

The Project Gutenberg eBook of Silverthorns, by Mrs. Molesworth

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SILVERTHORNS ***

Mrs Molesworth

"Silverthorns"

Chapter One.

Charlotte and Jerry.

The school-room at Number 19, Norfolk Terrace, was not, it must be confessed, a particularly attractive room. To begin with, it looked out upon the little garden at the back of the house, and this same little garden was not much to look out upon. The modest, old-fashioned name of "green" would have suited it better. Some of the gardens of the neighbouring houses were really pretty and well cared for, but Mrs Waldron had long ago decided that to attempt making of "our garden" anything but a playground while the boys were still "such mere boys," so irrepressibly full of high spirits and mischief, would be but to add another and unnecessary care to the long list of household matters which she found already quite as much as she could manage. So the garden remained the green, and the school-room the plain, rather untidy-looking room it had always been. It was not really untidy—a radical foundation of order and arrangement was insisted upon. But any room which is the ordinary resort of four boys and a girl, not to speak of occasional inroads from two "nursery children," cannot be expected to look as if no one lived in it.

"We are invisibly tidy," the Waldron boys used to say with a certain pride. "We do know where our things are, and the cupboards and drawers are really not messy at all. But of course we can't rig boats, and oil skates, and paint, and carve, and all that, without the room showing it. Not to speak of Ted's stamp-album, and Arthur's autographs, and *all*, our lessons at night."

"Yes, that's all very fine," Charlotte would reply. "But if it wasn't for Jerry and me I wonder how long you *would* all know where your things were, and how long the cupboards and drawers would pass mamma's inspections!"

Whereupon would ensue a series of "Of course, dear Charlotte" cries, and "You are awfully good, we know" cries—for the three elder boys knew that it would be a very bad look-out indeed for them if their sister were to relax in her constant efforts in their behalf.

"And really if it weren't for Jerry, I don't think I *could* keep on tidying for them so," Charlotte would sometimes say. Jerry was the youngest of the four big boys, in the middle of whom came Charlotte. He was lame, poor fellow, and as a small child he had been very delicate. That happily to a great extent was past now, but the gentleness and quickness of perception which often accompany delicate health had remained. Jerry was as good as a sister any day, Charlotte used to declare, and yet not the least "soft" either; considering his lameness it was wonderful what Jerry could do.

There were two tiny sisters up in the nursery, babies that hardly counted as yet in the restless, busy group of older ones. But they added their share, no doubt, to all that had to be done and thought of, though Charlotte often looked forward with prospective envy to the pleasant life that would be theirs when they came to her age.

"You are pretty sure to be out in the world by then, Jerry," she said to him one day, "and I, if I am not married, shall be quite an old maid—a sort of second mother to Amy and Marion. Think how nice and quiet and regular the house will be! I do think a large family is dreadful."

"But mamma says we don't know how dull it is to be an only child like she was," Jerry objected.

"As she was—do talk grammar," said Charlotte. "I don't care—I should have liked to be an only child—or perhaps to have had just one brother like you, Jerry. Just *think* what a nice life we would have had! But I mustn't talk any more. I *must* copy out my literature notes. When I have finished them, Jerry, I will tell you something if you remind me."

The two had the school-room to themselves for once, which was the more remarkable as it was Saturday afternoon,

and not a summer Saturday afternoon, nor yet a mid-winter frosty day, when Arthur, Ted, and Noble would have been safe to be off skating. It was a late September afternoon, dull and gloomy and already chilly. The rain had held off, however, fortunately, for the elder boys had for some days been planning a long country walk, to finish up with tea at the house of a schoolfellow, who lived a couple of miles out of the town.

"What a dreary day it is!" Charlotte began again, looking up from her notes. "I wish we might have a fire," and she shivered a little.

"I dare say we might," said Jerry, starting up. "Shall I ask mamma?"

"No," Charlotte decided. "We shall be in the drawing-room all the evening. I've nearly done. I know mamma is glad not to give the servants anything extra to do on Saturdays. And they haven't got into the way of regular winter fires yet. I wonder if it isn't any brighter out in the country to-day than it is here."

"Hardly, I should say," Jerry answered, as he glanced out of the window. "Still it would be *nicer* than here. I wish we had a pony-carriage, Charlotte—think what jolly drives we might have. Those woods out Gretham way where the boys have gone must be nice even to-day," and Jerry gave a little sigh. He could not walk far, and Wortherham, though not a very large town, was partly a manufacturing one, and large enough therefore to be somewhat grim and smoky, and to make one long for the freshness and clearness of country air.

"I wish you would not say that," said Charlotte, giving herself a little shake. "It makes me feel as if everything was all wrong for you not to have all you want, Jerry."

"Nobody has, I suppose," said the boy.

"I don't know about that," Charlotte replied. "But that reminds me. Jerry, you know that beautiful place out beyond Gretham. The place papa drove us out to once—he had some business there, I think."

"Silverthorns?" said Jerry. "Oh yes, I remember it. It is the prettiest place in the world, I think."

"So do I," agreed Charlotte with conviction. "Well, do you know, Jerry, the lady it belongs to—Lady Mildred something—I forget her last name—came the other day to see Miss Lloyd. I didn't see her, but the French teacher told us. She came to settle about a girl coming to Miss Lloyd's for classes, the way we all do, only I don't know if she's to come every day. Miss Lloyd was awfully pleased, I believe, for Lady Mildred said she had heard the teaching so highly spoken of, and that she wouldn't have sent the girl to a regular *school*. You know Miss Lloyd prides herself on hers not being a school, and it is true, everybody agrees, that we are thoroughly well taught."

"And who is the girl?" asked Jerry.

"I don't know her name, but she's Lady Mildred's niece. And somebody—oh yes, it was the Lewises, the doctor's daughters—said that Lady Mildred has adopted her, so that she is a tremendous heiress. And besides this she's exceedingly pretty and charming. Dr Lewis saw her one day that he went to see Lady Mildred, and he quite raved about her, the girls said. Just fancy, Jerry, young—just about sixteen, and so pretty and so rich and so *grand*—can you believe *she* hasn't got all she wants!"

"I don't know," Jerry replied philosophically. "You'd better ask her. Perhaps she's an orphan," he added.

"Ah, well, perhaps she is. That would be sad, of course; but if her father and mother died, as very likely they did, when she was quite little—a baby perhaps, and she can't remember them, that would be different. And very likely Lady Mildred is just like a mother to her. Jerry, I *wish* she weren't coming to our classes. I wouldn't say so to any one else, but I have a presentiment I shall *hate* her."

"Charlotte!" Jerry ejaculated, surprised and even a little shocked.

But Charlotte's face half-belied her words. She was already laughing a little, though she reddened too, slightly, as she felt her brother's soft blue eyes fixed upon her.

"I shouldn't say it, I know," she said, shaking back the thick dark hair that she still wore loose on her shoulders. "But you might understand. We are all very comfortable at Miss Lloyd's, and I don't want any one to come and spoil it—an outsider, as it were, for the rest of us have been there so long, and she is too old to be in any but the highest class."

"Unless she's very stupid for her age," suggested Jerry. "Very likely she is—perhaps that's the thing she hasn't got, Charlotte. Cleverness, I mean. And I'm sure," he went on with brotherly frankness, "you wouldn't give up being clever for the sake of being pretty—now, would you?"

Charlotte laughed.

"Surely I'm not so ugly as all that," she said. "Do you really think I am, Jerry?"

She lifted her face and looked across the table at the boy. Ugly she certainly was not, but though her features were good, her complexion was some degrees browner than "by rights" it should have been to match the very blue eyes common to all the Waldrons. And her hair was short as well as thick and curly, and in consequence rather unmanageable. But it was a bright and kindly and pleasant face, and Jerry felt vaguely as he looked at it that there were things, even in faces, better than strict beauty.

"I don't know," he said bluntly. "Your face is you, and so I like it. I don't want it changed, except that in a bit, I suppose, you'll have to do your hair up somehow."

"Yes, I suppose I shall," replied Charlotte, glancing sideways and somewhat ruefully at the dark brown curly locks in question; "but how I shall do it, I'm sure I can't tell. I wonder if I should begin to try soon. I think I'll ask mamma. I wonder how she did hers when she was my age—but hers could never have been difficult to do. It's so beautifully soft and never gets in a mess."

"No—I couldn't fancy anything to do with mamma in a mess," said Jerry. "You'll never be anything like as pretty as her, Charlotte."

"You don't suppose I ever thought I should, you stupid boy," retorted his sister indignantly. "I notice that people generally like to make out that children never are as pretty or as good or as something as their parents, and very often I dare say it's rubbish. But in *our* case any one with half an eye can see how lovely mamma is. I doubt if even Marion will be anything to compare with her, though she is a very pretty little girl."

Jerry grunted approval and agreement. He had got to a very delicate point in his occupation, which was that of taking out some stamps which Ted in a hurry had gummed into a wrong place in his album. All such difficult operations, settings right of other people's puttings wrong, were sure to fall to Jerry—his thin dexterous fingers seemed to have a genius for work that baffled every one else. Charlotte went on with her writing, and for a few minutes there was silence in the room.

Suddenly she looked up again.

"Jerry," she said, "I'm so glad you think that that girl is sure to be stupid."

"Wait a minute," said Jerry, whose mouth was again screwed up in absorbed anxiety. "There now," he exclaimed, "I've got it off without the least scrap tearing. I'm sure Ted should be very much obliged to me. What were you saying, Charlotte? I never said I was sure—only that *perhaps* she would be."

"No, no, you said more than that. If you didn't say you were sure, you said 'very likely.' That's more than 'perhaps,'" persisted Charlotte. "Well, I *hope* she is, for then I may be able to like her. If not—but I really think she *must* be, if not stupid, at least not clever. It wouldn't be fair for her to have everything," she went on, reverting to the old grievance. "Nobody has, people say."

But Jerry's sympathy on the subject was rather exhausted.

"I wish you'd leave off thinking about her," he said. "You'll work yourself up to fancying all sorts of things, and making yourself dislike a person that perhaps you'll never see. Possibly she won't come after all."

Charlotte sighed.

"I dare say you're right," she said. "It's only that I tell you everything, you see, Jerry."

"Hadn't you better tell mamma about it?" he said. "She generally finds out what gives one wrong sorts of feelings. She's put me to rights lots of times when I'd got horrid about—" and he hesitated.

"About what, Jerry dear?"

In his turn Jerry's face flushed.

"About being lame," he said. "You know we did hope for a good while that it was going to get almost quite well, so that it would hardly be noticed. But there's no chance of that now. I shall always be pretty much the same. And it did make me feel as if everything was wrong for a while."

"Dear Jerry," said Charlotte. "And you are so good about it. Nobody would know you minded."

"It's a good deal with getting into the way of not thinking about it," said Jerry. "It's no use trying not to think of a thing unless you put something else into your head to fill up the place. The trying not *is* thinking of it, you see. But mamma taught me what a good plan it was, when I found I was going on thinking of a trouble that *had* to be, to look out for some trouble that didn't *need* to be, and to try to put it right. And you wouldn't believe, unless you get in the way of it, what lots of those there are that you can at least *help* to put right."

Charlotte looked a good deal impressed. It was not often that Jerry said so much.

"Yes," she agreed, "I can fancy it would be a very good plan. But, you see, Jerry, I've very seldom had anything that it was better not to think of. Perhaps it is that my head has been so full of lessons, and the lots of things that are nice to think of."

"Well," said Jerry, "you can go on keeping your head full of sensible things instead of fussing about a stupid girl you've never seen!"

His calm philosophy made Charlotte laugh.

"I'm sure I don't want to think about her," she said, as she jumped up and began to put away her books. "What are you going to do now, Jerry? I'm sure you've been long enough over Arthur's stamps. When one has a holiday, I think one should have some of it at least to oneself."

"Will you play with me, then?" said Jerry. "I really like that better than anything, only it isn't much fun for you."

For Jerry was doing his best to learn the violin. He really loved music, and had already mastered the first difficulties,

though his teaching had been but some irregular lessons from a friend who had also lent him his fiddle. And Charlotte, who played the piano well, though with less natural taste for music than her brother, could not please him better than by accompanying him. It called for some patience, no doubt, but harder things would have seemed easy to the girl for Jerry's sake. So the two spent the rest of the dull autumn afternoon happily and contentedly, though the old school-room piano had long ago seen its best days, and the sounds that Jerry extracted from his violin were not always those of the most harmonious sweetness.

At six o'clock Charlotte started up.

"There is the first dinner-bell," she said. "We must get dressed at once, Jerry. There is to be no school-room tea to-night, for mamma said it wasn't worth while, as Noble was out. You and I are to dine with her and papa, and dinner is to be half-an-hour earlier than usual."

"Where are the boys?" asked Mr Waldron, putting his head in at the door at that moment.

"All out, papa, except me," Jerry replied.

"And we two are to dine with you and mamma instead of Arthur and Ted," added Charlotte.

"All right, my dear, but don't keep us waiting. I have to go out immediately after dinner," her father replied.

"How tiresome it must be for papa to be sent for like that!" said Charlotte. "I think a lawyer—at least a lawyer in a little town like Wortherham—is almost as badly off as a doctor. I suppose some old gentleman fancies he's going to die, and has sent for papa to make his will."

"Very likely nothing half so important," Jerry replied.

"I wish Arthur or Ted were back," said Mr Waldron at dinner. "One of them might have driven me out to—" but before he said more, Jerry interrupted him.

"Papa, mightn't I?" he exclaimed. "I really can drive—at least I am sure I could drive old Dolly."

His father looked at him doubtfully.

"It isn't really the driving so much as the waiting for me. I don't like to take Sam out on Saturday evening—he makes it an excuse for not getting things tidied up. But I hardly like to take you alone, Gervais, my boy; you see if any little thing went wrong while you were waiting for me—it isn't as if you could jump down quickly."

Jerry's face sobered down, but he said nothing.

"Papa," exclaimed Charlotte eagerly, "I'll tell you what. Take me too—we can all three pack in the dog-cart—you'll see, and then if any one had to jump down, I could. It would be such fun, and Jerry hasn't been out all the afternoon. Mamma, do say we may."

Mamma smiled. Her impulse was always on the side of "you may"—perhaps almost too much so.

"Are you going far, Edward?" she asked her husband.

"Out beyond Gretham—as far as—Silverthorns," he replied, with the slightest possible, not so much hesitation as slackening of speech before the last word. "I have no objection—none whatever," he went on, speaking quickly, "to the children coming with me, if you think it can't hurt them."

"I should so like to go. I haven't been so far as Silverthorns for—ages," said Charlotte eagerly still.

Her father glanced at her with a half-question in his eyes.

"It is not a particularly pretty road," he said; "besides it is dark already; one road is as pleasant as another in the dark."

"The house at Silverthorns must look lovely in the moonlight," Charlotte replied.

"And there will be a moon to-night," added Jerry.

"If it isn't overclouded," said Mr Waldron. "Ah, well, if mamma says you may, it will be all right, I suppose."

"You will not be kept there long?" asked Mrs Waldron.

"A quarter of an hour at most," her husband replied. "It is nothing of any importance—merely some little difficulty with one of the leases, which Lady Mildred Osbert wants to speak to me about. Had it been anything of consequence she would have telegraphed for the London men—I have never anything to do with the important business there, you know," he added, with an almost imperceptible shade of bitterness.

"Then I think it very inconsiderate to expect you to go all that way late on a Saturday evening," said Mrs Waldron. The colour rose in her cheeks as she spoke, and Jerry thought to himself how pretty mamma looked when she was a very little angry.

"That was my own doing. Lady Mildred gave me my choice of to-day or Monday morning. She is going away on Monday afternoon for a few days. I preferred this evening. Monday will be a very busy day."

He rose from the table as he spoke.

"Get ready, children," he said. "I give you ten minutes, not more. And wrap up well."

Chapter Two.

In the Moonlight.

It was almost quite dark when Mr Waldron's dog-cart with its three occupants started on the four miles' drive.

"I don't know about your moon, Jerry," said his father. "I'm afraid we shall not see much of her to-night. It is still so cloudy."

"But they seem to be little flying clouds, not heavy rain bags," said Charlotte. "And there *is* the moon, papa."

"It's almost full," added Jerry. "I believe it's going to be a beautiful night. Look, Charlotte, isn't it interesting to watch her fighting her way through the clouds?"

She had fought to some purpose by the time they reached Gretham, the village on the other side of which lay Lady Mildred Osbert's house. For when they entered the Silverthorns avenue the cold radiance, broken though not dimmed by the feathery shadows of the restless, rushing cloudlets, lighted up the trees on each side and the wide gravel drive before them, giving to all the strange unreal look which the most commonplace objects seem to assume in bright moonlight. Mr Waldron drove slowly, and at a turn which brought them somewhat suddenly into full view of the house itself he all but pulled up.



"There is Silverthorns in full moonlight."—P. 18.

"There, children," he said, "you have your wish. There is Silverthorns in full moonlight."

His voice softened a little as he spoke, and something in it made an unexpected suggestion to Gervais.

"Papa," he said, "you speak as if you were thinking of long ago. Did you ever see Silverthorns like that before—in the moonlight, just as it is now?"

"Yes," his father replied. "I had almost forgotten it, I think. I remember standing here one night, when I was quite a little fellow, with my grandmother, and seeing it just like this."

"How curious!" said Charlotte. "But I don't wonder it has come back to your mind now. It is so beautiful."

She gave a deep breath of satisfaction. She was right. The old house looked wonderfully fine. It was of the quaintly irregular architecture of some so-called "Elizabethan" mansions, though in point of fact some part of it was nearly two hundred years older than the rest, and the later additions were, to say the least, incongruous. But the last owner's predecessor had been a man of taste and intelligence, and by some apparently small alterations—a window here, a porchway there—had done much to weld the different parts into a very pleasing if not strictly correct whole. Ivy, too, grew thickly over one end of the building, veiling with its kindly green shadow what had once been an unsightly disproportion of wall; the windows were all latticed, and a broad terrace walk ran round three sides of the house, while here and there on the smooth, close-cut lawn just below stood out, dark and stiff, grotesquely-cut shrubs which had each had its own special designation handed down from one generation to another.

"See," said Mr Waldron, pointing to these with his whip, as he walked old Dolly slowly on towards the front entrance, "there are the peacocks, one on each side, and the man-of-war at the corner, and—I forget what they are all supposed to represent. They look rather eerie, don't they?—so black and fierce; the moonlight exaggerates their queer shapes. But it is lovely up there on the windows—each little pane is like a separate jewel."

"Yes," repeated the children, "it is lovely."

"We always say," Charlotte added, "that Silverthorns is like an old fairy castle. It must be one of the most beautiful houses in the world!—don't you think so yourself, papa? What would it be to live in a house like that! Just fancy it, Jerry!"

But by this time Mr Waldron had got down, and throwing the reins to Jerry, was ringing. He was not kept long waiting; the door flew open, and a flood of light—lamplight and firelight mingled, for there was a vision of blazing logs on an open hearth in the hall!—poured out, looking cheery enough certainly, though coarse and matter-of-fact in comparison with the delicate radiance outside.

"Her ladyship? Yes, sir—Mr Waldron, I believe? Yes, her ladyship is expecting you," said a very irreproachable sort of person in black, who came forward as soon as the footman had opened. He was busy washing his hands with invisible soap while he spoke, and as he caught sight of the dog-cart and its occupants, he made some further observation which Charlotte and Jerry did not distinctly catch. But their father's clear decided tones rang back sharply in answer:

"No, no—no need to put up. My son will wait for me. It is all right."

Apparently, however, the butler, or major-domo, or whoever he was, had some twinges on the score of hospitality, for the door, already closed, was re-opened, and the footman looked out.

"Mr Bright says, sir," he said, addressing Jerry in the first place, then stammering somewhat as he caught sight of Charlotte; "I beg your pardon, Miss, he says as I'm to leave the door a little open, and if you find it too cold, I'll be here in the 'all, and 'appy to call some one, sir, to 'old the 'orse."

"Thank you, it's all right," said Jerry, well knowing that neither he nor Charlotte would have ventured to enter without their father's permission and protection, even if the proverbial cats and dogs had suddenly begun to fall from the sky.

"Who's Mr Bright, do you think, Jerry?" Charlotte whispered.

"That fellow in black—the butler, I suppose," Jerry replied.

"Don't you wonder papa ventured to speak so sharply to him?" Charlotte went on. "Oh, Jerry! it must be awfully grand in there. I do wish they had left the door a little more ajar. We might perhaps have caught sight of *her*—she might have happened to be crossing the hall, the sort of way one always reads of in storybooks, you know."

"Her?—who?" said Jerry, in bewilderment. "Lady Mildred, do you mean?"

"Lady Mildred," Charlotte repeated. "Of course not. You can't have forgotten—the girl I mean, the girl who has come to live with Lady Mildred, and who's coming to Miss Lloyd's."

"Oh," said Jerry, "I had forgotten all about her."

"How could you?" Charlotte exclaimed. "I have been thinking about her all the time. It was so queer that just after hearing about her, and speaking about her, it should happen for us to come out here, where we hadn't been for so long. I began thinking of it at dinner, immediately papa said he was going to Silverthorns."

"I wonder you didn't tell mamma about her," said Jerry.

"I shall afterwards, but I was thinking over what you said. I want to get my mind straight about her, and then I'll tell mamma. But do you know, Jerry, I think I feel worse about her since coming here. It does not seem fair that one person should have everything. Just think what it must be to live here, and have all those grand servants waiting on her, and—"

"I shouldn't much care about that part of it," interrupted Jerry, "and I don't think you would either, Charlotte. You'd be frightened of them. You said just now you wondered papa dared speak so sharply to that undertaker-looking fellow."

"Ah, yes, but then he's not *his* servant. One would never be frightened of one's own servants, however grand they were," said Charlotte innocently. "Besides, even if one was a little, just at the beginning, one would soon get accustomed to them. Jerry, I wonder which is *her* room. There must be a lovely room at that corner, in that sort of tower, where the roof goes up to a point—do you see? I dare say her room is there. The French governess said that Miss Lloyd said that evidently Lady Mildred makes a tremendous pet of her, and doesn't think anything too good for

her.”

Jerry was getting rather tired of the nameless heroine. His eyes went roaming round the long irregular pile of building.

“I wonder,” he said, “if there’s a haunted room at Silverthorns. Doesn’t it look as if there should be?”

The wind was getting up a little by now; just as he spoke there came a gusty wail from the trees on one side, dying away into a flutter and quiver among the leaves. It sounded like an answer to his words. Charlotte gave a little start and then pressed closer to her brother, half laughing as she did so.

“Oh, Jerry,” she said, “you make me feel quite creepy. I shouldn’t like to hear the wind like that at night. I certainly don’t envy the girl if there is a haunted room and she has to sleep anywhere near it.”

“There now—you have found out one thing you don’t envy her for,” said Jerry, triumphantly. “But the door’s opening, Charlotte. There’s papa.”

Papa it was, accompanied to the steps by the amiable Mr Bright, who seemed really distressed at not having been allowed to make himself of any use. For Mr Waldron cut him short in the middle of some elaborate sentences by a civil but rather abrupt “Thank you—exactly so. Good evening,” and in another moment he was up in his place, and had taken the reins from Jerry’s hands.

“You’re not cold, I hope,” he said. “Dolly all right, eh? Well, Gipsy”—his pet name for Charlotte—“you’ve had enough of Silverthorns by moonlight, I suppose?”

Charlotte gave a little sigh.

“It was very nice,” she said. “I wish it were ours, papa.”

“My dear child,” he exclaimed in surprise.

“I do, papa. I think it would be delightful to be as rich as—as that. I just don’t believe people who pretend that being rich and having lovely houses and things like that is all no good.”

Mr Waldron hesitated. He understood her, though she expressed herself so incoherently.

“My dear child,” he said again, “if it were not natural to wish for such things, there would be no credit in being contented without them. Only remember that they are not the best things. And if it is any comfort to you, take my word for it that the actual having them gives less than you would believe, when you picture it in all the glow of your imagination.”

“Still,” said Charlotte, “I think one might be awfully good, as well as happy, if one were as rich and all that as Lady Mildred. Think what lots of kind things one might do for other people—I wonder if she does—do you think she does, papa?”

“I believe she does some kind things,” said Mr Waldron; “but I scarcely know her. As a rule rich people do *not* think very much about doing things for others, Charlotte. I don’t say that they mean to be selfish or unkind, but very often it does not occur to them. They don’t realise how much others have to go without. I think it would be terrible to be thus shut off from real sympathy with the mass of one’s fellows, even though I don’t altogether blame the rich for it. But this is one among several reasons why I am not sorry not to be rich.”

“But, papa—” Charlotte began.

“Well, my dear?”

“If—if rich people aren’t good—if they are selfish without its being altogether their fault as you say, doesn’t it seem unfair on them? Wouldn’t it be better if there were no rich people—fairer for all?”

Mr Waldron gave a little laugh.

“You are treading on difficult ground, Gipsy. Many things would be better if many other things did not exist at all. But then this world would no longer be this world! As long as it exists, as long as we come into it human beings and not angels, there will be rich and poor. Why, if we were all started equally to-morrow, the differences would be there again in a month! I give Arthur and Ted exactly the same allowance, but at this moment Arthur has some pounds in the Savings’ Bank, and Ted not only is penniless, but probably owes all round.”

“He borrowed threepence from me this afternoon,” said Jerry laughing.

“Just so. No—it has been tried many times, and will be tried as many more perhaps, but with the same result. I don’t say that the *tremendous* disproportions that one sees might not be equalised a little without injustice. But I don’t want to give you a lecture on political economy. Only don’t mistake me. All I mean is, that in some ways the narrow road is harder for rich people than for others. But when they do walk in it, they are not seldom the best men and women this world knows. Still you can perhaps understand my meaning when I say that the possession of great riches would make me afraid.”

“Thank you, papa,” said Charlotte. “I think I do understand a little. I never thought of it like that before.” She was silent for a few minutes; then with the pertinacity of her age she returned to the subject with which her thoughts were really the most occupied.

"I don't fancy somehow that Lady Mildred Osbert is one of the *best* rich people. Is she, papa? You don't speak as if you liked her very much?"

"I don't think one is justified in either liking or disliking 'very much' any person whom one scarcely knows," Mr Waldron replied. "I have told you that I believe she does kind things. I believe she has done one lately. But if you ask me if I think—she is an old woman now—she is the sort of woman your mother would have been in the same circumstances, well no—certainly I don't."

And Mr Waldron laughed, a happy genial little laugh this time.

"That's hardly fair upon Lady Mildred, papa," said Jerry. "We all know that there never *could* be any woman as good as mamma."

"My dear boy, what would mamma say if she heard you?"

"Oh, she'd quote some proverb about people thinking their own geese swans, or something like that, of course," said Jerry unmoved. "That's because she's so truly modest. And if she wasn't truly modest she wouldn't be so good, and then—and then—she wouldn't be herself. But I agree with you, papa," he went on in his funny, old-fashioned way, "it is a good thing mamma isn't rich. She'd worry—my goodness, wouldn't she just!—she'd worry herself and all of us to death for fear she wasn't doing enough for other people."

"That would certainly not be charity beginning at home, eh, Jerry?" said his father, laughing outright this time.

"Papa," said Charlotte, "what is the kind thing Lady Mildred has done lately? Is it about—the girl?"

"What girl?—what do you know about it?" said Mr Waldron, rather sharply.

But Charlotte was not easily disconcerted, especially when very much in earnest.

"A girl she has adopted. They say she is going to leave this girl all her money, so she—the girl—will be a great heiress. And she is awfully pretty, and—and—just everything. I heard all about it this morning at school," and Charlotte went on to give her father the details she had learnt through the French governess's gossip. "She is to drive herself in every morning in her pony-carriage, except if it rains, and then she is to be sent and fetched in the brougham. Fancy her having a pony-carriage all of her own!"

Mr Waldron listened without interrupting her. He understood better than before his little daughter's sudden curiosity about Silverthorns and Lady Mildred, and her incipient discontent. But all he said was:

"Ah, well, poor child! It is to be hoped she will be happy there."

"Papa, can you doubt it?" exclaimed Charlotte.

"Papa isn't at all sure if Lady Mildred will be very good to her, whether she makes her her heiress or not," said Jerry bluntly.

"I don't say that, Jerry," said his father. "I don't know Lady Mildred well enough to judge. I said, on the contrary, I had known of her doing kind things, which is true."

"Papa only said Lady Mildred wasn't a woman like mamma," said Charlotte. "She might well not be *that*, and yet be very good and kind. Of course we are more lucky than any children in having mamma, but still if one has everything else—"

"One could do without a good mother? Nay, my Gipsy, I can't—"

"Papa, papa, I don't mean that—you know I don't," exclaimed Charlotte, almost in tears.

"No, I know you don't really. But even putting mamma out of the question, I doubt if Lady Mildred—however, it is not our place to pass judgment."

Suddenly Charlotte gave a little scream.

"Jerry, don't. How can you, Jerry?"

"What's the matter?" asked Mr Waldron.

"He pinched me, papa, quite sharply, under my cloak," said Charlotte, a little ashamed of her excitement. "Jerry, how can you be so babyish?"

"I didn't mean to hurt you," said Jerry penitently. "It was only—when papa said that—I thought—there's another thing."

"Has the moonlight affected your brain, Jerry?" asked his father.

"No, papa; Charlotte understands. I thought perhaps she'd rather I didn't say it right out. It makes three things, you see—being stupid—and *perhaps* the haunted room and Lady Mildred being horrid to her. You see, Charlotte?"

But Mr Waldron's face—what they could see of it, that is to say, for the clouds seemed to be reassembling in obedience to some invisible summons, and a thick dark one, just at that moment, was beginning to veil the moon's fair disc—expressed unmitigated bewilderment.

"He means what we were talking about this afternoon, papa. Jerry, you are too silly to tell it in that muddled way," said Charlotte, laughing in spite of her irritation. "I said it seemed as if that girl had *everything*, and Jerry thinks nobody has. He said perhaps she's not very clever, and it's true one *kind* of pretty people are generally rather dull; and perhaps there's a haunted room at Silverthorns, and she may be frightened at night; and now he means that perhaps Lady Mildred isn't really very kind. But they're all perhapses."

"One isn't," said Mr Waldron. "There is a haunted room at Silverthorns—that, I have always known. If the poor girl is nervous, let us hope she doesn't sleep near it! As to her being 'dull'—no, I doubt it. She hasn't the kind of large, heavy, striking beauty which goes with dullness."

"Papa, you have seen her," exclaimed Charlotte in great excitement. "And you didn't tell us."

"You didn't give me time, truly and really, Charlotte."

"And what is she like? Oh, papa, do tell me."

"I only saw her for an instant. Her aunt sent her out of the room. She did seem to me very pretty, slight, and not *very* tall, with a face whose actual beauty was thrown into the shade by its extremely winning and bright and varying expression. All that, I saw, but that was all."

"Is she fair or dark?" asked Charlotte. "You must have seen that."

"Fair, of course. You know my beauties are always fair. That is why I am so disappointed in you, poor Gipsy," said Mr Waldron teasingly.

But Charlotte did not laugh as she would usually have done.

"Charlotte," said Jerry reprovingly, "of course papa's in fun. Mamma is darker than you."

"I don't need you to tell me that papa's in fun," said Charlotte snappishly. "Besides, mamma isn't dark, except her hair and eyes—her skin is lovelily white. There's nothing fair about me, except my stupid light-blue eyes."

"My blue-eyed gipsy," said her father, using a pet name that had been hers as a baby.

"Dear papa," said Charlotte; and the sharpness had all gone out of her voice.

They were almost at home by now. There had not been much temptation to look about them in returning, for the clouds were getting the best of it, and the moon had taken offence and was hiding her face.

"My little girl," whispered her father, as he lifted her down, "beware of the first peep through the green-coloured spectacles."

"Papa!" said Charlotte, half reproachfully.

But I think she understood.

"Jerry," she said, as her brother and she stood waiting at the door, their father having driven round to the stables, "just compare this door, this house, with Silverthorns."

"What's the good?" said Jerry.

Chapter Three.

A Family Party.

A hearty but somewhat unnecessarily noisy welcome awaited them. Arthur, Ted, and Noble were all in the drawing-room with their mother. She had insisted on the muddy boots being discarded, but beyond this, as the boys were tired, and it was late when they came in, she had not held out; and Charlotte glanced at the rough coats and lounging-about attitudes with a feeling of annoyance, which it was well "the boys" did not see. "Mamma" herself was always a pleasant object to look upon, even in her old black grenadine; *she*, thought Charlotte, with a throb of pride, could not seem out of place in the most beautiful of the Silverthorns' drawing-rooms. But the boys—how can they be so rough and messy? thought the fastidious little sister.

"It is all with being poor—all," she said to herself.

But she felt ashamed when Arthur drew forward the most comfortable chair for her to the fire, and Ted offered to carry her hat and jacket up-stairs for her.

"No, thank you," she said. "I'll run up-stairs, and be down again in a minute. It's messy to take one's things off in the drawing-room," and so saying, she jumped up and ran away.

"What a fuss Charlotte always makes about being messy, as she calls it," said Ted. "She's a regular old maid."

"Come, Ted, that's not fair. It's not only for herself Charlotte's tidy!" Arthur exclaimed.

"No, indeed," said Noble, chiming in.

"You needn't all set upon me like that," said Ted. "I'm sure I always thank her when she tidies my things. I can't be tidy, and that's just all about it. When a fellow's grinding at lessons from Monday morning till Saturday night."

This piteous statement was received with a shout of laughter, Ted's "lessons" being a proverb in the house, as it was well known that they received but the tag end of the attention naturally required for football, and cricket, and swimming, and stamp-collecting, and carpentering, and all his other multifarious occupations.

Mrs Waldron, scenting squabbles ahead, came to the rescue.

"Tell us your adventures, Jerry. Is it a fine evening? Where is your father?"

"He'll be in in a moment," Jerry replied. "He went round to the stables; I think he had something to say to Sam. Yes, mamma, we had a very nice drive. It was beautiful moonlight out at Silverthorns, but coming back it clouded over."

"Silverthorns!" Noble repeated. "Have you been out there too? Why, we've all been there—how funny! I thought mamma said you had gone to Gretham. I say, isn't Silverthorns awfully pretty?"

As he said the words the door opened, and Charlotte and her father came in together. They had met in the hall. Mr Waldron answered Noble's question, which had indeed been addressed to no one in particular.

"It is a beautiful old place," he said. "But 'east or west, home is best.' I like to come in and see you all together with your mother, boys. And what a capital fire you've made up!" He went towards it as he spoke, Charlotte half mechanically following him. "It is chilly out of doors. Gipsy, your hands are quite cold." He drew her close to the fire and laid one arm on her shoulder. She understood the little caress, but some undefined feeling of contradiction prevented her responding to it.

"I'm not particularly cold, papa, thank you," she said drily.

Mrs Waldron looked up quietly at the sound of Charlotte's voice. She knew instinctively that all was not in tune, but she also knew it would not do to draw attention to this, and she was on the point of hazarding some other remark when Jerry broke in. Jerry somehow always seemed to know what other people were feeling.

"Papa," he said, "were you in earnest when you said there was a haunted room at Silverthorns?"

Every one pricked up his or her ears at this question.

"I was in earnest so far that I know there is a room there that is said to be haunted," he replied.

"And how?" asked Charlotte. "If any one slept there would they be found dead in the morning, or something dreadful like that?"

"No, no, not so bad as that, though no one ever does sleep there. It's an old story in the family. I heard it when I was a boy."

"Don't you think it's very wrong to tell stories like that to frighten children?" said Charlotte severely.

"And pray who's begging for it at the present moment?" said Mr Waldron, amused at her tone.

"Papa! we're not children. It isn't like as if it were Amy and Marion," she said, laughing a little. "Do tell us."

"Really, my dear, there's nothing to tell. It is believed that some long ago Osbert, a selfish and cruel man by all accounts, haunts the room in hopes of getting some one to listen to his repentance, and to promise to make amends for his ill-deeds. He treated the poor people about very harshly; and not them only, he was very unkind to his daughter, because he was angry with her for not being a son, and left her absolutely penniless, so that the poor thing, being delicate and no longer young, died in great privation. And he left the property, which was not entailed, to a very distant cousin, hardly to be counted as a cousin except that he had the same name. The legend is that his ghost will never be at peace till Silverthorns comes to be the property of the descendant of some female Osbert."

"Do you know I never heard that story before? It is curious," said Mrs Waldron thoughtfully.

"But it's come all right now. Lady Mildred's a woman," said Ted, in his usual hasty way.

"On the contrary, it's very far wrong," said his father. "Lady Mildred is not an Osbert at all. Silverthorns was left her by Mr Osbert to do what she likes with, some people say. If she leaves it away, quite out of the Osbert line, it will be a hard punishment for the poor ghost, supposing he knows anything about it, as his regard for the family name went so far as to make him treat his own child unjustly."

"Is it certain that Lady Mildred has the power of doing what she likes with it?" asked Mrs Waldron.

"I'm sure I can't say. I suppose any one who cares to know can see Mr Osbert's will by paying a shilling," said Mr Waldron lightly. "Though, by the bye, I have a vague remembrance of hearing that the will was worded rather peculiarly, so that it did not tell as much as wills generally do. It referred to some other directions, or something of that kind. General Osbert and his family doubtless know all they can. It is not an enormous fortune after all. Lady Mildred has a small income of her own, and she spends a great deal on the place. It will be much better worth having after her reign than before it."

"Any way she won't leave it to me, so I don't much care what she does with it," said Ted, rising from his seat, and stretching his long lanky arms over his head.

"No, that she won't," said Mr Waldron, with rather unnecessary emphasis.

"My dear Ted," said his mother, "if you are so sleepy as all that you had better go to bed. I'm not very rigorous, as you know, but I don't like people yawning and stretching themselves in the drawing-room."

"All right, mother. I will go to bed," Ted replied. "Arthur and Noble, you'd better come too."

"Thank you for nothing," said Noble, who as usual was buried in a book. "I'm going to finish this chapter first. I'm not like some people I know, who have candles and matches at the side of their beds, in spite of all mother says."

Mrs Waldron turned to Ted uneasily.

"Is that true, Ted," she said, "after all your promises?"

Ted looked rather foolish.

"Mother," he said, "it's only when I'm behind with my lessons, and I think that I'll wake early and give them a look over in the morning. It isn't like reading for my own pleasure."

Another laugh greeted this remark, Ted "reading for his own pleasure" would have been something new.

"But indeed, mother, you needn't worry about it," said Arthur consolingly. "I advise you to let Ted's candle and matches remain peaceably at the side of his bed if it pleases him. There they will stay, none the worse, you may be sure. It satisfies his conscience and does no harm, for there is not the least fear of his ever waking early."

Ted looked annoyed. It is not easy to take chaff pleasantly in public, especially in the public of one's own assembled family.

"I don't see why you need all set on me like that," he muttered. "I think Noble might have held his tongue."

"So do I," said Charlotte, half under her breath. Then she too got up. "I'm going to bed. Good night, mamma," and she stooped to kiss her mother; and in a few minutes, Noble having shut up his book resolutely at the end of the chapter, all the brothers had left the room, and the husband and wife were alone.

Mrs Waldron leant her pretty head on the arm of the sofa for a minute or two without speaking. She was tired, as she well might be, and somehow on Saturday night she felt as if she might allow herself to own to it. Mr Waldron looked at her with a rather melancholy expression on his own face.

"Yes," he said aloud, though in reality speaking to himself, "we pay pretty dear for our power of sympathising."

"What did you say?" asked his wife, looking up.

"Nothing, dear. I was only thinking of some talk I had with Charlotte—I was trying to show her the advantages of poverty," he said, smiling.

"*Poverty!*" repeated his wife; "but nothing like *poverty* comes near her, or any of them,—at least it is not as bad as that."

"No, no. I should not have used the word. I should rather have said, as I did to her, of not being rich."

"Charlotte does not seem herself," said Mrs Waldron. "I wonder if anything is troubling her."

"She is waking up, perhaps," said the father, "and that is a painful process sometimes. Though she is so clever, she is wonderfully young for her age too. Life has been smooth for her, even though we are so poor—not rich," he corrected with a smile.

"But is there anything special on her mind? What made you talk in that way?"

"She will be telling you herself of some report—oh, I dare say it is true enough—that Lady Mildred Osbert is arranging to send this niece of hers, this girl whom, as I told you, she is said to have adopted, to Miss Lloyd's. And of course they are all gossiping about it, chattering about the girl's beauty and magnificence, and all the rest of it. After all, Amy, I sometimes wish we had not sent Charlotte to school at all; there seems always to be silly chatter."

"But what could we do? We could not possibly have afforded a governess—for one girl alone; and I, even if I had the time, I am not highly educated enough myself to carry on so very clever a girl as Charlotte."

"No; I sometimes wish she were less clever. She might have been more easily satisfied."

"But she is not dissatisfied," said Mrs Waldron. "On the contrary, she has seemed more than content, she is full of interest and energy. I have been so *glad* she was clever; it is so much easier for a girl with decidedly intellectual tastes to be happy in a circumscribed life like ours."

"Yes, in one sense. But Charlotte has other tastes too. She would enjoy the beauty, the completeness of life possible when people are richer, intensely. And at school she has been made a sort of pet and show pupil of. It will be trying to a girl of fifteen to see a new queen in her little world."

"But—she need not interfere with Charlotte. It is not probable that she will be as talented."

"That was one of Jerry's consolations," said Mr Waldron with a smile. "It was rather a pity I happened to take

Charlotte to Silverthorns to-night. It seems to have deepened the impression."

"She only waited outside. My dear, we cannot keep the children in cotton-wool."

"No, of course not. It is perhaps because going to Silverthorns always irritates me myself, though I am ashamed to own it, even to you. But to remember my happy boyhood there—when I was treated like a child of the house. It was false kindness of my grandmother and my grand-uncle. But they meant it well, and I never let *her* know I felt it to have been so."

"Of course your uncle would have done something more securely for you had he foreseen all your grandmother's losses. One must remember that."

"Yes; but it isn't only the money, Amy. It is Lady Mildred's determined avoidance of acknowledging us in any way. The cool way she treats me entirely as the local lawyer. She has no idea I feel it. I take good care of that. And then, to be sure, she never saw me there long ago! Grandmother never entered the doors after her brother's death."

"No, so you have told me. I suppose Lady Mildred, if she ever gives a thought to us at all, just thinks we are some distant poor relations of a bygone generation of Osberts," said Mrs Waldron. "And after all it is pretty much the state of the case, except for your having been so associated with the place as a child. I am always glad that the children have never heard of the connection. It would only have been a source of mortification to them."

"Yes; and my long absence from the neighbourhood made it easy to say nothing about it. You will know how to speak to Charlotte when she tells you, as no doubt she will, about this new class-fellow. I wish it had not happened, for even if the girl is a very nice girl, I should not wish them to make friends," said Mr Waldron. "It would probably only lead to complications more or less disagreeable. As Lady Mildred has chosen absolutely to ignore us as relations, I would not allow the children to receive anything at all, even the commonest hospitality, from her."

"I wonder if the girl is nice," said Mrs Waldron. "She must be spoilt. I should be afraid, if Lady Mildred makes such a pet of her. Do you know her name?" Mr Waldron shook his head.

"She is a niece of Lady Mildred's, I believe—perhaps a grand-niece. She may be a Miss Meredon—that was Lady Mildred's maiden name, but I really don't know. I did not catch her name when her aunt spoke to her."

"Oh, you saw her then?" exclaimed Mrs Waldron with some surprise. "What is she like?"

Mr Waldron smiled.

"Amy, you're nearly as great a baby as Charlotte," he said. "She was quite excited when I said I had seen this wonderful young person. What is she like? Well, I must own that for once gossip has spoken the truth in saying that she is very pretty. I only saw her for half a second, but she struck me as both very pretty and very sweet-looking."

"Not prettier than Charlotte?" asked Charlotte's mother, half laughing at herself as she put the question.

"Well, yes, I'm afraid poor Gipsy wouldn't stand comparison with this child. She is really *remarkably* lovely."

"Ah, well," said Mrs Waldron, "Charlotte is above being jealous, or even envious of mere beauty. Still—altogether—yes, I think I agree with you that I am sorry Lady Mildred is going to send the girl to Miss Lloyd's; for we cannot wish that Charlotte and she should make friends under the circumstances. It would only be putting our child in the way of annoyances, and possibly mortification. And I should be sorry to have to explain things to her or to the boys. I do so long to keep them unworldly and—unsuspicious, unsoured—poor though they may have to be," and the mother sighed a little.

"Yes," agreed Mr Waldron earnestly. "I am afraid the worldly *spirit* is just as insidious when one is poor as when one is rich. And do what we will, Amy, we cannot shelter them from all evil and trouble."

"I shall be glad if this Miss Meredon, if that is her name, is not in Charlotte's class," said Mrs Waldron after a little pause. "I should think it unlikely that she is as far on as Charlotte. Miss Lloyd was telling me the other day how really delighted she and all the teachers are with her."

"I hope they have not spoilt her," said Mr Waldron. "She is not the sort of girl to be easily spoilt in that way," said Charlotte's mother. "She is too much in earnest—too anxious to learn."

"I wish Ted had some of her energy," said the father. "He is really such a dunce—and yet he is practical enough in some ways. We'll have to ship two or three of those lads off to the backwoods I expect, Amy."

"I sometimes wish we could all go together," said Mrs Waldron. "Life is so difficult now and then."

"You are tired, dear. Things look so differently at different times. For after all, what would not Lady Mildred, poor woman, give for one of our boys—even poor Jerry!"

"*Even* Jerry!" said Mrs Waldron. "I don't know one of them I could less afford to part with than him. Arthur is a good boy, a very good boy as an eldest; but Jerry has a sort of instinctive understandingness about him that makes him the greatest possible comfort. Yes, cold and selfish though she may be, I can pity Lady Mildred when I think of her loneliness."

"And I don't know that she is cold and selfish," said Mr Waldron. "It is more that she has lived in a very narrow world, and it has never occurred to her to look out beyond it. Self-absorption is, after all, not exactly selfishness. But it is getting late, Amy, and Sunday is not much of a day of rest for you, I am sorry to say."

"I don't know about that," she replied, smiling brightly again. "Now that the boys are old enough not to require looking after, and Charlotte is very good with the little ones—no, I don't think I have any reason to grumble. My hard-working Sundays are becoming things of the past. Sometimes I could almost find it in my heart to regret them! It was very sweet, after all, when they were all tiny mites, with no world outside our own little home, and perfect faith in it and in us—and indeed in everything. I do love very little children."

"You will be more than half a child yourself, even when you have grey hair and are a grandmother perhaps," said her husband, laughing.

Chapter Four.

The New Pupil.

"Mamma," said Charlotte to her mother one day towards the end of the following week, "do you think—I mean would you mind?" She hesitated and grew rather red, and looked down at her dress.

"Would I mind what, dear? Don't be afraid to say what it is," said her mother, smiling. Her eyes half unconsciously followed Charlotte's and rested on her frock. It was one which had undoubtedly "seen better days," and careful though Charlotte was, nothing could hide the marks of wear.

"Is it about your dress?" Mrs Waldron exclaimed suddenly. "I was going to speak about it. I don't think you can go on wearing that old cashmere at school any more. You must keep it for home—for the afternoons when you are working in the school-room, and the mornings you don't go to Miss Lloyd's; and you must begin your navy-blue serge for regular wear."

Charlotte's face cleared.

"Oh, thank you, mamma," she said. "I am so glad. But—what about a best frock? You know, however careful one is, one can't look really neat with only one regular dress," and Charlotte's face fell again.

"Of course not. Have I ever expected you to manage with only one, so to say? I have sent for patterns already, and Miss Burt is coming about making you a new one. And your velveteen must be refreshed a little for the evenings. By Christmas, if I can possibly afford it, I should like to get you something new for the evenings. There may be concerts, or possibly one or two children's parties."

"I don't care to go if there are," said Charlotte, "I'm getting too old for them. In proper, regular society, mamma—not a common little town like Wortherham—girls don't go out when they're my age, between the two, as it were, do they?"

Mrs Waldron smiled a very little. Charlotte was changing certainly.

"We cannot make hard and fast rules, placed as we are," she said. "If you don't care to go to any more children's parties you need not. But of course Wortherham is your—our—home. I might wish it were in a different place for many reasons, but wishing in such cases is no use, and indeed often does harm. And on the whole it is better to have some friendly intercourse with the people one lives among, even though they may not be very congenial, than to shut oneself out from all sympathies and interests except home ones." Charlotte did not at once answer, and indeed when she did speak again it was scarcely in reply to her mother.

"I like some of the girls very well. I don't much care to be intimate with any of them, except perhaps Gueda Knox, and she scarcely counts, she's so little here now; but they're nice enough mostly. Only they do gossip a good deal, and make remarks about things that don't concern them. Mamma," she went on abruptly, "might I begin wearing my navy-blue to-morrow? I will take great care of it, so that it shall look quite nice on Sundays till I get my new one."

"To-morrow?" repeated Mrs Waldron, a little surprised. "To-morrow is Friday. Isn't Monday a better day to begin it?"

Again Charlotte reddened a little.

"Mamma," she said, "it's just that I don't want to begin it on Monday. That girl is coming on Monday for the first time—Lady Mildred's niece, you know. And you don't know how I should *hate* them saying I had got a new dress because of her coming."

"Would they really be so ill-bred?" exclaimed Mrs Waldron, almost startled.

"Oh, yes. They don't mean it, they don't know better. Mamma, I don't think you can know quite as well as I do how common some of the people here are," and Charlotte's face took an expression almost of disgust. "When you see the ladies you call on, they are on their good behaviour, I suppose, and if they did begin to gossip you would somehow manage to discourage it. Oh, mamma, you should be glad you weren't brought up here."

Mrs Waldron was half distressed and half amused.

"But we must make the best of it," she said. "We can't leave Wortherham, Charlotte."

"Couldn't we go and live quite in the country, however quiet and dull it was? I wouldn't mind."

"No; for several years at least it would be impossible. There may be opportunities for starting the boys in life here that we must not neglect. And living quite in the country would entail more fatigue for your father." Charlotte sighed.

"My dear child," said her mother, "I don't quite understand you. You have never seemed discontented with your home before. You must not get to take such a gloomy view of things."

"I don't mean to be discontented, mamma," said Charlotte.

"Well, dear, try and get over it. You will have to meet many people in life apparently more favoured and fortunate than you. Perhaps things have in some ways been too smooth for you, Charlotte."

"Mamma, I am not so selfish as you think. It is not only for myself I'd like some things to be different. Besides, I am old enough now to know that you and papa have a great deal of anxiety. Do you think I only care for myself, mamma?"

"No, dear, I don't. But don't you think the best way to help us would be by letting us see that you are happy, and appreciating the advantages we *can* give you?"

"Yes, mamma," said Charlotte, submissively enough. But her mother's eyes followed her somewhat anxiously as she left the room.

The amount of gossip at Miss Lloyd's school about the expected new pupil was certainly absurd. The young lady's riches and beauty and connections were discussed and exaggerated as only school-girls can discuss and exaggerate such matters, and the one girl who said nothing, and scarcely seemed to listen to all the chatter, was yet perhaps the most impressed by it.

Charlotte took care to be early in her place that Monday morning. There was half-an-hour's "preparation"—spent by the conscientious pupils in refreshing their memories by running over the lessons already thoroughly learnt, by the lazy ones in endeavouring to compress into the short space of time the work which should have taken several hours, and by the incorrigibly careless and indifferent in whispered banter or gossip—before the regular work of the day began. And Charlotte, who it need hardly be said belonged to the first category, was looking over a German translation in which she was soon so interested as really to have forgotten the impending arrival, when the classroom door opened, and Miss Lloyd appeared, conducting the new pupil.

"Good morning, young ladies," she said quietly as usual, glancing round at the two rows of girls who stood up as she came in.

"I wish to introduce you all and Miss Meredon to each other. Miss Meredon is to be a fellow-worker with you for some time."

This was Miss Lloyd's customary formula of presentation, and she made it with simplicity and dignity, in no way departing from her usual words or manner. Some of the girls raised their eyebrows with surprise that the advent of this much-talked-of young lady should have called forth no greater demonstration; some, and Mr Waldron's daughter among them, felt their respect for the quiet, somewhat prim little lady sensibly rise as they listened to her.



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"She's not a snob, any way," thought Charlotte, and then she half reluctantly allowed her eyes to turn to the girl standing beside the lady-principal. "Papa" had said she was lovely, so had Dr Lewis, but papa's opinion carried of course far more weight. But, even without it, even without any prepossession or expectation on the subject, Charlotte felt that her very first glance decided it. The girl *was* lovely—far, far more than "pretty," like little Isabel Lewis, with her merry eyes and turned-up nose, or "interesting," like pale-faced Gueda Knox. She was really lovely. Not very fair, but with a brightness rather than brilliance about her which came from one scarcely knew where—it seemed a part of herself, of her sunny hair, of her slightly flushed cheeks, of her smiling and yet appealing eyes, of her whole self. Her very attitude suggested full, springing, and yet gentle, youthful life as she stood there, one foot slightly advanced, her hand half upraised, as if ready and desirous to be friends and friendly with every one; and a slight, very slight shade of disappointment seemed to pass over her face when she saw that nothing followed the little formal speech, that no one among the several girls came forward to greet or welcome her. And as Miss Lloyd turned towards her the hand dropped quietly, and the speaking eyes looked gravely and inquiringly at her conductress.

"What am I to do now?" they seemed to say. "I was ready to shake hands with them all; I do hope I shall understand what to do."

Miss Lloyd spoke as if in reply to her unexpressed question.

"You can sit here in the mean time, Miss Meredon," she said, pointing to a side-table. "I shall give you a regular place when it is decided what classes you shall join. In a few minutes the first—that means the head German class—will begin. You can take part in it, so that Herr Märklestatter can judge if you are sufficiently advanced to join in it."

Then Miss Lloyd's keen eyes ran along the rows of girls still standing; as they rested for a moment on Charlotte Waldron's grave, almost solemn face she hesitated, but only for that moment, and then looked past her again.

"Sit down, young ladies," she said. "But you, Miss Lathom," she went on, addressing a thin, delicate-looking girl with a gentle expression—poor thing, she was training for a governess, for which, alas! her fragile health ill-suited her,—"bring your German books here, and give Miss Meredon some little idea of what you are doing."

"Thank you, that will be very kind," said the new pupil brightly, as if delighted to have an opportunity of expressing some part of her eager good-will; and as Miss Lathom, blushing with the distinction, came shyly from her place, Miss Meredon hastened forward a step or two to meet her, and took some of the pile of books out of her hands. Then the two sat down at the side-table, and the other girls having resumed their places, the class-room subsided into its usual quiet.

Charlotte's mind was in a curious state of confusion. She was in a sense disappointed, yet at the same time relieved that she had not been picked out to act mentor to the new pupil. She knew that Miss Lloyd's not having chosen her in no way reflected upon her position in the German class, where she had long ago distanced her companions.

"If it had been French," she thought to herself, "I might have been a little vexed, for Miss Lathom does speak French better than I do, with having been so much in France; but in German—she is further back than Gueda even. I suppose Miss Lloyd chose Fanny Lathom because she knows she is going to be a governess."

She was about right; but had she overheard a conversation the day before between Lady Mildred and the lady-principal, she would have felt less philosophical as to the choice not having fallen on herself.

"I have a very nice set of pupils," Miss Lloyd had said, "none whom Miss Meredon can in the least dislike associating with. Indeed, two or three of them belong to some of our leading families—Miss Knox, the vicar's daughter, and the two little Fades, whose father is Colonel of the regiment stationed here, and Miss Waldron—she is a most charming girl, and, I may say, my most promising pupil, and nearly of Miss Meredon's age."

"Waldron," Lady Mildred had repeated. "Oh, yes, to be sure, the lawyer's daughter; I remember the name. Oh, indeed, very respectable families no doubt. But I wish you to understand, Miss Lloyd, that it is not for companionship but for lessons that I send you my niece. I wish her to make *no* intimacies. She knows my wishes and she will adhere to them, but it is as well you should understand them too."

"So far as it is in my power, I shall of course be guided by them," Miss Lloyd had replied somewhat stiffly. "All my pupils come here to learn, not to amuse themselves. But I can only act by Miss Meredon precisely as I do by the others. It would be completely contrary to the spirit of the—the establishment,"—Miss Lloyd's one weakness was that she could not bring herself to speak of her "school,"—"of my classes, were I to keep any one girl apart from the others, 'hedging her round' with some impalpable dignities, as it were," she went on with a little smile, intended to smooth down her protest.

Lady Mildred was not foolish enough to resent it, but she kept her ground.

"Ah, well," she said, "I must leave it to my niece's own sense. She is not deficient in it."

Still the warning had not been without its effect. Miss Lloyd had no wish to offend the lady of Silverthorns. And a kindly idea of being of possible use to Fanny Lathom had also influenced her.

"If this girl is backward, as she probably is," she thought, "Fanny may have a chance of giving her private lessons in the holidays, or some arrangement of that kind."

But Charlotte was in happy ignorance of Lady Mildred's depreciating remarks, as she sat, to all outward appearance, buried in her German translation, in reality peeping from time to time at the bright head in the corner of the room, round which all the sunshine seemed to linger, listening eagerly for the faintest sound of the pretty voice, or wishing that Miss Meredon would look up for a moment that she might catch the beautiful outlines of her profile.

"She *is* lovely," thought Charlotte, "and she is most perfectly dressed, though it looks simple. And—it is true she seems sweet. But very likely that look is all put on, though even if it isn't what credit is it to her? Who wouldn't look and feel sweet if they had everything in the world they could wish for? I dare say I could look sweet too in that case. There's only one comfort, I'm not likely to have much to do with her. If Fanny Lathom's German is good enough for her I may be pretty sure she won't be in the top classes. And any one so pretty as she is—she must give a great deal of time to her dress too—is *sure* not to be very clever or to care much for clever things."

Ten minutes passed—then a bell rang, and Mademoiselle Bavarde, the French governess, who had been engaged with a very elementary class of small maidens in another room, threw the door open for the six children to pass in, announcing at the same time that Herr Märklestatter had come. Up started the seven girls forming the first class and filed into the Professor's presence; Miss Meredon was following them, but was detained by a glance from Miss Lloyd.

"I will accompany you and explain to Herr Märklestatter," she said.

He was a stout, florid man, with a beamingly good-natured face, looking like anything but the very clever, scholarly, frightfully hot-tempered man he really was. He was a capital teacher when he thought his teaching was appreciated, that is to say, where he perceived real anxiety to profit by it. With slowness of apprehension when united to real endeavour he could be patient; but woe betide the really careless or stolidly stupid in his hands! With such his sarcasm was scathing, his fury sometimes almost ungovernable; the veins on his forehead would start out like cords, his blue eyes would flash fire, he would dash from one language to the other of the nine of which he was "past master," as if seeking everywhere some relief for his uncontrollable irritation, till in the minds of the more intelligent and sympathising of his pupils all other feeling would be merged in actual pity for the man. Scenes of such violence were of course rare, though it was seldom that a lesson passed without some growls as of thunder in the distance. But with it all he was really beloved, and those who understood him would unite to save him, as far as could be, from the trials to his temper of the incorrigibly dense or indifferent students. It was not difficult to do so unsuspected. The honest German was in many ways unsuspecting as a child, and so impressionable, so keenly interested in everything that came in his way, that a word, the suggestion of an inquiry on almost any subject, would make him entirely forget the point on which he had been about to wax irate, and by the time he came back to it he had quite cooled down.

"I do hope, Gueda," whispered Charlotte to Miss Knox, as they made their way to the German master's presence, "I do hope that that stupid Edith Greenman has learnt her lessons for once, and that Isabel Lewis will try to pay attention. She is the worst of the two; it is possible to shield poor Edith sometimes."

"I wouldn't say 'poor Edith,'" Gueda replied. "She really does not care to learn. I feel quite as angry with her sometimes as Herr Märklestatter himself."

"So do I. But it would be such a disgrace to us all to have a scene the first morning, almost the first hour that girl is here."

"You sheltered Edith last week by an allusion to the comet. You did it splendidly. He was off on the comet's tail at once, without an idea you had put him there. But I think you can do anything with him, Charlotte, you are such a pet of his, and you deserve to be."

This was true. Charlotte both was and deserved to be a favourite pupil, and she liked to feel that it was so.

"Well, I hope things will go well to-day," she said. "I should not like Miss Meredon to think she had got into a bear-garden."

"Do you suppose she knows much German, Charlotte?" whispered Gueda. She was a very gentle, unassertive girl, who generally saved herself trouble by allowing Charlotte to settle her opinions for her.

Charlotte's rosy lips formed themselves into an unmistakable and rather contemptuous expression of dissent, and Gueda breathed more freely. German was not her own strong point, and she disliked the idea of the new-comer's criticism on her shortcomings.

Herr Märklestatter's smiling face greeted the girls as they entered the room.

"Good day, young ladies," he said. "A pleasant morning's work is before us, I trust," for he was always particularly sanguine, poor man, after the rest of Sunday. "Ah?" in a tone of courteous inquiry, as the seven maidens were followed by Miss Lloyd escorting the stranger. "A new pupil? I make you welcome, miss," he went on in his queer English,—hopelessly queer it was, notwithstanding his many years' residence in England, and his marvellous proficiency in continental languages,—as his eyes rested with pleasure on the sweet flushed face. "You speak German?" he added in that language.

"Miss Meredon will be present at this lesson, Herr Märklestatter," Miss Lloyd hastened to explain, "in order that she may see what work the advanced pupils are doing, and that you may judge which class she should join."

"Exactly so," the German master replied. "Now, young ladies, what have you to show me?"

The exercise-books were handed to him, certain tasks corrected and criticised at once, others put aside for the professor to look over at his leisure. Things seemed to be going pretty well, nothing worse than some half-muttered ejaculations, and raising of Herr Märklestatter's eyebrows, testifying to the mistakes he came across. Then followed the pupils reading aloud, translating as they went. They were all far enough advanced to read fairly, but Charlotte Waldron read the best. To-day, however, a rather unusually difficult passage fell to her turn; she made more than one slight mistake, and hesitated in the translation of a phrase.

"Come, come," said the professor, glancing round, as was his habit, till his eyes fell on a look of intelligence, "who can translate that? Miss Knox, Miss Lathom, eh, what, you know it, miss?"

For to his surprise, the young stranger, flushing still more rosily, but with a bright glance of satisfaction, looked up with lips parted, evidently eager to speak. "Yes?" said he. "Say what you think it is."

Miss Meredon translated it correctly, and in well-chosen words, without the slightest hesitation. Herr Märklestatter listened carefully.

"Good! very good!" he said. "Continue then. Read the following paragraph. Aloud—in German first, then translate it."

She did both; her accent and pronunciation were excellent, her translation faultlessly correct.

"You have read that before, Miss—"

"Meredon," replied the owner of the name.

"Miss Meredon? You have read that before?"

"No. I have heard of it, but I never actually read it before," she replied innocently, evidently unconscious of the bearing of his remark. Herr Märklestatter's face grew beaming.

"*Very good,*" he said; while Charlotte, half clenching her hands under the table, muttered in Gueda's ears, "I don't believe it."

The rest of the lesson went on in due routine, save that Herr Märklestatter made Miss Meredon take regular part in all. It became quickly evident that her first success had been no random shot. She was at home in every detail, so that at the end of the class, when giving out the work for next time, the master told her to write an essay in German as an exercise of style, which would have been beyond the powers of the rest of the pupils. Miss Lloyd came in as he was explaining his wishes.

"You are giving Miss Meredon separate work to do?" she inquired. "If she is not up to the standard of this class, would it not be better—"

But the enthusiastic professor interrupted her.

"My dear madam," he exclaimed, "not up to this class! Miss—but she is far beyond. Only you would not wish to have a class for one pupil all alone? And it will be of advantage—it will bring new life among us all. Miss Waldron, with your intelligence—for you work well, my dear young lady, only this morning not quite so well as usual—you will enjoy to work with Miss Meredon?" and the good man in his innocence turned his beaming countenance on Charlotte encouragingly.

Not to save her life could Charlotte have responded with a smile. But Miss Lloyd spoke again before Herr Märklestatter had noticed Miss Waldron's silence.

"I am pleased to hear so good a report of Miss Meredon. You must work well, my dear, and keep up your place," she said, addressing the new pupil.

"Thank you; I will indeed," Miss Meredon replied. "And thank you very much, sir, for your kindness," she added, turning to the professor.

Her face seemed positively alight with pleasure. It was really not to be wondered at that as the last girls left the room they heard him murmur the German equivalents for "bewitching, charming."

And one of these last girls was unluckily Charlotte Waldron.

Chapter Five.

Lady Mildred.

Charlotte went home that Monday looking fagged and unlike herself. Her mother met her as she was going into the school-room, her arms loaded with books.

"My dear, is that you?" said Mrs Waldron. "I did not hear you come in. What a dull, dreary day it is! You have not got wet, I hope?"

"It was not actually raining. My frock got no harm," Charlotte replied.

But her voice was dull and dreary like the day, and though, as she had just said of the weather, "not actually raining," the mother's ears perceived that tears were not very far off.

"Don't go to lessons again immediately you come in," she said. "'All work and no play' makes dull girls as well as dull boys. Come into the drawing-room. Jerry came in looking so shivery that I am going to give him a cup of my afternoon tea. Come too, dear, and let us three have a few minutes cosily together. The other boys won't be home yet."

Charlotte hesitated.

"Mamma," she said, "I must work hard—harder than ever; and then—I changed my blue frock immediately. You know I promised you I would, and if any one should come in I would not look very nice," and she glanced at the old brown dress.

"Nonsense, dear. It is most unlikely that any one will come on such a day. And take my word for it, you will work far better if you give yourself a little interval—a pleasant little interval."

Mrs Waldron opened the drawing-room door as she spoke, and Charlotte followed her. It did look pleasant and inviting, for well-worn as was much of the furniture, simple—in these days of plush and lace and gorgeous Eastern draperies—as were the few additions that had been made to it from time to time, Charlotte's mother possessed the touch that seems born with some people, of making a room attractive. Her extreme, exquisite neatness had to do with it—the real underlying spirit of order, which has nothing in common with cold primness or the vulgar hiding away from observation of the occupations of daily life; and joined to this a keen perception of colour, a quick eye and hand for all combinations which give pleasure.

"I can always tell when mamma has been in a room," Charlotte would say, rather dolefully. "I wonder if I shall ever learn to give things the look she does."

The tea-table was drawn up near the fire, and Jerry was seated on a low chair beside it.

"Oh, mamma," he exclaimed, "I thought you were never coming. I have made the tea to perfection. Oh, and here's Charlotte too. How jolly! It isn't often that we three get a cosy tea together like this."

"Are you warmer now, my boy?" his mother asked. "You are very bluey-white-looking still."

For Jerry, unable to run or even to walk fast, was apt to catch bad colds in chilly weather.

"I'm all right, thank you, mother. I'm quite hungry. Look, Charlotte," and he raised the cover of a neat little china dish on the table, "isn't that nice? I bought it for a present to mother. I got it from the old muffin-man—he was just passing. That's why mamma invited me to tea, I expect."

Charlotte's face relaxed. It was impossible to look and feel gloomy with such a welcome.

"It isn't fair for me to come too," she said in her own pleasant voice; "one muffin isn't too much for two."

"Nor for one, when it's a proper tea," said Jerry.

"But this isn't, you know. This is only a slight refectation. We're going to have our proper school-room tea as usual of course."

"And how have you got on to-day, Charlotte?" asked her mother, when the muffin and the tea had been discussed.

She was a little anxious to hear, though careful not to let it be seen that she was so.

Charlotte's face clouded over.

"Mamma," she said, "I think you had better not ask me. You know I would tell you and Jerry more than anybody—but—I want to be good, and I can't, and—perhaps there are some bad feelings that it's best not to speak about."

Jerry looked up with fullest sympathy in his thin white face.

"I don't know," said Mrs Waldron. "I can't judge unless you tell me a little. Is it about that young girl, Charlotte? Has she come?"

"Yes; she was there all day."

"Well, is she disagreeable? Does she interfere with you in any way?"

"In every way, mamma. At least I feel sure it is going to be in every way. She's—she's to be in my class for everything. She's—it's no good hiding the truth—she's awfully clever and far on, and ahead of us all."

Mrs Waldron's face looked grave. She felt such sympathy with Charlotte that she was almost shocked at herself. She was only human! She had hoped that her child might be spared the special rivalry which she knew would touch her the most acutely.

"Are you not fanciful, dear? How can you possibly be sure in one day that Miss—what is her name?"

"Meredon, mamma. Claudia Meredon—isn't it a lovely name?" said Charlotte with a rather curious smile. "Even her name is uncommon and beautiful." Mrs Waldron could not help laughing.

"You are going too far, my dear child. I am sure your own name is quite nice enough. You have no reason to be ashamed of it."

"Ashamed of it! no, mamma," said Charlotte with heightened colour. "It isn't that."

"But you are fanciful, dear, about Miss Meredon. How can you be sure in one day that she is going to distance you in all your lessons?"

"She will do so in German, any way," said Charlotte gloomily, "and that is almost the worst of all. Oh, mamma, if you had heard Herr Märklestatter to-day! Just out of contradiction I got an extra difficult piece to translate, and I stumbled over it rather, I know. At another time I wouldn't have minded, and he wouldn't have minded. But to-day—"

"He wanted you to show off before the new girl of course, and very likely you did too, and that made you worse," said Jerry bluntly.

"Perhaps," Charlotte agreed. "But oh, mamma, you would have been sorry for me," and her voice broke.

"I am sorry for you, my dear. It is a battle you have to fight. But you must be brave—about your lessons; you know *we* know you always do your best. That should keep you happy."

Charlotte gave a deep sigh. But before she left the room she stooped and kissed her mother.

"Thank you, mamma," she said.

Jerry followed her to the school-room.

"Jerry," she said, as she sat down and spread out her books, "I must have had a sort of feeling that this girl was to do me harm. It is not true that things are even—she has *everything*, you see. The worst of it is, that I almost believe she is good."

"Charlotte!" exclaimed Jerry.

"Yes, it sounds awful, but you know what I mean. It makes it horrid of me to hate her, and I'm afraid I do. At least if she gets the German prize—the one he gives for composition at the end of the term—I shall."

"Shall what?"

"Hate her," said Charlotte, grimly.

Jerry said no more.

Had Claudia Meredon "everything?"

Charlotte would assuredly have thought so more firmly than ever had she seen her at the moment when she was thus speaking of her. She was driving up the Silverthorns avenue in the pretty pony-carriage which Lady Mildred had appropriated to her use. It was a chilly evening, and the rain had been falling by heavy fits and starts all day. Miss Meredon was well wrapped up, however, and she drove fast. Her cheeks were glowing with excitement, and even in that most unbecoming of attire, a waterproof cloak, she looked, as Charlotte had almost bitterly allowed, "lovely." Her bright hair crept out in little wavy curls from under her black hat, her eyes were sparkling—she looked a picture of happiness.

"Don't ring," she said quickly to the groom, as she threw him the reins, "I'll let myself in," and she was out of the carriage and up the steps in a moment.

The great front door was fastened from within, but Claudia ran round the terrace to a side entrance which she knew she should find open. And without waiting to take off even her waterproof, she flew down a passage, across the large hall, and into a smaller one, on to which opened the drawing-room where Lady Mildred usually sat when alone.

"She cannot but be pleased," thought the girl; "and if I am very quick, I may be able to write a word home to-night."

She opened the door, and as she did so she seemed to bring in with her a gust of the fresh breezy autumn air. The lady who was reading by the fire, or possibly dozing, for the light was growing faint, started and shivered.

"Claudia," she exclaimed, "for any sake, shut the door. How can you be so inconsiderate?"

Miss Meredon closed the door gently and came forward.

"Oh, Aunt Mildred, forgive me; I am so sorry," she replied in her bright eager voice. "I was in such a hurry to tell you how capitally I have got on. I have been so happy. The school is delightful. And, aunt, only fancy—won't mamma and all of them be pleased? The German master did so praise me! I am to be in the highest class, and—and—he said it would do the others good to have me with them. It's not for myself I am so pleased—it's for papa and mamma. And to think that I never had German lessons from any one but mamma."

She ran on so eagerly that it would have been almost impossible to stop her. And when she at last came to a halt, out of breath, Lady Mildred did not at once speak. When she did her words were more chilling than silence.

"I do wish you were less impulsive and excitable, Claudia," she said. "Of course I am pleased that you should take a good place, and all that; but I think it rather injudicious of the teachers to have begun praising you up so the first day. They would not have done so had you not been my niece. It is just what I was afraid of."

"Aunt Mildred, I assure you the German master knew nothing about who I was. And I feel sure he wouldn't have cared if he had known. And it was more he than any one. Miss Lloyd is nice, but—she isn't at all gushing. She just told me quietly that so far as she could judge I should be in the highest classes, and—and that it was plain I had been very well taught."

Lady Mildred looked up sharply.

"You did not—I hope," she said, "you did not think it necessary to enlighten them as to who had been your teachers?"

"No," said Claudia, "I did not, because you had told me not to do so. I don't know in any case that I should have done so, aunt, for though you say I am so childish, I don't feel inclined to tell everything to people I don't know. Indeed I am not so silly, only—I couldn't help running to tell *you*, just—just as I would have done to mamma," and Claudia's voice quivered a little.

"Oh, well," said her aunt, "don't excite yourself about it. I am glad to see you have sense of your own—indeed, I always say you have if you would only think a little. But you must learn to be less impulsive—you know how entirely I forbid your making any friendships or intimacies among those girls. What are they like—pretty fair on the whole?"

"They were all very kind," began Claudia.

"Kind, child! Don't use such stupid words. Of course they will be all only too civil. That's not the question. What sort of girls do they seem?"

"Some seem very nice indeed," replied Miss Meredon. "The nicest looking of all, indeed she is rather a peculiarly pretty girl—I never saw any one quite like her, except—no, I don't remember who it can be she reminds me of. She has quite dark brown hair, and a rather brown complexion, prettily brown, you know, and yet bright blue eyes. Her name is Charlotte Waldron."

"Humph!" said Lady Mildred, "like her father." She was not fond of Mr Waldron's very "Osbert" characteristics, though she scarcely allowed even to herself that he had any traceable connection with the Silverthorns' family.

"Oh, do you know them?" exclaimed Claudia, joyfully. "I felt sure when I saw her that you could not object—"

"Nonsense, Claudia," Lady Mildred interrupted. "Her father is the Wortherham lawyer, or *a* Wortherham lawyer; no doubt there are plenty of them. And I should rather more object, if possible, to your making friends with this girl than with any others of the Wortherham misses. Mr Waldron has some little of the Silverthorns business, and I won't have any gossiping about my affairs. You know the understanding on which you came to me?"

"Of course I do, dear aunt," Claudia replied. "I wish you would not think because I say out to you whatever I feel that I have *any* idea of going against your wishes. I only meant that this girl looked so—it sounds rather vulgar to express it so, but it is the only way to say it—she looks so completely a lady that I thought you would probably not mind my knowing her a little better than the others. I fancy we shall be together in most of our lessons."

"So much the worse," thought Lady Mildred. "It is really very unlucky. I had no idea that Edward Waldron had a daughter old enough to be at school."

But aloud, after a moment's silence, she remarked with a slight touch of sarcasm in her tone,—

"So Miss Waldron also is a remarkably talented young person. She must be so if she is to rank with you, I suppose."

"Aunt Mildred!" exclaimed Claudia. In her place most girls of her age, Charlotte Waldron certainly, would have burst into tears, or left the room in indignation, but this was fortunately not Claudia's "way." She forced back the momentary feeling of irritation, and answered brightly: "I know you are only teasing me, Aunt Mildred. You don't really think me so dreadfully conceited?"

Even Lady Mildred could not help relaxing.

"You are very sweet-tempered, my dear, whatever else you are or are not, and it is the best of all gifts." She sighed as she spoke.

"Now you will make me blush," said Claudia merrily.

"And was this Miss Waldron very 'kind,' as you call it—very '*empressee*,' and all the rest of it?" Lady Mildred asked.

"No-o," answered Claudia, hesitating a little; "I can't say that she was. Her manner is rather cold and reserved, but there is something very nice about her. I am sure she would be very nice if one knew her better. Perhaps she is shy. I think that gave me the feeling of wishing to be nice to her," she added naïvely.

"'Nice' in the sense of being civil and courteous, of course you must be. I trust you are quite incapable of being otherwise. And it is the most ill-bred and vulgar idea to suppose that the right way of keeping people in their places is by being *rude* to them. That at once puts one *beneath* them. But, on the other hand, that is a very different thing from rushing into school-girl intimacies and bosom friendships, which I cannot have."

"I know," said Claudia, but though she sighed a little it was inaudibly. "Aunt Mildred," she began again, half-timidly.

"Well?"

"Has the letter-bag gone? Can I possibly write to mamma to-night?"

"The post-bag has not gone, I believe," said Lady Mildred. "No doubt you can write. I suppose you are in a fever to report the German master's compliments—if you think it amiable and considerate to leave your old aunt alone when she has been alone all day, instead of making tea for her and sitting talking with her comfortably. But of course you very intellectual young ladies now-a-days think such small attentions to old people quite beneath you. You will prefer to write in your own room, I suppose—you have a fire. I will send you up some tea if you wish it. May I trouble you to ring the bell?" But as Claudia, without speaking, came forward to do so, Lady Mildred gave a little scream.

"Good gracious, child, you haven't taken off your waterproof, and you have been standing beside me all this time with that soakingly wet cloak. If you are determined to kill yourself I object to your killing me too."

"It is scarcely wet, aunt," said Claudia, gently. "But I am very sorry all the same," and she left the room as she spoke.

"Why do I constantly vex her?" she said to herself, despairingly. "I must be very stupid and clumsy. I do so want to please her, as papa and mamma said, not only because she is so good to us, but even more, because she is so lonely—poor Aunt Mildred. Of course my letter can wait till to-morrow. Oh, I know what I'll do—I'll be *very* quiet, and I'll creep into the drawing-room behind Ball with the tea-tray, and Aunt Mildred will not know I'm there."

And the smiles returned to Claudia's face as she flew up-stairs and along the gallery to her room. Such a pretty, comfortable room as it was! A bright fire burned in the grate, her writing-table stood temptingly ready. Claudia would dearly have liked to have sat down there and then, to rejoice the home hearts with her good news. For they, as well as she, had been awaiting rather anxiously the results of her measuring her forces against those of her compeers. So much depended on the opinion of qualified and impartial judges as to her capacities; for, as her mother had said laughingly,—

"It may be the old story of our thinking our goose a swan, you know, dear."

Yes, it would have been delightful to write off at once—a day sooner than they had been expecting to hear. But the very sight of her room confirmed the girl in not yielding to the temptation, for it recalled Lady Mildred's constant though undemonstrative kindness.

"No doubt it was she who told the servants to keep the fire up for fear I should be cold," she thought. "Dear me, how very good she is to me. How I wish mamma, and Lalage, and Alix, and all of them, for that matter, could see me here really like a little princess! But oh! how I wish I could send some of all this luxury to them—if I could but send dear mamma a fire in *her* room to-night! They won't even be allowing themselves one in the drawing-room yet—they'll all be sitting together in the study. Monday evening, poor papa's holiday evening, as he calls it."

All the time she was thus thinking she was taking off her things as fast as possible. In two minutes she was ready, her hair in order, the rebellious curls in their place, her collar, and all the little details of her dress fit to stand the scrutiny of even Lady Mildred's sharp eyes; and as she flew down-stairs again, she met, as she had counted upon, the footman carrying in the tea-tray. The drawing-room was quite dark now, as far as light from outside was concerned, and Lady Mildred's lamp left the corners in shadow. It was easy for Claudia to slip in unperceived, for her aunt was not expecting her, and did not even raise her eyes when the door opened, and the slight clatter that always accompanies cups and saucers announced the arrival of the tea.

"Tell Crossley to come in a few minutes to take Miss Meredon's tea up-stairs," said Lady Mildred, not knowing that the footman had already left the room, and that the movements she still heard were made by Claudia, safely ensconced behind the tray, and laughing quietly to herself. In another minute a voice close beside her made the old

lady start.

"Aunt Mildred," it said, "here is your tea."

"Claudia!" she exclaimed. "I thought you were up-stairs in your room."

"Selfishly writing my letter home! Oh, aunt! how could you think I would be so horrid! My letter will do very well to-morrow. I did not think it was so near tea-time when I thoughtlessly spoke of it. Do you think I don't enjoy making tea for you?—almost the only thing I can do for you," said the girl with a kind of affectionate reproach.

Lady Mildred was silent for a few moments. Then she said again, with a tone in her voice which was not often heard,
—

"Claudia, you have the best of gifts—a sweet and sunny nature. Try to keep it, my dear."

And Claudia felt rewarded.

She sat up in her own room that night for half-an-hour to write the home letter.

"Mamma would forgive my doing so for once," she said to herself, "for I may not have time to-morrow. If I am really to do well at school I must work hard, and it will not be easy to do so, and yet to please Aunt Mildred. But I don't mind how difficult it is—it will be worth it all to be able to help them at home without being separated. But oh, mamma, mamma! it is very hard to be away from you all!"

And Claudia leant her head on the table and burst into tears.

Chapter Six.

Claudia's Home.

The Rectory at Britton-Garnett was one of those picturesque, tempting-looking, old cottage-like houses which, seen in summer by a passer-by, embowered in greenery and roses, remain in the memory as a sort of little earthly paradise. And its inhabitants, who loved it well in spite of its imperfections, would have accepted the verdict without much protest.

"It is a sweet little place," Mrs Meredon would say, "and for rich people it might really be made almost perfect. But with these old houses, you see, there seems always something that wants doing or repairing. The roof is in a very bad state, and we are sometimes very much afraid that there is dry-rot in the old wainscoting."

But the roof had to be patched up, and the incipient dry-rot had to be left to itself. Mr Meredon was far too poor to spend a shilling or even a sixpence that he could possibly help; and as the house was his own private property,—for what had been the Rectory was a very small house in the village, quite out of the question as the abode of a large family,—there was no one to appeal to for necessary repairs, as is usually the case. The Rectory proper was, in point of fact, large enough for the living, which was a very small one. Long ago now, when the Meredons first came there, shortly after their marriage, it had been with the idea that Britton-Garnett was but the stepping-stone to better things. But years had gone on without the better things coming, and now for some considerable time past the Rector had left off hoping that they ever would, or that he could be able conscientiously to accept them should they do so. For a terrible misfortune had come over him, literally to darken his life. He had grown almost totally blind.

It had been softened to some extent by a very slow and gradual approach. The sufferer himself, and his wife and elder children, had had time to prepare for it, and to make their account with it. There was even now a good hope that, with great care and prudence, the glimmering of sight that remained to him might be preserved; that the disease had, so to speak, done its worst. But adieu to all prospects of a more active career, of the wide-spread usefulness and distinction Mr Meredon had sometimes dreamt of, of "the better things," in the practical sense even, that he had hoped for, when he and his light-hearted and talented but portionless young bride had, like so many thousands of others in fact and fiction, "so very imprudently married." It was even harder in some ways than if the poor man had become completely blind, for then there would have been nothing more to fear, no use in precautions or care.

"Sometimes I could wish it had been so," he once confessed to his wife. "I don't know but that it would have been easier for you all."

"Easier for *you*, perhaps, dear Basil," said his wife. "But for us—oh no! Think what it would be for you not to know the children's faces as they grow up, not to—"

"The loss would be mine in all that," interrupted Mr Meredon.

"But, papa dear, it would be *much* more trouble for us if we had always to trot about with you, if you couldn't go anywhere alone. We should have to get a little dog for you—or else I should have to leave off my lessons and my music and everything to go everywhere with you. No, you are a very selfish old man to wish to be quite blind," said Claudia gaily. "I like you much better as you are."

"I should not see how thin your mother's face is growing. I can see that. The grey hairs—if they are coming—I can't see as it is."

"Nor can I—for the very good reason that there are none to see," Claudia replied.

There were several children—all younger, considerably younger than Claudia, and the two next her were girls. So for the moment the family cares were not so heavy as in the future they would assuredly be, when the little boys' schooling would have to be thought of, and college, or starting them in the world, beyond that again. Mr Meredon was the younger son of a large family. All that he could hope for had been done for him, and the seniors of his family were not rich men for their position.

"There is only Aunt Mildred," he said more than once to his wife: "she is alone now, and she used to be fond of me."

"Till you married," said Mrs Meredon. "And—it is not exactly as if her money was Meredon money. She only has it for life, has she not?"

"Yes, only for her life; and she has, by her husband's instructions, to keep up the place in such perfect order,—besides its being temporarily rather heavily burdened,—that she is really not very rich in ready money. General Osbert, the next owner, will be better off than she. Still, if she could see us, she might do something for the children. Anything would be something—even helping Claudia's education."

"That would be almost the best help she could give us," said Mrs Meredon, eagerly. "Claudia is, I feel almost certain, unusually clever, and—you must not be vexed, Basil—an idea has struck me, her and me I should say, which would make things easier in the future. If Claudia could have the chance of some really first-rate teaching for a couple of years or so, she would then be eighteen, and she might turn her knowledge to account."

"You mean by becoming a governess?" said Mr Meredon. "I doubt if Aunt Mildred would give any help towards such an end as that."

"No, I don't mean a governess in the ordinary way. But in the first place she could teach Lalage and Alix, and the boys too for some time to come. And besides that, I quite think she could have other pupils. Mrs Carteret has been speaking to me about her three girls—they are quite little still, you know, but in a year or two she will have to arrange something. Of course they are not the sort of people to send their girls to school; but, on the other hand, she is very averse to having a resident governess, as their house is already so full. She almost said to me that they would gladly pay as much as to a resident governess if they could meet with any lady in the neighbourhood who could undertake to give the children daily lessons. And Mr Fade, I rather fancy he would be delighted to join in any plan of the kind. He wants companionship for Sydney, and yet he would certainly never send her to school."

"So we should have a select establishment for young ladies here," said Mr Meredon, half amused, half incredulous. "I doubt if the Meredon prejudices would not be even more shocked by that than if Claudia became a governess."

"I don't think so; besides, we can't afford to consider that. Our circumstances are very peculiar. We must do what we can for ourselves. And Claudia is a very exceptional girl."

"Yes, I allow that. But would such a scheme not entail too much fatigue and work for her? She will be very young even at eighteen. And no teacher can teach everything."

"No; but if it were arranged, Claudia and I are sure that both the Carterets and Mr Fade would join to have one or two masters once a week or so from Curwen. Claudia could superintend the preparation for them, and I, of course, would give what help I could if it were in this house. But most likely Mrs Carteret would wish the lessons to be there. There would be an advantage in that, for it would leave me more time for reading and writing with you."

Mr Meredon was silent for a little.

"That would be a very great comfort," he said at last, "and possibly even more. I can't bear to take up your time just now, when you have all the teaching to do; but if you were freer I might perhaps go on with some of the work I had in hand when my eyes first got so bad. I could dictate to you," and Mr Meredon looked up eagerly.

But the brighter expression soon faded.

"I am afraid," he said, "we are reckoning on our chickens not only before they are hatched, but before we have got any eggs! In the first place, Mrs Carteret may not think Claudia fit for it. No man is a prophet in his own country—and you see they have known her since she was a baby."

Mrs Meredon smiled.

"I will ask Mrs Carteret about it," she said.

"And then the two years' schooling for her. Where is that to come from?" he asked.

"Ah! that *is* the question. Well, Basil, I love our independence as much as you do, but with this prospect of steady and remunerative employment for her, I think we should swallow our false pride,—it surely would be false pride in such a case,—and ask Lady Mildred to help us. It would not be asking much, or burdening her for long."

"I will think it over," Mr Meredon replied, "and you perhaps had better sound Mrs Carteret, and, if you like, Mr Fade also."

Perhaps Mrs Meredon had already done so. Be that as it may, the results were satisfactory. And a few days later the letter on which hung so many hopes was written by his wife to Mr Meredon's dictation.

"And now," she said wisely, "we have done what we could. Let us try in the mean time to put the matter off our minds."

Their patience, however, was not so taxed as often happens in such cases. Nor was the answer what they had expected. How seldom, how strangely seldom *are* expectations realised! If ever in the long run things turn out as we have anticipated, the details of their fulfilment are so curiously unlike what we had pictured that we scarcely recognise them. Mrs Meredon and Claudia, the blind father too probably, had lain awake many an hour reading in imagination Lady Mildred's reply. Would it be curt and cold, at once negating all hopes, or condescendingly benevolent, or simply kind and kinswomanlike? The last, after so many years, and after too her expressed disapproval of her nephew's marriage, was scarcely to be hoped for. It was none of all these, for in the shape of a letter her answer never came at all.

But one late August afternoon, about a month before the rainy Saturday when Charlotte and Gervais Waldron sat discussing the expected "new girl" at Miss Lloyd's, the nameless heiress of Silverthorns, the old fly from Welby, the Britton-Garnett railway station, turned in at the Rectory gate and slowly crawled up the drive, already slushy with early autumn rains and want of rolling,—for carriage wheels were rare at the Meredons'—and in answer to the scared little maid's information that "missus was at home," a tall, upright old lady in deep mourning descended, and was ushered into the drawing-room. It was empty. She had time to look about her—to note the shabby furniture, the scrupulous care with which the carpet, faded though it was, was covered to protect it from the sun, the darned curtains looped up so as to show to the best advantage, the one real ornament of the room, a lovely nosegay of roses, freshly cut and fragrant, placed so as to make a bright spot where most wanted.

"Yes," she decided, "there has been no exaggeration. They are very poor, but they are not degraded by it. They have kept up their self-respect."

But she was scarcely prepared for the vision that met her eyes when, an instant later, the door opening made her turn round.

It was Claudia—Claudia in a little washed-out cotton frock, which might once have been blue, with snowy collar and cuffs, and a rosebud at her throat, her lovely hair fluttering over her forehead, her hazel eyes raised in half-perplexed inquiry,—Claudia, the most exquisite picture of girlhood that Lady Mildred's gaze had ever rested on.

She half started forward to meet the child; but Claudia was absorbed in her commission, and did not notice it.

"Mamma is very sorry," she began, "she—she has been busy writing for papa. She will be here in a moment. Can you kindly tell me your name—and is there anything I can say to mamma for you?"

"My dear, yes. Tell her not to hurry; I can wait. Tell her and your father that I am Aunt Mildred, and that I have come to spend the day with them if they will have me. And before you run away, can you not kiss your old aunt?"

"Of course, of course. I had no idea it was you, dear aunt," said Claudia. "How strange of me not to guess, and we so often speak of you!"

"You knew that your mother, or perhaps I should say your father, wrote to me lately?" asked Lady Mildred.

"Yes," said Claudia simply, "I knew all about it. And oh! I am so glad you have come. It is ever so much better than a letter."

"She is lovely and good, I feel sure, and I should imagine clever, like her mother," thought Lady Mildred. "What a pity it seems! But they are right—their idea is infinitely better than making a governess of such a girl, even if she were not a Meredon."

And the result of that August day that Lady Mildred Osbert spent with her nephew and his family was, that a fortnight later Claudia Meredon was installed at Silverthorns.

Lady Mildred, when free from prejudice, could do things both kindly and sensibly, though nevertheless "in her own way."

"I cannot do much for you," she said to her nephew and his wife; "but I am heartily sorry for you,—I had no idea Basil's eyes were so bad,—and what I can do I will. I am not so rich as is generally thought."

"That I know," Mr Meredon interrupted.

"Yes, I have always wished my own family to know it. As for the Osberts, time enough for them to know it when I am dead. It is no love for them that actuates me, but my determination to carry out my husband's wishes. Thanks to this, the property will be all but unencumbered again when it leaves my hands. But this state of things cripples me. However, that is no one's concern but my own. Of all things I hate gossip, so I keep my own counsel. Now as to Claudia—I should like, I tell you frankly, to get some personal gratification out of what I do. I have taken a great fancy to the child. Suppose you let me have her for the two years, instead of sending her away to school—I hate girls' schools, by the way, even the best of them. But I have made inquiry, and I find that at Wortherham, near me, she could have excellent teaching. There is a *sort* of school there, a day school only, for some of the girls of the place, which is most highly spoken of—the principal of it, Miss Lloyd, is very capable herself, and has first-rate teachers to help her. If Claudia attended these classes she could live with me and cheer me up a little. I am very lonely. The two years may see the end of me—"

"Don't say that, Aunt Mildred," Mr Meredon interrupted; "it makes me feel as if I should have done something—written to you, or had some communication with you before. Has it been false pride?"

"Perhaps," said Lady Mildred, bluntly. "I was not cordial about your marriage. You know it, my dear," she added, turning to Mrs Meredon. "But it was no ill-feeling to you personally. And as things are—well, I see plainly that Basil

could not have a better wife.”

“Thank you for saying so,” said Mrs Meredon simply.

“And let me say I think your plan for Claudia a delightful one.”

“But I have more to explain,” Lady Mildred went on. “I like doing things in my own way. If she comes to me it must not be in the guise of a poor relation. I won’t have all the old women in Wortherham,—dreadful radical place, that it is,—nor my county neighbours either, for that matter, gossiping about the poverty-stricken Meredons. Every one knows the Meredons are poor, but let us keep all details to ourselves. Claudia must not let any one at this school know anything about her motives for studying as hard as I am sure she will do; and she must not overdo it. She is well advanced already, you say?”

“I hope so,” said the mother. “But it is difficult to judge till one compares her with others. In French and German I am sure she will stand well.”

“Yes, I know she could not have had a better teacher than you.”

“I had unusual advantages myself certainly,” said Mrs Meredon, who had been many years in France and Germany.

Lady Mildred nodded her head without speaking. She had the greatest belief in her niece’s ability, and with good reason.

“Well, then,” she said, “we may consider it settled. I shall meet Claudia in London a week hence and see to a ‘trousseau’ for her, so give yourself no trouble on that head. You can explain to her all I have said. She will understand why I do not wish her to make friendships with any of the Wortherham girls whom she will be thrown with?”

“She will thoroughly understand that she is to follow your wishes in *everything*,” said Mrs Meredon. “But I must warn you that she is a very sociable child—the world seems to her a very much more delightful place than to most of us, for somehow she always manages to see the best side of people.”

“I hope she will see the best side of me then,” said Lady Mildred, rather grimly; “for I am a cantankerous old woman, and too old now to change. Claudia had better rub up her rose-coloured spectacles before she comes my way.”

And so, a fortnight later saw Lady Mildred’s grand-niece installed as the child of the house at Silverthorns, or, according to the local wiseacres who there, as everywhere, knew more of their neighbours’ affairs than the neighbours themselves, as “her ladyship’s adopted daughter, heiress to Silverthorns, and all the great accumulation of Osbert wealth.”

And certainly the girl’s sunny face and bright bearing gave some colour to Charlotte Waldron’s belief that Claudia Meredon was one of those favoured human beings “who have *everything*!”

Chapter Seven.

Misunderstood.

Claudia’s success in the German class was, as Charlotte had expected, but the first of her triumphs. She had natural abilities of the first order; she had been excellently and most carefully taught, with the close individual attention and sympathy which no teacher can give in such perfection as a parent, rare though the parents may be who are fitted to teach their own children! And joined to these advantages she had the most intense desire to learn, not merely from her innate love of knowledge, but from the even nobler motive of wishing to help her parents. So that it was not to be wondered at that by the end of the first week Miss Lloyd, who had been requested by Lady Mildred to let her know her opinion of her new pupil, sent to Silverthorns a most satisfactory report. For Miss Lloyd was honest to the backbone.

“Miss Meredon will make good progress, I have not the least doubt,” she wrote; “but it is only fair to say that the credit will be mostly due to her own application and to the teachers who have already so thoroughly taught her how to learn.”

Lady Mildred showed Claudia the letter.

“It will not make *you* vain,” she said, “for it is your mother it praises, not you. Miss Lloyd must be a straightforward sort of person; most schoolmistresses try to make out that their pupils know nothing when they go to them, and learn everything with them. Does she ever cross-question you as to who those teachers of yours were?”

“No,” said Claudia. “She asked me—or perhaps it was the French governess—if I had ever been abroad, and I said no, and then I think I said I had always been taught at home.”

“And the other pupils—do they seem inquisitive either?”

Claudia hesitated.

“I don’t think they are more so than any girls would be,” she said. “I—I don’t tell them anything, and of course they are accustomed to being very friendly and communicative with each other. I think they are all nice girls. The one I like the best—she and I do nearly all the same lessons—is Charlotte Waldron. At least I think I could like her if I knew

her; but—”

“But what? You are not going to begin pestering me to let you make friends with her—her especially—I told you I don’t like her family,” said Lady Mildred irritably.

“Oh no, aunt, I was only going to say, I don’t know that she likes me,” said Claudia. “She is a very cold girl, except with some few whom she seems to know well.”

“Well, I hope you are cold to her in return,” replied her aunt, though as she glanced at the bright eager face beside her, it was difficult to associate it with the word.

“I try to do as you wish—as mamma explained,” said Claudia gently. “One thing I am sure of, Aunt Mildred, and that is that they all think me the very happiest girl in the world. And I almost think I am.”

She stooped to kiss Lady Mildred as she spoke, and then ran off.

She had not forgotten to bring her rose-coloured spectacles with her, that was certain. And it was well for her that it was so. There were difficulties in her present life that her mother had feared, but that Claudia herself in her innocence was as yet but very vaguely conscious of. She was scrupulously anxious to follow her aunt’s directions as to her behaviour to her companions, but to one so open-hearted and genial it was not easy to be only coldly courteous and always self-restrained. And the struggle gave her a curious sort of timidity and uncertainty of manner which was not perhaps without its charm, but made it difficult to understand her, even for those who cared to exercise any observation and discrimination.

“How do you like her, Charlotte? I do wish you would tell me?” asked Gueda Knox one day, about a month after Miss Meredon’s advent.

“I don’t want to speak about her; I hate gossip,” said Charlotte impatiently.

“I’m not asking you to gossip,” Gueda replied. “I really want to know. I think you might tell me; it can do no harm, as I am going away almost immediately,” for the Knox family, all excepting the vicar himself, were obliged to spend fully half the year in the south of France for Mrs Knox’s health.

“That’s just the worst of it,” Charlotte replied impatiently. “If you hadn’t been going away I would not have minded so much, but without you I shall be thrown more and more with her.”

“That of itself is a pretty plain answer to my question,” said Gueda composedly. “Of course it means you dislike her.”

“I have neither said nor implied that,” said Charlotte. “I suppose it is wrong to dislike any one whom you really don’t know any harm of,” she added.

“But one does so. Everybody in the world dislikes others without real reason. Don’t you remember Dr Fell?” said Gueda.

“No, it isn’t that,” said Charlotte. “I don’t dislike her without reason. If you weren’t going away, Gueda, I don’t know that I would tell you anything. I do dislike her, and my reason is that she is interfering with me in every way. Why did she come here at all? She is charming, and rich, and clever—why couldn’t she leave us all at peace? I am perfectly sick of her name—it is nothing but Miss Meredon this, Miss Meredon that, wherever you go. If you had heard Dr Lewis in the street yesterday, just raving about her.”

“And papa is nearly as bad,” said Gueda. “He saw her the other day when he called to see Miss Lloyd about the confirmation classes. I know how you must feel, Charlotte. Of course it is much the worst for you, because you have been so incontestably the head of us all till now. I can’t help feeling it for you, only—”

“Only what?”

“If it is a wrong feeling—if it is—don’t be angry, Charlotte—if it is jealousy,” said Gueda.

“I can’t help it. I’ve tried not to dislike her,” said Charlotte.

“Have you told your mother?—you say you tell her everything. That must be awfully nice. I dare scarcely tell mine anything now, she’s so ill,” said Gueda with a sigh.

“Poor Gueda,” said Charlotte with quiet sympathy. “Yes, I have talked about it to mamma; but she thinks it is best not to say much about it to any one. She says it impresses some kinds of wrong feelings more on our minds to talk about them. But how can I help it?—every moment it is something new. Did you bear this morning how mademoiselle went on about her French accent? And that duet that Mr Finlay will insist on our learning together! He said, Gueda, that I should take the bass because it was easier. Fancy that! he said it before her—Mr Finlay, who has always—”

She stopped.

“Yes, I know,” said Gueda. “It is very hard for you, Charlotte.”

“No one seems really to understand except Jerry, and now you,” said Charlotte. “I am afraid mamma is rather shocked at me. I suppose grown-up people don’t understand these feelings,” she added, little suspecting that the excess of her mother’s sympathy was what made her shrink from much expression of it, and she sighed deeply. “Why do some people have *everything!*” she went on, reverting to her old refrain. “It really does not seem fair. You know, Gueda, that it is a great deal because we are not rich that I want to get on very well. I may—don’t think me

very conceited—but I may be able to write books when I am grown-up, or to do something of the kind.”

“But you are getting on well—as well as you could possibly wish.”

Charlotte shook her head.

“The teachers don’t all think so *now*” she replied, “and I am losing heart. Oh, Gueda, *if* I don’t get the German prize!”

“You *must*,” said Gueda. “I wish you could like her, Charlotte.”

“No, I don’t want to like her. I only wish she would go away—or still more, that she had never come. I don’t want to like her and she doesn’t want it either.”

Gueda looked rather perplexed.

“There’s something in that,” she said. “I don’t think it’s as much your fault as might seem at first. I can’t make her out. She seems good and *nice* altogether; but she must be selfish. She does seem so perfectly delighted when she is praised, and even put before you; and she does not really try to make friends with us. She might make you like her.”

Something was running in Gueda’s head about the best way of winning withheld liking or affection being to put oneself in the way of receiving a service from the one to be gained over. “If Miss Meredon cared to do it with Charlotte, she might. Charlotte is so generous: if she were appealed to by the girl to help her a little, she would respond at once, I know,” thought Gueda.

“No,” agreed Charlotte with some satisfaction, “she does not try. I don’t want her to, and I don’t try myself. All the same, I am glad she doesn’t.”

“Some of the girls say she is affected,” said Gueda.

“It doesn’t prevent them all from toadying her in a disgusting way,” said Charlotte, contemptuously.

“Not all of them,” said Gueda. “Some of them are nicer than that, and are too proud to make friends with a girl who never seems able to speak to any of us naturally. *Some* think her manners are very ‘distinguished,’ and what one must expect from Lady Mildred’s niece.”

“Vulgar snobs!” ejaculated Charlotte.

“What can you expect?” said Gueda. “Perhaps she is really more shy than anything else, and yet I hardly think so. Now and then she seems as if she was ready to burst out laughing, and as eager to chatter and talk nonsense as any of us. And sometimes she has a very curious look in her face, as if she were almost asking pardon of us all. And oh, Charlotte, how pretty she is!”

“You needn’t repeat that. I hear it about fifty times an hour. And she certainly does not look as if she were asking pardon of me every time she is put before me,” said Charlotte. “Now do let us talk of something else, Gueda. Don’t spoil the last few days before you go.”

And Claudia, in blissful ignorance of all the discussion she evoked, was just then writing home one of her happy, almost triumphant letters, telling of new laurels gained and satisfactory opinions everywhere. She spoke warmly of Lady Mildred’s kindness, and kept silence on her strangely trying temper, as well as on the difficulties she was growing more conscious of in her school-life.

“It would be wrong, distinctly wrong,” she said to herself, “to complain of Aunt Mildred. So there, I have no choice. But about school—I wonder if mamma could say anything to help me? No, I am afraid not. I must just not mind if I am disliked.”

So she told of nothing but of good. Still Mrs Meredon, being a remarkably clever and acute woman,—a woman too of somewhat more determined and less emotional calibre than Charlotte’s gentle, sympathising mother,—read between the lines of her daughter’s letter and saw some rocks ahead.

“She is determined to make the best of everything, and that is only right,” she said to herself. “But she is too one-sided in her way of looking at things just now. I must warn her.”

And this letter brought in return some counsel to Claudia, which she had afterwards even fuller reason to appreciate.

There happened one morning to be an unusually difficult exercise to do for the French teacher. It related to some of the rules of grammar which it was evident the pupils had not thoroughly taken in. “Mademoiselle” explained them again more fully and clearly, but at the end of her dissertation she looked round the circle of faces, with their varying expressions of intelligence, indifference, or bewilderment, and sighed.

“I don’t believe you understand yet, young ladies,” she said. “One or two of you may do so perhaps—Miss Meredon?”—and a smile from Claudia confirmed her hopefulness in that quarter,—“Miss Waldron?” but Charlotte’s face was resolutely bent upon her exercise-book. “She does not understand, and she is too proud to own it,” thought the governess, who, like some others of the teachers, was rather in awe of Charlotte. “Ah, well!—Miss Knox, you Fanny, and Isabel, I am almost sure—” she went on aloud.

“Oh, yes, indeed we understand quite well, even though we can’t quite say it,” said Isabel Lewis hastily. Anything to have done with the lesson and poor conscientious “mademoiselle,” who was so “tiresome” to-day. “You’ll see, mademoiselle, we shall do it all right when it comes up again in our exercises.”

"I am glad to hear it," the French teacher replied in a peculiar tone. "You shall then give me the gratification you promise me without delay. For the next lesson you shall translate into French the following passage in English which I shall now dictate to you."

And she proceeded to read aloud a passage of English especially composed to test the pupil's comprehension of the knotty point.

Isabel made a grimace, but wrote it off readily enough. It was never her way to anticipate troubles. Who knew what might happen before the next lesson? She might discover some unanswerable reason for coaxing a holiday out of "papa"; she *might* have one of the convenient colds which were not much of a penance; the skies might fall! And she only laughed when her companions reproached her for having brought this extra piece of work upon them.

It was really a difficult exercise. It took all Claudia's thorough knowledge of the rules to complete it correctly; and Charlotte, whose advantages of training in modern languages had been fewer, found herself in one or two details hopelessly baffled. But she kept this to herself; she did her best, and trusted there was not much wrong. Where was the use of speaking about it? There was no one who could help her. Mrs Waldron's French was a long ago story; as to her companions, she was pretty sure that, with one exception, they were far more in the dark than herself. But it was new and painful to her to feel misgivings, and the very afternoon on which the exercises had to be given in she sat, her book open before her, trying to see what were her mistakes, and hoping to be able even then to correct them. She was so absorbed that she did not hear herself sigh, nor a light step approaching her in her corner.

"Miss Waldron," said a voice she knew well, with an inflection of timidity which, till recently, happy, hearty Claudia's tones had never known, "please forgive me for asking you if you are puzzled about that exercise. I found it very difficult, but ma—I was rather severely drilled in those rules, and I *think* I have got it right."

"Indeed!" said Charlotte coldly.

"It is the last phrase that is so particularly worrying, is it not?—of course it is made to be so. Many French girls themselves would not know how to put it perfectly."

Now it was this last phrase that to Charlotte had been a veritable ass's bridge. And besides her ambition, she had the purer motive of a student's real interest in thoroughly comprehending the working of the rule. As Claudia spoke she half unconsciously relaxed a little in her stiff, stand-off manner.

"Yes," she said more frankly, "it is the last part that I cannot satisfy myself about."

"Would you let me?—oh, please do," said Claudia, her face flushing, her voice literally trembling with eagerness. "Might I just explain to you how I have said it to myself?" and without waiting for Charlotte's half-hesitating reply, she ran on. In a few clear, terse sentences she put it before her listener, as all mademoiselle's long explanations or the involved language of the grammar had failed to do. Charlotte forgot herself and her prejudices in real admiration and satisfaction.

"I see," she exclaimed delightedly. "Miss Meredon, you have a real genius for teaching."

"Do you really think so?" Claudia replied joyously. "And you are such a good judge. Oh, if you only—" but she checked herself sharply. "You do work so well and so hard, Miss Waldron."

"Yes," said Charlotte, with a slight return of the cold moodiness which Claudia had rarely seen behind, "I don't spare myself. I care for nothing on earth so much as for getting on well with my lessons."

There was an intensity in her tone which almost startled Claudia. At the same time it touched a sympathetic chord.

"Oh, do you really feel so?" she exclaimed impulsively. "I think I can understand it. You have probably some very great motive as well as love of learning. Are you perhaps looking forward to making some use of your education, of all you are learning, before long—to help your parents, perhaps?" Charlotte grew crimson.

"Do you mean to say, am I being educated to be a governess?" she said haughtily. "No, Miss Meredon, I am not I think before you make such remarks you might be at the trouble to understand whom you are talking to, though you seem to think yourself of a perfectly different world from every one about you. But even in *our* world there are such things as well-educated ladies who are not governesses, though the idea may be a new one to you."

Claudia's face grew pale with distress. She clasped her hands together, while her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, dear, what have I done? How clumsy and rude I have been—just when I did so want to be the opposite," for her poor little overture to Charlotte had been made in deference to a suggestion of her mother's, that without infringing Lady Mildred's rules, she might surely find some small opportunities of showing kindness and sympathy to her companions. "I can only say I did not—oh, *indeed* I did not mean to offend you."

"You have found us all sufficiently well-bred to ask *you* no questions, as you evidently wished to be considered a person apart; and I can't therefore see that you, on your side, can expect any confidences," Charlotte said icily.

"No, no, of course not," said Claudia nervously. "But, Miss Waldron, you are forgetting—are you not going to correct that last paragraph?" for Charlotte was bundling up her books and preparing to stalk off with what she considered great dignity.

"Certainly not. I am not going to do anything so dishonourable as to correct my exercises by yours," said Charlotte.

"Oh, it would not be that—you know it would not be that," said Claudia sadly. "I know what is honourable and what is

not so, though you will not allow that I am nice in any way, now that I have offended you. I only explained the rule to you as mademoiselle had already done. You have not seen my exercise—you don't know what I have put."

But it was in vain. And the result, as might have been expected, was that Claudia's exercise was the only correct one, and that Charlotte received for the first time a sharp reprimand from the French teacher for inattention and indifference. And for the first time the praises that were lavished upon herself gave Claudia no pleasure, but instead, real pain and distress.

Chapter Eight.

The Old Legend.

"Jerry," said Charlotte suddenly, a few days after Claudia's unlucky attempt, "it's no use. I've tried and I've tried to like that girl, at least to have no unkind feelings to her, and it's no good. Gueda has gone now, and we—that girl and I—seem forced to be together in everything, and I just hate it."

"But not *her*," said Jerry; "it isn't so bad if it's only the—the thing, the way it's come, that you hate, not the girl herself."

"I don't know. I'm afraid it's much the same, and in a queer way I think I'd not mind so much if there were anything to hate about her, but there isn't. Sometimes I could almost fancy myself liking her awfully, and that makes it worse."

Charlotte stopped writing altogether and gazed out of the window on to the little deserted garden, looking blacker and drearier than ever in this grim December afternoon, with a sort of despair in her face.

"In spite of her being so horrid and impertinent to you the other day—asking if you were going to be a governess—you—papa's daughter, and with four brothers to work for you, even supposing you hadn't a father," said Jerry wrathfully.

"But after all, perhaps, she didn't mean it in any horrid, patronising way. I suppose very, very rich people really don't understand, as papa said. Everybody that isn't as rich as they seems all much about the same to them, I suppose."

Jerry gave a sort of growl.

"Then very rich people must be very vulgar and ill-bred," he said.

"I don't know," said Charlotte. "I try to say things to myself to make me feel nicer about her, but it seems no good. I don't speak about it to mamma, because she told me it was better to fight down such feelings in my own heart, and I could see it really made her unhappy. She is so dreadfully sympathising, and so gentle herself. I'm afraid there's something almost fierce in me that she can scarcely understand, Jerry. But there's one thing that's the worst of all. I think I could stand everything else if it wasn't for the German prize. But if she gets that—oh, Jerry, it will break my heart. And next week Herr Märklestatter will be giving out the notes for the essay. You know the prize is for the essay."

"Is she sure to try for it?"

"Oh, yes," said Charlotte. "The other girls are already saying that it lies between her and me. I don't know that *she* has heard or thought much about it—she doesn't hear much of the talk that goes on, and I'm sure I listen to as little as I can: it can't possibly matter to her as much as to me. It will be the first year I have not had it since Herr Märklestatter has taught us. Oh, Jerry, *isn't* it hard?"

Jerry sat silent, as was his way when his feelings were deeply moved.

"It's more than hard, it's unbearable," he said at last. "I don't care how lovely she is, and all that," he went on after a little pause, "she must be a horrid, stuck-up, selfish creature."

"I don't know," said Charlotte, for the third time. "I don't think I *do* think her so in the bottom of my heart, though sometimes it does seem like it. But independently of her interfering so with me, I don't understand her; she never tells any of us a thing. We don't know if she is an orphan, or if she has any one she cares for, or anything. And yet there is a look in her eyes—" and Charlotte's own eyes took a softer expression, "a far-away look, *almost* sad;—though what can she have to be sad about?—she that has *everything!* I saw it one day when mamma was going to call for me, and I had to go half an hour sooner. I like awfully when mamma calls for me, you know, Jerry, and I suppose I looked pleased when I jumped up, and she was sitting beside me, and I was almost sure I heard her give a sort of little sob."

"I thought you said her father and mother had died when she was a baby, and that she couldn't remember them," Jerry remarked.

"No; I only said very likely they had. It was at the beginning of our talking about it, when I was saying she had everything, and you tried to make out perhaps she wasn't clever,—oh, my goodness, she not clever!—and that she was an orphan, and—and—I am sure there was another thing you said perhaps she had or hadn't."

"I know," said Jerry: "it was that perhaps she had to sleep in the haunted room at Silverthorns. I just wish she had, and that the old ghost, the cruel old Osbert papa told us of, would appear to her and give her a jolly good fright, and teach her to feel for others a little."

"She isn't unfeeling in some ways," said Charlotte. "One day one of the dogs at Silverthorns—it's an old dog that belonged to Mr Osbert, and was always with him, and now it's taken a great fancy to her, she says—well, it followed her, running after her pony-carriage all the way to school, and she never saw it till it panted up to the steps and lay there as if it was dying. She was in such a state—the tears running down her face. She ran in with it in her arms, and begged Miss Lloyd to let it stay; and when she went home again she had it packed up in a shawl beside her. Oh, she does look so nice when she drives off! The pony and everything are so perfect. But I must go on with my lessons."

"So must I," said Jerry; and for a few minutes there was silence.

Then Charlotte looked up again.

"Jerry," she said, "I wish you hadn't said that about the ghost at Silverthorns; it makes me shiver. Supposing, just *supposing* it did go to her, and that she was fearfully frightened, it would seem as if it was our fault somehow."

"Rubbish!" said Jerry. "It wouldn't be our fault; we're not witches. Besides, it's all nonsense."

"I wonder if she has ever heard of it," said Charlotte. "I wonder if there is any truth in it."

And that evening, when all the family was together in the drawing-room, she spoke of it again to her father.

"Papa," she said, "do you remember telling us of a haunted room at Silverthorns? Is it *really* true that there is one?"

"Perfectly true, as I told you, that there is a room which is *said* to be haunted," replied her father. "But I personally can't vouch for anything—at least for very little—beyond that."

Five, nay six pairs of ears, for Mrs Waldron was nearly as eager on the subject as her children, pricked themselves up at this slight though incautious admission.

"'Very little,' you say, papa?" Charlotte exclaimed. "Oh, do tell us what the 'very little' is. Who told it you? Did you hear it at first hand, or how? and when? and from whom?"

Mr Waldron looked round him helplessly. He had spoken thoughtlessly, for even the wisest of us cannot be always on our guard. He had been half asleep, to tell the truth, when Charlotte first roused him by her question, for he had had a hard day's work, and had driven some distance in the cold, and the arm-chair by the fire was very comfortable. He was wide awake now, however, and very much at a loss what to say. He had always, for reasons understood by his wife, avoided allusions to Silverthorns or the Osbert family; but of late, circumstances had seemed to force the place and its inhabitants upon the young Waldrons' notice; and if he tried to back out of what he had said, it would probably only whet the interest and curiosity he deprecated. Better tell simply, and as it were unconsciously, what there was to tell.

"My dears, indeed there is nothing to interest you," he said. "You know the legend—I told it to you the other day—that a long-ago Osbert had behaved very unjustly and cruelly, and that his spirit is supposed to be unable to rest on that account. Well—"

"But, papa," said Arthur, "excuse me for interrupting you, but I was thinking over the story. I don't see that it was so very wrong of him to wish the place to remain in the family—I mean to be owned by *Osberts*. It is the feeling everybody has."

Mr Waldron smiled. It amused him to see the eldest son sentiment in Arthur, though he was heir to nothing.

"I quite agree with you," he said. "But you forget—he was really cruel, for he left his poor daughter utterly penniless, in reality to gratify the spite he had always had against her. He carried his family pride a little too far, surely? Besides, he was a hard and unfeeling landlord."

"Oh, yes," said Arthur, "I forgot. Of course he might have looked after his daughter without letting the place go out of the family. And what did you say was the prophecy, papa?—that he should be punished by Silverthorns going in the female line after all, isn't it? That has never come to pass yet—there have always been Osberts there?"

"Yes; the legend is, that the unhappy ghost shall never rest till the descendants of a daughter of the house own the place. It came near it once many years ago. The then squire had only a sister, and though the place had always been left in the male line, her grandson—her son was dead—would have succeeded, failing male Osberts, had not a cousin who had not been heard of for many years turned up. He was an old man, who had been most of his life in Australia, and he never came home to enjoy his inheritance. But he had two sons: one became the squire, and did very well for himself, by marrying Lady Mildred Meredon, for she is a clever and capable woman, and he would never have left things in as good order as he did but for her. The other son is now General Osbert."

"But, papa," said Charlotte, whose quick wits had taken in all he said, "if the place always goes to Osberts, it must be all nonsense about Lady Mildred's intending to leave it to this Miss Meredon, as everybody will say."

"I don't know," said her father. "There have been rumours that Lady Mildred is perfectly free to do as she likes with it, others that she is bound by some arrangement to leave it to the Osberts, and that in reality she only has it for her life. Either may be true. Mr Osbert and his brother were not very friendly, and General Osbert needed money. Perhaps he was satisfied with some help from his brother during his life. And the squire was much attached to his wife, and owed much to her. She may be able to leave it to her own people. But even if not, it doesn't matter—General Osbert has sons," he added, as if thinking aloud.

"Papa!" exclaimed Charlotte almost indignantly, "how can you say it doesn't matter? I think it would be the most unfair, unnatural thing to leave an old, old place like that to people who have *nothing* to do with it."

"What does it matter to us?" said Ted, with a yawn. "How can you excite yourself so about other people's affairs, Charlotte?"

But Mr Waldron stroked Charlotte's head as she sat near him.

"I think it is very unlikely," he said. "Mr Osbert had plenty of family feeling."

"What would the poor ghost do if it were so?" said Jerry, so seriously that they all laughed. "Just fancy his feelings! He'd lose all chance of ever resting in peace, poor thing—for if it once went away to another family, it could never go to the descendants of a woman Osbert. Lady Mildred isn't an Osbert. No, you needn't laugh—I'm very sorry for the ghost," he persisted with real concern. "It makes me feel quite fidgety. I'd like to know about how it really is."

"Perhaps Lady Mildred would 'count' as a woman Osbert," said Noble. "It would seem fair, for the ghost would surely be punished enough by its going quite away from his family."

"Nonsense, Noble," said Jerry irritably. "Those relations of hers—*that* girl," with an accent of bitter scorn, "is not even her descendant, supposing Lady Mildred did count."

Charlotte glanced at him uneasily. It was so unlike Jerry to speak with such a tone of any one. And she knew whence came the prejudice he showed.

"We shall have to tell *you* not to excite yourself next, Jerry, my boy," said his father. "I shall wish I had not told you anything about it."

"But you haven't, papa," said Charlotte. "That's to say, we have not heard a word about the ghost yet, I mean of what you 'could personally vouch for.' Do tell us."

Mr Waldron glanced at his wife. "How am I to get out of it?" his eyes seemed to ask.

"Yes," said Mrs Waldron calmly, chiming in with Charlotte; "do tell us."

"I had heard this old story as a child," he began. "You know I lived in this neighbourhood as a little boy, but I don't think I ever told you that in the old days I have stayed at Silverthorns."

"At Silverthorns itself!" repeated several voices. "No, indeed, papa, you never told us. How very funny it seems! Why didn't you ever tell us?"

"It is more or less painful to me to recall that time," Mr Waldron replied quietly. "They are all dead, all those I loved and cared for then. And it is so long ago now! But to go on with my story. I happened to be at Silverthorns one winter when the old squire was taken ill. I was there because my guardian who took charge of me was a very dear and old friend of his, and I was a quiet sort of child that did not give much trouble. I was left to run about the place as I liked, while the two old people were together. I slept in a little room in the oldest part of the house, which was the part the squire liked best, and he and his guests—unless there happened to be a great many in the house—inhabited it much more than the modern part. Do you remember, Charlotte and Jerry, noticing a sort of square tower at the end?"

"With a pointed window high up, and a pointed roof, almost like a kind of great pigeon-house? Oh, yes, I remember it," said Charlotte.

"Well, that room, the room with that window, is the one that is said to be haunted. It is quite a small room. I believe the story is that the ghost frequents it because it was from that window that the unnatural father watched poor Bridget making her way down the avenue, when his cruelty had made her at last determine to leave him. I had heard something of the story, as I told you, but in the vaguest way. I knew nothing of the particulars; I could scarcely have understood them. I only knew that a long-ago Osbert, who was said to have been a cruel, bad man, was supposed to haunt the tower. But I had never heard that he came more at one time than another; I never knew that his spirit was supposed to be especially restless when any of the family were going to die; above all, when the place was going to change hands, I suppose. And I was not the least afraid of the tower—I often ran in and out of it in the daytime, though there was nothing particularly interesting in the little bare, deserted room. But one night, late evening rather,—I remember it so well, it had been a bitterly cold day, and the ground was covered with snow,—I was hanging about, rather at a loss what to do with myself, for my gr—guardian had been all day shut up with the squire, who was really very ill, when a sudden fancy seized me that I would like to go up to the tower room, as it is called, and look out on the moonlight glittering on the frost-covered trees of the avenue,—I have often, by the bye, had a fancy that the great thorns at the end of the drive seen in a frost must have given their name to the place,—for, like most children brought up alone, I was fanciful and dreamy. My own room, where a nice fire was blazing, was only one flight of steps lower than the tower room, but it looked out to the other side. I ran up-stairs and opened the tower room door—it was perfectly flooded with clear cold moonlight, except in one corner, away from the window, which struck me, as is always the case in moonlight shadows, as extraordinarily black and dark. But I did not mind, I had no thought of fear. I ran to the window and gazed out. It was as I expected—the trees were glistening like silver and diamonds, it seems to me that I have never seen anything so beautiful since. I remember saying to myself, 'How I wish I could make some poetry about them to myself,' when suddenly I was startled by the sound, or *feeling*—feeling as much as sound perhaps—of something moving in the dark corner, and before I had time to look round I heard distinctly three deep sighs or groans. Even had it been the daytime, and had there been nothing eerie about the place, the sound would have made me shiver—it seemed to tell of such profound, hopeless misery. Then in half a moment there rushed over me the remembrance of the story I had heard, and that I was here actually in the haunted room itself. I dashed through the doorway and down-stairs, and never stopped till I got to the servants' regions; and then I was so near fainting and looked so wretched that my guardian had to be sent for, and all manner of soothing and comforting employed to bring me round. The whole thing might have been forgotten but for what followed. The poor old squire died that very night, and I think my guardian was glad he did not live till the next morning; for it

brought the news of the reappearance of the Osbert cousins whom he had thought it his duty to try to trace, and so his sister's grandson was cut out of his inheritance!"

"And the ghost had reason to be miserable then," said Jerry. "Poor ghost."

"Yes," said Mr Waldron; "his hopes of his long penance ending must have been dashed to the ground."

"Papa," said Charlotte, in a rather awe-struck tone, "you speak as if you really believed it. *Do* you? Do you in the bottom of your heart believe it was the ghost?"

"No," said Mr Waldron, smiling. "In the bottom of my heart I believe it was—" He stopped, and dropped his voice mysteriously.

"What?" exclaimed everybody.

"*Ow/s!*" said Mr Waldron in a thrilling whisper. Charlotte and Jerry, and one or two others, who afterwards denied it by the way, screamed.

"Oh, papa," said Charlotte, "you did so frighten us."

"Well, my dears, it shows how easily nerves can be worked up to be frightened at nothing. It was your own imaginations that frightened you."

"Then do you mean," said Noble, in rather a disappointed tone, "that there was nothing in it at all?"

Mr Waldron hesitated.

"I can't say," he replied. "I don't know. I think it was a very curious coincidence that for the first time for long any colour should have been given to the old story, just when the squire died; and even more, just when the estates' reverting to the female line was stopped. Of course this tells two ways—these circumstances following after made the incident impressive."

"Yes," said Noble; "I see."

"But, papa," said Charlotte, "didn't you say that the poor grand—yes, grand-nephew, who so nearly had all, came off very badly? That needn't have been—the squire might have left him something."

"He meant to do so, but—it is a long story, and the legal details would only confuse you. The squire had left things, as was usual in the family, all to the male heir, and failing him, to the female line; indeed, there was not very much he could alienate from the property, and the new squire had debts when he came into it, though it is in a much better way now. But the old squire had never really anticipated that the Australian Osberts would turn up. There was room for a lawsuit about what he had meant for his sister and her grandson; and they could not fight it. So all went from them."

"Did you know them—the sister and the boy?" asked Charlotte.

"Yes," said Mr Waldron, and he sighed.

"If you had been grown-up then, couldn't you have helped them now that you're such a clever lawyer?" asked Jerry.

"Perhaps I might have been able to do something."

"Only 'perhaps!'" said Jerry reproachfully. "Papa, I think the law is horribly unjust. I hate it. I don't want to be a lawyer. Fancy those poor things! And the poor, *poor* ghost."

"Jerry's got the ghost on the brain," said Ted, teasingly.

"Mamma," said Jerry plaintively, "do you hear Ted? Should he mock like that when papa's been telling us the story seriously?"

"He's only in fun; he didn't mean to vex you, Jerry," said Arthur, and Mrs Waldron looked at the boy somewhat anxiously. She did not like his half querulous tone. It reminded her of the time when he was suffering and feeble, and unable to bear ordinary nursery life. "Jerry can't be well," she said to herself; and she said it aloud to her husband when they were left alone.

"Do you think I should not have told that old story in his hearing?" he asked. "He is not usually nervous or excitable. I could not get out of telling it without seeming to make some mystery."

"And you think it better not to tell them the whole?" asked his wife.

"I see no good purpose that it could serve," he replied. "Not at present, at least, while they are young and impressionable. When they are older I have always intended that they should know, though it is most unlikely that it will ever affect us in any way."

Chapter Nine.

The Tower Room.

If we knew more than is possible for us of what is passing at a distance, we should find so-called "coincidences" much more frequent than we have at present any idea of. That very evening when the family party in the Waldrons' drawing-room was discussing the old legends of the Osberts, the conversation at Silverthorns between Lady Mildred and her niece had taken the same direction.

Claudia Meredon was not looking quite as bright and well as usual, and her aunt was becoming aware of it.

"You are so silent, child," she said, half reproachfully, "and I like you to talk. It was one of your attractions to me at the first that you were not one of those stupid, half-bred, or not-at-all-bred girls who think good manners consist in staring at their elders, and never answering anything but 'yes' and 'no' and 'if you please.'"

Claudia laughed.

"Then you don't approve of—

"'Hold up your head, turn out your toes,
Speak when you're spoken to, mend your clo'es,'"

"Aunt Mildred?" she said.

"Yes, I do," said the old lady, testily. "There's a medium in all things. I detest impertinent little chatterboxes of children. But you're not a child now, Claudia, and you have plenty of sense and knowledge in your head; you are quite able to talk very intelligently and agreeably if you choose. I only hope you are not going to turn into a book-worm. Are you working too hard?"

"No, aunt, I don't think so," said Claudia. "And you know how I enjoy my lessons. And the teaching at Miss Lloyd's is really very interesting."

But she gave a very little sigh as she spoke.

"Then what's the matter with you? Are you ill? I hope you're not home-sick. Or do any of those girls at Miss Lloyd's annoy you in any way? You can't deny that you're not in your usual spirits."

"No," Claudia allowed, "I don't feel quite as merry as usual; but I'm sure I'm not ill. And I'm not home-sick: if I were it would be too silly, when I know that what you are doing for me now is to make it possible for me to be a real help to them all at home. Perhaps, however, I am just a *very* little what people call home-sick. It isn't the girls at school—I have very little to do with them."

"All the better," said Lady Mildred. "They cannot be much worth knowing."

"Perhaps most of them are rather commonplace," Claudia allowed. "There is only one—the one I told you of, Charlotte Waldron—who interests me at all particularly. But I don't think I interest her, so though we do all the same lessons we scarcely ever speak to each other," and again Claudia sighed a little.

"You are a goose," said her aunt. "I believe you would like to make friends with the girl, and have her adoring you and gushing over you."

Claudia could not help laughing a little. The idea of cold, proud Charlotte "gushing" over any one, over herself especially, struck her as curiously incongruous.

"She's not at all that sort of girl, Aunt Mildred," she said.

"So much the better," repeated Lady Mildred again. "And whatever she is or is not," she went on, "remember, Claudia, I gave you fair warning that I could have no school-girl friendships."

"Of course, aunt, I know that quite well. Don't think I am dreaming of such things. I really and truly don't quite know why I don't feel as bright as usual."

It was as she said. She did not understand herself. Hitherto, though her life had been in some respects a hard and even anxious one,—for she had shared her parents' cares and struggles, and the mode of living at the rectory had been of almost Spartan simplicity,—there had been no complications. Duties had been clear and straightforward, to Claudia's genial and loving nature they had gone hand in hand with her greatest delight—that of serving and helping those about her. But now it was different: she felt herself misunderstood and disliked; she felt she was almost giving reason for this, and yet what could she do? The little kindnesses and overtures of good will which her mother had assured her she could find opportunity for without violating her aunt's wishes had been rejected almost with scorn. She was beginning even faintly to suspect that her earnest and conscientious school-work, or rather the success with which it was crowned, was rousing against her feelings which she could not endure to suspect the existence of in the hearts of others. Yet here again what could she do? It must be right to do her best, to profit to the utmost by the opportunities her aunt's goodness was giving her, even if it made her companions—though, to tell the truth, the word was in Claudia's mind represented by Charlotte Waldron alone—dislike and almost hate her. Yet it was so painful, so new; and to have to face these problems for the first time, when for the first time she was alone and with no one to reprove or advise her, did seem hard. For it would have been impossible to express all her difficulties clearly in a letter, even had she not felt that it would be disloyal to her aunt, and cruel to the anxious hearts at home, to attempt to do so.

"No," she repeated, as Lady Mildred did not at once speak, "I don't quite know why I don't feel as usual. Perhaps I am working a very little too hard. If it were summer I am sure I should be as merry as ever—it must be too lovely here in summer, Aunt Mildred."

"But you get plenty of fresh air—it is a good drive into Wortherham and back every day?"

"Oh, yes, and I do *so* enjoy it. You don't know how nice it is. I am so glad papa managed to teach me to drive quite as a child, though I never had anything like Kelpie to drive before. She is such a darling, Aunt Mildred."

Claudia's face lightened up with the thought of her pony's perfections. Lady Mildred looked at her: she saw that when the momentary glow faded the girl seemed again pale and tired-looking.

"My dear, do you sleep well?" she said suddenly.

"Not *very* well, perhaps," Claudia admitted.

"You're not nervous—you don't mind being alone?"

"Oh, no," said Claudia; "I have always had a room alone since I was quite a little girl."

"Yes; but at home, in a smaller house, where you all seem nearer together, it is different. You are quite sure you are not nervous here? Don't be afraid of saying so if you are. No one has been telling you nonsense about this house being haunted, or anything of that kind?"

A light broke over Claudia's face, which had been growing rather bewildered-looking.

"It is very kind of you to have thought of it, Aunt Mildred," she said. "But indeed I am not the least nervous in that way. I have not slept well partly perhaps because I have been thinking so much about my lessons. I do so want to show them at home that I am doing well, and the examinations and all that will be coming on soon."

"Don't overdo it," said Lady Mildred. "Your father and mother—and I, for that matter, if you care about me in that way—will be perfectly satisfied that you have done your best, without any prizes or things of that kind."

"There is only one prize given at Christmas," said Claudia, "and that is a German one that the master gives himself. I do dreadfully want to get it. Mamma is so anxious about my German."

"Well, don't overwork yourself, my dear. It would be very unlucky if you were to fall ill here—you that have always been so strong. It would reflect badly on me, or on Silverthorns, if you lost your rosy cheeks here. And to some of those girls, doubtless, prizes must seem matters of life or death—many of them probably are training for governesses."

"Some perhaps may be," said Claudia; "but I think many of them, particularly some of the least refined, are very rich. And I don't think any of them can wish for this prize more than I do. Think what it would be to send it home! But, Aunt Mildred," she went on in a different tone, "as you see I'm not nervous, I wish you would tell me more about the ghost."

"I know very little about, the story, my dear," Lady Mildred replied. "Mr Osbert, my husband, disliked its being spoken about, and I did not care to hear. There was some nonsense about the ghost being heard or seen at the time of the old squire's death, which annoyed him. I fancy it was set about by some cousins who had no right to the place, but tried to claim something, and they wanted to make out that the ghost was on their side."

"How very absurd, and how wrong!" said Claudia. "Yes; I know very little about it however. The ghost is supposed to be the spirit of a very ruffianly old Osbert, who cannot rest in peace."

"He haunts the tower, doesn't he?" said Claudia. "Old Peebles, the gardener, told me that, one day when I was asking him if there were owls' nests up there. He said he 'durstn't take upon himself to disturb them, nor anything else about the tower, and he couldn't say.'"

"Ah, yes, you see that explains it all. No doubt there have been owls there for generations, and if no one ever disturbs them they have it all their own way. We have never used those rooms much—the rooms in the lower part of the tower, I mean."

"But they are dear old rooms. The one the servants call the chintz room might be made delightful. I should not be the least afraid to sleep there," said Claudia.

"Well, if ever the house is more full of guests than it is likely to be in my time," said Lady Mildred, who was particularly amiable to Claudia that evening, "you shall move there and try how you like it. We have often used it as a sort of bachelor's room or odd spare room—it is easily put in order. And, by the bye, you would have no reason to fear the ghost, Claudia. He only appears to, or is heard by—I don't know which—members of the Osbert family. They must have Osbert blood in them."

"How disappointing!" Claudia replied. "I shouldn't care so much for sleeping in the tower if that's the case."

"Well, go and sleep in your own bed now, and let me see you looking better to-morrow. It is getting late," said her aunt.

Claudia kissed her and said good night, and went off. She felt brightened by the talk with Lady Mildred. It was not often that the old lady was so genial and sympathising.

"It was really *very* kind of her to think of my being perhaps frightened at night," she said to herself. "Very few grown-up people think of such things. If it had been poor Alix now—I don't believe Alix will ever be able to sleep in a room alone."

She was up-stairs by this time on the large first floor landing, which at one side was separated from the oldest part of the house by a door and short passage. Claudia looked at the door.



“Far away from everybody, up there with the moonlight and the owls.”
Frontispiece. P. 145.

“I wonder now if I should be frightened if I slept in the tower,” she thought. “I hardly think so. Yet it must be queer and lonely up in that empty room. I wonder if it’s at all moonlight to-night. I’ve a great mind to run up just for a moment. I’ll leave this door open, so that if I *am* frightened I can rush down at once.”

And half laughing at her own temerity, Claudia opened the door, propping it ajar, for it was a spring one, by the aid of a chair on the wide landing, and running along the passage, began the ascent of the stairs. A few steps led to the chintz room, the door of which, imperfectly latched, was rattling somewhat uncannily, as if some one were trying to get out. But Claudia did not stop to close it—she hastened on, up the two flights, to the tower room itself. The staircase was dark save for some light from below, whence, too, came the sounds of the servants moving about and speaking in the distance, for on the ground floor of this wing were some of the offices in regular use. Claudia was not sorry to hear the murmurs—it seemed less “ghostly.” But as she opened the tower room door and entered, it banged to behind her—and then it seemed indeed as if she were far away from everybody, up there with the moonlight and the owls.

For moonlight there was, though of but a faint and fitful kind. There was frost about, though as yet no snow had fallen this winter, and the outside world looked grim and unadorned, as Claudia went to the window and gazed out. Except where here and there a ray of light fell on the evergreen trees in the avenue, all seemed black and lifeless.

“How dreary,” she thought with a little shudder. “I can’t help pitying the ghost if his rambles are restricted to this melancholy room. I wonder what he did that was so wicked,” and her eyes rested unconsciously on the drive, seen here and there in patches of light and dark through the trees, down which poor Bridget Osbert so many, many years ago had crept away, sobbing and broken-hearted. Claudia had never heard the story, Lady Mildred herself did not know it, but as the girl stood and gazed a strange sensation—not of fear, but of pity and sadness—came over her; and suddenly her thoughts reverted to the mention made by her aunt of the cousins who had been disappointed in their expectations, some of whom apparently had held the last communication on record with the Osbert ghost.

“Poor things,” she thought; “I feel sorry for them. Perhaps they had some rights, after all. It must be hard to part with an old place like this, or to give up hopes of having it if one has expected it. There is something strange in the thought of inhabiting the very spot where one’s ancestors have lived for hundreds of years. It must seem so full of them—permeated with their feelings and actions. If they had been bad people, I think it would seem rather dreadful. I wonder why I feel this so much to-night. Standing here, I could almost fancy I was an Osbert—and I feel certain some of them have been very unhappy. I do feel so sorry for I don’t know whom! If the ghost appeared I really think I should have courage to ask if I could do anything for him—poor ghost.”

But nothing appeared, no sound broke the perfect stillness, save a low rustling wail from the wind as it came round

the corner. And the moonlight faded again, and Claudia turning from the window saw that the room was almost perfectly dark, and for the first time a slight feeling of fear came over her. She hurried to the door, and was glad to see as she opened it that the light from the large landing shone faintly up the stairs. And in another moment she had run down, and was smiling at her own trepidations in the cheerful security of her own room.

"I am not so *very* brave after all," she said to herself.

And as might have been expected, her dreams that night were rather troubled. They seemed full of Charlotte Waldron and Herr Märklestatter, but the German teacher had the face of Charlotte's father, whom Claudia had seen but once and for a moment only, the evening he came out to Silverthorns on business, and he seemed to be begging Claudia to do or not to do something. And just as she was consenting, and Mr Waldron was saying, "It is all for the poor ghost's sake, you know," she heard what she fancied in her dream to be a sudden cry of distress, and starting up in bed, found that the wind had got up, and was howling round the house, and that her door had blown open with a loud noise.

Still, though the next morning was dreary and stormy in the extreme, Claudia looked and felt better than for some time past.

"You don't look as if ghosts or anything else had been troubling you," said Lady Mildred; "but it is far too stormy for Kelpie this morning. You must have the brougham."

And Claudia, while she thanked her, smiled to herself as she wondered what her aunt would have said to her visit to the tower room the night before.

Chapter Ten.

Jerry's Appeal.

It was now very near Christmas, which promised this year to be what people are fond of calling "an old-fashioned" one. Snow had already fallen, though not to any great extent, though the weather-wise were prophesying that there was already more to come.

Charlotte Waldron was working harder at her lessons than she had ever yet done, and with a sort of feverish eagerness and absorption that was new to her. She tried to some extent to conceal her intense anxiety from her mother, perhaps because she felt instinctively that Mrs Waldron would have told her that she was allowing the spirit of ambition and emulation to carry her too far, especially if the whole of her motives had been confessed. She would not allow herself to acknowledge them; she would have been indignant with any one who had put them into words and faced her with their unloveliness. And as "none are so blind as those who won't see," she remained self-deceived, and in a sense self-satisfied.

Jerry, as usual, was her chief and indeed at this time her only confidant. And even to him she did not say very much, but what she did say startled and impressed the sensitive, sympathising nature of the boy far more than Charlotte had any idea of.

"Jerry," she repeated more than once, "if I don't get the German prize I shall go out of my mind. Oh, I don't know what I shall do! I just can't bear to think of it. It does not seem fair, does it, that I, who have been working steadily all these years, doing my best, my very best, should suddenly be set aside by a stranger, to whom the work is far easier than to me?—a girl who is far cleverer than I, who, for all I know—she never tells us anything—may have learnt her German in Germany and her French in France. That isn't fair competition. If it had been Gueda now, or one of the girls who have learnt as I have done, with no greater advantages, I might have felt it in a way, but I should have known it was fair. And now it just isn't."

"No," Jerry agreed, "it isn't. But oh, Charlotte, it does make me so unhappy when you speak like that."

"I'm very sorry," said Charlotte penitently. "I'll try not; but you see I've no one else to speak to. I told you I had left off talking to mamma about it all—and—there is just no one but you I can speak to."

"No, don't leave off speaking to me," said Jerry; "I should know you were thinking of it all the same. Charlotte," he went on after a little pause, "do you think the girl herself thinks it fair? You have said sometimes that you thought she was *really* a nice girl."

"I can't make her out," Charlotte replied. "She seems nice, only she is dreadfully reserved. As for whether she thinks it fair or not, I don't fancy she thinks about it in that way at all. I'm not sure that she really knows how clever she is. She does not seem conceited. But I suppose she wants very much to get the prize. The truth is, she should not be in the class or in any class; she should be by herself."

"I wonder the teachers don't see it," said Jerry.

"Oh, they don't care like that. They can't make such particular distinctions. It's only me it really matters to," said Charlotte hopelessly. "I suppose everything's unfair in this world. I don't see how one is to help getting to have horrid feelings. What *can* it matter to her, so spoilt and rich and beautiful—what can one little school prize matter to her as it does to me?" and she groaned despairingly.

Jerry was silent for a few minutes; then he spoke again.

"Charlotte," he said, "are you *sure* you won't get it? It would be all the more of a triumph if you did win it over her."

"But I know I can't," she said. "Of course I shall do my best; I should need to do that any way. Some of the girls are really very good German scholars. But she is more than good; she really writes it almost perfectly. Oh, no, I have no chance—the notes for the composition were given out last week. I have begun it, but I almost think I shall spill a bottle of ink over it, or let it catch fire accidentally at the last minute."

"Oh, no, Charlotte, you won't do that—promise me you won't. Do, Charlotte!" Jerry entreated.

"Oh, well, I don't suppose I shall. I should not like not to show Herr Märklestatter I had done my best. He used to be so kind to me; he is kind to me still. Only," and again Charlotte sighed profoundly, "I really don't know how I shall bear the disappointment and the mortification!"

Jerry did not sigh,—he was never very demonstrative,—but his face grew hard and stern, and he pressed his lips tightly together in a way that was usual with him when he was making up his mind to something.

For Jerry *was* making up his mind to something, and for the next few days he was silently thinking it over wondering how he was to carry it out.

The predicted snow fell but slightly. But the frost continued and increased. By the middle of December there was no talk among the boys on holiday afternoons but of skating. And one Tuesday evening, in the Waldrons' school-room there was great excitement about an expedition to come off the following day, which was as usual a half-holiday.

"Can't you come, Charlotte?" asked Arthur. For Charlotte, "one sister of her brothers," was, as was natural, a great adept at skating, and even at less feminine recreations.

"I wish I could," she said. "I'd give anything to go; but I can't. It's this extra work for the end of the term that I must get on with."

It was the German composition. A glance at the expression of her face told it to Jerry.

"It's out Gretham way, isn't it?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes," Arthur replied; "about half-a-mile past the first Silverthorns lodge."

"I wish you'd take me, as Charlotte can't go," said Jerry.

The others looked at each other in surprise.

"You, Jerry!" they exclaimed. For the boy was of course debarred by his lameness from skating or any amusement of the kind, and he had often seemed to shrink from being a spectator of what he could not take part in, with a sensitiveness which his parents regretted.

"Yes, I. Why not?" he said. "Of course I would enjoy going more if Charlotte were to be there too, but I meant that I could have her seat in the dog-cart. I don't take much room."

"Are you to have the dog-cart?" asked Charlotte. "That is a piece of luck."

"Yes; papa has to send Sam out that way with some message or papers or something, and he said we might get a lift. Of course we have to find our own way home, Jerry."

"I know that. I can quite walk one way," said the boy. "I needn't stay long if I get too cold."

"Very well. I'm sure you're welcome to come, as far as I'm concerned," said Arthur. "You must be ready at one, sharp."

"I couldn't have gone in any case," said Charlotte. "We are to have an extra French lesson to-morrow—recitations, and it won't be over till two."

"What a sell," observed Ted, "and on a half-holiday."

"Oh, I don't mind," said Charlotte.

"No, I dare say not," replied Ted. "You'll go off your head some fine day, Charlotte, or paralyse your brain or something, if you work and fuss at lessons like that."

"Well, I may be thankful that I shall have *one* brother sane enough to act as my keeper, if working at one's lessons is what sends people out of their minds," said Charlotte cuttingly.

Ted looked at her, opened his mouth as if about to speak, but shut it up again. He was no match for Charlotte in this kind of warfare, and indeed he was not quite sure if she were making fun of him or not. All the others burst out laughing, and Ted's discomfiture might have led to some family discord had not Mrs Waldron at that moment entered the room. Arthur, with the laudable intention of diverting the storm, turned to her.

"Jerry wants to go out to see the skating to-morrow, mother," he said. "You don't mind his coming? We are to get a lift one way."

Mrs Waldron looked pleased.

"No, of course not. I am very glad for him to go," she said. And she patted Jerry's head as she passed him, but the boy shrank away a little from the caress.

"Mamma thinks I want to go to amuse myself," he thought. "Nobody really cares about poor Charlotte except me."

It seemed colder than ever the next day, and there was a leaden look in the sky which told of snow not very far from falling. But it would certainly hold off till night, if not for another day or two, said Ted, who prided himself, and with some reason, on his weather wisdom.

"Wrap up well, Jerry," said his mother, as she saw the boys preparing to start, "and don't be very late. I should like you all to be home for the school-room tea. Perhaps I'll have it with you, as your father will not be back till late for dinner. Charlotte will enjoy being all together at tea, as she will have no holiday scarcely."

"When will she be home, mamma?" asked Jerry.

"About half-past two. All her class are staying later to-day."

Mounted in the dog-cart among his brothers, Jerry set to work with calculations which they little suspected.

"It will take us three-quarters of an hour to get to the pond," he thought. "*She* will be leaving Miss Lloyd's about a quarter past two; say it takes her an hour to Silverthorns—she'll go slower than we in this weather, I should think. Well, say only three-quarters—she'll be near the first lodge by three, and it will take me about ten minutes from the pond. So I can stay there till a quarter to three or so—quite long enough; and I'll tell them all then that I don't want to stay longer. And if I *don't* meet her I don't much care—I'll just go up to the house and say I want to see Miss Meredon. I won't go home without having done it, or done what I could, that is to say."

But all this preoccupation of mind did not render him a very lively companion.

"I can't think what Jerry comes for if he's so glum," grumbled Ted. And Arthur's warning "leave him alone" had to be several times repeated to secure the drive to the skating-ground ending in peace.

Things fell out much as Gervais had anticipated. He stood about the edge of the pond, with some other non-performing spectators, for three-quarters of an hour or so patiently enough. It was a pretty sight; notwithstanding his absorption in other things, he could not but own this to himself, and he felt pride in his tall, strong brothers, who were among the most agile and graceful of the skaters present. And now and then, when one or other of the three achieved some especially difficult or intricate feat, Jerry's pale face flushed with pleasure and excitement.

"How I wish I were like them!" he said to himself, as some of Charlotte's revilings against the unfairness of "fate" returned to his mind. And with the recollection returned also that of the real object of his joining in the excursion. He looked at his watch, a pretty little silver one which his father had given him a year ago, when he was only twelve years old, though his elder and stronger brothers had had to wait till they were fifteen for theirs,—were there not some compensations in your fate, Jerry?—and saw that it was fully half-past two. Time enough yet, but he was really getting chilled with standing about, and he was growing fidgety too. He had felt braver about it all in the distance, now he began to say to himself, how very much easier it would be to speak to the girl in the road than to have to march up to the house and ask for her formally, and he felt as if every moment was lessening the chance of his meeting her. Just then Arthur came skimming by. Jerry made a sign to him, and Arthur, always kind and good-natured, especially to his youngest brother, wheeled round and pulled up.

"What is it, Jeremiah?" he said. "You look rather lugubrious—you're not too cold, are you?"

"Yes," said Jerry, not noticing in his nervous eagerness to get away, Arthur's half-bantering tone, which he might otherwise have resented; "I am horribly cold. I don't want to stay any longer. I just wanted to tell you I was going, so that you'd know."

"All right," Arthur replied; "you're sure it won't be too far for you, and you don't mind going alone?"

"Of course not," said Jerry, already turning to go. But with an "I say, Jerry," Arthur wheeled back again. "It's looking awfully heavy over there," he said, pointing to the slate-blue darkness of the sky towards the north; "they say it's sure to snow before night. Make the best of your way home. You know the shortest way—the footpath over the stile just beyond the 'Jolly Thrashers'?"

Jerry nodded. Truth to tell, he had but a vague idea of it, but he could ask—and he must be off.

"Or," said Arthur, making Jerry nearly stamp with impatience, "perhaps, after all, you'd better keep to the high road. There's a strong chance of your falling in with Sam—he won't have got back yet."

"All right, all right," Jerry called back, and then he set off at the nearest approach to a run his poor stiffened knee could achieve.

He looked at his watch as he ran—only twenty-five minutes to three! barely five minutes since he had signalled to Arthur! Jerry relaxed his speed—it was scarcely possible that Miss Meredon was near Silverthorns yet.

He walked on quietly, past the second entrance, and along what from a certain corner was called the Wortherham road, till he came to the first Silverthorns lodge. Then he began to breathe more freely; "the girl," as he always mentally dubbed her, could not enter the grounds now without his seeing her. He looked at his watch for the third time—seventeen minutes to three. Just about the time he had planned. She should be here soon if she had left Miss Lloyd's a little after two.

But he had been walking up and down the short stretch of road between the so-called first lodge and the next corner fully twenty minutes before at last the sound of wheels reached him clearly through the frosty air, though still at some distance. Hitherto he had not gone beyond the corner—it would have made him feel more nervous somehow to

look all along the great bare road; but now he gathered up his courage and walked briskly on. He was still cold, and beginning to feel tired too, but new vigour seemed to come to him when at last he was able to distinguish that the approaching vehicle was a pony-carriage, and the Silverthorns one no doubt; not that he knew it, or the pony, or the driver by sight, but it was not very likely that any other would be coming that way just at that time.

Jerry stood by the side of the road, then he walked on a few steps, then waited again. The sound of the wheels drew nearer and nearer, and he heard too the tinkling of a bell on the pony's neck. Then he distinguished that, as he expected, the carriage was driven by a lady, and then—it seemed to come up so fast, that in another moment it would have passed him like a flash had he not resolutely stepped forward a little on to the road, taking his cap off obtrusively as he did so.

"Miss—Miss Meredon," he said in his thin, clear boy's voice. "I beg your pardon."

The pony slackened its pace, the girl glanced forward to where Jerry stood, with a slightly bewildered, inquiring look on her face.

"Yes," she said. "Is there something wrong with the pony, or the harness, or anything?" forgetting that a mere passer-by stopping her out of good-nature to point out some little mishap would not have been likely to address her by name.

"No," said the boy—quite a child he seemed to her, for thirteen-year-old Gervais was small and slight; "oh no, it's nothing like that. It's only that—you are Miss Meredon, aren't you?" Claudia nodded. "I wanted to speak to you for a minute by yourself. I—I forgot about *him*," he added in a lower tone, coming nearer her, so that the groom behind should not overhear him, which small piece of good breeding at once satisfied the girl that the little fellow was a "gentleman." "I wouldn't keep you for a moment. You don't think me rude, I hope?" he went on anxiously, for one glance at the sweet, lovely face had made Jerry feel he would be very sorry indeed to be thought rude by its owner.

"Oh, no," said the girl smiling; "I am only a little puzzled. You see I don't even know who you are."

But she began to throw aside the fur carriage rug as she spoke, as if preparing to get out to speak to him.

"I'm Ger—" he began. "My name's Waldron. I'm Charlotte—you know Charlotte?—I'm her youngest brother."

"Oh," said Claudia, in a tone of enlightenment. And then she knew what had seemed familiar to her in the very blue eyes looking wistfully at her out of the pale, slightly freckled face, with its crown of short, thick, almost black hair. "You are a little like your sister," she said, as she got out of the carriage, "and you are even more like your father."

For in Charlotte's eyes, as Claudia at least had seen them, there was none of the softness which kindness gave to Mr Waldron's, and anxious timidity at this moment to those of his little son.

"Oh, do you know papa?" said Jerry, with a mixture of interest and apprehension in his voice.

"I'll speak to you in an instant," said the girl, by this time on the footpath at Jerry's side. "Hodges," she went on to the groom, "take the pony home—it's too cold to keep him about. And tell Ball, if her ladyship asks for me, to say I am walking up the drive and I'll be in immediately."

The man touched his hat and drove off.

"Now," said Claudia, "we can talk in peace. You asked me if I knew your father," she went on, speaking partly to set the boy at ease, for she saw he looked anxious and nervous. "No, I can't say I know him. I only saw him once for a moment, but I thought he had the kindest eyes in the world. And when I first saw Char—your sister, I remembered his face again."

"Yes," said Jerry, gratified, but too anxious to rest there, "papa is as kind as he looks. I wish you could see mamma though! But it's about Charlotte I want to speak to you. Miss Meredon, will you promise never to tell anybody you've seen me? I've planned it all on purpose—coming out here and waiting on the road to meet you. Will you promise me? I shall never tell any one."

Claudia looked at the anxious little face.

"Won't you trust me?" she said. "Tell me first what it is you want of me, and then—if I possibly can, and I dare say I can—I will promise you never to tell any one."

Jerry looked up at her again.

"Yes," he said, "I'll tell you. It's about the German prize. Charlotte is breaking her heart about it—I mean about knowing she won't get it."

Claudia's face flushed.

"But how does she know she won't get it?" she said. "It isn't decided—the essays aren't even given in yet. Mine is not more than half done."

"I know—she's working at hers now. She's working awfully hard, though she has no hope. You are much cleverer; you're cleverer at everything, she says, and especially German. But you can't ever have worked harder than she's done. I suppose you learnt German in Germany? Of course that leaves no chance for the others."

He could not look at her now; he wanted to work himself up to a sort of indignation against her, and in sight of the

candid face and gentle eyes he felt instinctively that it would not have been easy.

"No," said Claudia, and her tone was colder; "I have never been in Germany in my life. I have been well taught, I know, but I too have worked hard."

"Well, I dare say you have. I don't mean to vex you, I don't mean to be rude," said poor Jerry; "but you are cleverer, you are much further on; and you knew a great deal more than the others before you came. There is a sort of unfairness about it, though I can't put it rightly."

"What is it you want me to do?"

Jerry gulped something down like a sob.

"I want you not to try for the prize," he said. "I can't think that if you are good and kind, as you seem, it would give you any pleasure to get it when it will break Charlotte's heart."

A crowd of feelings rushed through Claudia's heart and brain. What had Charlotte ever been or done to her that she should care about her in this way? Why should she make this sacrifice for a girl who had not even attempted to hide her cold indifference, even dislike? Could the loss of the prize be sorer to Charlotte, or the gaining of it more delightful, than to her, Claudia? Was it even in the least probable that the other girl's motives were as pure as she knew her own to be?

But as her glance fell on the anxious little face beside her these reflections gave way to others. It might be more to Charlotte Waldron and her family than she—Claudia—could understand. Charlotte had resented the idea that her education was to be turned to practical use, but yet, even if she were not intended to be a governess, her parents might have other plans for her. They certainly did not seem *rich*, and Claudia remembered hearing that they were a large family. It was in a softened tone that she again spoke to Jerry.

"I hardly see that my giving up trying for it would do what you want," she said gently. "Your sister would probably be too proud to care for the prize if she thought she had gained it by my not trying."

"Oh, of course you would have to manage not to seem to do it on purpose. I could trust you for that," said Gervais naïvely, looking up at her with his blue eyes. "And," he went on, "Charlotte is fair, though she's proud. She doesn't pretend that you're not much cleverer and further on."

"I haven't contradicted you when you said that," said Claudia; "but I don't think that I *am* cleverer than she is. In German I have perhaps had unusually good teaching—that is all."

"You will get the prize if you try, you know that," Jerry persisted. "If you give up trying Charlotte will think it a piece of wonderful good fortune. But I don't think she or any one could be very surprised. You have everything you want, why should you care to work extra for a prize like that? It isn't as if you had been years at Miss Lloyd's, like the others—and—and—cared about it like them. And the teachers think you too grand, to be vexed with you whatever you do."

"Grand," repeated Claudia, with a little laugh, but it was not a bitter one. "I only wish you all—" but she stopped. There was a good deal of truth in what Jerry said; she was only a new-comer, with scarcely a real right to enter the lists. And it was true too that she was free to retire without vexing any one, or involving others in her self-sacrifice. Lady Mildred would not care; her parents would, not improbably, take this boy's view of the case. *Self-sacrifice* was the only one involved.

She turned and looked at Charlotte's brother.

"Very well," she said, "I promise to do as you wish. I cannot yet quite see how I shall manage it. You will not of course blame me if I find I cannot. I do promise you to do my best to get out of it, so that Charlotte shall have no rivals but her regular ones."

Jerry looked up at her.

"Thank you," he said, "thank you awfully. You *are* very good and—and kind. I wish Charlotte could know; but of course she never must. You'll never tell anybody, will you?" he added.

"I'll never tell any one by whom it could possibly come round to Charlotte," she said. "And for some time to come I'll not tell any one at all."

"I'll trust you," said Jerry. "Now I must go. Oh but would you like me to walk up to the house with you?" he went on, with a sudden recollection of his "manners."

"No, thank you," said Claudia, secretly amused, for Jerry, though only three years younger, was about half her size; "oh no, thank you. You must get home as fast as you can."

"That isn't very fast," said Jerry, "for I'm lame, you see," and the child coloured painfully as he said it.

"And I believe it's beginning to snow," said Claudia, anxiously. "I do wish I could send you home somehow. Come up with me to the stables, and I'll see what can be done."

"Oh no, no, thank you," said Jerry eagerly, for now that his great purpose was achieved, a nervous shyness was beginning to overpower him, and he felt only eager to get away. "I shall be all right. I'm going to meet our dog-cart down by the 'Jolly Thrashers.'"

"You are sure?"

"Quite," he repeated. "Good-bye, Miss Meredon, and thank you again, awfully."

They shook hands, and the boy set off. Claudia stood watching him through the now fast falling snow.

"I hope he will be all right," she said to herself as she turned towards the lodge gates.

Neither she nor Jerry had realised how long they had been talking. When Claudia went in she found Lady Mildred on the point of sending out to see if she had taken refuge at the lodge from the snow.

"I should have felt very unhappy about that poor boy if he had had any further to go than the 'Thrashers,'" thought Claudia to herself more than once as the afternoon drew on into evening, and the snow fell so fast that one could not tell when the daylight really faded.

Chapter Eleven.

Sent by the Snow.

Claudia and her aunt were sitting quietly that same evening in the small drawing-room which Lady Mildred always used in the winter, and Claudia was thinking over her strange meeting with "the little Waldron boy," as she called him to herself (for she did not even know his Christian name), and hoping he had got safe home, when her aunt looked up suddenly.

"How should you like to spend Christmas in London, Claudia? Would it seem very dreary to you?" she said.

"Oh no, Aunt Mildred, not if you wished it," Claudia replied.

"I suppose the truth is, all places would seem much the same to you so long as they were not Britton-Garnett," Lady Mildred observed, with a touch of acrimony in her tone. But Claudia understood her better now. She only smiled.

"I should not like to be there this Christmas, Aunt Mildred, if you were to be here alone. It would be awfully nice to be all together, of course, but it would be nicest if you were with us too."

Lady Mildred sighed.

"I am afraid merry Christmasses are quite over for me. It is very dull here; it seems a sort of mockery for a poor old woman like me to be the centre of things, giving tenants' dinners and school-feasts, and all the rest of it. I have not the heart for any up-stairs festivities," and she sighed again. "After all, I dare say it would be less dreary in London. What has put it into my head is a letter from the lawyers saying that they may be wanting to see me on business."

"Would you be going soon?" asked Claudia.

"I don't know. It would not matter if you lost a week or two at school—you have been working hard lately."

"No," said Claudia, "it would not matter." And the thought passed through her mind that if her aunt carried out this plan, it would remove all difficulties in the way of her not trying for the prize.

"No one would ever know that I meant to give it up at any rate," she thought with a slight, a very slight touch of bitterness.

But at that moment the front door-bell rang violently. Both the ladies started.

"What can that be?" said Lady Mildred. "Not a telegram surely. Mr Miller would never think of sending a telegram on a Saturday evening, whatever the business may be that he wants to see me about."

"Shall I run and see what it is," said Claudia. For though there was a sound of voices and footsteps dimly in the distance, no servant appeared to explain matters.

"Yes, go," Lady Mildred was saying, when the door opened and Ball, followed by a footman, appeared.

"If you please, my lady," the butler began, "it's Rush from the lodge. He begs pardon for ringing so loud at the front, but he thought it would be quicker. They've found a child, if you please, my lady, a boy, dead in the snow down the road. A farm-lad passing—the snow's not so heavy now—found him and ran for Rush. But Mrs Rush is that frightened she's lost her head, and their baby's ill. So Rush thought he'd best come on here."

A smothered cry broke from Claudia.

"Charlotte's poor little brother," she said.

But no one noticed her words. Lady Mildred had already started to her feet.

"Dead, do you say, Ball?" she exclaimed. "How do you know he is dead? He may be only unconscious."

"That's just it," said Ball.

"Then don't stand there like a couple of fools. You're as bad as that silly Mrs Rush. Bring the poor child in at once—to

the servants' hall or the kitchen, or wherever there's a good fire; I will come myself as soon as the front door is shut, I feel the cold even here," and the old lady began to cough. "Claudia—" turning round, but Claudia was off already.

She met the little group in the front hall. There were Rush and another man carrying something between them, and several other persons seemed standing about or emerging from different doorways, for even the best of servants dearly love a sensation. Claudia for one instant turned her eyes away—she dreaded to recognise the thin little face, whose blue eyes had sought hers so appealingly but an hour or two ago. Then she chid herself for her weakness.

"Carry him at once into the kitchen," she said. "Her ladyship wishes it."

Her voice sounded authoritative, and was immediately obeyed. Some blankets appeared from somewhere in a mysterious manner, and in another minute the small figure was deposited upon them before the friendly glow of the fire, and Claudia knelt down to examine the child more closely. Her eyes filled with tears as she saw that it was indeed "the little Waldron boy." But even at that moment she had presence of mind enough to respect his secret.

"I don't know what is best to do," she said appealingly. "He is not a country boy—do you see, he is a gentleman?" she added, as Ball's wife, the housekeeper, hurried forward. "But surely, oh, surely he is not dead!"

He looked sufficiently like death to make every one hesitate to answer. He had seemed pale and delicate that afternoon, but in comparison with the ghastly colourlessness now, Claudia could have described him as *then* florid and rosy! His eyes were closed, his arm dropped loosely when Claudia lifted it, his breath, if indeed it were there, was inaudible.

"Let me get to him, missy, please," said the housekeeper, "and all of you gaping there, just get you gone. Here's my lady herself—she'll send you to the right-about. Ball, heat some water, and mix a drop or two of brandy. Then we'll undress him and get him to bed. The chintz room's always aired. Martha, light the fire at once and put some hot-water bottles in the bed. Dead! no, no. Let my lady see him."

The room was soon cleared of all but two or three. Then they undressed the boy, whose frozen, snow-covered clothes were now dripping wet, and rolled him in the blankets. And in a few minutes, thanks to the warmth, and the chafing and friction which Mrs Ball kept up, the first faint signs of returning life began to appear, and they got him to swallow a spoonful of brandy and water.

"Feel in his pockets, Claudia," said Lady Mildred, "and see if there is any letter or paper to show who he is. His people must be in cruel anxiety."

Claudia did so, feeling herself a sort of hypocrite for not at once telling all she knew. To her great relief she came upon a pocket-handkerchief marked "Waldron," and a neat little memorandum-book, for poor Jerry was the most methodical of boys, with "Gervais Waldron, 19, Norfolk Terrace, Wortherham" on the first page.

"Aunt Mildred," she said quietly, "it is one of the Waldrons—the lawyer's children, you know. His sister is at school with me."

Lady Mildred started, and made some little exclamation under her breath which Claudia did not catch.

"He is coming round nicely, my lady," said Mrs Ball. "The doctor will think he need not have been fetched," for a groom had already been sent to a village much nearer than Wortherham, where a doctor was to be found.

"It is better to let him see the boy," said Lady Mildred. "He looks such a delicate child," she added, speaking in a low voice, for Jerry was now opening his eyes, and showing signs of coming to life in every sense of the word.

"Shall we send to let his people know that he is safe?" said Claudia.

"I suppose so," said Lady Mildred. "Tell Ball to send the groom on to Wortherham as soon as he comes back from Crowby. And—"

"Would it do for me to write a note? I could write it to the sister I know?" asked Claudia.

Lady Mildred hesitated.

"Yes," she replied; "I dare say you might."

"And, my lady," said Mrs Ball, "I'll have the young gentleman carried up-stairs and put to bed. It will be just as well for him to find himself there when he quite wakes up, as it were."

Lady Mildred stooped again and looked at the boy closely. His eyes were closed. She saw nothing that struck her in the little thin pale face, for it was the blue eyes that were its one beauty—the *very* blue eyes characteristic of the Osberts.

"Very well. Come to the drawing-room, Claudia, and write the note. I should think the groom will be back directly. I will see the child again after the doctor has been."

"Aunt Mildred *is* really kind," thought Claudia. But she had to exercise considerable self-control during the writing of the note. *She* would have made it friendly and hearty in tone, but this did not suit Lady Mildred's ideas at all, and it was a rather stiff and formal production when finished, ending with a half-permission, half-invitation to the boy's parents to come and see him the next morning.

"My aunt feels sure the doctor will wish your brother to stay in bed all to-morrow," wrote Claudia, "and he will be

taken every care of. But should Mr and Mrs Waldron feel uneasy, she begs them not to hesitate to come to see him for themselves."

The doctor came, and confirmed the good account of the patient which Mrs Ball had already sent down-stairs.

"He will take no harm I fancy," he said. "But he is evidently a delicate child, and he has had a narrow escape. He would have been dead long before morning."

"Does he seem frightened?" asked Lady Mildred.

"No," the doctor replied. "I don't think his nerves have suffered. He is still sleepy and confused, and of course he feels sore and aching. But he can remember nothing very distinctly, I fancy."

"I will go up and see him," said Lady Mildred. "It must be past dinner-time, Claudia. This affair has made the servants forget everything."

The doctor took his leave, promising to look in again the next morning. Lady Mildred went up to the chintz room and Claudia ran after her.

"Mayn't I come in and see him too, aunt," she said; "I'd like to see him looking better. He did look so dreadful when they first brought him in," and she gave a little shudder.

Jerry was looking very far from dreadful by this time; he was half-sitting up in bed, with more colour than usual on his face, his eyes very bright and blue. Lady Mildred's face changed as she looked at him.

"I hope you are feeling better, my dear," she said quietly. "The doctor is sure you will be quite well to-morrow."

"Yes, thank you," said Jerry. "I'm nearly quite well now, I think, except that I'm aching rather. If you please," and he hesitated, "you don't think I could go home to-night? I don't know what o'clock it is—it isn't the middle of the night, is it? Oh," as Claudia just then came forward, "I—"

"This is my niece," said Lady Mildred. "She was anxious to know how you were."

Gervais looked up at Claudia, and a glance of understanding passed like lightning between them.

"I'm all right, thank you," he said to her.

"How was it?" said Claudia. "Did you lose your way in the snow?"

"I suppose so," said Jerry. "I was going along the road past the 'Jolly Thrashers' the last thing I remember. I thought I should have met our dog-cart, but I didn't, and I walked on as fast as I could, but it snowed dreadfully heavily, and I got so tired I had to rest a little. I'm lame, you know," he added, flushing a little. "I knew one should never go to sleep in the snow, and I only meant to rest a minute. But I suppose I went to sleep—I remember a very nice feeling coming over me, and then I don't remember anything else."

"Ah," said Lady Mildred. "You have had a narrow escape, my dear."

"I'm very sorry to have given you so much trouble," Jerry went on penitently. "But if I could go home—they'll all be so frightened."

"Your going home to-night is out of the question, my dear," said Lady Mildred; "but we have already sent a groom to tell your family that you are quite safe."

"Thank you very much. I'm very sorry to have given you so much trouble," Jerry repeated.

"Well, then, take care to give no one any more, by getting well as quickly as ever you can," said Lady Mildred kindly. "Try to go to sleep, so that you may wake quite well in the morning. Good night, my dear."

"Good night, Lady Mildred," said the boy.

But Claudia, who had already learnt to know his face and its expressions, detected an uneasy look, and when her aunt had left the room she lingered a moment behind.

"Gervais," she said,— "I know your name, you see—are you uncomfortable? Is there anything the matter—anything to do with what we were speaking of this afternoon?"

Jerry looked up wistfully.

"No," he said. "I'm sure you'll never tell any one—will you?"

"Oh, no; I will keep my promise exactly; and whenever I can do so without betraying you in the least, I will let Charlotte know that I am not going to try for the prize."

"Thank you, oh, thank you so very much," said Jerry fervently. "I know you will do it nicely."

"It may be quite easy," Claudia went on. "I am not sure but that we shall be going away very soon, and that I *couldn't* try for it even if I wanted," and she smiled a half-sad little smile.

"But I shall always know how good you were," said Jerry, as if that should console her for all other misapprehension.

Claudia smiled again.

"Thank you," she said; "and good night."

But Jerry still fidgeted about.

"I am afraid I can't go to sleep," he said; "I am so aching all over, and it seems so strange. Isn't this the chintz room?"

"Yes," said Claudia, a little surprised. "How did you know it?"

"Oh, I—I heard the name," he said. "Is it far away from everybody else's rooms?"

"No; mine is very near. There is a swing door across the passage, and mine is the first door through it. But some one—Mrs Ball or some one—will sit up with you if you would the least like it."

"No, no," said Jerry. "I told them not to. I wouldn't like it at all. Miss Meredon," he went on, beginning to laugh, "don't I look like Red Riding Hood's grandmother, rather, with all these fussy things round my neck?"

Claudia burst out laughing too. She saw what made the child look so comical. He was enveloped in one of her own nightgowns with voluminous frills.

"Is it one of yours?" said Jerry gravely, tugging at the frills and solemnly regarding them. "I don't like wearing girls' things, but I don't mind so much if it is yours."

At this moment Mrs Ball returned.

"Miss Meredon, my dear," she said, "the young gentleman must really go to sleep. My lady wouldn't be pleased if she knew you were still here talking to him."

"We couldn't help laughing at the nightgown, Mrs Ball," said Claudia. "It's one of mine, isn't it?"

"Yes, we made so bold. It was the nearest his size you see, missy dear."

"Well, good night again, Gervais," said Claudia as she left the room. "I do hope you will sleep well." Jerry smiled back a good night. He seemed in better spirits now.

"Isn't he a nice little fellow?" she could not help saying to Mrs Ball.

"And quite the little gentleman," said the housekeeper. "But he seems delicate, poor child. Just to think of it—what a mercy that Stobbs's boy was coming up that way, and that he had a lantern. For all that the snow had stopped, he'd have been dead before morning. I don't like to think of it—at our very door, so to say, Miss Claudia, and us with no thought of it. But there—my lady's just going down to dinner."

Lady Mildred was very silent that evening. Her mind seemed full of many things, and Claudia, after one or two attempts at conversation, thought it best to give it up. Not very long after dinner the groom returned from Wortherham with a note addressed to Miss Meredon. He had found, so he informed his friends in the servants' hall, the family at Norfolk Terrace in a fine taking about the boy.

"They were sending out in all directions," he said. "The poor lady looked like dead, and the young ladies were crying fit to break their hearts. I never see such a sight. The other young gentlemen had been out skating on Gretham pond, and they thought as this one had got home hours before, as he should have done. I'm almost sure as it was he as stopped our young lady when we was a-driving home this afternoon."

"Stopped our young lady!" exclaimed Ball in surprise.

"Oh, it was just some message about the school. The Waldron young ladies goes where Miss Meredon does," said the groom. And as no more was said about the matter, Jerry's and Claudia's secret remained their own.

The note was from Charlotte. It scarcely bore traces of the agitation described by the groom.

"Dear Miss Meredon," it began,—

"My father and mother wish me to thank Lady Mildred most sincerely for her kindness to my brother Gervais. They also thank you for writing to tell us of his safety. We were becoming very uneasy about him. My father will go out early to-morrow, and hopes to be able to bring him home in a close carriage. He and my mother regret exceedingly the trouble all this must have caused you.

"I remain,—

"Yours sincerely,—

"Charlotte Waldron."

Claudia handed it to her aunt.

"Humph!" said Lady Mildred, "a very school-girl production, dictated by her papa and mamma, I suppose."

"Not stiffer than mine was," thought Claudia to herself.

"That little fellow up-stairs has something original about him. I have rather taken a fancy to him," said Lady Mildred.

"Yes," Claudia responded warmly; "I think he's a dear little fellow."

"But he can't be the eldest son; there must be one nearly grown-up, I fancy," said Lady Mildred, with a little sigh.

Claudia looked up. What was Lady Mildred thinking of? What *could* it matter to her, or to any one, or to themselves even, whether Gervais was eldest or youngest of the Waldrons? A country lawyer's family heirs to nothing.

"Aunt Mildred must be half asleep," thought Claudia. "She might as well talk as if it mattered which of *us* was the eldest."

Chapter Twelve.

The Owls Recognise one of the Family.

It seemed late to Claudia when she went up to bed that night, though in reality it was not much past ten o'clock. But so much had happened since dark, and it had grown dark so early with the snow-storm, that it would have been easy to fancy it was already long past midnight.

Claudia went to the window and drew back one of the curtains. The snow overhead had quite disappeared, but down below, it lay like a carpet of white, glistening faintly in the moonlight.

"How cold it looks," thought the girl with a little shiver, and Mrs Ball's words returned to her. Yes, it was dreadful to think that but for what seemed a mere accident, Gervais Waldron would by this time have been lying dead under the snow. And had it been so, it seemed to Claudia that she would always have felt or fancied cause for self-blame.

"How thankful I am he is not the worse for it," she said to herself. "Poor little fellow—I would have insisted on sending him home if he had not said he was to be met. He was so anxious to get away once he had achieved his purpose. He is very anxious still to get away. I wonder if he can go home to-morrow. I am afraid he is rather unhappy at having to stay here—all night. By the bye," and Claudia started as a thought struck her, "I hope he has not heard anything about the haunted room, and all that story. It was curious that he knew the name of the chintz room. I dare say the story is gossiped about by some of the old people in the neighbourhood, and he may have heard it."

She did not like to disturb him again, and she hoped that by this time he was fast asleep. But she went out of her room as far as the spring door, between the old and new parts of the house, near which, on opposite sides, were both her room and Jerry's. She propped the door open with a chair, so that if the boy were by any chance afraid and came to look for her, he should at once see where he was. For a small lamp burned all night on a side-table on the large landing, and even a little light goes a long way when all around is darkness. And as she made her way back again, she glanced up the old staircase to where in the gloom was the door of the tower room.

"I wonder if the ghost is awake to-night," she thought, half-laughingly. "I always seem to think of the story on moonlight nights—perhaps because it is then that one is tempted to look out of the window, and that reminds me of the view from the tower room, right down the drive."

But she looked out of the window no more to-night. She was tired, and fell asleep almost immediately she got into bed.

Her dreams were, as might have been expected, somewhat disturbed and confused. She had kaleidoscope visions of herself and Charlotte and Jerry, and a snow-man shaking white flakes over them all, which, on close examination, proved to be leaves of an exercise-book, covered with the German prize essay. Then looking up to complain, she saw that the snow-man had turned into Herr Märklestatter, who was running after Lady Mildred with a very angry face, while Lady Mildred called for help, screaming out, "It is the ghost, it is the ghost." Claudia half woke up, roused, as it seemed to her in her dream, by her aunt's cries. But all was silent, and she turned round, half-smiling to herself sleepily at her foolish fancies, and was all but dreaming again, when again a sound something between a sob and a low wail, penetrated to her brain, this time effectually, for she started up, quite awake, and listened in the darkness.

She had not long to wait. A low sound, this time translatable into words, reached her ears.

"Miss Meredon! oh, Miss Meredon! are you there?" said a most doleful voice. And then came a sort of sob or groan of intense distress, the same sound as that which had awakened her.

A faint, very faint light came from the direction of the door, showing her that it was slightly open. For the light could only come from the little lamp on the landing outside. But Claudia had a candle and matches on a table close at hand.

"Who is it? what is it?" she exclaimed, trembling a little in spite of herself, while she struck a match.

"It's me, it's only me," was the answer. "I'm so ashamed. I hope you'll forgive me. I hope you won't think me very rude for waking you up, but I'm so dreadfully frightened. There's been some one or something crying and sobbing for such a time near my room. I tried to think it was my fancy, or the wind, or the owls, as papa said. But at last I couldn't bear it. I'm almost sure it must be the ghost."

And by the candle which Claudia had succeeded in lighting, a queer, grotesque, but most pitiful little object revealed itself. It was Jerry of course—standing there with his poor white face, looking almost as pallid as when they had drawn him out of the snow the evening before, his blue eyes feverishly dark and bright, Claudia's nightgown a mile too big for him trailing on the ground, and its frills standing up round his neck and sweeping over his hands.

"I am so sorry, Gervais, so very sorry," Claudia exclaimed, almost as if it was all her fault. "Wait a moment, dear. I'll put on my dressing-gown. Here," and she flung him a shawl which was hanging on a chair close by, "wrap yourself

up. You are shivering so. Is the fire quite out?"

"It's not quite out in my room," said poor Jerry. "I kept seeing little bits of light in it, and I think it made it worse, for once I thought I saw a shadow pass between it and me," and he shivered again violently. "Oh, Miss Meredon," he half sobbed, "I do wish you had let me go home last night."

"But it was impossible—it really was," said Claudia. "You will make me blame myself for all your troubles, Gervais. I should not have let you set out to walk home in the snow."

"No, no, it wasn't your fault," said Jerry.

"Then try and leave off shivering, and tell me what frightened you so. And who can have been mischievous enough to tell you all that nonsense about the ghost?" she added indignantly.

"It wasn't any one here," said Jerry. "I've known it a long time, and I *never* was frightened before. It was papa who told it us—he stayed here once when he was a little boy, and he was frightened himself. And he slept in the very room where I am now—that is how I knew the name."

"Well, if your father knows the whole story he might have told you that the ghost *never* appears to or is heard by any one but a member of the Osbert family, which shows *you* couldn't have heard it, my dear Gervais," said Claudia smiling, in order to comfort him, though to tell the truth her own heart was beating a good deal faster than usual.

Jerry's face cleared.

"I didn't know that," he said. "I am very glad."

"But what am I to do?" said Claudia. "I must get you warm again. I suppose I had better call up Mrs Ball or some one."

"Oh, no, *please* don't," Jerry entreated. "I should be so ashamed. I'll try and not mind now, if you'd let me have the candle to go back to my room with."

But his wan face and trembling voice belied his words—though Claudia respected him the more for his struggle to overcome his fears.

"I'll go with you to your room," she said, "and we'll try to make up the fire. It would be much cheerier with a good blaze, wouldn't it?"

The two took their way across the landing through the door, which Claudia had so thoughtfully propped open. And "Oh," Jerry ejaculated, "I don't know what I would have done if that door had been shut!"

The fire was by no means in a hopeless condition, and it was not the first time by any means that Claudia had skilfully doctored one. For she had taken her share in many days and nights too of nursing at home, when her father's eyes were at their worst, or the younger children had measles or scarlet fever. And soon a bright blaze rewarded her efforts.

"How clever you are," said Jerry admiringly. "I don't believe Charlotte could do up a fire like that. I didn't think—"

"What?" said Claudia.

"I didn't think such—such a *grand* girl as you would know how to do things like that."

Claudia turned her laughing face, on which rested the glow of the fire, towards the boy, who was now comfortably ensconced in a big arm-chair with a blanket round him.

"You'll have to alter your opinion of me, Gervais. I'm not 'grand' at all."

"But I think you are; and I think you are *very* pretty. If you only saw now how the flames make your hair shine!" said the child dreamily. "And you are very, very kind. I shall tell Charlotte. I am not sure that she wouldn't have laughed at me a little about the ghost. She thinks being frightened so babyish."

"Perhaps she has never been tried," said Claudia.

"What was it you heard, Gervais?"

"It was like sobbing and groaning in a muffled kind of way. It came from up-stairs, at least I fancied so; perhaps it was because I knew the haunted room is up-stairs—papa told me. At first I was rather sleepy, and I thought I was dreaming—I've had such queer dreams all night; perhaps it was with them giving me brandy, you know. And so I thought I was dreaming, and then when I woke up and heard it still, I thought it was the wind. But it seemed to come down the stair in the queerest way—really as if it was somebody, and almost into the room, as if it wanted me to get up and see what was the matter. And all of a sudden I seemed to remember where I was, and all that papa had told us came back into my mind, and I thought of the tower room up-stairs and the poor ghost crying all alone. Miss Meredon, I'm awfully sorry for the ghost, do you know! I used to think if ever I got a chance I'd speak to him, and ask him if I could do anything for him. But—" and Jerry drew a deep breath.

"Only, Gervais, it couldn't have been him after all; you see you're not a relation of his."

"No, but I didn't know that. I'll try to think that it was the wind, or the owls, or anything."

"And that you were not quite well, and that made you more fanciful; you see you had been dreaming already in a fanciful way."

"Yes," said Jerry, though his tone was only half convinced.

"And now don't you think you can manage to go to sleep? Get into bed, and I'll sit here beside you. I will leave the candle alight, and I will make up the fire so that it shall last till morning. It is near morning now, I fancy."

"Thank you, awfully," said Jerry. "Yes, I'll try to go to sleep. I don't like you to have to sit up like that; as soon as I'm at all asleep, please go. I have a feeling that I won't hear any more noises now.—Oh what a lot I shall have to tell Charlotte about how awfully good she is," he said to himself. And he lay perfectly still and tried to breathe regularly so that Claudia should think he was asleep, and as sometimes happens, the simulation brought the reality. In ten minutes he was really and truly in a deep and peaceful slumber.

Then Claudia went quietly back to her own room. All was perfectly still up the stair leading to the tower, but a strange, puzzled, half-sad feeling crept over the girl.

"It really seems as if there were something in that old story," she thought. "Why should that poor little fellow be so impressed by it? I can't understand his father's having heard it too. And Gervais said his father used to stay here as a boy. How could that have been? I wonder if it can have anything to do with Aunt Mildred's prejudice against the Waldrons—for I am sure she *is* a little prejudiced against them."

But Claudia was too tired and sleepy to pursue her reflections further, and her slumbers till the next morning were dreamless and undisturbed.

The little guest was fast asleep when Mrs Ball went to look after him.

"It is the best thing he can do, poor child. It would be a shame to disturb him. He does look a delicate little creature, to be sure. One sees it even plainer by daylight," she said, when she came to Claudia's room to report. "But you're looking tired yourself, Miss Meredon, this morning. It was rather an upset for you last night. He did look deathly when they brought him in."

"Yes; he looked dreadful," Claudia agreed. "How is her ladyship, Mrs Ball? It was an upset for her too."

"I've not seen her, miss; but she was ringing to know if the letters hadn't come. It will be a very dull Christmas here if my lady goes up to spend it in town. We were hoping with a young lady like you here, missy, it would have been a bit livelier. There are some nice families about, where there are young people, but my lady's got so out of the way of seeing any one, but just her own old friends."

"I'm afraid my being here wouldn't have made Christmas any cheerier, Mrs Ball," said Claudia. "I don't much mind whether we spend it here or in London. I'm glad to be a companion to Aunt Mildred, at least I'm glad that she seems to like to have me."

"That she does, missy," said the old housekeeper heartily.

Lady Mildred still seemed anxious and pre-occupied when Claudia met her at breakfast; but she was gentle and less irritable than was usual with her when she was at all uneasy.

"I have no letter from Mr Miller, yet. I cannot understand it," she said; "he promised to write at once, and explain what this business is that he wants to see me about. He said it was nothing pressing—'pressing' is such an indefinite word. If it was nothing pressing what did he say he wanted to see me for, and ask so particularly if I was likely to be in town."

"It is as if he wished to talk over something with you, perhaps to see you more than once, and not hurriedly," said Claudia.

"Yes," said Lady Mildred, "that is the feeling his letter gave me. The little boy seems better this morning Mrs Ball tells me," she went on.

"Yes, she came to my room to tell me so," Claudia replied; she was on the point of going on to tell her aunt about the disturbances of the night when something made her stop short. It would be scarcely fair to Gervais to do so, she reflected; at any rate while he was still in the house and might dislike being cross-questioned about the matter, as Lady Mildred would probably insist upon. Then she shrank a little from bringing up the old ghost-story just now, when her aunt was already evidently rather uneasy, for Claudia had detected a certain dislike to and avoidance of the subject on Lady Mildred's part, even while she affected to treat it all as nonsense.

"I will say nothing about it just now," the girl decided.

They had scarcely finished breakfast when wheels were heard on the gravel drive outside, and there came a ring at the bell.

"Mr Waldron, if you please, my lady," Ball came in to announce with his usual urbane solemnity. "He begs to apologise for coming so early, but if he can go up-stairs to see the young gentleman, he hopes it will not in any way disturb your ladyship."

Lady Mildred rose from the table.

"Show Mr Waldron into the morning room," she said; and when the visitor entered the room he found her already

there.

"I am ashamed—" he began, his usual rather cold courtesy to Lady Mildred tempered by the sense of his obligation to her; but she interrupted him.

"Pray don't thank me, Mr Waldron," she said; "I have done nothing to be thanked for. Hospitality in such a case is an absolute matter of course. I am only thankful the accident proved no worse. I have a good account of your little son this morning. You would like to see him, no doubt?"

Mr Waldron bowed.

"At once if possible," he said.

Lady Mildred rang the bell.

"He is a fine little fellow," she said, with perhaps the shadow of an effort perceptible in her tone; "but evidently delicate. You will excuse me for saying that it seems to me very rash to let a boy like him be so far from home and on foot in such weather."

Mr Waldron's face flushed slightly. He did not like being taken to task especially about his care and management of his children, but he felt that there was room for Lady Mildred's censure.

"You are right," he said; "but 'accidents will happen in the best-regulated families,'" he went on with a slight smile. "It was all a mistake, the other boys would never have let him start to walk back alone from the pond had they not felt sure he would meet the dog-cart. I can scarcely even now make out how he missed it."

"He is not your eldest son, then," said Lady Mildred. Mr Waldron's face flushed again.

"No," he said; "I have three older."

"Oh, indeed," said Lady Mildred, with a not altogether agreeable inflection in her voice; "then there is no fear of the Waldron family coming to an end."

But the entrance of the footman prevented any necessity of the visitor's replying.

"Show Mr Waldron up to the chintz room," said Lady Mildred.

Jerry's father started a little. Had they put the child *there*—in his own old quarters? It was a curious coincidence.

His mind was full of many thoughts as he followed the servant. He had never been at Silverthorns except once or twice for an interview of five minutes or so, on business matters, since the long ago days of his boyhood, and old memories crowded thickly upon him as he made his way along the well-remembered passages, and up the familiar stairs.

"To think that this was once home to me,"—he thought—"to think of my grandmother—more than mother as she was to me—having died in privation, almost in want, after being mistress here for a good part of her long life. Yes; it would have been hard in any case, but that, we could have borne uncomplainingly, had we not been treated with such unnecessary rigour and cruelty. It is very bitter to remember. I have done well to bring the children up in ignorance of it all."

But these thoughts were to some extent driven from his mind when he entered the chintz room, and saw Jerry. He had not expected to find the boy looking so ill—he was sitting up in bed eating his breakfast, but he was very pale and uneasy-looking, and when his father stooped to kiss him, he flung his arms round him, and clutched him convulsively.

"You've come to take me home, papa," he cried; "I'll be ready directly. Oh, I shall be so glad to go home!"

"My poor Jerry," said Mr Waldron; "why you talk as if you had been away for years. But they've been very kind to you here?"

"Oh, *very*," said the boy, in a tone of the deepest conviction; "but, papa, I wouldn't sleep here alone another night for *anything*. I can't tell you all now; but it was like what you told us about. I heard the sobbing and sighing, I did indeed."

Mr Waldron started a little, but imperceptibly to Jerry.

"I shouldn't have told it," he said regretfully; "of course I would never have dreamt of doing so had I foreseen this. It was only natural, Jerry, that you should think you heard those sounds, when your mind was full of the story, and you were besides not well—excited and feverish probably."

"Yes, that was what Miss Meredon said, and—"

"Does *she* know you were frightened?" interrupted Mr Waldron in surprise.

"Oh, yes; but I'll tell you all at home. She tried to satisfy me, and she said one thing which almost did—that nobody ever hears these sounds except one of the family. But I've been thinking after all that can't be, for *you* heard them and you aren't one of the family, so why shouldn't I?"

"It only proves that what one fanciful little boy thought he heard, another fanciful little boy may have—no, I won't say

thought he heard. I did hear them; but I believe it was perfectly possible they were caused by owls, and partly perhaps by some peculiar draught of air. This is very old, this part of the house. Did you know that?"

"Oh, yes; this is the very room you used to have. I remembered the name."

"Yes," said Mr Waldron, and he looked about him with feelings his little son could but very vaguely fathom. It was indeed the very room, as Jerry said; strangely little changed in the more than thirty years that had passed since he saw it. There was the queer cupboard in the wall where he kept his treasures, the old dark mahogany wash-handstand with the blue and white toilet-ware; yes, actually the very same; the faded chintz curtains which, in some far-off time when they had been the pride doubtless of some Silverthorns chatelaine, had given its name to the room; and to complete the resemblance, from where he sat, the glimpse through the window of the snow-covered drive and trees outside. For it was in winter that he and his grandmother had left Silverthorns, as seemed then, for ever.

But with a sigh he roused himself, and returned to the present.

"Jerry," he said; "I have not brought a close carriage for you. We should have had to get one from the 'George,' and in the note last night something was said of the doctor seeing you this morning to say if you could come."

"Oh, papa," said Jerry; "I *can't* stay."

His father looked at him again. It did seem as if it would do the boy less harm to go than to stay.

"Very well," he said; "I will try to arrange it."

Chapter Thirteen.

Mr Miller's News.

There were difficulties to contend with. Lady Mildred, whose hospitable instincts were aroused, and who felt really anxious about the delicate little boy, would not hear of his leaving without the doctor's permission.

"He will be here directly," she said; but it was impossible for Mr Waldron to wait. He glanced at Claudia in a sort of despair. She understood him.

"I am almost sure Mr Webb will say Gervais may safely go," she said; "perhaps if he is fidgety and nervous at being away from—from his mother and all, it would be better to run the risk of cold than to excite him by keeping him here."

"Yes," said Mr Waldron, gratefully; "that is just it. Then I may send a close carriage in about a couple of hours."

"No, certainly not," said Lady Mildred sharply. "If Mr Webb does give leave for him to go to-day, it shall certainly be in the brougham. I shall send Mrs Ball or some one with him—"

"I have some one with me," said Mr Waldron, "waiting in the dog-cart at the door."

Lady Mildred almost screamed.

"Waiting at the door in this weather! My dear Mr Waldron—"

A few minutes later, as Jerry lay wondering if he might not get up, a slight rustle in the doorway caught his ears, at all times of the sharpest. It was clear daylight, impossible to think of ghosts or anything uncanny; but Jerry's heart nevertheless beat rather faster than usual for an instant or two. Then there was a little cry, a rush towards the bed, disjointed exclamations—"Oh, dear Charlotte! is it you?"

"My own old Jerry, to think you were nearly lost in the snow. Oh, how miserable we were! Oh my old Jerry."

There was some one in the doorway, some one who had brought Charlotte up-stairs, whose eyes filled with tears as she listened to them.

"Oh, how happy they are to be together, not to have to be separated," she thought, as her fancy flew off to her own dear ones, Lalage and Alix, and the three little brothers at the Rectory.

And an hour or two later, Jerry, well wrapped up, and in Charlotte's careful convoy, was driven home in Lady Mildred's deliciously comfortable brougham. How his tongue went, how intense was Charlotte's interest in the thrilling experiences of the night before!

"It is *very* strange," she said thoughtfully; "indeed the whole thing is too strange. That you should have been put to sleep in that very same room; oh, I can fancy how frightened you must have been. I don't think it was babyish at all."

For that it had been so, was Jerry's worst misgiving.

"And oh, Charlotte, she *was* so kind; whether she's spoilt or not, whatever she is, I shall always say she is very, *very* kind."

"Yes, Jerry dear; I will try more than ever to—to like her, at least not to be jealous of her: it is a horrible feeling," said Charlotte with a sigh. And a softer feeling than she had yet had towards Claudia came over her as she thought of all her gentle kindness that very morning; how she had entered into Jerry's gladness when the doctor said he might go

home; how she had herself seen to the hot-water bottles in the brougham, and brought the warmest wraps, and insisted on lending her furred carriage overshoes, as Jerry's boots had shrunk. How lovely she had looked as she stood at the hall-door to see them off! It had been impossible for Charlotte to resist giving her a warm pressure of the hand, and murmuring a hearty "thank you." Afterwards she felt doubly glad that she had done so, though she was far from thinking just now how long it would be before she saw again the sweet, bright face against whose attractiveness she had so resolutely steeled herself.

Lady Mildred continued uneasy and nervous; she asked Claudia not to go to school that day.

"For one thing," she said, "it would not be fit for you to go with Kelpie, and there is no horse roughed except the one that has gone in the brougham; and I have a sort of feeling that there may be a telegram from Mr Miller as there was no letter. It is possible we may go up to town almost at once."

But no telegram came.

The next morning, however, brought a letter from Mr Miller in which he decidedly seconded Lady Mildred's proposal to spend Christmas in town. If she could manage to do so, he said, it would be in every way more satisfactory than his coming down to Silverthorns. For the business he wanted to see her about, was not anything that could be settled at once. He should hope to have several long talks with her.

"Tiresome man," said Lady Mildred; "why can't he speak out and say what it is. Claudia, I shall not feel comfortable now till I have seen him. I shall have a telegram this morning to say if I can get the rooms I want—my own house, you know, Claudia, has been let since Mr Osbert's death—and it so, I shall decide to go up to-morrow. You must send a note to your Miss Lloyd to say you will be away till after Christmas."

"Very well, Aunt Mildred," Claudia replied.

Lady Mildred glanced at her sharply.

"What is the matter, child?" she said. "Are you vexed at having to miss a week or ten days of these precious lessons? Any other girl would like the idea of a visit to town, even in winter. I will take you about, as much as I can."

"I do like it, indeed, aunt," said Claudia earnestly; "and for some things I am really not sorry to miss this last little bit at Miss Lloyd's."

"You are ahead of all the Wortherham misses, I suppose, and afraid of hurting their feelings, or something of that sort, I suppose," said Lady Mildred, with a sort of half-grudging admiration. "My dear Claudia, you are your father's own daughter—Quixotic is no word for you. You won't find that kind of thing answer in the world, I assure you."

But Claudia laughed brightly.

"I think the world is a much nicer place than most people allow, Aunt Mildred."

"You have seen such a great deal of it," Lady Mildred replied. "I am not sure but that you have seen enough of the Wortherham corner of it, however. I think you are beyond Miss Lloyd's institution. What you should have now is some first-rate teaching in France and Germany."

Claudia's eyes glistened.

"Of course I should like that very much," she said; "but I do think the teaching very good at Miss Lloyd's—it has been already such a test to me of what I really do know."

The telegram with a favourable reply about the rooms came that morning. The very next day saw Lady Mildred and Claudia installed in them. Claudia had never been in London before for more than a day or two at a time, and in spite of the dreary winter weather she was full of delight. Even the slight fog, which of course greeted them on their awaking the next morning, could not depress her spirits.

"I have always wanted so to see a real London fog," she said with satisfaction, when her aunt called her back from her station at the window.

"But, my dear, this is not a real fog," said Lady Mildred laughing. "It is foggy, certainly; but a real London fog, as you call it, would rather astonish you."

"I hope we shall have one then, while we are in town," said Claudia, naïvely.

And Lady Mildred was still laughing at her when Mr Miller was announced, and Claudia was dismissed.

"What a very charming girl," began the old gentleman, as she left the room. Everybody always did say something of the kind about Claudia, but in the present case the remark struck Lady Mildred as rather forced. It seemed to her that Mr Miller was deferring the evil moment of some communication he had to make to her. "Is she a relation of yours—or—perhaps of Mr Osbert's?" he went on with a sudden gleam of interest.

"Of Mr Osbert's!" repeated Lady Mildred, contemptuously. "What are you thinking of, my good Mr Miller? You know all about Mr Osbert's relations as well as or better than I do. You know he had none near enough to count except General Osbert and his family; and General Osbert has no daughter."

"No; but there are relations of Mr Osbert's, and not so very distant ones either, living within a short drive of you," said Mr Miller, rather snappishly. He did not like Lady Mildred's tone. "I had occasion several times to remind Mr

Osbert of this, though possibly your ladyship's attention was never drawn to it."

"You mean those Waldrons, I suppose," said Lady Mildred. "I do not know their exact connection with the Osberts. I know my husband did not like them; he had some trouble with old Mrs Waldron when he first came to Silverthorns, I remember his telling me. Some interference or some unreasonable claim she made. But why should we waste time in speaking about them just now, Mr Miller; you have some important matters to talk over with me, and I have been making myself quite uneasy with wondering what they could be."

She expected some courteous and smiling expression of regret and reassurance from the lawyer; but to her surprise his face remained very grave.

"Yes; I have some most important matters to discuss with you," he said; "I have been foreseeing the present state of things for some time. There has been—I have had bad news from Cannes. You are aware that General Osbert and his family—a very small family now—usually spend the winters there, though I think you never have any direct communication with them?"

"Never," said Lady Mildred; "though they keep themselves informed of *my* state of health, no doubt. My death will be a matter of some moment to them." But Mr Miller took no notice of this caustic observation.

"As I was saying," he went on, "I have had bad news from Cannes. The elder son—the only one, one might almost say, for the other one is hopelessly consumptive—had a bad accident last week; he was thrown from his horse. Yesterday evening came a telegram announcing his death."

Lady Mildred started.

"But he was married," she said hastily.

"Yes; he has been married several years to a cousin on his mother's side, but he has left no children; he never had any. General Osbert is terribly broken down by this, and he is already an old man. It is practically the end of the family. The other son cannot live many months."

"And I am an old woman," said Lady Mildred: "I may die any day. Don't be afraid to speak out, Mr Miller. You are thinking of what will become of the property if all General Osbert's family thus comes to an end."

"Yes," said Mr Miller quietly, "I am. Not what *will* become of it, but what *should*. I have much to explain to you, which I do not think you have ever thoroughly understood, indeed I have not always thoroughly understood it myself. There were some things wrongly done when the property last changed hands—not so much illegally as unfairly and unkindly."

"You mean to say when my husband's branch of it came into possession," said Lady Mildred hastily. "I will listen to no blame of *him*, Mr Miller."

Mr Miller smiled a little.

"I do not ask you to do so, Lady Mildred," he said. "Mr Osbert was misinformed and prejudiced; and there was foolish pride on the other side—reluctance to explain things properly. I blame the old squire's sister, the late Mrs Waldron, for this, though she was an admirable woman. If you will allow me, I will go over the whole with you, and explain exactly the present position of things."

Lady Mildred was closeted with Mr Miller for a long time that morning. When he at last left and Claudia rejoined her, the girl saw that she was grave and thoughtful, but not restless or uneasy.

"Mr Miller had melancholy news to give me, Claudia," she said; "my husband's nephew, General Osbert's son, is dead. It is very, very sad for them." Claudia's bright face shadowed over.

"Have they no other children?"

"It is not 'they'—the old man is a widower. Yes; he has one other son, but he is frightfully delicate," and Lady Mildred sighed. "I have a good deal on my mind, my dear. I don't quite see what to do. What should you say to our going abroad; I may have to see the General on business matters."

"I should like it, of course," said Claudia; "especially if—please don't think me selfish—if I could go on with my lessons."

"Oh, you tiresome child! You have lessons on the brain: yes, of course you would go on with them, and learn more than at Miss Lloyd's. No, I am not vexed with you; it is right and necessary that you should feel as you do. I wonder, by the bye, how that little fellow is—the little Waldron boy. I hope his adventure has done him no lasting harm; he did look so very thin and delicate. Perhaps the hearing of those unfortunate people's troubles has made me think of him again."

"Might I write to his sister to ask how he is, Aunt Mildred?" said Claudia. She would have spoken eagerly, for she felt so, but she knew that with Lady Mildred it was best to be calm.

Rather to her surprise the response was almost cordial.

"Yes; I have no objection. It would seem only natural after our having had him with us. Tell the girl I should like to hear that his exposure in the snow has done him no harm."

"Thank you, aunt; I will write at once," said Claudia, flushing with pleasure.

"What do you thank me for, my dear?" said Lady Mildred, with a rather curious smile. "It is rather I that should thank you for writing the letter for me."

But Claudia saw that she was not vexed, though she could not quite understand her.

"Aunt Mildred is rather incomprehensible sometimes," she said to herself; "but it is no use minding; she is so very good and kind."

For it was not by any means Claudia's way to worry or perplex herself with useless puzzles or wonderings; her heart and mind were too full of pleasanter and more profitable things.

She was not able, much as she wished to do so, to write to Charlotte that day. For she had to go out with her aunt, to write some notes to friends for her, and various other small pieces of business to attend to which made it evening before she had any leisure; and in the evening Lady Mildred disliked to see her occupied. And the next day was Sunday, when, as everybody knows, all the postal arrangements in London go to sleep.

So it was not till Tuesday morning that Claudia's letter was put into Charlotte's hands at the breakfast-table.

"A letter for me," she exclaimed, with some excitement and surprise; for Charlotte's letters, except on the very rare occasions when she was away from home for a little, were few and far between. "I wonder what it is. I wish it could be anything to please poor Jerry," she went on speaking half to herself.

For since they had brought him home, Jerry had been ill—confined to bed now for the best part of a week, and it seemed very melancholy without him, even in that busy household. It had not done him any harm to bring him straight home that first day; the harm was done already; the chill had given him a bad feverish cold, and though it was not anything very serious he was much weakened by it.

"He must get up his strength, or we shall be afraid to let him out again till the fine weather comes," the doctor said; "and that would be a sad thing for a boy of his age."

Then when he went down-stairs with Mrs Waldron to write a prescription for a tonic, he sat looking thoughtful and pre-occupied for a minute or two. Jerry's mother was a little alarmed.

"You don't think there is anything much the matter with him?" she said.

"No, oh no; he has rather lost ground in his general health the last few months. He needed a fresh start or a fillip, and unluckily he has, so to speak, had one the wrong way. But there is nothing to be uneasy about, only considering how wonderfully he has improved in the last few years, I should like to see him still stronger."

"Yes," Mrs Waldron agreed; "and in another year or so he will be getting into a higher class at school, and he will have to work harder, that will be trying for him."

"Exactly," said the doctor, who had known Jerry since he was a baby; "now's the time for him to get up his strength. You couldn't by any possibility, I suppose, manage to send him out of England, to some of the mild health places, for a winter? It would be the making of him."

Mrs Waldron shook her head. She saw no chance whatever of such a thing and said so.

"Ah, well," said the doctor, "we must do our best. I dare say he'll pull up again. It was only an idea that struck me."

And when he had gone, and Jerry's mother went up-stairs again, it struck her too that the boy did look sadly in want of something of the kind.

"If only we were rich," she thought. "When we are all well it does not seem to press so—it is illness that brings small means home to one sorely."

Charlotte opened her letter, and glanced through it; then made a little exclamation. She had her wish. It was something that would please Jerry.

"What is it?" asked her mother.

"It is,"—Charlotte began with a very slight shade of reluctance—"it is a letter from Miss Meredon to ask how Jerry is."

"It is very nice of her to have thought of it," said Mrs Waldron.

"She writes, she says, by Lady Mildred's wish," said Charlotte; "they are in London."

"Well, you may run up-stairs and tell Jerry about it. It will please him," said her mother.

Chapter Fourteen.

Lady Mildred Makes up her Mind.

Jerry was sitting up in bed; he was so far better that no serious illness was now to be feared, but he was weak and depressed, feeling vaguely "sorry for himself," not quite sure what he wanted, nor eager to profit by the doctor's

permission to get up in the afternoon, and go down to have tea in the drawing-room.

He glanced up listlessly as Charlotte came in.

"I have an hour still before I need to go to school," she said, "so I have come up to you, Jerry: there is a letter about you this morning."

"About me!" Jerry exclaimed; "anything about school, do you mean? They know I'm ill."

"No, not from school; it's from Miss Meredon, to ask how you are; they're in London."

"How nice of her!" said Jerry, his eyes brightening. "I'm sure you must see, Charlotte, how nice she is."

"Yes," Charlotte allowed; "she is kind and good; I'll never say she's not. But it can't be difficult to be nice when one has everything one wants, like her," she added, reverting to her old strain.

Jerry looked disappointed.

"I think you are rather unfair, Charlotte," he said. "If she wasn't nice you'd say she was spoilt and selfish, and as she *is* nice you say it's no credit to her. How can you tell that it isn't very difficult to be nice and kind to others when one has everything one wants oneself? *Papa* says it is very difficult indeed not to get spoilt when one's like that."

"I'd like to be tried," said Charlotte.

"Besides," pursued Jerry, "do you know I'm not quite sure that she *has* everything the way we fancied."

Charlotte looked up eagerly.

"What do you mean?" she said. "What can there be that she hasn't got? We *know* she's very rich and clever and pretty; that's a good deal, any way."

"But I'm almost sure she has to be away from the people she loves most," said Jerry; "I know it by some things she said. And I could tell by her ways that she's used to brothers and sisters—I fancy there's a lot of them."

"She is rather to be pitied for that," said Charlotte half-laughingly, "though it can't be so bad when people are rich. And then as Lady Mildred has adopted her what can it matter?"

"I shouldn't like to be adopted away from you all, however grand and rich I was to be," said Jerry, "and I don't believe you'd like it either, whatever you say. You make yourself out worse than you are, Charlotte."

"Well, read the letter," she said, and Jerry did so. As he gave it back to Charlotte he grew rather red.

"Do you see?" he said; "they're not coming back—not till after Christmas. Charlotte, you're sure of the German prize."

Charlotte's face lighted up.

"I did not notice that," she said; "I thought she said something about staying a few days."

"No," said Jerry, "she says, 'We shall not return to Silverthorns till after Christmas, perhaps a few days after, and perhaps not so soon.'"

Charlotte drew a deep breath.

"I see," she said. "My composition is nearly finished. Oh, Jerry, how I hope I shall get the prize now."

"You are sure to," he said shortly.

"Unless," Charlotte went on, "unless she possibly finishes it there, and sends it back by post."

"Nonsense," said Jerry; "I am sure she won't. She wouldn't have time for one thing, and—"

"What?"

"Oh, I don't think she's the sort of girl to set herself so to win a prize when she's been so short a time at school with you all," said Jerry.

"No; perhaps not. Of course it *can't* matter to her as it does to me. I dare say she's forgotten all about it now she's up in London amusing herself," said Charlotte in a satisfied tone which Jerry found rather provoking. "I don't mind her not trying—I mean I'm not too proud to say I know she would have won it if she had. I shall always say so, for she is much further on and much cleverer than any of us. And some of them have been working very hard lately. It isn't as if I had no one worth trying against."

Jerry said no more. He was glad for Charlotte, but he did feel it hard that Claudia's self-sacrifice, which had been just as great and real as if after events had not rendered it unnecessary, should remain for ever unknown and unappreciated.

"I wonder if I shall *never* be able to tell Charlotte," he said to himself. "Long after, perhaps, when she's left off caring about school things. I should like her to know some day," and his blue eyes gazed out into the future wistfully.

"What are you thinking of, Jerry?" said Charlotte suddenly. "Why do you look so melancholy? The doctor says you may get up this afternoon."

"I know he did," said Jerry, "but I don't think I want to. I'm too tired," and with a little sigh of weariness he lay down again on his pillows.

Charlotte looked at him in distress.

"Oh, dear," she said; "how unlucky that snowy day was, though I suppose things might have turned out worse."

"Yes," replied Jerry with complacency; "I might have had rheumatic fever, or brain fever, perhaps. But, Charlotte, it wasn't because I was feverish that I heard those noises that night; I *know* it wasn't. And I don't believe papa thinks so either. It can't be true about only a member of the family hearing it, for you see there was papa when he was a little boy. I'd like to tell *her*, Claudia, that."

"It was very queer," said Charlotte; "you don't know how pleased I am to have seen that part of the house, Jerry. I took a good look up the stair to where the tower room must be: there was something melancholy about the house, wasn't there? How awfully nice it would be with a large family in it, and lots of running about."

"You wouldn't mind lots of brothers and sisters then," said Jerry.

"No, I'd like it; just fancy what fun we could have. But I must go, Jerry. I will write to Miss Meredon when I come home."

"I think I'd like to write to her myself," said Jerry. "Ask mamma if I may."

"Very well," said Charlotte, rather surprised; "I dare say mamma will be quite pleased that you want to do it." And so Mrs Waldron was, for Jerry's lassitude and want of energy were troubling her.

He quite brightened up over his letter.

"You won't care to see it, will you, mamma?" he asked. "You see she's such a jolly—an understanding sort of girl; she won't bother about how it's spelt, and all that."

"But you will send a proper message of thanks to Lady Mildred," said his mother. "It is very good of her to take so much interest in you, and she was very kind to you at Silverthorns."

"Not as kind as Miss Meredon was," said Jerry; "but of course I'll say it properly, mamma."

Mrs Waldron told her husband that evening of the letter, and Jerry's replying to it himself.

"I was glad to see him interested about it," she said; "it is so unlike him to be so listless. How strange it seems that we should be in any way brought in contact with Silverthorns after all these years!"

"Stranger even than you think it," he replied. "Do you know I heard only to-day that General Osbert's eldest—or elder, he has only two—son is dead, in consequence of a fall from his horse? He died on the 13th, just the day Jerry was so frightened at Silverthorns. And it was when my old uncle died that I, as a child, was so startled there."

"You won't tell Jerry? It would only deepen the impression."

"Of course not. Besides, there are so many other ways of accounting for what he heard—his own feverish state at the time, in the first place."

"Perhaps it is on account of this news that Lady Mildred has gone up to town just now," said Mrs Waldron.

"I hardly think so: there is still the other son, who may be married and have children, or this one, poor fellow, may have left sons himself for all I know. I have never kept up much knowledge of them. You see it cannot matter to us, as it is so very improbable but that Lady Mildred would leave all to her own people if the Osberts died out."

Mrs Waldron smiled.

"I can't see it quite that way," she said; "you *are* half Osbert, and then you were so associated with the place from being brought up there. I am sure your grand-uncle would rather it had gone to you than to those far-off cousins."

"Ah, well, it is much better not to think about it," said Mr Waldron philosophically.

Jerry's letter took him some time; he was not satisfied with the first production, and being a very particular, not to say "fussy," little person, he determined to copy it out again. And he was very easily tired still. So it was not till the next day but one that Claudia received the answer to her letter of inquiry.

Her face lighted up with pleasure and amusement as she read it:

"My dear Miss Meredon," it began—

"I have asked Charlotte to let me write myself, to thank you for writing about me. I am better, thank you, but I am still in bed. The doctor says I may get up this afternoon, but I'm not sure that I'm inclined. It is so cold and I am so tired still; I wish it was summer again. I want to tell you that Charlotte is in very good spirits, and she is working hard, *especially* at German. I should like to see you again. Perhaps some day I could go to call on you when you come back, for I should like to thank Lady Mildred Osbert too for being so kind to me. Papa and mamma wish me to thank her for wanting to know how I was. I wish you a merry

Christmas. I remain,—
“Yours truly,—
“G.T. Waldron.”

They were at breakfast when the letter came. Lady Mildred glanced at Claudia’s smiling face.

“Home news, I suppose, to make you look so sunshiny?” she said, in the half-teasing tone that Claudia had learnt not to mind.

“No, Aunt Mildred; it’s a letter from little Gervais Waldron,” she said, and after a moment’s imperceptible hesitation in which she had time to say to herself,—“there is nothing in it which would tell his secret,”—she handed it to Lady Mildred, who read it.

“Poor little fellow,” she said, “it doesn’t seem much as if he were in a very promising way; they should send him abroad for the rest of the winter. He looks to me just the sort of child that might be set up by it. I think it a cruel thing to send away hopeless invalids to those southern places, even if it prolongs their lives a little it too often deprives them of their homes and friends at the last. But it is a very different thing for a delicate child with no actual disease. In such a case it may give a start for life.”

Claudia listened with some surprise. Her aunt’s interest in the subject of this boy was not exactly the sort of thing that Lady Mildred’s usual ways would have led her to expect.

“I dare say it would be a very good thing—the best in the world for him,” she said. “But I am *sure* they could not possibly afford it.”

“Why? Are they so poor do you think?” said Lady Mildred quickly.

Claudia could not help laughing a very little. “Auntie,” she said, “people needn’t be desperately poor not to be able to send a child abroad for the winter. But I think the Waldrons are poorer than many families who yet would find it very difficult to do that.”

“How do you know—how can you judge? You’ve never been in their house?” said Lady Mildred sharply and almost suspiciously; “and I put you on your honour not to get intimate with the girl or with any of your schoolfellows.”

“I am not intimate with any of them, and with Charlotte Waldron perhaps less than with any; and *of course* I have never been at their house nor at anybody’s house without your knowing. I would never do such a thing, dear aunt; you know I wouldn’t,” said Claudia gently. “But I can tell quite well that they are poor,” she went on, seeing Lady Mildred’s face clear again; “it is a sort of instinct, because you see I know so well about it myself. Charlotte has had the same dress ever since I have known her, and once or twice, when it had got wet or muddy, she came with a still plainer and much older one. And—other little things that I don’t suppose most girls would notice—I have seen her look quite troubled when her clean cuffs got inked, or when a copy-book was lost and she had to get an extra one. She is a very, very neat and careful girl. Some of the others call her mean—once they began doing so before me as if they thought I would join with them in it, because they fancy I am rich! I did feel so angry; for I know it all so well, you see, Aunt Mildred.”

“Bless the child—she talks as if she were a char woman with half-a-dozen children,” said Lady Mildred. “I suppose you think you know a great deal more of the practical side of life than I do, my dear?”

But though her tone was sharp, Claudia could see that she was not vexed, but on the contrary interested, and even touched.

“I know more in some ways about being poor than you do, I think, Aunt Mildred,” she replied. “Oh, in hundreds of little ways that one would be almost ashamed to put into words, that rich people would really not understand! You see with my being the eldest at home, and mamma always wanting to save papa all the worries she could, I could not but know a great deal. But nothing is too hard when we are together. You *can’t* know, aunt, how different everything seems now that I can look forward to staying at home, and helping them so beautifully—all thanks to you. There were times when mamma and I used sometimes to think I should have to go away as a teacher in some school, or as a sort of nursery governess even. And now it is *so* different.”

“I wish it were going to be still more different,” said Lady Mildred. “I wish I could help you all more effectually; but—”

“Dear Aunt Mildred, you couldn’t have helped us more effectually,” said Claudia, her eyes beaming. “We don’t want to be rich, even if you had a fortune to leave us, we couldn’t wish to be happier than we shall be when I am quite grown-up and able to begin my school, as mamma calls it. And we are all so strong and well, if it wasn’t for papa’s eyes.”

“Yes, that is a blessing,” Lady Mildred agreed: “the Meredons are a very sturdy race, much stronger than the Osberts. And that reminds me, I am sorry about that little Waldron boy; I cannot forget his poor little white face.”

“I hope he will get stronger soon,” said Claudia.

Lady Mildred said no more, and her niece saw little of her for the rest of that day, for there was another long interview with Mr Miller, and Claudia was sent out sight-seeing under the convoy of Lady Mildred’s maid.

It was some days later, Christmas Eve in fact, when the old lady said suddenly to her young companion:

“I see no help for it, Claudia; I must go to Cannes. It is absolutely necessary for me to see General Osbert without delay, and I cannot expect him to come here considering that his only remaining son is dying.”

"His only other son," Claudia repeated. "Oh, Aunt Mildred, how very sad!"

"Yes; but this they have anticipated for some time. It was John Osbert's death that was the great blow; and very probably the shock of it has made Frank worse. But it is very hard upon me too, though perhaps it seems selfish to say so; for I am too old to like starting off to the ends of the earth in this sudden fashion. For you I shall take care that it is no disadvantage. Once out of England I may not be in such a hurry to return. And you can have excellent lessons."

"Oh, aunt, I do hope my being with you will not make it all more troublesome," said Claudia. "Of course I shall like going better than anything. It is what mamma wished for me more than she could say. But, you know, if it would be easier for you it might be arranged for me to go to school, as mamma once thought of?"

"No," said Lady Mildred decidedly; "I shall like having you with me. It will be an interest to me, and without it I should feel very lonely I shall not see much of the Osberts, poor people. It is really necessity that takes me there. I have never known much of them. I should like you to write home and tell them of our plans. I shall add a word or two to the letter."

"And, Aunt Mildred," said Claudia half-timidly, "may I answer Gervais's letter? I should like to know if he is better; there is no fear of its leading to any intimacy that you might not like, as I may not be at Silverthorns again for a long time."

"You can write if you like," said Lady Mildred rather shortly. "I have nothing against the Waldrons. I dare say they are very well-brought-up young people. I only wish they did not live at that odious, gossiping Wortherham."

Claudia looked up in surprise. She had hitherto been under the impression that of all the families in Wortherham, the Waldrons were her aunt's chief aversion!

Chapter Fifteen.

Like a Fairy Tale.

"No," said the doctor; "he's not gaining ground as he should. Still there's nothing really wrong. But I hardly know what to advise. What he really should have, as I've told you before, is a complete change. Can you not manage it? Not even to Devonshire or the Isle of Wight?"

Mrs Waldron shook her head sadly.

"I think even one of those would be about as impossible for us as the South of France or Italy," she said. "But I will tell my husband what you say. Of course, in a case of life or death—"

"But it is not so bad as that; I have never said it was," interrupted the doctor. "Don't exaggerate it, my dear lady. If you *can't* do as I say, you can't, and we must do what we can, and hope the best. He will outgrow his present weakness I have no doubt. But he has come through so much that I was beginning to be rather proud of him, and this unfortunate back-cast is rather disappointing. I had set my heart on his growing up really strong and hearty, and I quite believe he might if he could get a thorough good start. That is the real state of the case."

"Thank you! Yes, I think I quite understand," replied Mrs Waldron. But she sighed as she spoke; and the doctor felt sorry for her, but he had to hurry away; and after all he came across people in worse plight than the Waldrons every day of the week, and he could not afford to spend much time or thought in sympathy.

The plight was bad enough, nevertheless, it seemed to Mrs Waldron, as she went back to the drawing-room where Jerry was lying covered with shawls and sheltered as well as could be from the draughts and insidious chills that it is so difficult entirely to defy in a small house, where one seems always running against a door or a window. The boy, to her eyes sharpened by anxiety, was doing worse than not gaining ground. He was, she began to believe, losing it. And some bitter enough tears rose to her eyes as she sat down to go on with the work at which Dr Lewis's visit had interrupted her.

"Mamma," said Jerry's thin weak voice, "don't you think Charlotte is really *very* pleased to have got the German prize?"

"Yes, my boy; I think she is. And she deserves to be so—she worked very hard indeed for it."

"She would have been dreadfully disappointed not to get it," said he again. "Though all the same," he went on thinking to himself, "it is a little provoking to think that she would have got it any way, and that I went and caught this horrible cold for nothing. Only I would never have known how good Claudia was but for all that, and *perhaps* she would still have tried for the prize. I wish she would write to me again! I'm sure she would if she knew how tired I am of being ill, and of everything."—"Mamma," he went on again aloud, "doesn't this winter seem dreadfully long, and it's only a fortnight and four days past Christmas? Charlotte and the boys only began lessons again three days ago. I wish I could go back to school too, mamma. Oh, I do wish the summer would come. I think I shouldn't care to live if it was to be always winter."

His words startled his mother. She got up and came over to him.

"What makes you so gloomy, my old Jerry?" she said; "it isn't like you."

"I don't mean to be naughty and impatient, mamma," he said; "it's just that I'm so tired—so tired of the cold, and the

darkness, and the grimness," and his eyes turned with almost a shudder from the window towards which they had glanced instinctively. He knew so well what the prospect outside must be; for it was raining heavily, one of Wortherham's very ugliest days. "Oh, how I should like just to see and feel the sun, and the blue sky above! I feel as if I could drink the sunshine, mamma; I am so thirsty for it."

Mrs Waldron sighed a little.

"It is as if he felt the want of it by instinct," she said to herself. "There are places in the world where there is sunshine even at this season, my Jerry," she said aloud. "I wish I could send you to one of them."

Jerry's eyes sparkled.

"Yes, wouldn't it be lovely?" he exclaimed. "I wonder if it is to one of those places that they are going;" he added.

"Who?" asked his mother.

"The girl at Silverthorns—Miss Meredon, and old Lady Mildred. She said in her last letter, you know, mamma, that perhaps they were going to France. How nice it would be if we could all go! Sometimes one can't help wishing to be rich, mamma."



"The woods out at Gretham"—P. 240.

"Or at least not so poor," his mother agreed with a rather wintry smile. "I can't help wishing it when it is anything any of my darlings seem to want that I can't give them, especially my poor old Jerry, who has had suffering enough in his life."

"Mamma, dear, sweet mamma, don't speak like that," said Jerry, softly stroking her cheek with his little thin hand. "I mustn't grumble, I haven't anything to grumble about, when I have you and Charlotte and papa and them all. And it isn't grumbling to wish for the spring, is it? It is so nice even to think of the woods out at Gretham, with the primroses and violets all coming out. Oh, I do hope I shall be quite well by then, so that I can often walk out there on half-holidays!"

Mrs Waldron tried to answer cheerfully, but it was not easy. There was a cold misgiving at her heart, which she dared not, would not give words to. What would the sunshine or the spring-time, or primroses or violets, or anything sweet and lovely be to her, be to them all, without their quiet, patient little lame boy? How poorly do those understand a mother's love who speak of one of several children as less precious than an only child! In a sense the intertwining bonds seem indeed but to make the whole affections stronger where a large circle is included by them.

Jerry seemed to have some notion of the thoughts in his mother's mind.

"You are sure it would make me quite well to go to one of those warm places?" he said again, after a little pause.

"Dr Lewis thinks so," said Mrs Waldron.

She had not meant to tell him so much, but she was feeling in a way, reckless.

"He *must* go abroad," she said to herself. "He must and he shall. I will tell Edward so this evening, and at whatever cost and sacrifice it shall be done."

And though the resolve seemed a wild one, though she had no faintest idea how it was to be carried out, her heart felt curiously lighter when she had made it.

Charlotte looked anxiously at Jerry when she came home from school that afternoon. He was lying asleep on his sofa, and her mother made a little sign not to disturb him as the girl opened the door.

"Is he no better to-day, mamma?" she whispered, as she sat down quietly beside her mother in the further corner of the room.

"Much as usual, I think," Mrs Waldron replied, in the same tone. "Perhaps in himself he has been a little brighter. He was interested in what we were talking about."

"Yes?" and Charlotte looked up inquiringly.

"Dr Lewis was here this morning. He examined Jerry thoroughly again, and still says the same thing. There is no actual disease, it is only weakness and want of tone that he speaks of. But those may be the beginning of anything! Charlotte, my dear, I have been feeling nearly desperate about Jerry."

Then she went on to tell the girl all that the doctor had said—all that she had been thinking and resolving in her own mind.

She found full sympathy.

"Yes, mamma," Charlotte agreed, "at all costs it must be done. But where should he go, and with whom, and how?"

"I don't think it matters very specially where," Mrs Waldron replied, "so long as it is a bright and sunny place. But how? Ah, I wish I knew! I am so ignorant of all those winter places—I don't know which are the cheapest. I fancy they are all dear! Jerry has been writing to his friend, Miss Meredon, again. She wrote to him that she and her aunt are going abroad. I wish—I wonder if we could get any information from them."

"Oh, no," Charlotte interposed hastily; "don't let us put ourselves under any more obligation to them. I don't want to be horrid, mamma, but that girl seems to be *always* coming in my way. Even now that she has left school for a while, the next thing is we must hear of her going abroad for the winter like a princess, just when we'd give *anything* to be able to send Jerry."

"Charlotte, my dear, you really are unreasonable," said Mrs Waldron. "I thought you were grateful to this young girl, as we all are, for her kindness to Jerry. You told me yourself that you would never again say she was spoilt, or selfish, or any of the terrible things you had made up your mind she *must* be."

"I know I did," said Charlotte half penitently. "I did not mean to speak that way; but oh, mamma, it makes me wild to think about Jerry—he does look so white and thin?" She got up as she spoke, and went across the room on tip-toe, and stood for a moment looking down at the sleeping boy, her eyes filling with tears. "Mamma," she said again as she returned to her mother, "we *must* manage it."

But two or three days went by without any solution to the problem offering itself. Mr Waldron was exceedingly busy just at this time, and his wife shrank from saying much to him about what was constantly in her thoughts, till she had some at least *possible* plan to suggest. At last one night a sudden idea struck her.

"I will write to Mrs Knox," she thought; "she may know of some place, some kind of *pension*, perhaps, or some doctor's family, where Jerry would be well cared for, on pretty moderate terms. And once we hear of such a place we just *must* find the money somehow,"—and her mind ran over the few treasured pieces of silver plate in their possession,—and Edward must take him there. Only will he not be terribly home-sick, alone among strangers?"

But Charlotte agreed that it seemed the only thing to do. The letter to Mrs Knox was written, and that evening after dinner Mr Waldron, his wife decided, must be told of all Dr Lewis had said. Dinner-time drew near, however, and instead of Mr Waldron there came a boy from his office with a note to say that he was not to be waited for; he had been detained unexpectedly, but would be home before long.

"How unlucky," sighed Mrs Waldron. "I cannot send the letter without talking to your father, and he will come home so tired. Arthur," for Arthur as well as Charlotte was in her confidence, "can you manage to keep Ted and Noble quiet in the school-room so that I can speak to your father uninterruptedly? Tell them he will be tired, and will like to be quiet."

"All right, mother; I'll see to it," and a moment or two later certain ominous sounds from the school-room announced that Arthur was favouring his younger brothers with a specimen of certain strong measures he intended to resort to, should occasion arise, such as their "kicking up a row or making fools of themselves when mamma wanted to be quiet."

He achieved his purpose, however. Mrs Waldron was alone, and the house was unusually silent when their father

came in; he went straight to the drawing-room.

"You must be very tired, Edward," said Mrs Waldron, starting up, "and hungry too. You have not had dinner."

"Yes, thank you; I have had all I want," he replied. "Tea then, or coffee?"

"In a little while, perhaps, but not just yet. I'm glad you are alone, Amy; I want to talk to you. How is Jerry to-day?"

"Much the same. I want to talk to you too—about Jerry—about what Dr Lewis has been saying," Mrs Waldron began.

Her husband looked up sharply, and then she noticed that he was very pale, and as she mentioned the doctor's name he started.

"Not anything worse? You are not trying to break anything dreadful to me, Amy," he said hoarsely. "What a mockery it would all seem if it had come too late!" he added, as if speaking to himself, in a lower voice, though not so low as not to be heard by his wife. But she did not stop to ask the meaning of his words—she was too eager to set his anxiety at rest.

"Oh, no, no," she said; "there is nothing new. It is only that Dr Lewis does so very earnestly advise—"

"His going abroad for some months," interrupted Mr Waldron, his face clearing. "Yes, I know that. You spoke of it a little the other day; but I did not know till to-day that he urged it so very strongly."

"Till to-day," repeated Mrs Waldron, bewildered; "how did you hear it to-day? Has Dr Lewis been to see you?"

"No," said her husband, with a rather peculiar smile, "it was not from him I heard it. Why did you not tell me how much he had said about it, Amy?"

"I have been going to do so all these last days," she said; "but I waited to think over any feasible plan before saying more to you. I knew you were busy and worried. And even now I have but little to propose," and she went on to tell of her letter to Mrs Knox, and her hopes of some advice or help in that quarter. Mr Waldron listened and again he smiled.

"I think I have a better plan than that to talk about," he said. "You will scarcely believe me, Amy, when I tell you that I have this afternoon a letter from Lady Mildred Osbert offering to take charge of Jerry at Cannes for some weeks, or months—in fact for as long as it would be well for him to stay there."

"From Lady Mildred!" Mrs Waldron ejaculated. "Edward! How ever did she know about his being ordered to go?"

"For that, and perhaps for the idea itself, we have to thank that young niece of hers, Charlotte's schoolfellow. Jerry told us how kind the girl was to him, and in writing to her he must have said, quite innocently, of course, what Dr Lewis wished for him. They are leaving themselves for Cannes to-morrow; but Lady Mildred proposes that—that I should take Jerry to them next week."

"*You?*" said Mrs Waldron, growing pale with suppressed anxiety and excitement. "Oh, Edward, you have more to tell me. What should she want to see you for, when she has always so completely ignored us as relations, unless there is some great change in some way."

"Yes, Amy; there is a great change. That is what I wanted to tell you. The reason I did not come home earlier as usual to dinner was that I wanted to think it over quietly, to take it in as it were, before I tried to tell you about it. I have felt as if I were dreaming since I got the letters."

"Letters?" half whispered Mrs Waldron; "were there more than one then? You said the one about Jerry was from Lady Mildred herself."

"Yes; but it referred to another—a long and clear and most important letter from the London solicitors; it was in fact written by old Miller himself. I will show it you afterwards, but just now I want merely to tell you the drift of it all."

"I think I can guess it," said Mrs Waldron; "Lady Mildred has found out that she has been unfairly prejudiced against you, and she wants now to do something to help us. It will be a great boon, whatever it is—this offer for Jerry alone has lifted a terrible weight from my mind. But how has she changed so?"

"My dear Amy, don't run on so fast. It is true that Lady Mildred has changed, but there is a great deal more to tell. You heard of Mr Osbert's death, the General's elder son? Well it appears that the second one, the only other—is dying. He has been in a hopeless state for years, but Lady Mildred did not know it. Mr Miller evidently thinks it was concealed purposely. She has had very little communication with the Osberts, and she has always thought of the sons as certain to succeed, as the General is an old man. But, do you see, Amy, as things are, there will be no Osbert to succeed?"

Mrs Waldron looked up bewilderedly.

"But it is all in Lady Mildred's hands, is it not?" she said. "She can leave Silverthorns to her own family, can she not?"

"She can *legally* leave it to anybody, but she considers herself absolutely bound by her husband's expressed wishes; and those were that it should never leave the family. Mr Miller says, that failing the Osberts, the Squire instructed Lady Mildred to look up all remoter connections; but till now, it does really seem very strange, she did not know, had no idea that we were the nearest. Mr Miller has been a good friend in the matter; he has, I suppose," and here Mr Waldron laughed a little, "made inquiries about us and found all satisfactory. He has removed all Lady Mildred's

prejudices against me, and what I care for most, against my poor grandmother. And,"—Mr Waldron hesitated,—“Amy, it seems impossible, her intention therefore is now to make *me* the next proprietor of the old place.”

Mrs Waldron was silent for a moment.

“It seems too much,” he said again. “I don’t deserve it,” her husband went on.

This gave her power to speak.

“You not deserve it!” she exclaimed. “Oh, Edward, could a man deserve it more? How you have toiled, how you have kept up your spirits through all! If you said / didn’t deserve it—I have been often so faint-hearted and depressed. I don’t think—I *don’t* think we shall be spoilt by prosperity; we shall always know so well what a struggling life really is; it will be so delightful to help others. And oh, Edward! Arthur and Noble can go to college, and Ted into the army! That is to say if—will it make any difference at once?”

“Yes; Lady Mildred’s idea is that we should at once, at least very shortly, go to live on the estate, and that I should take charge of things. There is a very good house, at present occupied by one of the farmers, which can easily be made a capital house for us. It is so pretty, I remember it well; how delightful it will be to see you there, Amy! Lady Mildred, of course, will have the big house for her life, but she will be glad to feel free to come and go—the place has been growing a great charge to her. This is the rough sketch of her plan only. Of course there are numberless details to be arranged, and for these she wishes to see me. Then again, *in case* the General survives her he would have a right to some provision for his life, though it is very certain he would never wish now to be master of Silverthorns—he is quite broken down—and even had he inherited the place, he says he never would have come to live there. But Lady Mildred thinks it right to see him, and she wishes me to see him too. Miller says she is determined that none of the old prejudice against me shall be left; she is not a woman to do things by halves, once she has made up her mind. So, thanks to Miss Meredon, the idea of offering to take Jerry for a time fits in with my going to Cannes. And there we can talk all over.”

Mrs Waldron sat gazing into the fire.

“Edward,” she said, “I feel as if I were dreaming. Tell me—should we not let the poor children know this wonderful news at once?”

“Arthur and Charlotte, perhaps,—they deserve it,” he replied, getting up as he spoke to summon them.

And then again the whole had to be told.

Arthur’s pleasant face literally beamed with delight.

“Oh, papa!—oh, mother!” he exclaimed. “I can’t believe it. It is like a fairy tale. Why did you never tell us before that we were half Osberts?”

“I had meant to tell you before long,” said Mr Waldron; “but I had a horror of raising vague expectations. I knew too well what I had suffered from my false position as a child.”

“Yes,” said Arthur, thoughtfully; “I see.” And then, as a sudden idea struck him, “Fancy its coming after all through the female branch. Papa, the ghost will be laid.”

“Yes,” said Mr Waldron, smiling; “the ghost will be laid.”

“I bet you anything,”—Arthur went on—“I bet you anything, that the first thing old Jerry will say when he quite understands it, will be, ‘I’m so glad for the poor ghost.’”

“And if we never hear anything more of the ghost,” said Charlotte, speaking almost for the first time, “Jerry will be more than ever convinced that he *did* hear it. Papa,” she added with a little hesitation, “won’t Lady Mildred’s niece, Miss Meredon, be dreadfully disappointed when she knows all this? Perhaps she has heard all the talk about Lady Mildred’s intending to make her her heiress?”

“I hope not,” said Mr Waldron; “she has certainly hitherto shown a most friendly spirit to us. I should be grieved for our good fortune to cause disappointment to any one.”

“And then she must be so rich and grand already, I don’t suppose it would matter much to her,” said Charlotte.

“I don’t know about that: the Meredons are not a rich family by any means,” said Mr Waldron.

“I shall always love that girl,” said Mrs Waldron enthusiastically. “It is her doing about Jerry. Oh, Charlotte, darling! to think that all our poor little plans for sending him abroad are to be so delightfully replaced.”

“May I tell him, mamma?” said Charlotte eagerly; “to-morrow, not to-night, of course! I will take care not to startle him. But it would be *so* nice. And I will tell him how kind *she* has been—he is very fond of her,” she added with a slightly reluctant honesty.

“You must be fond of her too, my dear child,” said her father.

“I would like to be, at least I think so,” said Charlotte, and a vision rose before her of Claudia’s sweet, appealing face. “I have been horrid to her, I know,” she added to herself, “but she was rather queer at school.”

Chapter Sixteen.

Claudia's Victory.

It seemed more like a dream than ever the next day.

"I can't understand how I took it so quietly," Charlotte thought to herself as she was dressing. "I suppose I was half stunned. I feel this morning as if I could just *scream* with delight. To think of *Silverthorns* coming to be our home—our own beautiful home. And how I have grumbled, and how jealous I have been of *her*. I don't suppose she could ever quite understand—nobody who has never been poor themselves can. But, oh, I shall try to be kind and sympathising to others. It makes me feel as I used to when I was little, sometimes, when mamma saw I was cross and discontented, and instead of speaking sharply she would do some kind thing to make me feel happy. I wonder if God sometimes makes people good that way? For I know I haven't deserved it, though dear papa, and mamma, and Arthur, and Jerry have. Oh, to think I may tell Jerry!"

The telling Jerry was more easily managed than she had anticipated. The boy's instincts were sharpened by illness, and he had never forgotten the impression of his strange experiences at Silverthorns.

"I knew it, Charlotte," he exclaimed, his blue eyes gleaming, "I knew it. When I was told that, about the ghost only coming to some of the family, and I remembered papa's having heard it too, something seemed to tell me that we *had* to do with Silverthorns, and that more would come: I knew it, Charlotte. And she will be so pleased—Claudia, I mean."

"You think she will be?" Charlotte said, rather surprised.

"Of course; I know she will be," he said confidently; "you'll see. And, of course, it will be ever so much nicer for her when she's there, to have us living near. I'll get to know her so well this winter, staying with them at that place. Oh, I say, I'm awfully glad to think of going there, and to know it won't cost papa and mamma anything. I do so want to get well, Charlotte. I may say it now—I've really felt as if I never would lately, and almost as if I didn't somehow much care."

"Jerry!" Charlotte exclaimed.

"Yes; and that's the queerest feeling of all. I suppose people have it when they're really going to die, and that it's a good thing. It must make it not so bad," the boy went on.

"But you don't feel that way now?" Charlotte asked anxiously.

"No, I feel quite different. It was partly, you know—" and Jerry hesitated—"the horrible feeling of being such a worry and such an expense to papa and mamma. I've thought often lately," and the boy looked before him wistfully—"Charlotte," he broke off, "isn't it queer how things bring things to your mind? There's a corner of one of the window-panes there that's cracked; I see it every morning when I wake, and I always wonder when it will break away, and there'll have to be a new pane. And then some proverb about cracked things lasting the longest comes into my mind, and I begin thinking perhaps I shall last an awfully long time, and then I worry about what a lot I shall cost them, and perhaps never be able to earn anything. And that's what's made me think sometimes lately that it would be better if I died."

"But, Jerry," Charlotte repeated; she spoke very quietly, for she was dreadfully afraid of beginning to cry; "you don't need to feel that now. *Now* you can try to take advantage of all your chances for getting well without any worry to spoil it."

"Yes; that's what I'm so thankful for. Oh, I am so thankful!" he said fervently. "And, Charlotte," he added very gravely, "there's another thing I'm glad of, very glad of—the poor ghost will be able to rest now."

Charlotte jumped up and clapped her hands. In her state of suppressed excitement one mood rapidly followed another, and it was better to laugh than to cry! But Jerry did not join in her merriment.

"Don't, Charlotte," he said, "I'm not joking. I've thought of him lately in the middle of the night when I couldn't sleep, and I have felt so sorry for him. So sorry that if I had heard him again I would have spoken to him, I am sure. Can you fancy anything more terrible than to have to wander about,—never resting, with no home, and no power of doing any good, or undoing any harm,—for years and years and years? I think it's quite as dreadful a punishment as any one could imagine, and I think, perhaps, if people believed in that kind of ghosts a little, it wouldn't do them *any* harm."

"But, supposing it's true even," said Charlotte, "the poor old thing's at rest now."

"Yes, I think so; I do hope he'll be able to be at peace. For, after all, he *has* tried to tell how sorry he was, and to put things right," said Jerry, with a sigh of relief.

He was weak and tired all that day, but it was scarcely, perhaps, to be wondered at. And the night following he slept soundly, and awoke refreshed; and when Dr Lewis saw him he expressed his conviction that the boy would be quite able to stand the journey in a week's time. And it was with one anxiety the less on his overburdened professional shoulders that the good doctor left the Waldrons' house that morning.

"It will save the boy, there is no doubt of it," he said to himself. "And I know no one more deserving of good fortune than Waldron," for Jerry's father had thought it right to take his old friend to some extent into his confidence. "Dear me!—to think that *he* should be the next in the Silverthorns succession! I knew there was some connection, but I thought it a much more remote one."

Surprises seemed to be the order of the day at Norfolk Terrace. Some day within the week, during which, preparations for Jerry's journey went on busily, came a letter with a foreign post-mark, addressed to Charlotte. She started a little when she saw the writing.

"From Claudia Meredon," she half whispered to herself; "she must be writing about Jerry, I suppose."

But when she drew out the letter she saw that it was rather a long one. "The boys" were all about, and Charlotte knew that quiet was not to be expected in such circumstances. So she took the letter off to her own room to read in peace. The first few words surprised her.

"My dear Charlotte," it began,—whereas hitherto Claudia's one or two little notes had been formally addressed to "Dear Miss Waldron,"—"Aunt Mildred tells me I may call you by your first name as she says we must each think of the other as a sort of cousin now, so I hope you will not mind it. I have been longing to tell you how happy I was to hear all that has come to pass. It is, of course, very sad for General Osbert and his family, but they have never really seemed like relations to Aunt Mildred, and I do not think they have ever cared much about dear Silverthorns. It is delightful to think that it is going to be your father's some day, and indeed it will seem like his almost at once, as Aunt Mildred is longing for him to take charge of things. I do so want to see you. I want to explain to you many things that I have never been able to tell. I know you must have thought me strange and unfriendly, and I want you to know how difficult it was. Aunt Mildred will not mind my telling you everything now. She wants us to be friends, and this brings me to what I want especially to write about."

And then followed a proposal which made Charlotte's face flush with pleasure, and her eyes beam.

"Oh, how delightful it would be," she whispered. "Oh, will papa and mamma let me?"

And scarcely waiting to finish the letter she flew to her mother in such a state of breathless excitement that Mrs Waldron scarcely recognised her quiet self-contained little daughter.

"It is very, very kind," she said, when she had read what Charlotte eagerly pointed out.

"And may I go? Do you think papa would let me?" she exclaimed. "Oh, mamma, I would work so hard at French and music. You see Claudia says I could join in her lessons."

"We must wait till your father comes home," said Mrs Waldron. "But I should like it for you very much indeed."

Mr Waldron had had a letter too—from Lady Mildred herself. She wrote earnestly begging her newly acknowledged cousin to bring his daughter, as well as Jerry, for a two or three months' visit to her at Cannes.

"I beg you not to let the expense be any difficulty," she said. "There are long arrears due to you which I can, alas, only indirectly make up. And I am most anxious, peculiarly so, that my dear little niece, Claudia Meredon, should make friends with your children. She will be speaking of this plan in more detail in her letter to your daughter."

So it was decided, and a few days later Mr Waldron, accompanied by his two children, started for Cannes.

Jerry bore the journey fairly well, but he was very exhausted before they got to its end, and his father was thankful that Charlotte was with them. Some little time of anxiety about him followed, and he required much care and nursing to bring him round, though the doctor assured them that there was no serious cause for alarm and much for congratulation that the move southwards had not been delayed.

"I doubt if he would have stood it a few weeks hence," said he. "He was evidently losing instead of gaining strength every day in England. But you will see a great change in a little while."

And in the mean time Jerry's illness had one good effect. It drew the two girls together as nothing else could have done, and made the Waldrons feel more quickly and thoroughly at home with Lady Mildred than would otherwise have been the case. For her real kindness of heart came to the front at such times, and all her stiffness and "frighteningness" vanished.

One day—one lovely day, when it was difficult to believe it was only February, and that up there in the north in poor, grey old England, the rain and the fogs, or the snow, perhaps, were having it all their own way—a little group was enjoying the sunshine on one of the pleasant terrace walks above the sea. There was Jerry in an invalid-chair still, but looking as if he would soon be independent of anything of the kind, and beside him his two constant girl-attendants. Suddenly one of them started forward.

"Claudia," she said, "I see papa; he is coming our way. Would you mind my running to meet him? I do so want to talk to him a little. He will so soon be going now, and I have scarcely seen him alone for so many days."

"Of course," Claudia replied. "Jerry and I will be perfectly happy. Don't hurry, Charlotte."

And in another minute Charlotte was beside her father, her two hands clasped on his arm.

"Well, my gipsy?" he said.

"Oh, papa, I have so much to say to you, and you are going so soon," she replied.

"And I have been so busy since Jerry got better that my little girl is beginning to think I am forgetting her—is that your new trouble? Remember, I never agreed with you in the old days, when it seemed to you that if a good many 'ifs' were realised, there would be no such thing as a trouble left."

"Papa," said Charlotte reproachfully; "I'm not making troubles. I'm never going to do so—it would be *too* ungrateful. I suppose, as you say so, they must come some time or other, but just now, with Jerry better and all, it's difficult to think of them. *You* haven't any, have you, dear papa?"

"No, my dear; I have so much good to be grateful for, that, as you say, it is difficult to think of anything but sunshine. Everything is going on satisfactorily."

"You have seen General Osbert again, papa, since the poor son's death?" asked Charlotte; for the younger Mr Osbert had died a few days after the Waldrons arrived.

"Yes, poor old man; he and Lady Mildred are quite at one about everything, and of course I am only too glad to carry out her wishes. One thing I am glad of, and that is that I shall have plenty to do, Charlotte. I could not have endured a life of even comparative idleness."

"Papa dear," Charlotte went on, "it is most of all about Claudia I want to speak to you. I cannot tell you how I feel about her. Do you know, papa, I *could* not have been like her if our places had been reversed? Just think, she is really as happy for us as if we were her own family. I don't believe it has once come into her mind, even the very least little bit, to wish any of it were coming to them."

"She is a most sweet and noble girl," said Mr Waldron.

"And, *papa*, to think of all she has told me—of how horribly I misunderstood her. To think how poor they are, and of her father's blindness, and how they have struggled, and all that Claudia has done—not that she seems to think she has ever done anything. I sometimes can't *bear* to think of the feelings I had," and Charlotte's honest eyes filled with tears.

"It was not altogether your fault," said her father consolingly.

"Yes, papa; the horrid feelings were," said Charlotte firmly. "But do you know it is Claudia's *happiness* that makes me the most ashamed. She does not know—you said when you first understood about her, you remember, that it would hurt her for me to say too much about how I misjudged her?—she does not know half, and she thinks it was all because she dared not be frank and companionable at school. And she says she is so happy now that we are friends that it was the only thing wanting, and that she is the luckiest girl in the world. And after all, papa, the happiness she is so looking forward to, of working hard and earning, not many would think it a very delightful future, would they? Oh, papa, she is *so* good."

"And so she is to be envied after all. Has she not 'everything' in the best sense, gipsy dear?"

"And we will *always* be her dearest friends, won't we, papa? Afterwards—when—when Lady Mildred is dead, though I don't like to speak of it, you will be rich enough to help them in many ways that they would not mind, won't you, papa?"

Mr Waldron's eyes looked very bright as he turned to Charlotte.

"I have been saying to Lady Mildred that nothing she can ask of me would give me greater pleasure than the being allowed now, or in the future, to be of use to the Meredons. Even were they less to be admired and respected than they are, it would be my place. And for Claudia herself, I am like you, Charlotte, I can't say what I feel about her. I can only say I am most thankful for you to have such a friend."

"I'm only dreadfully afraid, papa, that now I am learning to love her so, I shall not see much more of her. Lady Mildred is already talking of perhaps not returning to England all this year—of going to Germany in the summer, and back here again next winter. She says her mind is at peace about Silverthorns now, and that she means to have some holidays. And I mustn't stay away from home very long, papa. Mamma could never manage the removal to Silverthorns, to the Old Lodge, I mean, without me," she added importantly; "though I shall be dreadfully sorry to leave Claudia, and Lady Mildred too."

"But think how very delightful it will be to be installed at the Old Lodge when they do come back, and to be able to give them a sort of welcome home."

"And, papa, Claudia must always come to us for holidays even when she is settled at her own home, unless she is with Lady Mildred. And Jerry and I were planning we might ask one or two of the little ones to come with her each time, so that she wouldn't feel she was leaving them all with her mother. Though Mrs Meredon isn't quite so badly off as mamma, the next girl is past twelve, and our little girls are *so* tiny. But I think we must go on to Claudia and Jerry, papa. They want to see something of you, too, before you go. Oh, papa, *how* lovely it is here!"

And her eyes seemed as if they would never be tired of gazing at the perfection of sky and sea—at the blue glory one must leave our cold northern shores far behind ever to see.

"Yes," said Mr Waldron, "it is very, very beautiful. But there are chilly and dull days here too, Charlotte. It is not always such sunshine and brilliance."

"And even if it were, one would wish for home in a while," the girl replied. "When the spring comes."

"Yes—"

"'Oh, to be in England Now that April's there,'" quoted her father. "Well, I hope we shall be all together there before April goes at any rate."

And so saying they rejoined the others.

Charlotte's misgivings that Lady Mildred would not return home for some length of time were realised. The old lady, who had not left England for many years, greatly enjoyed another taste of foreign travel, of which in her youth she had had much. Her mind was more at ease than it had been since her husband's death as to the management of the property, and she also felt that she was conferring real and lasting benefits on Claudia. But some months before the two years during which her grand-niece was to be her charge, had expired, a sort of home-sickness came over them both.

"I think we won't spend another Christmas away from England, Claudia," she said rather suddenly one day. "I have a yearning to see Silverthorns again. And I know the Waldrons will never feel thoroughly at home till I am there myself. I must get to know Amy, and I want to see my pet Jerry again, and Charlotte too. And you will like to feel near your own people again, eh, my dear?"

"Yes, Aunt Mildred. It will be very nice, *very* nice," said Claudia.

"Another Christmas if all's well—if I'm still with you all, that's to say," pursued Lady Mildred, "we must have the house full. I must have you all over with me. But this year of course I must devote myself more particularly to Edward's wife and children. And in that you will be a great help to me, you and Charlotte being already such friends."

"She says—they say," said Claudia laughing, "that I'm to spend all my holidays there—that's to say when *you* don't invite me. They are so *very* kind to me, really as if they were relations of my own. And some people in their place, Aunt Mildred, *might* not have been so cordial to me. I do think it's delightful that your relations on the other side should be so nice. How beautifully things have turned out for us ever since that day you came down to Britton-Garnett! I do think I must have been born under a lucky star."

And as she looked up with her sweet bright face and sunny eyes, Lady Mildred could not help agreeing with her.

"Yes, my dear, good child," she said; "I think indeed some very beneficent fairy godmother must have been at your christening. You have some gifts you scarcely realise—the gift of bringing sunshine into other lives for one."

"Auntie dear," said Claudia, almost startled, for never was woman less demonstrative than Lady Mildred; "you are too good to me. I can do *so* little, and everybody is so kind to me. Auntie dear," she went on timidly; "have I really brought a little sunshine to *you*?"

Lady Mildred smiled and stroked the girl's soft hair as Claudia knelt down beside her; and though she did not speak, her niece was more than satisfied.

And no more was ever heard of the owls in the tower room at Silverthorns.

The End.

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