

## The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Third Miss St Quentin, by Mrs. Molesworth

This ebook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this ebook or online at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org). If you are not located in the United States, you'll have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: The Third Miss St Quentin

Author: Mrs. Molesworth

Release date: July 6, 2013 [EBook #43109]

Most recently updated: August 6, 2013

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE THIRD MISS ST QUENTIN \*\*\*

Mrs Molesworth

"The Third Miss St Quentin"

---

### Chapter One.

#### Six Years Old.

A very little girl was sitting on the rug in front of a brightly burning fire. She was amusing herself with picture books, a number of which were scattered about her, but her small face was flushed, her eyes were heavy, and she seemed restless and dissatisfied. She was suffering from a very bad cold.

"I can't read, and I can't see the picshures," she said complainingly, "my eyes hurts, and my head too. You read to me, Harvey."

The nurse to whom she spoke was busied in putting away the breakfast things.

"You must wait a bit, Miss Ella. I've got ever so many things to do this morning."

Ella looked far from pleased.

"Things must wait, not me," she said imperiously. "Mamma always reads to me this minute."

"Your mamma's ill, Miss Ella; and when there's illness in the house there's plenty for everybody to do without wasting one's time over nonsense."

Ella's face grew scarlet with anger.

"'Tisn't nonsense," she said; "I'm ill too. I've got a cold, and you should amoose me."

But before Harvey had time to reply, except by a short laugh, the door opened, and both the occupants of the nursery looked round to see who was there. A young girl of thirteen or fourteen, but with something in her air and manner which made her seem older, came in quickly. She was tall and slight, and though very plainly dressed, one could not have passed her by without noticing her.

"Harvey," she said, and her tone, though not ungentle, was cold and even a very little haughty, "how is Miss Ella to-day? Mrs St Quentin is very anxious about her."

Harvey glanced round with a sort of affectation of indifference that was irritating.

"There's not the least need in the world to be anxious, miss," she said. "The child's got a cold, like everybody else in this changeable weather. There was no need for her mamma to hear nothing about it."

The girl looked at her still more severely.

"It is your fault that she has a cold, and you know it," she said. "She was out far too late the day before yesterday. I certainly do not wish Mrs St Quentin to be troubled, but if you are not more careful I shall speak to my father; I warn you plainly." Ella had been listening open-mouthed to this discussion, and in the interest of it had forgotten her own tribulations. She got up from the floor, and moved by the generous childish impulse of defending the oppressed, resenting too, perhaps, that her sister had taken no direct notice of her since entering the room, she ran to Harvey and caught hold of her hand.

"Naughty Maddie," she said, "you're not to scold poor Harvey; I don't like you, Maddie. Go away; I'll tell mamma."

Madelene glanced at the little girl, opened her lips as if to speak, but closed them again.

"If she is kind to Ella it is a good thing, I suppose, and perhaps I should not have said anything before the child," was the reflection that rapidly passed through her mind.

"You don't understand, Ella dear," she said quietly, and with unusual self-control, though her fair face coloured a little. "I am very glad that you don't like Harvey to be scolded."

And without saying more, she left the room.

"'Scolded' indeed, by a upsetting piece of goods like her. Very fine, Miss Madelene, but you're not mistress yet, nor never shall be to *me*, I can promise you," muttered Harvey.

But Ella was clinging to her.

"You must read to me now," the child urged. "I'm very good to you, Harvey. I wouldn't let sister Maddie scold you, so you should be nice to me."

A slight and not pleasant smile crossed the maid's face.

"Come along then, Miss Ella," she said. "If you'll be very good and not worrit-worrit if I'm out of your sight for half a minute, I'll read to you for a little. What is it you want?"

She seated herself comfortably in a rocking chair by the fire, and took the child on her knee.

"Here now," she said, carelessly picking up the first picture book that came to hand, "I'll read you some of these nursery rhymes—'Little Boy Blue.'"

"No," said Ella crossly, "I don't like singy stories. Read me real ones. 'Laddin's' very nice." But Harvey's eyes had caught sight of another of the bright-coloured books.

"Oh, no," she exclaimed, with a little malicious laugh, "we'll have 'Cinderella,' Miss Ella. 'Cinderella, Miss Ella,' there's a rhyme for you! It's like your name, and she's like you too. She had two big sisters, and her mamma was—" Here she coughed and stopped short.

"Her mamma was dead. I know the story," put in Ella, "*my* mamma isn't dead, so it isn't like me. You're talking nonsense, Harvey," and she pushed the book aside and began to wriggle about impatiently.

"I'm not talking nonsense," said Harvey sharply. "Just listen now, Miss Ella. Cinderella had two big sisters, and they were very cross to her—at least not always perhaps, but pretty often, and they'd come and scold for nothing at all."

"Like Maddie this morning," said Ella; "but it wasn't me she scolded. It was you. The story isn't like me; you're very silly, Harvey."

Harvey began to lose her temper; she was not going to be called "silly" even by a baby.

"Just you take care what you say, Miss Ella," she said roughly, "you don't know anything about it. The story doesn't say the big sisters were bad to her when she was a little girl like you. But some day you'll grow up and be a young lady, and then you'll see. How would you like to have all the dirty work to do and old shabby clothes to wear, while Miss Maddie and Miss Ermie went flaunting about in silks and satins and feathers?"

And as she spoke she opened the book at one of the pictures, where the sisters were arraying themselves for the ball, while sweet Cinderella crouched forlorn in a corner.

Ella stared at the book with an attention she had never before bestowed upon it, her face very solemn indeed. Suddenly her expression changed.

"No," she said, "it's not like me and Maddie and Ermie. *Her* sisters are very ugly, and they've horrid black curls. Maddie and Ermie aren't ugly, and they haven't nasty cross faces. No; they'd never be so naughty," and she looked up in triumph, though there was a little quaver of anxiety in her voice still.

"Oh, very well," said Harvey, "if you're so fond of your sisters as all that, however unkind they are to poor Harvey—"

"I didn't say *you*—I think Maddie was very naughty to scold you, dear Harvey. I only said they wouldn't be so c'uel to me if I was big—not like these *piggys* sisters in the book," said Ella, using the strongest language in her repertory.

"Oh, well, you're not big yet. Perhaps you'll wish for poor Harvey all the same some day, though you don't care for her now. Of course poor Harvey's only a servant, and Miss Maddie and Miss Ermie are grand, rich young ladies."

"And I shall be a grand, rich young lady too," said Ella.

Harvey only laughed.

Ella grew very excited.

"Harvey, say I shall be. You *must* say it," she repeated, shaking the maid's arm.

"Miss Ella, for shame. What a little fury you are. How can I say what you'll be? You should be a grand, rich young lady if *I* was your sister, but I can't speak for others."

"What do you mean?" cried Ella. "*Mamma* will let me be a grand young lady. Maddie and Ernie aren't over *mamma*. Harvey, do you hear?"

"Hush," said the nurse, suddenly changing her tone, "your *mamma's* very ill, Miss Ella, and if you make such a noise they'll all think you very naughty. I was only joking—of course you'll be a beautiful young lady too, some day."

But Ella was not to be so easily smoothed down.

"You weren't joking," she said resentfully. "I'll ask Maddie if it's true," and she began to scramble down. "I'll take the book and tell her you said it was like me and them."

Harvey caught hold of her.

"If you do, Miss Ella," she said, "you'll get such a scolding as you've never had in your life. And I'll be sent away—you'll see—and it'll be all your fault." Ella stopped short.

"Then why did you say it to me?" she asked, for she was a clever and quick-witted child.

"Oh, well—I shouldn't have said it. When you're older you'll understand better, darling. You see Harvey loves you so—she'd like you to be the eldest and have everything like a little princess. The *third's* never the same—and Harvey doesn't like to think of her Miss Ella coming in for the old clothes and the leavings, and the worst of it all, so to say."

Ella had calmed down now, but she sat listening intently with a startled, uneasy look, painful to see on her pretty little face.

"But *mamma* won't let me have the shabby old clothes, *mamma* loves me too, Harvey," she persisted.

"Yes, yes—but poor *mamma's* very ill. But never mind, darling. While Harvey's here no one shall put upon you, and then there's your Auntie Phillis. *She* loves my Miss Ella, that she does."

"Auntie's not here," said the child.

"No, but may be she'll come some day soon," said Harvey mysteriously, "only don't you say I said so. You don't want to get poor Harvey scolded again, do you, darling?"

"No," said Ella, but that was all, and when Harvey kissed her, though she submitted quietly, she did not in any way return the caress.

Then she got down from her nurse's knee and collected her picture books together, and put them away.

"Sha'n't I read anything to you? There's lots of other pretty stories," Harvey asked.

"No," said Ella again, "I don't like no stories."

And once or twice during that day, even Harvey was startled, and a little conscience-stricken at the expression on the child's face.

That same morning in a pretty sitting-room on the ground floor of the house, Madelene St Quentin and her sister Ermine were reading, or rather preparing some lessons together, when the door opened and an elderly lady in walking dress came in. Madelene started to her feet.

"Oh, Aunt Anna," she exclaimed, "I am so glad you have come. I have felt so fidgety all the morning, I couldn't settle to anything. It is so good of you to have come over again so early."

"I promised you I would, my dear," the new-comer replied. "I knew you would be anxious to see me after your father being with us last night."

"You had a long talk with *mamma* first, and then you and papa had time to consider it all?" said Madelene, "oh, I do hope—"

Lady Cheynes interrupted her.

"I will tell you all about it," she said, "but first tell me—how is poor Ellen this morning? Had she a good night?"

Madelene shook her head.

"Not very, I'm afraid. It is so provoking—with all our care to save her anxiety—last night when Ella was taken to say good-night to her, *mamma* found out in an instant that the child had a cold, and she has been worrying about it ever since. I spoke as severely as I could to Harvey this morning. Of course it is all her fault."

Lady Cheynes in her turn shook her head.

"Of course it is her fault. But I am afraid it is no use for you to say anything, my dear Maddie. It is a vicious circle. Ellen's faith in Harvey must not be destroyed, for it could only be done at a terrible risk to your poor mother—and yet the more Harvey is left to herself the more and more she presumes upon it."

"I am not quite sure of that, Aunt Anna," said Madelene. "There must be good in Harvey, I hope—Ella is very fond of her."

Lady Cheynes tapped the umbrella she held in her hand, impatiently on the floor. She was a small, handsome old lady, scarcely indeed old in point of years, but looking so, thanks to her white hair and the style of dress she affected. She was never seen except in black, but black of the richest, though as she had not changed the fashion of her garments since her widowhood some thirty years ago, she had something quaint and old-world-like about her, decidedly pleasing however when combined with freshness of material and exquisite neatness of finish. She had bright dark eyes, and delicate features. A very attractive old lady, but somewhat awe-inspiring nevertheless.

"Rubbish, Maddie," she said sharply. "I don't mean," she hastened to add, "that there is no good in the woman. If so, she would be a fiend. But as for the child being fond of her—that says nothing; people talk a good deal of nonsense about children's innate discernment. There is nothing so easy as to humbug a child—up to a certain point, that's to say. Harvey can easily wheedle Ella into fancying herself fond of her, when it suits the woman's purpose. But at bottom I doubt if the child does care for her."

"Ella has a generous nature," said Madelene.

"Yes," Ermine agreed, speaking for the first time; "she always flies up in defence of any one she thinks ill-used."

Lady Cheynes glanced across the room at the last speaker.

"I did not notice you were there, Ermie," she said abruptly, "Philip is kicking his heels somewhere about. Suppose you go out and look for him? The two of you can entertain each other for half an hour or so while I talk to Madelene. It's no secrets—you needn't feel hurt. But I never have been and never shall be able to talk comfortably *à trois*."

Ermine got up from her place at the table and moved towards the door, turning a laughing face to Lady Cheynes as she did so.

"My feelings offended, auntie!" she said. "That would be something new, wouldn't it? Now do make a nice and gratifying little speech to me for once."

Lady Cheynes smiled at Ermine as she left the room.

"I wish Ella were as good tempered as Ermie," said she, with a sigh. "The child is very spoilt; that is the worst of it. And that brings me to what you are so anxious about, my dear."

"Yes?" said Madelene eagerly, her face flushing, and her large soft eyes lighting up.

But her aunt hesitated. She knew the extreme disappointment her next words must convey, and though her manner was abrupt, her heart was tender and sympathising.

"It is no use, Maddie. I said everything I could think of yesterday to poor Ellen. And your father, as we know, agrees with us. But of course he *cannot* but give in now to that poor child of a wife of his. It would be brutal not to do so."

Madelene did not speak, but her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, auntie," she said at last.

"You must be *truly* unselfish, my dear, and not take it to heart too much."

"I had thought it would have been a comfort to poor mamma, for she has been very good to Ermine and me. I think—I do think, considering she has had us herself since we were quite little, that she might trust us," said Madelene in a tremulous voice.

"She does—thoroughly," said Lady Cheynes, "don't make it more painful for yourself by any doubts of that kind, my dear child. And there is reason in what she says, too. Ellen is not a foolish woman."

"No," said Madelene, "I did not mean—"

"You are very young, you know, my dear, though older than your years. And even as it is, things will not be easy for you. That is what poor Ellen feels. There is your father—it is very hard upon him, still a young man, to be a second time left a widower. And he will never marry again—not a third time."

Madelene started. Her aunt patted her hand gently.

"Don't be shocked at my alluding to such a possibility," she said. "I know your father and Ellen would like you to understand all. So much hangs on you, Maddie. It is to you Ellen confides your father, and that is one of her great reasons for wishing the child to be away. It would be too much upon you. I see that myself. You would have to get a first-rate nursery-governess, or some one of that kind, or, worst of all, you might be bound to keep Harvey."

"But Harvey will stay with her as it is—stay and do her best to poison our little sister against us," said Madelene. "For you see, aunt, the—the position will be rather an awkward one afterwards, when we are all grown-up, I mean. And Ella must come back to her own home, some time."

"If she lives," said Lady Cheynes, "but that is another point. Ellen may be fanciful—I hardly agree with her myself; her own illness seems to me accidental. Her family is strong, but, rightly or wrongly, she thinks Ella very delicate. And Mrs Robertson lives in a mild climate and would take the child abroad if necessary. In that way there is something to be said in favour of the plan."

"Yes," said Madelene, but she still sighed. "Aunt Anna," she added in a moment or two, "I will try and bear the

disappointment well, and be as cheerful as I can with poor mamma, for—for the little while that remains.”

“Yes, dear, I am sure you will. Now, perhaps, we had better call in Ermine and Philip—he is anxious to see all he can of you before he goes. And next week Bernard will be here—they will go back to school together.”

“Oh,” exclaimed Madelene, “I am so glad Bernard is coming. Ernie and I have always wished so to see him. Only—everything is so sad here just now,” and she hesitated.

“You and Ernie must come over once or twice to spend a day with us while the boys are still here. Ellen would like it—she was saying only yesterday how unhappy it makes her to see your young lives so saddened.”

“Poor mamma, she is very unselfish,” said Madelene.

Then Lady Cheynes got up, and followed by her grand-niece, made her way out of the room, down a long passage with a glass door at the end leading into the garden, where for a moment she stood looking out.

“I don’t see them,” she said; “get a shawl, Maddie, and we’ll go and look for them. A breath of air will do you good.”

She slipped her hand through the girl’s arm, and together they walked slowly along the broad gravelled terrace, which ran round two sides of the house.

“They may have gone to the stables,” said Madelene. “Ermine is always glad of an excuse for visiting the horses, and papa won’t allow her to go alone.”

“I should think not, indeed,” said the old lady. “Even with Philip, I don’t know—Philip is only a boy—”

Laughing voices were just then heard.

“There they are,” said Lady Cheynes, as round a corner came the two she and Madelene had come out to look for. “Dear me, running races, are they? Ernie is really a tom-boy, I am afraid.”

But a very attractive tom-boy, it must be allowed, she could not but add to herself, as Ermine, her cheeks flushed with running, her bright brown hair, some shades darker than Maddie’s, flying behind her, her merry hazel eyes sparkling with fun, came rushing towards them.

“We’ve had such a race,” she exclaimed breathlessly. “I expect it’s about the last time I’ll have a chance of gaining. Philip’s legs *are* growing so long.”

“Time they should,” said Philip. “I think you forget, Ermine, that I was fourteen last week. And I’m not anything like as tall as most fellows of my age.”

“Take your hands out of your pockets if you want to look taller,” said Madelene in an elder-sisterly tone. “It makes boys slouch so dreadfully. And, by the by, Philip, you haven’t even offered to shake hands with me.”

The boy started and looked ashamed.

“Oh, I beg your pardon, Madelene, I do, indeed,” he said, “won’t you forgive me?”

He looked up at her—she was a little taller than he—with real distress in his dark eyes. He was a strikingly handsome boy, with his grandmother’s delicate features, though in his case sun-browned and stronger looking, and eyes which the old lady used to say confidentially to some of her friends, made her tremble for the mischief they might do in the future. Already in the present they were not to be resisted. Madelene laughed a little and held out her own hand, which Philip took eagerly.

“I am glad,” she said, “to hear from Aunt Anna, that your friend Bernard is coming next week to keep you in order till you go back to school.”

“Oh,” Ermine exclaimed, “is *he* coming? I’m not glad at all. I hate prigs.”

Rather to Madelene’s surprise Philip said nothing. “Is he a prig?” she asked.

Philip coloured a little.

“No,” he said, “of course he isn’t. Ask granny. He’s not a prig, but I’m cross.”

Lady Cheynes looked rather puzzled.

“What’s the matter, Phil?” she said. “You were pleased enough this morning about Bernard’s coming.”

“I know I was,” said the boy. “But it’s since coming over here and feeling the old jolly way. It’s so horrid not to see more of each other. I’d rather have you girls than any one when I’m at home. And Bernard’s older and you don’t know him. He’ll make you seem quite grown-up, and—”

“Maddie, perhaps—not me,” Ermine interrupted. “Never mind, Phil. You and I will keep each other company.”

“But I’ve scarcely seen you these holidays,” said Philip. “Granny, can’t they come over to us?” Madelene shook her head.

“Not just now,” she said sadly. “We really have a good deal to do. One or other of us has to walk or ride with papa

every afternoon—mamma fidgets so if she thinks he doesn't go out—and then one of us must be within hail in case she was worse. And then there's Ella—"

There *was* Ella in fact. For as she said the words, a little shrill voice came sounding over the lawn.

"Maddie, Ermie, I'm here. And oh there's big Phil. Take me a ride, Phil, on you's shoulders, do, *do*."

"Horrid little minx—" the boy was beginning to say, though in a low voice, but the words died on his lips. The little figure looked so bright and innocent as it flew towards them like a lapwing, heedless of Harvey and her remonstrances in the background, sure, with the irresistible confidence of childhood, of its welcome.

"Good morning, godmother," she said, holding up her sweet little face for a kiss. "I've got a bad cold," and she tried to cough, "but Harvey said it would do me good to come out a little in the sun. And I'm going to see mamma when I go in, to let her see my cold isn't worse. Oh, big Phil, *do* take me a ride on your shoulders."

She clasped her hands entreatingly. Everything she did was full of pretty childish grace, when, that is to say, Ella chose to be in good temper.

"Hoist her up," said Philip, and between them the two elder sisters managed to settle the child on his shoulders.

"That's right—gallop away. Oh! how nice!" she exclaimed, and when after two or three canters round the lawn, which was really as much as ever Philip had breath for, he deposited her again safely on the ground, she thanked him as graciously as a little princess.

"What a pity Maddie and Ermie are too big for you to ride them too," she said condescendingly, at which they all laughed.

"Yes," said Lady Cheynes, smiling, but not for Ella to hear, "you can be generous enough, my little girl, when you get your own way."

"And when she is *first*" added Ermine. "It is too funny, auntie, to see that sort of feeling in Ella, already. I'm sure Maddie and I weren't like that when we were little."

Lady Cheynes looked round, Harvey was coming up the path, the old lady made a little sign to Ermine to take care.

"I think perhaps Miss Ella has been out long enough, if you'll excuse me, my lady," said the maid, in her smoothest tones.

"Take her in then by all means," said Lady Cheynes. "Ella, my dear, your nurse is waiting for you."

Ella was playing with Phil, a few paces off.

"I won't go in," she said coolly.

Madelene took her by the hand.

"Come, dear," she said, "you mustn't make your cold worse."

The child pulled away from her.

"You're very naughty, Maddie," she said. "You only want me to go away that you and Ermie may play with Phil yourselves. Phil, say I'm not to go."

"Not I," said Philip. "You're a spoilt, rude little girl, and I'm very sorry I gave you a ride."

Ella turned upon him like a little fury, but Harvey interposed.

"Come, Miss Ella, my dear," she said. "Sir Philip will think you're growing into a baby instead of a big girl if you dance about like that."

And by dint of coaxing and persuasion which Harvey knew how to employ skilfully enough when it suited her, the child was at last got away.

"Grandmother," said Philip Cheynes, half-an-hour or so later, when the two were on their way home in the old lady's pony-carriage, "don't you think it is a great pity that Colonel St Quentin married again? It has brought them all nothing but trouble—Mrs St Quentin so delicate, and that spoilt little brat."

"You mustn't abuse my godchild, Phil," Lady Cheynes replied. "She might be a charming child. And her poor mother—No, I think Madelene and Ermie owe a great deal to her."

"Oh, well," said Philip, boyishly, "I suppose they do. Maddie's awfully cut up about Ella's going away from them. For my part, I'm very glad she is going away. Still, she is a jolly little thing when she's in a good temper."

---

## Chapter Two.

### Eleven Years After.

Summer, not spring now. But the same garden and the same people in it—three of them, that is to say, little chance though there might be at the first glance, of our recognising them.

They were sitting together on the lawn—the two sisters Madelene and Ermine and their cousin Philip. They were less changed than he perhaps—Madelene especially, for she had always been tall, and at fourteen had looked older than her years, whereas now at five-and-twenty one could scarcely have believed her to be as much. She had fulfilled the promise of her girlhood for she was an undoubtedly beautiful woman, though to those who knew her but superficially, she might have seemed wanting in animation, for she was quiet almost to coldness, thoughtful and self-controlled, weighing well her words before she spoke and slow in making up her mind to any decision.

Ermine, brown-haired and brown-eyed, brilliantly handsome, was more popular than her elder sister. But rivalry or the shadow of it between the two was unknown. Never were two sisters more completely at one, more trusted and trusting friends.

“They are all in all to each other and to their father,” was the universal description of them. “Almost too much so indeed,” some would add. “It must be because they are so perfectly happy as they are that neither of them is married.”

For why the Misses St Quentin did *not* marry was every year becoming more and more of a puzzle to their friends and the world at large.

Sir Philip Cheynes got up from the comfortable garden chair on which he had been lounging and leant against the elm under whose wide-spreading branches the little party had established themselves. A table was prepared for tea, Ermine had a book on her knee which she imagined herself to be or to have been reading, Madelene was knitting.

“It will spoil it all,” said Philip at length after a silence which had lasted some moments, “spoil it all completely.”

“What?” asked Madelene, looking up, though her fingers still went on busily weaving the soft snowy fleece on her lap.

“Everything, of course. Our nice settled ways—this satisfactory sort of life together, knowing each other so well that we never have misunderstandings or upsets or—or bothers. Your father and my grandmother are a model aunt and nephew to begin with, and as for us three—why the world never before saw such a perfection of cousinship! And into the midst of this delightful state of things, this pleasant little society where each of us can pursue his or her special avocation and—and perform his or her special duties—for we’re not selfish people, my dears—I’m not going to allow that—into the midst of it you fling helter-skelter, a spoilt, ill-tempered, restless unmanageable school-girl—eager for amusement and impatient of control—incapable of understanding us or the things we care for. I never could have imagined anything more undesirable—I—”

“Upon my word, Philip, I had no idea you could be so eloquent,” interrupted Ermine. “But it is eloquence thrown away, unless you want to prove that you yourself, if not we, are the very thing you have been denying, without having been accused of it.”

“Selfishness—eh?” said Philip.

“Of course, or something very like it.”

Philip was silent. To judge by his next remark Ermine’s reproof had not touched him much.

“I don’t know that, for some time to come at least,” he said, “it will matter much to me. I shall probably be very little here till Christmas and then only for a few weeks.”

His cousins looked up in some surprise.

“Indeed,” they said. “Where are you going? Abroad again?”—“You will miss all the hunting and shooting,” Ermine added.

“I know that,” said Philip. “I’m not going for pleasure. I am thinking of taking up my quarters at Grimswell for a while. The house there is vacant now, you know, and my grandmother thinks it a duty for me to live on the spot and look after things a little.”

Madelene’s eyes lighted up.

“I am so glad,” she said. “I quite agree with Aunt Anna.”

“I thought you would,” said Philip, “and so would never mind who. I can’t say I exactly see it myself—things are very fairly managed there—but still. I’m the sort of fellow to make a martyr of myself to duty, you know.”

Ermine glanced at him as he stood there lazily leaning against the tree—handsome, sunny and sweet-tempered, with a half mischievous, half deprecating smile on his lips, and a kindly light in his long-shaped dark eyes.

“You look like it,” she said with good-natured contempt.

“But to return to our—” began Philip.

“Stop,” cried Ermine, “you are not to say ‘muttons,’ and I *feel* you are going to. It is so silly.”

“Really,” Philip remonstrated. “Maddie,” and he turned to Miss St Quentin appealingly, “don’t you think she is too bad? Bullying me not only for my taken-for-granted selfishness but for expressions offensive to her ladyship’s

fastidious taste which she fancies I *might* be going to use."

"My dear Philip, you certainly have a great deal of energy—and—breath to spare this hot afternoon," said Ermine, leaning back as if exhausted on her seat, "I know you can talk—you've never given us any reason to doubt it, but I don't think I ever heard you rattle on quite as indefatigably as to-day. One can't get a word in."

"I want you both to be quiet and let me talk a little," said Madelene breaking her way in. She scented the approach of one of the battles of words in which, in spite of the "perfect understanding" which Philip boasted of between his cousins and himself, he and Ermine sometimes indulged and which were not always absolutely harmless in their results. "As Philip was saying when you interrupted him, Ermine, let us go back to our—subject. I mean this little sister of ours. I wish you would not speak of her return, or think of it as you do, Philip."

"That's meant for me too, I wish you to observe, Phil," said Ermine. "It's a case of evil communications, and Maddie is trembling for my good manners to the third Miss St Quentin when she makes her appearance among us."

"On the contrary, Ermine," said Madelene gravely, "if you are influenced by Philip's way of speaking it is that the ground with you is ready for the seed." Philip began to whistle softly—Ermine grew rather rosier than she was before.

"If so—well—what then? Go on, Maddie," she said.

She got up from her seat and half threw herself on the grass beside Madelene. But Madelene did not speak. "Of course," Ermine went on, "I know it's all quite right, and not only right but inevitable. And you're as good and wise as you can be, Maddie. It was only that this morning I felt rather cross about it, and Philip and I couldn't help showing each other what we felt. But go on, Maddie—say what you were going to say."

"It is only the old thing," said Madelene. "I think, and I shall always think what I did at the time, though I was only a child then, that it was a mistake to send Ella away to be brought up out of her own home and separated from her nearest relations. Of course it was not anticipated that the separation would be so long and complete a one as it has turned out—at least I *suppose* not."

"I don't know why it need have been so," said Ermine, "only every time there has been anything said of her coming to us her aunt has put difficulties in the way."

"There seemed sense in what she said," Madelene replied; "it was not much use Ella's coming here, just to get unsettled and her lessons interrupted, for a short visit. And then, of course, papa's long illness was another reason."

"And Mrs Robertson's own wishes—the strongest reason of all," added Ermine. "She may be a kind and good enough woman, but I shall always say she is very selfish. Keeping the child entirely to herself all these years, and now when she suddenly takes it into her head to marry again in this extraordinary way—she must be as old as the hills—poor Ella goes to the wall!"

"That's probably the gentleman's doing," said Philip.

"Well then she shouldn't marry a man who would do so," said Ermine.

"I quite agree with you," he replied drily, "but we all know there's no fool like an old fool."

"It is hard upon Ella, with whomever the fault lies—that is what I've been trying to get to all this time," said Madelene. "If she had always looked upon this as her home, and felt that we were really her sisters, she would have grown up to understand certain things gradually, which, now when the time comes that she must know them, will fall upon her as a shock."

"You mean about our money and this place?" asked Ermine.

"Of course—and about papa's being, though I *hate* saying it, in reality a poor man."

"Do you think there is any need for her to know anything about it for some time to come?" asked Philip gently, completely casting aside the bantering tone in which he had hitherto spoken.

Madelene looked up eagerly.

"Oh, do you think so, Philip?" she said. "I am so glad. It is what I have been thinking, but I know papa respects your opinion and it will strengthen what I have said to him."

"Decidedly," said Philip. "It seems to me it would be almost—brutal—I am not applying the word to any person, but to the situation, as it were—to meet the poor child, already sore probably at having been turned out of the only home she can really remember, with the announcement that the new one she is coming to is only hers on sufferance, and that her future is, to say the least, an uncertain one."

"It would not be so for another day if we had more in our power," said Madelene hotly.

"No, I know that—know it and understand it. But—a child of—how much? fifteen, sixteen?"

"Seventeen, seventeen and a quarter."

"Well, even of seventeen and a quarter would have the haziest notions about law and legal obligations. No, gain her love and confidence first, by all means."

"It is papa," said Madelene rather disconsolately. "The best of men are, at times I suppose, a little unreasonable."



Though he has given up the idea of a formal explanation to poor little Ella, still I am afraid he will wish us to be more —I don't know what to call it, less treating her just like ourselves, than Ermine and I would wish," and she looked up appealingly, her blue eyes quite pathetic in their expression.

"And she may misunderstand it—us," added Ermine.

"But it is right, necessary to a certain extent that she should *not* be placed in exactly the same position that she would have as your very own sister," said Philip firmly. "People should think of these awkward complications before they make second marriages, but once awkward positions do exist, it's no good pretending they don't. However, I think you are exaggerating matters, Maddie; unnecessarily anticipating an evil day which may, *will*, I feel sure, never come. Before this much-to-be-pitied young lady has to learn that she is not an heiress like her sisters, she may have learnt to love and trust those sisters as they deserve, and love casteth out other ugly things as well as fear."

"Thank you, dear Philip," said Miss St Quentin.

"And—grand discovery!" he exclaimed. "She's not 'out'. You can easily treat her more like a child at first, till she has got to know you. She cannot have been accustomed to much dissipation under the roof of the worthy Mrs Robertson."

"No, none at all I fancy. But she has had her own way in everything there was to have it in I feel sure," said Madelene. "And if we begin by snubbing her—"

"Snubbing her, not a bit of it. It will make her feel herself of all the more importance if you will tell her Uncle Marcus thinks it better for her not to come out till she's eighteen—neither of you came out till then?"

"I was nineteen," said Ermine; "you know we were abroad all the year before. I thought it very hard then, but now I'm very glad. It makes me seem a year at least younger than I am," she added naïvely.

"It's only staving off, after all, I'm afraid," said Madelene. "When she *is* eighteen or even nineteen, and has to come out, and wonders why papa won't let her have everything the same as us and—"

"Oh, Maddie, don't fuss so," said Ermine.

"Twenty things may happen before then to smooth the way."

"I hope so," said Miss St Quentin. But her tone was depressed.

"Scold her, Philip, do," said Ermine. "If she worries herself so about Ella it will make me dislike the child before I see her, and that won't mend matters."

"When does she come?" Sir Philip asked.

"Next month," Madelene replied.

"Do you think she feels it very much—the leaving her aunt, and coming among strangers as it were?" he asked.

"I don't know. She cannot but be fond of her aunt, but she has said distinctly that she would not wish to go on living with her and her new husband. And of course it is time and more than time for her to come to us if this is ever to be her home. And though Mrs Robertson is marrying a wealthy man, she loses all she had as a widow, and certainly we should not have liked *our sister* to be dependent on a stranger."

"You could have given Mrs Robertson a regular allowance for her, if that had been the only difficulty. But if this Mr what's his name?"

"Burton," said Ermine.

"If that Burton fellow is rich he would possibly have disliked any arrangement of that kind," said Philip.

"He evidently wants to get rid of her," said Madelene, smiling a little. "Some things in Mrs Robertson's letters make me imagine that the third Miss St Quentin has a will of her own, and a decided way of showing it. She speaks of 'dear Ella's having a high spirit, and that Mr Burton was not accustomed to young people.'"

"And Ella called him 'old Burton' in a letter to papa," added Ermine. "We told papa she must have left out the 'Mr', but for my part, I don't believe she did. I think that expression has made me more inclined to like her than anything else," said Ermine, calmly.

"Ermine!" said Madelene.

But Philip turned to her with another question.

"Are you sure," he said, "that Mrs Robertson may not already have explained things to Ella? If so, it would be better to know it."

"I am sure she can't have told her what she doesn't know herself," said Madelene. "Papa's losses made no practical difference to her; she has always received anything she wanted for Ella—to do her justice she has never been the least grasping—from us, but in his name just as before. We begged him to let it be so, and it has never come to much."

"Then do you think she has brought the child up very simply?" asked Philip.

"No—that is to say, I fancy she has been indulged a good deal as to her personal wishes. Mrs Robertson was comfortably off, though she had not a large house. I think all she has ever taken from papa or us has been literally spent on little Miss Ella herself. And they went to the South of France two winters, you know."

Philip did not speak for a minute or two.

Then he said slowly,—

"As things are, perhaps it is as well that Ella does not know more. But—had they remained as they were, I don't know but that Mrs Robertson *had* a right to be told of Uncle Marcus's losses. Indeed, it might have influenced her plans, possibly have prevented her marrying again, had she known the child had nothing to look to in the future."

Madelene reddened.

"She *has* something to look to in the future," she said, "she has *us*. And I'm quite sure nothing of the kind would have stopped her aunt's marrying again."

"'No fool like an old fool,' and everybody knows there's nothing on earth as obstinate *as* a fool. You're forgetting what you just said, Phil," said Ermine.

"No, I'm not. I didn't say it would have stopped it once she had got it into her head. I meant it might have prevented her ever thinking of it," Philip replied.

"I don't see that it would have made any difference. Mrs Robertson could never have *left* Ella anything except savings, which couldn't have come to much. But do leave off talking about money, Philip—I perfectly hate it. Ermie and I have been driven into hating it in the last two or three years since we came of age."

"And leave off talking about Ella, too, for a bit, do," said Ermine. "I mean to do my duty by her when she comes, but oh! I am so tired of the subject! Don't you think we might have tea now, Maddie? I don't believe papa will be back for ever so long."

"Certainly—it would be nonsense to wait for him—will you—oh, thank you, Philip, yes, just ring the bell at the side-door, twice. They understand. What a comfort it is to have some one who knows our little ways!"

"A tame cat," said Philip meekly, "Well, thank you. You are not so lavish of civil speeches to me, you and Ermine, as to make me inclined to quarrel with even the ghost of one."

"Come now, that's not quite fair," said Ermine, as the kettle and hot cakes duly made their appearance, "one doesn't make civil speeches to one's best friends, one keeps them, like calling cards, for acquaintances."

"Well, not civil speeches then—nice, gratifying speeches."

"I should have thought you must be tired of that sort of thing," Madelene replied.

Philip looked at her with an expression of inquiry, but of annoyance, too.

"Do you mean, Maddie, that you think I am spoilt?" he said. "If you do, I wish you would say so plainly."

Madelene felt a little conscience-stricken.

"No," she said, "I don't really. But I think it is a great wonder that you are not. You are a fair prey to flattery—rich, handsome, clever—"

"Madelene, stop," exclaimed Philip. "I might retaliate—why are you and Ermine not spoilt then?"

Miss St Quentin hesitated.

"I don't know," she said at last naïvely. "I don't think women—girls—do spoil so easily. And then—there are heaps of girls, here in England, as good-looking and far better-looking than we are—it is much rarer to find a man as handsome as you, Phil. And then—we have had more anxieties and responsibilities than you, and they keep one from being spoilt."

"I have granny," said Philip. "I don't mean that she is an anxiety or a responsibility, but she is—pretty sharp on one, you know. She wouldn't let me be spoilt."

"No," said Madelene, "she is very sensible. And after all you needn't look so cross, Philip. I didn't say you *were* spoilt—I said on the contrary it was great credit to you that you were not."

"You didn't," said Philip, "you allowed me no credit whatever in the matter. I do think it's rather hard on me to have all this severe handling just because I said I liked nice speeches from people I cared for—mind you, people I care for. That's quite a different thing from being open to flattery."

"Well, of course, it is," said Madelene. "We don't seem to be understanding each other with our usual perfection of sympathy, somehow, to-day."

"It's all because of that tiresome child's coming," said Ermine crossly. "I'm afraid Philip is right in dreading it. 'Coming events cast their shadows before them.' I can't say I think Ella's advent is likely to add to our sunshine."

Just then came the sound of wheels up the avenue. "What can that be?" said Madelene.

“Callers,” Philip suggested.

“No, it is getting too late. Besides—it sounds too slow and heavy for a carriage or pony-carriage. It is more like—” and she hesitated.

“Maddie won’t commit herself,” said Ermine laughing. “She sets up for a sort of ‘Fine Ear’ in the fairy-story, don’t you know, Philip?”

“No,” said Madelene. “It isn’t that. I only hesitated because what I was going to say seemed so silly. I thought it sounded so like the old Weevilscoombe fly—and what *could* it be coming here for at this time? The old Miss Lyndens hire it when they come out for their yearly visit, but that is over and past a fortnight ago.”

That it was an arrival of some kind, however, became clear. In another minute the hall bell was heard to ring—it was a bell of ponderous clang, impossible to mistake for any other.

Then the figure of Barnes, the butler—Barnes who never disturbed himself except on occasions of peculiar importance—was seen hastening along the terrace. The three cousins stared at each other.

“What can it be?” said Madelene, growing rather pale. “Can papa have met with an accident?”

The same thought had struck Sir Philip: he did not reply, but looked apprehensively towards Barnes.

“If you please, ma’am,” said that functionary, puffing a little with excitement and quick movement, “if you please, ma’am, it’s—it’s a lady. A young lady, with luggage—from Weevilscoombe, I suppose—anyhow, it’s the Weevilscoombe fly as has brought her—” but though there was plenty of time for Madelene to have here exclaimed “I knew it,” she did not avail herself of Barnes’s pause, for this purpose.

“A young lady;” she repeated; “there must be some mistake. We are not expecting any one. What is her name—she gave it, I suppose?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Barnes, hesitating still more—though he had all the air and bearing of an old servant he had not been more than five or six years in their service—“she did and she said as her name was ‘Miss St Quentin’.”

The three looked at each other again.

“Miss St Quentin,” they at last repeated, simultaneously, though not perfectly so—Madelene was a little behind the others and her “tin” came out last.

“I thought,” began Barnes again, “I took the liberty of thinking, it must be a mistake. From what I have ‘eard, ma’am, I should say it was, so to say, a slip of the tongue, the young lady being accustomed to be so addressed, living at a distance, if so be as I shrewdly suspect that her rightful desergration is Miss—Hella St Quentin, the third Miss St Quentin, ma’am.”

And again—too startled to feel any inclination to smile at the butler’s grandiloquence, which was often, almost more than any one’s risible nerves could stand unmoved—the three cousins looked at each other. And again they made simultaneously the same exclamation; this time consisting of but one word,—

“Ella!” they all three ejaculated.

---

## Chapter Three.

### “It is Really Ella.”

“What shall we do? What can be the matter?” said Madelene, when after an instant’s silence she began to take in the fact of Ella’s arrival.

“Receive her cordially of course. What else in Heaven’s name can you do?” Sir Philip replied with a touch of impatience. “After all there is nothing so extraordinary in a girl’s coming to her own father’s house—even taking refuge there if, as is possible—”

“She has been turned out of her aunt’s,” interrupted Ermine. “Yes, I’m certain that’s it—she and old Burton have come to blows and Ella’s high spirits or high temper have proved too much for him.”

“Ermine,” said Philip, warningly, “you should really,” and he glanced in Barnes’s direction.

But if Barnes did hear what they were saying he at least appeared so absolutely unconscious that Philip’s remonstrance fell rather flat. The butler had retired to a few paces distance, where he stood awaiting orders with an irreproachably blank expression.

“Is the young—is Miss Ella St Quentin in the library?” asked Sir Philip suddenly.

“Yes, my—I beg pardon—yes, Sir Philip,” Barnes replied. His former master had been a peer, and even after some years of serving a commoner Barnes found it difficult to ignore the old habit.

“Then go and tell her Miss St Quentin; mind you, say it distinctly, no Miss Madelene or Miss Ermine—the young lady is, as you supposed, Miss Ella St Quentin—say that Miss St Quentin will be with her immediately. You’d better go at once, Maddie.”

"She couldn't have meant to call herself Miss St Quentin—it was just an accident, no doubt," said Madelene nervously.

"Of course, but it's just as well from the first to remind her that she is *not* Miss St Quentin," said Philip. "Stupid of her aunt to have let her get into the habit. But Madelene—"

"Yes, yes. Ermine, hadn't you better get some fresh tea?—this will be cold," said Madelene, touching the teapot. "Philip, hadn't Ermine better come too?"

No one could have believed it of her—no one ever did believe it possible that the cold, stately Madelene was in reality a martyr to shyness and timidity. But the two or three who knew her well, knew the fact and pitied her intensely, her cousin Philip among them. But he knew, too, the best way to treat it, cruel as it sometimes seemed.

"No," he said, "decidedly not. You will get on much better alone, Maddie. Off with you, there's a good girl. And good-bye. I'm going round to the stable-yard and I'll mount there. I'm dying with curiosity, but all the same I'm too high-principled to indulge it. It wouldn't do for me to stay—you and Ermine are quite enough for the poor child to face at first."

"Oh, Philip," said Madelene, stopping short again, for by this time she had got a few yards on her way, "I thought you would have stayed to help us."

"Not I," Philip called after her. "It's much better not, I assure you. I'll look in to-morrow to see how you're all getting on, and to hear the whole story. And if I meet Uncle Marcus on his way home, as I dare say I shall, I'll tell him of the arrival, so as to save you having to break it to him."

"And do beg him to come home as quickly as he can," replied Madelene.

Philip got up from his seat and moved to go.

"Good-bye, Ermine," he said.

Ermine looked at him dubiously.

"Are you in earnest, Philip?" she said. "I have more than half an idea that you are going off out of cowardice, and—and—that all your regard for Ella's feelings, etc, is—"

"What?" said Philip, smiling.

"Talk," Ermine replied curtly.

Philip laughed.

"No, truly," he said. "All things considered it is much better for me to leave you. And it's quite true about my curiosity. I'm awfully curious both to hear about it all and to see this little personage who has descended among us in this thunder-and-lightning, bomb-shell sort of way. By Jove—" and he stopped short, while a different expression came into his face—"what a nuisance it is to think that all our jolly times together are over! I was grumbling at it prospectively this morning—to think that it has already come to pass."

He sighed. Ermine sighed too.

"Yes," she said, "it is horrid. For I know—as positively as if I could hear what is at this moment passing in the library—that the child has come to stay."

"Oh Lord, yes," Philip exclaimed, "not a doubt of it."

"I only wish she *were* a child," pursued Ermine. "It might be more of a bother in some ways, but in others—seventeen's an awful sort of age—most girls then are really children and full of fancying themselves grown-up, and standing on their dignity, and all the rest of it, and yet not really grown-up enough to be proper companions to—"

"Two full-fledged old maids like you and Maddie," put in Philip.

"Exactly," said Ermine.

"Well, good-bye again," he said, lifting his hat as he turned away in the direction of the stables.

Miss St Quentin made her way slowly to the house. She looked outwardly calm, indeed to look anything else had scarcely ever in her life occurred to Madelene, but inwardly she was greatly perturbed. To begin with, she was as I have said, a sufferer from intense shyness; shyness of that kind most painful and difficult to contend with, better perhaps defined as moral timidity, which shrinks with almost morbid horror from giving or witnessing pain or discomfort, which, but for the constraining and restraining force of a strong sense of duty, would any day gladly endure personal suffering or neglect, or allow wrong-doing to go unrebuked, rather than attempt the slightest remonstrance. Madelene could enter a roomful of strangers without a touch of nervousness, but the thought of reproving a servant would keep her awake for nights! and that something in the action of her young half-sister was about to call for rebuke or disapproval she felt instinctively certain. Then there were other reasons for her feeling far from able to meet Ella with the hearty welcome she would have wished; housekeeper's considerations were on her mind!

"I did so want to have the rooms arranged the way Ermine and I were planning," she said to herself. "It would have

been so much better to have begun regularly at once. Now I really don't know what to do. Papa would certainly be displeased if I gave her one of the long corridor ones, and yet the two or three empty rooms in the south wing are so small and would seem shabby. But I am afraid there is nothing else to do. I must explain to her that the rooms intended for her can't possibly be ready for some time. And about the maids too—we had planned it so well. Now, there will really be no one able to look after her, for I can't trust Mélanie; she is so injudicious with that chattering tongue of hers."

Meantime, the cause of all these discussions was waiting alone in the library. She had seated herself when first shown in, in a matter-of-course, unrestrained manner, as if quite at her ease. But this had been for the benefit of Barnes and his subordinates. No sooner was she left alone, than the girl got up and strolled nervously towards the window, where she stood looking out. Now that the deed was done, her courage began to flag.

"I wonder," she said to herself, clasping her little hands together, "I *wonder* what they'll say. They surely can't blame me, when I tell them how unendurable it was, and that even Aunt Phillis, in her heart, though she wouldn't own it, wished I were gone, for I know she did. She'll have got my telegram by now. How delighted old Burton will be—that's the only bit of it I hate to think of! Still, staying there to spite him would have been quarrelling with my nose—is that it?—no, quarrelling with my face—oh bother, I can't get it right, I do so wonder what they'll all say here."

There was nothing to help her in what she saw outside—not a human being was in sight—only the lovely, perfectly kept grounds, looking perhaps at their very best in the soft mellowness of the summer afternoon.

"How delightful it is here!" she thought next; "what a beautiful room, and what splendid books," and her girlish heart swelled with satisfaction to think that here was her home, the spot on earth where she had an undoubted, an unquestionable right to be! "How poky auntie's house would seem in comparison—and Mr Burton's 'mansion' even worse, for any way there was nothing vulgar or *parvenu* about our little house. Still—it does seem rather a shame that I should have been out of it all, all these years, I, that have just as good a right, as poor old Harvey used to tell me, to everything here as Madelene and Ermine. I do hope I shall be able to like them—of course I must not let myself be 'put upon,' but still—I consider they have kept the best of things to themselves hitherto and—oh I wish she'd be quick and come. I don't want to seem nervous and yet I *am*, horribly so."

She tapped her parasol on the floor, then she glanced furtively in a mirror to see how she was looking.

"My hair's rather rough," she thought, "but otherwise I don't think I look bad. I wish I didn't seem quite so young—and, oh, I do wish I were a little taller!"

She was small certainly, but as she was also slight and very well proportioned, this did not really detract from her—*beauty*, one could scarcely call it. Ella St Quentin was not beautiful; she was just exceedingly pretty. Her hair was brown, a shade lighter than Ermine's perhaps, but dark in comparison with Madelene's fair coils, and her eyes were hazel, lovely eyes, pathetic and merry by turns, as it suited their capricious little owner to make them, and her features were all charming. There were good points in this pretty face too, real sweetness in the curves of the mouth, frankness and honesty in the forehead and no lack of resolution in the chin—but the whole was the face of a child rather than a woman—a well-meaning, but fitful and undisciplined child, who had known little of life and its graver lessons, whom one would tremble to expose to the storms which, sooner or later, in one form or another, all must face. Yet there was latent strength too, if one looked more closely; it was a face to make one anxious but hopeful also.

She was well but simply dressed. Save for the extreme neatness of everything about her, she would have looked a mere school-girl; but the sweeps of her grey draperies, the poise of her head, nay, the very fit of her gloves, at once removed her from any possibility of being relegated to the category of girlish hobbledahoys. She had not a trace of awkwardness about her; she had passed through all the stages of teeth-changing, hair "doing up," skirts lengthening and such crises, as one to the manner born—awkwardness and Ella were not to be thought of in the same century.

The door opening at last, Ella flashed round from the window—was it the door, or her fancy only? For now all seemed still again, no, yes—the handle was moving a very little—truth to tell, Madelene holding the outside knob, was making a last effort to screw up her courage so as to meet her young sister affectionately but with all her wits about her nevertheless.

There was no drawing back now that she had begun to turn the handle, and with a sigh which Ella could not hear, Miss St Quentin came in. Ella gasped slightly—"how beautiful," was her first thought, to be however instantly followed by a second, "but how cold, and how horribly stuck-up! No, I feel it already—I shall never like her."

But Madelene, pale and calm, was advancing across the room.

"Ella?" she said, as if till that moment she had had some lingering doubt on the matter, "Ella—it is really you! What a surprise—no, I would not have known you again in the least. Tell me, there is nothing wrong? Nothing the matter with your aunt, I hope?"

She had stooped to kiss the young girl as she spoke. It would be untrue to say that the kiss was a very affectionate one, but on the other hand there was no intentional coldness about it. But Ella was not of this opinion.

"No, thank you," she replied, after submitting to, though not in any wise returning, the sisterly embrace. "Aunt Phillis is quite well—at this moment she must be, I am afraid, rather upset, for she will have got my telegram. I sent her one from Weevilscoombe station when I arrived."

"And why should that upset her?" asked Madelene; "she asked you to telegraph your safe arrival, I suppose? But you didn't travel alone?"

"Yes, indeed I did," said Ella with a slight laugh. It was a nervous laugh in reality, but to her sister it sounded hard and a little defiant. "I not only travelled alone, but I came off without any one knowing. In fact auntie would only know that I *had* left her for good, when she got my telegram."

Miss St Quentin's pale face flushed a little, then the momentary colour faded, leaving her paler than before. She sat down, and motioned to her sister to do the same.

"I am very sorry, very, very sorry to hear this," she said, nerving herself to speak. "Ella, I am afraid you have done very wrong, and foolishly. It is not using Mrs Robertson well after all her care of you—replacing a mother to you and giving you a home all these years. And—it is not a good beginning of your future life with us, to have done what we—what papa cannot approve of."

Ella half rose from the chair on which she had only that moment seated herself. Her eyes sparkled ominously, her face flushed too, but after a different fashion from Madelene's.

"I don't know anything about your not approving, and as for papa—well at least he can tell me himself what he thinks. But as for Aunt Phillis—I am sorry if I have grieved her. I would not have done so if I could have helped it, but I don't see that I could. It isn't my fault that she is going to marry a vulgar, purse-proud old snob, who had already begun to cast up to me, yes, actually to cast up to *me*, the daughter of Colonel St Quentin of Coombesthorpe, what his wife-to-be had done for me and spent on me as if I were a charity-child! And that touches on the point of the whole. I am grateful to poor auntie for all her love and care," and here the young, excited voice quivered a little, "but I don't see that I need to be grateful to her for what you may call substantial things—she didn't *need* to give me a home, as you say, or to spend her money on me—and a good deal of what was spent was my own money, or at least papa's, which is the same thing; she has told me so herself. I had my own home, just as you and Ermine have—I am papa's daughter just as much as you two are, even though we hadn't the same mother. Do you think now—in the name of common-sense—do you see that I should be grateful for being taken away from my own proper home, such a home as *this*—for no reason at all that I can see except that auntie herself wished it."

Madelene's face looked unspeakably pained.

"It was your own mother's wish," she said, in a low voice.

"So I have been told—but—do you think dead people's wishes should be allowed to affect the welfare of the living to such an extent?" asked the child in her sharp downright fashion. "For I don't. Still that's not the point—it was done and we'll take it for granted it was done for the best. But now it was coming to an end—old Burton wasn't going to have any trouble about me—he's never been asked and never will be to spend a penny upon me, except once when he paid a fly for me and quarrelled with the driver, and on my last birthday when he gave me a *very* shabby prayer-book—sham ivory backs, you know, the kind that splits off—and it was auntie's own doing, so I *don't* see that I could have been expected to put up with his rudeness."

"Had you done anything to irritate him?" asked Madelene.

Ella opened her eyes in surprise.

"Oh dear, yes," she said, "heaps of things. I don't suppose I ever did anything but irritate him. My very existence, at least my presence, in auntie's household irritated him. I understand it all now," she went on, speaking more and more naturally with the interest of the subject. "Don't you see he didn't know anything about us when he first made auntie's acquaintance and began to think she'd just suit him for a wife, and he thought I was a homeless orphan, a poor dependent, and that he'd have to take me too. It was rather irritating, I'll allow," she continued, smiling to herself a little, "for he saw we'd never get on, and if he'd only been a little nicer when he found I wasn't in his way, after all, we might have 'parted friendly,' as servants say. But he was thoroughly put out by me—I *couldn't* help trying to annoy him. And last night it came to a sort of crisis—he said I was impertinent and other things he had no business to say to papa's daughter, who is no relation of *his*, and at last he told auntie, poor auntie, that she must choose between him and me."

"And what did Mrs Robertson say?" asked Madelene.

"She didn't say much. Indeed I didn't give her any opportunity. She had a headache this morning, no wonder, and didn't come down. So I just packed up a few things and told the servants to say I'd gone out, and I went to the railway and—came off here. *Naturally* I came here," she repeated, her tone acquiring again a shade of defiance, in reality the veil of some unacknowledged misgiving.

Madelene did not at once reply. She sat there, her eyes gazing out of the window before her, in what Ella thought a very aggravating way.

"Do you not agree with me?" the younger sister asked after a moment's silence. Shyness was unknown to Ella, as were hesitation and patience when she was much concerned about anything.

Madelene turned round and looked at her.

"She's angry," thought Ella. "It is not any other feeling that makes her look like that." And she kept her own bright eyes fixed upon her sister, which did not add to Miss St Quentin's composure.

"Of course if you were obliged to go *anywhere* in this—this strange sort of way, you did right to come here," said Madelene quietly. "But that is not the question at all. Were you right to leave your aunt's house as you have done? That is the thing."

"Yes," said Ella coolly, "under the circumstances I think I was quite right."

"Without consulting papa, without talking it over with Mrs Robertson, without—without," Miss St Quentin went on, a sudden sensation of something very like temper nerving her to say it—"without in the least considering our—Ermine's and my—convenience?"

Ella gazed at her in unfeigned surprise, for a moment or two she was too astonished to feel indignant.

"I don't understand you," she said. "Is it usual for sisters to be upon such terms? Is a daughter expected to beg and apologise like a stranger, before getting leave to come home—home where she has a right to be, and from which she was banished without her wishes being consulted in the least?"

"You were a baby," said Madelene. "You could not have been consulted. And—well the thing was done and this has *not* been your home, and it is no use talking in that exaggerated, theatrical sort of way, Ella. I shall do my best, my very best," and here there was a little tremor in her voice, "to make you happy and content with us, and so I know will Ermine, but I can't say that in what you have done to-day I think you have acted wisely, or—or rightly. What papa will say about it I don't know. I—I did not mean to put forward any inconvenience to myself, or ourselves, in any prominent way."

She had already regretted the allusion to her sister and herself that she had made. It was, she felt, both unwise and inconsistent with the resolution she had come to.

Ella did not answer.

"Will you come out for a little?" Madelene went on. "We have been having tea—Ermine and I and—and our cousin—on the lawn. You would like a cup of tea, would you not? I am afraid your room will not be ready yet. We have been making some changes, and the rooms we intend for you are to be papered and painted next week. In the meantime we must consider how best to arrange."

"I am sorry to give you so much trouble," said Ella coldly. "I should have thought—it surely cannot be difficult for the third daughter to have a room just as you and Ermine have. But of course you are right—I *am* a stranger, and it is no good pretending I am not."

"That was not what I meant at all," said Madelene. But again Ella made no reply.

"I must take care what I say," she was thinking to herself, "or I shall be called 'exaggerated' and 'theatrical,' again."

Madelene opened the window and stepped out. "Shall we go this way?" she said. "It is nearer than round by the front door."

Ella followed her.

"I am to be a younger sister when it comes to questions of precedence and that kind of thing, it appears," she thought. "But a stranger when it suits the rest of the family to consider me so."

There was something soothing however to her impressionable feelings in the beauty all around her; it was a really exquisite evening and the girl was quick to respond to all such influences.

"How lovely!" she said impulsively.

Madelene turned. There was a smile on her face, almost the first Ella had seen there; the quiet, somewhat impassive countenance seemed transfigured.

"Yes," she said, "it *is* lovely. I am glad for you to see it again for the first time on a day like this, though to us, and I think you will agree with us when you have lived here long enough, Coombesthorpe has a charm of its own in every season."

Ella opened her lips to reply, but before she had time to do so, she caught sight of a figure hastening towards them over the lawn.

"Oh," said Madelene, "here is Ermine. Yes! Ermie," she called out, before the new-comer was quite close to them, "it is she—it is really Ella."

---

## Chapter Four.

### Back in the Nursery.

Ella's eyes rested on her second sister with admiration scarcely less than that which her first glance at Madelene had aroused.

"At least," she thought to herself, for a moment throwing her prejudice and irritation aside, "at least I have no reason to be anything but *proud* of my belongings. They are both beautiful."

Ermine who was tall also, though an inch or two shorter than Madelene, stooped to kiss her. And her kiss seemed to Ella less cold than her elder sister's.

"I shall like her the best," she rapidly decided, for she was much given to rapid decisions.

"You have quite taken us by surprise, Ella," said Ermine, in a tone which told nothing. The truth was that she was on the look-out for some sign or signal from Madelene as to what was the meaning of this sudden invasion and in what spirit it was to be met. For though they were not absolutely free from small differences of opinion in private, the mutual understanding and confidence existing between the sisters were thorough and complete, and even had this not been the case, they would never have allowed any outsider to suspect it.

Madelene caught and rightly interpreted Ermine's unspoken inquiry.

"Ella has thought it right," she began in a somewhat constrained tone, "to come home sooner than was arranged, on—on account of annoyances which she has been exposed to at Mrs Robertson's and—"

"'Annoyances,'" flashed out Ella, thereby giving Ermine her first glimpse of the fieriness of which Madelene had already in the last quarter of an hour seen a good many sparks, "'annoyances,' do you call them? I think that is a very mild term for unendurable, unbearable insult, and—"

"Ella," said Madelene quietly, "you have told me quite as much as I want to hear at present. Papa will be home soon and then you can see what he says. In the meantime it seems to me very much better to drop the subject—it would only leave a painful association with the beginning of your life here to do nothing but uselessly discuss disagreeables. The thing is done—you have left your aunt's and you are now with us. Neither Ermine nor I need to say anything about it and it is probably much better that we should not."

"Very well," said Ella, with as near an approach to sullenness in her tone, as such an essentially un-sullen person could be capable of. "I don't like it, but I don't want you to think me ill-natured or quarrelsome when I know I am neither, so I'll give in. But all the same I feel that you blame me and disapprove of me, and I hate to feel that."

She glanced up with a slight suspicious dewiness in her lovely brown eyes.

"Poor little thing," murmured Ermine half under her breath, but a glance from Madelene restrained her. "I know how she means, Maddie," she said aloud, "I hate the feeling of unexpressed blame or disapproval more than the worst scolding spoken out to me."

"But there is no question of either, just now," said Madelene smiling a little. "I did tell Ella openly what I thought, but she did not agree with me, and so I don't see that there's the least use in saying more. Do let us get into the shade—and I am sure Ella is longing for some tea."

"It is all ready," said Ermine, leading the way to the table under the trees, as she spoke. "I had some fresh made."

"And Philip?" asked Madelene with the very slightest possible touch of hesitation.

"He is gone," said Ermine. "He left immediately after you went in."

"I thought perhaps he would have stayed after all," she said vaguely.

Ella listened, not without curiosity.

"Who is Philip?" she had it on the end of her tongue to say, but she hesitated. "If they wanted to make me feel at home—*one of them*," she said to herself, "they would have begun telling me all about everybody and everything, and if they don't choose to tell I don't choose to ask. 'Philip,' I remember something about some one of the name in a dreamy way. And just now in the house Madelene spoke of a cousin—'our cousin,' I think she said. Well I suppose he is my cousin too, and if so, I can't but hear about him before long, without asking."

One question however occurred to her as a perfectly natural and permissible one.

"Is my godmother, Lady Cheynes, at home just now?" she asked abruptly.

Madelene looked a little surprised.

"'My godmother,'" she repeated to herself inwardly, "what a queer way of speaking of our aunt! Of course it is only because she is our aunt that she is Ella's godmother, I remember her offering to be it 'just to please poor Ellen,' as she said. What does Ella want to know for? Perhaps she is thinking of making a descent upon Cheynesacre if she doesn't find things to her mind here! I suppose our mention of Philip put it in her head."

Ella repeated her question in another form.

"Lady Cheynes lives near here, does she not? and she *is* my godmother," she said with a touch of asperity, as much as she dared show to Madelene, for there was something in Miss St Quentin's calm, self-contained manner which awed even while it irritated her younger sister.

"Yes," Madelene replied. "She lives at Cheynesacre, which is about five miles from here. But she is our aunt."

"Oh," said Ella, looking a little mystified, "then should I call her aunt? When I have written to her I have always said 'godmother.'"

"She is not your aunt," said Madelene gently. "Unless she particularly wished it, I should think it best for you just to call her by her name."

Ella grew crimson.

"Another snub," she said to herself.



"She is really our great-aunt," Ermine said quickly, as if divining Ella's feelings. "She was our mother's aunt, and her grandson, Sir Philip Cheynes, is, therefore, only papa's first cousin once removed. But he always calls papa uncle."

"Oh," said Ella. "Of course," she went on bitterly, "I can't be expected to understand all the family connections, considering I have been brought up a stranger even to my father. I *suppose* Colonel St Quentin is my father," she went on sarcastically, "but I begin to feel a little doubtful even about that."

"Ella," said Ermine, "what do you mean? You must not take that tone. You are vexing and hurting Madelene," for Miss St Quentin's face was pale and her lips quivering, "and I can just tell you, my dear child, now at once, at the first start, that I won't have Madelene vexed or hurt. You are a foolish baby, otherwise—"

Ella's crimson had turned to something still fierier by this, and her eyes were literally gleaming. She controlled herself for a moment or two to the extent of not speaking, but she lost no time in mentally retracting her decision that she "would like Ermine the best." It was, perhaps, fortunate that at that moment Barnes reappeared upon the scene. He was not in the habit of so much condescension, but for once dignity had yielded to curiosity. Barnes was dying to have another look at the new arrival, and to be able to judge how things were going to turn out. So he seized the excuse of his master's dog-cart being seen approaching to betake himself again to the lawn.

"If you please, ma'am," he began, hesitating when he had got so far, partly because he did not feel quite at ease under Miss Ermine's rather sharp glance, and partly because he was conscious of being rather out of breath—

"Well, Barnes?" said Madelene coldly.

"I thought you would like to know, ma'am, that the colonel will be here directly. James has just seen the dog-cart at the mile-end turn."

This was a land-mark visible by experienced eyes from Coombesthorpe gates, though at some considerable distance.

"Very well. Thank you, Barnes. You can tell my father he will find me in the library. I should like to see him as soon as he comes in," said Madelene composedly, and Barnes retired, very little the wiser for his expedition, though Ella's burning cheeks had not been altogether lost upon him, and he gave it as his private opinion to the housekeeper that less peaceful times were in store for "his" young ladies than hitherto.

Miss St Quentin got up.

"Ella," she said, "will you come with me at once to see papa?"

Ella looked a little taken aback. She had expected to find that Madelene was going to have a long, confidential talk with her father in the first place.

"If you like—if you think it best," she said, with the first approach to misgiving or shyness she had yet shown.

"Would you like better to see papa alone?" asked Madelene.

Ella instinctively made a little movement towards her.

"Oh no, no, thank you," she said, looking really, frightened.

"Well then, we will go together," said Madelene softened, though her manner scarcely showed it.

And in a few minutes Ella found herself again in the library where she had waited for her sister, little more than half-an-hour before.

Wheels crunching the gravel drive were heard almost immediately, then Barnes's voice and another in the hall.

"In the library, do you say?" this new voice repeated. And in a moment the door was opened quickly.

"Are you here, Madelene? There is nothing wrong, I hope? Barnes met me at the door to tell me you wanted me at once."

"Yes, papa," said Miss St Quentin, rising as she spoke. "You didn't meet Philip, then? No, there is nothing wrong. It is only that—" She half turned to look for Ella. The girl was standing just behind her, and it almost seemed to Madelene as if she had intentionally tried to conceal herself from Colonel St Quentin's notice at the first moment of his entering the room. And for the second time a softened feeling, half of pity, half almost of tenderness, passed through her towards her young sister. "Ella," she went on, and Ella came forward. "You see, papa," Madelene added, "*this* is why I wanted to see you at once. Ella has arrived—sooner than we expected." She tried to speak lightly, but Colonel St Quentin knew her too well not to detect her nervousness. He knew, too, that this sudden move on Ella's part could not but be annoying and disappointing to his elder daughters, who had been making all sorts of plans and arrangements for her joining them at the time already fixed upon.

"Ella!" he exclaimed. Then he held out his hand, and, drawing her towards him, kissed her quickly on the forehead. "Is there anything the matter with your Aunt Phillis? You have grown a good deal since last year."

For he had seen Ella from time to time, though but hurriedly.

The remark was not a happy one.

"I don't think I have grown at all for two years," she said. "I have certainly stopped growing now."

Her tone was not conciliating. Colonel St Quentin slightly raised his eyebrows.

"I beg your pardon, my dear," he said. "I had forgotten your mature age. And to what then are we indebted for this unexpected pleasure?" he went on.

Madelene looked distressed. This was exactly the tone she most dreaded to hear her father take. He did not mean to hurt Ella, up to now indeed he had no reason to feel displeased with her. For all he knew she had been driven away from Mrs Robertson's by an outbreak of smallpox, or by the house having been burnt down! And Madelene and Ermine were accustomed to this half-satirical, bantering manner of his, and the good understanding between the three was complete, more perfect indeed than is often the case between father and daughters. For there was an element of something nearly allied to *gratitude* in Colonel St Quentin's affection for his elder daughters, which even on the parent's side, between generous natures is quite compatible with the finest development of the normal paternal and filial relations.

"It was nothing wrong—that is to say no illness or anything of that kind," Madelene hastily interposed, "but Ella thought it better to come away. Mr Burton, the old gentleman you know, papa, that Mrs Robertson—"

"Yes, yes, that Mrs Robertson is going to marry. Well, what about him?" he interrupted. Colonel St Quentin was much more vivacious than his eldest child.

"He seems to have been getting rather jealous, exacting, I don't know what to call it—annoyed at Ella's sharing her aunt's attention with him, I suppose. Is not that it, Ella? And he has shown it in a disagreeable, ill-bred way, it seems," said Madelene.

"He was actually rude, insulting," said Ella. "He seemed to think I was nothing and nobody, quite forgetting I was your daughter, and—"

"Insufferable, purse-proud old ruffian he must be," interjected her father.

Ella's eyes danced.

"Yes, papa—that's just what it is," she said, "He could not have been less—respectful," she added with a little hesitation, "if I had really been a penniless pauper, instead of having a family and home of my own."

Colonel St Quentin glanced at Madelene. He was on the point of speaking, but a sign from her, imperceptible to Ella, restrained him. He contented himself with a sigh. Ella imagined it to be one of sympathy with her wrongs, and her spirits rose—"penniless pauper," had been very telling, she said to herself.

"And so—and so, you and your aunt thought it best for you to come away," he said. "Well, well, it is a pity things could not have gone on smoothly a little longer, considering how many years you have been with her and how good she has always shown herself to you. In any case she surely might have written or telegraphed—I certainly think she might have considered us a *little* as well as old Burton. Of course she sent a servant with you."

"No, no," said Ella, hesitatingly. "I came alone."

Colonel St Quentin's face darkened.

"She let you—a child like you, travel here alone!" he exclaimed. "Upon my word, Madelene—you knew this?" he added, turning to her.

Madelene looked very uneasy.

"Papa," she said, "you don't quite understand. Mrs Robertson is not so much to blame as you think. Ella—" and she looked at her sister, "Tell papa yourself. It is no use concealing anything. Mrs Robertson will of course be writing herself, and then—"

"I have no wish to conceal anything," said Ella, haughtily. "I never dreamt of such a thing. Yes, what Madelene says is quite true, papa. Aunt Phillis did not send me away. She did not know of my leaving. She will only have heard it by a telegram I sent her from Weevilscoombe."

"Do you mean to say," said Colonel St Quentin slowly, "that you left your aunt's house without her sanction or even knowledge, as well as without writing to consult me—in short, that you ran away?"

"Something very like it," said Ella defiantly. Madelene looked grievously distressed.

"Oh, Ella," she said, "do not speak like that. She does not mean it really, papa—she has explained more about it to me. Ella, tell papa you are sorry if you have vexed him. It was natural for her to come to us, papa—even if she has acted hastily."

But Ella would say nothing. She stood there proudly obstinate, and Miss St Quentin's appeal in her favour fell on unheeding ears. One glance at her, and her father turned away and began walking up and down the room in a way which as Madelene well knew betokened extreme irritation.

"Little *something*," she heard him murmur, and she hoped Ella did not suspect that the half inaudible word was "fool"—"nothing, no conjunction of things could have been more annoying."

Then he stopped short and stood facing his youngest daughter.

"Ella," he said quietly, but there was something in his tone which made the girl inwardly tremble a little in spite of her determination, "you have acted very wrongly. You have placed me in a most disagreeable position—obliging me to apologise for your rudeness to your aunt, to whom already I was under heavy obligations for you," here Ella glanced up in surprise, and seemed as if about to speak, but her father would not listen, "and you have certainly given this Mr Burton a victory. The more vulgar he is, if he really is vulgar—I don't know that I feel inclined to take your word for it—the more he will enjoy it." Ella compressed her lips tightly. "And," Colonel St Quentin went on, his hard tone softening as he glanced at Madelene, "there are other reasons why I *extremely* regret the way you have chosen to behave. You have shown no sort of consideration for our—for your sisters' convenience."

Ella started up. This time she would be heard.

"That part of it I cannot in the least understand," she said. "It seems extraordinary to talk of *inconveniencing* one's own nearest relations by coming home when—when one had nowhere else to go," and her voice faltered a very little.

Her father looked at her with a sort of expression as if he were mentally taking her measure.

"Ah, well," he said, "I did not say I expected you fully to understand. You have shown yourself too childish. But you are not too childish to understand that when one does a distinctly wrong thing one may expect undesirable results in more directions than one. And this—the inconvenience to your sisters / lay stress upon, and I shall expect you to remember this. What room are you intending Ella to have?" he went on, turning rather abruptly to Madelene. "Those you meant for her of course are not ready."

"No," Miss St Quentin replied. "They are not yet begun, and what should be done will take some weeks. I wanted them to be so nice," she said regretfully.

"I know you did," said her father, and the sympathy in his tone made Ella unreasonably angry.

"In the meantime," Madelene continued, "I was thinking of giving Ella one of the rooms in the north wing. Indeed they are the only—"

"No," said Colonel St Quentin, "that will not do. We may need those rooms for visitors any day. It is much better for her to have the nursery on the south side. You can easily have what additional furniture is needed moved in, and, as it is Ella's own doing, she cannot object to less comfortable quarters than you had intended for her for a time."

Ella reared her little head, but said nothing.

"You must be tired," said Madelene, glad to suggest any change, "and I am sure you would like to take your hat and jacket off. Come with me to my room; and I will see about getting the nursery ready, papa."

Ella's head rose, if possible, still higher as she turned to leave the room. Madelene was leading the way, but as they got to the door her father called her back.

"I don't want to give her a room with a north exposure," he said to his eldest daughter in a low voice, "you know we cannot be sure of her health yet, and she has hitherto been always in such mild places. But of course we must not make her fanciful."

"No, papa. I quite understand," said Madelene, gently.

But this little incident did not tend to smooth down the ruffled wings of the small personage who followed her sister up the wide staircase with the gait of a dethroned queen.

"For to-night, Ella," said Madelene, "I think you had better sleep in my dressing-room. There is a nice little sofa-bed there that Ermine sometimes uses when we have a fancy for being quite close together. Sometimes when papa is away this big house seems so lonely."

"Is there no bed in the—the *nursery*?" she inquired icily.

"Oh, yes," said Madelene, "there has always been a bed there. It is a comfortable little room; it is not what used to be the *night* nursery; that has been turned into a large linen room. But this is what was your day nursery when you were a tiny child. You can't remember the house in the least of course?"

"Not in the least."

"We have used the nursery, as we still call it, now and then for visitors when the house was very full," Madelene went on.

"Oh, yes; for ladies'-maids, I suppose," said Ella pleasantly.

"No," said Madelene, "not for ladies'-maids. We would not put our sister in a room used for servants. And I do not wish you to sleep there till it has been made quite comfortable. It is perfectly clean and aired, but I shall change some of the furniture to make it look nicer, even though you are only to have it temporarily, and, to-night, as I said, you can sleep in my dressing-room. Here it is." She threw open a door as she spoke and passed quickly through the large bedroom it opened into to a smaller one beyond. Both rooms were very pretty and handsomely furnished, with all sorts of girlish "household gods" about, telling of simple but refined tastes, and long association. For in the bookcase, side by side with the favourites of Madelene's grown-up years, were old childish story-books in covers that had once been brighter than now, and behind the glass of the cabinets were many trifling ornaments of little value save for the memory of those by whom, or the occasions on which, they had been given.

Ella glanced around with a peculiar expression. The fresh admiration which had escaped her at sight of the garden was wanting. She said nothing, but stood looking in at the dressing-room door.

"Thank you," she said, "if I may leave my hat and jacket here just now; I will fetch them again as soon as I know where to put them. But I should prefer not to sleep here—I suppose there is no actual objection—it is not particularly inconvenient," with a slight accent on the two last words, "that I should sleep at once in what is going to be my room. I should very much prefer doing so."

"No," said Madelene in a rather perplexed tone, "it can be got ready at once if you really wish it." She was anxious not to oppose Ella when not actually obliged to do so, and she determinedly swallowed her own not unnatural disappointment that the young girl should seem so reluctant to meet her in any direction "half-way."

"Thank you," said Ella, more heartily than she had yet spoken, "yes, I should like it very much better. Perhaps you would not mind showing me my room now," she went on, "then when it is ready I can find my way to it alone without troubling you again."

Miss St Quentin did not speak, but she turned to leave the room, followed as before by Ella. They crossed the landing and passed down another corridor.

"Down there," said Madelene, pointing to the end of the passage, "are your real rooms—those that Ermine and I have been planning about for you. The nurseries are down this way," and she descended a few steps leading on to another smaller landing, from which a flight of back stairs ran down to the ground floor. "I warn you that the room will not seem very attractive, but there is a nice look-out at this side. Our mother and—and yours—both liked these nurseries. They get all the sun going, in winter."

It was a plain room certainly, old-fashioned-looking, for it was less lofty than the other side of the house, and the furniture, such as there was, was simple and seemed to have seen good service. The carpet was rolled up, and the small bed was packed into a corner; the window-curtains were pinned up to keep them clean, though enough was left visible to show that they were of faded chintz.

Ella in her turn was silent, but she at once deposited the little hand-bag she carried, and her parasol on the only available place, namely the top of the chest of drawers, with an air of taking possession.

"I suppose my little box—I only brought one quite small one with me—may be brought up here?" she said.

"Yes, certainly, but you *must* leave the room to the housemaids for an hour or two," Madelene replied. "Will you dress in Ermine's room, in preference to mine? It is nearer—just up the little flight of stairs."

"I don't mind in the least," said Ella. "I must say I had no idea, not the very slightest, that my coming would have caused such a fuss. Perhaps I should apologise, but—I begin to see I have been very foolish. I have been allowing myself to forget the real state of the case, I suppose."

"What do you mean by the real state of the case?" asked Madelene, calmly resting her eyes on her sister's face.

"Why—" began Ella, a little discomfited though she would not show it, "I mean that you and Ermine are not, after all, my own sisters. I seem to be a sort of nobody's sister—or nobody's anything, and yet this is my own father's house. I do not see why everybody should be so down upon me."

"Nobody wishes to be down upon you, Ella," said Madelene gently. "And I know that I have done and will do all I can to prevent papa being vexed with you. But it has not been a good beginning—there is no use in concealing it, and Ermine and I had wished to welcome you heartily. And won't you come to my dressing-room after all, Ella, and let me feel that things are not uncomfortable for you?"

But Ella stood firm. She shook her little head, though a slight smile quivered about her mouth too.

"No thank you," she said, "I like much better to begin as I am going to be. I hope you don't think me such a donkey as to mind what kind of a room I have."

"/mind," said Madelene, as she turned away. The housekeeper and hostess instincts were very strongly developed in Miss St Quentin and Ella had succeeded in wounding her in a tender place.

A few minutes later, when Ermine had come up stairs and was standing in her own room, thinking about getting ready for dinner, there came a knock at the door, and in answer to her "come in" Ella appeared. She was carrying a dress on her arm.

"Would you mind—?" she began. "Oh I am afraid I am disturbing you—I thought Madelene said something about—that I might dress in here."

"So you may if you like," said Ermine, not too graciously it must be allowed, for she suspected Ella had been annoying her elder sister. "There is plenty of time. I will go to Madelene till you are ready. You can ring for Stevens, the second housemaid, to help you."

If Ella had had any idea of making friends with Ermine in preference to Madelene it was speedily discarded.

"I detest them both," she exclaimed, as soon as the door had closed on her sister, "nasty, cold, stuck-up things. I almost think I'd rather be back with aunt, if it wasn't for that *horrid* old Burton. But I'll never let auntie know—no *never*, that I'm not happy here. It would be such a triumph to that old wretch."

And this lively reflection stopped Ella's seeking relief for her outraged feelings in tears, which she had been very nearly doing.

"Nobody shall be able to say I'm a cry-baby who doesn't know her own mind," she said resolutely, as she dressed herself quickly but carefully, for Ella had no love of making a fright of herself!

---

## Chapter Five.

### Ermine's Inspiration.

When his daughters were leaving the room that evening after dinner, Colonel St Quentin detained Madelene by an almost imperceptible gesture. On her side Madelene glanced at Ermine, and by the slightest possible turn of her eyelids recommended Ella to her care. None of this was lost upon the young lady.

"Going to talk me over again," she said to herself as she followed Ermine, "well, they'll have plenty of opportunities of doing so before they've done with me, I'm afraid."

"Sit down for a minute or two, can't you, my dear?" said her father, as Madelene stood beside him; "it fidgets me to see you standing. Surely Ermine can look after that child for a few minutes."

"Oh, yes," Miss St Quentin replied, drawing a chair close to her father's as she spoke.

"It's about her I want to speak of course," Colonel St Quentin went on. "I have been thinking a great deal about her even in the hour or two since she came. What are we to do with her, Madelene?" Madelene could not help smiling a little at her father's overwhelmed tone. He who had faced unmoved all the dangers and vicissitudes of a soldier's life, who had not so many years ago borne with comparative equanimity the complete loss of all the fortune he could really call his *own*, now seemed quite unnerved by what was surely but a most natural, not to say agreeable event, the return of his youngest child to her home.

"Oh, papa, don't worry about her," she said. "Things will settle themselves, you'll see. It is only the awkwardness of her sudden arrival that makes you feel uneasy about her. She *must* be a nice child—she couldn't be your daughter and poor Ellen's—" since the death of her young stepmother, Miss St Quentin had half-unconsciously adopted the habit of speaking of her by her Christian name—"without having a true and good nature *au fond*."

"If she only were a child," said her father, "but it strikes me pretty forcibly," he went on, smiling a little, though rather grimly, in spite of himself, "that she is, and considers herself very decidedly a young woman. She's very pretty too, and knows how to set herself off, that little black frock with those fal-de-rals, rosettes—what do you call 'em?"

"Bows," corrected Madelene.

"Bows then—was very coquettishly managed."

"It was too old for her," said Miss St Quentin decidedly. "And—not altogether good style for so young a girl as she really is. I fancy Mrs Robertson has left her a good deal to herself, of late especially. I think it was time she came to us, papa," she added. "Indeed I only wish—" but she stopped.

"That she had never left us—but don't say it, Madelene. It's no use, and—I don't know that she would have been alive but for Phillis's care."

"Perhaps not," said Madelene. "Still, she is not like her mother—she has not that transparent look." She did not say more, reserving to herself her private opinion that Ella was and always had been, her slight make notwithstanding, a most sturdy little person, for which indeed there was every precedent, as young Mrs St Quentin had been the only delicate member of her own family. "It may perhaps soften papa to think her not strong," she said to herself.

"Like her mother," repeated Colonel St Quentin, "no, indeed. Ellen was the simplest, most gentle creature. I don't suppose she ever gave two thoughts to herself in any way—appearance or anything else. Yet—oh Madelene, I do wish I had not married again!" he burst out with a sigh.

"Papa?" said Madelene, and her tone sounded almost as if she were a little shocked. "I can't quite understand how you can say so, or feel so, dear papa," she went on, more softly. "When you say yourself, how perfectly sweet and gentle Ellen was—and not only sweet, sturdily true, and high-principled, even for our sakes, Ermine's and mine, you should be glad we had such an influence as hers for the six or seven years she lived. I often think we don't know how much we owe her."

"Yes," said her father, "that is true, and I thank you for reminding me of it. If her own child had had the same advantage all might have been well. It has all gone wrong; the having to part with her for so long—and then my losses. Of course but for that I would probably have had her home sooner, but I could not bear you girls to have all the expenses of her education, and the running about with her to mild climates if the winter happened to be severe, as well as your poor old father on your hands!"

"Papa—I did not know you had thought of it that way," said Madelene, rather sadly. "It makes me feel as if we really have something to make up for to poor little Ella."

"No—don't begin fancying that," he said quietly. "There were other reasons, too—my health for a time; and then Phillis was able and willing. I wish I hadn't said it. For of all things I dread your spoiling Ella. And don't sacrifice yourselves to her for my sake in any way, I entreat you, my dear child."

He looked up anxiously.

Madelene smiled as she replied, though in her heart she sighed. Colonel St Quentin was not a selfish man, in intention even less so than in deed. And *the* sacrifice, a sacrifice of some years' duration already, which his eldest daughter had made to him, he suspected as little as she desired that he should.

"You needn't be afraid, papa," she said. "For her own sake it would be *wrong* to spoil her."

"But there's spoiling and spoiling," he went on. "In her place now, she should go on studying for some time. You know, Madelene, she *should* be prepared for contingencies. She may have to work for her living; there is no saying."

"Only in case of both Ermine and me dying," said Madelene calmly. "And that, to say the least, is not *probable*. Besides—we might easily increase our life insurance, papa?"

"No, no, nothing of the kind," said Colonel St Quentin excitedly. "I won't have you crippling your income any more—do you hear, Madelene? If such an awful catastrophe happened as your both dying before me—well, *surely* it would kill me?" he said. "Though such things don't kill! But there would be enough for me, as much as I have deserved, after mismanaging my own money."

"It wasn't your fault, papa. *Everybody* says so," his daughter replied. "I do wish you wouldn't speak of it that way."

"But besides that," Colonel St Quentin went on, "there are other and less terrible possibilities. If you married, Madelene, you and Ermine, and of course that may happen any day, though I know you are both of you rather, what the French call *difficile*—your husbands might not, naturally enough—care about being saddled with a little half-sister-in-law, even if he consented to the pensioning off of the old man himself."

"Papa," said Madelene again, but this time her tone was really stern, "you pain me indescribably, really indescribably, by speaking so. Anything reasonable—*anything*, really for Ella's good, you may depend on our carrying out. But you cannot expect us to sympathise with you when you become, I must say, really morbid on this subject."

Colonel St Quentin was silent for a moment or two. He sat, shading his face with his hand, so that Madelene could not judge as to his expression.

"There is another view of the case, too," said Madelene. "Ella is very attractive. Why should *she* not marry? Surely there are some few men in the world who don't look out for heiresses."

"Perhaps," said her father. "Well yes, I suppose we may allow that is a possibility. Still—that brings in complications too—there must be no sailing under false colours, and it would be so natural for her to be credited with her share of your fortunes by strangers. No, Madelene, till she is old enough to understand the whole—and I agree with you that till she has come really to *know* you and Ermine, it may be best to avoid explanations—I think the less society she sees the better. And one outlay I will not object to for her—let her have a few thoroughly good lessons, the best you can get; it will give her occupation, and at the same time fit her to be independent—should the worst come to the worst so to speak?"

"Very well," said Madelene. "I agree with you, that it will be good for her to have occupation—"

"And make her useful—practically useful, so far as you possibly can," interrupted her father again.

"Very well," she said again. "But, papa dear, as far as 'the worst's coming' in any sense except that Ernie and I might die—is to be taken into account, do dismiss it for ever. We *couldn't* marry men who would look at things in the way you put it. You wouldn't wish us to marry selfish brutes, papa?"

And Colonel St Quentin was forced to smile.

Then Madelene and he joined the two others in the drawing-room.

"Can we not have a little music?" said Colonel St Quentin, a minute or two latter. "Ella, my dear, you play I suppose—or do you sing?"

His tone was kindlier again. Madelene's spirits rose. She thought her talk with her father had done good. She went towards the piano and opened it, glancing smilingly at her young sister.

Ella was seated on a low chair in a corner of the room—the light of a lamp fell on her face and bright hair. It struck Madelene that she looked paler than on her first arrival.

"Will you play something, Ella?" she said, "or are you perhaps too tired?"

"I am not the least tired, thank you," the girl replied, "but I hate playing. I never practise, on that account."

"Upon my word," muttered Colonel St Quentin.

"Do you sing then?" Ermine interposed, quickly. Ella hesitated.

"Your mother—mamma," said Madelene, using purposely the old name for her stepmother, "mamma sang beautifully."

Ella turned towards her.

"Do you mean *my* own mother?" she asked coldly.

"Of course," Madelene replied. "I said so." Colonel St Quentin moved impatiently.

"Why can you not answer Ermine's question simply, Ella?" he said. "And why do you speak to Madelene in that tone? It is, to say the least, very questionable taste to accentuate in that way the fact that you and your sisters had not the same mother. And—if no one has told you so before, I tell you now that your mother, my second wife, loved my two elder daughters as if they had been her own, and her best wish for you was that you might resemble them. Where you have got these vulgar notions about half-sisters and so on—I see you are full of them—I can't conceive. Is it from your Aunt Phillis?"

"No-o," Ella replied, a little startled apparently by her father's vehemence. "I did not intend to say anything to annoy you," she added.

"But about the singing?" Ermine said again.

"Yes," said Ella, "I do sing a little. I like it better than playing. I will try to sing if you—if papa wishes it."

Her tone was humble—almost too much so. There was a kind of obtrusive dutifulness about it that was rather irritating. Still Madelene gave her credit for having put some force on herself to keep down her temper.

"Shall I play a little in the first place?" Miss St Quentin said, seating herself at the piano as she spoke.

Madelene played beautifully, though her style was very quiet. Ella rose gently from her seat and came nearer her; she stood silent and motionless till the last soft notes had died away.

"That is lovely, most lovely," she said, her whole face and manner changing. "I should love the piano if I could play like that."

"You must love music, I suspect," Madelene replied. "Perhaps it is the actual mechanical part of playing that has discouraged you."

"I have bad hands for it," said Ella, looking at her very little fingers, as she spoke.

"You have peculiarly small ones," said her sister; "that is like mamma. Still she managed to play very charmingly. Now what will you sing? I dare say we have some of your songs."

Ella opened a book of songs and ran through its contents.

"Yes," she said, "there are one or two of mine here. Perhaps," she added more timidly, "they are some that mamma sang, as Aunt Phillis chose them. I will try this if you like," and she pointed to what had been in fact one of Mrs St Quentin's special favourites.

It was a simple enough song, calling for no great execution, still, though the observation may sound absurd, it was a song depending for its beauty on the voice of the singer. And Ella's young voice suited it perfectly. There was complete silence till she ended. Then a slight sigh from her father made her glance at him.

"I remember that well," he said. "It is very sweet, very sweet. Thank you, my dear."

"You have been very well taught it seems to me, Ella," said Madelene, "and you have a charming voice. It is a pleasure to accompany you. Still it would be well for you to accompany yourself sometimes—you must keep up your playing too."

"She must have lessons in both," said Colonel St Quentin decidedly.

Ella pouted.

"I hate playing," she repeated.

"Don't be childish," said her father sharply. "The question is not of your likes or dislikes. It is of what your capacities are. It seems to me you have taste for music and it is only common-sense in your — for everybody to cultivate their best powers."

"I like singing," Ella said. "But I don't see that I need be *forced* to play if I don't want to go on with it. It isn't as if I were going to be a governess."

"You would probably get to like it better after a while," said Ermine. "No one could have had more difficulty with the mechanical part of it than I, for though my hands are not small, my fingers are what is called 'tight.' But I am so glad now that I didn't give it up, for though I can't play like Maddie, I can join her in duets."

"Much more than that," said Madelene. "But, Ella, I am sure you are tired. Don't you think you had better go to bed? It is nearly ten. I feel rather tired myself, somehow."

Ella rose, with again her air of obtrusive submissiveness. The truth was she was desperately tired—and longing to go to bed, but she would have thought it beneath her dignity to allow it.

"I am not at all sleepy, thank you," she said, "but of course I am quite ready to go."

And she turned to bid her father good-night, with a little formal manner that would have been amusing had it not, under the circumstances, been very irritating.

"Good-night, papa. Come, Ermine, you are not to sit up any longer either. We are all rather tired," said Madelene with a little intentional peremptoriness which Ermine understood, though Ella glanced at her with surprise.

"I wouldn't be ordered about like that, at *her* age," thought the youngest sister.

Colonel St Quentin kissed his elder daughters in silence, but just as Madelene, who was the last to leave the room, got to the door, she heard him sigh, and despite her resolution of not talking things over any more that night, she could not resist turning back for a moment.

"What is it, papa?" she said gently.

"Oh, nothing much, my dear," he replied. "I am only afraid we are going to have trouble with that child. I don't understand her. You and Ermine never were like that—yet she is lovable too if she would allow herself to be so."

"Yes—I think so too, but, papa, don't think so much about her. She will fall into her place."

"She should never have been out of it. It is that I am blaming myself for," he replied.

Madelene hurried up stairs after her sisters. They were just at the door of Ella's room—"the nursery"—when she overtook them. Ermine opened it—the candles were already lighted and Stevens was arranging some of Ella's belongings. It looked a pleasant and cosy room now, even the slightly faded air of the furniture rather added to its comfort. No one, save a most perversely prejudiced person could have found any reason to complain of such quarters. But a very perversely prejudiced person Ella was, it is to be feared, fast becoming.

She sat down in the capacious, old-fashioned armchair, covered with the same faded chintz as that of the window-curtains, and looked about her.

"Well," she ejaculated, "I wonder what Aunt Phillis would say, if she saw me here. Here in the old *nursery!* After eleven years' exile from my rightful home, this is the best they can give me."

Her glance fell on the toilet-glass—it was a large, handsome one, which Madelene had directed the housemaids to put in place of the smaller one really belonging to the room. The candles were lighted, two on the mantelpiece not far from where Ella was sitting, and two on the dressing-table, and the girl's face and surroundings were clearly reflected. She had loosened her hair and put on a little white jacket—and as she caught sight of herself, her face in the glass, looking even paler than in reality, her eyes sad and wistful, she wondered what her own reflection reminded her of. Suddenly she started—

"I know," she thought, "I know what it is. I look exactly like that picture of Cinderella in the *musée* at Nantes that aunt and I went to see last year. I didn't think I could ever look so pretty," and she smiled with a little inward satisfaction. But the smile faded, and a look of perplexity replaced it. The sight of the old room, once so familiar, though since so entirely forgotten, was beginning to vaguely awaken memories of her past childhood. And the association of the pretty French picture helped to bring one special scene to her recollection.

"Yes," she said to herself, "I do remember—Harvey was sitting on this very chair, I do believe, with me on her knee, and there were picture books strewed about. And she told me the story of Cinderella, that was it, and there is a confused remembrance in my mind of thinking I was like her, the third sister, though at that time, of course, I knew nothing of half-sisters or stepmothers. Still, after all, I haven't a stepmother—Madelene and Ermine had that, but they don't seem to have suffered from it. I suppose my mother was a gentle, angelic sort of—goose—" Here Ella, to do her justice, felt a little shocked at herself. "I shouldn't say that exactly. But she must have given in to them in everything—about sending me away after her death no doubt, for she couldn't have *wished* me to be expatriated Poor mamma. It would have been better for me, no doubt, if I had had more of her nature, but as I haven't—"

Then she sighed and glanced round the room again, while her mind reverted to her sisters' spacious quarters.

"It is very queer," she thought, "that I should have remembered about Harvey and the picture to-night. It was like a sort of vision of my life and position—only—I fear there is no chance of the prince ever finding his way to me. Madelene and Ermine wouldn't let him! I wonder why they are not married themselves, for they are very good-looking. But Madelene's manner is so forbidding, and most likely she wouldn't allow Ermine to marry before her. Ermine is quite under her thumb. Ah, well—it is rather melancholy to feel so lonely in my own home. I wish I could have found poor old Harvey here again."

For Ella cherished roseate remembrances of her former nurse, whom, in point of fact, she could only recollect as a name. Harvey had left Mrs Robertson's service, happily for the child she had the care of, very few months after Ella went to live with her aunt.

Miss St Quentin and Ermine, the former's protestations of fatigue notwithstanding, had not been able to resist a few minutes' confidential talk.

"You are not to stay, Ermie, you really mustn't," said Madelene. "I am tired—it is not nonsense, and I want to be as bright and fresh as possible to-morrow morning, for I foresee papa is going to be rather—worried—about Ella. And it is so bad for him."

"It will be very stupid of him if he really takes it that way," said Ermine. "He will say, of course, that it is for *our* sakes, whereas the only part of it we really—or, at least, principally—mind is *his* feeling it painfully. And after all, it's *wrong*, really wrong to make a trouble out of it—of having our own sister to live with us, where she should always have been."

"That's the whole trouble in the matter," said Madelene. "If she had always been here it would have been all right



and natural.”

“She’s very pretty,” said Ermine, after a moment or two’s silence, “and she has evidently a good deal of character.”

“Witness her running away from her aunt’s,” interrupted Madelene.

“Well, after all, I confess to some sympathy with her there,” Ermine went on. “But I am afraid she has a very fiery temper, Maddie.”

“Fiery, perhaps, but I hope not sulky or ungenerous,” said Madelene. “The difficulty will be to carry out papa’s wishes without rousing her ill-will. He is so determined that we are not to spoil her, and, in some ways, no doubt, she *is* spoiled already, and it will make it much more difficult to—at all put her back, as it were. I quite agree with papa about giving her plenty of occupation; she has lots of energy and I fancy she is clever.”

“She sings so sweetly,” said Ermine musingly; “indeed, she is charming in many ways, or might be, if she would. I could love her very much if she would be nice and sensible. But there is truth in papa’s view of it—it is an awkward position. Madelene,” she exclaimed suddenly, “an idea has just struck me. Why shouldn’t Ella marry Philip?”

“That child!” Madelene replied. “My dear Ermie—”

“She won’t always be a child—indeed, she is not one now. Lots of girls marry at eighteen—we ourselves haven’t married young, but that is no rule for Ella.”

“No—I didn’t mean that,” said Madelene. “I don’t quite know what I meant. The person that Philip should marry has always seemed a sort of myth, and to turn her into little Ella, somehow—”

“Struck you all of a heap,” said Ermine laughing. “You are not given to inspirations like me, Maddie. I have great faith in my inspirations. Think this one over, now. Why shouldn’t it do? It would perfectly delight papa, it would put her in a position such as neither you nor I expect for ourselves—and we would not be jealous, would we? I should love to think mamma’s child was safe and happy—and—”

“But the wealth and the position would not make her either safe or happy,” began Madelene—

“Of course not,” Ermine interrupted with some impatience. “It is Philip himself I am thinking the most of, you might know. Where could she have a better husband?”

“Yes,” said Madelene, though doubtfully still, “I know Philip is as good and reliable as he can be. But—he is lazy, Ermie, and *laissez aller* in some ways. I have always hoped he would marry some one who would have great influence on him and bring out the best of him—some woman of real character and energy.”

“Philip wouldn’t marry that kind of person,” said Ermine, smiling. “I can see her in my mind’s eye—a sort of Gertrude Winchester, only better-looking, I hope.”

“I was thinking of no one in particular,” said Madelene in a slightly aggrieved tone.

“Or if he did,” Ermine went on, “it would be the worst possible thing for him. He would leave everything to her and let her manage his affairs, and he would grow lazier than ever.”

“Aunt Anna manages his affairs as it is,” said Madelene.

“But in quite a different way. She keeps him as well as them up to the mark, and she is always anxious to put more and more into his hands. And I think a young wife would rouse him and make him feel his responsibilities better than anything. And I am sure Ella is clever, and energetic—her energy we have already seen some proof of. Oh, I do wish they would fall in love with each other!”

“Yes,” said Madelene, “it’s just as well you have remembered to put that unimportant detail in at the end. I thought you were leaving *it* out altogether.”

“Maddie, you’re rather cross, and you’re not fair on me. You know I am only too romantic in my ideas I think it is frightful for people to marry if they don’t care for each other. And Philip I am sure would not do such a thing, and I don’t think little Ella would.”

Madelene sat thinking.

“It might be very nice,” she said at last. “I think perhaps you’re right about Philip’s character—only—Ermie, I’m afraid Ella has really a bad temper,” and she looked up anxiously.

“Not *bad*, quick and hot perhaps, but that’s different, and she is in many ways very young still.”

“Well—” said Madelene, getting up as she spoke “we must go to bed, Ermie. And—I certainly don’t want anything of the kind just yet; papa would be horrified. We must do as he wishes, and try to make Ella please him. I shall have to see about masters for her. I wonder if Viénot still comes over to Weevilscoombe?—Philip certainly can scarcely help *admiring* Ella.”

---

## Chapter Six.

### Lady Cheynes at Luncheon.

"I don't mind having some singing lessons," said Ella, twisting round on the piano stool, where she had established herself for the sake of conveniently examining her sisters' music, "but as for playing—it would be money thrown away, and however rich we are I don't see any sense in that. I wouldn't practise, for that would be waste of time too."

"But if papa wishes it—makes a point of it, in fact," said Madelene.

Ella was silent.

"If it's a duty—as obedience to papa—well, in that case I suppose I must give in," she answered. "But I think it's rather hard lines—at my age. Were *you* forced to go on with lessons when you thought you had done with them—you and Ermine?" she asked abruptly.

"There would have been no 'forcing' required if we had known it was papa's wish, even if we had disliked it," said Miss St Quentin. "But the circumstances were quite different—"

"I don't see it," muttered Ella.

"And the present question is the thing to consider," Madelene went on, taking no notice of Ella's interruption. "All the same, I may tell you that at your age Ermine did not consider herself by any means grown-up or 'out.'"

Ella pricked up her ears.

"But you do count me 'out,'" she said eagerly. "I should by rights have been presented this year. Aunt Phillis said so, it was one of the things she regretted—this stupid marriage of hers coming in the way, I mean—for she could not bear the idea of my leaving her till—till I had to."

"You would not have been presented this year in any case," said Miss St Quentin. "Seventeen is, with very rare exceptions, too young to come out."

"That means," said Ella, "that I am still to be considered in the schoolroom, no, in the nursery, figuratively and literally."

"You will be with us at home—we are not thinking of getting a governess for you," Madelene answered, smiling a little—she was full of determination not to let herself be put out by Ella—"but as for going out—to parties I mean—I don't think papa will wish that for you at present. He is very anxious for you to have these lessons—French and German as well as music. And I think it would be a good thing for you to take some little charge in the house."

"I should like to take my share with you and Ermine now that I am here altogether," said Ella, with dignity. "Do you mean taking week about of the housekeeping? Some sisters do that, I know."

Miss St Quentin had some difficulty in keeping her gravity.

"No," she said quietly. "I do not mean charge of that kind. You forget that to look after a large house like this, even with very good servants, takes a great deal of experience. I have had it to do more or less ever since I was younger than you, but it was not easy, I can assure you."

"Then why shouldn't I begin now? If you and Ermine were married I might have to keep house for papa here. Why shouldn't I begin to learn?" asked Ella.

"It isn't likely you would ever have to do that," began Madelene. Then she hesitated. "I shall be glad to teach you what I can—but I think you should have some definite work in the house too. I was thinking you might take charge of the books in the library, dusting them and seeing that they are kept in order, for papa doesn't like the servants to touch them. And I think he wants an addition to the catalogue made. And then, it would be a great help to Ermine if you looked after the flowers in the drawing-room every morning."

"Can't the gardeners do that?" said Ella.

"We have always superintended it ourselves," said Madelene simply.

Her reply rather disconcerted Ella. She wanted to be able to say to herself that the disagreeable work was to be put upon her; the things her sisters did not like doing themselves—but in the face of Madelene's remark she could scarcely hint at anything of this kind. So, she said nothing, but sat vaguely turning over the leaves of the music-book before her. Suddenly the door opened—

"Lady Cheynes," said the servant.

Madelene hastened to meet the new-comer, her face lighting up with pleasure.

"Oh, Aunt Anna," she exclaimed, "how nice of you! You have come to stay all day, I hope, at least to luncheon?"

"To luncheon, well perhaps, but I must leave immediately after," said the old lady, kissing her niece as she spoke. "And now—where is the child?" and she glanced round.

"Ella," said Madelene, "she was here an instant ago—can she have run off?"

"Shy?" asked Lady Cheynes. Madelene smiled.

"I don't think so," she said. "Ah, there you are," she went on, as Ella appeared from the other side of a screen, where she had momentarily hidden herself. "Ella, Lady Cheynes remembers you, though I don't think you remember her."

Ella raised her lovely eyes to the old lady's face with a softer expression than Madelene had yet seen in them.

"I am not quite sure of that," she said very gently, "things are beginning to come back to me a little. I almost think I do remember my—Lady Cheynes a very little."

The old lady laid her two hands on Ella's shoulders and drew her forward a little.

"Is she like her dear mother at all?" speaking half to herself and half to her niece.

"I scarcely think so," said Miss St Quentin softly.

"Her voice is like Ellen's," Lady Cheynes went on, "and—yes, her eyes are like hers too. You must see it," she added to Madelene.

"I do," Madelene replied, honestly, though truth to tell she had not before perceived it; "I quite see it now," for the gentleness was still in Ella's eyes.

"God bless you, my child," Lady Cheynes murmured, and she kissed Ella on the forehead; "I could not wish anything better for you than that you should be like your mother in every way, except that I hope you are stronger. And she looks so, does she not, Maddie?"

"I don't think she could possibly look better," said Madelene. Ella glanced at her with a less amiable expression than that with which she had been favouring Lady Cheynes, but the visitor was loosening her mantle at that moment, and did not see it.

"Of course they will make out that I am as strong as a horse," the girl was saying to herself.

"Where have you located her?" the old lady went on to ask. "The rooms you were intending for her can't be ready."

"No," said Madelene, "that is the worst of Ella's unexpected arrival, and we couldn't—papa did not wish her to be in the north side—so—"

"I am in the nursery," said Ella, meekly. "I am quite comfortable there."

"In the nursery," repeated Lady Cheynes with a comical expression, "but I don't expect you will stay there long, do you?"

Ella looked down.

"I don't know," she said. "It is quite a nice little room. Would Lady Cheynes like to see it, perhaps?" she asked demurely.

Miss St Quentin felt at that moment more inclined to shake Ella than at any time since her arrival.

"Why should my aunt wish to see it?" she said sharply. "You forget Ella, that she knew this house long before any of us were heard of. It was her own old home."

Ella's eyes opened in genuine astonishment.

"I didn't know—I can't understand," she said. "Was your unmarried name St Quentin, then, god—Lady Cheynes I mean?"

"No, for in that case I should be *your* aunt, my dear, which I am not. All the same this was my home, for Coombesthorpe at that time belonged to my father. But why do you call me Lady Cheynes? Why not godmother, as in your letters?"

Ella's eyes sparkled. "That's one for Madelene," she would have said had she been acquainted with schoolboy language. "I wasn't sure," she began.

"Don't be afraid of putting the blame on me," interrupted Madelene. "It was I, Aunt Anna, that told Ella it was better to call you by your name unless you wished her to do otherwise."

Lady Cheynes smiled.

"Call me godmother then," she said, "though I warn you, Ella, I mean to take all a godmother's privileges. I shall—well—pet you if you are a good girl, but—I can scold too," and she knitted her brows, without much effect however, as her bright eyes had plenty of fun in them.

"I'm not afraid, godmother—not a bit," said Ella laughing.

"Why can she not be like that to *us*?" thought Madelene regretfully.

"How did you know of Ella's arrival?" she asked her aunt suddenly.

"Through Philip, of course. And oh, by the by, I was to ask you if you will be at home this afternoon, if so, he will come over, but he is rather busy, and prefers not to chance it."

"I don't think we can possibly be at home," said Madelene. "I have to go to Weevilscoombe, and Ermine is going to drive over to Waire, to get the addresses of some masters for Ella. Papa is anxious that she should begin some

regular occupation at once. But I do want to see Philip. May I drive back with you, Aunt Anna? and then I could easily walk to Weevilscombe, and papa can meet me there—he has to go there too.”

“By all means,” Lady Cheynes replied.

Then there fell a little silence, which was broken by Madelene.

“Ella,” she said, “I think you should not put off writing to your aunt, as papa said. You will be out all the afternoon.”

Ella rose at once.

“Shall I—may I write in the library?” she said meekly.

“Of course,” Miss St Quentin replied.

Lady Cheynes kept silence till Ella had closed the door behind her—then she turned quickly to her niece.

“Now tell me all about it, Maddie,” she said. “Of course Philip didn’t know more than the mere fact. But I can see you are put out—I was anxious to hear all; that was why I hurried over. There can’t be much amiss however—the sight of the child has reassured me. She has quite won my heart already, and she seems most anxious to please you—ready to take your least hint.”

Madelene hesitated before replying. She was unselfishly anxious for Ella to propitiate her godmother and really glad that the first impression had been so favourable. Yet—all things considered—it was a little hard upon her! It took some self-control to listen to Ella’s praises with perfect good temper.

“I am sorry if I have seemed ‘put out,’ Aunt Anna,” she replied at last. “I am very glad indeed you are pleased with Ella, and I hope you will make papa a little happier about her. He is *rather* hard upon her perhaps—about her coming off as she did,” and Miss St Quentin went on to tell the story of Ella’s taking the law into her own hands, as she had done.

Lady Cheynes listened attentively, smiling a little now and then.

“Ah,” she said, “I understand. Yes, just the sort of thing to annoy Marcus. For my part, I don’t like the child the less for it. And she knows nothing of the real position of things. Philip and I were talking it all over last night, and he told me what he had said to you, and I agreed with it. Yes—the first thing to do is thoroughly to gain her confidence and affection—but that surely will not be difficult.”

“It seems as if it should not be so, certainly,” said Madelene. “But you see, aunt, papa has taken up some ideas about Ella, very strongly. And we cannot oppose him, and yet I am so afraid of her thinking that it is we, not papa. Just as you came in I was trying to get her to agree to, or rather to like the idea of, these lessons. She has got some absurd notion in her head that Ernie and I are wanting to keep her down.”

“She has been spoilt,” said the old lady decidedly. “But I am sure she has a good heart. It is to be hoped,” she added, “that Philip and she won’t see much of each other while she has these ideas about you and Ermine. He would be so angry that he would take a prejudice to her, and I should regret that.”

“So should I,” said Madelene. “Perhaps,” she went on, after a little pause, “it will be as well if we just go on quietly by ourselves for a little. There are no gaieties in prospect at present, so the question of Ella’s ‘grown-up-ness’ need not be discussed, and if she is sensible and pleases papa about these lessons, he may perhaps relax a little after a while. I am not even altogether sorry,” she added, “much as we shall miss him, that Philip is to be away. In Ella’s present mood it would have been—a little difficult.”

“He will be leaving very soon,” said Lady Cheynes, “but I must have him home by Christmas. You will let the child come over to me now and then, won’t you? I will undertake to do no harm, and I may be able to help you.”

“Of course,” said Madelene heartily, “and if she shows her best side to you as I think she will, you will find her very charming. I think—I fancy she has a much more cordial feeling to you, aunt, than to us,” and Miss St Quentin could not help sighing a little.

“All the better—in one sense, that is to say,” replied the old lady briskly. “If she were prejudiced against me too, it would be a bad look-out I can influence her far more if she fancies me impartial.”

“Or partial—to her,” suggested Madelene smiling.

“What does Mrs Robertson say to this escapade of Ella’s? You have heard from her?” asked Lady Cheynes.

“Yes, there is a letter to papa this morning. She is very distressed about it of course, but her principal anxiety seems to be to exonerate Ella. She is dreadfully afraid, evidently, of its vexing papa with her, just at the first.”

“Just what it has done,” said Lady Cheynes; and then they went on to talk of other matters.

At luncheon Ella maintained the same quiet demure tone which amused even while it irritated Madelene. And though Lady Cheynes appeared to take it quite naturally, and even now and then rather acted the part of drawing out the timid little stranger, the twinkle in her bright old eyes from time to time convinced Miss St Quentin that Ella’s godmother knew what she was about.

“And perhaps of us all,” thought Madelene, “she gauges Ella’s character the most correctly.”

The thought in itself was a relief. Madelene no longer felt so perplexed and dispirited. She even could afford to smile, inwardly, at the sight of Ella's preternaturally resigned expression and meek tone of voice when Ermine told her, rather sharply perhaps, to get ready for their drive, the pony-carriage being already at the door.

"I beg your pardon," Ella replied. "I did not know, at least not clearly, that you were going to be so kind as to take me a drive."

"I shall shake her well before long," said Ermine, as she stood in the hall with her aunt and sister, waiting for the little delinquent. "I can stand her temper and impertinence," laughing as she used the word. "It's so absurd and comical. But I can't stand her suffering-saint-ism. I really can't."

"For my part I should think it's the more amusing of the two," said Lady Cheynes, "but then to be sure I have not yet been favoured with a sight of the little volcano's explosions. When I have done so I'll give you my opinion."

At that moment Ella made her appearance. She was dressed as on her arrival the day before, and as she bade the girl good-bye, kissing her as she did so, her godmother "took her in" from head to foot.

"I think I have scarcely perhaps estimated the difficulties seriously enough," said Lady Cheynes, when she and Madelene were installed in her carriage. "There is any amount of determination, not to say obstinacy, about that small personage. And she has certainly been spoilt. I see it more clearly. The style of her dress is far too old, even though one cannot call it showy, but it is a degree too *soigné*, I hardly know how to express it, for a girl of seventeen. I like neatness of course, but that is quite a different thing."

"I fancy Ella has been allowed to give a great deal of time and thought to her appearance," said Madelene. "But after all, there must come a stage of that kind, I suppose, in every girl's life."

"Perhaps," said her aunt. "But for my part I prefer it later. I do love a good honest tom-boy girl of fifteen or so."

"But Ella is seventeen past," said Madelene; "that makes all the difference."

"Umph," grunted the old lady. "I am quite sure she never was a tom-boy. Just think of Ermine at seventeen."

And Madelene could not help smiling.

"Yes," she agreed. "Ermine was very different, certainly. I remember how she cried at having her skirts lengthened, and tried privately to shorten them again. Still we must remember that Ella's life has been quite different."

"You must make her dress more simply," said Lady Cheynes. "Those tight-fitting garments without a crease or wrinkle, and perfect gloves, and pointed boots may be all very well in town, though for my part I don't like *that* sort of particularity carried too far; it takes off the thoroughbred look. But in the country it is absurd. Get her a brown holland frock or two, or a homespun with a nice little Norfolk jacket and a belt, and see that the skirts are shorter and that she has sensible boots." Then an amused look stole over the old lady's face.

"What is it, Aunt Anna?" asked Madelene, without, it must be confessed, much amusement in her tone. Indeed she was looking and feeling decidedly lugubrious, the prospect of such a transformation of Ella's wardrobe was appalling!

"I was only thinking what fun Philip would make of her if he saw her setting off for a country ramble like a little figure out of the *Revue de la Mode*. That hat of hers, and the little veil, fastened just at the proper height, or depth, and the parasol, held so daintily, and—"

"Oh, please stop, aunt," said Madelene. "I don't want Philip to make fun of her, I'm sure, but how to transform her, as you calmly propose, I don't see." And poor Miss St Quentin really looked as if she were ready to cry.

Lady Cheynes began to laugh, and her laugh gathered strength and soon became a hearty one.

"My dear Maddie," she said, "you have met your match. You, who are never put out or disturbed in your regal calm by anything or anybody! It is very wicked of me, but I can't help laughing."

Madelene herself by this time could not help joining in it. They were both still somewhat hilarious therefore when, at the lodge gates of Cheynesacre they came upon Sir Philip. He threw away his cigar and got into the carriage beside them.

"My dear friends," he began. "My very much respected grandmamma, my admired cousin—I am enchanted, but at the same time, slightly, very slightly, surprised to see you indulging in such mirth. May I—dare I venture to inquire its cause?"

Madelene only laughed the more, especially when Lady Cheynes turned upon Philip. "Don't be so silly, Philip," she said sharply; "why can't you say plainly, 'what are you laughing at'? Not that I am going to tell you, for I am not."

Philip turned his eyes plaintively on his cousin.

"Nor you? Is it useless to appeal to you?"

"Quite," Madelene replied. "It is a private joke of auntie's and mine. I have come round this way on purpose to see you, Philip, as you would not have found any of us at home to-day. I suppose it will be to say good-bye, as you are leaving so soon, I hear."

"I am leaving very soon, certainly," he replied. "The day after to-morrow, probably. But I quite intend to come over to

Coombesthorpe first. I want to say good-bye to Uncle Marcus and Ermine too.”

“They are coming here to luncheon to-morrow,” said his grandmother promptly.

“Oh, indeed,” said Sir Philip. “Well then if Maddie will invite me I will drive back with them to afternoon tea.”

“I shall not be at home,” said Madelene.

“Maddie,” said Philip reproachfully, “it is mean, it is unkind of you to force me to avow my real motive. The fact is—I am dying to see the third Miss St Quentin. Why is she not with you to-day? You might have some regard for my feelings.”

“She has gone to Waire with Ermine,” said Lady Cheynes. “Madelene is arranging about her having lessons from the same masters as the little Hewitts at the rectory. And,” she went on, “they are nicely brought-up girls—they will be pleasant companions for Ella.”

“Those gawky Hewitt children!” said Philip, with a complete change of tone. “Why I thought Ella was seventeen and quite a grown-up sort of person!”

“She is seventeen,” said Lady Cheynes, calmly, “but some girls are grown-up at seventeen and others are children.”

“Oh,” said Philip. “Well for my part, I don’t care about girls of the Hewitt type. I suppose then, that Mrs Robertson has kept her back—that she is what you call ‘quite in the schoolroom’ still.”

“If you had heard what she said to me, you would suppose her still in the *nursery*, even,” replied his grandmother.

“Then,” Philip remarked, “I think I will defer for the present my introduction to your sister, Madelene.”

“Just as you please,” Miss St Quentin replied indifferently.

But as they got out of the carriage, “I did not know,” she whispered, “that you could be so naughty, Aunt Anna.”

---

## Chapter Seven.

### An Invitation.

The summer was gone; autumn itself was almost giving place to winter. Ella St Quentin looked out of the window one morning as she finished dressing, and shivered as she saw the grass all silvered over, faintly gleaming in the cold thin sunshine.

“How freezing it seems!” she said to herself. “I hate winter, especially in the country. I wish—if it weren’t for that old wretch I really think I would write to auntie and ask her to invite me for a week or two’s visit. It can’t be so cold, and certainly not so dull, at Bath as here. I do think I deserve a little fun—if it were even the chance of some shopping—after these last three or four months. To think how I’ve practised and bored at French and German—not that I dislike my lessons after all,” and she smiled a little at the consciousness that *had* she done so it would indeed have been a case of “twenty not making him drink.”

“These teachers are really very good ones, and I don’t dislike reading English with Ermine, either. If she were a teacher and not my sister, I could really get very good friends with her. But all the same—*what* a different life it is from what I expected. If auntie could see me in this horrid rough frock that makes me look as if I had no waist at all,” and Ella impatiently tugged at the jacket of the very substantial sailor serge which Madelene had ordered for the cold weather, “and in this poky room.”

For Ella was still “in the nursery.” She was not to inhabit her permanent room till the winter was over, for the chimney had been found to smoke, and there was a leakage from the roof which had left the wall damp. And Ella had caught a slight cold, thanks to her thin boots, which had alarmed her father quite unreasonably. So the decree had gone forth that in her present cosy quarters she was to remain till the milder weather returned, which gave her the delight of another grievance.

As she stood gazing out at the wintry landscape which to less prejudiced eyes would have been full of its own beauty, the prayers bell rang. Ella started—her unpunctuality had been a frequent cause of annoyance for several weeks after her arrival at Coombesthorpe, but, perverse as she was, the girl was neither so stupid nor so small-minded as to persist in opposition when she distinctly saw that she was in the wrong. So this short-coming had to a great extent been mastered.

She tugged at her belt, gave a parting pat to her hair, saying to herself as she caught sight of her reflection in the glass, “It certainly takes much less time to dress as I do now than in the old days,” and flew along the passages and down stairs just in time to avoid a collision with Mr Barnes, as, heading his underlings, he politely followed the long file of women-servants into the library, where Colonel St Quentin always read prayers.

Ella took her place by the window; outside, a cheery red-breasted robin was hopping about on the gravel, and the sunshine, which was gathering strength, fell in a bright ray just where the little fellow stood. It is to be feared that much more of her attention was given to the bird than to her father’s voice.

“What a little duck he is,” she exclaimed, as soon as prayers were over. “See, Madelene—” and as her elder sister came forward with ready response, Ella’s face lighted up with pleasure. The whole world seemed brighter to her; so

impressionable and variable was she.

"Yes," said Miss St Quentin, "he is a dear. We can hardly help fancying it is always the same robin. For ever since Ermine and I were quite little there is one to be seen every winter on this terrace. It is here we have the birds' Christmas tree, Ella—one of those over there. It is so pretty to see them. There are so many nice things in the country in winter—I really do not know sometimes which I like the best—summer or winter."

Ella felt a little pang of self-reproach—she remembered how five minutes before she had been grumbling up in her own room.

"Madelene must be much nicer and better than I am in some ways," she thought to herself; "perhaps I would have been like her if they had kept me with them, or had me back some years ago," and the reflection hardened her again, just as the softer thought was about to blossom.

At that moment Colonel St Quentin's voice was heard from the adjoining dining-room.

"Breakfast is ready and the letters have come," he said.

"Nothing for me?" said Ermine; "what are yours, Maddie?"

"One from Flora at Cannes," said Miss St Quentin, "two or three answers to the advertisement for a laundry-maid, and—oh, here's something more interesting. The Belvoirs are giving a dance—on the 20th. Here's the card," and she tossed it over to Ermine, "and there's a note from Mrs Belvoir, too, 'to make sure of us,' she says."

"Colonel and the Misses St Quentin," murmured Ermine, "that means—I suppose—" and she looked up hesitatingly at Madelene.

"Oh," said Madelene, "it means what you choose, in the country. It isn't like London, where one has to calculate the inches of standing and breathing space for each guest."

"It means of course," said her father, "such of the Misses St Quentin as are—'out.'" He pronounced the last word with a good deal of emphasis, then turned to his coffee and his own letters as if the question were settled.

Ella had not lost a word. A flush of colour had come to her cheeks and a brightness to her eyes on first hearing her sister's announcement.

"They *can't* mean not to take me," she said to herself. "Just at Christmas too—why, girls who aren't a bit out go to Christmas dances."

And Madelene, for her part, was wishing more devoutly than she had ever wished concerning a thing of the kind in her life, that she had not been so impulsive as to mention the invitation in her younger sister's hearing.

"I only long for her to go," she said to Ermine when they were alone. "I'd give anything if papa would let her. And I don't see that it could do any harm—a Christmas dance is different, and really she has been good about her lessons, especially about her practising. Three wouldn't be too many, to such old friends."

"Not to go to the ball," Ermine replied. "But I fancy they will want us to stay for a day or two. You see Mrs Belvoir says she will come over to make further arrangements. And three would be too many to go to stay. But Maddie, I—"

"No. I know what you're going to say, and you're not to say it," Madelene interrupted. "You are not to be the one to stay at home. You're ever so much younger than I—"

"One year, eleven months and a day," said Ermine. "Twenty years—a hundred would come nearer it," said Madelene. "I was born old and circumstances have not rejuvenated me. No—if we can get papa to agree to let Ella go, I shall stay at home. It stands to reason. I am getting to an age when I should not be expected to go on dancing."

"Ah, well—we needn't quarrel about it yet," said Ermine lightly. "I am only afraid the occasion will not arise, and that papa will be inexorable. There was something far from propitious in the accent he put on that 'out' this morning."

She was right; inexorable he proved. Yet the sisters went about it diplomatically enough. They said very little at first, and were careful not to fret the thing into a sore from the start, as is so often done, and for a day or two they congratulated themselves that their gently suggested arguments had carried weight. But when the following week Mrs Belvoir wrote to say she was driving over to settle about the day they would come, and how many nights they would stay, and to discuss the whole programme—then the bolt fell.

"Ella go? No, most certainly not," said Colonel St Quentin. "I never thought of such a thing. I hope you haven't been putting anything of the kind into her head?"

"We have not mentioned it to her since the morning when the first note came," said Madelene. "That morning unluckily I spoke of it before her."

"Why should you say 'unluckily'? It is absurd to treat her in that way," said her father. "There should be and there must be no question raised, in the faintest way even, of anything of the kind for her. She is not yet eighteen—why, Ermine never went out at all till she was nineteen—"

"That was unusual however papa," Miss St Quentin ventured to say.

"Well, what can be more unusual than Ella's case? *It* calls for unusual treatment certainly. She has been most

injudiciously brought up, I see it more and more clearly. A life of dependence—dependence on her own exertions not improbably—”

“Oh, papa,” murmured Madelene reproachfully—“for which she is about as fit as—as that kitten of yours,” contemptuously indicating Ermine’s Persian cat, who had long left all kittenishness behind it, and was sleeping on the hearth-rug in calm placidity.

“Tartuffe is *scarcely* a kitten now, papa,” Ermine could not resist interrupting.

“Ermine!” said Madelene in a tone of remonstrance.

“And,” pursued Colonel St Quentin unmoved, “just as the silly child is settling down a little, you would go and spoil it all by stuffing her head with waltzing and admiration. No, no—I am surprised at you, Madelene, I really am. And if there were no other objection, there’s her health. You are afraid of her catching cold again if she changes her bedroom, and yet you would propose taking her off to a strange house, unaired beds possibly, and exposing her to the alternate heat and chills of a ball-room, and—”

Colonel St Quentin was working himself up to thorough unreasonableness.

“We won’t say any more about it, papa,” said Madelene, decidedly. “We have said *nothing* to Ella, so you really needn’t be vexed about it.”

She refrained from adding, as she might have done, that the scare about Ella’s health had entirely originated with himself, and she was wise in so doing. What human being, man, woman or child, was ever rendered more amenable to reason by being “put in the wrong?”

“I mind it principally, of course,” she said to Ermine, “because it *will* seem to her that it is our doing—negatively at least. She will think that if we had begged papa to let her go he would have given in. And I haven’t, in the faintest degree, let her think that we disagree with him about it. It would alienate her still more from him, and, besides, it would be disloyal to papa.”

“And, besides,” added Ermine, “I hardly like to say so, but I doubt if Ella would believe our protestations. There is an element of suspiciousness in her character, which I don’t at all like in so young a person, and quite lately she has seemed to me to be wrapping herself up in it more and more.”

“Yes, she has been very cold and stand-off to us lately,” Madelene agreed, “ever since that unlucky morning when I blurted out about the Belvoirs’ dance.”

“She would have had to hear about it sooner or later,” said Ermine. “I don’t see that it would have made much difference.”

“We might have managed it more diplomatically. We might have told her we were going away for a day or two, and mentioned that there was to be a dance, incidentally,” said Miss St Quentin.

Ermine looked up at her, half amused, half distressed.

“My dear Maddie,” she said. “I do think you’ve got Ella on the brain. You mustn’t give yourself such a lot of trouble about her—beating about the bush and worrying lest she should be put out. It will become a kind of slavery. I almost feel inclined to speak to papa about it from *your* point of view.”

“No, no, you must not, Ermie,” her sister replied. “Papa is already irritated on the subject. It will come right in time, I dare say. I wish Aunt Anna were at home. She might have had some influence with papa about this dance. I do think he is making a mistake—I must tell Mélanie,” she went on, “that she need not do any more about the frock we were planning for Ella.”

“It’s half made,” said Ermine.

“Well, she must turn it into a dinner-dress. But there is no need for Ella to know about it at present. It would only tantalise her, poor little thing. When will Aunt Anna be back, Ermine? You heard from her last.”

“A few days before Christmas—that was all she said,” Ermine replied, “Philip will be coming about the same time. I wonder what papa wants us to do at Christmas, Maddie. Shall we go to Cheynesacre, do you think, or will they come to us?”

“I don’t know. If papa remains in his present mood, I should say neither,” Miss St Quentin replied with some asperity. “He would probably dislike the idea of Ella’s going there with us, and a party here would be as bad. And if he proposed such a thing as our going without her—well—I should certainly refuse. One must make a stand somewhere. How can he expect the child to get to love us?”

“Madelene is making quite a personal grievance of it,” thought Ermine. “I am much more concerned for her than for Ella,”—“It is very tiresome that this should have happened just now,” she said aloud. “For one thing, I did so want Philip to see everything harmonious when he came back.”

“So did I,” Madelene replied. “That is just another vexation.”

The subject of the Manor dance was never named in Ella’s presence, but she was quick enough to see that it was in contemplation for her sisters.



"Will they really go so far as to leave me all alone?" she said to herself. "It will be a scandal if they do. If I am to be distinctly treated in this way, ignored as if I were about seven years old—they should at least be consistent and get a governess to keep me company when they go off and leave me alone. As if either of *them* was ever treated so at my age! What can Madelene want to go to a dance for—I am sure I wouldn't if I were as old as she—and really, sometimes lately since she has had this cross fit, she has looked thirty."

It was almost true. Poor Madelene's real distress of mind at the failure of all her hopes with regard to her half-sister, had preyed upon her. She was one of those much-to-be-pitied people who have but little spontaneous power of expressing their deeper feelings; indeed the more she felt the less she showed it, though her very silence and apparent indifference told their own tale to those who knew her well. Ermine had good reason for feeling at the present juncture much more concern for Madelene than for Ella.

A week or two passed, uncomfortably enough. The weather, as in England is often the case, seemed to aggravate the dreary uneasiness of the mental atmosphere at Coombesthorpe. It rained—a steady, pitiless winter rain—almost incessantly for a week. There was no possibility of walking or driving, and more than once Ella found herself seriously picturing in her own mind the life she might now, had she exercised some diplomacy, have been leading with Mr and Mrs Burton, with actual regret.

"At worst, I might have gone out sometimes. In a town however it rains one can always get out a *little*—and here,"—and she moved away with a gesture of something approaching despair, as her glance fell on the gravel paths sodden with rain, on the dripping trees, on the stretch of park beyond the garden, where faint mists or clouds—it was difficult to say which—hid the horizon, and made one feel as if shut in in a universe of hopeless grey.

In those days Ermine, it must be owned, was barely kind, certainly not sympathetic towards the girl. She was sorry for her in her heart, but this very feeling caused a certain irritation, for Ermine's nature was more prejudiced than Madelene's; she was vehement in her affections, and where these were strongly engaged, she was apt to be one-sided. In one direction the two younger Misses St Quentin got on well together—Ella had shown herself from the first an apt and interested pupil, and about this time Ermine, rather to her surprise, remarked a distinct increase in her zeal and attention.

"This composition of yours is really very good—very good indeed, Ella," she said one morning when she had been looking over an essay of her young sister's, compiled from notes of various writers on a certain period of history. "At your age I could not have done nearly so well."

Ella's eyes flashed, and there was a peculiar expression about her mouth—there was however a distinct mingling of satisfaction in her tone as she replied, though coldly.

"I am glad you approve of it. I am glad that you think it above the average of what girls of my age can do."

"Decidedly," said Ermine warmly. But as she glanced at Ella, she felt chilled again by the hard look on the round young face. She would have felt more than chilled had she read the thoughts at that moment passing through the girl's brain.

"Yes," she was saying to herself, "I am clever, and they can't deny it. I shall learn all I can, and then, if this goes on, I shall run away and become a governess. I should manage it somehow, I am sure." Two days later, as they were going to bed one evening, Madelene called her for a moment into her own room.

"Ella," she said, "Ermine and I are going away from home for a few days. We are going to the Belvoirs; you may remember our speaking of the invitation one morning when it came. Mrs Belvoir was here the other day, but you were out. They are nice people, and they give nice dances. When—when you are out I shall like you to go there."

"Then they didn't invite me this time?" asked Ella drily.

"They invited 'the Misses St Quentin,'" Madelene replied. "That meant what we liked to decide ourselves of course. It does not rest with outsiders to determine if a girl is out or not."

"Of course not," said Ella. "Then," she went on, "will you tell me what you wish me to do while you are away? Am I to be quite alone with Mrs Green (the housekeeper) as chaperon?"

"No," her sister replied, irritated by the scarcely veiled impertinence of Ella's tone, though a moment before she had been longing to express to her some of her own feeling on the matter, "no, certainly not. I am writing to ask Miss Harter, Mrs Hewitt's sister, whom you have seen at Waire, to come to stay with you."

"Oh, indeed," said Ella. Miss Harter was a pleasant, intelligent woman of thirty, whom Ella had found amusing and agreeable enough once or twice when she had met her, though it now suited her to describe her to herself as "a fusty old maid."

Things both great and small but *very* rarely turn out as we expect. Two days before that on which Colonel St Quentin and his two daughters were to leave home he fell ill. His illness was not very serious, but sufficiently so to put his going out of the question. And as he said that the presence of a stranger in the house would be an annoyance to him, Miss Harter's visit was put off, Ella manifesting livelier satisfaction at this than she had condescended for long to show about anything.

"What an incomprehensible girl she is," said Madelene, as she and Ermine drove away. "I think I must give up trying to make her out."

"I think her present phase is comprehensible enough," Ermine replied. "She is violently in love with the idea of being

a martyr, a suffering saint—no, neither of those expresses it quite. I have it—a Cinderella.”

A smile broke slowly over Madelene’s face.

“Yes,” she said, “that does express it. And we are the two cruel sisters—step-sisters, not half-sisters—a little poetic licence must here be allowed—going off in triumph to the ball! What a pity we have not got black corkscrew curls, Ermine, and an aigrette of three plumes apiece to appear in to-morrow evening!”

---

## Chapter Eight.

### Left Behind.

Ella spent the afternoon of her sisters’ departure in praiseworthy fashion. She acted up that is to say to the *rôle*, she had chosen to adopt. She prepared her lessons perfectly, she practised the most uninteresting of her piano exercises for an hour and a half; then she went up to her own room and looked out her oldest and shabbiest clothes, to see if she could not find anything in want of repair among them. It was not easy to do so. Stevens, who was an excellent needlewoman, kept Ella’s things by Madelene’s directions in perfect order, and it took some hunting on the girl’s part, before she succeeded in finding a stocking or two with incipient holes, or a skirt which looked as if it would not be the worse for a new braid round the edge.

On these she set to work, huddling herself up in shawl, for it was very cold, and sitting on the straightest-backed and hardest chair in her room.

“I wish they would give me an allowance for my clothes, however small,” she said to herself. “I could save out of it, I am sure, for I could dress much more plainly than I do even, which would certainly not distress my sisters. And I would have a right to what I saved in that way, surely. Every child can claim food and clothing from its parents till it is of age,” and she smiled bitterly. “Perhaps if I can make Madelene see that it would cost less to give me a small allowance, I may persuade her to make papa agree to it.”

Just then her meditations were interrupted by a knock at the door, and old Hester, the head housemaid, who had been deputed by Madelene to take care of Ella, so far as her material comforts were concerned, came in.

“Miss Ella,” she exclaimed, “whatever are you about? Sitting up here without a fire when it’s as cold as cold. Wouldn’t the Colonel be in a taking if he knew! You could have had a fire lighted if you’d only said the word. And there’s the library, and the little drawing-room as bright and cheery as can be, at your service.”

“I am busy working, thank you, Hester,” Ella replied primly. “I could not take work like this down stairs.”

She did not resent Hester’s reproaches, for the housemaid was an old servant, who had been at Coombesthorpe during the life of Ella’s mother, and was much attached to her.

Hester looked at what Ella was sewing.

“Darning stockings,” she exclaimed. “Now upon my word, I do call that too bad of Stevens. Not but what it’s a very right thing for a young lady, be she who she may, to know how to turn her hand to darning a stocking, but you’ve your studies, my dear, and other things to see to, and—”

“It’s—it’s not exactly Stevens’ fault, Hester,” said Ella, too honest to leave Hester under such a mistaken idea. “She does mend all my things; it is not often she overlooks a hole. But I prefer to do more myself, and I want to accustom myself to going without fires and little things like that, for there is no knowing how I may be placed some day, and I want to be independent.”

Hester looked at her in surprise and perplexity. She knew that the second wife had been portionless, and she knew too, though vaguely, that Coombesthorpe and the bulk of the family revenues had come from the mother of the two elder daughters—but she could not believe that they would ever allow their half-sister to realise this practically in any painful way.

“We none of us know how we may be placed any day for that matter, Miss Ella, my dear. The best of us is in God’s hands and subject to His will, and even if it seems hard we must bow to it. But—you’ve a good home and kind friends—it’s a sort of tempting of Providence like, for you to speak that way.”

She looked at Ella half-inquiringly as she spoke; she wondered how much “the child,” as she mentally called her, knew. “They might have left her in her innocence a bit,” she said to herself half indignantly. On her side Ella was struck by Hester’s tone.

“She speaks almost as she might if I had been an *adopted* child, with no real right here,” she said to herself. “It just shows—”

“And of course, Hester,” she replied haughtily, “it must *seem* as if I were one of the last women in the world ever to have to think of managing for myself or earning my own livelihood, but there are things that it is better not to explain. I may have my own feelings.”

“To be sure,” Hester replied, more and more perplexed. “But any way, Miss Ella, you’ll let me light a fire for you. It’d be far from independent if you was to fall ill of a bad cold, and your papa ill already, and just for this day or two with no one but you to see to him.”

Ella started.

"I forgot," she said. "I forgot about papa. Perhaps I had better go and see if there is anything I can do for him."

She was not exactly to blame for this thoughtlessness. Since her coming to Coombesthorpe her relations with her father had continued uncertain and constrained, and Madelene had judged it better to trust to time to bring about a better state of things, for the least effort on her part to force this would have been at once perceived and resented by Colonel St Quentin.

"Don't tell that child to look after me while you and Ermine are away," had been almost his last words to Madelene before she left. "If she thinks of it of herself that would be a different matter."

And in ordinary circumstances the chances are that Ella would not have gone near her father. But Hester's words reminded her that he was ill, and her conscience struck her.

"I'll go to papa now," she said. "He is in the study, isn't he, Hester? He was to get up after luncheon."

"Yes, Miss Ella, you'll find him in the study. But maybe he's asleep. Tap gently at the door."

Ella's tap revealed the fact that her father was awake.

"Come in," he said, his voice sounding rather sharp and irritable.

"Cross old thing," muttered Ella to herself, "I wish I hadn't come down. Can I do anything for you, papa?" she asked aloud as she entered the room. "Would you like me to read to you, perhaps?"

Colonel St Quentin was lying on a couch by the fire; his books and newspapers on a little stand beside him. He glanced at Ella hesitatingly. He was feeling very lost and dull without his two elder daughters, and his eyes were tired.

"No, thank you," he began to say, but his tone was not very decided.

"I—I think I read aloud pretty well," the girl went on. Her quick impressionable nature was touched by her father's looks: he was very pale, and she knew that he had suffered a good deal. "How selfish of them to have left him," was her next reflection. "Do let me try, papa," she went on more eagerly and naturally, "it must be rather dull for you alone, when you can't get about."

"And for you too, my dear," he said kindly. "What have you been doing with yourself all day—since your sisters left, I mean?"

Ella grew rather red.

"Oh," she replied, "I've been practising, and doing my French and German—much the same as usual. And then I've been sewing."

It did not sound very lively. The "much as usual," struck Colonel St Quentin too, and again he glanced at his youngest daughter. It struck him that she looked paler and thinner than formerly, and less bright and spirited. The fact was that Ella was blue and pinched with having sat in her fireless room for more than an hour, but this her father did not know. He moved uneasily on his couch.

"You can read to me if you like," he said. "I think I have exhausted the papers, but this book is rather interesting. Madelene is reading it to me but she can finish it to herself afterwards."

Half pleased and half frightened, Ella took the book. She had done herself scant justice in saying she read "pretty well." She read very well indeed, and at the end of three-quarters of an hour Colonel St Quentin looked up with real gratification.

"Thank you, my dear," he said. "That is a good place to stop at, I think. I have enjoyed it very much. Now I shall rest a while, for I hope to be able to come in to dine with you. It would be too dreary for you all alone."

Ella did not reply, but her father saw that her face flushed again a little.

"You are not looking as well as I should like to see you," he said. "Do you not feel well?"

"Oh, yes," said Ella, touched in spite of herself. "I'm quite well, thank you, papa, but," and here, in spite of all her heroic resolutions to endure in silence, the girl's impulsive nature burst out—"it is rather dull. I have tried to do as you wished about my lessons and practising, and I like them, but it is rather dull," she repeated.

"While your sisters are away, you mean? Just this day or two?" asked Colonel St Quentin.

"No, I meant altogether," answered Ella frankly. "I—I've been accustomed to more variety I suppose, and at auntie's I wasn't considered a mere child. I think it's that that makes it seem so dull."

Colonel St Quentin made no reply for a moment or two. He sat, leaning his head on his hand, considering deeply. It seemed as if what Madelene had tried to warn him of had come true. Had he made a mistake in the tone he had insisted upon being taken with Ella? He had never liked her so well as to-day, nor felt so drawn to her, and quite unreasonably he became almost inclined to blame his elder daughters for not "managing better."

"I have given in to their wish that no formal explanations should be made to her, not," they said, "till they had gained

her affection and confidence.”

“I certainly don’t think they are much nearer doing so than they were the day she came. It is an uncomfortable state of things altogether,” he said to himself.

Suddenly he looked up.

“How old *are* you, Ella?” he said abruptly.

“Nearly eighteen, papa. I shall be eighteen in two months,” she replied promptly.

“That is seventeen and ten months,” Colonel St Quentin replied dryly. “Well now, my dear, you can run away. I think I shall manage to get into the dining-room by dinner-time.”

Ella went off.

“‘Run away,’ indeed,” she repeated to herself, “as if I were about three! I wonder he doesn’t ring for my nurse to fetch me.”

Still, on the whole, the interview with her father had raised her spirits.

“I *almost* think,” reflected Ella, “I *almost* think that if it were all to come over again, papa would tell Madelene I *was* to go. Nobody scarcely but would pity me, left here alone, and it would have seemed so much more natural for me to go than either of the others, who have had years and years of it. I’m quite sure, when I’m as old as Madelene I shan’t care about dances and things like that, *especially* if I’m an old maid.”

The evening passed tranquilly. Colonel St Quentin dined with his daughter, Ella greatly enjoying her seat at the head of the table. And after dinner they spent an hour together in the drawing-room, when Ella very prettily volunteered to play, for her father to judge of her improvement.

Colonel St Quentin was pleased and touched.

“You must have practised diligently, my dear,” he said. “You find it less tedious now, do you not?”

Ella hesitated.

“I shall never care much for playing,” she said. “But I am glad you think I have improved. May I sing to you a little?”

“Certainly—you are sure you have no cold? You must never sing if you have the least cold,” said her father anxiously.

But Ella’s clear notes set all such fears at defiance. She chose two or three of the songs which she knew to have been her mother’s favourites, and she felt that she sang them beautifully. Her father said little, but she knew that she had pleased him.

A few minutes’ silence followed; then Colonel St Quentin said he felt tired and would go to his own room.

“I hope to be quite well to-morrow, or nearly so at least,” he said as he kissed Ella. “I really begin to hope I may escape easily this time,” for the poor man was from time to time a martyr to gout. “I am only sorry to have to leave you so early, but it gives me a better chance for to-morrow. Good-night, my dear.”

“Good-night, papa,” said Ella dutifully. “It isn’t very early. I generally go to bed at ten, and it is half-past nine,” this with the tiniest of tiny sighs. “What will they be doing to-night, papa? Do you think they will be dancing, just the party in the house, to try the floor, perhaps?”

“I can’t say, I’m sure. No, no, I should scarcely think so,” replied Colonel St Quentin, half consolingly, half irritably. Ella’s small shaft had gone home.

And Ella went up to her own room, and as she settled herself comfortably in the old nursery easy chair before the now brightly blazing fire, a “Mudie book,” which Madelene had thoughtfully provided for her in her hand, she did not look altogether an object of pity.

“Yes,” she said to herself, “I really do think if it came over again, papa would make them take me. I’ll try again to-morrow to make him understand better.”

But to-morrow, alas! brought disappointment. To begin with, the weather was atrocious. It continued bitterly cold, with the aggravation of just falling short of frost, and by nine o’clock the rain set in again, the cruel, pitiless winter rain, blurring the sky and the land with its grim veil.

Ella, who had planned a brisk walk early in the morning, gazed out of the dining-room window in despair.

“What *can* I do all day long?” she thought, and then as her eyes fell on the table where breakfast was waiting, she moved from it impatiently. “They might have let me have my meals in one of the smaller rooms,” she thought. “It looks too ghastly—that table and only poor me. I wish I had pretended to have a cold and stayed in bed.”

Just then her father’s servant came in with a message—a message not calculated to raise her spirits. Colonel St Quentin was not so well, very much less well this morning indeed. He was very sorry, the man went on, not to be able to get up. He would send for Miss Ella later in the day, but just now he was going to try to sleep a little.

“It’s too bad,” thought Ella, “just as we seemed to be getting to know each other better! And very likely Madelene

and Ermine will make out that I've made him ill, somehow. Oh dear, I wish I hadn't quarrelled with old Burton and then I could have asked auntie to have me on a visit?"

She had been so diligent the day before, that this morning there was even less than usual for her to do, and after the hour-and-a-half's piano practising there was literally no obligation on her of any kind.

The library books were in perfect order, the flowers in the drawing-room had been all attended to, and if not, thought Ella bitterly, what was the use of dressing up the room for nobody to see!

The morning seemed interminable. Tired of the big, empty rooms Ella at last went off up stairs to give herself another dose of stocking-darning, as a preparation for the governessing which again began to fill her imagination as the only possible escape from this unendurable state of things.

The fire was not lighted. Hester had felt so certain that her remonstrance of the day before would be effectual, that she had not thought it needful to take further precautions. Hence it came about that Ella was seated like the day before, muffled up in a shawl, which did not prevent her looking blue and pinched, her eyes slightly reddened by tears of sympathy with her own woes, when, in answer to her rather startled "come in," (Ella's conscience made her cowardly of Hester) a tap at the door was followed by an unexpected apparition.

"*Godmother,*" the girl exclaimed, scarcely able to believe her eyes, and starting to her feet as she spoke.

"Yes, godmother herself," said Lady Cheynes, coming forward. "But, my dear child, what are you thinking of—what is everybody thinking of to allow it?—you sitting up here in the cold on a bitter day like this? Do you want to get ill? Why it's enough to give you a sore throat or bronchitis or a frightful cold in your head to say the least."

"I don't feel so very cold, thank you, godmother," said Ella meekly. "I don't catch cold easily, and I want to make myself hardy. I—I had some little things to do up in my own room."

Lady Cheynes glanced at the stockings Ella had not had time to put out of sight.

"Darning stockings!—hum—can't one of the maids do that for you? You don't mean to say Madelene expects you to do this sort of thing. And—surely—if you do want to sit up in your own room you can give orders to have a fire lighted, can't you?"

Lady Cheynes frowned. Ella had never seen her look so stern.

"Oh—I'm sure—Hester would have lighted it if I had wanted it. And I might have stayed down stairs only—it's very dull," she burst out nervously. "Papa isn't any better to-day—he can't leave his room, and down stairs it all seems so big and lonely."

Ella's voice quivered before she got to the end of the sentence; she was so very sorry for herself. Her godmother eyed her keenly.

"When do Madelene and Ermine come home?" she asked. "This afternoon, I suppose."

"Oh, no," said Ella. "The ball—the dance at the Belvoirs' is only this evening. They are staying, I think, till to-morrow."

"Humph," said Lady Cheynes. "You don't care for dancing, I suppose?"

This was too much. Ella's face was a study. "*Me*" she exclaimed, "not care for dancing. Who ever said so?"

The old lady laughed a little.

"I don't know—nobody perhaps. I was judging by circumstantial evidence. A girl of your age, who did care for it, would have managed by hook or by crook to get leave to go."

Ella gasped.

"Do you really think so?" she exclaimed. "Why, godmother, the question was never raised in the least; the *possibility* of such a thing was never alluded to. If I had thought there was the faintest chance of it I should have nearly gone out of my mind."

"Did you never tell your sisters how much you would have liked to go?" asked Lady Cheynes.

"No," said Ella. "They may have guessed it, but we hardly alluded to it at all. But oh, godmother, please don't say *now* there might have been any chance of my going. It is—it is more than I can bear to think of it."

She clasped her hands together and looked up in the old lady's face, her lovely brown eyes brimming over with tears.

Lady Cheynes said nothing. She walked to the window and stood there looking out.

"How well I remember the view from this room," she said dreamily, speaking as much to herself as to Ella. "This was our nursery, too. I recollect one day my doll's falling out, between the bars, and when she was picked up and brought to me her face was all disfigured and cracked. Wax dolls cost a small fortune in those days. I remember thinking I never *never* could be happy again! Dear me—it is only a question of proportion after all—a child's bitter sorrow is as bad to it, as what seem more real sorrows are to older people. It seems a pity to—to add," but here she stopped, rather abruptly.

Ella had left off crying in the interest of listening to her godmother. She was disappointed that Lady Cheynes said no

more.

“Yes?” she said insinuatingly; “what were you saying, godmother? ‘A pity to add to?’”

“Never mind, child. I was thinking aloud. Now, take off that shawl and run down to the warm library, like a sensible girl. If you must finish darning your stockings, take one or two of them with you. There is no one but Barnes to be shocked. I am going to see your father if he is not asleep, and then I shall ask you to give me a scrap of luncheon. I only came home last night, and I heard Marcus was ill and drove over at once.”

Ella obeyed. The two went down stairs together. Then in reply to Lady Cheynes’ message came one from her nephew, saying that he was awake, and begged her to go to see him.

Ella sat alone in the library. She felt considerably less desolate and depressed, and it certainly was more comfortable than up stairs in the cold. She was very glad to have her godmother’s company at luncheon, anything was better than sitting alone through the meal with Barnes and his subordinates fidgeting about. And she was by no means sorry that the old lady should have come upon her as she had done, for however fond she was of her grand-nieces Ella felt certain Lady Cheynes did not approve of the present state of things.

“If she had been at home, I do believe I should have gone,” thought Ella.

Suddenly the door opened and her godmother reappeared. Her eyes looked very bright, there was a slight flush upon her soft old cheeks and a smile, a peculiar smile, flickered about her mouth.

“Godmother,” exclaimed Ella, as she had done up stairs in her own room. “What is it?” she went on, feeling a sort of vague excitement. “You look as if you had something to tell me. You are smiling, so it can’t be anything wrong. What have you been talking about to papa?”

Lady Cheynes drew a chair close to Ella’s, and sat down.

“Supposing I were a *fairy* godmother, Ella, just for fun, you know, what would you ask me to do to cheer you up a little this dreary day?”

Ella opened her eyes wide, very wide—and I almost think she opened her mouth too.

“Godmother?” she said, while a rosy colour crept over her face, “oh, godmother, what *do* you mean?”

---

## Chapter Nine.

### Too Good to be True.

“Godmother,” Ella repeated, “what do you mean?”

Lady Cheynes smiled.

“Supposing I were to tell you you were to go to the dance at the Belvoirs’ to-night after all?” she said.

Ella’s face fell a little.

“Godmother,” she replied, “I’m afraid you’re teasing me; I *couldn’t* go now.”

“Not if I took you? I was asked of course—they are very old friends, and I did not answer definitely, not being sure when I was returning home. Indeed till this morning I thought it was over, that it was last night.”

“But,” Ella went on, the corners of her mouth drooping like a little child’s, “I haven’t any frock, godmother. That makes it quite impossible.”

“I don’t know. Hester tells me there is a very pretty little white tulle frock almost ready for you. Madelene has been having it made by Mélanie—in case of anything unexpected, I suppose,” said Lady Cheynes quietly.

Ella looked as if she could scarcely believe her ears.

“*Madelene* has been getting a frock ready for me,” she said. “Perhaps, perhaps, godmother it was for a surprise. Wouldn’t she be vexed at my knowing it? Do you—would you *dare* to let me wear it? Oh, godmother,” and her eyes sparkled, “how lovely it would be!”

“*Will* be,” said her godmother, smiling more and more. “Listen, Ella, I’ve got your father’s leave to take you. You are to drive home with me immediately after luncheon. Hester is putting up the frock and my maid will set to work and finish it. Now think, have you everything else you need—gloves—shoes?”

“I have gloves—tan-coloured ones, but they’re quite new and nice and long. They are the last pair of those poor auntie gave me. I have never needed to wear such long ones here! And shoes—I have no white ones, godmother.”

“You must have white ones,” said Lady Cheynes. “Ah well—perhaps we can get some at Weevilscombe. I can send a man in to the shoemaker’s there. Or if not—” and the old lady hesitated. “Never mind—we’ll manage somehow. Now, my dear, run up stairs and show Hester all that you want packed up. You must be quick, for we shall leave immediately after luncheon.”

Scarcely knowing if she were standing on her head or her heels, off flew Ella. Up stairs in her room she found Hester, who now that the young lady was in such luck thought it well to sober her down a little by looking rather grim.

"Oh, Hester," cried Ella, flying at the old servant, seizing her by the shoulders and whirling her round, "did you ever know anything so lovely? Have you packed up the frock? Do tell me about it—how did you know about it? Was it to be a surprise and oh! Hester, what will my sisters say when they see me there? I'm so awfully afraid they'll be vexed, even though they won't show it to her ladyship."

Hester stopped short in the packing she was already in the midst of.

"Now, Miss Ella," she said, "that just shows how little you know your sisters. Vexed indeed—they'll be just as pleased as pleased, Miss St Quentin especially. If only you knew—No, miss, you can't see the frock—it's all pinned up neatly, and you must let Jones undo it herself," and Hester laid a protecting hand on the white puffy-looking packet she was reserving for the top of the trunk.

"You cross old thing," said Ella. "However I'll forgive you. I'm too happy to mind. All the same if my sisters did want me to go, why didn't they ask papa—he gave in the moment godmother tackled him?"

Hester grunted, but said nothing.

"That reminds me," Ella went on, "I must run in to see papa for a moment, to thank him. You've got all my things in now, Hester. I haven't time to change this frock, though I should have liked to," glancing at her thick grey homespun with contempt; "and besides, my Sunday frock—fancy me having come back to Sunday frocks like a good little girl!—is rather the uglier of the two. It is so clumsily made; I'd have *liked* to take my dark green cashmere that I brought from auntie's."

"And catch your death of cold. You forget, Miss Ella, it's a deal colder here than at Bath, and in a town too it's always warmer."

"Oh, well, I don't care. I shall come back first thing to-morrow morning; so it won't matter. Oh, Hester, I am so happy—here, catch, these are my gloves. Yes, I'm sure I've all now."

And with another series of pirouettes Ella took herself off.

She flew to her father's room this time.

"May I come in? Oh, papa, I don't know how to thank you," she cried. And as her father looked up, she seemed to him a transfigured creature from the meek, subdued Ella of the night before. There she stood, radiant and glowing with a delight which one could have fancied illumined even the dull folds of her grey frock as with sunshine.

A smile broke over Colonel St Quentin's pale worn face.

"My poor little girl," he ejaculated involuntarily, "do you really care so much about it?"

"Of course I do. Oh! you don't know how happy I am. But oh, papa, you don't think Madelene will mind, do you?"

Colonel St Quentin's face changed.

"*Madelene* mind!" he repeated. "My dear Ella, how extraordinarily you misapprehend your sister." Just, in other words, what Hester had said. For a moment Ella's face looked grave. If it were the case after all that Madelene was not to blame? But no—how could it be so? For papa, had been so easy to persuade—was now so plainly enjoying her delight. The girl's expression darkened. Madelene, she felt almost inclined to believe, was worse than she had yet imagined. She must be cleverer and more cunning, thought Ella, not only to keep her in the position she did, but to make it seem that she wished it otherwise. But these reflections of course were not to be expressed. And come what would, Ella decided triumphantly, her sister could not deprive her of this one evening's enjoyment.

"I'm glad you don't think Madelene will be vexed," she said quietly.

Colonel St Quentin gave a slight smile. "You must promise me, Ella," he went on, "to be very nice—biddable and considerate you know, to your—to Lady Cheynes. It is really very good, very good indeed of her to take you. Don't tease her to stay late, or anything of that kind. I suppose it's all right about your dress—she says so. Now, good-bye, my dear. Enjoy yourself and don't fancy that any one will grudge your doing so."

"Good-bye, papa," said Ella, stooping to kiss him.

They set off immediately after luncheon. Arrived at Cheynesacre, a great consultation took place. Jones was fortunately good-natured as well as skilful—she surveyed the snowy mass which old Hester had packed up so carefully with grave consideration.

"Yes, my lady," she said, "boolyooners of toole, quite simple, I see. The bodice is complete, luckily. Well—if Harriet can work with me—Harriet is a handy girl, I don't see but that it may be ready by eight o'clock—or even a little sooner."

"Sooner, decidedly," said Lady Cheynes, "we must start at half-past eight. It's a long drive and of course an early dance. You must have some white flowers Ella—not a bouquet, but a spray or two on the bodice. And was there not something else you needed?"

"Shoes, godmother. I have no white ones."

"Oh, to be sure. What do you think, Jones, could we get a decent pair at Weevilscoombe?"

Jones shook her wise head.

"Then—run down stairs, Ella, and ring for the head-gardener to speak to me in the conservatory. I will follow you immediately."

Five minutes later, the old lady entered the drawing-room with a small, carefully enveloped parcel in her hand. There was a look in her face that Ella had never seen there before—a look which in a younger woman would have been accentuated by tears in her eyes. But old age weeps rarely and painfully. Lady Cheynes' bright, dark eyes were undimmed, yet they had a very tender light in them as she unfolded the packet.

"Look, child," she said. "Here is a pair of slippers which I little thought would ever have danced again. They belonged to my own child. You have never heard of her of course. She would have been an old woman in your eyes, had she been alive still. They were the last white slippers she ever wore; you see they are perfectly clean, only yellowed a little with age, in spite of my blue paper!"

Ella took them carefully and admiringly in her hands. They were very dainty little shoes, and on the front of each sparkled an old-fashioned buckle.

"How pretty they are!" said the girl. "Are these diamonds, godmother?" and she touched the buckles.

"No, they would be too valuable in that case to be left stitched on the slippers," Lady Cheynes replied. "They are only old paste, but very good old paste. I gave them to Clarice to wear at the fancy dress ball she got the shoes for, and they were old even then. You see the shoes have high heels, Ella, which suits them for present fashions rather too well, in my opinion. That was because they were for a fancy dress. When Clarice was a girl, high heels were not worn. Now try them on, child—I only hope they are not too small."

Ella slipped off her own shoe and drew on one of the white ones without the least difficulty.

"Do they fit you?" asked Lady Cheynes quickly. "Quite; perfectly," said Ella, proceeding to try the second slipper. "The left foot is perhaps, yes, just a trifle too large," she went on. "You see they are both *easy*, and my left foot is a little tiny bit smaller than my right—and then I have thicker stockings on than in the evening. But I am sure they will do, godmother, beautifully; and it is so *very* good of you."

Lady Cheynes stooped to look at the little feet in their motley clothing of red stockings and white shoes.

"Humph," she said, with a mingling of admiration and contrariety in her voice, "humph—I thought Clarice's feet the smallest that ever were seen. You can put a bit of cotton-wool in the toes if you like, Ella."

"Oh, no, thank you, they're not as bad as that," said Ella, jumping up. "I can dance in them splendidly—I *fee*! I can," and she gave herself a twirl or two. "Oh, dear godmother," she went on, "I can scarcely believe that I'm going. I really *can't*." Jones and the handy Harriet worked their best. Before eight o'clock all was ready, and Ella stood arrayed for her godmother's inspection.

"Very nice, yes, very nice," said the old lady. "Put out your foot, Ella—yes, there won't be another pair of shoes and shoe-buckles like those, there. Now, what have you to put on over you? No! no," as Ella held up a gauzy mantle or shawl, "that's not half enough. You must have something over that. My dark-brown fur-lined cloak, Jones, will be the very thing. You are not used to a long drive in winter such as we shall have to-night. And it is freezing now, I hear—the roads are getting slippery. We cannot go fast."

"You must have plenty of hot-water bottles, my lady," said Jones, as she returned with the cloak. "And I'll tell Henry to be sure and have them filled again to come home with."

"We shall not stay so late as all that," the old lady replied. "However, it will do no harm to speak to Henry. What are you making such grimaces about, Ella?"

"The cloak, godmother. It is so awfully heavy—I am afraid it will crush me dreadfully, and see, it quite trails on the floor. Don't you think, in the warm carriage—if I doubled my shawl?"

"No, nonsense," said Lady Cheynes, decidedly. "That cloak is the proper thing. You can shake yourself out when you get there. Good tulle is elastic," and she turned away inexorably.

It was a long drive—longer than Ella had realised. And it was so cold outside that the carriage windows had to be kept up the whole way, not admitting a breath of air; and they quickly became so opaque that even if the night had been brighter and clearer than it was, Ella could have seen nothing. In spite of her excitement and eager anticipation she felt herself growing drowsy, and when they at last drew up, though she had not been actually asleep she had been so near it that all about her seemed dreamy and unreal. Hardly understanding where she was, she found herself following her godmother across a great square hall, whose dark oak panelling was decorated with Christmas evergreens and holly, down a short passage into a room crowded with ladies' shawls and wraps and attendant maidens.

"Shake yourself out, Ella," said Lady Cheynes. "Yes, that is right," as her god-daughter half mechanically obeyed her, under the supervision of one of the ladies'-maids. "You are not at all crushed. Keep our cloaks where they will be easily got at, we shall be leaving early," she went on to the woman, who evidently recognised her. "Now, Ella, my dear. But for goodness' sake, child, don't look so solemn. No one would recognise you."

"I—I didn't mean to look solemn, godmother," said the girl, glancing up in the old lady's face with a little smile of



deprecation in her lovely eyes.

At that instant a young man hastily crossing the hall, just behind them, caught sight of her. He stopped short and hesitated.

“By Jove!” he ejaculated under his breath, then drew back. He was out of the range of seeing or being seen by Lady Cheynes.

“Who can she be?” he said to himself.

The old lady moved on calmly till she reached the doorway where Mrs Belvoir was standing, and the greetings and introduction of Ella took place.

“We are later than I expected,” said Lady Cheynes. “You see it was such a sudden idea of mine.”

“A delightful idea,” Mrs Belvoir replied. “Where will you establish yourself, Lady Cheynes? There are a few seats in the ball-room—or would you prefer staying here?”

“I will stay here, thank you,” Ella’s godmother replied, seating herself beside her hostess. “But this child here,” she added in a lower voice, “I should like her to dance. Her sisters don’t know she is coming. It will be quite a surprise to them to see her.”

“They are both dancing,” said Mrs Belvoir. “Of course she must dance. Ah! there is Louis,”—as she caught sight of one of her sons and beckoned to him. “Louis,” and a word or two of whispered explanation followed, before he was brought up and introduced, nothing loth, to the lovely stranger.

He did not catch the name clearly; Mrs Belvoir’s special care to introduce the young girl correctly, as “Miss *Ella* St Quentin,” had a curious result.

“Miss Ellison Winton,” young Belvoir repeated to himself; “who in the world can she be? I have never seen her before, that’s certain.”

But long ere his fragment of a dance with her came to an end, he found himself hoping that he should see her again!

“She is quite bewitching,” he thought, “and she dances beautifully. I wish I were not engaged so deep.”

“May I introduce a partner or two to you, Miss—Miss Winton?” he said, and Ella did not notice the mistake, as she acquiesced, and two or three new men were led up to her.

“Major Frost, Mr Littleton, Sir Philip Cheynes,” followed each other in quick succession, and each in turn was informed privately by young Belvoir that the young lady was “a Miss Ellison Winton, a perfect stranger,” he added, “staying at some house in the neighbourhood;” and Ella herself, a little bewildered still, heard the various names but indistinctly—the “Sir Philip,” she caught but not the surname. And it never occurred to her to associate the bearer of it with her godmother’s grandson, whom she believed to be still in the north.

There was dancing in two rooms; during Ella’s next dance, a waltz with Major Frost, the elder Misses St Quentin were in the other room. The next, which she danced with Mr Littleton, was a square, and though she once caught sight of Madelene’s head through a doorway, they did not come more nearly together! which Ella, still more than half afraid of being seen by her sisters, was not sorry for.

“It must come, sooner or later,” she thought; “but I should like to be beside my godmother when they first see me.”

---

## Chapter Ten.

### An Old-World Shoe.

“Our dance, I think, Miss St Quentin,” said Major Frost, when, after searching some time for Madelene, he discovered her at last in the tea-room. “The second polka it is,” and as Madelene acquiesced, “I have been dancing with such a wonderfully pretty little creature,” he went on, “a Miss Wyndham, or Winton, I am not quite sure of the name. A perfect stranger, staying at some house in the neighbourhood they say. I must point her out to you.”

“I wonder who she can be?” Miss St Quentin replied. “Mrs Belvoir did not know of any particularly pretty girl coming—no stranger, I mean.”

“But she is a *very* particularly pretty girl; I know you will agree with me. If you don’t mind we’ll go into the other room and I will point her out to you. She is dancing with Cheynes, I think.”

Madelene felt but mildly interested in the object of her partner’s enthusiasm, but she made no difficulty. The second room was very crowded.

They danced for a few minutes and then stopped.

“It is too full, really,” said Major Frost. Then suddenly he gave a little exclamation.

“There she is,” he said, and Madelene looked where he directed. It was her turn to start and exclaim.

“What is it?” asked her partner in surprise.

Madelene had recovered herself.

"Nothing," she said, "nothing except the most—the *most* extraordinary resemblance. It is not very pleasant here," she went on, "suppose we go back to the other room. I want to speak to my sister Ermine; she is in there."

Major Frost was too polite to object, but he was rather disappointed.

"So you don't admire the stranger?" he said.

"On the contrary—I could only glance at her, but I could see that she is very lovely, as you said. I wonder if my cousin, Sir Philip Cheynes, knows who she is?"

Just then she caught sight of Ermine. She was fortunately not dancing. Madelene made a sign to her.

"Ermine," she said in a low voice, "I am perfectly bewildered. Do you know I do believe Ella is here?"

"*Ella?*" Ermine repeated.

"Yes—dancing in the other room with Philip. If it is not she, I never saw such a likeness—*never*."

"But," said Ermine, looking dazed, "if she is dancing with Philip, he would know, he would tell us."

"*He* may not know who she is," said Madelene impatiently, for once grasping the situation more rapidly than her sister. "He has never seen her. And if it is she, she has not come in her own name. Major Frost said she was a Miss *Wyndham*."

Ermine looked relieved.

"Then it can't be she," she said. "She would never do such a thing. Knowing too that we were to be here—it would have been perfectly absurd."

But Miss St Quentin still looked dissatisfied.

"I don't know," she said. "I feel as if I were dreaming. She is not only the very image of Ella, but her dress is uncommonly like the white tulle frock that I had made for her in case papa had given in. Ermine, if she has done such a thing—such a scandalous thing as to come here by herself trusting to us not to tell—it would be—I don't know *what* we should do."

"Your imagination is running away with you, Maddie," said Ermine. "Still all the same I shall go and have a look at this remarkable young woman—quietly, you know, without letting her see me. There's Major Frost looking as if he couldn't think what's the matter, and he is rather a gossip. I'll meet you again in the tea-room after I have made my voyage of discovery."

So Madelene returned to her partner whose curiosity was not, at that time at least, destined to be satisfied. As soon as the dance was over, she declared herself too tired and hot to attempt the next, and sending Major Frost off to explain matters to a brother-officer of his to whom she happened to be engaged, she found a seat for herself in a corner of the conservatory where she hoped to be able to remain *perdue* for a few minutes.

Her head was full of Ella—for that Major Frost's "Miss Wyndham" was not her sister she could scarcely believe. And she felt both uneasy, and indignant. Suddenly a slight rustling close at hand warned her that her retreat was no longer hers alone—a small figure in white was making its way in her direction, and as it seated itself she heard Ella's voice say lightly to some one unseen.

"Oh, yes, you will find me here. It is very good of you to fetch it for me."

Madelene rose to her feet. They were alone.

"*Ella*" she said.

The girl turned her head, then she too got up, and came forward, with a smile on her face, but a somewhat ill-assured and deprecating one.

"I was wondering when we should come across each other," she said. "I meant to go into the other room to look for you and Ermine, Madelene," and here she tried to smile again, but the effort was rather a failure, and her lips quivered a little. "Madelene, are you very astonished to see me? Had you no idea I—might perhaps come after all? Madelene, don't look at me like that. I didn't think you'd be so vexed."

For Miss St Quentin's face was growing very stern. She had caught sight of and identified the white tulle frock by this time.

"I cannot say anything till I understand the whole," she began. "It is your place to tell me."

Just then steps were heard approaching. Ella started.

"It is the man I am dancing with—he went to fetch me an ice," she said hurriedly. "I don't want him to see me being scolded," and her voice sounded as if she were going to cry.

Madelene hated scenes, and still more did she hate any exposure to strangers of family affairs. She instantly drew back.

"I shall take care that your partner does not see me," she said. "But I shall look out for you in the tea-room after this dance. Ermine will be there too."

There was no time for Ella to reply. Miss St Quentin had no difficulty in concealing herself. She just stepped quietly behind a clump of high and thick-growing plants in the corner, where the light was not strong, and her dress being black, no one would have noticed her unless they had been directly looking for her.

A moment after, she heard a voice addressing her sister.

"Here is the ice—at least it is a cup of iced coffee. Will that do as well, Miss Wyn—?"

It seemed to Madelene that the new-comer rather slurred over the name; it was the case that he did so, for he had heard it but indistinctly, and Ella, in no hurry to be revealed to her sisters, had not cared to set the mystification right. But—Madelene scarcely noticed what he said, in her surprise at recognising Ella's partner as her cousin Philip! For a moment or two, she could not understand it. Then again she gradually recollected that it was perfectly possible he did not know Ella—he had never seen her; he had probably been introduced to her by some one who had no idea who she really was. Madelene had already seen and talked to Philip, who had hastened his return from the north in order to be present at the Belvoirs' dance. He was to spend the night with his present hosts and "surprise" his grandmother by appearing at Cheynesacre in the course of the following afternoon, some days sooner than she was expecting him. For neither he nor his cousins had the slightest, the very slightest, notion that such a move on the old lady's part as she had executed with Ella in her train was possible.

"Thank you, thank you very much. Yes of course it will do—much better than a regular ice, for I can drink it off in a moment, and I do so want to lose no more of this lovely waltz," Madelene next heard her sister reply.

"She is eager to get out of my way," she thought, "and what wonder? But I am not going to make a scene, you need not be afraid, Ella. Philip evidently does not know her. It must all be told him afterwards. How disgraceful it seems! And just when we wanted her to have made a good impression on him—he will be utterly horrified. Oh! I wish I could see Ermine."

The voices had ceased. Ella and her partner had left the conservatory. Madelene made her way to the entrance and then, glancing round to make sure they were not standing about anywhere close at hand, hurriedly crossed the ball-room to the room where Ermine was to meet her.

She was already there, eagerly looking out for Madelene, whom she at once drew into a corner.

"Madelene," she began, but Miss St Quentin for once was so excited that she interrupted her.

"Ermine," she said, "it *is* she—Ella. I have seen her and spoken to her. I never in all my life was so—"

"Wait, Madelene—do let me speak. Of course it is Ella, but it is all right. She came with Aunt Anna. There is nothing to be vexed about. Aunt Anna took it all upon herself. She persuaded papa to let the poor child come. Really, Maddie," seeing that no change of expression lighted up her elder sister's face, "I don't understand you some times. I thought you would have been quite delighted. You *did* want her to come."

But Miss St Quentin's equanimity had been too thoroughly disturbed for her to recover it quickly. She was, at the bottom of her heart, more seriously vexed with herself than with any one else, vexed with her own hasty and, as she now saw, absurd idea that Ella would have ventured on such an escapade as to follow them by herself. And to one of Madelene's temperament, mortification is peculiarly bitter. For the moment she yielded to her irritation and allowed herself the questionable relief of venting it on others.

"Of course I wanted her to come if the thing had been properly arranged. Papa should have consented when *we* asked him, or else, it seems to me, kept to his decision. Aunt Anna went to Coombesthorpe, I suppose, and found Ella weeping like a poor little martyr at having been left alone. And her entreaties and Ella's tears prevailed where my downrightness failed, it seems," she said cynically.

Ermine looked at her in surprise.

"Well, and what if they did?" she said. "You are not going to begin feeling jealous of Aunt Anna's influence with papa—that would be too absurd. And as for Ella's tears—wait at least till we know that she shed any. But, Maddie—I've seen Aunt Anna, and it is so absurd. Philip and Ella are dancing together—have been, at least, and neither knows who the other is! Isn't it fun? Aunt Anna has quite entered into the spirit of it, and she says we are to try to keep it up, and not let either of them speak to her or to us when the other is by. Ella is engaged for every dance—people are all smitten by her, but aunt is going soon, so it won't be difficult."

"I don't see any point in it," said Madelene, coldly.

"Don't you! Oh I think it's Capital—the very thing we thought of at the beginning," and here, though there was no one to catch her words, Ermine dropped her voice,—“if—if they were to take a fancy to each other, Maddie, it would be such a good thing, such a comfort to papa, too.”

Madelene's face softened.

"I am afraid Ella is too superficial, if not heartless—" she said, though with reluctance. "For all Philip's careless manner, he has really deep feelings. He would be miserable with a frivolous wife."

"Maddie, you are prejudiced. I don't think you have any right to think Ella shallow—her deeper feelings may not have been awakened yet, but that is a different matter," said Ermine. "I think it would be delightful."

"It certainly would cut the knot of several difficulties," Madelene allowed.

"And they are far more likely to be attracted to each other, meeting as strangers," said Ermine. "It is as good as a play! Philip is prejudiced against Ella—he fancies she is a worry to us, and she would have found this out at once, she is so quick! Oh, I think it is too lucky that they should have met like this." Ermine looked quite ready in her enthusiasm to clap her hands—Madelene could not resist the infection. She smiled at her sister.

"My dear child," she said, "I had no idea you were such a matchmaker. What would Aunt Anna say to it?"

"Aunt Anna knows what she is about. Don't trouble about *her*," said Ermine. "But we must not be seen whispering together like this. I want to get hold of Major Frost, to prevent his finding anything out, and spoiling it all."

Miss St Quentin sat still for a moment or two after her sister had left her.

"If I could feel sure that Ella has any real character, real depth," she thought. "It would certainly be very nice—if her future were assured it might, indirectly, make many things easier. It would surely make papa less morbid."

And Madelene sighed a little as for once she allowed her imagination to glance backwards on what might have been had cares and responsibilities fallen less prematurely upon her.

Ella meanwhile, but for her disagreeable interview with her eldest sister, had been enjoying herself to the top of her bent. She had not been long of discovering that she was sailing under false colours, as more than one of her partners, imagining he had heard her name correctly, addressed her distinctly as "Miss Wyndham." And she did not set the mistake right. She would enjoy herself for this one evening, she decided, and Madelene's unpleasant strictures might be reserved till afterwards.

"I will keep out of their way," she said to herself, "for if all these men knew I was their sister they would begin cross-questioning me, and it would all seem queer. And godmother won't mind if from time to time I let her know I'm all right. She wants me to have as much dancing as I can—we shall be leaving so early."

It all turned out more easy of execution than she could have expected. After her first half-apologetic whisper to Lady Cheynes, at the end of her dance with Major Frost, of "Godmother, I'm so happy, but need I come back to you *every* time? The dances follow so quickly," had been met with an indulgent smile, and the words, "No, no, my dear—amuse yourself as much as you can, but remember we must leave at twelve," she felt quite at ease on that point, and somehow she did not again catch sight of Lady Cheynes at all. And with her partners she took care to keep to generalities, nor was it difficult to do so, seeing that socially speaking she was really a stranger in the neighbourhood.

She danced twice in succession with Sir Philip, the second time immediately following the passage of arms with Madelene in the conservatory. She had not the faintest idea who he was, but she thought him by far the most agreeable of her partners. And he, attracted at first sight by her beauty, was still more captivated by her pretty, half-childish bearing and the little air of mystery about her, which he was quick enough to detect.

"You will give me another dance, I hope?" he said; "though indeed it is perhaps hardly fair of me to ask it, when so many less fortunate than I have been already, must be refused."

"But you were one of the first to ask me," she said simply, "you, and Mr—Mr something Belvoir, a son of the house, and a Sir Philip somebody, and Major—Major Frost. You are not Major Frost, are you?" she added quickly, with a slight tone of inquiry.

Philip smiled. He was not going to be trotted out by this charming little person, who knew so well how to keep her own secrets.

"Mr Louis Belvoir, you mean," he said, calmly ignoring the latter part of her speech. "Ah, yes, there he comes. You are dancing with him? And what about another waltz?"

"It must be soon, then," she said, "for I am leaving early; at twelve, not a moment later, my god—my chaperone said."

"What a very strict chaperone she must be," said Sir Philip, smiling. "It sounds quite like a certain old fairy-story. I wish I could be dancing with you when the clock strikes, to see what would happen."

To his surprise the girl did not laugh, or even smile. She looked up at him with a curious expression.

"I don't think I like that story," she said. "I have never liked it since I was a baby. And yet—somehow—it seems always coming up," she added in a lower voice.

Philip's curiosity increased.

"You don't mean to say," he said laughingly, "that if I call upon you to-morrow morning I shall find you scrubbing the kitchen pots and pans?"

Ella's face crimsoned.

"You can't call upon me," she retorted sharply; "you don't know where I live nor anything about me."

"Except your name—Miss Wyndham," he repeated, slightly accentuating the last two words.

The girl turned quickly, as just at that moment Mr Louis Belvoir's voice was heard.

"Our dance, Miss Winton, I think," he said.

"And I may claim the next but one then, I hope?" Sir Philip hastened to add.

Ella nodded "yes," as she went off on Louis Belvoir's arm.

"*Who* can she be?" thought Sir Philip, as he stood there, looking after them, rather bewilderedly. "She is quite wonderfully pretty, and—what is it? Charming is such a stupid word. She is too simple and naïve to be called charming; her eyes are so honest, too. What or who is it she reminds me of I wonder? No one seems to know. And how odd she was when I alluded to 'Cinderella.'"

He did not dance the next dance but hung about till he could claim "Miss Wyndham" for the promised waltz, and as he kept her and young Belvoir in view, he had no difficulty in finding her when the time came.

"This is my last dance," she said, after a turn or two. "Mr Belvoir has just told me the time."

"And is your chaperone quite inexorable? Would there be no use in trying to melt her—suppose we do?" suggested Philip eagerly.

Ella shook her head.

"No," she said with a little sigh. "I promised not even to ask her. But oh, I have enjoyed myself so much," and again came the little sigh.

Sir Philip's eyes expressed the sympathy he felt, but he dared not venture on any more questions.

"I may meet you at some other dance before long, I hope?" was the utmost he risked.

"It is not likely," she replied. "I am no—" and she hesitated.

"Not remaining long in this part of the world?"

"No—not that. I was only going to say I am not supposed to be *out*," she said with evident reluctance.

"And yet she is *visiting* in some house in the neighbourhood evidently without any of her own family," thought Philip, more and more *intrigué*, and in his own mind he was considering what observation leading to further revelations he might hazard when he was startled by a sudden move on his partner's side.

"I must go now; please don't think me rude," she exclaimed hurriedly, and before he had time fully to take in the sense of her words she had gone.

"I *will* find out where and with whom she is staying," he said to himself, starting forward to follow her, when a hand was laid on his arm, and turning, he saw his cousin Ermine.

"Where have you been hiding yourself all this time?" she said smiling. "Are you not going to ask me to dance to-night?"

"Of course, of course, if you care to," Philip replied. But his manner was confused and hurried. It was evident he did not want to be detained. "I'll be back in two minutes, Ermine," he said, "but excuse me for an instant. Some friends of mine are just leaving, and I want—I just have a word to say to them before they go."

"But I must speak to you for a moment," said Ermine persistently. "Did you not know your grandmother has been here?"

"My grandmother!" ejaculated Sir Philip, so astonished as to forget for an instant his determination to discover some particulars about the mysterious Miss Wyndham, and if possible obtain a glimpse of the chaperone she had alluded to.

"Yes, of course. Aunt Anna—Lady Cheynes. Why do you look so incredulous?" Ermine went on.

"It seems so queer. What in the world put such a thing in her head, and why wasn't I told? She will be very vexed at my not having gone near her," he said with considerable annoyance in his tone.

"Not at all. She had not in the least expected to find you here. She had no reason to do so—you know you meant to give her a surprise by walking in to-morrow morning. She told me to tell you she knew you were dancing and she didn't want to interrupt you."

"All the same, I wish I had known," Sir Philip persisted. "I can't get over the idea of her having been here and my not knowing."

"She didn't stay long," said his cousin. "She was sitting in the small drawing-room all the time, and I *assure* you she wasn't in the least, not the very least, vexed at not seeing you. She's expecting you home to-morrow."

"It was such an odd fancy of hers to come," Philip repeated. "Why—it's years since I knew her go to anything of the kind. Are you sure she's gone, Ermine? May she not be still in the cloak-room, perhaps?"

"No, I'm sure she's gone. I wish you'd believe what I say," said Ermine, looking slightly irritated by his pertinacity.

"Oh, well, I suppose it's all right. But I shall be too late for the other friend I wanted to say good-night to. Excuse me,

Ermie—"I'll be back in two minutes," and before his cousin could think of any further excuse for detaining him he was gone.

"It will be too provoking," thought she, "if he goes running against them just as they're leaving. I wonder who it is he wants to say good-bye to." Philip hastened as fast as he could to the hall—a sharp rush of cold air told that the door was open, and as he got up to it the sound of wheels announced that some one had just driven away.

"Whose carriage was that?" he inquired of one of the servants standing about. The man was a stranger and did not recognise him.

"Lady Cheynes's," he replied. "It was the Cheynesacre carriage, sir."

With a muttered exclamation of annoyance Philip drew back. He glanced into the cloak-room as he passed—it was quite deserted, no one else seemed to be taking their departure just then. He strolled forward again towards the door, and pushing it open, stepped out on to the drive. Yes, it was a very cold night, much too cold for keeping horses waiting, in consequence of which, no doubt, no horses or carriages were to be seen.

"She must have gone," thought the young man. "But who in the world is she, and whom can she have come with? Louis Belvoir knows no more than I do, and I don't want to make myself conspicuous by asking any one else."

He turned back, but just as he was stepping inside the porch, something glistening on the ground caught his eye.

"By Jove!" Philip ejaculated, "can it be one of my lady's diamond pins? What a joke it would be—for she always maintains that she never loses anything."

He stooped as he spoke to pick it up, but the object that met his hand was not at all what he had expected. The sparkle which had attracted him was that of diamonds of a kind, certainly, but the jewel was attached to something else, much more ponderous, though small and dainty enough for what it was—a shoe!

It had lain in the shadow, all of it except the front, on which the old paste buckle had glittered in the moonlight—it had once been a slipper of gleaming white satin, but time had slightly dimmed its brightness. Sir Philip took it into the light of the lamp—there was no servant about just then—and examined it curiously. Gradually a smile broke over his features.

"Ah," he thought, "my allusion to Cinderella this evening seems to have been prophetic. I shall pocket this treasure. It is Miss Wyndham's, I know, I remember noticing the buckles when she was dancing, and the rather old-world look of the slippers. Upon my word, it is like a fairy-tale. The shoes must have been too big for her."

He was quiet and rather absent when he returned to his cousin Ermine, but had evidently got over his annoyance.

"You were in time then to say good-night to your friends, I hope?" asked Ermine with some curiosity.

"No—at least, not exactly," he replied. "But it doesn't matter."

---

## Chapter Eleven.

### After the Ball.

"Good-night, and good-bye for the present, though I shall be coming over to Coombesthorpe in a day or two. I am going home very early to-morrow morning, before any of you good people will be stirring," said Sir Philip to his cousins, when, all the guests save those staying in the house having departed, these last were dispersing for the night.

"You're in a fidget about Aunt Anna," said Ermine. "I can see it, Phil—you should have more trust in my assurances."

"I have—unlimited; still I shall be more comfortable when I have seen her, I confess," he said.

"Well, come over as soon as you can," said Madelene. "You know," she went on, "you haven't forgotten that our sister—Ella—is with us?"

There was a tone of constraint in her voice which Sir Philip perceived at once.

"Poor Maddie," he thought, "she is too good to say so, but I can see—I feel sure—that that child is a great torment to her." And "No indeed," he went on, "worse luck. I have not forgotten that fact."

"Phil!" Ermine exclaimed, but there was a mischievous look in her eyes which would have puzzled her cousin had he seen it clearly.

"You should not be prejudiced, Philip," said Madelene gravely.

"But I am, and I can't help it," he retorted.

"At least you must own to some curiosity on the subject," said Ermine. "You will come over soon?"

"Of course. I want to hear and ask scores of things," he replied. "No, I am not curious at all, except so far as your comfort is concerned. Have you found it possible to carry out my suggestion and keep her in the schoolroom in the meantime?"

"Better still," said Ermine, her eyes dancing unmistakably. "We have for the present relegated her to the *nursery*."

She dropped her voice somewhat, and glanced round her as if anxious not to be overheard. Philip raised his eyebrows in surprise, but a look of relief overspread his countenance at the same time.

"Oh, come," he said, "that's almost too good to be true! What a phenomenon she must be—I am really beginning to feel curious. But I mustn't keep you chattering here any longer. They'll all be wondering what secrets we've got."

He was true to his word. The next morning, clear, cold and frosty, saw him betimes on his way to Cheynesacre. He had taken it into his head to walk over, leaving word that he would send for his luggage in the course of the day, and in a modified degree carry out his original intention of "surprising" his grandmother, by marching in upon her at her solitary breakfast. For notwithstanding her unwonted dissipation of the night before he felt pretty confident of finding Lady Cheynes at her usual place at table at her usual hour of ten.

Nor was he disappointed. He had the satisfaction in the first place of considerably startling the "Barnes" of the Cheynesacre establishment, and leaving him aghast in the hall, walked coolly on into the dining-room.

A bright fire was blazing on the hearth, the kettle was singing, the round table with its snowy cloth was spread ready for breakfast, and at it, reading her letters as usual, sat Lady Cheynes.

"Granny," said Philip in the doorway.

The old lady started.

"My boy," she exclaimed, "you must have got up in the middle of the night, or perhaps you haven't been to bed at all, after your gay doings."

"It strikes me, granny, that my gay doings are nothing to yours. I'm glad to see you looking just like yourself, but it really was too bad of you not to let me know in time last night that you were there."

He stooped to kiss Lady Cheynes as he spoke; she looked up with a smile.

"You were enjoying yourself; I didn't want to interrupt you. It was a sudden thought of mine; I did not stay long," the old lady replied, speaking less deliberately than her wont.

"I can't conceive what put it in your head to go at all," he said, as he seated himself. "I'm tremendously hungry, granny. I walked over, and I must send Symes for my luggage. I meant to have given you a surprise; you didn't expect me till next week, did you?"

"No, of course not. I'm not very fond of surprises as a rule, but still, as it has happened I'm glad you're here. It seems a shame to begin working you the moment you arrive, but will you go over to Weevilscoombe this morning for me to speak to Mr Brander about Layton's lease? It will save me from writing a letter which after all would probably not have made things clear."

Sir Philip tapped his boots with his cane reflectively.

"This morning?" he said. "I suppose to-morrow wouldn't do? I want to go over to Coombesthorpe to-day if I can."

"I am afraid to-morrow would not do," said his grandmother. "I should like you to be at Mr Brander's by twelve. I am going over to Coombesthorpe myself, so I can tell them you will be there to-morrow. Indeed I don't think Maddie and Ermine will be home till this evening. I am going to see their father, who has been seriously ill."

"And that child—I'm delighted to hear she *is* such a child still," said Philip. "I suppose you look after her when the girls are away."

"Yes," said Lady Cheynes, dryly. "I do. But who told you she was 'such a child'?"

"Ermine. She said that not the schoolroom even, but the *nursery* was Ella's proper place," replied Philip, honestly believing that he was literally repeating Ermine's words.

"Indeed!" said Lady Cheynes slightly raising her eyebrows.

Then the bell was rung and Sir Philip's dog-cart ordered to be round in half an hour.

"In the meantime," said his grandmother, "if you will come to the study, I will explain to you the points which I wish Brander clearly to understand." Philip sauntered to the study.

"Granny is even more than commonly energetic," he said to himself, as he stood at the window gazing out at the wintry landscape while he waited for her. "However—I wonder if by any chance she knows anything about that lovely little personage last night! She has such quick eyes, I expect she noticed her—she could hardly have failed to do so. I expect the small princess is in trouble about her shoe this morning! It looks like a family heirloom."

He drew it out of his pocket and looked at it—yes, by daylight it seemed even quaint. The satin was a rich creamy yellow, and the buckle was of curiously antique form.

"Granny could tell the date to a year," he thought to himself. All the same, he slipped the shoe back to its hiding place pretty sharply when he heard the door handle turn and his grandmother enter the room.

He would have been rather astonished had he overheard the directions she had just been giving to her trusty Jones.

"I don't wish Miss Ella to know of Sir Philip's return," she said. "Take her her breakfast when she wakes—I told her to ring for it—and tell her that the carriage will be round as soon as she is dressed. I am going to drive back to Coombesthorpe with her, myself."

Then the old lady rejoined her grandson in the study and kept him immersed in her instructions to Mr Brander, till his dog-cart was announced.

"You will probably stay to luncheon with him," she said. "You may as well, for you would not find me at home. I am going to lunch at Coombesthorpe."

"Then tell them," Sir Philip began,—“oh no, by the by, you will not see the girls?”

"Perhaps I shall—I may wait till they return."

"Tell them I shall be over to-morrow, then. They were looking very well last night, didn't you think so? Ermine especially, Madelene looked rather solemn—does that child worry her much, do you think, Granny?"

"If she does, it is Maddie's own fault," Lady Cheynes replied sharply. "At least hers to some extent, and perhaps partly her father's. I find Ella as reasonable as one could wish. I'm sure when she is alone with me—" but here she suddenly checked herself.

"Is she ever alone with you? Do you have her here? Upon my word, Granny, it's most self-sacrificing of you. But—you're not going to have her here any more, I hope, not now I've come back?"

"How unselfish you are!" said his grandmother, with a smile, however, that somewhat belied the satire of her words. "She is my god-daughter; I have duties and responsibilities with regard to her."

Philip murmured something inaudible. But Lady Cheynes took no notice.

"You shouldn't keep the horse waiting, Phil," she said. "It is biting cold."

"Good-bye then, till—dinner-time, I suppose?" he said as he went off.

He felt slightly dissatisfied. "Granny" had not seemed as pleased to see him as she usually was after an absence; she had asked him nothing about matters at Grimswell, where he had really been working hard, and "going into things,"—the rectifying of abuses, the setting a-foot new benevolent schemes, and so on—with fervour and energy which he had scarcely known he possessed. He could and would of course talk it all over with Granny when he got her to himself, that very evening probably, but still—no, she had not been quite herself that morning, she was "carried" and constrained. Perhaps there were troubles at Coombesthorpe which he had not heard of; his grandmother had spoken rather snappishly of Madelene.

"I do believe it's all that child," was the conclusion at which the young man finally arrived. "I must get it all out of Granny and help to smooth things a little if I can. I wonder,"—was his next thought—"I wonder if Maddie noticed that girl or knew who she was."

He found the lawyer at home, but somewhat surprised to see him. Sir Philip explained to him his unexpected return. Mr Brander, who had known him from his infancy, pricked up his ears at the prospect of a little local gossip.

"So you were in time for the Manor dance, Sir Philip. A very successful affair I hear. My nephew,"—Mr Brander had a brother who ranked among the small squirearchy—"my nephew looked in this morning on his way home; he slept at his sister's—and he was full of it. He was telling me all the details. I was delighted to hear that Lady Cheynes chaperoned her nieces herself, though sorry to hear of the Colonel's illness."

Philip looked surprised.

"Oh no," he said, "my cousins were staying in the house. What put it into my lady's head to go I'm sure I don't know, but it was not as chaperone to any one."

"Indeed," said his companion, "I must have misunderstood Fred then. But he was quite clear about it—said that the youngest Miss St Quentin was tremendously admired, bids fair in fact to, so to speak, outshine her sisters. Of course there is the charm of novelty in her case; she is quite a stranger in this neighbourhood."

Philip's brow contracted. Old Brander meant no harm, but his remarks struck the young man as slightly free. Besides—what utter nonsense he was talking!

"There is some absurd mistake," he remarked rather stiffly. "I don't suppose you misunderstood your nephew, but he has got hold of some nonsense. The youngest Miss St Quentin is still to all intents and purposes a child; there could have been no question of her being at the Manor last night."

In his turn Mr Brander looked surprised.

"Fred must be more exact in his statements," he said; "he must have mistaken some one else."

And then as Philip proceeded to lay before him the papers and explanations with which Lady Cheynes had furnished him, the conversation took the turn of business and no more was said about Mrs Belvoir's dance.

But a feeling of increasing mystification was left in Philip's mind.

"I cannot understand my grandmother's sudden freak last night," he thought. "It is sure to make people gossip,



especially if any one noticed that she and I were never together the whole evening. The next report will be that she and I have quarrelled—it would be no more absurd than that Fred Brander's story about Ella St Quentin having been the belle of the Manor ball!"

Ella was at that moment dressing as quickly as she could, having slept till long after her usual breakfast hour and only awakened to be told that as her godmother wished to drive over to Coombesthorpe for luncheon, she had no time to spare. So her thick grey linsey frock was donned again, and the fluffy masses of white tulle, slightly "tashed," as the Scotch say, but snowily pretty still, reconsigned by Jones's careful hands to the tray of Ella's large basket trunk.

"It's very little the worse," said the maid. "If you just get Millannie to iron it out the next time you want to wear it, Miss, it'll be as good as ever. It is Millannie to do it, I suppose? You haven't a maid of your own yet."

"No indeed," Ella replied. "Hester looks after me a little, and Stevens, the second housemaid, mends my things. Mélanie never does a thing for me; she's always busy for my sisters."

"Never mind, Miss. It'll be different when you come to be counted quite a grown-up young lady, which will be soon now, you'll see. And you did enjoy yourself last night?"

"Oh indeed I did. It was—heavenly," said Ella with fervour. "And I do thank you so much for getting my frock ready so beautifully, Jones. Now I must run off, I suppose."

There was only one thing on her mind as she flew down stairs to her godmother, but it was rather a big thing! A most extraordinary accident had befallen her on leaving the Manor the night before. She had lost a shoe! One of *the* shoes. Clarice's shoes—which Lady Cheynes had kept enveloped in silver paper for more years than twice Ella's whole life could count, and only with much thought and hesitation had confided to her little god-daughter for one evening. It was really dreadful. Yet Ella could scarcely take blame to herself.

"They were much too big—especially that left foot one," she said to herself. "I shall always think myself wonderfully clever for keeping them on while I was dancing. And the buckles are not real. I am glad of it, though I am afraid godmother will mind quite as much as if they were."

Should she tell of the loss at once? She hesitated. She was not cowardly, but she was very reluctant to cause pain to the old lady, and it was perhaps needless to do so, as there seemed every probability that the slipper would be found. If her godmother did not ask about them, Ella decided that she would not speak of the shoes, and as soon as possible she would find some way of making inquiry at the Manor.

"If Madelene and Ermine are not cross about my having been there," she thought, "I'll get them to help me. They can't blame me when I tell them exactly how it happened—it must have been just as I was getting into the carriage. I remember one of the horses started a little and godmother told me to be quick."

Lady Cheynes seemed to have forgotten all about the precious loan. She was in a fidget to be off, congratulating herself on her cleverness in having prevented her grandson and god-daughter meeting, or indeed having any suspicion of each other's vicinity. For she had entered into the spirit of the mystification thoroughly, as Ermine had said, and quite agreed with her that it would be most amusing to witness Sir Philip's astonishment when he should be presented to the little lady, of whom he had so mistaken an idea.

"Don't let them meet, if you can possibly help it, auntie, till Phil comes over to us," Ermine had said, to which Lady Cheynes had agreed.

"He is very prejudiced against her, I warn you," she had added. "I doubt if he would ever have let himself even admire her if they had met first in an ordinary way."

"That's just why," Ermine replied enigmatically, but Lady Cheynes asked for no explanation.

Not much was said during the drive to Ella's home. The girl was still a little sleepy, and rather nervous too when she thought of the shoe. And her godmother seemed pre-occupied and slightly absent. Only once just before they reached the Coombesthorpe lodge, she turned somewhat abruptly to Ella.

"Then you did enjoy last night, my dear? It was worth the trouble?"

"Godmother," said Ella earnestly, "I enjoyed myself, *tremendously*. I shall always thank you for having taken me, always, more than I can say," and she held up her pretty face for a kiss. "I do hope," she added after a moment's silence, "I do hope Madelene will not be vexed about it. She surely won't be when she hears how it all was."

Lady Cheynes caught her up sharply.

"*Madelene* vexed," she said. "My dear child what are you saying? Why, how can you imagine Madelene would be vexed?—she will have been delighted. And even supposing she had any such feeling, which is impossible—really *impossible*, she knows her duty, the respect she owes to her father, and I may say, to myself, far too well to resent anything we approve." Ella did not venture to say anything in disagreement, but in her heart she began to do her elder sister greater injustice than ever heretofore: she began to doubt her sincerity.

Colonel St Quentin was better, was the news Barnes met them with, and when the ladies' arrival had been announced to him, he sent word that he would join Lady Cheynes in the library in five minutes.

"You need not stay with me, my dear Ella," said her godmother, "your father and I will entertain each other till luncheon is ready and you may like to get your things unpacked."

Ella never resented anything from her godmother, and set off to her own room quite contentedly. A bright fire was burning in "the nursery" to welcome her, and faithful Hester, on the pretext of unpacking, was waiting eagerly to hear the young lady's adventures.

"Oh, how jolly of you to have a fire, you dear old thing," was Ella's greeting. "Dear me, how strange it seems to be back again! Hester, open my box quick and let me have a peep at my frock before you put it away. I want to feel sure it wasn't all a dream."

"Then you enjoyed yourself, Miss Ella? Indeed, I can see you did," said the old woman, as she carefully shook out the "*bovillonnés*" which had so exercised Mrs Jones's mind. "Your dress isn't—not to say spoilt, at all. It'll look as good as new for the next time."

"Next time indeed!" sighed Ella, "and when will that be, I wonder? There was a gentleman there last night, do you know, Hester, that said I reminded him of Cinderella? But Cinderella was luckier than I—she went to *three* balls, one after the other, and—"

But Hester interrupted her. She was peering anxiously into the trunk.

"Miss Ella," she said, "I can't see the fellow to this slipper nowhere. They're not your own, are they? At least I don't remember packing them up."

Ella's face grew grave.

"Oh dear," she exclaimed, "I had forgotten about it. I don't know what to do," and the story was related to Hester.

"You must tell Miss Madelene—Miss St Quentin, about it, as soon as ever she comes home, and I daresay she'll send to inquire at the Manor. Dear—dear—it would be a pity if it were lost."

And the talking about it put other things out of the girl's head, otherwise she might not improbably have gone on to tell Hester more details about the ball and the unknown who had compared her to the old fairy-tale heroine.

But the luncheon-bell interrupted her gossip with Hester. Ella found her father already in the dining-room with Lady Cheynes.

"I'm so glad you're better, papa," she said, as she went up to kiss him, her sweet face bright and eager.

"Yes, my dear. I'm glad of it myself. And you—why, Aunt Anna, she looks like a robin-redbreast—as brisk and fresh as can be! Not at all as if she had been dancing till I don't know what o'clock."

"Gaiety suits her apparently," said Lady Cheynes smiling. She was delighted to see the beginning of a better understanding between the father and child,—and she was a very good girl, Marcus; I must do justice to her. She stopped dancing,—though she owned that her partner was most attractive—resolutely, when the time came for us to leave, and neither by word or look hinted at wishing to stay longer."

"That's right," said Ella's father approvingly. "And what news of Philip, aunt? Will he be turning up soon?"

"I expect to find him at Cheynesacre when I get back there this afternoon," said the old lady.

Colonel St Quentin brightened up still more.

"Indeed! I am very glad to hear it. We must try to have a cheerful Christmas—Ella's first among us too—" Ella smiled with gratification—"Madelene and Ermie will be delighted to hear Philip is back. You will be able to wait to see them this afternoon?"

Lady Cheynes hesitated.

"I fear not," she said, "the days are so very short now."

"And Phil arriving. Ah well—tell him to come over soon."

Ella left her father and his aunt to themselves again after luncheon, but apparently they had not much more to say to each other, for she was soon sent for to bid Lady Cheynes good-bye.

"And be a sensible child, my dear," were her godmother's parting words, "don't begin fancying nonsense about Madelene. Let her and Ermie see your father by himself when they come in this afternoon and he will tell them all about it."

"Thank you, dear godmother," said Ella.

She seemed almost to cling to the old lady as if reluctant to let her go.

"Poor child," thought Lady Cheynes as she drove off, "yes—there is much good in her. She is very sweet and may certainly be led, even though not driven. If only they don't all get at cross-purposes—I fear Maddie is right—it was a mistake to separate her from them all."

It was nearly dark when the Coombesthorpe carriage, which had been sent to the Manor to fetch the two sisters, drove up to their own door. Ella who had spent the afternoon in restless Sitings about the house, unable to settle to anything and anticipating half nervously the meeting with Madelene and Ermie, was in the hall to receive them.

"Will you go to papa?" she said gently. "He is anxious to see you—he is a good deal better. I shall have tea ready for you in the library in a quarter of an hour, if that will do."

"Yes, thank you," said Madelene, and "That will do beautifully," Ermine replied more heartily.

Ella's heart sank. She had honestly meant and wished to do her best.

"Madelene is *not* going to be nice to me," she reflected.

The truth was that Miss St Quentin was feeling both anxious and bewildered.

"Ermine," she said, pausing at the door of her father's room, "are you going to tell papa about Philip's having been there last night?"

"No, I don't suppose there will be any approach to the subject. If Aunt Anna has chosen to keep up the little mystification till to-morrow, it would be rather impertinent for us to interfere. And Madelene, you are not to begin blaming yourself to papa for having, as you say you did, spoken crossly to Ella last night. It will just worry him and make mischief. Just let him see, as I shall, that we were both heartily pleased for her to have the pleasure."

Madelene sighed.

"I don't feel—" she began.

"Oh well, if you want to do penance, apologise to Ella. She looks very meek and mild—I fancy she is in a mood of good resolutions, and for any sake don't let Phil find us all at loggerheads."

---

## Chapter Twelve.

### Smuts.

The interview with her father turned out satisfactorily for Madelene. Each was suffering from inward consciousness of having acted to some extent unreasonably, and each felt a kind of unexpressed relief at not being brought to task. Colonel St Quentin's manner and tone were plainly deprecatory of blame.

"You must not think me weak and foolish for having given in to your aunt, when I had stood out so—well, I suppose I must say—obstinately with you and Ermine," he said with a slight smile.

"Ermine and I were only too delighted for Ella to have the pleasure of it," Madelene replied.

"I knew that—I was assured of that," said her father, and then the subject was allowed to drop.

Ella was looking very demure in her grey linsey-woolsey, waiting beside the tea-table in the library, when the two others joined her. A smile which she could not altogether repress, crossed Ermine's face as the contrast between her little sister's present "get-up" and that in which she had last seen her, crossed her mind.

"Oh, well, I'm not sorry to be home again," she said aloud. "What do you think, Ella? Would you like to have yesterday night over again?"

Ella looked up with a half doubtful questioning in her sweet eyes. Was Ermine chaffing her, or was this veiled sarcasm, or what? But before she had time to form any judgment on the matter, to her surprise Madelene interposed.

"Ella," she said—she was standing near the fireplace, and her tall figure in its dark winter garb looked very imposing, though her face, had Ella seen it clearly, was gentle and almost touching in its expression—"Ella, my dear," she said, "I want to say to you now, at once, that I am very sorry I so misjudged you last night, blaming you when you did not deserve it—when indeed you *could* not have deserved it; for a moment's reflection might have shown me you could not have come to the Manor unknown to or unapproved of by papa. But I was so astonished that for once, I suppose I lost my head. Will you forget about it, and believe that I am very happy you had the pleasure?"

"Of course," said Ella. "I often am hasty myself—I never dislike any one for being a little cross," she went on, smiling. "I'm very glad you liked me to be there. Papa was very kind about it," she added, unable to repress a little hit at her sister, "he agreed to my going *at once* when my godmother proposed it."

Madelene's face grew cold again.

"Why could you not stop at the right place, you foolish child?" thought Ermine. But she kept her thoughts to herself—a glance at Madelene had told her that it was best so.

Outwardly, however, things seemed most prosperously smooth.

"Your frock looked lovely, Ella," said Ermine. "Mélanie will be quite jealous of Jones."

"And it is really not spoilt at all," said Ella, eagerly. "But oh, Madelene, that reminds me—I had such a misfortune."

Miss St Quentin looked up anxiously. To her nature any appeal for sympathy always brought healing on its wings.

"What?" she said, expecting to hear of some trifling accident. Her face expressed real concern when she heard the particulars of the lost shoe.

"We must certainly try to get it back," she said. "It is pretty sure to have been picked up. Only if any dishonest servant has got hold of it, the buckle would be a temptation; an ignorant person would so easily mistake the paste for diamonds—I will write to Mrs Belvoir to-morrow, Ella—it is too late to-night—and send over a man expressly."

"Thank you," said Ella. "But," she went on, "will she understand? Did she know I was your sister, as I didn't come with you?"

"Of course," said Madelene haughtily. "You don't suppose Ermine and I would have given any cause for gossip. We took care to speak quite naturally the next morning about Aunt Anna having brought you over for a little—it was all Louis Belvoir, who Mistook your name at the first."

"Oh yes, I see," said Ella. She seemed on the point of saying more, but her courage failed her.

"I wonder if they know who the man was that I danced that last waltz with," she said to herself.

Ermine seemed to play into her hands.

"How did you like young Belvoir, by the by, Ella?" she inquired. "He dances well, doesn't he? What other men did you dance with?"

But Ella was not going to be trotted out, especially not before Madelene, whose eyes, she fancied, and perhaps not without reason, were fixed on her scrutinisingly.

"There were several," she replied; "I didn't hear all their names distinctly. Yes, I thought Mr Belvoir danced well, but there were one or two others who danced quite as well."

"Oh, indeed," said Ermine. "No one in particular, then?"

"Major Frost was very amusing," said Ella.

Madelene, who had finished her tea, put down her cup and turned to the door.

"We had better go up stairs and take our things off, Ermine," she said.

"I am afraid Ella is the reverse of ingenuous," she said when they had left the library. "We *know* she danced more with Philip than any one. She is a regular woman of the world in the way she can keep back what she does not choose to tell—it would be only natural for her to ask us who he was, if she really did not know."

"Oh, Maddie, I don't think you are fair about her," said Ermine. "And talking of not being ingenuous—she might accuse us of it when she comes to know him. She will know we must have seen her dancing with him, if she takes the trouble to think it over, and our not mentioning his being there may strike her."

"Well, it isn't my doing. I hate mystifications," said Madelene. "However as Aunt Anna is mixed up in it I suppose it will be all right. But—no, Ermine, I'm afraid Ella is not the sort of wife we should wish for Philip. And I'm afraid of letting myself wish it, lest I should really be influenced by selfish motives, for no doubt it might make things easier."

"You're enough to provoke a saint," said Ermine. "However I don't suppose either you or I will have much power to 'make or mar' in the matter. If it is to be, it will be—so far we haven't meddled; *we* didn't originate their meeting as they did."

"People always take refuge in that sort of fatalism when they want to throw off responsibility," said Madelene. "I don't believe in fatality about marriages any more than about anything else. But / shall not interfere, I am far too uncertain of its being a good thing for Philip."

"Maddie has had an Indian letter, and she has got a fit of extra conscientiousness in consequence," thought Ermine. "If I were Bernard, I don't think I'd stand it."

And yet as she looked at her sister, and saw the gentle sadness in her eyes, and noted the increasing signs of endurance and uncomplaining patience in the delicate features, a sort of rush of tenderness came over her. No one better deserved to be happy than her own sweet Madelene, she said to herself.

The evening passed peacefully. Colonel St Quentin was pleased to have his daughters with him again, and pleased too with himself for feeling so much more cordial and affectionate than heretofore towards his youngest child. And Madelene was pleased too to see him so, for jealousy formed no part of her nature, though her exaggerated conscientiousness and self-questioning sometimes took the appearance of suspiciousness of others. Ella's quick eyes detected her elder sister's satisfaction at her father's kindlier tone, and she felt puzzled by it.

"She does seem as if she wanted papa and me to get on better together, after all," she thought, and the idea softened her own manner in turn. Besides this, she was, though she would on no account have confessed it, both tired and sleepy; the unusual excitement, more than actual fatigue had told upon her, and she was not sorry when Ermine, openly acknowledging that she was quite ready to go to bed, proposed that they should all say good-night.

"It's quite disgraceful to be so done up after such a very mild amount of dissipation," she said laughingly. "Philip would make great fun of us. He is coming over to-morrow, Maddie, you know."

"Yes, papa says Aunt Anna left a message from him to tell us so," said Madelene thoughtlessly.

Ella pricked up her ears at this.

"How could—" she began, but something in the expression of her elder sister's face made her stop short.

"Ah," she reflected, "Madelene said that by mistake. They didn't want me to know that precious cousin of *theirs* was coming. I shall hate him for being their cousin and not mine—only he is dear godmother's grandson, and I should like him for that. Godmother must have had a letter from him while I was there, I suppose. She might have told me of it."

And a feeling of resentment to Lady Cheynes too, mingled with her indignation against her sisters. Her "good-night" was correspondingly cold, but they did not seem to notice it.

"I will write a note to Mrs Belvoir to-night, Ella," said Madelene in a low voice, as they were leaving the room, "to have it ready for to-morrow morning, so that one of the grooms can take it over quite early and wait for an answer."

"Thank you," said Ella, and for the moment she felt really obliged. The lost slipper was weighing a good deal on her mind, and she began to think that after all she would feel rather foolish if obliged to confess to her godmother how she had lost it.

"She will certainly say I should have found it out before I got into the carriage, but I quite thought it was among the rugs—and Jones looked herself for me, this morning. I think it must have slipped off just as I stepped in and rolled out before they shut the door."

And her dreams were haunted by the slipper. She thought Madelene came down to breakfast next morning with it tied on to her head as an ornament, and that it suddenly skipped on to the floor all of itself, and became a wonderful white satin chariot which careered round the room drawn by six cats, while on the box sat her partner in her last waltz at the Manor, shouting at the top of his voice that he was going to take a note to Mrs Belvoir first thing in the morning, and to wait for an answer. And these words "wait for an answer," seemed to mingle themselves fantastically with all the consciousness of her sleep. Or perhaps it seemed so to her, for they were the first that fell on her ears as she began to awake next morning. The door was opening and some one just entering was speaking to another person outside.

"Yes," said the voice—it was old Hester's—"wait for an answer—be sure to tell him."

"What are you talking about?" asked Ella. "What is it about waiting for an answer?"

"It's the message for the groom, who's going to the Manor, Miss Ella," Hester replied. "Miss St. Quentin gave me the note last night, and I was telling Stevens. She's so sorry for you to be uneasy about the shoe—'taking off the pleasure of her first little treat, poor child,' was her words to me, Miss Ella."

"It's very kind of her," said Ella sleepily, with again the return upon herself as to her judgment of her sister. Suddenly a new idea struck her. "Hester," she said, "what sort of person is Sir Philip Cheynes? Is he nice, or is he conceited and stuck-up, and—flirting, you know—that sort of a man?"

"Bless you, no, Miss Ella, not as ever I've heard tell. What's put such a notion in your head? If he was stuck-up, he'd not be so to his own cousins; and he does think all the world of them, that he does. And as for being a flirting gentleman, he'd be uncommon clever to get Miss Maddie or Miss Ermie to join in such like nonsense, though by what I hear sometimes, young ladies—and young ladies who think a deal of themselves too—is not so partickler as they might be, now a days. I don't hold with that tennis-playing, Miss Ella, and all that sort of apeing gentlemen, as seems the fashion."

Ella laughed.

"Tennis is very dull, / think. I shouldn't like to spend several hours a day at it," she said.

"Sir Philip is evidently a prig of the first water," she decided mentally. "But if so, he's not likely to admire *me*, so why do they want to keep me out of his way, as I see they do? And they have got god mother to join them in it for some reason."

Ella's inward indignation sent her down stairs to breakfast in anything but a genial mood. And, as her moods were very apt to do, it found its expression in her outer woman.

"You do look so grim, Ella," said Ermine. "I am so tired of that linsey-woolsey frock of yours—couldn't you put a bit of scarlet about yourself somewhere? Even a red tucker would be an improvement."

Madelene glanced at her younger sister as Ermine spoke.

"You might wear your sailor serge every morning now, I think, Ella," she said. "That frock is getting shabby and it is a dingy shade. You remember we couldn't get the grey we wanted. About Christmas time too, one likes to see people looking bright."

Ella surveyed her garments with a half indifferent air that was rather irritating.

"I think it does very well," she replied. "Even aunty thought two new winter frocks enough. I don't see that it matters so long as it is warm, and indeed to tell the truth, I like this better than my Sunday frock; it is so clumsily made."

Madelene said no more.

"Every step forward seems followed by two backwards with her," she reflected. "Ermine had better not build any castles in the air about her and Philip—if she had the slightest suspicion that *we* should like such a thing, it would, I do believe, make Ella detest him."

"I have sent over to the Manor, Ella," she said as she rose from the breakfast-table; "the groom should be back by half-past twelve or so, as Mrs Belvoir is sure to be at home. I am sure you are feeling anxious about the poor little slipper."

"I am," said Ella. "Thank you, Madelene."

And indeed it was partly distress of mind about the lost property which was making Ella indisposed this morning to take a roseate view of life.

"The weather seems really settling in for frost," said Ermine. "After the rain it will make the roads very slippery. I hope the frost will last till after Christmas, now it has begun. I wish I could go a good long walk this morning, but I fear we mustn't think of it—eh, Maddie?"

"No—there are arrears of things to see to even after being away only two days," Miss St Quentin replied. "You might get Philip to take you a walk after luncheon, when I go to sit with papa."

"And Ella too," Ermine added. "Would you like a nice long walk, Ella? It would be a pleasant variety to have an escort for once."

"No, thank you," said Ella, stiffly, though in her heart she thought Ermine much kinder than her elder sister. "I don't care for walking in the afternoon. I shall go out after I've finished my practising this morning."

"Not alone, Ella?" said Madelene; "or at least if you do go alone, it will not be further than the grounds, I hope?"

"No," said Ella, "I don't mean to leave the grounds."

She spoke more amiably—for this sort of authority or interference on her sister's part did not irritate her, as it might have done some girls. She resented nothing which gave her the sensation of being considered a person of importance.

Twelve o'clock found her walking briskly down the drive which led to the principal entrance. The sharp clear air stimulated her nerves pleasantly; she felt high-spirited and almost happy. As Madelene had said truly, Coombesthorpe had a beauty of its own in every season.

"It is lovely," thought Ella, as she looked around her, down across the gently sloping lawns to where the first murmur of water told of the stream pursuing its way, lonely now, without the merry companionship of its summer friends, the birds and gnats and butterflies; not to speak of the many quaint creatures who found their homes on its banks. "I wonder where they all go to?" she went on. "I suppose lots of them are asleep. I wish I knew more about country things. Ermine is so clever about them. I could learn all sorts of things from her if I was sure she—they—wanted to like me—"

Then her gaze passed on from the thicket concealing the brook, up again to the hills rising beyond. There was snow on the higher peaks; to be guessed at rather than seen, for a thin wintry haze made hills and clouds melt into each other. Ella shivered a little.

"Fancy living up on those hills," she thought. "And they say there are cottages there where the people stay all the winter. The road to the Manor passes round the foot of them. I wonder how soon the groom will be back. Oh, I do hope he will bring the shoe." She had forgotten about it for the moment; the recollection made her hasten her steps. She would ask the woman at the lodge if possibly the groom had already returned; if not, she would walk a little way down the road, which for some distance beyond these first gates remained a private one, in hopes of meeting him, for it would be easy to ask if he was bringing back a parcel or only a note.

There seemed no one stirring about the lodge when she got there, which was unusual, as the couple who lived in it were the proud possessors of two very pretty children, one or other or both of whom were generally to be seen peeping out of the doorway when any one came by.

"They seem all asleep," thought Ella, who had long ago made great friends with the little family. "I hope they're not ill."

She made her way to the door as she spoke, and tapped gently, at the same time endeavouring to "lift the latch," like Red Riding Hood of old, and let herself in. But the door resisted; it was evidently fastened inside.

Ella tapped more loudly, and almost before she finished doing so, a faint sound of weeping caught her ear, but no reply came to her knocks.

"Is any one in?" she called out, beginning to feel a little uneasy. "Willie, Hetty, who is it crying? Mrs Rose, are you there?"

A sort of movement inside, sounding like the slow, enforcedly deliberate way in which a little, short-legged child gets down from a chair, followed by a pattering of small feet across the stone floor, became audible. Then a doleful voice replied to her questions:

"I'm all aloned. I'm Hetty. I dunno who you is. Mammy's took Willie in Master Crocker's waggin to doctor's. Willie's eyes is bad. And the pot won't budge and the dinner's spilin."

Then ensued a louder burst of bitter wailing.

Ella rapped again impatiently.

"Let me in then, you silly child," she cried. "I'm Ella—Miss Ella from the hall. You know my voice, surely, Hetty. I'm not a wolf," she added, half laughing.

Thus adjured, Hetty cautiously approached.

"Miss Ella," she said in a tone of relief. "I'll try to loose the door, Miss, but its drefful hard. Mother locked it outside and pushed the key in under the door. I weren't to open it till daddy comed home, but mammy didn't know Miss Ella'd be coming," she added, as if half in vindication to herself of her departure from mammy's injunctions.

"Then do the same again," said Ella. "Push the key under the door and I'll open it outside. Your little hands can't turn it."

Hetty gave a sort of grunt of satisfaction at the brilliant idea. The key was pushed through, and in another moment, Ella stood on the open threshold. Poor Hetty's face was swollen with crying and scorched by the fire, and her first greeting to Ella was a fresh burst of tears.

"'Tis the dinner—daddy's dinner," she exclaimed, and sure enough a rather ominous smell of burning drew Ella's attention to the fire. Quick as thought the girl pulled off her thick jacket, tossed aside her fur cap—for the kitchen felt very hot after the keen clear air outside—and stood for a moment investigating the formidable-looking pot, which was the cause of Hetty's woe.

"Give me a towel or something, Hetty. I don't want to burn myself."

Hetty stuffed a substantial cloth into her visitor's hands.

"And a apern, Miss, or you'll smutty your nice gown. Here's one of mammy's."

Ella took the hint and tied it on, and well for the linsey-woolsey that she did so, as it was not without various black streaks on the vicarious apron that she succeeded in safely depositing "daddy's dinner" on the hearth-stone.

"Goodness! how heavy pots are," she exclaimed, "and how the fire does scorch one's face—even a little one like that. I don't think the dinner's *much* burnt, Hetty," she went on, carefully investigating the contents of the stew-pot with the aid of an iron spoon, and sniffing them gingerly at the same time.

"Stir it about, Miss, please, so as it won't stick to the sides," suggested Hetty; which Ella proceeded to do, thinking to herself the while, that if all other trades failed her, that of a cook would be little to her mind.

"Now, Hetty," she said, "I think this'll take no harm, staying where it is. When does your father come home? It's about his time, isn't it?" as the clock struck the half hour to one.

"He should a' been home before, Miss Ella, else mammy wouldn't a' left me and the pot aloned. But there's a deal to do in the houses, now it's so cold, a' seein' to the fires,"—her father was one of the gardeners—"and maybe Mr Meakins has kept him late. But it's all right now, Miss, and thank you," said six-year old Hetty, remembering for the first time to bob her courtesy. "Would you like to wash your hands, and there's a smut on your cheek? You've made it worser," as Ella involuntarily raised her hand to the indicated spot.

"Thank you, Hetty, perhaps I'd—" Ella began, when suddenly the sound of horse's feet approaching, reminded her of her original errand at the lodge. "There's the groom—the groom from the Manor," she said, flying off, forgetful alike of smutty marks and "mammy's" big apron in her eagerness, and heedless of Hetty's assurances that she could open the gate, anxiety as to which the little maiden supposed to be the cause of the young lady's excitement.

Ella's ears had not misled her. A horse was waiting at the gate, but scarcely had she called out to its rider—

"You've been at the Manor; what message is there?" when a glance upwards told her that she had made some great mistake. It was no groom who sat there, gazing at her in speechless astonishment—it was a gentleman; so much she perceived instantaneously; but this first flash of surprise was as nothing compared with the shock of astonishment which succeeded it when in another half second her eyes told her brain what at first it refused to accept—the rider was her partner—her partner *par excellence* that is to say, of two nights before at Mrs Belvoir's dance.

But if Ella was surprised, what was the effect on the new-comer of the sudden apparition of the mysterious little personage who had made so much impression on him? *Was* it she—"Miss Wyndham," or was it only a case of extraordinary resemblance? Yet if not Miss Wyndham, who then? He knew the Roses at the lodge, as well as he knew himself—Mrs Rose was the only daughter of one of his own tenants, and though a comely young woman, in no way exceptionally pretty—this girl could be no sister or cousin of hers, he felt sure. Yet again his hasty glance had shown him that she was not in the ordinary attire of a lady; she was half covered by a huge and not over-clean apron, her hair was pushed off her forehead, her face was scorched-looking and a grimy streak crossed it on one side. "Miss Wyndham," if Miss Wyndham it were, must be playing a part in a comedy, or else—could it be that the girl he had been so struck with was *not* a lady; that in some clever way she had inveigled herself in among the smart people at the Manor, and that this was the meaning of her strange, half mysterious, half reticent manner? A curious and by no means agreeable thrill passed through the young man as this last idea drove its predecessors out of his mind with the rapidity of lightning. Hetty meanwhile had run out and was fumbling at the gate. The sight of the child brought Philip back to matters-of-fact.

"I will open myself, Hetty," he said, for the elder girl stood as if transfixed making no effort to help the little one. And in a moment he had dismounted and was leading his horse through the gateway.

They both stared at each other for half a second. Ella was the first to speak, though her cheeks glowed more and more as she did so. Happily she had forgotten all about the sooty mark on her cheek.

"I beg your pardon for mistaking you," she said. "I thought you were the groom from—"

"I cannot beg your pardon," interrupted Philip, "for I am absolutely in the dark as to whether I have mistaken you or not. Are you—" but here he hesitated, though the tone of her voice and the manner of her speech had almost satisfied him that his recognition had been correct—"are you Miss Wyndham, and if so—what in the world—"

It was by this time all Ella could do to repress her laughter.

"What in the world am I doing here?" she said, finishing his sentence for him. "Did you not ask if you would find me scouring pots and pans if you came to see me? Well—I have been doing something of the kind—witness my apron, and my hands," staring ruefully at some black streaks on her fingers.

"And your cheek, Miss Ella," interrupted Hetty, understanding the gesture though not the words. "It's a deal smuttier nor your hands."

Ella's face grew still more scarlet.

"Oh, you horrid little girl," she exclaimed, "why didn't you tell me?" and lifting a corner of the apron she began to rub her cheek so indignantly that Sir Philip could scarcely keep his countenance. But his bewilderment and curiosity overcame his amusement.

"Then," he said, for though Hetty's name for the young lady had vaguely caught his ear, it had not as yet awakened any association, "then I am to conclude you *are* Miss Wyndham?"

"No," said Ella sharply, for the consciousness of the smut on her face had quite upset her temper, "I'm not, and I never said I was; and why you chose to call me by a name that was not mine I am sure I don't know. I didn't know yours, and I don't now, and you wouldn't tell it me, but for all that I didn't call you by an imaginary one."

Sir Philip looked rather taken aback.

"When I had the honour of being introduced to you," he said stiffly, "I think I was told your name was Wyndham?"

"I am not responsible for other people's stupidity," said Ella. "I have no objection to your knowing who I am. I—"

But at this moment little Hetty gave her a tug. "There's daddy a coming, Miss Ella," she said. "I see him over there in the long path. May I run to tell him what mammy said?" and hardly waiting for permission, the child set off.

---

## Chapter Thirteen.

### Ermine Misses the Fun.

A mist seemed suddenly to roll away from Sir Philip's brain.

"*Miss Ella*," he repeated, with a sort of gasp; "you don't mean to say—you can't be little Ella St Quentin?"

"Why not?" Ella retorted, sharply still—the "little" was unfortunate. "I am Ella St Quentin and I have never pretended to be any one else; but at my age people are not spoken of as if they were three or four years old."

"I beg your pardon," said Philip.

"And," she went on, "I don't understand why you should speak of me in that way at all. I don't know who *you* are."

But Philip did not at once reply—his thoughts for the moment were pursuing another train. "I can't make out," he said, speaking more to himself than to her, "why they all mystified us. They must have known we were dancing together—Madelene, Ermine, certainly, and my grandmother must have—was it with *her* you came to the Belvoirs?" he exclaimed suddenly. "Was *that* the reason of Granny's strange freak?"

In her turn, Ella's face looked first astonished, then illumined.

"Are you speaking of Lady Cheynes, my godmother?" she said. "Then are you Sir Philip Cheynes? Oh, how fearfully stupid of me not to know! But," and her bewilderment took the same direction as his, "why did none of them introduce us properly? Of course I never thought of you being here; I understood till yesterday that you were up in the north somewhere. I did not hear your surname at all, and I was not sure if *you* were 'Sir Philip,' though I remembered that much. If I had thought of it—it is not such a very common name—but I just never thought of *you*, of my godmother's grandson, at all."

"I see," Philip replied; "and they all lent themselves to the—'mystification,' that is plain. I confess I don't see much point in it."

He spoke stiffly, but he was not resenting it on *her*—indeed he had no reason to do so, but when people are vexed they are not always reasonable—so Ella remained gracious. Suddenly his eyes fell on her quaint figure—she had forgotten all about her personal travesty by this time—and a half dubious, half quizzical smile lighted up his face as if in spite of himself.

"It seems mystifications all round," he said. "It is, to say the least, an extraordinary coincidence that I should light upon you like this, all perfectly got up in the Aschen-puttel style."



"You are very,"—"impertinent" was on the tip of Ella's tongue, but she suppressed it. "I daresay he has heard of all my iniquities from Madelene. I am not going to have him endorse her opinion of me," she thought, and a very charming smile stole over her face, as, colouring again a little, she replied gently, "You are right. It is *very* queer that we should have met again like this," and she went on to explain Hetty's domestic tribulations.

"It was most kind of you," said Philip warmly. "But," as at that moment the little girl and her father joined them, "don't you think you had better return to your own character now? It is very cold, too. Rose, you mustn't let Hetty keep house alone in this style, my good fellow," he went on to the gardener; "the child might have fallen into the fire and been badly burnt."

It had never happened before, and never should again, the man assured him civilly. He had not known of his wife's absence; she had, so Hetty had been charged to explain, been tempted to take advantage of the unexpected chance of getting her boy to the doctor's; and by the invariable rule of contrary, Rose himself had been detained at work much later than usual. While the gardener was thus explaining matters, Ella had run in to the lodge, and a moment later reappeared in hat and jacket, minus the apron and the smuts.

"Good-bye, Hetty," she said, and "good-bye Sir Philip Cheynes," she added, turning to him. "I am going a little further, towards the outer gate."

Philip looked at her.

"Will you not take your constitutional in another direction?" he said quietly. "There is—I have something to say to you, which I may not find another opportunity for."

Ella looked surprised and a little startled. His tone was solemn. Was he going after all to make out that she deserved lecturing for her innocent deception? But her expression changed to relief when he went on, Rose and Hetty having by this time retired—

"It is not exactly something to say; it is rather something to *give* you. If you don't mind walking beside me while I lead my horse, I will explain. A—a piece of property of yours has come into my possession. I had no expectation of course of seeing you here, but I have the—article in my pocket, because, to tell the truth, I was going to show it to my cousins and consult them about it. I thought it probable they had noticed the shoes 'Miss Wyndham' wore the other evening if they were the peculiar-looking ones in question, and that they would be able to tell me where to find her."

Ella had had hard work to keep down her impatience during this long explanation, and when he came to the word "shoe" her eyes danced with delight.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "if you have found my slipper I can't thank you enough. You don't know how miserable I have been about it," and she went on to tell how her anxiety to hear if it had been found had brought her to the lodge that morning. "It must be mine," she went on; "it is too impossible that such a queer accident should have happened to any one else the same evening. But please let me see it, that I may be quite sure."

Philip drew a little parcel out of his pocket and held it out to Ella, who eagerly unwrapped it. Yes—there it lay—the dainty little old-world slipper, with infinite pathos about its mellow satin and quaint buckle to any one who knew its history.

Ella looked inclined to kiss it.

"Oh, how pleased I am," she said. "Do tell me where you found it and all about it—and how odd it was that you should have noticed the slippers I had on and known it was mine."

Sir Philip looked at her quizzically.

"I must take your word for it, I suppose, that it *is* yours," he said. "*By rights*, you know, you should try it on, at least after Madelene and Ermine have done so."

"What nonsense," Ella exclaimed. "You are not in earnest?"

It was not till some time afterwards that she understood what he had meant.

"I can show you the fellow to it, if you like," she added.

"Well—perhaps that would do as well," he agreed, looking much amused.

"And as for trying it on, that *wouldn't* convince you," she said after a moment's reflection, "for they're too big for me. They weren't made for me—"

"Scarcely, unless—you are even more of a fairy personage than I have suspected. The slippers must be thirty years old at least. If you were grown-up thirty years ago, you look young for your age," he said.

Ella laughed.

"Yes, I see," she answered. "But, by the by, I wonder you never saw them before. They belonged to your sis—no, she couldn't have been your sister—what was she to you, then, Clarice Cheynes?" and she glanced up in his face with a little frown of perplexity on her own.

A light broke over Philip's.

"They were *hers!*" he exclaimed, "and poor granny disinterred them for you to dance in!"

"I am her godchild," Ella replied, rearing her head a little as she spoke.

"Of course. I only meant, what I am sure you think too, that it was very good of her. People are sometimes more selfish about feelings of that kind than about anything else. No—I never saw the slippers before, but I know that granny has a room where she treasures up all the little possessions of my aunt—who never was my aunt—Clarice."

"Did she die before you were born then?" asked Ella.

"Yes—she died the year my father and mother were married, and I was not their eldest child," said Sir Philip, "though all the others died as babies."

They were near the house by this time. Ella looked up dubiously.

"Perhaps you will get on your horse again now," she said, "and ride up to the door. My sisters are expecting you, I know—perhaps you will tell them of having met me, and found out who I was."

"Will you not tell them yourself?" he said.

"No, I am going round the other way, behind the house. I have no longer any interest in watching for the groom," Ella replied, "and I would rather you told my sisters, please." She hesitated a little—"They, Madelene, might be a little annoyed, at—at my having been at the lodge, and all that."

Philip looked surprised.

"I don't think that is at all the sort of thing to vex Maddie," he said. "Indeed it is rather in Ermine's own line, I should say."

But Ella still looked doubtful, and hurried off, half smiling, but with a gesture that implied her preference for not making one at the forthcoming interview.

Philip mounted and rode up, *en règle*, to the door, where, in answer to his inquiries, he was told that Miss St Quentin was at home and in the library.

There, sure enough, he found his elder cousin. She started up as he came in.

"Oh, Philip, that's right," she exclaimed. "We were just hoping you would come before luncheon. It is so nice to have you at home again," she added affectionately.

"It is nice to *be* home again," he replied, as he went up to the fire and stood warming his hands at the blaze. Then there fell a little silence.

"Madelene," said Sir Philip at last, "you haven't yet introduced me to your sister Ella."

"No," Miss St Quentin replied, "there has not yet been any opportunity for my doing so," she was beginning, when she suddenly and unaccountably stopped. "If you will ring, Philip," she said, "I will send to tell both Ermine and Ella to come."

But Philip did not move towards the bell.

"I don't want them to come just yet," he said. "I want to talk to you a little first. And besides, Ella is out."

"Ella out," repeated Madelene, looking up and changing colour slightly. Her manner seemed rather constrained and nervous. "How do you know?" her glance at him said.

Philip smiled.

"Yes," he said, "I know what you are looking so 'funny' about, Maddie, as we used to say when we were children. You cannot sham the very least bit in the world; you never could, you know. Yes—I have met Ella, and the mystification is at an end. But by Jove what it ever began for, I cannot imagine. Will you not enlighten me?"

Miss St Quentin grew more and more uneasy.

"No," she said, "I can't. It—it was a freak of Ermine's, and Aunt Anna took it up and joined in it, so *I* could not oppose it, though to tell you the truth I never liked it. Of course *at the beginning* it was altogether accidental; we had no idea—Ermine and I, I mean—of Aunt Anna's getting papa to let Ella go to the ball—we had done our utmost to persuade him, but he wouldn't. And then your being there was unexpected—and they made a muddle of Ella's name: all that came about of itself."

"Yes," said Philip. "I see. But I see, too, how cleverly you all—no, not so much you, Maddie—joined to keep up the mistake, though upon my word I can't see any point in it. I cannot find fault with my grandmother, but I shall have it out with Ermine."

Madelene looked distressed; she saw that Philip was on the point of being angry.

"It is my clumsiness," she said. "If you had seen Ermine first it would have been all right. She would have made you see it differently—but don't be vexed about it, Philip. I do beg you not to be. I do *so* want to have no more worries in which Ella is concerned. I am so tired of misunderstandings and all that kind of bother."

Philip took her up at once.

"Have you had many bothers, poor Maddie?" he said. "Is she—is Ella not—not nice and gentle with you?"

Madelene felt as if she could have bitten her tongue off for having spoken so ill-advisedly.

"No, of course I didn't mean to say anything against Ella," she replied quickly. "You shouldn't take one up so, Philip. It makes me think Ermine was right."

"Right in what? Maddie, I am tired of all these half-speeches and cross-purposes. And I foresee I shall very likely have a quarrel with Ermine if you won't speak out. What was she right in, and why did she want me to make your young sister's acquaintance without knowing who she was."

"She thought—as it had happened so—it was not our doing at first, remember—she thought you would like Ella better, judge her for herself as it were, if you met her as a stranger. Ermine has fancied you were a little prepossessed *against* Ella, and, I think," Miss St Quentin went on, consideringly, "I *think*, perhaps she blames herself a little for its being so. You remember—that day when Ella first arrived—Ermine had been really hardly fair about her."

Philip sat listening.

"Well?" he said, after waiting as if for his cousin to continue.

"That's all," said Madelene. "It really is, Philip. I can't tell you any more of what Ermine thinks or doesn't think, and as it is, I didn't want to tell you this. You might have treated it, I do think, as a simple little piece of fun. But now that I have said so much, I trust you to make no to-do about it."

"I shall have it out with granny," remarked Philip; "but that's our own affair, hers and mine." But he said no more about quarrelling with Ermine.

After a while he looked up and related to Madelene how he and Ella had met. A variety of expressions crossed Madelene's face as he spoke.

"I wish you had not met her for the first time—"

"But it wasn't the first time," Philip interrupted.

"Well—you know what I mean—the first time at *home*, in that extraordinary guise. She must have looked comical," said Madelene, laughing however. "She is very impulsive."

"Impressionable, I should say," said Philip. "And very warm-hearted. I like to see that sort of impulsiveness," he added heartily, watching Madelene's face rather closely the while.

Again a slightly uneasy look stole over it.

"Yes," she said, "it was kind, thoroughly kind of her to help poor Hetty."

But even in this cordial praise there was a suggestion of reserve which did not escape Philip.

"Cross-purposes. They're all at cross-purposes," he thought, "and I'm afraid Maddie's in a mood for a good long ride on her hobby-horse at present. Madelene," he said suddenly after some moments silence, "you've had a letter from Bernard lately. I know you have, for he wrote to me by the same mail."

"In that case I need not give you any news, as you will have heard it all direct," Miss St Quentin replied dryly.

"Come now, Maddie, I know what that means. You don't want to talk about him. Is there no change then—do you see no prospect of any?"

"None at all," Madelene replied, in a voice which she strove to make as expressionless as possible.

"It's rather hard upon Omar, I must say," said Philip; and if his object were to rouse his cousin, he succeeded.

"Did I ever say it wasn't hard on him?" she exclaimed. "Is it my fault? Have I left undone *anything* to make him give it up?"

"I don't say you have. I don't say that in that way you are to blame," said Philip quietly; "always allowing that the obstacles *are* as insuperable as you make out."

"They are more so—worse and worse," said Madelene, with a rather wintry smile.

"Then you will forbid his coming home, as he can now, I suppose?"

"I have no right to do so, but if he does, I—"

The rest of her sentence was left to the imagination, for at that moment the door opened, and Ermine, followed by Ella, made her appearance.

Ermine gave no one time to feel awkward.

"It is too bad of you, Philip, and of you, Ella, too," she said laughing, "to have balked me of my fun. It would have

been too lovely to see you both looking so astonished.”

“I am not very fond of looking ridiculous for the amusement of my friends, though I would do a good deal to oblige you, Ermine,” said Sir Philip dryly.

Ella’s eyes sparkled with satisfaction. She would not like Sir Philip Cheynes to speak to *her* in that tone, she said to herself. But Ermine did not seem to mind in the least.

“I can stand your withering speeches, my dear boy,” she said coolly. “It was great fun all the same, and Aunt Anna enjoyed it as much as I did. You can have it out with her, if you like, when you go home.”

“I intend to do so,” he replied.

Ella stood glancing from one to the other with a rather comical look of perplexity on her pretty face. They seemed on very free and easy terms, these sisters of hers with their cousin. Somehow she had not quite realised it, and it surprised her a little. She had never seen anything quite of the same kind before. It was not flirtation, and yet—she was not by any means sure but that the brother and sisterly love covered some deeper and tenderer feeling, and she watched and listened with peculiar curiosity. Madelene, she observed, looked up with some anxiety when she heard the bandying of words between Ermine and her cousin.

“Philip,” she said half reproachfully in a low voice—he was standing near her—“you promised me?”

Sir Philip turned, with the smile which was one of his charms.

“Don’t be afraid, Maddie,” he said almost tenderly, it seemed to Ella. “Ermine, my dear, we must not even *play* at quarrelling; it troubles dear old Mad.”

“Shall we kiss and be friends then—eh, Phil?” said Ermine saucily; and when Sir Philip began something about taking her at her word, and she ensconced herself defiantly behind her elder sister’s chair, Madelene laughed with hearty pleasure, her whole face lighted up with satisfaction at seeing that there was no real danger of misunderstanding between the two.

“I have it,” said Ella to herself. “It isn’t Ermine herself so much. It is Madelene who wants Philip for her; *that* explains the keeping me out of his way when I first came, and all the rest of it. I wonder if my godmother wishes it too? Yet the trick the other night can hardly have been on that account. I don’t see any object in it. I suppose it was just a freak of Ermine’s, and that Madelene and my godmother too gave in to her. Ermine *is* so spoilt.”

But she was interrupted in these wise and profound cogitations. Ermine suddenly gave an exclamation.

“Oh dear,” she said. “I am forgetting to give you this note from Mrs Belvoir. I met James with it as I was crossing the hall.”

“A note only—no parcel,” said Madelene in a tone of disappointment. “I am so sorry, Ella,” she went on after running her eyes down the two or three hurried lines which the envelope contained. “I am so sorry. Mrs Belvoir knows nothing of the—of your lost property. I am so sorry for you, dear.”

A pleasant light spread over her cousin’s face as he caught the last words. They seemed to assure him of Madelene’s kindness and sympathy. Ella too was touched by them.

“About the shoe, you mean,” she said. “Oh, Madelene, I was just going to tell you. I am not surprised or disappointed for,”—here she glanced at Philip—“won’t you tell them how it was?” she went on, half shyly; “I don’t think I heard quite exactly how or when you happened to find it.”

“*You* found it! Phil found it! oh, how lovely!” cried Ermine. “Have you got it in your pocket, Philip, or were you afraid of sitting down upon it and smashing it?”

Philip frowned a little.

“Out with it,” said Ermine, “then—what should you do then?—we’ll have to skip the herald part of the business. Go down on your knees—isn’t that it?—and present it first to Maddie and then to me. Of course *we* can’t get it on, and then you summon—”

Philip began to look distinctly annoyed; Ella, notwithstanding her usual quickness, seemed merely bewildered.

“I have not got it,” said Sir Philip; “of course I returned it at once to its rightful owner.”

“I have got it,” said Ella. “It is up stairs with its fellow. Sir Philip gave it to me when we met. Would you mind telling where you found it?”

“It was just outside the hall door at the Manor,” the young man replied. “I was standing there not long after my last dance with—with *Miss Wyndham*,” he added with a little smile, “and saw it lying—the buckle gleaming in the moonlight.”

“Like *glass*” interrupted Ermine; “dear me, you are quite poetical, Philip. It must have been that time you went to catch some friends of yours whom you wanted to say good-night to before they left.”

“Yes,” said Philip, simply, “it was.”

And Ella fixed her brown eyes on him as he spoke.

---

## Chapter Fourteen.

### Differences of Opinion.

As Philip was leaving that afternoon, Ella, whom he had not seen since luncheon, met him in the hall.

"Will you be so kind," she began, "if it is not too much trouble—would you mind taking this little parcel to my godmother?" and she held up a small packet just twice the size of the one that had been transferred from his keeping to hers that same morning.

"Is it the shoes?" he said; "ah, I supposed so. Certainly I will give them to her. Shall I say you forgot them before?"

"No," said Ella, colouring a little, "for that would not be true. Still I would rather she did not know of my having so nearly lost one; it would distress her and seem as if I had been careless. I don't think you need say anything; just give her them from me."

"Without telling her of their adventures?—very well. But, Ella,"—she looked a little surprised at his thus addressing her—"I must call you Ella; anything else would be absurd,"—he interpolated.

"Well, yes; I suppose so," she said rather stiffly.

"You must warn Madelene—your sisters—that you don't want my lady to know of the accident, otherwise she might very likely allude to it, especially with *my* having had the good luck to find it."

Ella's face fell.

"Oh, then," she said, "you had better tell my godmother all about it yourself. It would be enough for me—I mean, Madelene would very probably make a matter of conscience of telling it, if I asked her not. She—my sisters do not give me credit for much good as it is," she added with a slight smile, more bitter than playful, "However, it doesn't matter. I will write by to-night's post and confess all my sins myself to my godmother."

"I think it would be both foolish and unnecessary to tell her anything about it," said Sir Philip, who had his own reasons for not wishing anything more to be said about the episode of the shoe. "I can, if you like, say a word of warning myself to Maddie," he went on, turning back as he spoke to the library. "At the same time," as Ella made an eager gesture of assent, "I don't agree with you about Madelene being so—so ill-natured and unfeeling and indeed, worse—hypocritical—as you seem to think her."

His tone was quiet, but very grave. Ella started a little. It was not so much that he convinced her by what he said, as that she was shocked at hearing her opinion of her sister translated into the words of others.

"I—I did not exactly mean that," she said confusedly.

"No," Philip returned. "I am sure of that. Besides, of course anything you may say to me—in a moment of thoughtlessness or irritation, and we are all subject to such moments—about your sisters, cannot possibly do any harm."

He smiled at her a little as he spoke—and Philip's smile was very sweet—and then disappeared again into the library. Ella went slowly up stairs to her own room; a bright fire was blazing there.

"That speech may tell two ways," she said to herself; "if he is such a very privileged and neutral sort of person, I suppose he will listen to all they say against me. What a fool I was to think he would sympathise with me!" and her cheeks glowed with annoyance. "Yet he might really have been a friend, for I know dear old godmother cares for me. I just wish I had chanced to meet them both elsewhere, quite independently of all the associations and influences here, for I am sure," and a little smile flickered over her face, "I am sure Sir Philip *did* like me the other night—and now," the smile quite fading away, "he will just look upon me as they all do—as a tiresome, spoilt little fool that needs any amount of sitting upon. Indeed, *but* for meeting me *incognito*, I don't suppose he would ever have been nice to me at all. And the very thing they took advantage of to *prevent* our getting to know each other well and naturally, had just the opposite effect, my dear sisters! But why did godmother join in it?" and Ella's brows contracted in perplexity. "I suppose Ermine can get her to do whatever she likes," she decided, though the conclusion was not a thoroughly satisfactory one.

Just then Hester knocked at the door. She had come "to see to the fire," she said, Miss St Quentin having given orders that during this very severe weather a good one was to be kept up in Miss Ella's room all day.

"Did you go telling tales about my sitting up here in the cold then?" asked Ella, ungraciously enough.

"Not I, Miss Ella," said Hester, calmly. "If you had gone for to do it again I'd have spoke up to the young ladies likely enough; but you'd have known of it, Miss Ella—I'm not one as goes aught but straightforrard."

"Am I not one of the young ladies then?" said Ella.

"You're just a contrary baby, Missie; sweet enough, I'll not deny, when it suits you."

Ella laughed, but her laugh was rather contemptuous.

"So you've had Sir Philip here, Miss Ella," the old servant went on. "Wasn't I right about him—he is a nice gentleman,

isn't he?" And Hester looked rather scrutinisingly as she spoke. Hester was not without a little harmless love of gossip.

"I'm sure I don't remember what you said," Ella replied indifferently. "If you mean that he's nice-looking, yes; he's not bad."

But while she spoke she congratulated herself that she had not told Hester more particulars of the dance at the Manor.

"Not much chance of *his* ever being my prince," she thought with a sigh, realising now the place which for the last day or two she had allowed "the stranger," as they say in the old romances, to occupy in her vague, pretty day-dreams. For the girlish imagination at eighteen "gallops apace."

Down stairs in the library meanwhile Ella's two sisters were sitting together. Philip had left, after giving, as if of himself, the suggestion as to not mentioning to Lady Cheynes the narrow escape of the slipper—a suggestion at once appreciated and accepted. Madelene was writing; Ermine, under cover of a book and some work at hand on a little table beside her, was in reality doing nothing, except from time to time glancing at her sister.

"Maddie," she said at last.

Miss St Quentin stopped writing and looked round with a slight touch of impatience.

"What is it, Ermine?" she said. "If it is anything very particular I'll leave off, but I do want to finish this letter. It must go to-morrow, and you know I can never count upon doing anything in the evening."

"It is a letter for the Indian mail then, I suppose?" said Ermine.

"Yes."

"I—I wish you'd tell me what you are saying, Maddie," said Ermine hesitatingly. "You know I don't ask out of officiousness or curiosity."

"I don't suppose you do; all the same I wish you would leave the subject. It doesn't do any good and it only makes it harder for me."

"Tell me at least what you have said," urged Ermine.

"You know the only thing I can say—the old story—while papa lives it is impossible."

"And that is all Bernard Omar has won by five—six years' waiting!" exclaimed Ermine indignantly.

"My dear Ermine, be just to me," said her sister sadly. "I have never wished him to wait, nor encouraged him in the least to do so. And now—you must see for yourself that it is less possible than ever."

"Because of Ella?"

"Yes, of course. I can't leave this place. It would be wrong, considering it *is* mine, though eventually I feel sure it will be yours. But it would be too much, far too much to put on you alone, Ermine—the care of this place and papa, as he now is, and, in addition, Ella! No blessing would follow me if I acted so selfishly."

"But if Bernard agreed to give up his profession and come and live here?" said Ermine. "He would not do so six years ago, and I think he was right then. But *now*—Heaven knows he has gained his laurels if ever a man did; and as for being idle, he would have plenty to do here in looking after the place and with his own writing."

"Stop, Ermine," said Madelene decidedly. "Such an arrangement is absolutely out of the question. Bernard would never feel he had a wife, nor I that I had a husband: coming into the midst of a family like ours would certainly not be the kind of thing he would like, and every existing difficulty would be increased."

"You mean Ella, I suppose?" said Ermine; "and yet you are indignant with me for wanting Philip to fall in love with her and marry her. That would make everything easier. It would leave me at liberty to go hopping about a little, and perhaps somebody decent might take a fancy to poor me at last. Nobody ever has, you know, hitherto."

"Nonsense, Ermie. Lots have, but you've snubbed them all, you know. Why don't you go about more as it is?"

"And leave you alone for all the home worries? No, indeed—if you had a husband to help you, now."

"Oh, Ermine, do leave the subject," said Madelene wearily. "Of course, as far as we are concerned it *would* be delightful for Ella to marry Philip—it would make a different man of papa, I do believe; but neither papa nor we are the chief people to be considered. And I will not do anything to help on a marriage in that way—above all, with the grave doubts I have as to how it would turn out."

"Well then, it's to be hoped nobody ever will take pity on me," said Ermine, dryly, "for assuredly I will never leave you here as things are."

"It is fortunate then that the contingency in question, according to you, has not yet arisen," said Madelene calmly, turning again to her letter.

Yes—Ermine had spoken truly. It was really six years since Madelene St Quentin had agreed to consider herself engaged to Bernard Omar, with the understanding that no one but her sister and Bernard's old friend, Philip Cheynes,

were to be taken into their confidence. For it was at that time that Colonel St Quentin's health had begun to fail, and any additional anxiety or excitement was forbidden for him. Besides this, the engagement could not have been but an indefinite one; for Madelene, though but nineteen, had many responsibilities on her hands, and Bernard, three years her senior, was on the point of starting with his regiment for India. It had been due to an accident that an understanding, even between the two themselves had ever been come to, for Mr Omar was poor and Madelene was rich, and both were proud. But they had known each other since Madelene's childhood; their mutual trust and confidence were entire; and trying though the long delay had been, it had yet been the great happiness of both lives.

Once only during those six years had Bernard, now Captain Omar, returned to England on a few months' leave. He and Madelene had not seen very much of each other, for during some part of the time the St. Quentins had been abroad. But little as they were together, the two separated more deeply attached to each other, if that were possible, than before, and with fervent, if vague, hopes for the future. These hopes, however, were rendered vaguer still by Colonel St Quentin's increased illness, aggravated, if not caused, by his money troubles, which made Madelene entirely renounce all idea of ever leaving him even for a few years' sojourn in India. For some time she looked forward to Captain Omar's retirement as the goal which was to see all difficulties set straight; but with the advent of Ella on the scene, her father's morbid irritability, and her own ever-increasing duties, she began to despair. Breaking off the engagement seemed to her the only alternative, and she wrote to India to this effect, entreating Bernard not to dream of renouncing his profession for her sake, but to try to forget her and the weary years which had but led to ever-repeated disappointment. To this letter she had just received an answer. Captain Omar refused to come to any decision till they should again have met and discussed matters; in order to do this he had applied for leave and expected to be in England in the course of the next six months. But the tone of his letter seemed to Madelene cold, and her heart was very sore.

"He is getting tired of it at last," she thought.

The situation was a complicated one, for though Captain Omar had distinguished himself both as an officer and a writer, in the eyes of the world his marriage with Miss St Quentin would be looked upon as greatly to his advantage; furthermore, he felt keenly that in offering to renounce his profession for Madelene's sake he was giving the strongest possible proof of his devotion—devotion which it now seemed to him, or would have done so had he known her character less perfectly, was but faintly appreciated.

The letter was completed, folded, and directed. Ermine made a face at it when she saw it lying ready for the post on the side-table of their little sitting-room up stairs.

"I suppose Maddie has written to say that he need not give himself the trouble of coming here at all, or something of that kind. I do think it's too bad. She is sacrificing any—ah, well, it's no use thinking of that. I don't believe the Marchants are going to ask me after all—and negatively, so to say, sacrificing Ella, too. I'm *sure* Philip admires her more than he has ever admired anybody before, but Madelene has such influence over him—a cold look or glance of hers would prejudice him—even without her meaning it in the least. And if I were Bernard I wouldn't stand it, no I wouldn't, and in one side of my heart I hope he won't."

Ermine stamped her foot—there was no one to see—with an energy which would have gone far to prove her relationship to fiery little Ella. "I won't tell Madelene of the Marchants' invitation, if it does come, till too late. If she is so obstinate I have no choice—I must follow suit, I suppose."

The next day or two passed uneventfully enough. The weather continued bitterly cold, and Colonel St Quentin scarcely ventured to leave his room. One or other of his elder daughters was almost constantly in request to read or talk to him or write his letters. Ella paid him little duty visits and was always kindly received, but the sort of affectionate and almost familiar tone which had begun between the father and daughter while they were alone, seemed to have disappeared. Again there came over the girl the cold mortifying sensation of being but an outsider in her own home, and the vague scheme for her future which had momentarily, in the excitement of her visit to the Manor and the appearance of Philip on the scene, been half-forgotten, began again to haunt her restless little brain.

"This life is too dreary," she said to herself, "day after day the same. No one to sympathise with me—no one to care what I do or feel or anything. It is becoming unendurable."

But on the third morning of this unendurable existence—the fourth that is after Sir Philip's visit to Coombesthorpe—something did happen. The post brought an invitation from Lady Cheynes to Madelene and Ella, to drive over the following afternoon to dine and stay the night with her.

"Ella!" exclaimed Miss St Quentin, involuntarily. "Not you, Ermine?"

"Why not, Ella?" said Ermine, and had she been speaking to any one but her adored Madelene, one would have been inclined to call her tone testy, if not snappish; "why shouldn't it be Ella? You don't want to set off like the graces, or the 'three old maids of Lea,' or any unfortunate trio of spinsters you like to name, whenever we go a visiting, do you? And I was spending the whole day at Cheynesacre yesterday."

"Well, then, why didn't you bring the invitation verbally, or at least you might have told me of it," said Madelene. "You know Ella is not—"

"Madelene would have liked to hear of it privately, so that I should never have known of it," thought Ella, while aloud Ermine exclaimed impatiently.

"Not out, are you going to say, Maddie? You can't give that as an excuse to Aunt Anna, for she certainly thinks she has a right to a voice in Ella's concerns. And late events show she means to claim her rights too! As for my not bringing the invitation or telling you of it, I was not told to do so by Aunt Anna—you know she has her own ways of doing things."

Madelene looked,—not annoyed,—but dissatisfied still.

“Did you know she was going to invite us?” she said again to Ermine.

But Ermine was at that moment busily reading a letter of her own, and either did not, or wished to seem as if she did not, hear the question. Be that as it may, Madelene got no answer. Ella, secretly enjoying her elder sister's discomfiture, happened just then to catch sight of her face. It looked more than anxious; pale and weary and almost worn. Something in its expression touched Ella's impressionable feelings.

“Poor Madelene,” she thought, with a rush of a kind of generous pity which she would have found it difficult to explain to herself. “I am sure she *means* to do right. And after all—if she does want Sir Philip to—to care for Ermine, why shouldn't she? Ermine is her very own sister. Only—I wish it had all been settled and Ermine married to him before I came here.”

The softened feeling—as most feelings did with Ella—expressed itself.

“Madelene,” she said half timidly. “I am of course *quite* willing to do as you like—I mean as you think best—about going out at all or not. I know—I quite understood at the time that my godmother's taking me to the Manor dance was an exception—a sort of extra thing altogether. And I am sure she couldn't be vexed if you said it was best for me not to go out any more just yet, and if Ermine went instead. I do believe Ermine,” with a grateful glance in her second sister's direction, “I do believe Ermine planned it to please me, and asked godmother to invite me instead of her.” Madelene looked relieved at this—some diplomacy had been exerted by Ermine the day before at Cheynesacre, she felt sure, and she was glad to think it had been thus simple—but Ermine, though she reddened a little, replied rather abruptly.

“No, Ella. I did not really. The inviting you was Aunt Anna's own idea.”

“I will tell papa about it, Ella, and see what he thinks,” Madelene said. “But thank you, dear, for what you say. I shall be so glad for you to believe that interfering with any pleasure for you is my very last wish.”

---

## Chapter Fifteen.

### Sir Philip Burns his Fingers.

“Of course she must go; it would seem like dictating to my lady to make any difficulty about it,” Colonel St Quentin replied, when the subject of the Cheynesacre invitation was mentioned to him by Madelene. “What conceivable reason is there why she should not go?”

“I am very glad indeed for her to go,” said Madelene gently. “I only—was not sure, papa, how you might feel about it, because you know you would not let her go to the Manor dance at first, not till—”

“Not till my aunt made a point of it and then I gave in, for which I suppose you think me very inconsistent—well, well, I am not going to defend myself, my dear. I dare say I am inconsistent and weak and foolish and in my dotage—what you like,” he replied irritably. “But one thing, Madelene, is certain, I am not going to quarrel with my aunt. She seems to have taken a fancy to Ella and she may be a good friend yet to the poor child. And Heaven only knows how soon she may need a friend.”

Colonel St Quentin sighed or groaned—his daughter knew the peculiar sound and it was inexpressibly trying to her.

“Papa,” she said, “you don't know how you pain me when you take that tone about Ella. Of course I am delighted for her to go—but really sometimes I don't know how to please you.”

“Well—well—never mind. I didn't want to vex you. But I have something more important to consult you about. I have a letter from Mrs Marchant—did you know they had asked Ermine to stay there and that she had refused?”

“No,” said Madelene in surprise. “I know something was said about it at the Manor when we met them there—both Mr and Mrs Marchant and a brother of his were there, and they were speaking of gaieties they are going to have. But it was not definite. And why should Ermine have refused, without even telling me?”

Madelene's voice sounded aggrieved.

“Nor me,” said her father. “But it is very sensible of Mrs Marchant to have written to me. She says she is sure Ermine would enjoy it, and that she only gave some vague reason of being wanted at home, or something of that kind. There is no reason why she should not go, is there?”

“None whatever, and every reason why she should,” said Madelene eagerly. “Papa, will you speak to her yourself, and say you wish it? She has only refused out of some exaggerated idea that we can't get on without her here, and it is such a pity for Ermine to get in the way of shutting herself up. She enjoys society and shines in it; she is quite different from me.”

Colonel St Quentin glanced up at his daughter as she spoke. Her face was a little flushed with the interest of what she was saying, but still she looked ill and less serene than her wont.

“I don't see why you should speak so of yourself, Maddie,” he said kindly. “When I get round again—when the weather's a little better, perhaps, couldn't we ask a few people? It might cheer us up—and little Ella would enjoy it.”



Miss St Quentin listened in surprise, not wholly unmingled with a less innocent sensation. For Madelene was not perfect.

"He would do for Ella already what he has never dreamt of doing for me," she thought with a passing flash of bitterness. But she quickly overcame it. "If you felt able for it, certainly, papa. We might think of some nice people. That would be when Ermine comes back. Let me see—when do the Marchants want her?"

She took up the letter which her father held out to her, and some discussion as to the journey and other details followed. And then Madelene, with a brighter face than she had had for some time, went off to summon Ermine to an interview with her father.

At luncheon that day Ella was struck with the increased cheerfulness of the family party, and for some little time her powers of discernment were baffled as to the cause.

"Can papa have decided I am not to go, and can they be looking so pleased on that account?" she said to herself. "Can they—Madelene at least, for after all it is she that is looking the cheeriest, *can* she be so horrid?"

But as no allusion was made to the Cheynesacre invitation—which in point of fact had for the moment been forgotten by the elders of the party in the greater excitement of Ermine's projected visit—she could not or would not not approach the subject, till her elder sister and she happened to be by themselves. Then said Ella in a voice which though sounding timid and even meek was in reality soft with restrained indignation.

"Have you asked papa, Madelene? Is—is Ermine to go, then?"

"Of course," Miss St Quentin replied. "He decided at once and he has told her so. In her heart I am sure she is pleased though she is pretending to grumble a little. But I am so pleased—and I am sure Philip will be too to see her there, though he won't be there the first part of the time."

Ella scarcely attended to the latter part of this speech, so *almost* boiling over with indignation did she feel.

"Oh indeed," she said icily. "Then of course you will explain it all to my godmother. I should like to have thanked her for thinking of me, but for the future I hope she will not go through the mockery of inviting me."

Madelene stared at her.

"What do you mean, Ella? What has Aunt Anna got to do with it? And, by the by," as the first hazy perception of some element of cross-purposes began to penetrate to her brain, "how did you know about Ermine's going at all? She couldn't have told you about it when she hadn't told me?" and there was an accent of pain in the last words.

Ella stared in turn.

"You told me yourself—this morning at breakfast when Lady Cheynes' invitation came," said she.

Madelene stood still and began to laugh.

"My dear child," she exclaimed, "I am so sorry. I had forgotten all about to-morrow. Yes, certainly you are to go—you and I. Papa is *quite*, pleased, and of course if he is, I am. What I was talking about was quite another matter," and she went on to tell Ella all about the invitation Ermine had received and her pleasure that it was to be accepted. Never had Madelene been so confiding and companionable to her before; she seemed a different creature.

"She *is* very unselfish," thought Ella, and she felt ashamed of her own suspicions, as she heartily joined in Madelene's pleasure.

"You see," Miss St Quentin went on, "we have lived rather a shut-up life—for even travelling is often shut-up, though it sounds absurd to say so, and Ermine is still young—I don't want her to begin fancying she is not. I should like her to go about more."

"You would like her to marry, wouldn't you?" said Ella, calmly, though softly. But the calmness rather took Madelene's breath away.

"Yes," she said honestly, though the colour deepened a little in her fair face. "I should. But," she went on rather confusedly, for to her there seemed something slightly coarse in the bald connection of the two ideas, "it isn't exactly that—girls often marry just as happily who stay at home."

Ah, thought Ella, I understand. "Is it far from here where Ermine is going?" she asked.

"Not very; still it is a new part of the country to her, which will make it all the nicer. Philip will be there part of the time, too. They are old friends of his. Mr Marchant's half-brother (his mother married twice; her second husband is Lord Farrance) Guildford West, was at school and college with him. He was at the Manor. I dare say you danced with him. A small thin man, much smaller than Philip and not nearly so good-looking."

"I don't remember," said Ella indifferently. "Then you are quite sure you wish me to go to-morrow to Cheynesacre?" she added.

"Of course," Madelene repeated bewildered by the change in Ella's tone, which had lost all its sympathetic softness again. "I am delighted that papa seems relaxing a little about you, and by degrees I hope it will be rather livelier for you here. If—" and here Madelene, cold, stately Madelene for the second time that afternoon blushed a little—"if Ermine *were* married, it would make everything seem brighter, I think."

"Yes," said Ella, "to you I suppose it would do so, if she married somebody you thoroughly liked. And—if she were to live near you, too."

She spoke with a kind of clear cold precision which would have caught Madelene's attention had she been less pre-occupied. But she was full of pleasureable excitement about Ermine's plans, and it was almost with an effort that she listened to Ella.

"Yes, of course," she replied half absently, "that would make it much nicer."

And Ella drew her own conclusions.

It was with curiously mingled feelings that she looked forward to the visit to her godmother's the next day.

"Very likely," she thought, "Sir Philip will not be there. As Ermine isn't going Madelene and his grandmother won't mind whether he is or not. No," she went on, "no, it isn't my godmother's doing. I won't think it. It is only Madelene—I don't even feel sure that Ermine herself wants it. She, I must say, always seems pleased to put me forward. I'll never forget Madelene's face when she saw whom I was dancing with that evening at the Manor." Madelene however did not seem as devoid of interest in her young sister, as Ella in her present mood would have liked to imagine. One of the prettiest of the frocks she had brought with her from her aunt's, was looked out and revived by Mélanie's skilful hands, under Miss St Quentin's own supervision, and Ermine herself assisted at Ella's toilet.

"You look lovely,—doesn't she now, Maddie?" she exclaimed, when Madelene glanced in to say that the carriage was round. "Now don't look forbidding—let me spoil the child a bit for once. That shade of pink does suit her—*almost* better than white. It's the shade Philip likes so—now, Ella, don't forget to ask him *from me* if it isn't his favourite colour."

"Do you often wear it?" said Ella, meaningly.

"Bless the child, what does Philip care what I wear?" exclaimed Ermine.

But Madelene's displeasure was not to be mistaken this time.

"Ermine," she said coldly, "you really must not run on so heedlessly. Of course Philip cares. Even if he were really our brother, as you like to say he seems—he would care. And he will care about Ella too because she is our sister. But you shouldn't talk such nonsense—I mean send silly messages like that. It would make Ella feel and look quite foolish."

And she turned back for an instant as she and Ella were going down stairs, to reprimand Ermine still more sharply.

"Do you want to teach the child to flirt?" she asked. "You have agreed with me that there was quite enough tendency of the kind about her already. You will be getting into trouble, Ermine, if you don't take care—making her fancy Philip is in love with her, and preparing great unhappiness for her, poor child, perhaps."

But Ermine only laughed.

"Nonsense, Maddie," she said. "Why must you always be so gloomy about everything? You really needn't be so cross to me when I've given in *so* sweetly about going to the Marchants—all to please you, you know."

And Madelene could not resist her kiss, nor resent the whispered warning at the last moment—not to spoil Ella's evening by looking severe.

Ella was scarcely in a humour to have been much depressed or impressed by her sister's looks. Her spirits rose with every yard that separated them from Coombesthorpe, and when they arrived at Cheynesacre and were received in the drawing-room by her godmother the girl flew into her arms as if she had been a caged bird escaping at last from its gloomy prison into sunshine and brightness.

"Oh, dear godmother, dear, dear godmother," she whispered, "I am so pleased to be with you again." It was impossible not to be touched; she was so genuinely sweet, and she looked so pretty. There were tears in the old lady's eyes, as she kissed her god-daughter.

"My dear little Ella," she said. "Then you have forgiven me?"

"Forgiven you?" Ella repeated; "what for, dear godmother?"

"For the trick I played you, or helped to play you and Philip here the other evening? Philip has forgiven me—it really was very funny."

Sir Philip came forward from the other side of the screen where he had been talking to Madelene. "Ella has done better than I, granny," he said, as he shook hands with her. "She has not only forgiven but forgotten, it appears."

Ella started a little when he spoke of her by name. It was still difficult to disassociate him from the attractive "stranger" of the Manor ball.

"I think it *was* rather too bad of them all," she said, "but I *couldn't* have been vexed with godmother when it was all her doing—all the deliciousness of going to the dance at all."

She had no time to say more, barely to catch sight of the grave expression with which Madelene was listening to her, when she was interrupted by the arrival of other guests.

There was a party of fourteen, all strangers to Ella, though several among them recognised her as the lovely "Miss Wyndham" who had so puzzled everybody at the Manor. Ella's squire was a man who declared he had not yet recovered from the disappointment of her not having given him a dance on the occasion in question. He was evidently an adept at flirting and seemed very disappointed when a few words from his charming companion proved that that was "not her style." Not so, Sir Philip, whose dark eyes spoke satisfaction when he overheard the ladylike little snub, for he had arranged with his grandmother that Ella should be his neighbour on the left.

"She will be so much of a stranger; it is really the first time she has dined here properly," he said, and Lady Cheynes made no difficulty.

That dinner was a very pleasant experience to Ella. Philip's manner was perfect. He made her feel quite at home, even while taking care that no one present could have suspected such care was required.

"It is the first time I have really felt as if I had *not* been brought up a stranger to them all," thought she to herself, and the only thing that in the least marred her complete satisfaction was the catching sight now and then of Madelene's eyes fixed upon her with an anxious, almost, Ella could have imagined, pitying expression.

"She thinks I am having my head turned," thought Ella, with a slight involuntary toss of the said head. "And she is pitying me too for imagining that Sir Philip could possibly care about *me*, when all his *devoirs* are, or should be, consecrated to Ermine." And it was with increased determination to resist any attempt at restraint which Madelene might try, that Ella responded in her sweetest and most charming manner to her "step"-cousin's attentions.

Her godmother was not displeased, thus much was certain. For she called the girl to her in the drawing-room after dinner, to introduce her to her old friend Lady Beltravers, who with her husband made two of the guests, and made her sit beside her while she fondled and petted her.

"I must make much of her, you see," she said half apologetically to Lady Beltravers. "She has been away from us for so long! It is not like having a godchild of one's own, never to see her, is it? Did Philip take good care of you at dinner, my dear child?" she went on, turning to Ella. "He would not give you up to any one else, I assure you, though by rights Mrs Monkerton should have been at his left side."

Lady Beltravers smiled kindly at Ella.

"I wish we had any young people about us," she said with a little sigh. "My son has no children, you know—and then he is always so busy. Won't you bring Miss St Quentin—"

"Call me 'Ella,' please," interrupted the girl. "I'm not Miss St Quentin, and besides—any friend of dear godmother's—"

"Ella, then," went on the old lady, completely *subjuguée*—"won't you bring Ella over to see me, while she is with you? We might make up a little party—it is so near Christmas and there are a few young people in the neighbourhood just now—let me see, the day after to-morrow—"

"But I am not staying here after to-morrow," said Ella gently, "my sister and I are going back to Coombesthorpe to-morrow morning."

"Yes," said Madelene, who at that moment joined the group, "we must be off early, too. There are such a lot of things to do just at Christmas time. We have to settle about Christmas day too, Aunt Anna. Papa does so hope you and Philip will come to us."

"On one condition," said Lady Cheynes quickly, "and that is that you will leave me Ella till then. I will bring her back to you on Christmas eve, that is next Monday, without fail. Ermine leaves—let me see, when is it?"

"The day after Christmas," Madelene replied.

"Ah, well then, it would of course be selfish to take Ella from you when you are alone. But till then—you and Ermine will have lots of preparations to make for her visit; this child here would only be in the way."

Madelene murmured something about "papa." Her face was a curious study, so mingled were its expressions—of pleasure and even excitement, of almost wistful anxiety and misgiving. Ella watched her closely; the misgiving she was quick to see, not so the pleasure.

"Of course she will find some reason against it," thought the girl.

Lady Cheynes tapped Miss St Quentin on the arm.

"Come, Maddie, my dear," she said, "you are keeping us all waiting. Lady Beltravers too."

Madelene coloured.

"I don't really think it is for me to decide, Aunt Anna," she replied. "You have quite as much—more—voice in it than I. I should be delighted for Ella to stay—and I am almost sure papa would be so too."

"Then put it upon me," said the old lady decidedly. "Tell your father I kept Ella—subject to his approval of course—if he doesn't like it, he may send over to fetch her home to-morrow afternoon."

Ella crept to her godmother's side and threw her arms round Lady Cheynes ecstatically.

"Oh, godmother, how sweet you are! Oh, Madelene, you *will* make papa let me stay, won't you?"

Madelene smiled: it was impossible to resist Ella sometimes.

"I do hope it will do no harm," thought the elder sister to herself.

Just then Sir Philip and the other men came in; Madelene was asked to play, and Ella to sing, her sister accompanying her. It was the first time Philip had heard her.

"I had no idea you sang so beautifully," he said to her when the little performance was over, and Miss St Quentin was engaged in accompanying another member of the party.

Ella's eyes sparkled.

"Do you really think I sing well? I am so pleased," she said simply. "I know you are a good judge. Ermine told me so. She and Madelene like my singing, I think. It—it is one of the few things Madelene seems to approve of in me," she added with bitterness that was real though she tried to say it lightly as if in jest.

Philip looked at her with grave concern in his eyes.

"Are you in earnest, Ella?" he said; "real earnest, as the children say?"

Ella gave what in a less elegant and perfectly well-bred young person might have been called "a wriggle."

"I don't want to talk about it," she said.

"About your sisters you mean?" he went on. "I certainly don't want to do so either if, as I fear, you are unfairly prejudiced against them. At least I should be sorry to hear you say anything unfair, which—which might," but here he hesitated. "Don't think I am setting myself up as a judge," he went on, "but it is possible I might be able to make you see things differently. I know my cousins so well, so thoroughly, and yet I think I can see that the position of things is difficult for you all."

"I have nothing to say against Ermine," said Ella quickly, with a sudden access of generosity. "Ermine is very good to me—"

She glanced at Philip as she spoke: a pleased look had stolen into his eyes.

"Ah," thought Ella.

"I am glad to hear you say that," he said eagerly; "but Mad—"

"Oh, for that matter," Ella went on, "I don't mean to say that *practically* Madelene is not good to me too. But—it is she who is prejudiced it seems to me," she added with rather a wintry smile; "she does not judge me fairly. I don't understand her, nor she me—that is the truth of it, I suppose. I don't think she has ever been young, or had young feelings. She is so frightfully cold and measured, and she thinks every one should see things precisely as she does."

Philip smiled too, but in his smile there was little more mirth than in Ella's.

"Madelene cold and unfeeling!" he exclaimed. "My dear child, how little you know her! I allow," he went on hastily, noticing an expression on her face which irresistibly reminded him of the days when she used to stamp her feet at "big Phil" if he refused to gallop about with her as much as she wanted, "I allow that Madelene's *manner* is often against her. Very often the very extent and depth of her feeling makes her seem colder from the effort she puts on herself to be self-controlled."

"That's what is always said of cold, stiff, reserved people," Ella answered. "Just *because* you can't see or feel their feelings you are told to believe in them doubly! I hate reserved people."

Philip was a little taken aback.

"I think they are rather to be pitied," he said quietly.

The words were not without their effect on Ella, but she would not show it.

"You—" she began, but a little quaver in her voice made her hesitate, "you won't make me like Madelene any better for taking her part against me," she said with a sort of incipient sob.

Philip laid his hand on her pretty white arm. "Dear Ella," he said with genuine distress in his voice, "how can you mistake me so? If you only understood better! My only wish is that you should not make yourself unhappy when there is no need for it."

Ella swallowed down one or two tears before replying.

"I am happy *here*," she said. "I am always happy with dear godmother. I wish, Sir Philip, you would let me forget about home troubles for a little. I think you might—you are going away soon to amuse yourself; you needn't grudge me my little bit of holiday."

Philip grew more and more annoyed.

"I have done no good, I see," he said in a tone of vexation. "Indeed I have done harm—for I have made you indignant with me for meddling. I wish to goodness—" but here he stopped.

"What?" said Ella, gently.

"I wish you were Miss Wyndham, or Miss Anybody except what you are," he said petulantly. "You will now always be thinking I am 'taking parts,' or some nonsense of that kind."

"No—I don't want to think that," she replied glancing up at him half shyly with a sort of deprecation in her lovely eyes.

"Thank you—thank you for saying that," he replied eagerly. "Indeed you would be doing me the greatest injustice if you—" but at that moment as he was bending towards Ella, speaking though earnestly, in a lower tone than usual, a voice interrupted them. It was that of Miss St Quentin, who had risen from the piano.

"Ella," she said in her quiet, impassive way, "I want you to take Ermine's part in that duet that she and I have just got. I am sure you can manage it."

Ella rose at once, though without speaking.

"Upon my word," said Sir Philip to himself, "Madelene is strangely deficient in tact. She might trust me to do the child no harm—she knows how anxious I am to bring about a more cordial state of feeling."

And his manner towards his cousin for the rest of the evening was decidedly a shade less cordial than it was wont to be.

---

## Chapter Sixteen.

### Out in the Cold.

Ella woke the next morning with that most delightful of all delightful feelings—the vague consciousness of something nice having happened ere she fell asleep. She slowly, half reluctantly opened her eyes—

"I do hope it wasn't only a dream," she murmured, but as she caught sight of the objects around her, the large bow-window with its curtains of richer material than the old faded chintz of the Coombesthorpe "nursery," the toilet table with its marble top and large mirror, and the wardrobe of beautiful inlaid wood—for Lady Cheynes made a point of installing her little god-daughter in one of the "best" rooms—a smile crept over her face, and she closed her sleepy eyes again with a sensation of vivid satisfaction.

No, it was no dream—she was to stay a whole week at Cheynesacre, with her dear godmother. Papa would never be so cruel as to send for her back again, whatever Madelene said, and Madelene had as good as promised to plead her cause, and after all she, Ella, had no real reason for thinking her elder sister actually insincere. Then her mind reverted to what Sir Philip had said the night before.

"He thinks so very highly of Madelene," thought Ella, "and he must know her well. He speaks more of her than of Ermine, but—" and a slight frown clouded her brow, "that *might* mean that he cares most for Ermine, really. How I wonder if he does! He shouldn't be—*quite* like what he is to—to other girls, if he does. Perhaps he's one of those men that can't help being charming to everybody," and at this point in her cogitations poor Ella gave a deep sigh. "But any way," she went on, "Ermine doesn't care for him, not *that* way, though of course she might if it was put in her head."

And then the quicksilver of her eighteen years refused to let her ponder any more.

"I'm going to be happy—for a week at least, come what may," she said aloud as she sprang out of bed. "And as I'm his guest it's Sir Philip's business to make me enjoy myself, and it would be very surly of me not to."

Certainly it looked as if the host's task was not to be a very arduous one—never, in Madelene's sight at least—had the girl been so sweet and bright and happy.

"Dear child, she seems in love with all the world," said her godmother when she and Madelene were alone that morning for a few minutes before Miss St Quentin took her departure. "How I wish poor Ellen could see her! It must make you feel happy, dear Maddie, to see her so bright and blooming." But Madelene did not respond as heartily as she really wished she could do.

"She is so different at home, Aunt Anna," she said. "She seems as if she could not trust us, me especially. It seems unnatural in one so young and impressionable," and she sighed.

"It will all come right," said the old lady cheerily; "you are too gloomy, Maddie."

She did not understand the new direction of Madelene's anxieties; had she overheard a word or two that passed between the cousins as Philip stood at the carriage door saying good-bye, she might have been enlightened.

"Philip," Miss St Quentin whispered, "I must say one word to you at the risk of offending you. I hope I am doing right in leaving Ella—Phil dear, don't be angry with me—remember she is very, very young and—you know you can be so very charming."

The blood mounted to the young man's forehead.

"Madelene," he said, "I really sometimes cannot understand you. Do you want me to be actually unkind to your half-

sister? Do you think *that* would mend matters?"

And he turned coldly away.

"I wish I had not gone," said Madelene to Ermine when the sisters were together again at Coombesthorpe. "It has only made Philip angry with me, and done no good to Ella. I wish Aunt Anna would adopt her altogether."

"Papa would never consent to that," said Ermine, "at least not in the sense you mean, though in *my* sense, nothing could be more delightful. I am enchanted that she is staying there—it would have been too stupid of you to oppose it."

"I would have done so if I could," Madelene replied. "I am so unhappy about Ella for her own sake, Ermine. I can see that she is already very much attracted by Philip and—"

"Well? What could you possibly have to say against it? It won't be your doing."

"I am afraid Philip is only amusing himself. You know how charming he can be. And that would be dreadful for her, poor child. It has all come of that absurd comedy at the beginning of their acquaintance."

"Yes," said Ermine, "I hope it has."

Colonel St Quentin made not the smallest objections to Ella's remaining at Cheynesacre, and once satisfied as to this, the girl gave herself up to full enjoyment of the present.

"I have never been so happy before," she said to her godmother on the last day of her stay. And she said truly. Sir Philip who was in the room at the time glanced at her as she spoke.

"We must have a jolly Christmas at Coombesthorpe," he said. "Poor Maddie and Ermine have had plenty of dull ones there."

"Have they?" said Ella quickly. "Well it must have been their own fault."

"No, indeed it wasn't," Philip replied rather coldly, "unless you call their unselfishness and patience their 'fault.'"

Ella made no reply, but her bright face clouded over. An hour or two later when Sir Philip and she were on their way to the pond for "a last skate" as she said, he reverted to what had passed.

"Ella," he began, "since I saw that it vexed you the other night I have said nothing more about your—well I can only call it prejudice against your sisters. But I see it is still there. I wish I could disabuse you of it—you don't know how earnestly I wish it. You are so sweet and affectionate to every one else—I cannot really understand it."

"It is often the case that near relations don't get on as well with each other as with—strangers," said Ella somewhat primly.

"But you don't count granny and me strangers, I hope?" he asked eagerly. "And granny is not a person that *every one* gets on with."

"Perhaps not, but she loves me—I feel that she does. And I shouldn't mind *anything* she said, not even if she scolded me badly—just because of that. And I never can feel that way to Madelene. But I do get on very well now with Ermine," she added though with a shade of reluctance.

"Dear Ermine," said Philip. "I can scarcely imagine the possibility of not 'getting on' with her. Everybody takes to her wherever she goes. I am so delighted she is going to the Marchants," he added.

"You are going too?" asked Ella, though she knew it already.

"Yes. I hope to be there the first week of Ermine's visit, at least," he replied.

"Oh," said Ella, "that will be very pleasant."

"Delightful," replied Philip absently.

This time Ella made no observation.

Suddenly Philip turned to her again.

"Ella," he said, "do forgive me for harping on the subject, but don't you think all this might be put right? If you could show a little more confidence in Madelene, a little more affection in your manner, she would, I feel certain, be quick to respond. I can't—" and here he hesitated, "I can't just yet tell you all I should like you to know—I wish I could—but some day you will understand better."

Ella felt choking. "Understand"—did she not understand? But pride and some better feeling than pride, for after all she had no real grounds of complaint against Sir Philip, came to the rescue.

"I *will* try to be gentler and pleasanter at Coombesthorpe, if you think it would do any good," she said bravely. "And changes come—it may not be for very long. I should like you and my godmother to know I had done my best, for—for the time we must be all together there."

The tears trembled on her eyelashes, but she turned away to hide them: she did not see the expression on Philip's

face as he heard her words. She only heard his answer.

"Thank you, dear Ella," he said. "I know you will do what you say, and you have made me very happy by speaking so, for I have been terribly afraid of making things worse instead of better, by my interfering. No—it may not be for long as you say. But you are so young, Ella," and there was a half regretful intonation in his voice, "you will see things differently afterwards, and you will like to look back and feel that you have done your best."

Ella glanced up at him. There was a look in his eyes which made her cheeks flush.

"Dear Ella," he added softly.

"I will do my best," she repeated. And to herself she said, believing that she fully realised her words, that come what would she would deserve his approval. "Even if he is only to be—a sort of brother to me," she thought, "I would like him to see that I try to be good."

And she believed it was as a reward for her heroism that the world all about her looked so bright again, and some faint rays of wintry sunshine that lighted up the frost-besprinkled fields and palely gilded the tops of the dark fir-trees, seemed to her to glow with the warmth and brilliance of a midsummer sky.

Christmas passed with cheerfulness, if not exactly with "jollity," at Coombesthorpe. Colonel St Quentin was still too much of an invalid to stand a large party, but a few old friends and neighbours joined the family circle. Madelene was quiet as ever, but gentle and almost affectionate to Ella, who, true to her promise, received her elder sister's advances in good part and refrained from all sharp or icy retorts, even when, as must happen, however good the will on both sides, perfect unanimity of opinion was not the case. And Ermine was in such tremendously good spirits that the infection of them was to some extent irresistible. She was so gracious to Philip that he, in his own mind, was a little puzzled by it, for a coldness, slight but yet to themselves tangible enough, still seemed to hang between Madelene and himself. His cousins for once seemed to be at issue, he fancied, and he was small enough to try to punish Madelene by a show of even extra responsiveness to Ermine.

And Ella watched and wondered; sometimes feeling certain that her misgivings as to the state of things between Philip and Ermine were founded on fact; sometimes rising to a flutter of delight and hopefulness at some slight incident which seemed to prove to her conclusively that there was "nothing in it."

"If there were," she said to herself more than once, "would Madelene be vexed with him; as I am almost sure she is?"

And yet—that there was perfect good feeling between him and Ermine she could not doubt, and what that might not mean in reality she could not bear to think!

Wednesday—for Christmas day had been a Tuesday—saw the whole party scattered. Lady Cheynes returned home; Ermine started on her journey to Shenewood Park, whither Philip was to follow her the next day from Cheynesacre. And Ella, as she stood at the window watching the last carriage disappear, felt that now was the real test of her promise to Philip. The prospect of a whole fortnight alone with Madelene; Madelene quieter and "duller," as Ella expressed it, than she had yet known her, was not inspiring. For curiously enough, though it was Ermine whom the girl's fancy had erected into a rival, it was not on her, but entirely on her elder sister that she resented the fact.

"I could never dislike Ermine. She is so bright and open," thought Ella, while a tear or two trickled unbidden down her face. "Even as Philip's wife I don't think I could ever be jealous of her. But it is so different with Madelene; everything is calculation with her. She has settled that it would be a good thing for them to marry, and she is determined to carry it out—whether *they* care enough for each other or not. *She* has never cared for any one—that's certain."

The mood was not a very propitious one, for some vague warnings which Miss St Quentin unluckily thought it her duty to give her younger sister. It was when they were sitting together in the already fading light that afternoon—Ella after fidgeting about restlessly the whole day, having at last taken a book and settled herself in the library where Madelene was already installed with what the younger girl mentally dubbed "that everlasting knitting of hers."

But the book did not prove very interesting. Ella yawned, then gave a sort of groan, and ended by flinging it aside.

"Do you not care for that book?" asked Madelene calmly. "I think I like it. But the other new Mudie books are in the drawing-room."

"I don't think I should like any book to-day," said Ella frankly. "I do feel so stupid. Do you never feel that sort of way, Madelene?" she went on with a sudden irresistible craving for sympathy. "As if—as if you didn't care for anything."

Madelene glanced at her half curiously. Was this mere childishness—or—were her fears for poor little Ella's peace of mind already beginning to be realised? Was this the first taste of the weary pain—the sickness of heart which she herself had not yet grown innured to?

"And in her case it would be ever so much worse," she said to herself, "if Philip does not really care for her. I at least have always been sure of Bernard, though even thus, heaven knows it has been hard to bear!"

Her heart ached for the young creature looking up at her with troubled eyes. But she must ignore what she still hoped was but superficial.

"Everybody knows that kind of feeling at times, I suppose," she said placidly. "It generally is a sort of reaction. We have had a little more excitement than usual, you see, and you enjoyed yourself very much at Cheynesacre."

"I never was so happy in my life," Ella replied impulsively.

"I am glad you liked it. Philip is certainly a model host—he is a favourite everywhere, and deservedly, for he is very kind-hearted. And it says a good deal for him that his being such a favourite—especially with women—has not quite spoiled him."

Ella looked up sharply.

"Do you mean that he is a flirt?" she asked abruptly.

Madelene hesitated.

"Not exactly that," she said. "He may flirt a little sometimes but there is no harm in that. But he would never consciously, *intentionally* go further than that. Still his very kind-heartedness has its weak point; he cannot bear to see any one unhappy. And he is impressionable and impulsive in some ways—I should be a little anxious about throwing any—very inexperienced girl much in his society."

"But you and Ermine have always been thrown with him," said Ella.

Miss St Quentin drew herself up a little.

"That is quite different," she said. "I am, to all intents and purposes, older than Philip."

"But Ermine is not," thought Ella bitterly, though aloud she only replied, "Oh yes, of course."

Ermine's letters came nearly every day, bright and sunny, overflowing with fun and enjoyment. Now and then Madelene gave one, or a part of one to Ella to read, which the girl did eagerly, especially when Sir Philip's name was mentioned, as was constantly the case.

"How much Ermine seems to be enjoying herself," said Ella one morning. "When I am what you consider *quite* 'out,' Madelene, I may pay visits like this of hers, mayn't I?"

They were at the breakfast-table. Colonel St Quentin, who by this time was as well as usual, overheard the remark.

"I hope so," Madelene was beginning with an ill-assured glance at her father, when he suddenly interrupted her.

"I hope *not*, Ella," he said. "That sort of thing would only put nonsense in your head. It is quite different for Ermine."

Ella gazed at him in astonishment. His tone was not unkind, but very decided. To his last words she could give one interpretation—it was different for Ermine because she was already tacitly engaged to Philip, and but for this her father evidently would not have approved of her visiting by herself. Ella felt herself grow pale, but she did not speak.

"Oh, papa," Madelene interposed, "that is too sweeping. Some day I hope Ella *may* see something of country-house society—with *me* you would trust her?"

Colonel St Quentin murmured something, of which Ella only caught the words—"Plenty of time—rational life for a girl."

But she felt now as if she did not care.

The next morning brought no letter from Ermine, the day after came one which Madelene read to herself with somewhat clouded brow.

"Ermine is so tiresome, papa," she said. "For some reason or other she seems to have got a fit of homesickness. Just when I was so delighted to think she was enjoying herself. She actually talks of coming home the day after tomorrow."

"Umph," said Colonel St Quentin, "that will be Friday. Tell her I can't send to the station that day—Brown is going to look at that new pair, and I won't trust Parker's driving in this weather; she must stay any way till Monday. Is Philip still there?"

"No," said Madelene, going on with her letter. "At least he is leaving to-day."

"Ah, well, that settles it. She might have arranged to come back with him had he been staying till Friday, if she is *really* home-sick, poor child. But as it is she must wait till Monday."

"I can't make her out quite," said Madelene, "But I will tell her what you say. Perhaps—if she is dull, I suppose she had better come home."

Ella went up stairs to her own room and stood gazing out at the cold, wintry landscape. It was a grey, sunless day. It seemed to her like an image of her own life.

"Why did I ever come here?" she said. "It would have been better, yes *far* better, to have borne old Barton's impertinence. Only—poor aunty—it might have made *her* unhappy! It would not now—I am so changed. I should be meek enough. What a fool I have been—to dream that Philip Cheynes had fallen in love with me! He was only amusing himself and thinking of Ermine all the time. But *why* did he? He must have seen I was a fool;" and her cheeks burnt as she recalled the little trifles—trifles at least, if put into words—looks and tones more than actual speech or action, which had seemed to her so significative.

"And Madelene suspects it. Yes, I know she does. Perhaps after all she has meant to do her duty by me. If she had only been a little more loving at the first I might have confided more in her; I might have been guided by her. But it is



too late now. I won't stay here, where no one cares for me. They may keep my share of the money and everything. I don't want anything where I am not loved."

What should she do? She could not decide. For the next day or two her head felt confused and dreamy—she longed to do something, to go somewhere, but lacked the energy to determine upon anything, and a vague, not unpleasing feeling came over her that perhaps she was going to be ill, to have a brain fever and die possibly, and that in this case it was not worth while planning to go away or anything.

She must be looking very ill, she said to herself with some complacency, for more than once she caught Madelene's eyes fixed upon her with an anxiety that was almost tender.

"Are you feeling ill, Ella?" she said.

But Ella smiled and shook her head, and replied that she supposed it was the cold; she had never liked cold weather.

So passed two or three days; then came the goad to sting her into action.

Nothing further had been heard or said about Ermine's return, but on Monday morning Miss St Quentin exclaimed eagerly, as she opened the letter-bag, which she was accustomed to do if she was down before her father.

"Ah, a letter from Ermine at last! That's right. Ella, dear, please put these letters on papa's plate. Dear me—there is one with a Shenewood envelope for him—whom can that be from? And—that's Philip's writing. I wonder why he has not been over to see us?"

Almost as she spoke her father entered the room. He kissed his daughters, making some slight remark as he did so on the extreme coldness of the morning.

"Is that what is making you look so pale, Ella?" he added as he caught sight of her face.

Again Ella forced a smile and murmured something vaguely about disliking cold. But her father scarcely heard her reply. He had opened his letters and was immersed in them, unsuspecting of the keen attention with which his youngest daughter was observing him. His face grew grave, very grave indeed as he read the one from Shenewood Park which Madelene had remarked upon: a slight look of relief overspread it as he glanced at the shorter letter from Sir Philip Cheynes.

"Madelene," he said hastily, handing both to her across the table, "did you know anything of this?" and Ella saw that the fingers which held out the letters trembled.

Miss St Quentin read both quickly. Then she looked at her father.

"No," she said, "nothing at all."

Her voice was grave and she had grown rather pale, still to Ella it seemed that her evident emotion was not caused by distress.

"Philip is coming over himself, I see," Madelene said. "I am glad of that. Talking is so much better than writing."

Colonel St Quentin pushed back his chair from the table where stood his untasted breakfast.

"I suppose so," he said; "but—you will think me very foolish Maddie, but this has completely unhinged me. I can't eat—I will go to my own room, I think."

"Oh, papa," Miss St Quentin was beginning in a tone of remonstrance, when Ella interrupted her.

"Is anything the matter?" she exclaimed. "You—you seem so strange, Madelene, you and papa. If it is anything I am not to hear about, I would rather go away: I have nearly finished my breakfast."

Her little pale face looked almost as if she were going to cry. Madelene seemed as if she did not know what to say or do.

"It—it is nothing wrong," she said hastily, "but still not anything I can quite explain to you just yet."

"It is something about Ermine. I know that," said Ella. "But if you don't mind I would rather go, and then you and papa can talk freely."

And almost before they quite understood what she was saying, she had gone.

"Has she had her breakfast really?" said her father, glancing at Ella's plate. "Yes, I suppose so. But she isn't looking well, Madelene. I think we must have Felton to look at her. However—just for the moment I can only think of Ermine. Give me that letter again. Philip will be able to tell us more. What crotchet has Ermine got in her head about anything of the kind being 'impossible'? I'm not such a selfish old tyrant as all that, surely! And if I were—while I have *you*, Maddie—"

"Yes, papa," Miss St Quentin replied, though her own lip quivered a little. "Yes, with *me*, I hope you would never feel deserted. And this is what we must impress upon Ermine, if—as seems the case—everything else is favourable and desirable."

Then they read the letter over again more than once indeed, with eager anxiety to discover from the written lines all they possibly could as to the writer.

"It is a nice manly letter," said Madelene at last. "But Ermine will be angry, I fear."

And Ella meanwhile had flown up stairs to her "nursery," the scene of her mature as well as of her childish trials. It had come at last, the certainty of the event she had so dreaded. Ermine and Philip were to be openly engaged. Must she stay to see it? Could she bear it? Pride said yes; her hot, undisciplined girl's heart said no. And in this conflict she passed the morning, till suddenly a sort of compromise suggested itself. She would write to her Aunt Phillis—surely she could trust *her*? "I will tell her that I am very unhappy here and ask her to write at once inviting me to go to her. She will do it, I am sure. I will promise her to be as nice as possible to Mr Burton. Oh, if only I can get away I shall not care about him or anything!"

---

## Chapter Seventeen.

### Ella Overhears.

The letter was soon written. But then came the question of how to post it. Ella would not send it openly with the rest of the letters as usual, for she was afraid of Madelene's catching sight of it.

"I will take it to the post-office in the village myself," she decided. "They won't miss me. They are far too busy and absorbed about Ermine. And Sir Philip will very likely be coming over to luncheon. How I wish I could say I was ill and keep out of the way! It is too hard to feel myself a complete stranger and alien in my own home—and it will cut me off from dear godmother too. I can never see much of *her* now."

A few minutes saw her wrapped up and making her way down the drive. It reminded her of that other morning only a very few weeks ago when she had found little Hetty in distress at the lodge and had stopped to help her, and when, all unconscious of her smutty face, she had met Philip at the gate. She had not even known his name then, and now—if only he had not been Philip Cheynes, but a stranger as she had imagined him! He had once wished she were really "Miss Wyndham."

"I wonder why," thought Ella. "Perhaps if I *had* been a stranger everything would have been different. There would have been no Madelene to interfere and stop it all. And I was so sure Ermine did not care for him—I wonder how it has all come about."

But she felt as if she dared not let her thoughts dwell on it. She hurried on, safely posted her letter, and turned to go home again without misadventure. It was not till she was within the lodge gates, walking more slowly now that she had accomplished her purpose, that it suddenly struck her what a risk she had run of meeting Sir Philip, and she started as she realised this, and for half a moment stood still to reflect if she could not reach the house by some other way. But no—there was no choice of road till much nearer home—and then, as if evoked by her fears, the sound of a horse approaching at a steady trot broke on her ears. It was some way off, even a slight noise travelled far in the clear frosty air, but Ella had a long way to walk still before she could reach the concealment of the shrubberies, and where she was now standing her figure stood out clear and distinct against the sky.

"If it is he, he has seen me already," she thought with a sort of shiver, and she started off almost at a run, from time to time stopping for a moment both to take breath and to listen if the horse and his rider were indeed coming her way. Yes—she heard them stopping at the lodge gate—then on again, faster, a good deal faster, surely!

"He has recognised me," thought Ella, running now at full speed, till her heart beat almost to suffocation and her breath came in panting sobs. She was near the shrubbery now—and once there she could easily elude him—another effort, though she was all but breathless now, and—no, it was too late!

"Ella!" cried the voice she knew so well, "what in the world is the matter? What *are*, you running away in that mad fashion for?"

She had to stop—it was almost a relief to her that she was physically incapable of speaking—her face was scarlet, she panted so that Sir Philip was really startled. She tried to laugh, but the convulsive effort quite as nearly resembled a sob.

"Ella," Philip repeated, "can't you tell me—can't, you speak?"

"It—it is nothing," she replied at last. "I have only been running."

"But why were you running so? It is wrong, it may really hurt you. You will probably catch cold if you overheat yourself so," he went on seeming vexed and uneasy. "We might have walked up together comfortably from the lodge, as we did the day I brought you back your shoe. Do you remember?" Did she remember? Ella gave an instant's glance at him, but without speaking.

"*Is* anything the matter?" Philip went on.

"Your father is not ill?"

"Oh, no," she said. "I have scarcely seen him and Madelene this morning. They are expecting you, I know. I think—Is it not a pity to keep them waiting?"

Sir Philip had got off his horse by this time. He gave an impatient exclamation.

"Say plainly you don't want to speak to me, and I will understand you, Ella," he said. "There is no such tremendous hurry for my seeing your father and Madelene. I was in such spirits," he went on reproachfully. "I don't think I ever

felt so happy in my life as I did this morning when I was riding over, and when I caught sight of you I thought it such a piece of luck—" his voice dropped a little, and his dark eyes looked quite pathetic—"and now you have spoilt it all. I don't understand you this morning, Ella."

"There is nothing to understand or not to understand," said the girl, trying, though not very successfully to speak lightly. "I didn't particularly want to speak to you, and I didn't suppose you wanted particularly to speak to me. I—I heard a little this morning, though they don't take me into their confidence. But I know they are waiting for you, and anxious to see you and talk it over."

Philip looked at her curiously. She did not seem, as to him it would have appeared natural that she should do, either excited or much interested. Ermine however was not her own sister, he said to himself. Perhaps that made a difference, for that she was either self-absorbed or cold-hearted he could not for an instant believe.

"There is really no such tremendous hurry," he repeated. "Uncle Marcus will be all the better for a little time in which to digest the news. They might as well have told you all about it. Madelene's conscientiousness and caution run riot sometimes. I should like you to understand it all, and I am quite—"

"Oh no, no, please no!" she cried, putting her hands hastily to her ears. "I don't want you to—I would much rather wait for Madelene to tell me. Please—please let me go now. I hope it will be all right, and you know I do care for Ermine, and I do want her to be happy."

"Of course you do. Whoever doubted it?" he replied, half smiling at her strange manner. "But, Ella—"

His words were wasted. Before she had heard them Ella was off. She darted away, for she had recovered her breath by now, and was hidden among the neighbouring thick-growing shrubs, whose shelter she had all but reached before Sir Philip had first accosted her. He stood for a moment looking after her, his brows knit, his bright face clouded with perplexity. But it would scarcely do for him to run after her, as if they were a couple of children playing at "I spy." Besides which he had his horse to think of. So he slowly mounted again and rode on to the house.

"Something has rubbed her the wrong way this morning," he said. "Madelene's mistaken want of confidence probably. Maddie means well, but she doesn't understand Ella. And there is some excuse for it. She does seem such a child, and yet she is not really childish." He drew a long breath. "Perhaps granny is right about waiting, but I don't know. One *can't* make rules in such matters, and one may run great risks. I will not let any misunderstanding come between us—that I will not do. Before I leave to-day, I will tell her all there is to tell about Ermine, and show her she is in *my* confidence at least."

And with no very serious misgiving the young man rang at the hall door and was told that the master of the house was expecting him and would see him in his own room.

It was one of the days of Ella's "lessons." Her German teacher was due at two o'clock. As a rule a very little haste at luncheon left her free by the time appointed, which could not have been easily altered as Fräulein Braune's "time" to her, poor woman, was "money." But when Ella came into the dining-room at half-past one no one was there. A sudden idea struck her: it would be the greatest possible relief to escape making one at the family party. She helped herself hastily to a slice of cold meat, and having eaten it quickly, took a piece of cake in her hand and rang the bell. Barnes, who was extra attentive and condescending to-day, as he scented some news in the air, appeared in person.

"Tell Miss St Quentin and my father," said Ella coolly, "that I could not wait to have luncheon with them as I should be too late for Fräulein Braune."

"Certainly, Miss Hella," Barnes replied patronisingly. "It will be of no consequence, I feel sure. My master and Miss St Quentin *and* Sir Philip are still hanged in the study. Orders not to be disturbed. It will do if I explain your absence, miss, when the Colonel comes in to luncheon?"

Ella did not trouble herself to reply. She detested Barnes, and he, on his side, did not love her. Their intercourse had *débuté* badly; Ella had never forgotten or forgiven the half-suspicious condescension with which he had received her on her first unexpected appearance at Coombesthorpe, and had she better understood the facts of her position there, she would have been still more irate. For carefully as the St Quentins believed themselves to have kept private all the details of their family history such things always leak out. There was not a servant of any intelligence in the establishment who was not thoroughly aware that the place and the money belonged to the two elder sisters, that "the Colonel, poor gentleman," had lost his own fortune in risky investments, and that the young daughter of his penniless second wife was to all intents and purposes a pauper. "But for the goodness of our own young ladies," Barnes, *plus royaliste que le roi*, was wont to say, "Miss Hella, for all her high and mightiness, would have to earn her daily bread—and a deal of good it would do her."

Fräulein Braune was punctual: the hour of her lesson passed heavily to-day; it was very difficult for Ella to give her usual attention. The German was a good, tender-hearted creature, who had known too much suffering in life herself not to recognise the symptoms of it in another, though she smiled inwardly as she thought that trivial indeed and probably imaginary must be the troubles of one so placed as her fortunate pupil—"young, lovely, rich, surrounded by friends, what can she really have to grieve about?"

"My dear, you are tired to-day," she said kindly. "You have a headache I see. There is only a quarter of an hour more. Let us spend it in conversation. Would the open air do you good?"

Ella gladly acceded.

"I will walk to the furthest gates with you, Fräulein," she said, "and we will talk as we go. I have a headache, but it is not a real one; it is because I am unhappy."

The gentle woman gave her a glance of sympathy, but she tempered her sympathy with common-sense.

"Beware, my child," she said, as they walked down the drive, "of *imagining* causes of unhappiness. One is so apt to do so when one is young," and she sighed.

"Ah, but I have some real troubles," Ella replied, "troubles that no one could deny. I have no mother, you know, Fräulein, and only half-sisters who till lately were complete strangers to me."

"Certainly the want of a mother is a great want," her companion agreed. "But an elder sister may go far towards making up for it."

"Ye-es, sometimes," acquiesced Ella. But the tone was enough.

"Poor little girl," thought Fräulein Braune when she left her, "she does seem lonely. And she is so lovable! Miss St Quentin must be of a cold nature." Ella retraced her steps: it was cold, but she walked slowly. She felt sure Sir Philip would not be staying long; as he had come over so early, and she wandered about the grounds, choosing the side of the house from which she would not be visible to any one leaving it, in hopes of not re-entering it till he had gone.

But it grew too chilly at last. She determined to make her way in by the conservatory whence she could run up stairs to her own room without much risk of meeting any one. The conservatory felt pleasantly warm: she lingered in it for a moment or two, not observing at first that the door leading from it into the drawing-room was open, nor indeed attaching any consequence to the fact when she did observe it: the drawing-room was never used by the family in the earlier part of the day. Suddenly she heard voices. They were those of Madelene and her cousin.

"I can't find it, Philip," said the former. "Aunty must forgive my carelessness. I will send it back to-morrow before her Mudie box goes."

"May not Ella know where it is?" Sir Philip suggested.

"Possibly. I think I saw her reading it. But she is at her German lesson and it is a pity to interrupt her."

"Goodness, Madelene, you talk as if she were about twelve years old," said Philip irritably. "When are you going to allow the poor girl to consider herself grown-up? At her age, you—"

"It is no good going back upon what I was," Miss St Quentin interrupted. "I was quite different, and circumstances were quite different. I do my best with Ella, though I fear I don't succeed in making her happy. It has been a sore subject."

"When—when Ermine goes, you must make more of a companion of her," Sir Philip suggested. "And then—some day—if Ella goes in the same way—"

"It would simplify matters of course; that is to say if it was for her happiness," said Madelene, half reluctantly, it seemed to Ella.

"I should rather think it would. Why *then* Omar might take up his quarters here for good. He would be a perfect right-hand to Uncle Marcus. I can understand your feeling that with Ella here it might not be a pleasant or natural position for him. Uncle Marcus scarcely counts as a third person—he is so much in his own room."

"Philip, don't talk about it," said Madelene decidedly. "You almost seem to want to tempt me into wishing Ella away. Very certainly with both her and my father in a sense on my hands I have no right to undertake other ties. And if *both* Ermine and I married, it would complicate matters financially, you know."

"Yes, I do know," said Philip, "and I repeat what I said. It would be a very good thing if Ella—"

"Oh, do be quiet, Philip," said Madelene in a tone almost of entreaty. "She is much too young, and—by the time there is any prospect of her being provided for, it will be too late for me."

Sir Philip gave a sort of grunt, which did not express assent, but he said no more.

"It is cold in here," said Madelene. "Come back to the library."

"I must be going," he replied. "You have letters to write I know, and if Ella is to be shut-up at her lessons all the afternoon, the prospect is not lively." Then Ella heard them leave the room.

With a rush there came over her the realisation of what she had been doing—"Listening!" Her face grew scarlet with shame but not for long.

"I could not have helped it," she thought with a kind of defiance. "Their very first words were about me: I should never have known the truth had I interrupted them. And at all costs it was best to know it. Now I need have no hesitation. I will not stay another night here—they shall never be troubled by me again."

Her face glowed as she recalled some of the expressions she had overheard. Then again she felt perplexed at certain allusions she could not explain. What did Madelene mean by speaking of "financial" complications?

"We are all three sisters; it isn't as if one of us were a son," she thought. "Even if most is to go to Madelene as the eldest, papa is certainly rich enough to provide well for Ermine and me too. Not that I want their money—I shall let them see that. I don't in the least mind earning my own living, and I am sure I am able to do so. I should thank papa, I suppose, for having made me work hard since I have been here. It is as if he had foreseen it." Then her thoughts

took another turn. Who was "Omar"? Some one that Madelene was to marry, or would have married already, it appeared, but for her, Ella's, unlucky advent.

"Everything of course, everything unfortunate is put upon my shoulders," she reflected bitterly. "Still Madelene *means* to be good and unselfish, I do believe. She shall not be sacrificed to me. And when she is married to this Mr Omar, whoever he is, and Ermine to Sir Philip, I *don't* think they will have much to reproach me with, 'sore subject' though I am."

She sat still for a moment or two till she felt a little more collected. Then she crept quietly up stairs to her own room, locked the door by way of precaution and set to work.

All her belongings were together and in neat order. "It will be quite easy for any one to pack everything up," she thought. Then she dressed herself in her warmest clothes, put a few things into a bag not too heavy for her to carry, and when all was ready, sat down to write a few words, which, as is the fashion of heroines in such circumstances, she fastened conspicuously to her toilet pincushion. The note was addressed to Miss St Quentin and contained these words:—

"I overheard what you and Sir Philip were talking about in the drawing-room; I know it was dishonourable to listen, but I could not help it, after the first. It is not my fault that I have been such a sore trouble to you hitherto, but it would be if I stayed here, knowing better now. I will write to you when my plans are settled, but it isn't any use sending after me, as I am not going anywhere you know. I hope you will be very happy—and I hope Ermine will be very happy too. Please tell papa I see now how wise it was to make me go on with my lessons.

"Your affectionate sister,—

"Ella Marcia St Quentin."

Then Ella made her way quietly down stairs, and out by a side-door. She met no one, and keeping as long as possible in the shade of the shrubberies, she gained the lodge, then the outer gates, a quarter of a mile further off, finding herself finally on the high road to Coombe. She knew her way quite well, though it was now growing dusk. She knew too what she meant to do, so she walked on without hesitating.

"I have nearly three pounds in my purse," she reflected. "That will do. But I must get on as fast as I can. I don't suppose Madelene will miss me till about five o'clock; it must be almost that now, and if they sent along the road they might overtake me."

She hastened her steps; there was a short cut to Coombe through the lanes, which she knew, and by walking very fast, she reached her destination without risk of being overtaken.

---

## Chapter Eighteen.

### A Decided Step.

Fräulein Braune was sitting in her modest lodging over the Coombe post-office when the door opened and the maid-servant announced a visitor. The good lady started up in surprise, but before she had time to greet the new-comer, the latter cautiously shut the door, and then hastened towards her exclaiming as she threw off her hat and veil.

"It is I, Fräulein, Ella St Quentin. I have come to ask you a great favour. Will you let me stay with you for to-night? I have left my home and I don't want them to know where I am just yet. Next week—as soon as I am settled—I shall write to them, but not yet. I must first—"

"You have run away from home," interrupted the governess. "Oh, my dear Miss Ella, that is a sad step to take! Think how frightened they will all be."

"No," said Ella, "I have taken care of that. And I had the best reasons. There has been no quarrel, but I have found out that I am a great burden and trouble to them all. It will be an immense relief to them. I cannot explain all without telling you what I have no right to tell, but you must believe what I say. It is not as if I had been brought up at home. I have only been with them about eight months: they will soon forget I have been there at all and everything will get straight now I have left."

Ella spoke so fast and decidedly that for a moment or two Fräulein Braune felt confused and bewildered. But though timid and gentle she was a woman of considerable common-sense. She saw that for the moment at least, there was no use in arguing with the girl.

"And what do you propose to do then, my dear?" she said. "Where will you go to-morrow when you leave this—if—if it is arranged for you to stay here to-night?"

Ella looked at her for a moment or two without speaking.

"Fräulein," she said, "you must be candid with me. I came to you because I thought I could trust you. But if I am mistaken, if you intend to do anything towards making me go home again, or telling my people where I am, then I tell you plainly I will go away from this house at once leaving no trace of myself, and neither you nor any one will be able to find me again, I warn you."

The governess considered a moment. Ella looked resolute and probably meant what she said.

"What do you want me to promise you, my dear?" Fräulein Braune said quietly.

"That you will not—you must give me your word of honour that you will not—tell any of my people anything about me till or unless I give you leave."

"Very well," Fräulein Braune replied. "I give you my promise. There is little fear but that they will be able to find her at once if they think it best to set to work vigorously," she reflected. "And anything is better than that she should be seen running about by herself, or that she should take some foolish step through her inexperience—I give you my promise," she repeated.

Ella looked relieved.

"Then," she said. "I will tell you my plan," and she proceeded to do so.

When she had finished, she looked up at the German lady inquiringly.

"It is not a bad plan?" she asked. "There is nothing wild and silly about it."

"No," Fräulein Braune replied, "I don't know that there is if, that is to say, your leaving your home is absolutely unavoidable. But, my dear Miss Ella, one thing I must insist upon. I will go to London with you to-morrow. I cannot let you travel alone."

"I'm not the least afraid of travelling alone," began Ella hastily, "and I have the exact address. And—it will cost a good deal, Fräulein, even if we go second-class and—I haven't much money."

"You shall repay me some day," said the good governess, "but that I go with you is decided. It must be—on every account."

Ella sighed.

"It is very kind of you," she said, "but I wish you wouldn't."

There was determination however, as well as kindness in Fräulein Braune's grey eyes. Ella had to give in.

She shared her friend's evening meal, though not daring to eat as much as she was inclined to do, when she saw how very modest it was. She would not allow the governess to give up her bed to her, as she wished, but insisted on spending the night with the aid of a pillow or two, on the little hair-covered sofa in the sitting-room. It was not very comfortable, she owned to herself, when Fräulein Braune had left her, *very* much less so than the cosy bed in the despised "nursery" at Coombesthorpe. And she was hungry too, really hungry, for she had had no luncheon to speak of, no afternoon tea at all, a very long walk in the cold and only enough supper to whet her hearty girlish appetite!

"I must get used to it," she said to herself. "I can't expect more than the bare necessities of life now." But she was so tired that in spite of all, she fell asleep and slept soundly.

It was morning already when she awoke—some moments of bewilderment as to what had happened and where she was were followed by a gradual recollection of the painful events of the preceding day. Then Fräulein Braune in a curiously befrilled headgear which Ella supposed must be a German nightcap, peeped in, to see if her guest was awake. Ella started up nervously.

"It is time to be getting ready, I suppose?" she said. "I was forgetting."

"Yes," said the governess. "If you have really kept to your determination of—"

"Of course I have," said Ella sharply. "I shall be dressed in ten minutes; there will be time to catch the early train, will there not?"

"Oh, yes, if we are quick," Fräulein Braune replied. Not that she would have been sorry if they had missed it, poor woman! But she was in secret hopes that Ella's friends would have already communicated with the railway officials, and that her escapade would come to a premature ending at the station.

Nothing of the kind happened however, and the German was obliged to own to herself when fairly off on their journey, seated opposite Ella in a second-class compartment that it really did not look as if the poor girl's family cared much about her. Still the more she thought it all over the more satisfied she became that she had acted not only kindly, but wisely in accompanying her pupil.

"She would never have got on without me," the governess reflected, "though she is too childish to understand that. It will be easy to confide in Mrs Ward so far as is necessary to ensure her taking care of Ella in the meantime, without Ella's in the least suspecting anything of the kind."

And indeed though the girl's heart and mind were very troubled and sore, she was feeling no special practical anxiety about her prospects. She had no misgiving as to the feasibility of the plan she had made, and was in no way surprised when things turned out pretty much in accordance with her own ideas.

Mrs Ward was the matron or superintendent of a small "Home" for governesses. Ella had once in past years, when little more than a child, called at this institution with her aunt to inquire for a young girl temporarily there, in whom Mrs Robertson took an interest. Ella had been struck by Mrs Ward's kindly, capable manner and sensible advice, and the whole incident had been recalled to her memory recently by Fräulein Braune speaking of this very institution as her usual head-quarters when in London. And to go there and apply for a situation as governess in France or

Germany had been the girl's idea.

The winter afternoon was fast closing in, it was dusk, almost dark when the cab containing Ella and her escort drew up at 29 Percival Terrace. As had been agreed between the two during their railway journey, Fräulein Braune got out first, leaving Ella alone to await the result of her interview with Mrs Ward. It had been raining, a cold sleety regular London winter rain. Ella shivered as she gazed out at the sloppy pavement, glistening in the light of an adjacent gas lamp.

"I had no idea London could look so dreary," she thought. Then her fancy pictured the spacious comfortable library at Coombesthorpe as it must be looking at that moment—the fire burning brightly, throwing warm reflections on the crimson carpet and the dull rich bindings of the books, while Madelene made tea at the pretty table with its sparkling silver "equipage," and Colonel St Quentin lay back in his chair talking to her as she did so.

"And," went on Ella to herself, "very likely Sir Philip is there too, unless he has gone off to Ermine again. They are none of them troubling themselves about me—that's plain. But it's better so. I could not stand it—no I could not go back again."

Just then the door of the house opened and Fräulein Braune came out. She smiled at Ella.

"It is all right," she said. "Mrs Ward insists on my staying the night, though I had intended going back at once."

"Oh no, no, that would never have done, dear Fräulein," said Ella, as she sprang out.

Then the governess paid the cabman and they went in.

"What did Mrs Ward say?" asked Ella, when they were in the hall.

"She will tell you herself," Fräulein Braune replied. "I—I thought it right to tell her your name, Ella."

"Of course. I have no intention of concealing it," Ella replied haughtily. "But you made her promise not to write home or anything of that kind, Fräulein? You know I shall do so myself as soon as ever I am settled."

"Yes," said the German lady calmly, as she opened the door of the room where Mrs Ward was waiting for them.

Ella at once stated her wishes. Mrs Ward listened quietly, though now and then a quiet smile lighted up her face.

"You don't think it would be difficult to get a situation such as I should be fit for?" said the young lady in conclusion.

Mrs Ward hesitated.

"No," she said, "I think I might put you in the way of something of the kind. But it would be only a modest beginning, particularly as you want to leave England. You would have no salary at your age, or if any, very little. Your best chance would be a situation *au pair*, as it is called. I have one or two on my books."

"What does that mean?" asked Ella, whose countenance had fallen a little.

"You would have to teach English and in return for that you would have board and lodging and certain facilities for acquiring French or German, or both. I have an application at this moment from a school in Germany of this kind." And she turned to a large ledger on the table.

Ella's face for the first time expressed perplexity and misgiving. "No salary," she said to herself. "Well, after all I have clothes enough to last a good while and the great thing is to get something settled." She turned abruptly to Mrs Ward.

"I will accept that situation," she said. "I am eager to be settled. Can I go at once?"

Fräulein Braune gave an exclamation.

"My dear Miss Ella!" she said.

"Things of this kind are not settled quite so quickly, my dear young lady," said Mrs Ward with a smile. "However I will write about it at once, and you can stay here till I get an answer. But—you in the meantime must get your parents' leave. You are not of age and I could not take the responsibility of sending you away anywhere unauthorised by them."

Ella looked very blank.

"I mean to tell them when I am settled," she said. "I—I did not want to do so before."

"You must think it over," said Mrs Ward. "In the meantime I will write the letter. Now, Fräulein Braune, you know the house. Tea will be ready in a few minutes. Will you take Miss St Quentin up stairs to Number 5: it is the only unoccupied room, and when you hear the bell ring please come down to the dining-room for tea."

Ella followed Fräulein Braune up stairs in silence; she looked grave and perplexed and the kind woman's heart was touched. But she thought it best and wisest to leave the girl to her own reflections. It was not till the next morning, when her friend was about to leave, that anything was said.

"I have been thinking it all over," Ella began.

"I see it is no use trying to keep my plans a secret, and after all it will not make much difference, as I always meant to write home eventually. But I don't want to write myself, just yet. If it is not asking too much, Fräulein, will you be so kind as to see my father or my sister as soon as you go back to Coombe and tell them where I am, what I intend, so that they can write to Mrs Ward and satisfy her? I don't think there will be any difficulty; certainly not with my sister, and my father will probably be so angry, that he won't care what I do. You can see for yourself that they are not anxious about me, or they would have done something."

Fräulein Braune could scarcely gainsay this. She was too experienced not to know that nothing would have been easier than to trace Ella by this time had her friends cared to do so.

"Will you see them for me, dear Fräulein?" Ella repeated.

Fräulein Braune was only too delighted to do so, and to free herself from the responsibility which was very heavy upon her. But to Ella she felt it was wiser not to express her satisfaction too strongly; any approach to "crowing over" the girl might still be fatal in its results.

"Certainly I will see them. I shall go out to Coombesthorpe to-morrow morning. I would go this evening but I fear it will be too late."

"Oh I wouldn't think of going to-night," said Ella, with a little smile. "They are not uneasy. It is for my own sake I ask you to go soon. I am so anxious to have it all settled about this place in Germany." Mrs Ward was well pleased to learn from Fräulein Braune what had been arranged between her and Ella.

"They will never let her go to Germany," said the matron. "It would be almost a scandal—people in such a position as theirs."

Fräulein Braune shook her head.

"I don't know I'm sure," she replied. "It does not seem as if they cared for her. I do not know much of the private relations of the family—Ella is not an indiscreet girl and has not told me more than was necessary. But I do not think they can care for her, and perhaps they will let her go as a sort of punishment."

"Ah, well, we shall see," said Mrs Ward. Her position had brought her in contact with many curious phases of family life.

The day dragged on slowly for Ella. She had nothing to do and for a great part of the time no one to speak to, for of the dozen or so governesses, young or old, at present domiciled in the "Home," a proportion was engaged as daily teachers and the rest were busy running about to see or be seen with a view to finding situations. It was not till the afternoon that Ella, on re-entering the neat chilly-looking drawing-room found a temporary companion. This was a girl of two or three-and-twenty, whose pleasant, sensible face had already struck Ella agreeably. She was knitting busily, but looked up with a smile when the young stranger appeared.

"You must be rather dull, here," she said. "It is all very well when one is busy, but I could not stand it for long if I were not so. It is weeks since I have had a quiet, lazy afternoon."

"Then have you been here long?" Ella inquired. "Some months. I was fortunate in getting a daily engagement which has enabled me to save a little. So now I am going to Switzerland. I have never had a chance of speaking French, but I could not have gone without any money, you see."

"Won't you get a salary then?" said Ella.

The girl shook her head.

"Not the first year, and I'm not sure that I shall want to stay a second. A friend of mine has a girls' school, and if I can speak French well she may be able to find work for me with her."

"But should you like that as well as being abroad?" said Ella, opening her eyes. "I think Switzerland is so charming. I've been there a good deal."

"Ah, yes—travelling or visiting there is charming no doubt. But to be a governess is very different. One has to put up with a good deal in such cases, but of course when it is a question of acquiring the language, one doesn't mind anything, does one?"

"I can't say," replied Ella rather loftily. "I can speak French quite well. I don't care about going abroad on that account."

She rather resented the "rowing in the same boat" tone of her new acquaintance.

"Oh, I thought some one said you were going to Germany—to Wahlbrunn, I know about the place—*au pair*, as they say."

"Perhaps I am," said Ella dryly. Her companion glanced at her half curiously. She could not quite "make her out."

"I wonder you go abroad if you don't care about the language," she said. "You'll have to rough it you may be sure, and I don't fancy you'll like that."

"I dare say not, but that part of it can't be helped," said Ella smiling a little. "But it won't be worse for me than for others."



"I don't know that," the girl replied. "You look as if you had had a nice home and all that kind of thing. I've never had a home; I was an orphan as a baby—that makes a difference."

"My mother died when I was three years old—*that* makes a difference," said Ella. Her companion nodded her head as if to say she "understood," and a picture of a harsh and unloving stepmother turning this pretty young creature out of her home crossed her mind's eye. But she was too delicate-minded to ask any questions, and the conversation drifted off to less personal subjects. The girl was leaving England the next day; Ella never saw her again, but her words had left their impression. It was with a little shiver that lying awake in the middle of the night she recalled them. "Roughing it," what might that not mean? Rough words and looks and tones, as well as more practical physical discomfort—nobody to care about her, whether she were happy or miserable—nobody to love her—"and I have so longed to be loved," thought Ella. "But except poor aunty, and—yes, I believe my godmother does love me, or *did*, she will probably give me up in disgust now—except those two I hardly think any one *has* ever really loved me. Oh, Madelene, if you had only been a *little* loving, I would have turned to you now and—perhaps if I had been able to confide in you I would not have been so easily taken in by *him*, by his manner, which meant nothing when I thought it meant everything. For Madelene was wise—she did warn me; if only she had cared for me a little. But it is too late now. Such as it was, it *was* my home, but I have thrown it away. What would that poor girl think if she could see it? Fancy her never having had any home—"

Ella's pillow was wet with tears the next morning when she woke. She dreaded and yet hoped for a letter—but there was none. Mrs Ward noticed her anxious face.

"There has hardly been time for an answer from Fräulein Braune," she said kindly, though in her heart not sorry that the girl was beginning to realise the full bearing of her rash step. "You would be the better for a little air, I think. Would you not like to go out?"

Ella glanced down the long breakfast-table.

"Is there any one who could go with me, do you think?" she asked timidly. Mrs Ward looked up rather sharply.

"Are you afraid of going out alone?" she said. "You must get used to it, my dear. You will never get on if you are so dependent."

"I am not *afraid*," replied Ella, growing very red as she spoke. "But it is just that I have never had to go out alone."

"Ah, well—perhaps I can get some one to go with you for once. But you know we are all very busy people here."

She spoke to one of the elder ladies, who undertook to accompany Ella. For Mrs Ward felt it right to take special care of the girl in her peculiar position. Yet she knew that it was well for her to have the practical side of the future she had chosen brought home to her. "If her people really care for her," thought Mrs Ward, "they can easily get her to go home again. She is tiring of it already."

But she scarcely understood the character she had to deal with.

Ella went out with Miss Lister, and though the walk was only to a music shop where her companion had to choose a large selection of "pieces" for her pupils, and though the day was so cold and gloomy as to suggest impending fog, the mere fact of being out of doors and walking quickly raised her impressionable spirits again. She was in a decidedly less conciliatory mood than before going out, and it was with a heightened colour and resolutely compressed lips that she received the parlour-maid's announcement that a lady had come to see her, and was waiting in the drawing-room.

"Madelene, no doubt," thought Ella with a rush of curiously mingled feeling, among which considerably to her own surprise she was conscious that there vibrated a thrill of something very like delight.

"Do I care for her, after all?" she thought. But before she had time to answer the question, other sensations followed. Madelene had come to urge her return, Madelene who knew, or at least suspected the root of her bitterest suffering; Madelene who had planned and schemed for Ermine regardless of the poor little half-sister! Ella hardened her heart.

"No," she thought, "I will not go home. No. She may beg and pray me to do so, I will not. Not at least for a long, long time, till I have got accustomed to it all—to Ermine and Philip—or at least till I have learnt to hide what I feel. And when they see how firm I am they will have to give in and let me go to that German place. I don't care what it is or how rough it is if only I can get away."

She looked and felt cool and determined enough, as, after a moment's pause outside the drawing-room door, she turned the handle and entered. Only the two bright red spots on her cheeks betrayed any inward disturbance.

"Madelene," she began at once, before her eyes had taken in any details of the figure that rose from the sofa at the sound of the door opening. But in an instant she stopped, the words on her lips died away as a keen dart of disappointment sped through her.

"No, no, my darling, not Madelene. Only your poor old auntie," and in a moment she was enfolded in Mrs Burton's embrace. "Oh, Ella, my dear, I have been so miserable about you ever since Sir—ever since your sister sent to me! Oh, my child, you see how it has ended. Why did you leave me as you did? All might have been happy and peaceful. Mr Burton's heart is really such a kind one—it is only manner, my dear. You will get to see it is only manner, I can assure you—"

But Ella calmly disengaged herself from Mrs Burton, with an unreasonable feeling of irritation and impatience.

"I thought it was Madelene," she said. "I thought—"

"You were nervous about meeting her, my darling. Of course it was only natural. She has never understood you—that is clear. But it is all going to be happy now; you will see—all's well that ends well, you know Ellie."

"Have they sent you for me? Do they want me to go home?" she exclaimed. "For I—I had reason for what I did—I am not a child. I cannot consent to go back—I—"

"No, no, of course not. How could you wish to go back, where I can see and feel you have been so misunderstood and unhappy? Oh, no, dear, you may make your mind quite easy on that score. You don't think your poor auntie would have come on such an errand—to persuade you to go back to prison again, for prison indeed it must have been. Oh, no, even Madelene saw that—there was no question of your returning there."

No question of her returning there! She had cut the bonds then only too effectually—a sharp, yet chill pain seemed for an instant to take the girl's breath away.

"They don't want me back again, then?" she said. And then without giving her aunt time to speak, she answered her question herself. "No, of course not—how could they? I heard it with my own ears; they wanted to be rid of me."

But the last few words were too low for her aunt to catch.

"How could they indeed, knowing how unhappy they had made you, my darling?" said Mrs Burton. "No, no, / would never have come on such an errand!"

Ella looked up.

"Then did they not send you? How did you know? I don't understand," she said in a dull, bewildered way. "I am tired, I think, aunty, and the not expecting to see you, you know. Please tell me all about it; I will sit here quietly and listen."

"My darling," Mrs Burton repeated, possessing herself of Ella's hand as she spoke. It lay passive in her grasp for a minute or two, but before long the girl managed to draw it away.

"Tell me, aunt, please," she repeated. "I have got out of those petting sort of ways, I suppose," she said to herself. "I wish aunt Phillis wasn't quite so caressing."

---

## Chapter Nineteen.

### "A Marriage is Arranged."

This was what Mrs Burton had to tell. On the evening her niece had left Coombesthorpe she had been startled by a telegram from Madelene, inquiring if Ella were with her, to which of course she was obliged to reply in the negative.

"I was not so *very* frightened as I would have been had I not that very morning got your letter asking me to invite you for a visit. Fortunately Mr Burton was out when the telegram came," she went on, "so I did not need to tell him about it—it is just as well—I don't think he need hear more than that you are coming on a visit—oh, but I am running on without explaining," seeing Ella raise her eyebrows with a look of surprise. "I must tell you that all the next day and the day after, I kept thinking you would walk in, my dear, and when you did not come and there was no letter I began to be really frightened. I was just making up my mind to tell Mr Burton all about it and start for Coombesthorpe when last night to my astonishment there came a message—"

"A telegram?" Ella interrupted.

"No, neither a telegram nor a letter. A message brought by a messenger from your sister Madelene," said Mrs Burton, with a little confusion of manner which did not escape Ella's sharp eyes, "as she could not come herself—"

"And why could she not come herself? If she had really cared—" interrupted Ella with a little choke in her voice.

"And your father so ill! You forget, Ella."

"Papa ill—he was much better?" Ella exclaimed with a little start.

"But he had a sort of attack the evening you left. Did you not know? Oh, no of course, how could you. He had had a good deal to agitate him that day, it appears, and at first they were very much alarmed, but it was more nervousness than anything else, and he is better now, but he won't hear of Madelene leaving him. She must have had rather a time of it, I fancy—what with the fright about you and all. But I dare say it will do her no harm to be shaken out of her apathy a little."

Ella's face had grown very grave. Poor Madelene! Had she been frightened about her—Ella—then, and Ermine away?

"Was it about my—about me that papa was upset, do you think, aunt?" she asked.

"Not only that. Si—the—I understood that Madelene made the best of it to the Colonel," said Mrs Burton, "took the blame upon herself of some misunderstanding. You will tell me all about it of course. The least Madelene could do *was* to blame herself, I should say! And now, darling, that I have explained things, supposing you get ready? I have seen Mrs Ward and settled everything with her."

"But I don't understand in the least," said Ella, "you haven't explained anything, aunt Phillis. What did Madelene's messenger say to you? Had she not seen Fräulein Braune? Do you not know that I am only waiting here for their

consent—a nominal form that Mrs Ward insists on—to my going to Germany as—as a sort of governess?”

Mrs Burton gave a gasp. Yes—she knew it all, but she had been warned to act with the greatest caution and tact and to avoid as much as possible all irritating discussion. And just as she was flattering herself that she had done so, and managed it all so beautifully, here Ella faces round upon her, and nothing has been done or settled at all!

“My dearest child,” she exclaimed, “you cannot seriously think such a step would be allowed? Of course Madelene has seen Fräulein Braune and had a long talk with her. But it *can't* be—your father would not hear of it. And think of the scandal!”

“I can't help that,” said Ella quickly. “Of course people would talk of it—the daughter of a very rich man like my father, going out as a governess, would naturally make people talk. But I will not go back, and so as I won't do what they wish I do not ask for any money—not even the money that when I am of age would be legally mine. I am quite willing to work for myself. I told Madelene, at least I wrote it, that I would give up my share, but I would not stay at home.”

“You wrote that to Madelene about giving up your share,” repeated Mrs Burton with a curious expression in her face, an expression which Ella did not understand.

“Of course I did. What is money without affection?” said Ella, rearing her little head superbly.

Mrs Burton hesitated. They were treading on delicate ground, ground on which she herself had been specially warned to tread with the greatest caution, and she grew nervous.

“My dearest child,” she began after a moment's silence. “I have not said that your father insists on your returning to Coombesthorpe, even though he refuses his consent to your going to Germany. On the contrary he does not want you to go back to them. He seems to think it better not.”

“And Madelene?” asked Ella sharply. “What does *she* wish?”

“Personally, as far as I could make out, she was most anxious for you to go back. She was suffering terribly, so—that may have been exaggerated—at not being able to come herself to you, but she gave in to your father's decision.”

“And what was that?”

“That you should come back to me, darling. It was what you wished yourself when you wrote last week,” said Mrs Burton anxiously.

“Yes, but things have changed since then. I don't want any temporary plan. I want to—to be independent for good. I want *never* to return there, to Coombesthorpe,” said Ella, almost fiercely.

Mrs Burton groaned. What was she to do or say? She had undertaken the mission cheerfully and hopefully, confident in Ella's affection for herself and, judging naturally enough by the letter she had so recently received, without any misgiving but that her niece would be ready and glad to return to her care, once she was assured of a welcome.

“It will be all right, you will see,” she had said to Miss St Quentin's “messenger;” “she would have come straight to me, I know, but for her fears that Mr Burton might not be willing to receive her. And that I can satisfy her about.”

But Ella's unexpected attitude set her quite at fault. She put her hand in her pocket to draw out her handkerchief, for she really felt as if she were going to cry, and with a sudden exclamation of relief she drew it out again, with not her handkerchief but a letter. It was addressed to Ella.

“I am forgetting this,” said Mrs Burton, “perhaps it may have more effect than my words.”

The writing was Madelene's. A slight flush rose to Ella's pale face as she saw it, and without speaking she opened the envelope.

“My dear Ella,” the letter began,—

“I have been completely miserable about you. I would have set off at once in search of you, had it been possible to leave papa. Thanks, to” and here some word was erased, “inquiries I was able to make without raising any gossip, I satisfied myself that you were in safe hands, and Fräulein Braune has now kindly come to see me herself. We *cannot* consent to your going to Germany; all I can do at present is to beg you to go to Mrs Burton's in the meantime. I cannot tell you how unhappy I am that you should have overheard and somehow so terribly misconstrued what I said to Philip in the drawing-room. I do not altogether understand you even now, and I know you do not understand me. I can only pray that some day it may be different. Forgive the pain I have—oh, so unintentionally—caused you. If Ermine were here I would beg her to write instead of me—she would know better what to say, and I think you trust her. I shall know no peace till I hear that you are safe with your aunt. I have been almost overwhelmed these last few days and I scarcely know what I write. Papa is better, and I have not allowed him to blame you. I have made him see it has been my fault. Let me hear you are with Mrs Burton.

“Your affectionate sister,—

“Madelene.”

Ella kept her eyes fixed on the paper for some time after she had read it; she did not want her aunt to see the tears, which rose unbidden and which with a strong effort she repressed again. When she looked up it was with a calm, almost impassive expression.

“I will go back with you, aunt Phillis,” she said. “I do not wish to make an *exposé* of our family affairs by attempting to

defy my father. I will go back with you in the meantime.”

“My darling!” Mrs Burton exclaimed. “I knew you would not be obstinate. And you will see—Mr Burton will be delighted to have you with us. You must feel you are really coming *home*, my own dear child.”

“Poor aunty,” said Ella half affectionately, half patronisingly. But she smiled graciously enough, and Mrs Burton was satisfied.

Ella contrived to say a word or two in private to Mrs Ward before she left. She thanked her for her kindness and added,—

“You must not think I have given up my plan, Mrs Ward. I had to give in in the meantime, but when I am of age, or sooner perhaps, you will probably hear of me again.”

The matron smiled.

“I shall always be pleased to hear of you, Miss St Quentin,” she answered. “But not as wanting to be a governess, I hope. Try to be happy and useful at home. There is no place like it—except in *very* exceptional circumstances. And then there are so many women who must work and find it very difficult to do so. I am always sorry to see their ranks increased unnecessarily.”

Ella seemed rather struck by this remark.

“I had never thought of it that way,” she said. It was not till her aunt and she were ensconced in a comfortable railway carriage by themselves that she ventured upon the question she had been all along burning to ask.

“Aunt Phillis,” she began, “have you nothing more to tell me? Did—did Madelene’s messenger say nothing more?”

“What do you mean, my dear?” said Mrs Burton with manifest uneasiness.

“I am almost sure I know who the messenger was,” Ella went on, “and under the circumstances it was, I think, really kind. But you don’t want to tell me, so I won’t ask. Only—did this mysterious person not tell you any news—anything about Ermine?”

Mrs Burton looked up with evident relief. This was plainly a safe tack.

“About Ermine?” she said with perfect candour; “no, my dear, nothing at all—except—yes, I think—that was said—that she is coming home immediately; she must indeed be home already, I fancy.”

“And that was all?”

“Yes, all, I assure you. What news did you expect?”

“I can’t tell you,” Ella replied. “We shall be hearing it before long no doubt.”

Then she relapsed into silence, and Mrs Burton in her own mind began to put two and two together. Could Ella’s determination to leave her home have anything to do with the handsome young cousin of her sisters’—Madelene’s “messenger,” as the girl had shrewdly surmised? Could it be that he had been playing a double game, and making the poor child believe he cared for her when in reality engaged, or in some tacit way plighted, to one of her sisters? For Mrs Burton had heard some gossip more than once about Sir Philip Cheynes and the Coombesthorpe heiresses. If it were indeed so it would explain all. And yet—it was difficult to believe anything of the kind of the young man.

“He seemed so frank and chivalrous,” thought Ella’s aunt, “and he spoke in such an entirely brotherly way of Madelene and Ermine. And they all seem to have *unshed* to make Ella happy. The keeping from her the true state of affairs about the property was kindly done. And I am sure Sir Philip Cheynes was genuinely concerned and anxious about Ella. He really seemed terribly sorry. I do wish she had never left me; and to think that poor Marcus’s money is all gone, and that there is nothing for her! If I had known it, I would never have married again, never, kind as Mr Burton is! I do hope he and Ella will take to each other, and I think they will, his best comes out to any one in trouble.”

It was very strange to Ella to find herself again—and after the lapse of comparatively speaking so short a time—under her aunt’s roof, or to speak more correctly, under Mr Burton’s. She would have shrunk from meeting the worthy gentleman a short time before, but late events had changed her greatly. She was quiet and gentle enough now, so much so indeed that her aunt and her husband agreed that they would be glad to see a spark or two of her old spirit.

“How you and she used to fight,” Mrs Burton exclaimed half regretfully.

“And now,” her husband added, “she is as quiet and mild as a lamb. I don’t like it, Phillis—no, my dear, I don’t like it. I take blame to myself for having let her leave you, and if there is anything I can do to make up for it, I will do so. She has such pretty, thoughtful ways too. Did you notice how she sees that my paper is always folded ready for me? Her father must be hard to please if he was not satisfied with her.”

It was true. Ella was much softened; her sore heart was grateful for kindness, and she was ashamed to recall her childish petulance and impertinence to her aunt’s husband. But kind as the Burtons were to her, there were often times when she regretted that she had not been allowed to take her own way; for life was dull and dreary to her. She missed the companionship of her sisters, little as she had prized it while with them. Madelene’s gentleness and refinement, Ermine’s merry humour and bright intellect had become more to her than she had in the least realised. “If only, oh, if only they had loved me a little,” she repeated to herself.

Time passed—slowly enough to Ella; at the end of a week she felt as if she had been a month with her aunt; at the end of a fortnight she could have believed a year had gone by since she left Coombesthorpe; before the first month was over the whole of the past year began to seem to her like a strangely mingled dream of pain and pleasure. She wrote to Madelene, gently and regretfully, but vaguely, and Madelene who had been longing for this letter, and building some hopes upon it, felt saddened and discouraged. She handed it to Ermine, who read it carefully.

“Can you understand her?” asked Miss St Quentin.

Ermine knitted her brows.

“Not altogether,” she said. “But, Maddie, I don’t despair yet of things coming right somehow. I suppose,” she added with a little smile, “when one is happy one’s self, it is easier to feel hopeful about other people, even—” but here she hesitated; “even about you and Bernard.”

“Oh, Ermine, do leave that subject alone,” said Madelene.

“Next week I shall write to Ella,” said Ermine, “papa will let me send a message from him I feel sure.”

Ella had been fully four weeks at Mrs Burton’s when Ermine’s letter came. It was a mild day in March, one of the occasional early spring days which are not false to their name; Ella had persuaded her aunt to let her go for a walk by herself, and with many injunctions as to the direction she was to take, and the roads and paths she was not to wander from, Mrs Burton had consented. In spite of herself the fresh, yet soft air, the sensation of “promise” in the birds’ chirpings, and the few all but invisible green specks in the hedges, still more the discovery of a lingering snowdrop or two, and of something not unlike buds here and there among the primrose tufts, gave her a thrill of keen pleasure and invigoration.

“I wish I could go away—quite away, ever so far,” she said to herself. “I should like to make a fresh start and show them all I am not the spoilt, self-willed child they have thought me. I wish they would write and tell me about Ermine’s engagement, it must be openly announced by now. I do wish they would tell me of it, and then I think I would take courage and write to dear godmother. I am afraid she is very angry with me, and no wonder. It must have seemed very unnatural to her that if I was in trouble at home I did not go to her, when she was so sympathising about my thinking Madelene didn’t care for me. But Cheynesacre was the last, the very last place I could have gone to.”

She was crossing the wide breezy downs not far from Mrs Burton’s house on the outskirts of the town. Already the short afternoon was closing in, and the colours in the sky, softened by the wintry haze, announced the approaching sunset. Ella stood still to admire.

“How lovely it would be just now at home,” she thought; the word slipping out half-unconsciously, “I do love the *real* country, and yet when I was there with them I used to fancy I longed for streets and shops. I must have changed—yes, I am sure I have changed. But I am very babyish still. I do feel this afternoon somehow as if I were going to be happy—and yet I don’t know why.”

She hastened on.

“Aunty will be getting frightened,” she thought. And as if in reply to the thought, suddenly just emerging on to the open ground, she caught sight of Mrs Burton’s familiar figure. She was walking quickly, more quickly than usual, for aunt Phillis was stout and short and not very much given to exertion. Ella’s conscience reproached her as she perceived that the good lady was panting for breath and considerably redder in the face than usual.

“Oh, aunty,” she exclaimed, “I’m so sorry. Have I stayed too long?”

For a moment or two Mrs Burton could not get her breath to reply, instead of speaking she held out a letter—it was addressed to Ella in Ermine’s writing.

“I couldn’t wait till you came in. I was so eager to tell you. I felt so excited,” panted the good lady at last. “I am so pleased and I am sure it will bring things round. Madelene has written to me, that is how I know. I do think it very nice of her. And they have—your father and they have invited us to the wedding—Mr Burton and me. It is very gratifying,” and Aunt Phillis beamed with complacency.

Ella had taken the letter in silence. But she had grown deadly pale. It had come then—the blow which she had been vaguely anticipating; which she had—how mistakenly she now saw—come to believe she thoroughly realised, had fallen.

“I knew something was going to happen,” she said to herself; “I felt it coming, and like a fool I fancied it was going to be something happy.”

Her silence startled her aunt. She glanced at her hastily.

“My dear child,” she exclaimed. “You look quite white. How thoughtless of me to startle you so. Don’t be frightened, Ella dearest. It is pleasant—good news, nothing to be distressed about.”

Ella turned to her with what was intended to be a smile, but failed disastrously.

“I—I was only startled,” the poor child said at last, with a painful sort of gasp.

Mrs Burton grew more and more alarmed. She glanced round; there was a bench a few paces off.

"Let us sit down for a minute or two," she said. "It is cold. But you must rest and recover yourself. Read your letter quietly. I won't speak to you till you feel all right again."

She had fortunately some eau de Cologne in her pocket, by the help of which and a few minutes of perfect quiet, Ella mastered her agitation. Then she opened the letter.

She had read but a few lines when a change came over her face, first a look of bewilderment which increased as she read, then a curious, half-fearful questioning appeared in her eyes, to be followed by a flush of eager, yet tremulous joy.

"Aunty," she said breathlessly, "please look at it," and she held out the letter, "am I making some strange mistake? I feel as if I were dreaming. Aunty—let me see your letter—do they tell you too who it is? Is it true—is it not Sir Philip that Ermine is going to marry?"

Mrs Burton glanced at her niece in astonishment, astonishment which soon changed to keen concern and sympathy as she understood Ella's anxiety. She had plenty of good sense and ready wit however.

"Ella shall never know I have discovered her secret," was the thought that flashed through her mind.

"Not Sir Philip," she repeated, "why of course not—I never thought of him for either of your sisters. He has been far too much like a brother to them always."

Her tone was quite matter-of-fact. Ella gave a half shy look at her—it was reassuring.

"Yes," she said, "they have seemed like that, I know, but still—one never knows how things may turn out. Would you like to read my letter, aunty?—and may I see yours? Ermine's is very, very kind."

"Kinder than I deserve," she added to herself. How grievously she had misjudged her sisters, Madelene especially! How suspicious and mean now seemed her fancies that Madelene was plotting to keep her out of Sir Philip's way in order that she might bring about a marriage between him and Ermine! She grew more and more ashamed as she read Madelene's own letter to her aunt, for it was evident that Miss St Quentin's personal feelings were those of the greatest satisfaction; there was not the slightest shadow of regret or disappointment that Ermine's choice should have fallen where it had.

"She could not have written as she does if she had *ever* thought of Sir Philip as I suspected," thought Ella, and she sat, lost in her own reflections till her aunt's voice interrupted her.

"Have you ever seen him, Ella—your future brother-in-law—Mr Guildford West?" asked Mrs Burton.

"N-no—no," Ella replied, "at least I don't remember him. I think—yes, I recollect Madelene's saying once that he was at the Manor ball, but I don't think I knew which he was."

Then her mind reverted to what Madelene had said at different times about Ermine's future, and she felt startled again to think how she had misinterpreted every allusion of the kind. Yet there was still something she could not altogether understand—why had Madelene spoken of her as such a care and burden, adding to the existing "complications?"

"No," thought Ella, "I can't quite make it out. But I will never mistrust Madelene again—it is the least I can do to trust her now after having so shamefully misjudged her. Some day perhaps, if she and I are ever together again—some day she will explain things perhaps and till then I can only ask her pardon in my heart."

She was very pale and there were tears in her eyes as she roused herself to take part in her aunt's eager speculations and comments on the interesting piece of news.

"It is so nice of Madelene to say they will hope to see *us* at the wedding. I hope Mr Burton will go; he is rather shy, you see, Ella, having been so long a bachelor, and that makes him seem gruff till people get to know him. But we *must* get him to go—it will be charming to see you as bridesmaid. I *am* so pleased about it altogether. And your father is pleased—it will do him good. Mr West must be very nice in every way," she went on, "not very rich, I suppose, but with Ermine's fortune that was not necessary."

Ella turned to her with a little surprise.

"Will Ermine have much while papa lives?" she asked. "I have never heard much about it, but papa never speaks as if he were very rich."

Mrs Burton fidgeted a little.

"Oh—Ermine will have a very handsome income," she said evasively. "But I dare say they will explain things themselves to you, now you are really grown-up. I consider it a *very* good marriage for Mr West too."

And Ella's girlish mind gave no more thought to this part of the matter. Pounds, shillings, and pence were such very unimportant considerations in her eyes.

---

## Chapter Twenty.

### "Having It Out."

The primroses were over—the paler hues of spring were giving place to the richer and fuller beauty of early summer when Ella found herself once more at Coombesthorpe. It was the day before that of Ermine's marriage when she arrived there with Mr and Mrs Burton. It had been proposed that she should precede her aunt, but she shrank from doing so, and with real kindness and tact, her sisters had refrained from pressing the matter.

"She must feel uncomfortable, poor little thing," said Ermine, "and it will be easier for her if she only arrives when there are a good many other people here."

"And naturally she feels that any sort of 'explanations' would be ill-timed just now when we have so much to think of," agreed Madelene. "Nothing could be sweeter or gentler than her letters. Ermine, what *can* have come over the child? I cannot yet understand her strange bitterness—for after all, what she overheard could have been simply explained. It will have to be explained sooner or later—about money matters I mean, and papa's exaggerated way of looking at it. Ermine—I fear it was a mistake not to tell her the whole at first. Do you remember the day she came, just when we had been talking it all over with Philip? Not a year ago yet."

"If nobody ever did wrong and nobody ever made mistakes, this world would not be this world any more, and I'm not at all sure but that it would—with our present feelings—be a very dull place indeed," said Ermine, philosophically. "Keep up your spirits, Maddie. I should not be half as cheerful as I am about leaving you if I had not great faith in some, at least, of my pet schemes ending well after all." Madelene said nothing for a minute or two.

"If—if you are still thinking about *Philip* and Ella, you are only preparing fresh disappointment for yourself," she said. "He never mentions her scarcely; he seems to have forgotten all about her."

"It did not look as if he were indifferent that day that you were so horribly frightened about her—the day she ran off I mean," Ermine replied.

"No," Madelene allowed. "That day I did think—He was fearfully upset. But it may have been principally on our account. I shall never forget how he looked when I sent over in my desperation to fetch him back from Cheynesacre—he was almost *rough* to me—fancy, Ermine! But I did not mind—I was so frightened myself. And he was so clever and sensible about it. He found out so wonderfully quickly that she was safe with Fräulein Braune."

"And he managed Mrs Burton very well too," said Ermine.

"Don't forget our promise never to tell it was he who went to see her," said Madelene, quickly.

"Ella shall certainly not hear it from us," said Ermine, "but I doubt Mrs Burton's capacity for keeping a secret."

"I hope she has not told it," said Madelene; "I could not bear poor Ella to be misled into thinking Philip cares for her—I did my best to warn her, but I doubt if it did any good."

"Except to make her angry with you," said Ermine. "That is usually the fate of the warner in such cases."

"And perhaps it put the idea more in her head than it was," added Madelene, regretfully. "They say, Ermine, that Philip is a great deal at the Belvoirs' now, and Leonora is certainly a very nice girl."

"Rubbish," said Ermine. "He has known Leonora Belvoir since she was a baby, and seen her constantly. And she is not *half* as pretty, as Ella. If only Ella had come back sooner, I think I could have got Guildford to find out about it," she added meditatively. "I suppose you couldn't get Bernard to do so?"

Madelene grew crimson.

"Ermine, how can you be so thoughtless?" she exclaimed. "It is really unkind of you. I hope most earnestly, as you know, that Captain Omar will not come. Philip knows I do not want him to come."

But Ermine said no more.

The day of the marriage was bright and sunny. When Ella woke up, and saw from her window the familiar scene in all its summer beauty, she shut her eyes for a moment, while a sort of fantastic wish went through her that the last few months might prove to be only a dream, that she had only now arrived for the first time at her home, and that all happy possibilities lay before her. She was again in her old "nursery"—she had begged that it might be so, though the rooms her sisters had originally intended for her were long ago ready.

"Oh, dear, if I could but go back again, how different I would be," she thought. "How is it? Madelene and Ermine seem so different now—it is as if scales had fallen from my eyes. I wonder," she went on, "I wonder if I had never remembered that silly old fancy about being like Cinderella—I wonder if Harvey had never put it into my head, if things would have turned out better? How sad it seems that bad or foolish things should stick to us like burrs all through the years, and that good and wise and useful things should be so quickly forgotten!"

She roused herself before long however; there was plenty for her to do this wedding-day. She was full of the wish to be of all the help and support she possibly could be to Madelene. For calm and quiet as Miss St Quentin appeared, Ella well knew that the parting with her sister, her "other self," for such indeed Ermine had been to her, was no light matter, no slight wrench. And this reflection bore good fruit with the youngest sister.

"I will never call Madelene cold or heartless again," she thought. "I *know* how she loves Ermine, and yet she is quietly smiling and calm—a stranger might say she did not mind it at all."

It was still the old-fashioned days of early morning marriages: most of the guests were to assemble at the house, for the distance thence to the church was very short. Ella had not as yet seen anything of her godmother, for the

evening before, with the exception of aunt Phillis and her husband, Colonel St Quentin and his children had spent alone—and the thought of the meeting with Lady Cheynes lay rather heavily on the girl's mind. But like many anticipated evils it turned out quite differently from her fears.

"Run down to the fernery, Ella," said Madelene, as they were giving the last touches to the bride, "and bring me one or two more sprays of maidenhair. No, Ermine, I'm not putting too much green. It needs just a tiny bit more."

Off ran Ella, but half-way down stairs, at a sudden turn she came full tilt against Lady Cheynes, slowly mounting to Ermine's room.

"Oh, dear—I beg your pardon," Ella began. Then in a different voice, "Oh! godmother, dear godmother, is it you!"

She half threw her arms round the old lady's neck, then drew back in affright.

"Oh, godmother, dear, will you kiss me? Will you forgive me?" she cried. "I'm afraid you've been very, very vexed with me, but I *didn't* mean to do wrong—it—it was all a mistake somehow."

Her voice faltered as if she were going to cry; in an instant Lady Cheynes was kissing her.

"My darling," she said, "my poor little silly child. No, no—I was more grieved than vexed, dear, but perhaps I understand you as well as, or better than you understand yourself. But don't cry, my little Ella. It would never do to have tears to-day."

"I *won't*, godmother, I won't cry," said Ella, choking back the tears bravely, "it is only," she went on, "that you are—you are all so *very* good to me."

"Well, well—we must have a good talk when all this bustle is over. I am going up to see Ermine; shall I be admitted?"

"Oh, dear, yes," said Ella, "she is almost ready. But I must be quick—I was running down to the conservatory for some fern."

She ran off again, meeting no one till she had chosen and cut the sprays of maidenhair. Then as she turned to leave the fernery, by way of the drawing-room, she heard voices there. Two or three persons had entered while she was busy about the maidenhair. And one of the voices was that of Sir Philip Cheynes. Ella hesitated; her heart beat fast, she felt for a moment or two as if she could not face him composedly; and at that juncture she would have given years of her life rather than let him perceive any traces of nervousness or agitation. Yet stay where she was for more than a minute she could not.

"I am not going to play eavesdropper again. What an unlucky place this fernery seems for me."

She could not avoid overhearing a little—the end of a conversation between Sir Philip and another man, as they came strolling towards the spot where she stood.

"It is awfully good of you, Phil, to take such an interest in it—but—no I am not sanguine. If the obstacles are to some extent imaginary, they are, with an almost morbidly conscientious mind like hers, all the more difficult to combat. And this recent affair has done great harm; she *will* take all the blame of it to herself."

"Yes," came Philip's voice in reply, "I know. But don't lose heart, my dear fellow. You can't—Why, *Ella!*" with a sharp exclamation, "is it—is it really you?"

Ella's lips were trembling, but she made a tremendous effort. And the sudden perception that Sir Philip was quite as nervous, or considerably more so than herself helped in a marvellous way to calm her.

"I was cutting some maidenhair for Ermine," she began. "I—there was no one in the drawing-room when I passed through."

"It is certainly a curious coincidence," said Sir Philip. "I—I wish—I hate this place—one never knows who may or may not be here," he added vehemently.

Ella grew cold as ice.

"If you mean that I have been listening, a *second* time," she said with frigid haughtiness, "you are mistaken. I only heard the last few words you and this gentleman were saying, and that I could *not* help."

The gentleman in question came forward; he smiled slightly as he caught sight of Ella, but there was a half quizzical look on his face which did not tend to smooth her ruffled plumage.

"I am afraid—I hope we have not been trespassing?" he began, looking rather puzzled. "We should not have come so early, perhaps, Cheynes?"

"Oh no," said Ella sweetly, with a complete change of tone, as she turned to the stranger, "of course it was quite right for—but—are you Mr West?" she exclaimed suddenly, as the idea struck her.

The tall, dark man before her bowed formally.

"I have not the honour of being Mr West," he said. "I am only—"

"You have met before," Philip interrupted. "Ella, don't you remember Captain Omar—Bernard Omar?"



Ella in her turn looked perplexed.

"I remember the name—I have often heard it," she said: "But I don't remember ever seeing *you*, the bearer of it, before."

She pointedly addressed the stranger, and she seemed to take a perverse pleasure in looking her sweetest and speaking in her softest tones. Sir Philip bit his lip and turned away.

"I'll have it out with her," he muttered.

Captain Omar smiled again, more thoroughly this time; he had very white teeth, and very blue eyes, though his hair was dark and his complexion bronzed. And as his eyes smiled as well as his lips, the effect was very pleasant.

"I cannot expect you to remember," he said. "But I do—the last summer you spent here, as a baby almost—before you went to live with your aunt—that summer I spent my holidays here—at Cheynesacre, that is to say. That was in the days when Cheynes was 'big Phil,' and ran races with a certain little lady perched on his shoulders."

Ella grew crimson—but she would not seem annoyed by anything Captain Omar said.

"Yes," she replied—her calm tone belying her face, "what absurd creatures children are. But I was really only a baby then. No, I don't remember you, Captain Omar, but I am very pleased to make your acquaintance."

She held out her hand graciously—Bernard took it deferentially, as if he appreciated the honour. Ella had not shaken hands with Philip.

"I must be quick," she said, "my sisters will think I have forgotten what I was sent for," and with a smile and nod to Captain Omar she flew off.

"What a lovely girl she has become," said he enthusiastically.

Sir Philip gave a sort of grunt.

"You think so?" he said. "Well, yes—she is very much admired."

"She will marry soon, I should think," said Captain Omar.

Sir Philip said nothing.

"She has no fortune," he remarked dryly after a minute or two's silence.

Captain Omar gave a slightly bitter laugh.

"Upon my word I think that fact is not likely to be an obstacle. If—if Madelene had had no fortune you don't suppose things would have been as they are for me? I wouldn't have allowed it in that case."

Sir Philip hesitated.

"It's not so much her being *rich*, as her having this place—and all the responsibilities it brings, and the complication of her father and his peculiar position, and—and latterly the addition of Ella and the care of her future."

"But Ella will marry—that's to say she's sure to have opportunities of doing so, if Madelene doesn't shut her up," said Captain Omar impatiently. "Now that I have seen Ella, I understand all these new difficulties less and less. Yet, surely," and he turned to Philip with a sort of anguish in his eyes, "don't think me a brute, Cheynes, for saying it—you have known the whole story all through—it can't be that she has left off caring for me, and that she puts it on these pretexts, and—"

"No, no," Sir Philip interrupted, "don't get anything of that kind into your head, Omar. I'm perfectly certain that Madelene is as true as steel, and—if things were to disentangle themselves a little, if she was quite happy and satisfied about Ella's future and saw her way to marrying you without any fear of conflicting duties, I'm sure it would be all right. Don't lose heart just yet, my good fellow."

"There's not much time left for keeping up my heart in," the other replied. "My leave's over next month, Cheynes."

But Sir Philip had no time to say more, for just then some other wedding guests made their appearance in the drawing-room.

It was not till late that afternoon that Sir Philip had an opportunity of putting into practice his doughty resolve of "having it out" with little Ella. All had "gone off," as the saying is, to perfection; the bride and bridegroom had driven away, most of the "assistants" had thoughtfully taken their departure and Madelene, poor Madelene, had ventured to shut herself up for an hour or two like the bride's sister in the old song. She had some reason for tears, though scarcely as much as she made herself believe, but Ella in her new-born sympathy with her eldest sister, was almost inclined to exaggerate Madelene's troubles, and ready to fly out like a little turkey-cock at any one who should venture to think lightly of them.

With the object of securing some quiet for Miss St Quentin, Ella had cleverly decoyed away the few younger guests who were remaining till the next day, out to the tennis-court, where, with Mrs Burton as chaperon, some sets were quickly arranged. But Ella herself hated tennis, she was glad to find she was not required to play, and seeing everybody apparently happily engaged, she strolled off a little way among the shrubberies by herself. A rustic bench in a shady corner tempted her; she sat down, gazing before her vaguely. She felt tired and strange, and the

remembrance of the *contretemps* in the unlucky fernery that morning did not tend to soothe or calm her feelings.

"I wonder what they are going to settle about me," she said to herself. "I—I should like to stay here if I could be any good to Madelene, but it doesn't look as if that could be. And for some things I would like to go away and never come back again. I should like never to see Philip Cheynes again."

A wish not to be fulfilled, for at that moment a quick step along the path made her look up, Philip stood before her. Ella's eyes fell, and she grew red as she congratulated herself that her last words had not been spoken aloud. But she quickly looked up again, with a sort of cold inquiry in her face.

Philip smiled slightly as he caught her expression.

"Yes," he said, "I knew you would be vexed at my following you. I kept out of the tennis on purpose. I must speak to you, Ella. I want to know what is the matter. Why did you behave so—uncivilly to me this morning—and before Omar, too?"

"I had overheard a little of what you were saying," said Ella haughtily. "It was much the same sort of thing as—as that other time."

Sir Philip muttered something between his teeth which Ella could not catch. Then suddenly to her surprise his tone changed; he turned to her with a smile.

"Are you glad Ermine is married?" he said. "Don't you like West?"

Ella hesitated.

"I like what I have seen of him," she replied. "He is not good-looking though; he is small and rather insignificant."

"Not like Omar?"

"No," she agreed, "not nearly as handsome as Captain Omar." Then with a sudden impulse, "Sir Philip," she said, "won't you explain to me—*why* won't Madelene marry Captain Omar? Why am I made a—a burden and a difficulty of? I would do anything; I have been so unhappy. I know I have misjudged Madelene in some ways, but I don't now. I do want to—to be good and nice, and—and—"

But the rest of her confidences were lost; her voice broke, and Philip knew that she was crying.

"Ella," he exclaimed, "Ella, darling, I can't bear to see you like that. Have we all been very cruel to you, somehow? I feel as if we had. I feel as if I had, and yet—and yet—I would do anything—I would give my life to make you happy."

Ella's sobs ceased. She glanced up at Philip with a curious mingling of expressions on her face.

"Sir Philip," she said quietly, "I am not a child. You shouldn't speak to me quite—quite like that, though I know you mean it kindly."

"Kindly!" he repeated hotly. "Ella—you know it isn't that. I dare say I'm a fool—you will probably only laugh at me, but I have waited and I don't think it has done any good. Granny said you were too young, and that it wasn't fair upon you till you had seen more of the world, but things have gone wrong quite enough. I won't risk it any more. Ella—do you, no, *could* you ever get to care for me?"

Ella's eyes filled with soft tears again.

"Sir Philip, do you really mean it? Is it not only that you are sorry for me? I—you are very kind—but I couldn't bear for you only to be sorry for me!"

"My darling—what a way to put it! Sorry for you—my princess! No indeed! I shall be sorry for myself, if—but it's not going to be that. Ella, you will try to care for me, won't you?"

"I don't need to try," she answered gently. "It wouldn't be worthy of you if any *trying* were needed. Oh, Philip—if you are sure you mean it—I have been so unhappy. I was so ashamed of—of caring for you—"

"Ashamed," Philip interrupted.

"Yes—for I thought you cared for—I thought at least you were going to marry—Ermine. That was how I misjudged Madelene. That was the *great* reason why I went away."

Philip's face cleared; a good many mists were dispersed by these words of Ella's.

"But when you *knew* that wasn't true—up to this morning even, why were you so strange and cold to me?" he asked.

"Because there was something you said about my being an obstacle or a difficulty—and of course I had no reason to think you cared for *me*, even if you did not for Ermine. Philip," with a sudden thought, "if this is to be—you and me, I mean—will it make it easier for Madelene to marry Captain Omar?"

Philip nodded.

"She will think so, I have no doubt. Though really and truly there was nothing to prevent it. But your father since his losses has got morbid about your future, and Madelene has got morbid too in another way; self-sacrifice seemed the readiest means of cutting the knot, and so she has persuaded herself that it was her duty. But now—"

He had drawn Ella's pretty head close till it all but rested on his shoulder, suddenly she drew herself away and faced him with anxious eyes and tremulous mouth.

"Morbid about my future! How do you mean?" she exclaimed.

"What a fool I am," Philip replied. "I forgot you didn't understand. It was only, darling, that the money that should have been for *you*—Madelene and Ermine having very large fortunes from their mother—was lost several years ago. And there might have been difficulties, once your sisters were married and all that, in the way of their making any *certain* provision for you, so—"

"So Madelene would have sacrificed herself for *me*?" Ella interrupted.

"In a sense, yes, I suppose I must say so. But also for the sake of your father's peace of mind, and the fear of not being free to do her duty as a wife. She has mounted it all up most ingeniously. But now—Maddie will be *so* glad, Ella."

Ella's face was turned away however. Sir Philip grew uneasy.

"Ella," he repeated, and with gentle force he turned her head, so that she had to look at him. She was crying.

Philip changed his tone.

"Ella," he said gravely, "I don't think this is fair upon me. Any one to see you, as you are now, would not believe that you were happy in what you have just promised. Are you regretting it already?—if so—"

Ella melted at once.

"Oh, no, no! You know it is not that," she said. "How *could* I? I have only just told you how I care for you. I care for you *dreadfully*, Philip. But it is just that that makes me so unhappy—so frightened that it is only, or mostly that you pity me. I never dreamt that I was poor. I wish, I do wish they had told me."

"It was done with the best and purest motives," Sir Philip answered quietly. "But, Ella, how can you say such things? The very breath of them spoils it all—all our pretty romance. Why, my darling, if you had been a great heiress like your sisters it would have lost all its charm; you would not have been what you are—my fairy princess, my Cinderella!"

And Ella looked up smiling again among her tears.

"Let us go and tell them all," she said. "Madelene and my father. And oh, Philip, dear godmother! It was she after all—a great deal certainly was her doing. For if we hadn't met first as we did, perhaps—who knows?—perhaps you would never have taken such a fancy to me?"

"Who knows?" said Philip teasingly. "There is one thing I must get out of granny, Ella. I shall insist on your being married in those little old slippers."

---

The End.

---

[Chapter 1](#) | [Chapter 2](#) | [Chapter 3](#) | [Chapter 4](#) | [Chapter 5](#) | [Chapter 6](#) | [Chapter 7](#) | [Chapter 8](#) | [Chapter 9](#) | [Chapter 10](#) | [Chapter 11](#) | [Chapter 12](#) | [Chapter 13](#) | [Chapter 14](#) | [Chapter 15](#) | [Chapter 16](#) | [Chapter 17](#) | [Chapter 18](#) | [Chapter 19](#) | [Chapter 20](#) |

---

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE THIRD MISS ST QUENTIN \*\*\*

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE  
THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE  
PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase "Project Gutenberg"), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at

## Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org). If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website ([www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project

Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."
- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS', WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

## **Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™**

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org).

### **Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation**

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at [www.gutenberg.org/contact](http://www.gutenberg.org/contact)

### **Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation**

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit [www.gutenberg.org/donate](http://www.gutenberg.org/donate).

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: [www.gutenberg.org/donate](http://www.gutenberg.org/donate)

### **Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works**

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org).

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.