exactly to what mother and Camilla asked, yet some of you, *somehow*, have been our good fairies. Perhaps it was your sister Jacinth, perhaps it was Mrs Mildmay; and I am sure, dear Francie, that if ever *you* had a chance you spoke kindly of us; perhaps we shall never know exactly who did it, [Pg 267] or how it was done, so wisely and carefully as it must have been. But oh, we *do* thank you; if you could see the difference in everything about us now, how we are all as happy as the day's long, *you* would all feel happy just to see it. Nearly every night, when we say our prayers, Margaret and I thank God for having sent you and Jacinth to be our school-fellows at Miss Scarlett's, and for the wonderful way things have come right."'

Then followed a few details more interesting to Frances than of consequence in themselves, about the lessons Bessie and Margaret had been doing, and how well Camilla managed to teach them, and hopes that 'some day' the former school-fellows might meet again; ending up with

repetitions of the gratitude they felt *sure* they owed to somebody, and 'much love' from 'your affectionate friend, Elizabeth Vandeleur Harper.'

'"Vandeleur" was Bessie's mother's name. She's very proud of it,' said Frances, gazing admiringly at the pretty writing. Then she looked up with glistening eyes. 'Mamma, Jass, isn't it *beautiful*? Isn't it lovely to think they're so much happier?'

Mrs Mildmay's own face was nearly as bright as Francie's.

'I cannot *tell* you how glad and thankful I am,' she said. And she took hold gently of Jacinth's hand. 'Doesn't it seem to follow up what we were saying the other day after we had been at old Mrs Burton's?' she whispered.

But Jacinth's face looked pale, and her eyes had tears in them.

'Mamma,' she said, 'I suppose you thought I wouldn't have been nice about it, but I think you might have told me that you did get Lady Myrtle to do something to help the Harpers. I can see [Pg 268] that Francie knew about it, and it is horrid to be in a way *thanked* by them, when—when I have really been more a sort of enemy to them than a friend.'

Mrs Mildmay had started a little at Jacinth's first words, for she had in fact forgotten, in the consciousness of increasing sympathy between her elder daughter and herself, how, at the time of her first appeal to Lady Myrtle, she had judged it wiser to say nothing about it to Jacinth. And now to her candid and naturally confiding nature this reticence gave her almost a guilty feeling. But as Jacinth went on speaking, her mother realised that she had done wisely.

'Dear Jassie,' she said quietly, 'at that time I did think it better not to tell you that I had interfered. I wanted to avoid all possibilities of irritation till you got to know me better. And I did see that you were prejudiced to some extent. But now I feel quite differently about it, and I wish I had thought of telling you lately, though you must take my not having done so as a proof of my feeling at one with you. For till this minute I thought you did know. At least I forgot you did not. I will tell you exactly how it came about.' And she did so, adding rather sadly, as she concluded, 'And after all, dear, you see I was able to do very little. Lady Myrtle will *not* think of them as her relations, and grateful though they are for this present help, of course it is not anything lasting; not what we would like to make sure of for their future.'

'No,' Jacinth agreed, 'I understand how you mean. Still, it is a very good thing their father is so much better. I think they have a great deal to thank you for, mamma—you, and Francie too, in her way. I think they should know *I* have not helped at all; it makes me feel almost—dishonest. If [Pg 269] Francie writes to Bessie, couldn't she say something?'

'Whatever she says about the matter at all must only be very slight and vague,' said Mrs Mildmay. 'And, Jassie dear, you *do* feel kindly to them now?'

'I want to feel whatever's right,' Jacinth replied, and her tone was wonderfully humble.

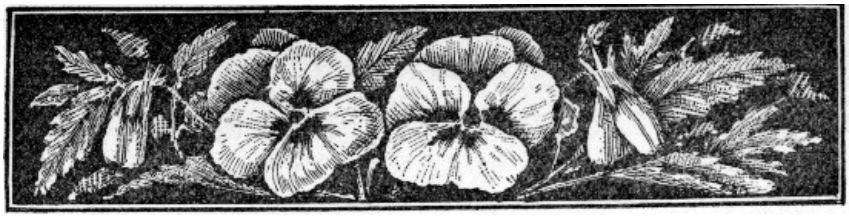
'Then there is no need to enter into any explanations,' said Mrs Mildmay. 'It would only hurt poor Bessie if you made any sort of disclaimer of the friendliness they credit us all with. The only thing you could ever do might perhaps be'——She hesitated.

'What, mamma?' asked Jacinth.

'Some day,' said her mother, 'you *may* have an opportunity of saying to Lady Myrtle that you think you were a little prejudiced against them.'

'Yes,' Jacinth agreed, 'perhaps it would be right. For, you see, mamma, *she* thought I avoided speaking of them because I did not want to annoy her, and I think I made myself believe that too. But now I see it wasn't only that. It was partly a—I feel ashamed to think of it—a sort of horrid jealousy, I am afraid, mamma.'

And though she reddened as she made what to her was really a painful confession, Jacinth's heart felt lighter from that moment. There was now no shadow of misunderstanding between her mother and herself.



[Pg 270]

CHAPTER XVIII.

'I WILL THINK IT OVER.'

The very faint hope which the Mildmays—Jacinth especially—had cherished that, after all, the coming Christmas might 'somehow' be spent by them and Lady Myrtle together, soon faded.

There was no question of the old lady's coming north, though in one of her letters she spoke of the gladness with which she would have made the effort had it been possible; and there was even no question of their all joining her at Robin Redbreast, though but for a short visit, for in November the fiat went forth which each winter she had secretly for some years past been dreading—she must not remain in England. For her chronic bronchitis was on her again, and a premature taste of winter in the late autumn threatened for a week or two to turn this into something worse.

'For myself,' she wrote, 'I would rather stay at home and take the risk, but I suppose it would be wrong, though really at my age I have little sympathy with that excessive clinging to life one sees where one would little expect it. But there is nothing to detain me here specially, and it may be that I shall benefit by the change. I want to choose one of the winter places I was so happy at more than once long ago, with *your* mother, when she and I travelled together with my parents.' [Pg 271]

For the letter was to Mrs Mildmay.

And a fortnight or so later came another, which threw great excitement into the house in St Wilfred's Place, where the children were doing their best to give something of a festive and country look to the rather dark rooms with the help of plenty of holly and mistletoe, which had come in a Christmas hamper from Robin Redbreast, by Lady Myrtle's orders, though she was no longer there. For by this time it was Christmas Eve.

This new letter was from abroad. The old lady was already settled in her winter quarters. Which of the many southern resorts she had chosen matters little, as it is no part of this simple story to describe continental towns or foreign travel. And in this particular case there would be little interest in either, seeing that these places are so well known nowadays to the mass of English folk of the well-to-do classes, that accounts of them are pretty sure to be monotonous repetitions. We will call the spot selected 'Basse.'

Lady Myrtle wrote cheerfully. She was better, and she was enjoying, as old people learn to do, the chastened pleasure of recalling happy days in the scenes she was now revisiting.

'It is all wonderfully little changed,' she wrote. 'I drive along the same roads, and walk slowly up and down the same terraces, where Lady Jacinth and I used to talk together by the hour in our light-hearted girlhood. I even fancy I recognise some of the shops we pass, for I am able to stroll about the quieter streets a little with the help of my good Clayton's arm. I have actually done a little shopping, the results of which will, I trust, please you, trifling as they are. I am sending off a little box by the Globe Express, which will, I hope, reach you by Christmas Day. And now, dear [Pg 272] Eugenia, for the point of my letter. It is Clayton's idea; she burst out with it the other day when we were busy about this same shopping. "Oh, my lady, if only Miss Jacinth—Miss Mildmay I should say—were here it would be nice! She's just the young lady to enjoy the change and not mind the quiet life, and she *would* brighten you up." So will you spare her to me for the three or four months I shall be here? I hesitate to ask it; you will miss her so. But I am emboldened by the belief that it might be for the dear child's own good. She could have excellent lessons of any or every kind, and some amount of French talking, as I have a few old French friends in the neighbourhood, near enough to spend a day with now and then. Her father would bring her out, and, for my sake, I trust, not grudge the time and fatigue. The whole expenses you would surely let me defray? You cannot be hard-hearted enough to refuse *this*, dearest Eugenia.'

Mrs Mildmay thought it over and talked it over with her husband: then they laid it before Jacinth herself, giving her indeed the letter itself to read. Jacinth's face crimsoned with pleasure and excitement, and her eyes glistened. But in a moment or two they grew dewy.

'Oh, mamma,' she exclaimed, 'it would be delightful. But—I cannot bear to think of leaving you for so long.'

These were sweet and grateful words to the mother's ears. But, as ever, she took the cheerful and sensible view of the matter. The separation would be but a short one, and it might really be of great advantage to Jacinth. Besides which—and this argument, I think, had the most weight with them all—was it not a duty to do what they could to please their dear old friend?

So a favourable and grateful answer was sent without much delay, and before the new year was [Pg 273] many days old, Jacinth and her father found themselves speeding across France as fast as the *train de luxe* could take them, to join Lady Myrtle in her winter home.

Jacinth enjoyed it all, and there was a considerable amount of freshness to her in the experience, though it was not entirely unknown ground. For, as a young child, she had spent some time in the south of France with her mother on her way to England, and she had once in later years passed a week or two in Paris with Uncle Marmy and 'Granny.' But the special place which Lady Myrtle had chosen was quite new to her, and it had its own peculiar beauties and attractions.

'Tell mamma,' she said to her father the morning before he was to leave, 'tell dear mamma and

Francie that I am as happy as I can be anywhere away from them. And I will work really hard at French and music, so that I may be able to help Francie with hers. And it will please mamma, won't it, papa, to hear how glad Lady Myrtle seems to have me?'

'Yes, dear, I am sure it will,' said Colonel Mildmay cordially. 'I cannot help feeling, personally, great pleasure in having been able to do anything to gratify her. It was generous of her to give us the opportunity of doing so.'

'She *is* so generous,' said Jacinth warmly, 'so large hearted about everything, isn't she, papa?'

'She is indeed,' her father agreed with a little sigh, 'about everything except *one* thing. It is curious and sad to see how very deep down are her prepossessions on that subject. And I am the more hopeless about them, because there is really no personal vindictiveness, or even, I may say, prejudice mixed up with these convictions.' [Pg 274]

'It *is* sad,' Jacinth agreed.

The next morning saw Colonel Mildmay's departure for home.

Then began for Jacinth a quiet, regular, but far from unenjoyable life. Lady Myrtle had already made inquiries about the best teachers, and such of these as undertook the special subjects the girl wished to give her time to were engaged for her. So several hours of each day were soon told off for lessons and preparation for them. As a rule, Lady Myrtle drove out in the afternoon, her young guest accompanying her, sometimes to pay calls to such of the visitors to the place as were old friends, or in some few cases new acquaintances of hers; sometimes out into the beautiful country in the neighbourhood, beautiful even in mid-winter, where the views were as varied as charming.

And as a rule, between twelve and one o'clock, sometimes too in the afternoon if the old lady were not feeling well enough for a drive, Jacinth went for a brisk walk with Clayton as her duenna.

It was during one of these walks that something most unexpected happened one day. Lady Myrtle had caught a slight cold and been forbidden to go out. It was a bright but somewhat treacherous day, for though the sunshine was warm there was a sharp, almost icy, 'under air' painfully perceptible in the shade.

'I feel roasted and frozen at once; don't you, Clayton?' said Jacinth laughingly, as they crossed the road to get into the warmth, such as it was, again.

'Yes, indeed, Miss Mildmay,' the maid agreed. 'It's a day when you need both a parasol and a muff together. For there is such a glare.'

A glare there was, truly. Snow had been falling now and then during the last day or two, and [Pg 275] though but in light and short showers, the ground was sufficiently frozen for it to 'lie;' so that the sunshine, not powerful enough to melt it, save here and there very superficially, was reflected from the gleaming surface with extraordinary brilliancy.

'We really should have snow spectacles,' Jacinth was saying, when a sudden shock made her aware that in her dazzled state she had run foul of some one or something standing on the pathway just in front of her.

'I beg your pardon,' she exclaimed instinctively, and the stranger turning sharply—for she had been looking in the forward direction—almost at the same moment made the same apology, adding quickly, when she heard Jacinth's English voice, 'I should not be blocking up the'——But her sentence was never completed. 'Oh, can it be you? Jacinth—Jacinth Mildmay? Is Frances here? Oh, how delightful.—Camilla,' as an older girl came across the road in her direction, 'Camilla, just fancy—this is Jacinth. I can scarcely believe it,' and before Jacinth had had time to say a word, she felt two clinging arms thrown round her neck, and kisses pressed on her burning cheeks, by the sweet, loving lips of Bessie Harper.

The blood had rushed to Jacinth's face in a torrent, and for a moment she almost gasped for breath.

'Bessie, Bessie dear, you are such a whirlwind. You have startled Miss Mildmay terribly.'

'I am so sorry,' said Bessie penitently, and then at last Jacinth was able to answer the girl's inquiries, and explain how it had come about that she alone of her family was here so far from home.

'And are *you* all here?' she asked in return.

'Yes,' Miss Harper answered, 'all of us except my eldest brother. The two others are here [Pg 276] temporarily; the little one who is going into the navy got his Christmas holidays, and the other has his long leave just now. And my father is so wonderfully better; you heard, you saw Bessie's letter to Frances?' and Camilla's face grew rosy in its turn.

'Oh yes,' Jacinth replied. 'We were very, very glad. Frances wrote almost at once.'

Bessie shook her head.

'I never got the letter,' she said; 'but we have missed several, I am afraid. We have been moving

about so. Cannot you come to see us, Jacinth? Mother, and father too, would love to see you. We are living a little way out in the country at the village of St Rémi; we have got a dear little house there. Camilla and I came in for shopping this morning. Couldn't you come back with us to luncheon? We could bring you home this afternoon, and your maid would take back word to—to Lady Myrtle Goodacre.'

'I am afraid I cannot,' said Jacinth, with some constraint in her voice. 'I never go out anywhere without asking Lady Myrtle's leave.'

'Of course not,' Camilla interposed. 'It would not do at all. You must do as you think best, Miss Mildmay, about getting permission to come to see us. I beg you to believe that, if you think it better not to ask it,' she spoke in a lowered tone, so as to be unheard by Clayton, 'we shall neither blame you nor misunderstand you. And now, perhaps, we had best not keep you waiting longer.'

She held out her hand with the same quiet friendliness as appeared in her words; not perhaps *quite* without a touch of dignity almost approaching to *hauteur* in the pose of her pretty head as she gave the unasked assurance. Jacinth thanked her—what else could she do?—feeling curiously [Pg 277]
small. There was something refreshing in the parting hug which Bessie bestowed upon her, ere they separated to follow their respective roads, but Jacinth was very silent all the way home.

'Nice young ladies,' remarked Clayton. 'They are old friends of yours, Miss Jacinth, no doubt?'

'The younger one was at school with my sister and me,' the girl replied, for Clayton's position as a very old and valued servant removed all flavour of freedom or presumingness from her observations. 'But I scarcely know the older one.'

And for the rest of the way home she was unusually silent. Her mind was hard at work. Jacinth was passing through a crisis. Should she tell Lady Myrtle of the Harpers being in the near neighbourhood, or should she not? There was no obligation upon her to do so; their name had not been alluded to, even if Clayton should mention to her mistress the meeting with the young ladies, nothing would be easier than for Jacinth to pass it off with some light remark. And with the temptation to act this negatively unfriendly part awoke again the sort of jealous irritation at the whole position, which she believed herself to have quite overcome.

'They perfectly haunt us,' she said to herself: 'why in the world should they have chosen Basse out of all the quantity of places there are? And to think'—this was a very ugly thought—'that but for mamma they wouldn't have been able to come abroad at all! Why should they spoil my little happy time with Lady Myrtle? And very likely no good would come to them of my telling her that they are here. She would be sure to refuse to see them.'

But what if it were so? Did that affect her own present duty? [Pg 278]

'It might annoy Lady Myrtle,' whispered an insidious voice; but had not Mrs Mildmay risked far more in her outspoken appeal, when still almost a stranger to her mother's friend? Would not the concealment of so simple a circumstance as her meeting the Harper girls be more than negative unfriendliness? would it not savour of want of candour and selfish calculation, such as in after years Jacinth would blush to remember? And again there sounded in her ears the old north-country woman's quaint words: 'It do seem to me, ma'am, as there's two kinds of honesty.'

And Jacinth lifted her head and took her resolution.

That afternoon there was to be no drive, as the old lady had caught a slight cold. And after luncheon Jacinth came and sat beside her in her favourite position, a low stool beside Lady Myrtle's chair, whence she could rest one elbow on her friend's knee and look up into her kind old face with the strangely familiar dark eyes, which were dearer to Robin Redbreast's owner than even the girl herself suspected.

'I want to talk to you, dear Lady Myrtle,' she began. 'I want to tell you whom I met this morning,' and she related simply what had occurred.

The old lady started a little as Jacinth spoke the names 'Camilla and Bessie Harper.' But then she answered quietly: 'It was right of you to tell me, dear,' she said. 'And you need not fear its annoying me. It is strange that they should have chosen Basse, but really it does not matter to us in the least. I am very glad the father is so much better. Now let us talk of something else, dear.'

Now came the hard bit of Jacinth's task.

'Dear Lady Myrtle, that isn't all; it's only the first part of what I have to say,' she began tremulously. 'I want to tell you *everything*, more even than I told mamma, for till to-day I don't [Pg 279]
think I saw it quite so plainly. I have not been as good and true as you have thought me; nothing like Frances, or mamma, of course. And I feel now that you must know the worst of me. I shall never be happy till you do, even though it is horrible to own how mean I have been.'

Lady Myrtle sat silent, too bewildered at first to speak. What had come to Jacinth, so quiet and self-controlled as she usually was? But she held the girl's hand and said gently, 'Tell me anything that is on your mind, dear child, though I think—I cannot help thinking—that you are exaggerating whatever it is that you think you have done wrong.'

Then out it all came: the confession that many would hardly have understood—would have called morbid and fanciful, perhaps. But Lady Myrtle's perceptions were keen, her moral ideal very

high, her sympathy great; and she did not make the mistake of crushing back the girl's confidence by making light of the feelings and even actions which Jacinth's own conscience told her had been wrong. One thing only she could not resist suggesting as a touch of comfort.

'I think, latterly at any rate, dear, you *were* influenced by the fear of troubling me. You must allow that.'

'Well, yes,' Jacinth agreed. 'But even then I should not have let even that make me uncandid and —and—almost plotting against them.'

'No, no, dear; don't say such things of yourself. And now you may put it quite out of your mind for ever. You have been only too severe on yourself. But try to understand one thing, dear; *no* child could be to me what you are. Even—even if these young people had been in happy relations with me, as of course, but for past miseries, might have been the case, they would not have been *Jacinth*.' [Pg 280]

'No; I know it is for grandmother's sake you care for me so much more than I deserve,' said the girl, as she wiped away her tears, 'and even in that way I should not have been jealous. I did not know it was jealousy. I have never realised before that I could be jealous. But I cannot put it quite off my mind till you let me feel I have done something to make up. Lady Myrtle, dear Lady Myrtle, *may* I ask them to come to see you? I know they are longing to thank you. And oh, it would make me so happy!'

'I will think it over, my dear,' was all Lady Myrtle would commit herself to. But even that was something.

[Pg 281]

CHAPTER XIX.

UNCLE MARMY'S GATES.

When people really and thoroughly want to do right, and do not content themselves by *saying* they want to do so, I doubt if they are ever for long left in perplexity. Jacinth Mildmay had found it so. She had courageously dismissed all the specious arguments about 'troubling Lady Myrtle,' 'not going out of her way to dictate to her elders,' or 'interfering in their affairs,' and had simply and honestly done what her innermost conscience dictated. And now, as to how she was to act about and towards the Harpers, she was content to wait.

But Lady Myrtle did not keep her very long in suspense. She too had put aside every consideration but the one—what was her duty to the Harper family?—and she had found solid ground.

'My dear Jacinth,' she said, the second morning after the unexpected meeting of the former school-fellows, 'I have decided that it would be unkind and ungracious to keep Captain and Mrs Harper and their children at arm's length, if—if it would be any satisfaction to them to see me, as they like to think I have been of help to them. So I intend to drive out to St Rémi to call upon them.'

Jacinth looked up with a bright smile. [Pg 282]

'I am so glad, Lady Myrtle,' she added impulsively; 'I do think you are so very good.'

The old lady shook her head sadly.

'My dear,' she said, 'the bitterest part of approaching the end of life is the realising how terribly, how overwhelmingly other than "good" one has been, and how little time remains in which to make amends. As regards one's self the recognising this is salutary; the more one feels it, the more thankful one should be. But it is about others: it is terrible to think of the harm one has done, the good one has left undone. If I had been more patient—more pitiful—more ready to make allowance for their strange weakness of character—with—with my poor brothers'——

Her voice broke; the last words were almost inaudible: it was very wonderful for her to say so much. And a new ray of light seemed to flash on Jacinth's path as she listened. If such a thing were possible, if it could come to pass that Lady Myrtle should reinstate her nephew and his family in their natural place in her affection and regard, what happiness, what softening of past sorrows might such a change not bring to the sorely tried heart of her old friend. And a rush of unselfish enthusiasm came over the young girl.

'Anything *I* can do to further it, I shall do,' she determined, and at that moment died away the last fast-withering remains of jealousy in her heart that the Harpers might in any way replace her in Lady Myrtle's regard.

It seemed like an encouragement—an endorsement of this secretly registered vow—when Lady Myrtle spoke again.

'Does it make you happy, dear child, to hear what I have resolved to do? I hope so; for your feelings, your self-blame so honestly avowed, though I think you exaggerate the need of it, have [Pg 283] helped to influence me. I know how bitter such self-blame may grow to be, and my darling Jacinth, I want to feel, when I come to die, that at least I have brought nothing but good into *your* young life.'

'Dear Lady Myrtle,' said Jacinth, 'what you tell me makes me happier than I can express; far, far happier than I have deserved to be.'

They went the next day. Lady Myrtle's cold was better, and for the season, the weather was wonderfully mild. Jacinth had hesitated about accompanying her old friend, but Lady Myrtle insisted upon her doing so.

'It will make it far easier and less constrained for me,' she said, 'and considering everything it seems to me only natural.'

They had luncheon early, and set off immediately after. Less than half an hour's drive brought them to the picturesque little village, which was in fact scarcely more than a suburb of the town of Basse.

'Villa Malmaison' was the direction, and soon the coachman drew up at a gate opening on to the road, for there was no drive up to the house. The footman was preparing to enter, but when he came round for his instructions, Lady Myrtle stopped him.

'No,' she said, 'you can wait here. We will get out at once.—I have a fancy,' she said to Jacinth, 'for going straight up to the house without being announced.'

It was a small and simple place; a balcony ran round the ground floor, and there in a long chair—a deck chair—a gentleman was half lying, half sitting, for the day was mild, and the house had a south exposure. At the sound of their slow footsteps—for Lady Myrtle was feebler than of yore— [Pg 284] he looked up, then rose courteously, and came forward to meet them. He was a tall thin man with gray hair, and with evident traces of delicate health and suffering upon him, and he walked lame. But his smile was both bright and sweet; his keen dark eyes not unlike Lady Myrtle's own.

'Can I'——he began, for the first instant's glance revealed to him that the new-comers were English, but a sort of exclamation from Lady Myrtle arrested him.

'Jacinth,' she had just whispered, and for a second she leant so heavily on the girl's arm that Jacinth feared she was going to faint, 'it must be he—my nephew—he is so, so *wonderfully* like my father.'

And before Jacinth could reply, the old lady straightened herself again, and drawing her arm away from her young guide, seemed to hurry forward with a little cry.

'Are you Reginald?' she said. 'My nephew? You must be. Oh Reginald, I am your old Aunt Myrtle.'

And then—all the plans and formalities were set at naught. The two tall figures enfolded each other in an embrace like that of an aged mother and a long absent son.

'Aunt Myrtle, my dear aunt!' Jacinth heard the kind, cheery voice exclaim, though in accents broken by sudden emotion. 'You who have been so good to us, to whom I owe my life. But this—this coming yourself is the kindest of all.'

Then Jacinth turned and fled—fled down a path leading somewhere or nowhere, till she found herself at the other side of the house, and ran full tilt against Bessie, who was coming out to see what was happening. For sounds carried far in the clear frosty air, and visitors were an event at [Pg 285] the little St Rémi villa.

'Jacinth,' she exclaimed, catching hold of the flying girl, 'what is it?'

'Oh Bessie, it's everything—everything beautiful and wonderful. But we mustn't interrupt them. Take me into the house and call Camilla and your mother, and I'll explain it all.'

That was the beginning, but by no means the end. Far from it indeed. For even if Jacinth lives to be a very old woman, I think she will always look back upon the next few weeks at Basse—the weeks before the Harpers returned to England, which they did before the doctors considered it quite safe for Lady Myrtle to face the northern spring—as among the happiest she ever knew. There were several reasons for this. There was the great and unselfish pleasure of seeing the quiet restful content on her dear old friend's face, and knowing that in some measure she had been the means of bringing it there; there was the delight of writing home with the news of the happy state of things that had come about, and receiving her full meed of sympathy and appreciation from her father and mother and faithful little Frances; and lastly, there was the, to Jacinth, really new pleasure of thoroughly congenial companionship of her own age. For at school her habit of reserve and self-dependence had come in the way of her making friends, and she was so accustomed to taking the lead and being the elder, that she was slow to enter into the give and take on more or less equal ground that is an essential condition of pleasant and profitable intercourse between the young. [Pg 286]

And her ideal friend—much as she learned to love and esteem hearty generous Bessie and gentle little Margaret—Jacinth's friend of friends came to be Camilla, whose two or three years' seniority seemed only to bring them closer, for Jacinth was in many ways 'old for her age.'

Yes, it was a happy time, even though now and then some twinges of self-reproach made Jacinth feel how little she had at one time merited the loving confidence with which her new friends treated her.

'But that you must bear, my dear,' said Lady Myrtle, when on one or two occasions this feeling grew so acute that she had to express it to some one. 'Take it as your punishment if you think you deserve it. For it would be cruel to distress these candid, unselfish girls by confessions of ill-will or prejudice which no longer exist. For my sake, dear Jacinth, for my sake too, try now to "let the dead past bury its dead."'

And the girl did so.

Some happy years followed this good beginning. Years not untouched by trouble and trials, but with an undercurrent of good. Barmettle never became a congenial home, but Jacinth as she grew older lost her extreme dislike to it, in the happiness of being all together, and knowing that not only was her father satisfied with his work, but that many opportunities for helping others were open to herself and Frances, as well as to their active unselfish mother.

And bright holidays with Lady Myrtle, when old Robin Redbreast stretched his wings in some wonderful way so as to take in his kind owner's grand-nephews and nieces as well as the Mildmay party, went far to reconcile Jacinth and Frances to the gloom and chill of their home in the north. [Pg 287]

Perhaps Christmas was the most trying time. For a merry family party would have been something to look forward to at that season. But the dear old lady, alas! had spent her last Christmas in England that year—that first year at Thetford—when Jacinth and Frances and Eugene were her guests. For her health grew more and more fragile, and every season her time at Robin Redbreast had to be cut shorter and shorter, till at length barely six months of the twelve could be spent by her in England.

Most winters Jacinth spent some part of with her at Basse, and sometimes Camilla or Bessie replaced her. One year the whole Mildmay family joined her for two months. So there were many pleasant mitigations of her enforced banishment, though it gradually became impossible for those who had learned to love her so dearly to blind themselves to the fact that the gentle old woman was not far from the end of her chequered and at one time lonely life.

And one day in the early spring-time, when the sunshine was already warm and the sky already deeply blue in the genial south, when the snowdrops were raising their pretty timid heads in the garden at Robin Redbreast, and the birds were beginning to hope that the winter was over and gone, Lady Myrtle died. There was no one with her at the time. Captain Harper had left her but the week before, and Jacinth Mildmay was to have joined her a few days later.

'If I could but have been with her, mamma,' said the girl among her tears.

But perhaps it was better not. To some natures the sorrow of others is very hard to see, and I think Lady Myrtle was one of those. Jacinth was nineteen at the time of her old friend's death. [Pg 288] Two years of Colonel Mildmay's time at Barmettle had yet to expire.

'We shall miss our summers at Robin Redbreast sadly, mamma, shall we not?' she said one day. 'What is to be done about it? Is it to be sold, or are the Harpers to have it? I hope so. Does papa know?'

'He has only heard about it recently,' said her mother. 'He and Captain Harper are Lady Myrtle's executors, but there has been a good deal of trouble and delay, for owing to her death having taken place abroad, some difficulties occurred about proving the will. But now I believe all is right, and your father is going to tell you about it.'

At that moment the door opened and Colonel Mildmay came in. He glanced at his wife with a half-inquiry in his eyes when he saw that she and his daughter were talking seriously.

'Yes,' replied Mrs Mildmay to his unspoken question, 'I was just saying to Jacinth that you were going to explain to her about our dear old friend's disposal of things.'

'I happened to ask mamma if the Harpers were going to live at Robin Redbreast,' said Jacinth. 'Somehow I hadn't thought about it before.'

'It must have been a "brain wave,"' said her father, 'for only this morning I decided to have a talk with you about it.'

Jacinth looked up with a slight feeling of apprehension. Colonel Mildmay's tone was very grave. But she had no reason for misgiving: she knew she had never—since her eyes had been awakened to the prejudice and jealousy she was in danger of yielding to—never felt or expressed anything but sincere esteem and affection for Lady Myrtle's relations. [Pg 289]

'I don't want to hear anything in particular, papa,' she said gently, 'but just as you like, of course. It was only,' and her voice faltered a little, 'the associations with Robin Redbreast. We have been so happy there: I shouldn't like strangers to have it.'

'Strangers are not going to have it,' Colonel Mildmay replied. 'But it is not left to the Harpers. They did not wish it. They have no special liking for that neighbourhood, and it suits them far better to make their headquarters farther south. But I know you will be glad to hear, Jacinth, that their aunt has left them a most fair and equitable proportion of the property at her disposal. They have no cause for future anxiety at all. Captain Harper is more than satisfied; he had expected nothing of the kind, and I perfectly believe that if, as he says, "just a little token of her restored goodwill" had been all that was to come to them, he would have been content. I never met with more truly unworldly and unselfish people.'

He stopped for a moment.

'I am so glad, so very glad,' said Jacinth.

'And the Elvedons too are very grateful,' continued her father, 'for besides what they knew was to be theirs, she has left them her town house—a much better one than they have had hitherto. Then her favourite charities have no reason to complain; she has forgotten nothing and no one'——

Again he hesitated, and for some undefined reason Jacinth's heart began to beat faster.

'And Robin Redbreast, my dear child; Robin Redbreast is—is to be yours.' [Pg 290]

'Oh, papa,' exclaimed the girl with a curious choking sensation. 'Oh, papa; is it right? Do you and mamma think it is?'

'Yes, dear. I think it is right. It is depriving no one of anything they had a claim upon. For Lady Myrtle had considerable savings: some part of those she surely had every right to leave as her own feelings prompted. Some of the land is to be sold; just enough kept to make the little place complete of its kind and not too expensive to manage. Enough money will be yours—or ours—Lady Myrtle wished it to be considered our home in the meantime, anyway, and she has managed all so that, if or when you marry, a certain separation of income can be easily made—for real comfort without extravagance or display. And some of her private charities she has left in your hands, trusting to your good judgment and unselfishness. All has been excellently thought over and wisely arranged.'

'Oh, papa; oh, mamma!' was still all that Jacinth could say. But after a moment or two she asked the question which she had so much at heart, 'Shall we all go to live there?'

'Part of the year certainly. And when my time here is out—you will be of age by then, Jass—perhaps I may feel that the day for taking it easier has come, and I may get some less onerous post nearer Thetford. But there is time enough for these details. Now run and tell Francie. I know you are longing to do so.'

So the curious prevision of the future which had come over them all at 'Uncle Marmy's gates' was actually fulfilled. And kind Uncle Marmy himself came home before very long to find it so.

There is talk of his leaving off soldiering—he has seen some active service in the East of late—and taking up his abode in his own home at Stannesley. For he has been economical to some purpose. And Jacinth, who still builds castles in the air in her quiet way, has one under construction on the completed roof of which a flag *may* fly some day. It is that the very nicest and most entirely delightful wife Marmaduke Denison could possibly find, were he to search all the four quarters of the globe, would be Camilla Harper. [Pg 291]

THE END.

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