

МАРГАРЕТ ОЛИФАНТ

THE LAST OF
THE
MORTIMERS

Margaret Oliphant

The Last of the Mortimers

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Margaret Oliphant

The Last of the Mortimers / A Story in Two Voices

PART I. THE LADIES AT THE HALL

Chapter I

I THOUGHT I heard a slight rustle, as if Sarah had taken off her spectacles, but I was really so interested in the matter which I was then discussing with Mr. Cresswell, our solicitor, that I did not look round, as I certainly should have done in any other circumstances; but imagine my utter amazement and the start which Mr. Cresswell gave, nearly upsetting the ink on the drab table-cover, which never *could* have got the better of it, when my sister Sarah, who never speaks except to me, and then only in a whisper, pronounced distinctly, loud out, the following words: "His Christian name was Richard Arkwright; he was called after the cotton-spinner; that was the chief thing against him in my father's days."

Now it was years and years ago since Sarah had lost her voice. It happened before my father died, when we were both comparatively young people; she had been abroad with him and caught a violent cold on her way home. She was rather proud in those days—it was before she took to knitting—and she had not forgotten then that she was once a beauty. When she saw that her voice was gone for good, Sarah gave up talking. She declared to me privately that to keep up a conversation in that hoarse horrid whisper was more than she could give in to, and though she was a very good Christian in principle she never could be resigned to that loss. At first she kept upstairs in her own room; but after my father's death she came regularly to the drawing-room, giving everybody to understand that she was not to be spoken to. Poor dear old soul! she was as anxious to hear everything that was said to me as if she had come down off her stilts and taken part in the conversation; but you may suppose what a startling event it was to hear Sarah's voice.

I gave a jump, as was natural, and ran to her to see what had happened.

"Do be cautious, Milly," she said, fretfully, in her old whisper; for to be sure I had whisked down her ball of worsted, and caught one of her pins in my new-fashioned buttonholes. "At your age a gentlewoman should move about in a different sort of way. I am quite well, thank you. Please to go back to your occupation, and leave me to carry on mine in peace."

"But Sarah, my dear soul! you've got back your voice!" cried I.

Sarah smiled at me, not with her pretty smile. "People who are strong are always thinking such things," she said. "You don't know what it is to be afflicted; go back to your business, please."

"What does she say, Miss Milly?" cried Mr. Cresswell, quite eagerly, when I went back to the table.

"Oh, nothing at all; it's all a mistake, I suppose," said I, feeling a little nettled, "put it down all the same. I dare say it was one of those spirits we hear about nowadays. And a very useful bit of information too, which makes it all the more remarkable, for I never heard they did much good in that way. Richard Arkwright! Of all the names I ever heard, the oddest name for a Mortimer! but put it down."

Mr. Cresswell put it down as I said. "Richard Arkwright Mortimer is something more of an individual than Blank Mortimer, Esq., that's true," said he; "he ought to be something with that name. Begging your pardon, Miss Milly, though he was a Mortimer, he ought to have had either a profession or a trade with that name. Don't you think now," he said, lowering his voice, and making a sign at Sarah over his shoulder, "after having broken the ice, something more might be got out of *her*?"

I shook my head at first, being angry; then I nodded as I came to myself, and at last said—it was all I could say—"We'll see."

"Ah, ah, we'll see—that'll do, Miss Milly; but don't lose your temper, my dear lady," said Mr. Cresswell; "all the county reverences you for an angelic temper, as you well know."

"Stuff!" said I; "I've too much Welsh blood in me for that; but a pack of interlopers, like the rest of you, never know the real mettle of them that come of the soil; we're as clear of the soil as the ore in the Llangollen mines, we Mortimers; we can do what we have to do, whatever it may be."

Mr. Cresswell cast up his eyebrows a little, and gave a kind of glance towards Sarah and her knitting. "Well, well, it isn't bad ore, at all events," he said, with a chuckle: "but, after all, I suppose the first squire was not dug out of Llewellyn cliff?"

"It will be a vast deal more profitable to find out where the next squire is to come from," said I; "we are old women both of us; I'd advise you to set things agoing without delay. What would happen, do you suppose, if Sarah and I were both to die without finding an heir? What does happen, by the bye, when such a thing occurs; does it go to the crown?"

"My dear lady, I would not give much for the crown's chance," said Cresswell, with, a little shrug of his shoulders. "Heirs-at-law are never so far lost or mislaid but they turn up some time. Birds of the air carry the matter when there's an estate in question. There's nothing so safe to be found, in my humble opinion, as an heir-at-law."

"For I shouldn't much mind," said I to myself, thinking over it, "if it went to the Queen. She might fix on the park for autumn quarters, sure, as well as on that outlandish Scotch castle of hers. It's a great deal nearer, and I make sure it's prettier; or if she gave it to the Prince of Wales as a present, or to any of the other children, I should not mind for my part. It is not by any means so bad a prospect as I supposed—it might go to the Queen."

"But, then, what would be done with Mr. Richard Arkwright and his progeny? I'll be bound he has ten children," said Mr. Cresswell. "Somebody did leave Her Majesty an estate not so very long ago, and I rather think she sought out the heirs and made it up to them. Depend upon it, Mr. Richard Arkwright would have it out of her. Come, we must stick to the Mortimers, Miss Milly. I'll go off and see after the advertisements; there's plenty of time. I don't believe you mean to be in any hurry out of this world, either Miss Sarah or you."

"That's as it may be—that's as God pleases," said I; "but you must wait a little first, and I'll see if I can find out anything further about him. Perhaps some one can think on; we'll see, we'll see; more may come."

Mr. Cresswell nodded his head confidentially. "You don't remember anything about him yourself?" he said.

"Bless you, I am ten years younger than she is," said I; "she was a young lady, I was only a child. I neither knew nor cared anything about the Lancashire cousin. Ten years make a great deal of difference when people are young."

"And when they're old as well," said Cresswell, with a little nod of his head. Mr. Cresswell, of course, like all the other people, would never have looked at me when Sarah was present in old days; but now, when we were both old women, the sly old lawyer had wheeled about, and was rather an admirer of mine. I have had admirers since I was fifty; I never had many before.

"Now, are you going to stay to tea?" said I.

“Thank you. I have not the least doubt it would be for my own advantage; my cook is not to be named in the same breath with yours; but I promised to be home to dinner,” said Mr. Cresswell. “Thank you all the same; Sara will be waiting for me.”

“And how is the dear child?” said I.

“Very contrary,” said Mr. Cresswell, shaking his head. “To tell the truth, I don’t know what to make of her. I had twenty minds to bring her to-day and leave her with you.”

“Bring her next time. I never find her contrary,” said I. “But perhaps *you* never were young yourself?”

“Perhaps not, Miss Milly,” he said. “I have had a pretty tough life, anyhow; and it is hard to be thwarted at the last by the only creature one has to love.”

“It is harder not to have a single creature that one has a right to love,” said I a little sharply. “If we had your Sara belonging to us, contrary or not, we should not have to hunt up a far-off cousin, or advertise for an heir.”

A little passing gleam shot from the solicitor’s eye; he looked at me close for a moment, and then at Sarah, with a lip that moved slightly, as if he were unconsciously saying something within himself; I saw what it was as clear as daylight.

“She’s a good girl,” he said, faltering a little. “I daresay you’d soon have her in hand, Miss Milly; there’s no place she is so fond of as the Park; I’ll bring her out to-morrow.”

And he went away, never thinking that I had seen what was in his mind.

Chapter II

OUR drawing-room was a very large one. The Mortimers had required large rooms in their day; and I will not say, if we had been young people, and disposed to have company, that we could not have kept it up with any of them; for my father, who lived in a very homely way, proud as he was, had laid up a good deal, and so had we. But though we kept no company, we had not the heart to turn the Mortimer family, of which we were the only remaining representatives, out of their old room. So we had a great screen, made of stamped leather, and which was like everything else, of my grandmother's days, stretched behind Sarah's chair, and with a very large bright fire, and a good lamp upon the round table, we managed to find the fireside very comfortable, though we were surrounded by all the ranges of old furniture in the old half-dark room. Old Ellis had to come stumbling as slowly as if the distance had been half a mile between us and the door, when he came into the room with anything; and I dare say impatient young people could not have put up with the rumble of chairs rolled aside, and footstools tripped over, with which he always gave us warning of his coming. For my part I was used to it, and took no notice. Where I sat, the prospect before me was, first, Sarah in her easy chair, close within shade of the screen, and beyond a darkling stretch of space, which a stranger might have made very mysterious, but which I knew perfectly well to be filled with just so many tables, chairs, ottomans, and miscellaneous articles, not one of which could have been stolen away without being missed. On the other side of the room, behind my own chair, was a grand piano in a corner and another waste of old furniture. Many people wondered why we did not make a cosy little sitting-room of the boudoir, which had never been used since my mother's days. But Sarah, and I may say myself also, was of a different way of thinking. We liked the big room which once had not been at all too big for the Mortimers, and I am not sure that I did not even like the dark bit on either side of us, and the two big old-fashioned mirrors, like magic mirrors in a fairy tale, with a faint trembling of light over them, and all the shadowy depths of the room standing out in them, as if to double the size, which was already so much too great. Sometimes I used to stand and watch myself going across one of those big mirrors. It was a strange weird creature wandering about among the still, silent, deserted household gods. It was not surely me.

Not that I mean to represent myself as a sentimental person—not in the very slightest degree. I am past fifty and stout. My own opinion is that people had best be stout when they are past fifty, and I like my own little comforts as well as anybody of my years. When I was young I was far from being pretty. If I am to state frankly my own ideas on this subject, I would say that I think I might have passed for moderately good-looking, if I had not been sister to a beauty. But when we two were described as the beautiful Miss Mortimer and the plain Miss Mortimer, you may suppose how any little poor pretensions of mine were snubbed at once. To be good-looking was something not expected from Sarah's sister. But however the tables have rather turned of late. If you asked little Sara Cresswell, for example, who was the pretty Miss Mortimer, I do believe the dear child would say, with the greatest of innocence, "Miss Milly." At our time of life it doesn't matter very much, to be sure; but dear, dear, vanity does lie deep! I declare honestly it's a pleasure to me.

When Sarah and I are by ourselves, we don't have a great deal of conversation. She has lost her voice, as I said, which makes her decline talking; and I must say, though she never yields to acknowledge it, that I think she's lost her hearing a little, poor dear old soul! Every night in her life (except Sundays) she reads the Times. That paper gets great abuse in many quarters, especially in the country, where our old Squires, to be sure, are always at it for changing its opinions; but I say, great success, and long life to the Times! that is my opinion. How ever Sarah would get over those long evenings without that paper, I don't know. It quite keeps us in reading; and I do assure you, we know much more about most things that are going on than a great many *men* do, who are much more in the world. The Times comes in early, but Sarah never looks at it till after tea. I have to keep

out of her sight, indeed, when I glance over it myself in the early part of the day, for Sarah does not approve of daylight reading. She thinks it a waste of time. We have not such a very great deal to occupy us either, as you may suppose; at least Sarah has little, except her knitting, for she will rarely allow me to consult her anything about the property, though she is the eldest. I wonder for my part that she does not weary of her life. She never comes down to breakfast, and I don't know very well what she and Carson find to busy themselves about till noon in her room upstairs; but at twelve o'clock punctually she comes down all dressed for the day. She does not dress as I do, in the ordinary dress that everybody wears, neither are Sarah's fashions the same as I remember in our youth, when our waists were just under our arms, and our gowns had "gores" in them. On the contrary, she has taken to a very long waist and tight sleeves, with a worked muslin shawl or scarf over her shoulders. In cold weather the muslin is lined with silk of delicate colours, and her cap, which is always light and pretty (Carson has great taste), trimmed to correspond. Her hair, of course, she *always* wears in curls at the front. It is quite silver-white, and her face, poor dear soul, is a little pinched and sharp nowadays. When she takes her seat within shelter of the screen at twelve o'clock every day, the muslin shawl, lined with peach, is as pretty as possible in itself: to be sure Sara Cresswell might almost wear it to a ball; but I do declare I thought it looked very chilly to-day on Sarah. Nice white Shetland for instance, which is almost as pretty as lace, or, indeed, one of those beautiful soft fine woollen shawls, would look a great deal better over that purple silk gown, if she could only think so. But to be sure, Sarah will have her own way. There she sat knitting all the time Mr. Cresswell was talking with me, and there she does sit all day long with her basket of wools, and knitting-pins, and patterns. Every other day she takes a drive, goes to church once on Sundays, and reads the Times on all the week evenings. That is exactly how she lives.

Now perhaps this does not appear so odd to anybody else as it does to me; and I am sure I might have got used to it after a dozen years; but only Sarah, you see, has very good abilities, and is not the person to fix herself down like this. And she knows a great deal more of life than I do. My father and she were, I think, near upon ten years abroad after my mother died. What she was doing all that time I know no more than Carson does. Many a rumour went about that she was married, and many an anxious hour I had all by myself at the Park. But when she came back just Miss Mortimer, there was not a soul in the county but was surprised. Such a great beauty! and papa's eldest daughter and co-heiress! people said it was unaccountable. I can't say *I* thought it unaccountable. I never saw anybody that I could fancy myself, except perhaps—, and then *he* never asked me, you know. It might be precisely the same with Sarah, though she was a beauty. But the wonder to me is that after having lived abroad so long, and having, as I have no doubt she had, a life of her own, which did not merely belong to my father's daughter, she should just have settled down like this. Many and many a time have I thought it all over, sitting opposite to her of an evening, when tea was over and she was reading the Times. There she sat quite straight up, her muslin shawl with the peach-bottom lining dropping down a little over her shoulders, and her thin hands in their black lace mits holding the paper. She had never reposed any confidence in me, you see. *I* did not know what might have happened to her when she was out upon the big waves of life. I dare say many a time when I wondered why she took no interest in my affairs, she was back upon that reserve of her own which I knew nothing about. But the odd thing to me is, that after having really had something that one could call a life, something happening to her own self,—don't you know what I mean?—she should have settled down so fixed and motionless here.

We dined early, which was a prejudice of mine; but as Sarah had a very uncertain appetite, we had always "something" to tea, which was the cause of Mr. Cresswell's allusion to our cook Evans. Further, we indulged ourselves by having this substantial tea in the drawing-room, which we never left after our early dinner. When tea was over on the night of Mr. Cresswell's visit, I had some little matters to do which kept me about the room, going from one place to another. As I stood in the shadow looking at the bright fire and lamp, and Sarah reading in her easy chair, I could not prevent

a great many inquiries rising in my mind. What was Cousin Richard Arkwright Mortimer to her, for example? He had not been at the Park, nor heard of, so far as I know, for forty years. And then about her voice? On the whole it was very curious. I resolved to try hard for some conversation with Sarah, after she had done with the Times, that night.

Chapter III

IT was not a very easy matter to draw Sarah into a conversation, especially in the evening. I had to watch my opportunity very carefully. At ten exactly the door opened in the dark distance, and Ellis came rumbling along through the dim depths behind the screen with the sherry and biscuits. Just at the same moment Sarah smoothed out the paper carefully, laid it down, as she always did, on the top of her wool-basket, and held out her hands to warm them at the fire. They were very thin hands in their black lace mits, and they were a little rheumatic sometimes, though she did not like to confess it. She kept rubbing them slowly before the fire.

I poured out her glass of sherry, put the plate of biscuits within her reach, and drew my chair nearer, that I might be sure of hearing what she said. Sarah took no notice of my movements; she rubbed diligently one of her forefingers, the joints of which were a little enlarged, and never so much as glanced at me.

“Did you ever know anything about this cousin Richard of ours, Sarah?” said I.

She did not answer just for a moment, but kept on rubbing her forefinger; when that was finished she answered, “I knew a good deal about him once. I would have married him if they had let me, in the old times.”

I was so thunderstruck by this unexpected frankness that I scarcely knew what to say. At last I stumbled out somehow—“You would have married him!” with a kind of inexpressible amazement; and she saying it so calmly too!

“Yes,” said Sarah, rubbing her middle finger thoughtfully, “he was young, and fresh-looking, and good-tempered. I dare say I could have liked him if they had let me; it is quite true.”

“And would they not let you?” cried I, in my eagerness, thinking that perhaps Sarah was going to confide in me at last.

“No,” she said, pursing up her lips. She seemed to echo the “no” after, in the little nod she gave her head, but she said nothing more.

“And Sarah, tell me, please, if you don’t mind, was it because of his means?” cried I; “was he not rich enough?”

“You don’t know anything about these affairs, Milly,” said Sarah, a little scornfully. “I don’t mind in the least. He was exactly such a man as would have taken your fancy. When I saw him, five years after, I was glad enough they did not let me; though it might have saved a deal of trouble too,” she said to herself in a kind of sigh.

I don’t know how I managed to hear those last words. I am sure she did not think I heard them. You may suppose I grew more curious with every word she spoke.

“And where was it you met him five years after; was it abroad?” said I, with a little flutter in my voice.

I cannot think she was very sharp in her hearing. She gave a little glance up at me, noticing that I paused before the last word; and then seeing me look a little frightened and conscious, she drew herself up all at once, and stopped rubbing her fingers.

“Do you mean to cross-question *me*, Milly?” she cried, giving a stamp with her foot. “Do you mean to rummage into my affairs and find me out by your questions? You are very much mistaken, I can tell you. I am just as willing as any one that Richard Mortimer should be found out. In making your new heir you shall have no opposition from me.”

“Why, bless us all, Sarah!” said I, “it was your own idea.”

“Very well,” she said, with a little confused heat of manner; “why do you imply that I have any objection? One would suppose, to hear you, that you were trying to find out some secrets of mine.”

“I never knew you had any secrets to find out,” said I, sharply. I knew quite well I was aggravating her, but one must take one’s own part.

She did not make any answer. She got up on her feet, and drew her muslin shawl round her. There was a little nervous tremble about her head and hands; she often had it, but I marked it more than ever to-night. I thought at first she was going away without her sherry, but she thought better of that. However, she went a few steps behind the screen to put her basket aside, a thing she never did; and I think I can see her now, as I saw her in the big mirror, drawing the fingers of one hand through the other, and gliding along through the dark room, all reflected from head to foot in the great glass, with her peach-blossom ribbons nodding tremulously over her grey hair, and her white muslin shawl drawn over her shoulders. Her face, as I saw it in the mirror, had a cloud and agitation upon it, but was set with a fixed smile upon the lips, and a strange, settled, passionate determination. I could no more penetrate what it meant than I could tell why Sarah was angry. It was something within herself that made her so, nothing that I had done or said.

After she was gone I dropped into my chair, and sat there wondering and pondering till the fire had nearly gone out, and the great room was lying blank and chill in the darkness. Now that my thoughts were directed into this channel—and it was very strange to me that they never had been so before—there were a thousand things to think of. When Sarah was twenty and I only ten there was a wonderful difference to be sure between us, and not a great deal less when Sarah was thirty and I twenty; but from that time it had been growing less by degrees, so that we really did not feel nowadays any great difference in our age. But I was only fourteen when my mother died. I had never, of course, been able to share in any of the gaieties, being only in the schoolroom, and certainly never dreamed of criticising my big sister, whom I thought everything that was beautiful and splendid. Then my father and she went away and left me. The Park was let, and I lived with my godmother. I almost forgot that I had a father and sister in the world. They seldom wrote, and we lived entirely out of the world, and never heard even in gossip of the goings on at Rome and Naples, and what place the beautiful Miss Mortimer took there. They came home at last quite suddenly, in the depth of winter. Naturally Sarah had caught a very bad cold. She kept her own room for a very long time after and never saw anybody. Then she lost her voice. I remember I took it quite for granted at the time that it was her cold and the loss of her voice that made her shut herself up; but I must say that once or twice since I have had a little doubt on that subject. She was then not much past five-and-thirty, a very handsome woman. My father lived many years after, but they never, though they had been great companions for so long before, seemed to be at ease in each other's presence. They never even sat down to dinner together when they could help it. Since then, to be sure, Sarah had begun to live more with me; but what a life it was! I had the concerns of the property to occupy me, and things to manage; besides, I was always out and about in the village and among the neighbours; and still more, I was quite a different woman from Sarah, more homely-like, and had never been out in the world. I wouldn't for anything be what you might call suspicious of my own only sister; and what I *could* be suspicious about, even if I wanted to, was more than I knew. Still it was odd, very odd, more particularly after Sarah's strange words and look. My mind was all in a ferment—I could not tell what to think; but it came upon me as strong as a conviction that something *must* have happened in those ten years; what it could be was as dark as midnight, but there must be something. That was the end I came to after all my pondering. Ellis came twice into the room to shut up, and twice stumbled off again with his "Beg pardon, ma'am." It began to feel chilly as the fire went out, and the night grew pale and ghostly in the mirrors. By and by I began to hear those cracks and rustles which one always hears when one sits up late at night. It wasn't in the furniture, bless you! I know a great deal better than that; the old walnut and satin-wood was all seasoned by a century's wear. I don't pretend to say what it was: but I know that I was made very uneasy sitting all by myself, with the fire out, in that big room. When it drew near twelve o'clock, I went to bed.

Chapter IV

I MIGHT as well, before all this description of our day's talk and cogitations, have said first who we were.

The Mortimers are an old Cheshire family. We came originally from the other side of the Dee; but we have been settled here in the Park since Henry the Seventh's time, when to be sure Welshmen were in fashion. The old tower of Wyfod, over Llangollen way, was the cradle of our family. So we have not travelled very far from our origin. We have always been, since we came to the Cheshire side, tolerably prosperous and prudent, not mixing much with politics, having a pretty eye for a bargain, and letting other people get along in their own way; I say so quite frankly, not being ashamed of it. Once, I confess, I felt a little sore that we had no crusading knights nor wild cavaliers among our ancestors; but that, of course, was when I was young. Now I take a different view of affairs. Cavaliers and crusading knights have been generally very expensive luxuries for their families, and must have done a great deal more mischief than a man, however well disposed to it, could do at home. Another circumstance has been good for our purse, but not so good (I fear—so at least it threatens at the present moment) for the prolongation of the race. The Mortimers have never had large families. I suppose few English houses of our rank, or indeed of any rank, can count so few cousins and collateral branches. We have relations, certainly, by my mother's side, who was one of the Stamfords of Lincolnshire; but except this visionary Richard Arkwright (did ever mortal hear of such a name for a Mortimer!), there is not a single individual remaining of our own name and blood to inherit the property after us, which is a very sad thing to say, and indeed, in some degree, a sort of disgrace to us. The family allowance of children for ever so long has been somewhat about one son and one daughter. The daughter has married off, as was natural, or died unmarried, as, indeed, for a Miss Mortimer, was more natural still; and the son has become the squire, and had a son and a daughter in his turn. In Queen Anne's time, the then squire, whose name was Lewis, made an unfortunate divergence from the usual custom. He had two girls only; but one of them married, and her husband took our name and arms; the other died very opportunely, and left her sister in full possession, so no harm was done. It is, however, a saying in the family, that the Mortimers are to end in two sisters, and that after them the property is to be divided and alienated from the name. This is one reason why I never was much of a favourite at home. They forgave Sarah, for she was beautiful, and just the person to be an heiress. But co-heiresses are the bugbear of the Mortimers. Ah me! If there had been no such saying as this, or if we had been poor girls, it might have made a difference! Not in me, to be sure; I need not be sentimental about it. I never saw an individual in this world I could have fancied but one, and he, you know, never asked me; so it could not have made the slightest difference to me.

However, if there's one thing more than another that my heart is set to resist, it is letting this prophecy be fulfilled in our time. I'd rather compass sea and land to find a Mortimer! I'd rather set out, old as I am, and hunt for one with a lantern through the world! Sarah, though she is so capricious and contrary, is of the same mind. It was she who told me of this Mr. Richard Arkwright, whom I had forgotten all about. And yet, you see, after showing such decided interest, she turns upon one so! What a very odd thing it is that she did not marry! I never could make it out, for my part. Nobody could imagine, to see her now, how very pretty, nay, how beautiful she was; and such a way with her! and dressed, to be sure, like a duchess. All the young men in the county were after her before she went abroad. But dear, dear! to think what a changed life when she came home, and lost her voice, and shut herself up in her own room.

There is nothing I dislike more than curiosity, or prying, or suspiciousness; but I *should* like to know the rights of it—how Sarah went on abroad. To be sure my father was anxious enough that *she* should get married, and have a good humble-minded husband, who would take the name of Mortimer.

It was only me that he would not hear of any proposal for. I don't think he would have broken his heart if, like the Milly Mortimer in Queen Anne's time, I had been so obliging as to die.

However, here we are, just as we were in the nursery, two Miss Mortimers. Sarah, who might have had half a dozen good marriages, just the same as I am; and I protest I don't even know that there are two people existing in the world who have the smallest collateral right to divide the property and take it away from the name; unless Richard Arkwright should happen to have co-heiresses! married to husbands who will not change to Mortimer! Don't let me think of such a horror!

These are our circumstances in the meantime. It is a very sad thing for a family when there are no collateral branches. I forgot to say that how this Richard Arkwright came about, was by the strange accident of Squire George, who died in 1713, having *two sons*!

Chapter V

DURING all this time—and indeed, after all, it was only a single day—I had forgotten all about Mr. Cresswell and his Sara. He and his family had been our family's solicitors for a great many generations. He knew all our secrets that we knew ourselves. It is only about twenty years since he succeeded his father in the business, and married that pretty delicate young creature, the clergyman's daughter of St. John's. She died very early, poor thing, as was to be expected, and Sara is his only child. But, of course, he does not know any more than a baby how to manage a pretty fantastical young girl. They are a very respectable, substantial family in their way, and have been settled in their house in Chester for a very long time—though, of course, it would be absurd to call a family of solicitors an *old* family—and Mr. Cresswell is very well off in the world, and can give a very pretty fortune to his daughter; yet the covetous old fox has actually a fancy in his mind—I could see it when he was last here—that if Sara only played her cards well she might be heiress of the Park, and succeed Sarah and me. An attorney's daughter! Not that I mean to put a slight upon Sara, who is our godchild, and a very sweet, pretty girl. But to fancy that old Cresswell could take up such an idea, and *I* not find him out! It is odd, really, how the cleverest of men deceive themselves. He will take every means to find out Richard Mortimer all the same. He'll not fail of his duty, however things may turn out, I know that; but to think at the very bottom of his sly old heart that he should have a hankering after the Park! It is quite inconceivable what fancies will take hold of men.

Sara is our godchild, as I said, called Sara Millicent, in token of the kindness that poor Mrs. Cresswell, poor young motherless creature, thought she had received from us. Poor little soul! she little thought then, that the baby she was so proud of, was the only one she was to be spared to bring into the world. From that time till now Sara has been a pet at the Park, and always free to come to us when she wished, or when her father thought it would do her good. This was how she was coming to-day. Perhaps it might be imagined by some people rather a bold thing of one's family solicitor to bring his daughter to us without an invitation. But you see we were only ladies, and did not stand on our dignity as people do when there are men in the house; and, besides, she was our pet and godchild, which makes all the difference.

Just before dinner, Mr. Cresswell's one-horse chaise came into the courtyard. We never use the great door except for great people, and when Sarah goes out for her airings. I always use the court entrance, which is much handier, especially in winter, and when there is no fire in the great hall. I really see no use, except on occasions, for a fire in that great hall. It looks miserable, I dare say, but then the coal it consumes is enormous—enough to keep three families in the village comfortably warmed—and *we* keep no lackeys to lounge about there, and be in the way. A good respectable family servant, like Ellis, with plenty of maids, is much more to my taste than those great saucy fellows, who have not the heart of a mouse. But this is quite apart from what I was saying. Sarah had come down just the same as ever, except that she had her brown gown on,—she wears a different gown every day in the week,—and her muslin shawl lined with blue, and of course blue ribbons in her cap to correspond. Carson, after all, is really a wonderful milliner. She seemed to have forgotten, or at least passed over, our little quarrel, for she spoke just the same as usual, and said, as she always does, that she hoped that I would not forget to order the carriage for her drive. I have given over being nettled about this. She says it regularly, poor dear soul, every other day.

“And little Sara is coming to-day,” said I. “You'll take her for company, won't you? It will do the child good.”

“Do her good! why, Cresswell has a carriage!” said Sarah in her whisper; “beggars will ride before all's done.”

“But he's nothing of a beggar, quite the reverse; he's very well-to-do, indeed,” said I. “I think he has a very good right to a one-horse chaise.”

“Ah, to be sure, that makes all the difference,” said Sarah in her sharp way, “I forgot it was but one horse.”

Now her voice, which is rather pleasant when she’s kind, gets a sort of hiss in it when she’s spiteful, and the sound of that “horse,” though I wouldn’t for the world say any harm of my sister, drew out all the hoarseness and unpleasant sound in the strangest way possible. I was quite glad to hear at that moment the wheels in the courtyard.

“There is little Sara,” said I, and went off to fetch her in, very glad to get off, it must be confessed; but glad also, to be sure, to see my little pet, who had always taken so kindly to me. Before I could get to the door which Ellis was holding open, the dear child herself came rushing upon me, fairly driving me a few steps back, and taking away my breath. “You’re not to come into the draught, godmamma. It’s so cold, oh, it’s so cold! I thought my nose would be off,” cried Sara’s voice close to my ear. She was talking and kissing me at the same moment, and after the start she had given me, you may suppose, I did not pick up exactly every word she said. But that was the substance of it, to be sure.

“Why didn’t you wear a veil? You ought to wear a veil, child. We were all supposed to have complexions when I was young,” said I. “Don’t you have any complexions, now, you little girls?”

“Oh, godmamma! I don’t expect ever to hear you talking nonsense,” said Sara severely. “What’s the good of our complexions? We can’t do anything with them that I ever heard of. Come in from the draught, please, for the sake of your dear old nose.”

“You are the rudest little girl I ever knew in my life. Go in, child, go in, and see your godmamma,” said I. “How ever do you manage that girl, Mr. Cresswell? Does she think I don’t know all the draughts in my own house?”

“Ah, my dear lady, she’s contrary. I told you so—she always was and ever will be,” said Mr. Cresswell, putting down his hat with a sigh. Dear, dear! the poor man certainly had his troubles with that little puss. Manage her, indeed! when, to be sure, as was natural, she made him do exactly just as she pleased.

When we went in after her, he and I, there she was, to be sure, kneeling down on Sarah’s footstool, trying all she could to put my sister’s curls out of order with kissing her. If any one else had dared to do it! But Sara, who never since she was a baby feared any creature, had her way with her godmother as well as with all the rest of us. There’s a great deal in never being afraid.

“Now, go up-stairs, and take off your bonnet, there’s a good child; there’s a fire in your room to warm it for puss in velvet. Go, and come down smooth and nice as your godmamma loves to see you. Dinner will be ready presently, and you must be nice for dinner. There, there, don’t talk any more, Sara, go and smooth your hair.”

“Oh yes, certainly, and then you’ll see what’s happened!” cried Sara, and frisked off out of the room like a little puss as she was.

I dare say the dear child expected nothing less than a great curiosity on my part about what had happened. Poor dear little kitten! she forgot that these little secrets were not such great matters to me. When she was gone we did not say a syllable about Sara; but her good father began to pull about the things on one of the tables behind the screen, and made signs to me with his eyebrows to come and talk to him. When I passed over that way he said quite softly, “Anything more?”

“Not a word,” said I; for, to be sure, that about Sarah marrying if they would have let her was private, and even the family solicitor had nothing to do with it, though, I dare say if the truth were known, he knew all about it better than I did. “Not a word; only, I suppose, I should say he must be about her own age.”

Mr. Cresswell glanced up at me, gave a short little smile, a nod of his head, and a shrug of his shoulders, and understood all about it as if I had told him.

“Was in love with her once, of course—thought so!” he said in his undertone: “you ladies, for one good thing, do think on when we’ve made fools of ourselves about you. It’s always our compensation.”

“We think on after you’ve forgotten all about it—that’s what you mean,” said I.

Mr. Cresswell gave another little shrug with his shoulders, and glanced at the screen behind which Sarah was knitting. “How lovely she was once, to be sure!” he said with a little sigh, and then laughed out at himself, not without a little redness in his face. To speak of a blush in a man of his years would be simply absurd, you know. Such a piece of presumption! I do believe Bob Cresswell had taken it upon him to fall in love with Sarah too in his young days. I could have boxed his ears for him; and to think he should have the audacity to laugh at himself now!

Chapter VI

THIS conversation of ours, if it could be called a conversation, was luckily interrupted by the entrance of little Sara, who came into the room, lightfooted and noiseless, as such creatures can when they are young. She had on a velvet jacket, over a thick-corded blue silk dress. She must have spent quite a fortune in dress, the little saucy puss. What startled me, however, was her hair. She had a beautiful head of hair, and wore it of course in the fashion, as all young girls ought. Some people were so misguided as to call Sara Cresswell dark-complexioned. They meant she had very dark hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes. As for her skin, it was as pure as Sarah's, who had always been a blonde beauty. But with all the mass of hair she had, when she chose to spread it out and display it, and with her black eyes and small face, I don't wonder people thought the little witch dark. However, all that was done away *now*. There she stood before me, laughing, and making her curtsy, with short little curls, like a child's, scarcely long enough to reach to her collar—all her splendid hair gone—a regular crop! I screamed out, as may be supposed; I declare I could have whipped her with the very best will in the world. The provoking, wicked little creature! no wonder her poor father called her contrary. Dear, dear, to think what odd arrangements there are in this world! *I* should have brought her under some sort of authority, I promise you; but really, not meaning to be profane, one was really tempted to say to one's self, what *could* Providence be thinking of to give such a child to poor old Bob Cresswell, who knew no more how to manage her than I know how to steer a boat?

"I declare I think you are very wicked," I said when I gained my breath; "I do believe, Sara, you take a delight in vexing your friends. For all the world what good could it do to cut off your hair? Don't speak to me, child! I declare I am so vexed and provoked and angry, I could cry!"

"Don't cry, godmamma," said Sara quite coolly, "or I'll have it made up into a wig; you can't fancy how nice it is now. Besides, what was the good of such a lot of hair? Don't you know that's what gives people headaches? I thought I had better be wise in time."

"You little storyteller!" cried I, "you never had a headache in your life."

"Ah, but prevention is better than cure," said the wicked little creature with her very demurest look.

"Dinner, Ma'am," said Ellis at the door. It was just as well for Sara. But I had a great mind to pinch her, as Mr. Thackeray says the ladies do, when we went together to the dining-room. I am sure she deserved it. However, she did not escape a little pinch which touched her, brave as she was. Sarah, I suppose, had not taken the trouble to look at her till we were all seated at table. Then she looked up, quite ignorant of what had happened. Sarah did not start like me, nor scream out; but she looked at little Sara quite composedly, leaning forward to see her all round. When she had quite done, she folded her hands upon her napkin, and smiled. "What a shocking fright you have made of yourself, my dear child," said Sarah with the most amiable look in the world. Little Sara coloured up in a moment, grew red and furious like a little vixen, and had something angry and wicked on the very tip of her tongue, which however, bold as she was, she dared not say. Mr. Cresswell ventured to give a little mutter and chuckle of a laugh, and how the little witch did look at him! But as for me, though I was glad to have her punished, I could not find in my heart to hear anything said against her without standing up in her defence.

"Well, of course, I am very angry," said I; "but I can't say I agree with your godmamma either—it's pretty enough for that matter."

"Oh, please, don't take any trouble about my feelings. I never meant it to be pretty," said little Sara, quite furious.

"Nice hair is very much in a dark person's favour. It helps the complexion and harmonises," said Sarah, who kept always looking at the child in her smiling aggravating way. "People will soon

notice the want of it in you, my dear. They will say you are very much gone off in your looks. It's a pity you were so rash. It does make you a sad fright, whatever Milly says."

Now, only imagine how little Sara was to bear all this, spoken just in Sarah's whisper, which made everybody, even Ellis, who was waiting, listen close to hear what she said. It was very seldom she said so many words in one day, not to say at one speaking. She began to eat her soup when she had done her pleasant remarks. And surely I never did remark before how odd the s's sounded in her poor lost voice. Somehow they seemed to go hissing round the table, as if every word had an s in it. It was a round table, and not very large. Sarah never would do any carving, and I got tired of always doing it. So Ellis managed for us now on the sideboard, knowing foreign ways a little, and a small table suited us best.

"Ah, my dear lady, I wish you'd take her in hand," said Mr. Cresswell (dear, dear! it is inconceivable how injudicious some people are!); "she's too many for me."

"My opinion is," said I, breaking in as well as I could, seeing that poor little Sara must come to an explosion if they kept it up, "that when a gentleman comes to visit two single ladies, he should let us know what's going on in the world. Have you never a new curate at St. John's to tell us of, and are all the officers just exactly as they used to be? You may all be very superior, you wise people. But I do love gossip, I am free to acknowledge. I heard your rector preached in his surplice last Sunday. How did you Evangelicals take that, Mr. Cresswell, eh? For my part, I can't see where's the harm in a surplice as you Low Church people do."

"You and I will never agree in that, Miss Milly," said Mr. Cresswell; "though, indeed, if Dr. Roberts came into the pulpit in white, I've my own idea as to how you'd take it. However, not to speak of surplices, the red-coats are going, I hear. We're to have a change. The Chestnuts are coming up from Scotland, and our men are ordered to the West Indies. The Colonel doesn't like it a bit. It's better for him in one way, but he's getting to like a steady friendly little society, and not to care for moving. He's getting up in years, like the rest of us, is the Colonel. This will tell on him, you'll see."

"Well, to be sure, when a man's old, he ought to retire," said I; "there are always plenty to take his place."

"Ah, it's easy to talk," said Mr. Cresswell. "It's all very well for us to retire that have made money; but a man that has only his pay, what is he to do? He has got that poor little widow-daughter of his to keep, and Fred is very unsettled, I'm afraid, and little comfort to his father. There's a deal of difference, Miss Milly, between full-pay and half-pay. He'd have to cut down his living one half if he retired."

"That's just exactly what I quarrel with in these grand times of ours," said I; "what's the harm of cutting down one's living one half? My own opinion is, I'd respect a man very much that did it. Great people can do it somehow. I wish you luxurious middle-class people would learn the way. But then you don't stand by each other when you fall into poverty. You drop your friend when he can't ask you to dinner. You are good to his children, and patronise them, and forget they were just the same as yours a little while ago. I don't think we'll ever come to any good in this country till we get back to knowing how to be poor."

"My dear lady, England never was in such splendid condition," said Mr. Cresswell, with a smile at my ignorance. "If we've forgotten how to save, we've learned how to grow rich."

"I know all about England," said I; "we read the Times; don't you tell me. I'm anything but easy about England. Making money is no substitute in the world for saving it. I tell you, the world won't be what I call right till a gentleman may be as poor as God pleases, without being ashamed of it; and have the heart to cut down his living one-half too."

"Well, well Miss Milly, ladies are always optimists," said Mr. Cresswell; "but I shouldn't like to be poor myself, nor see Sara tried with economics. *She* don't understand anything about them, that's sure."

"The more's the pity. What if she should marry a poor man?" said I.

“She *shan’t* marry a poor man, my dear lady,” said Mr. Cresswell.

Upon which Sara lighted up. I knew she would. The dear child would do anything out of contradiction.

“Rather a poor one than a rich one, papa,” cried Sara, with a little start of opposition. “Godmamma is always quite right. It’s shocking how everybody worships rich people. If we were to live in a little cottage, now, and make a dozen poor people comfortable! instead of always living in that dull old house, and having the same chairs and tables, and looking at exactly the same things every day. Godmamma! I do so want my room fresh papered. I know every tint of that pattern, till it makes me quite ill to look at it. Wouldn’t it be a thousand times more reasonable and like a Christian, if papa would stop giving stupid dinners, and taking me to stupid parties, and divide all his money with, say, a dozen poor families, and live in a sweet country cottage? It isn’t enough for us, you know, to make us great people. But it would be quite enough to give us all plenty to live upon, the dozen others and ourselves as well. Don’t you think it would be a great deal more like what a man should do, than keeping all one’s money to one’s self, like papa?”

Little Sara grew quite earnest, and her eyes sparkled as she spoke. Her father laughed inwardly under his breath, and thought it just one of her vagaries. She divide all her money with her neighbours, the extravagant little puss in velvet! But don’t suppose Sara was shamming. She was as thoughtless and as prodigal as ever a child was who knew no better. But for all that, she could have done it. She could have found out how to do it. She meant what she said.

Chapter VII

“BUT you are a very foolish, thoughtless, provoking little puss; there can’t be any mistake about it,” said I.

“Nothing of the sort, godmamma,” said Sara, “such a quantity of time was always taken up with that hair of mine; it had to be brushed out at night, however sleepy I was, and it had to be done I don’t know how many times a day. Think of wasting hours of one’s time upon one’s hair!”

“But, my dear child, you have too much time on your hands. Do you ever do anything in the world, you velvet kitten,” said I.

“If it was anybody else but you, I should be angry, godmamma,” said Sara; “but, indeed, I have tried a quantity of things. As for working, you know I *won’t* work—I tell everybody so plainly. What’s the good of it? I hate crochet and cushions and footstools. If I had some little children to keep all tidy, there would be some good in it; or if papa was poor I might mend his stockings—but I won’t work now, whatever anybody says.”

“I don’t see any reason why you should not keep some little children tidy, or mend papa’s stockings either, if you would like it,” said I.

“If I would *like* it!” cried Sara, in high wrath and indignation, “as if that was why I should do it! I don’t think there can be anything more dreadful in life than always having to do just what one likes. Now, look here, godmamma; suppose I was to mend papa’s stockings because I liked it,—oh, how Mary would giggle and laugh and rejoice over me! She *has* to do it, and doesn’t like it a bit, you may be sure. And suppose I were making frocks for poor children, like the Dorcas society, wouldn’t all the sensible people be on me to say how very much better it would be to have poor women make them and pay them for their work? I could only do what it’s other people’s business to do. I have got no business. The best thing wanted of me is just to sit idle from morning to night and read novels; and nobody understands me either, not even my dear old godmamma, which is hardest of all.”

“But, Sara, if you chose, you could do *good*; the best thing of all to do—you could—”

“Oh stop, stop, godmamma! I can’t do good. I don’t want to do good. I hate going about and talking to people; and besides, they are all, every one of them,” said Sara, with tears, half of vexation and half of sorrow, sparkling in her eyes, “a great deal better than me.”

I had not a single word to say against this; for indeed, though I said it, because of course it was the right thing to say, I can’t undertake, upon my honour, that I thought a spoiled child like Sara Cresswell was the kind of creature to be much comfort to poor men or poor women labouring hard in the sorrows of this life.

“I went once with Miss Fielding from the Rectory. There was one house,” said Sara, speaking low and getting red, “where they hadn’t so much to live on for the whole year through as papa had to pay for my dressmaker’s bill. He had just been worrying me about it that morning, so I remember. But they weren’t miserable! no more than you are, godmamma! not one half, nor a quarter, nor a hundredth part so miserable as I am! And the woman looked so cheerful and *right* with the baby in her arms, and all the cleaning to do—I cried and ran off home when I got out of that house. I was ashamed, just dead ashamed, godmamma, and nothing else.—Doing good!—oh!—I think if I were the little girl, coming in to hold the baby, and help to clean, I might get some good myself. But then nobody will understand me whatever I say. I don’t want to invent things to ‘employ my time.’ Employing one’s time is about as bad as improving one’s mind. I want to have something *real* to do, something that *has* to be done and nobody but me to do it; and I don’t mind in the least whether I should like it or not.”

“Well, dear,” said I, “you’re not nineteen yet; plenty of time. I dare say you’ll have your hard work some day or other, and won’t like it any more than the rest of us. Have patience, it will all come in time.”

“Then, I suppose,” said Sara, with a little toss of her provoking little head, “I had better just go to sleep till that time comes.”

“Well, my love, papa would save a good deal, no doubt, if there were no dressmaker’s bills. You inconsistent little witch! Here you tell me how disgusted you are with being a rich man’s daughter and having nothing to do, yet you cut off your hair to save time, and go on quite composedly spending as much as would keep a poor family—and more than one poor family, I suspect—on your dressmaker’s bill. Little Sara, what do you mean?”

“The two things have no connection,” said Sara, tossing her head again; “I never pretended that I wanted to save papa’s money. What’s the good of it? I like pretty things to wear, and I don’t care the very least in the world how much money papa has in the bank, or wherever he keeps it. He told me once it was my own means I was wasting, for, of course, it would be all mine when he died,” she went on, her eyes twinkling with proud tears and wounded feeling; “as if *that* made any difference! But I’ll tell you what, godmamma. If he was to portion out all the money to ourselves and so many other people, just enough to live upon, you’d see how happy I should be in muslin frocks. I know I should! and keep everything so snug and nice at home.”

“Oh, you deluded little child!” said I; “don’t you know there’s ever so much *nasty* work to do, before everything can be nice as we always have it? Should you like to be a housemaid with your little velvet paws, you foolish little kitten? You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“But I do, though—and I could scratch too,” said the wild little puss, with a glance out of her black eyes which confounded me. I thought the child had gone out of her wits altogether. No wonder her poor father called her contrary, poor hapless man.

This conversation took place after dinner, when we two went back to the drawing-room. Mr. Cresswell had returned to Chester in his brougham, and Sarah had gone out all by herself for her drive. Perhaps little Sara, after being so aggravated at dinner, would not have gone with my sister even had she been asked; but her godmamma did not ask her. Dear, dear, what a very strange world this is! Poor Sarah chose to go out alone, driving drearily through the winterly trees and hedges; she chose always to turn aside from the village, which might have been a little cheerful, and she never dreamt of calling anywhere, poor soul! I have lived a quiet life enough, but I could not get on without a smile here and a word there, and the sight of my fellow-creatures at least. However, I have no call to censure neighbours, much less my sister. This is how Sara Cresswell and I had time for our long conversation. I broke it off short now, thinking it was about time for Sarah to come in.

“Now little Sara,” said I, “we’ll drop the question what you’re to do as a general question just now; but your godmamma will be in directly. What shall you do while you’re here? Should you like to come and set my papers straight? It’s nice, tiresome, sickening work. It always gives me a headache, but I can’t trust a servant to do it. I think it’s the very work for you.”

“But, dear godmamma, here’s a novel,” said Sara, who was sunk deep in an easy-chair, and had not the very slightest intention of obeying me, “just the very one I wanted, and I see by the first chapter that Emily is my own very favourite heroine. I’ll do it to-morrow, please—to-morrow morning, not to-day.”

“But it must be done to-day.”

“Oh, *must!* why *must?* You have only to do what you please—you are not obliged to keep time like a dressmaker or a clerk,” said Sara, reading all the while.

“Oh, you child!” said I; “suppose papa’s dinner was waiting, or his stockings to mend, would you let them stand till you had finished your novel? Oh, you deluded little thing, is that the good workwoman you would be?”

Before I had finished speaking Sara had started like a little sprite out of her chair, tossed the novel into the corner of a distant sofa, and went off like the wind to the library, where I did my business and kept my papers. I had to hurry after her as quickly as I could. A pretty job she would have made of it, had she done it alone!

Chapter VIII

IF there is one thing I dislike more than another, it is the housemaid, or even Ellis, meddling with my papers. I don't scold a great deal, in a general way, but I will allow that I don't spare any of them when they flutter my accounts and receipts about in setting things to rights. So in the course of nature the things get dusty; and I quite expected to see poor little Sara grow pale and give in before she was half through the year's accounts. But nobody knows the spirit that is in that child. After she had once roused herself to do it, she held at it without an idea of yielding. I saw her look now and again at her little toys of hands, but I took no notice; and on she went at the papers manfully, putting them in as regular order as I could have done myself. It was not such a very important business after all, but still it's a comfort to see a person set to anything with a will, especially a little spoilt wilful creature that never had anything to do but her own pleasure all her life.

Nearly an hour after we had come into the library somebody came with a gentle knock to the door; thinking it was Ellis, I said, "Come in," without looking up, waiting for him to speak. But while I sat quietly going on with my business, with Sara close by rustling her papers, I was quite startled and shaken all at once to hear a voice close by me which I did not hear half a dozen times in a twelvemonth, the voice of Carson, Sarah's maid.

"Bless me, what's the matter?" I said, looking up at the sound, being really too much startled to notice what she said.

"Nothing, I hope, ma'am," said Carson, who was very precise and particular. "But my missis is not come in, ma'am, from her drive, and I thought I'd make bold to ask if she was going anywhere as I didn't know?"

"Sarah not come back from her drive?" said I, looking at my watch; "why, we've had lights this half hour, Carson; it's getting towards five o'clock."

"Yes, ma'am," said Carson, briefly, not allowing for my surprise, "that is just what I said."

This pulled me up a little, as you may suppose; but I was seriously put out about Sarah, when I really saw how the matter stood.

"I know nothing about where she was going. Dear, dear, can anything have happened?" I cried, getting a little flustered and anxious; then I jumped up, as was natural, and looked out at the window; though of course nothing was to be seen there but the shrubbery and a corner of the flower-garden. "But I can't think what *could* have happened either. The horses are very steady, and Jacob is care itself; besides, we'd have heard directly if anything had gone wrong. No, no, there can't have been any accident. My sister was just in her usual, Carson, eh?"

"Just in her usual ma'am," said Carson, like an echo of my voice.

"Then, dear, what can be the matter? it's only some accident, of course," said I; "I don't mean accident, only some chance turn out of the way, or something. Bless me, to think of Sarah out after nightfall! Why don't you run out to the road and look for the carriage? Call some of the people about. Ring the bell, child, can't you?—or no, sit still, Sara. I'll take a peep out at the great gate myself."

Saying which, I hurried past Carson, brushing against her, as she did not keep out of my way, and snatched a cloak out of the hall, and ran to the gate. It was only twilight out of doors, though we had our lamp lighted. A nice night, grey, a little frosty, but rather pleasant, with the lights twinkling out of the windows. I said to myself, "Nothing I should like better than a brisk walk down to the village; but Sarah, you know—Sarah's different." What could keep her out so late? I can't say I was alarmed, but I did get a little uneasy, especially as I saw Ellis making his way up one road from the gate of the courtyard, and the houseboy running down another. It was Carson's doings, no doubt; well, well! I ought to be thankful my sister had a maid that was so fond of her; but taking things out of my hands in this way, not only made me angry, as was natural, but flurried me as well.

As I stood there, however, watching, and thinking I surely heard a sound of wheels somewhere in the distance, somebody went past me very suddenly. I could not see where he sprang from, he appeared in such a sudden unexplainable way. I got quite a fright, and, except that he was a gentleman, and probably a young one, I could tell nothing more about the figure that shot across my eyes. Very odd; could he have been hiding in the bushes? What could he want? Who could it be? I certainly hear the carriage now, and there comes the houseboy up the road waving his arms about; but instead of looking for my sister, I looked after this figure that had passed me. It passed Ellis too, and looked in his face, making him start, as it appeared to me, and so went straight on, till the road turned and I could see it no longer. I felt quite as if I had met with an adventure. Could it be some lover of little Sara's that had followed her out here?—or, dear, dear! could it have anything to do with delaying Sarah's drive? Just then the carriage came in sight, and I ran back to the house-door to receive my sister and ask what had detained her. She stepped out of the carriage, looking paler than her ordinary, and with that nervous shake in her hands and head, and looked as if she could quite have clutched hold of Carson, who of course was there to receive her.

"Sarah," cried I, "what in all the world has kept you so long? We were at our wits' end, thinking something had happened."

"You'll be glad to see nothing has happened," said Sarah, in her whisper, trying hard to be quite composed and like herself as she took hold of Carson's arm. "The beauty of the evening, you know, drew me a little further than I generally go."

This she said looking into my face, nay, into my eyes all the time, as if to defy any suspicions or doubt I might have. Her very determination to show that there was no other reason, made it quite evident that there had been something, whatever it was.

I said nothing of course. I had not the least idea what my own suspicions pointed at, nor what they were. So it was not likely I should make any scene, or put it into the servants' heads to wonder. So I stood still and asked no more questions, while Sarah passed before me, leaning on Carson's arm, to go upstairs. It was the most simple and reasonable thing in the world; why should she not have gone further than she intended one night in her life? But she did not, that is all.

When I went back to the library, little Sara, extraordinary to relate, was sitting exactly where I left her, busy about the papers. The wilful creature did not seem to have moved during my absence. She was as busy and absorbed as if there was nothing else to do or think of in the world. And while we had been all of a flutter looking for Sarah, she, sitting quiet and undisturbed, had got the greater part of her work finished.

"Sara, you unfeeling child," said I, "were you not anxious about your godmamma?"

"No," said Sara, very simply. "Godmamma Sarah, and coachman Jacob, and those two fat old horses could surely all take care of each other. I wasn't frightened, godmamma. I never heard of any accidents happening to big old stout carriages and horses like yours. I've nearly got my work done while you've been away."

This was all the sympathy I got from little Sara. Of course I could no more have told her the puzzle my mind was in than I could have told the servants; but still, you know, an intelligent young person might have guessed by my looks and been a little sympathetic;—though to be sure there is no use pretending with one's self. I do believe I liked Sara twenty times better for taking no notice;—and then, how cleverly the little kitten had got through her work!

We saw nothing more of Sarah that night. When it was time for tea, Carson came down again with missus's compliments, and she was tired with her long drive, and would have tea in her own room. I said nothing at all, but handed her the Times. I don't doubt Sarah had her tea very snug in her nice cosy dressing-room, with Carson purring round her and watching every move she made. I never could manage that sort of thing for my part. Little Sara and I, however, though her godmamma deserted us, were very comfortable, on the whole, downstairs.

Chapter IX

WE had both been reading almost all the evening. Sara had her novel, and I had the Times Supplement, which I am free to confess I like as well as any other part of the paper. I will not deny that I finished the third volume before I began to the newspaper; but, to be sure, a novel, after you are done with it, is an unsatisfactory piece of work; especially if the evening is only half over, and you have nothing else to begin to. I sat leaning back in my chair, wandering over the advertisements, and very ready for a talk. That is just the time, to be sure, when one wants somebody to talk to. If I had ever been used to the luxury of a favourite maid when I was young, as Sarah was, I do believe I should have been in my own cosy room now as well as Sarah, talking everything over with *my* Carson. But that is not the way I was brought up, you see. To be sure, as there was ten years of difference between us, nobody had ever looked for me, and Sarah had got quite settled in her heiress ways before I was born. When I was young, I used to think it a sad pity for everybody's sake that I ever was born, especially after my mother died; however, I changed my views upon that subject a good many years ago. Yet here I sat looking all over the advertisements, and keeping an eye on Sara to see if there was any hope of getting a little conversation out of her. Alas! she was all lapped up and lost in her novel. She thought no more of me than of Sarah's empty chair. Ah! novels are novels when people are young. I looked at the poor dear child, and admired and smiled at her over the top of the newspaper. If I had been a cabbage, Sara could not have taken less notice of me.

At last she suddenly exclaimed out loud—at something she was reading, of course—"I declare!" as if she had made a discovery, and then stopped short and looked up at me with a sort of challenge, as if defying me to guess what she was thinking of. Then, seeing how puzzled I looked, Sara laughed, but reddened a little as well, to my amazement; and finally, not without the least little touch of confusion, explained herself. To be sure it was quite voluntary, and yet a little unwilling too.

"There's something here exactly like the Italian gentleman; he that people talk so much about in Chester, you know."

"I never knew there was an Italian gentleman in Chester. What a piece of news! and you never told me," said I.

"He only came about a fortnight ago," said Sara. "It looks quite romantic, you know, godmamma, which is the only reason *I* have heard anything about it. He came quite in great style to the Angel, and said he was coming to see some friends, and asked all about whether anybody knew where the Countess Sermoneta lived. You may be quite sure nobody had ever heard of such a name in Chester. I heard it all from Lucy Wilde, who had heard it from her brother, who is always playing billiards and things at the Angel—Harry Wilde—"

"That is the poor young man who—"

"Oh, dear godmamma, don't bother! let one go on with one's story. Harry Wilde says the Italian came down among them, asking everybody about this Countess Sermoneta, and looking quite bewildered when he found that nobody knew her; but still he was quite lively, and thought it must be some mistake, and laughed, and made sure that this was really *Chestare* he had come to, and not any other place. But next day, people say, he sent for the landlord and asked all about the families in the neighbourhood, and all of a sudden grew quite grave and serious, and soon after took lodgings in Watergate, and has been seen going about the streets and the walls so much since that everybody knows him. He speaks English quite well—people say so, I mean—and he has a servant with him, the funniest-looking fat fellow you ever saw; no more like a proper Italian servant in a play or a novel than I am; and he calls himself just Mr. Luigi; and that, of course, you know, must be only his Christian name."

"Nay, indeed, Sara, I don't know anything about it. There is nothing at all Christianlike in the name, so far as I can see."

“Well then, *I* know, godmamma, which is all the same,” cried the impatient little creature; “but then, to be sure, our old Signor Valetti used to tell us they never minded their family names in Italy; and that people might be next-door neighbours for ever so long and never know each other’s surnames. Isn’t it pretty? especially when they have pretty Christian names, as all the Italians have.”

“My dear, if you think Looegee pretty, I don’t,” said I. “Take my word for it, there is nothing like the sensible English names. I’ve had a good deal of experience, and I don’t like your romantic foreigners. For my part, I don’t like people that have a story. People have no right to have stories, child. If you do your duty honestly, and always tell the truth, and never conceal anything, you can’t get up a romance about yourself. As for this Italian fellow and his name—”

“I don’t believe he’s a fellow any more than you are, godmamma,” cried Sara, quite indignantly; “people should know before they condemn; and his name is just plain Lewis when it’s put into English. I did not think you were so prejudiced, indeed I did not—or I never would have told you anything at all about the poor count—”

“Heaven preserve us! he’s a count, is he?” said I. “And what do you know about him, Sara Cresswell, please, that you would quarrel with your own godmother for his sake?”

Sara did not speak for a few minutes, looking very flushed and angry. At last, after a good fight with herself, she started up and threw her arms round my neck. “Dear godmamma, I wouldn’t quarrel with you for anybody in the world,” cried the little impulsive creature. Then she stopped and gave a little toss of her head. “But whatever anybody says, I know it’s *quite* right to feel kind to the poor Italian gentleman, a stranger, and solitary, and disappointed! I do wonder at your people, godmamma—you people who pretend to do what’s in the Bible. You’re just as hard upon strangers and as ready to take up a prejudice as anybody else.”

“I never pretended not to be prejudiced,” said I; “it’s natural to a born Englishwoman. And as for your foreign counts, that come sneaking into people’s houses to marry their daughters and run off with the money—”

“Oh, if it is that you are thinking of, godmamma,” cried Sara with great dignity, sitting quite bolt upright in her chair, “you are totally mistaken, I assure you. I never spoke to the gentleman in my life; and besides,” she went on, getting very red and vehement, “I never will marry anybody, I have quite made up my mind; so, if you please, godmamma, whatever you choose to say about poor Mr. Luigi, *whom you don’t know anything about*, I hope you will be good enough not to draw me into any stupid story about marrying—I quite hate talk of that kind.”

I was so thunderstruck that I quite called out—“You impertinent little puss,” said I, “is that how you dare to talk to your godmother!” I declare I do not think I ever was put down so all my life before. I gave her a good sound lecture, as anybody will believe, about the proper respect she owed to her friends and seniors, telling her that I was very much afraid she was in a bad way; and that, however her father, who spoiled her, might let her talk, she ought to know better than to set up her little saucy face like that in our house. I said a great deal to the little provoking creature. I am sure she never saw me so angry before, though she has been a perfect plague and tease all her days. But do you think she would give in, and say she was sorry? Not if it had been to save her life! She sat looking down on her book, opening and shutting it upon her hand, her little delicate nostril swelling, her red upper lip moving, her foot going pat-pat on the carpet, but never owning to be in the wrong or making the least apology. After I had done and taken up my paper again, pretending to be very busy with it, she got up and rummaged out the other volume of the novel, and came to me to say good-night, holding out her hand and stooping down her cheek, meaning me to kiss her, the saucy little puss! As she was in my house, and a guest, and her first night, I did kiss her, without looking at her. It was a regular quarrel; and so she too went off to her own room. So here I was all alone, very angry, and much disposed to launch out upon the servants or somebody. Contrairy indeed! I should think so! I wonder how that poor old Bob Cresswell can put up with his life. If she were mine I would send her off to school, for all so accomplished as they say she is.

Chapter X

I HAD not a very good night after these troubles: somehow one's sleep goes from one more easily when one grows old; and I kept dreaming all the night through of my sister and little Sara, and something they were concealing from me, mixing them both up together in my mind. I rose very uneasy and excited, not a bit refreshed, as one should feel in the morning. One thing very strange I have noticed all my life in dreams. Though never a single *thing* that one dreams should ever come true, the feeling one has comes true somehow. I don't know whether anybody will understand me. I have had friends in my young days, whom I thought a great deal upon, that did not prove true to me. And I have remarked, often long before I found them out, however fond or trustful in them I was through the day, I was always uneasy in my dreams, always finding out something wrong or meeting some unkindness—which makes me have a great confidence, not in what you would call *dreams*, you know, but in the sentiment of dreams, if you can understand what I mean. I woke up very unrefreshed, as I say; and got dressed and came downstairs as soon as it was daylight, though I knew well enough I should find nobody there. My sister always breakfasted in her own room, and Sara was late of coming down at the best of times; however, I got some letters about business, which were perhaps the best things I could have had. They put me off minding my quarrel with little Sara, or trying to find out what had kept Sarah so late on her drive.

I had nearly finished breakfast when little Sara came downstairs. She came up to me just as she had done the night before, holding out her hand and stooping down her cheek to be kissed, but not looking at me. I kissed her, the provoking puss, and poured out her coffee. And after ten minutes or so we got on chatting just as usual, which was a relief to me, for I don't like apologies and explanations. I never could bear them. Little Sara, after she had got over feeling a little awkward and stiff, as people always do when they have been wrong, was just in her ordinary. She was used to affront people and to have them come to again, the little wicked creature—I am afraid she did not mind.

This little quarrel had put Sarah a good deal out of my mind, I must allow, but I got back to being anxious about her directly when I saw her come down-stairs. I can't tell what the change upon her was—she did not look older or paler, or anything that you could put plainly in words—she was just as particularly dressed, and had her silver-white curls as nice, and her cap as pretty as usual, but she was not the same as she had been yesterday; certainly there was some change. Not to speak of that little nervous motion of her head and hands, which was greater to-day than ever I had seen it, there was a strange vigilance and watchfulness in her look which I don't remember to have ever seen there before. She looked me very full in the face, I remember with a sort of daring defying openness, and the same to little Sara, though, of course what could the child know? All over, down to her very hands, as she went on with her knitting, there was a kind of self-consciousness that had a very odd effect upon me. I could not tell what in the world to think of it. And as for supposing that some mere common little accident, or a fright, or anything outside of herself, had woke her up to that look, you need not tell me. I have not lived fifty years in this world for nothing. I knew better. Whatever it was that changed Sarah's look, the causes of it were deep down and secret in herself.

It was this of course that made me anxious and almost alarmed, for I could not but think she must have something on her mind to make her look so. And when she beckoned to me that afternoon after dinner, as she did when she had anything particular to say, I confess my heart went thump against my breast, and I trembled all over. However, I went close up as usual, and drew my chair towards her that I might hear. Little Sara was close by. She could hear too if she pleased, but Sarah took no notice of the child.

“Have you heard anything from Cresswell about Richard Mortimer?” Sarah asked me quite sharply all at once.

“Why, no: he did not say anything yesterday when he was here. Did *you* have any conversation with him?”

“*I!* Do I have any conversation with any one?” said Sarah, in her bitter way. “I want you to bestir yourself about this business, however. We must have an heir.”

“It is odd how little I have thought about it since that day—very odd,” said I; “and I was quite in earnest before. I wondered if Providence might, maybe, have taken it up now? I have seen such a thing: one falls off one’s anxiety somehow, one can’t tell how; and lo! the reason is, that the thing’s coming about all naturally without any help from you. We’ll be having the heir dropped down at the park gates some of these days, all as right and natural as ever was.”

I said this without thinking much about it; just because it was an idea of mine, that most times, when God lays a kind of lull upon our anxieties and struggles, it really turns out to be because He himself is taking them in hand; but having said this easy and calm, without anything particular in my mind, you may judge how I was startled half out of my wits by Sarah dashing down her knitting-pin out of her hand, stamping her foot on the footstool, and half screaming out in her sharp, strangled whisper, that sounded like the very voice of rage itself— “The fool! the fool! oh, the fool! Shall I be obliged to leave my home and my seclusion and do it myself? I that might have been so different! Good God! shall *I* be obliged to do it—*me!* When I was a young girl I might have hoped to die a duchess,—everybody said so,—and now, instead of being cared for and shielded from the envious world,—people were always envious of me since ever I remember,—must I go trudging out to find this wretched cousin? Is this all the gratitude and natural feeling you have? Good heaven! to put such a thing upon me!”

She stopped, all panting and breathless, like a wild creature that had relieved itself somehow with a yell or a cry; but, strange, strange, at that moment Ellis opened the door. I will never think again she does not hear. The sound caught her in a moment. Her passion changed into that new watching look quicker than I can tell; and she sat with her eyes fixed upon me,—for, poor soul, to be sure she could not see through the screen behind her to find out what Ellis came for,—as if she could have killed me for the least motion. I got so excited myself that I could hardly see the name on the card Ellis brought in. Sarah’s looks, not to say her words, had put it so clearly in my mind that something was going to happen, that my self-possession almost forsook me. I let the card flutter down out of my hand when I lifted it off the tray, and did not hear a single syllable of what the man was saying till he had repeated it all twice over. It was only a neighbour who had sent over to ask for Miss Mortimer, having heard somehow that Sarah was poorly. She heard him herself, however, and gave an answer—her compliments, and she was quite well—before I knew what it was all about. If she had boxed me well she could not have muddled my head half so much as she had done now. When Ellis went away again, and left me alone close by her, I quite shook in my chair.

But she had got over her rage as it seemed. She stooped down to pick up her knitting-pin—with a little pettish exclamation that nobody helped her now-a-days—just in her usual way, and took up the dropt stitches in her knitting. But I could very well see that her hand trembled. As she did not say any more, I thought I might venture to draw back my chair. But when she saw the motion she started, looked up at me, and held up her hand. I was not to get so easily away.

“I had no idea you minded it so much. Well, well, Sarah,” cried I, in desperation, “I will write this moment to urge Mr. Cresswell on.”

“And shout it all out, please, that the child may hear!” said Sarah, with a spiteful look as if she could bite me. I was actually afraid of her. I got up as fast as I could, and went off to the writing-table at the other end of the room. There was nothing I would not do to please her in a rational way; but, of all the vagaries she ever took up before, what did this dreadful passion mean?

Chapter XI

THE next day I had something to do in the village, which was only about half a mile from the Park gates; but little Sara, when I asked her to go with me, had got some piece of business to her fancy in the greenhouse, and was not disposed to leave it, so I went off by myself. I went in, as I passed the lodge, to ask for little Mary Williams, who had a cough which I quite expected would turn to hooping-cough, though her mother would not believe it (I turned out to be right, of course). Mrs. Williams was rather in a way, poor body, that morning. Mary was worse and worse, with a flushed face and shocking cough, and nothing would please her mother but that it was inflammation, and the child would die. It is quite the strangest thing in the world, among those sort of people, how soon they make up their minds that their children are to die. I scolded her well, which did her good, and promised her the liniment we always have for hooping-cough, and said I should bring up a picture-book for the child (it's a good little thing when it is well) from the new little shop in the village. This opened up, as I found out, quite a new phase of poor Williams' trouble.

"I wouldn't encourage it ma'am, no sure, I wouldn't, not for a hundred picture-books. I wouldn't go for to set up them as 'tices men out of their houses and lads fro' home. No! I seen enough of that when poor old Williams was alive, and we was all in Liverpool. It's all as one as the public-houses, ma'am. I can't see no difference. Williams, it was his chapell; and the boy, it's his night-school and his reading. I don't see no good of it. In the old man's time, many's the weary night I've sat by myself mending their bits o' things, and never a soul to cheer me up; and now, look'ee here, the boy's taken to it; and if I'm to lose Mary—"

"You ridiculous woman," cried I, while the poor creature fell sobbing and took to her apron, "what's to make you lose Mary? The child's going in for hooping-cough, as sure ever child was, and I see no reason in the world why she shouldn't get over it nicely, with the spring coming on as well. Don't fret; trouble comes soon enough without going out of the way to meet it. What's all this story you've been telling me about poor Willie, and the shop in the village, and the night-school? Don't you know, you foolish woman, the night-school may be the making of the boy?"

"I don't know nothink about it, ma'am, nor I don't want to know," said our liberal-minded retainer. "I know it takes the boy out o' the house most nights in the week; and I sits a-thinking upon my troubles, and listening to all the sounds in the trees, sometimes moidered and sometimes scared. I'd clear away thankful any night, even washing night, when I'm folding for the mangle, to have him write his copy at home; and have a hearth-stone for him, though I say it as shouldn't, as bright as a king's. But he's a deal grander nor the like o' that, he is—he'll stay and read the papers and talk. Bother their talk and their papers! I ask you, ma'am, wouldn't Willie be a deal better at home?"

"I shouldn't say but what I might perhaps think so too," said I; "but then the gentlemen say not, and they should know best."

"The gentlemen! and there's another worry, sure," said Mrs. Williams; "who would you think, ma'am, has been in the village, but a Frenchman, a-spying all about, and asking questions; and had the impudence to come to my very door, to the very park gates, to ask if I knowed a lady with a French name that was here or hereabout. I answered him short, and said I knew nothink about the French, and shut the door in his face, begging your pardon, ma'am; for, to be sure, he was after no good, coming asking for outlandish ladies here."

"Very odd," said I, "I hope it's no robber, Williams. You were quite right to shut the door in his face."

"And if I might make so bold," said Williams, coming closer and speaking low, "Jacob, he maintains it was a French fellow with a mustache that scared Miss Sarah the day afore yesterday. Jacob seen him, but took no notice; and directly after Miss Sarah up and pulled the string, and told

him to drive round by Eden Castle, a good five-mile round, and to go quick. You may depend Miss Sarah took him for a robber, or somethink; and I'm dead sure it was the same man."

I was very much startled by this, though I could scarcely tell why; but, of course, I would not let Williams suppose there was any mystery in it. "Very likely," said I; "my sister goes out so little, she's timid—but I am losing my time. Good-bye, little Mary, I'll fetch you your picture-book; and be sure you rub her chest well with the liniment. I have always found it successful, and I've tried it for ten years."

When I had fairly got out of the lodge, I went along without losing any more time, wonderfully puzzled in my own mind. Here was a riddle I could neither understand nor find any key to. After hearing little Sara's tale, and all she had to say about the Italian, there was nothing so surprising in finding him out here, if it should happen to be him, seeing the park was only a few miles from Chester; only that Sara showed more interest in him than she had any call to do, and if he should happen to be coming after *her*, it was a thing that should be looked to. But why, in all the world, should *Sarah* be agitated by the sight of him? *That* was the extraordinary circumstance. As for supposing her to be alarmed at the idea of a robber, that, of course, was the merest folly, and I never entertained the idea for a moment. But if this were not the reason, what could the reason be? I was entirely lost in bewilderment and consternation. Could it be the mere passing face of a stranger which made her so deeply anxious as to the name of the visitor who called next day, and the entrance of Ellis with the card? How, in all the world, could a wandering Italian, seeking or pretending to seek for somebody no one had ever heard of, make any difference to Sarah? The more I turned it over the more I was mystified. I could not even guess at any meaning in it; but to drive five miles round out of her way, to be so excited all at once about the heir of the Mortimers, and to have got such a strange, watchful, vigilant look on her face, these changes could not come from nothing: but I had not the merest shadow of a clue to guide me in connecting little Sara's Italian, if it was he, with my sister Sarah's agitation and excitement. I stopped short at this, and could not go a step further; if there was any connection between the two—if there was nothing else to account for Sarah's trouble which I did not know of—then the whole affair was the most extraordinary mystery I ever came across.

I walked pretty smartly down to the village while I was occupied with these thoughts. A nice little village ours was, though I can't really say whether you would have called it picturesque. A little bit of a thread of a stream ran along the lower edge of the common, and found its way somehow, all by itself, little thing as it was, down to the Dee. At that time of year the common was rather chilly to look at, the grass and the gorse bushes being a good bit blackened by frost, which had set in pretty sharply. I remember noticing, as I passed, that Dame Marsden, whose cottage is the first you come to on the left-hand side, just on the edge of the common, had her washing out, some of the things, after the line was full, being spread on the gorse, and that the shirts were lying there with their stiff white arms stuck out like pokers, as hard with the frost as if they had been made of wood. But after you pass the first few cottages, which just lie here and there, you come to a snug bit of street, with the Rectory garden and a peep of the house on one side, and the doctor's house staring straight at it across the road; and the other better houses of the village thrusting forward on both sides, as if to take care of the aristocracy, and keep them cosy. Just before you come to the doctor's was the new shop I had spoken of at the lodge. It was got up by the doctor, and was going to be a failure. It had all kinds of cheap books and papers, and of all things in the world, a reading room! And the shopkeeper, who was rather a smart young fellow, taught a night school after the shop was over. I dare to say it wasn't a bad place; but, of course, in a bit of a rural village like ours, it was easy to see it would never succeed.

Into this shop, however, I went to get little Mary Williams her picture-book; and I can't but say I was very much struck and surprised to see a stranger standing there whom I had never seen before, and to hear roars of laughter coming out of the shop and drawing the children about the door. The stranger was one of the fattest men I ever saw: not that he was dreadfully big or unwieldy, —on the contrary, he was spinning about on his toes in a way that would have been a trial to the

lightest Englishman. His fatness was so beautifully distributed that it was amazing to see. His arms in the coat-sleeves which fitted them like the covers of a cushion, his short plump fingers, all were in perfect keeping. As for his face, that was nearly lost in beard. When I entered the shop he had seized his beard with one of his fat hands, in the warmth of his monologue; for he was talking, I have no doubt, in a very animated and lively manner, if any one could have understood a word of what he said. Now, I confess I felt a good deal of sympathy with the poor fellow; for I remember quite well the only time I ever was abroad feeling an odd sort of conviction that if I only spoke very clear, plain, distinct English, and spoke loud enough, people, after a while, must come to understand me. When he saw me he made a spin clean out of my way, took off the queer hat he had on, made me a bow, and stopped talking till I had done my business; which was the most civil thing I had seen in a stranger for many a day. And the face was such a jolly, honest sort of face that, in spite of my prejudice against foreigners, I felt quite disarmed all at once.

“Who is he? What is he saying?” said I to the shop-people.

“Goodness knows!” cried old Mrs. Taylor, the shopkeeper’s mother. “I know no more on’t nor if it was a dog. Lord, Miss Milly! to think of poor creatures brought up from their cradles to talk sich stuff as that!”

“I was brought up at a grammar-school, ma’am,” said young Taylor himself, with a blush; “where it isn’t modern languages, you know, ma’am, that’s the great thing; and, though I know the grammar, I’m not very well up in my French.”

Here his little sister, who had kept nudging him all this time, suddenly whispered, with her face growing crimson, “Oh, Alfred! ask Miss Milly!—to be sure she knows.”

And, to tell the truth, though I knew I could never keep up a conversation, I had been privately conning over in my own mind a little scrap of French, though whether he was French or not I knew no more than Jenny Taylor. So I faced round boldly enough, not being afraid of any criticism, and fired off my interrogation at the good-humoured fat fellow. He looked so blank after I had spoken that it was quite apparent he did not understand a word of it. He made a profusion of bows. He entered into a long and animated explanation, which sent Jenny Taylor into fits of laughter, and filled her mother with commiseration. But I caught two words, and these confounded me. The first was “Italiano,” over and over repeated; the second which he pronounced, pointing out to the street with many lively gestures, was “padrone.” I comprehended the matter all at once, and it made my heart beat. This was the servant whom little Sara had described, and the master, the “padrone,” was in the village pursuing his extraordinary inquiries, whatever they were, here. For the moment I could not help being agitated; I felt, I cannot explain why, as if I were on the eve of finding out something. I asked him eagerly, in English, where his master was; and again received a voluble and smiling answer, I have no doubt in very good Italian. Then we shook our heads mutually and laughed, neither quite convinced that the other could not understand if he or she would. But the end was that I got my picture-book and left the shop without ascertaining anything about the padrone. Perhaps it was just as well. Why should I go and thrust myself into mysteries and troubles which did not make any call upon me?

Chapter XII

I HAD a good many little errands in the village, and stayed there for some time. It was dusk when I turned to go home. Very nice the village looks at dusk, I assure you—the rectory windows beginning to shine through the trees, and the doctor's dining-room answering opposite as if by a kind of reflection; but no lamps or candles lighted yet in the other village houses, only the warm glow of the fire shining through the little muslin blind on the geraniums in the window; and, perhaps, the mother standing at the door to look out for the boys at play, or to see if it is time for father's coming home. Dame Marsden's shirts were still lying stiff and stark like ghosts upon the gorse bushes; and some of the early labourers began to come tramping heavily down the road with their long, slow, heavy steps. I had just stopped to ask James Hobson for his old father, when my share of the adventure came. I call it the adventure, because I suppose, somehow, we were all in it—Sarah, little Sara Cresswell, and me.

Just when that good Jem had gone on—such a fellow he is, too! keeps his old father like a prince!—another sort of a figure appeared before the light; and, bless me, to think I should have forgotten that circumstance!—of course it was the same figure that started so suddenly past me that evening when I stood looking for Sarah at the gate. He took off his hat to me, in the half light, and stopped. I stopped also, I cannot tell why. So far as I could see, a handsome young man, not so dark as one expects to see an Italian, and none of that sort of French showman look—you know what I mean—that these sort of people generally have: on the contrary, a look very much as if he were a gentleman; only, if I may say it, more innocent, more like a child in his ways than the young men are now-a-days. I did not see all this just in a moment, you may be sure. Indeed, I rather felt annoyed and displeased when the stranger stopped me on the road—my own road, that seemed to belong to me as much as the staircase or corridor at home. If he had not been possessed of a kind of ingratiating, conciliatory sort of manner, as these foreigners mostly have, I should scarcely have given him a civil answer, I do believe.

“Pardon, Madame”—not *Madam*, you perceive, which is the stiffest, ugliest word that can be used in English—and I can't make out how, by putting an e to the end of it, and laying the emphasis on the last syllable, it can be made so deferential and full of respect as the French word sounds to English ears—“pardon, Madame; I was taking the liberty to make inquiries in your village, and when I am so fortunate as to make an encounter with yourself, I think it a very happy accident. Will Madame permit me to ask her a question; only one,—it is very important to me?”

“Sir,” said I, being a little struck with his language, and still more with his voice, which seemed to recall to me some other voice I had once known, “you speak very good English.”

His hat was off again, of course, in a moment to acknowledge the compliment; but dark as it was, I could neither overlook nor could I in the least understand, the singular, half pathetic, melancholy look he gave me as he answered. “I had an English mother,” said the young foreigner; and he looked at me in the darkness, and in my complete ignorance of him, as if somehow I, plain Millicent Mortimer, a single woman over fifty, and living among my own people, either knew something about his mother, or had done her an injury, or was hiding her up somewhere, or I don't know what. I could not tell anybody how utterly confounded and thunderstruck I was. I had nearly screamed out: “I? What do I know about your mother?” so much impression did it have on me. After all it is wonderful how these foreigners do talk in this underhand sort of way with their eyes. I declare I do not so much wonder at the influence they often get over young creatures. That sort of thing is wonderfully impressive to the imagination.

He paused quite in a natural, artful sort of way, to let the look have its full effect; and he must have seen I was startled too; for though I was old enough to have been his mother, I was, of course, but a plain Englishwoman, and had no power over my face.

“Madame,” said the stranger with a little more vehemence, and a motion of his arm which looked as if he might fall into regular gesticulating, just what disgusts one most, “to find the Countess Sermoneta is the object of my life!”

“I am very sorry I can’t help you,” said I, quite restored to myself by this, which I was, so to speak, prepared for; “I never heard of such a person; there’s no one of that name in this quarter, nor hasn’t been, I am sure, these thirty years.”

Seeing I was disposed to push past, my new acquaintance stood aside, and took off again that everlasting hat.

“I will not detain Madame,” he said in a voice that, I confess, rather went to my heart a little, as if I had been cruel to him; “but Madame will not judge hardly of my case. I came to find one whom I thought I had but to name; and I find her not, nor her name, nor any sign that she was ever here. Yet I must find her, living or dead; I made it a promise to my father on his death-bed. Madame will not wonder if I search, ask, look everywhere; I cannot do otherwise. Pardon that I say so much; I will detain Madame no more.”

And so he stood aside with another salute. Still he took off his hat like a gentleman—no sort of flourish—a little more distinctly raised from his head, perhaps, than people do now-a-days; but nothing in bad taste; and just in proportion to his declaration that he would not detain me, I grew, if I must confess it, more and more willing to be detained. I did not go on when he stood out of my way, but rather fell a little back, and turned more towards him than I had yet done. Dame Marsden had just lighted her lamp, and it cast a sort of glimmery, uncertain light upon the face of my new acquaintance; undeniably a handsome young man. I like good-looking people wherever I find them; and that was not all. Somehow, through his beard—which I daresay people who like such appendages would have thought quite handsome—there seemed to me to look, by glimpses, some face I had known long ago; and his voice, foreign as it was, had a tone, just an occasional indescribable note, which reminded me of some other voice, I could not tell whom belonging to. It was very strange; and one forgets stories that one has no personal interest in. Did I ever hear of any country person that had married an Italian? for somehow I had jumped to the conclusion that it was his mother he sought.

“It is very odd,” said I, “I can fancy I have heard a voice like yours somewhere long ago. I seem to feel as if I knew you. I don’t remember ever hearing the name you want; but I’ll consult my sister and an old servant we have, and try to find out,—Sermoneta! I certainly do not recollect ever hearing the name. But it is very sad you should be so disappointed. If you will come to the Park some day next week and ask for Miss Millicent, I will do my best to find out for you if anybody knows the name.”

He made a great many exclamations of thanks, which, to be sure, I could have dispensed with, and paused a little again in a hesitating way when I wanted to go on. At last he began quite in a new tone; and this was the oddest part of all.

“If Madame should find, on inquiring, that the bearer of this name did not *will* to bear it; if there might be reasons to conceal that name;—if the lady, who is the Contessa, would but see me, would but let me know—”

“Sir,” said I, interrupting the young fellow all at once, “is it an *English* lady you are speaking of? English ladies do not conceal their names. Reason or not, we own to the name that belongs to us in *this* country. No, no, I know nothing about such a possibility. I don’t believe in it either. If I can hear of a Countess Sermoneta, I’ll let you know; but as for anybody denying their own name, you must not think such things happen here. Good night. You’re not accustomed to England, I can see. You must not think me impatient; but that’s not how we do things in our country. Come to the Park, all the same; and I shall do what I can to find out whether anybody remembers what you want to know.”

This time he did not make any answer, only drew back a step, and so got quite out of the light of Dame Marsden’s window. He seemed to be silenced by what I had said, and I went on quite briskly, a little stimulated, I confess, by that little encounter, and the exertion of breaking my spear for English honour. Denying one’s name, indeed! Of course we have our faults like other people; but who ever

heard of an English person (not speaking of thieves, or such creatures, of course), denying his name! The thing was quite preposterous. It quite warmed me up as I hastened back to the Park, though I was rather later than usual, and the night had fallen dark all at once; and, to be sure, this kept me from all those uncomfortable ideas—that perhaps, it might be a deception after all; and what if it were a contrivance to be admitted to the Park? and it might, even, for anything I know, be all a fortune-hunter's device to get introduced to Sara Cresswell—which disturbed my mind sadly, though I felt much ashamed of them after I had time for reflection at home.

PART II. THE LIEUTENANT'S WIFE

Chapter I

I WILL tell you exactly how it all happened.

I have been an orphan all my life; at least, if that is a little Irish, I mean that I never knew, or saw, that I know of, either my father or my mother. Sad enough in the best of cases, and mine was not the best case you could think of. I don't know who paid for me when I was a child. Some of mamma's relations, I suppose, among them; and of all people in the world to trust a poor little orphan child to, think of fixing upon a soldier's wife, following the regiment! That is how I have always been half a soldier myself; and one reason, perhaps, if any reason was necessary but his dear, good, tender-hearted self, why I was so ready, when Harry asked me, to do the most foolish thing in the world.

Though I say they made a strange choice in leaving me with dear Nurse Richards, I don't mean that it was not, so far as the woman was concerned, the very best choice that possibly could have been made. Richards himself was a sergeant, and she was quite a superior woman; but much more to the purpose than that, she had been my very own nurse, having taken me when poor mamma died. She had lost her baby, and I had lost my mother; and it was for real love, and not for hire, that Nurse Richards took the charge of me. She used to work hard, and deny herself many things, I know, to keep the little house, or the snug lodgings we always had, as far off from the barracks as Richards would allow them to be. I know she could not possibly have had enough money for me to make up for what she spent on my account; but I don't think it was hard to her, working and sparing for the poor orphan little girl. I know such things by my own experience now. It was sweet to her to labour, and contrive, and do a hundred things I knew nothing about, for "the child's" sake. I would do it all over again, and thankful, for her sake. Ah, that I would! Pain and trouble are sweet for those one loves.

She did her duty by me too, if ever woman did. She never would let me forget that I was a lady, as she said. She used to lecture me by the hour about many a thing being fit enough for the other children which was not becoming for me, till I came to believe her as children do, and gave myself little airs as was natural. I got no education, to be sure, but reading and writing, and needlework, and how to do most things about a house. So far as I have gone into life yet it has been a very good education to me. I don't doubt much more serviceable than if I had been at boarding-school, as poor Aunt Connor used to lament, and wish I had; but it was a sad wandering life for all that. We were in Edinburgh the first that I can recollect. I remember as clear as possible, as if it were in a dream, the great Castle Rock standing high up out of the town, and whatever was ado in the skies, sunshine, or moonlight, or clouds, or a thunder-storm, or whatever was going on, always taking that for its centre, as I imagined. I could fancy still, if I shut my eyes, that I saw the grey building up high in the blue air, with the lights twinkling in the windows half way up to the stars; and heard the trumpet pealing out with a kind of wistful sound, bringing images to me, a soldier's child, of men straying about, lost among the darkling fields, or bewildered in the streets, when the recall sounded far up over their heads in that calm inaccessible height. I see that very Castle Rock now again, not in imagination, but with my real eyes. It is just the same as ever, though I am so very different. It is my first love, and I am loyal to it. Not being of any country, for I am *some* Irish, and some Welsh, and some Scotch, and Harry is a pure thorough-bred Englishman, I can quite afford to be in love with Edinburgh Castle. The regiment went to Swansea after it left Edinburgh, and then to Belfast, and we were in dreadful terror of being sent to Canada, where Nurse Richards declared she never would take "the child." However, it never came to trying. At Belfast, dear tender soul, she died. Ah me! ah me! I could not

think how the kind Lord could leave me behind, so wretched as I was; but He knew better than I did. I was only fifteen; I humbly hope, now I'm twenty, I have a great deal more yet to do in the world. But I thought of nothing then except only what a comfort it would be to slip into the coffin beside her and be laid down quietly in her grave.

I did not know a single relation I had, if, indeed, I had any; Aunt Connor, I know, used to send the money for me; but Nurse Richards had often told me she was not my real aunt; only my uncle's wife, and he was dead. So, though she supported me, she had no right to love me; and she couldn't love me, and did not, that is certain; for I was fifteen, and had never seen her, nor a single relation in the world. However, when she heard of Nurse Richards' death, Aunt Connor sent her maid for me. It is very fortunate, Bridget said, we were in Belfast, and no great distance off, for if it had been in England, over the seas, there was no telling what might have happened. I was very unwilling to go with Bridget. I struggled very much, and spoke to Richards about it. I said I would much rather go into service, where at least I could be near *her* grave; but it was of no use speaking. I was obliged to obey.

Aunt Connor lived in Dublin; and when I got to her house and saw the footman, and the page in his livery, and all the grandeur about the house, I thought really that Aunt Connor must be a very great lady. Harry says the house was shabby-fine, and everything vulgar about it; but I cannot say I saw that. Perhaps I am not so good a judge as Harry, never having seen anything of the kind before. I do believe that she really was very kind to me in her way; I must say so, whatever Harry thinks. Harry says she behaved atrociously, and was jealous of me because I was prettier than her own girls (which is all Harry's nonsense), and a great deal more like that—all in the Cinderella style, you know, where the two young ladies are spiteful and ugly, and the little girl in the kitchen is quite an angel. I love Cinderella; but all the same, Harry's story *is not true*. I underscore the words to convince him if he should ever see this. Alicia and Patricia were very handsome girls,—as different from me as possible—and good girls too, and always had a kind word for their poor little cousin. They did not take me to all their gaieties, to be sure. I am sure I did not wish it. I was much happier in the nursery. After I had seen Harry a few times, perhaps I did grudge going down so seldom to the drawing-room; and used to keep wondering in my heart which of them he was fond of, and had many a cry over it. But now that it is all past, and I see more clearly, I know they were very kind indeed, considering. They were never, all the time I was there, unfeeling to me; they liked me, and I liked them: nothing in the world of your Cinderella story. If I had a nice house, and was rich enough to have a visitor, there is nothing I should like better than to have Patricia (her sister is married) come to see me. It would be pleasant to see her bright Irish face. No, honestly, I cannot complain of Aunt Connor. I am very sorry I deceived her for an hour—she was never unkind to me.

Chapter II

I DID not think I could have said half a dozen words about myself without telling all the story of my marriage. But what I have said was necessary to keep you from blaming me so much. For, after all, I was a young, friendless, desolate creature, longing very much to have somebody belonging to me, somebody of my very own, and with no very clear natural duty to Aunt Connor, though she had paid for bringing me up. I say again she was kind to me, and so were the girls; but principally because it was not in their nature to be unkind to anybody, and not because they had a particular affection for me. And that is what one wants, whatever people may choose to say. One might die of longing for love though one was surrounded with kindness. Ah, yes, I am sure of it: even a little unkindness from people we belong to, and who belong to us, one can bear it. To have nobody belonging to you is the saddest thing in the world.

I never was melancholy or pensive, or anything like that. After a while, when I could think of Nurse Richards without breaking my heart, I got just as cheerful as other girls of my age, and enjoyed whatever little bit of pleasure came to me. But after I began to know Harry—after it began to dawn upon my mind that there might be somebody in the world who would take an interest in all my little concerns, for no better reason than that they belonged to me, not for kindness or compassion, I felt as if I were coming to life all at once. I have had some doubts since whether it was what people call love; perhaps I would have been shy had it been so, and I don't think I ever was shy to speak of. I was so glad, so thankful, to the bottom of my heart, to think of having somebody belonging to me. If we could have done something to make ourselves *real* brother and sister, I believe I should have been just as glad. However, of course that was impossible. All the officers used to come to Aunt Connor's; she was always good-tempered and pleasant, and glad to see them, though I am sure she would not have allowed her girls to marry any of those poor lieutenants. However, I happened to be in the drawing-room a good many times when Harry came first. Nobody noticed that we two were always getting together for a time; but when my aunt did observe it, she was angry, and said I was flirting, and I was not to come downstairs any more in the evening. I thought I didn't mind; I never had minded before. But I did feel this. I made quite sure Harry was falling in love with one of my cousins, and used to wonder which it would be, and cry. Crying by one's self does not improve one's looks; and when I met Harry the first day, by real accident, he looked so anxious and concerned about me, that it quite went to my heart. My aunt used to send me on her particular errands at that time,—to order things for the dinner-parties, and to match ribbons, and to take gloves to be cleaned; things the servants could not do properly. She used to say if I kept my veil down, and walked very steadily, nobody would ever molest me; and nobody ever did. Only Harry got to know the times I generally went out, and always happened to meet me somewhere. Oh yes, it was very wrong; very, *very* wrong; if I had ever had a mother I could not have forgiven myself. But it was such a comfort to see his face brighten up as he caught sight of me. No one could tell how cheering it was except one as friendless as me. So, as you may suppose, it went on from less to more, and at last (after we had been asked in church, and I don't know all what) Harry and I called in at a far-off little church one morning, and were married. I had not thought very much about it till it was over; but the moment it was fairly over I fell into the greatest panic I ever was in, in all my life. What if Aunt Connor should find us out? If she did find us out, what would be done to us? what would happen to Harry? I almost think he must have carried me out of church, my head quite spun round upon my shoulders. I fell into such a tremble that my limbs would not support me. When we were out of the church,—it was a summer morning, beautiful and sweet, and the air so pleasant that it made one happy to breathe it,—we two foolish young creatures looked with a kind of awe into each other's faces. Harry was pale as well as me. I do believe he was in a panic too. "Oh, Harry, what have we done?" cried I with a little gasp. He burst out into a great trembling laugh. "What we can never undo, Milly darling; nor anybody else

for us,” said he; “and God be praised!” I could not say another word. We neither of us could speak any more; we went silently along through the air, so sweet and sunny, trembling and holding each other close, to my aunt’s door, where we were to part. I think we must have gone gliding along like fairies, on the wings that grow to people’s shoulders at those wonderful moments; surely we did not walk over the common pavement like ordinary people. But the common door, the white steps, the blank front of Aunt Connor’s house, disenchanted us. I could not stop to say good-bye, but only gave him a frightened look, and ran in, for the door was fortunately open. Oh, how cold and trembling I felt when I shut my room door, and was safe in, and knew it was all over! I took off my white frock, all in awe and terror of myself. But when I had put on my morning dress, and looked at myself in the glass, it was not Milly Mortimer! *I* knew it was not Milly Mortimer. I fastened my ring so that I could wear it round my neck under my high dress, without anybody knowing; but already it had made a mark round my finger. I was married! Oh dear, dear, and to think I could not tell anybody! I never had a secret all my life before. I went down on my knees in the corner, and asked God to forgive me, and to take care of us two poor children that did not know what we were doing. Then I had to get up and open my door, and go out in the every-day house. I can’t tell how I did it. Of all the wonders in my life, there is none like that. I can fancy how I was led on to consent to be married; but how did I ever go downstairs and do my sewing, and eat my dinner, and look Aunt Connor in the face? I suppose I must have done it somehow without making them suspect anything; and I don’t wonder my aunt called me a little hypocrite. What a hypocrite I must have been!

I did not see Harry next day, and felt very miserable; cold, as if a sudden frost had come on in the middle of summer. But the next morning after, looking out of my window very early, who should I see looking up at the house but himself! That moment I got back into the sun. We belonged to each other; everything, even to the dress I had on, Harry was pleased to know about. Ah, what a difference! I cannot say anything else, though it may be very improper. After that moment I never was ashamed again of what I had done, nor frightened, nor sorry. If it was wrong, it’s a pity, and I don’t defend myself; but from that time I thought only that I had somebody belonging to me; that I dared not get ill, or mope, or die, or do any foolish thing; that I had Harry to think of, and do for, and take care of. Ah, that was different from doing Aunt Connor’s messages. It was not being married, it was being born—it was coming to life.

Chapter III

YOU are not to suppose, however, that we did not pay for our foolishness. If I had been a well-brought up girl living at home, I should have been perfectly wretched in that strange, feverish, secret life in which everything felt like guilt; and, as it was, the excitement and feeling of secrecy wore me out day by day. Poor Harry, too, got quite harassed and wretched looking. This that we had done certainly did not make us happy. Harry still came to the house for the chance of seeing me; and imagine what I felt to know that he was in the drawing-room, and *I, his wife*, sitting upstairs, after the little children had gone to bed, sewing in the quiet nursery! I don't know how I ever endured it; and to hear Alicia and Patricia next morning saying to each other what a bear that young Langham had grown! Once or twice, when I was allowed to be downstairs, it was worse and worse. If one of the other gentlemen so much as looked at me, Harry flushed up and looked furious. Twenty times in a night I thought he would have interfered and made a scene; but all the time we dared scarcely speak to each other; and I am sure Aunt Connor never thought we were flirting then. When I went out, as before, on my aunt's errands, with my veil down, Harry, instead of being pleased to meet me, as he used to be, was so cross and unhappy that it was quite dreadful to be with him. And he would come about the house looking up at the windows at all kinds of improper times, quite in an open way, as if he were defying Aunt Connor. I was quite in a fever night and day; I never knew what might happen any minute. He could not bear so much as to think of other people ordering me about, and making me do things I did not want to do. I am sure it is very good of Harry to be so kind and fond of me as he is; for I feel certain that, for the first three months, our marriage made him miserable, injured his health, and his temper, and his appetite, and everything. You may say, why did we keep it secret? The reason was this, that he was to come in to a little money, which his uncle, who was his only relation, had promised him on his birthday, and which he ought to have got before now; and poor Harry thought every day it might come, and was always waiting. But unless it was that promised present, he had nothing in the world but his lieutenant's pay.

However, of course, this state of things could not go on. One day I had gone out to take some gloves to be cleaned, and Harry, of course, had met me. We were going along very quiet, not saying much to each other, for he had been in one of his troublesome humours, having got a letter from his uncle without a word in it about the money, and I had been begging him to have patience a little, when all at once my heart gave a jump, and I knew the crisis had come. There, straight before us, crossing the road, was Aunt Connor, with her great eyes fixed upon Harry and me!

I gave a little cry and looked round. If there had been any cross street or opening near I should have run away, and never looked either of them in the face again; but there was not a single opening in all the houses. I clasped my hands together tight, and stood still, with something throbbing so in my head that I thought it would burst. I did not see Harry nor anything, only Aunt Connor coming up to me whom I had deceived.

She grasped hold of me by the arm as soon as ever she came up. "Oh, you shameless, ungrateful creature! Is this what you have come to after all my care of you? This is how you take your walks, is it, Miss Mortimer? Oh, good heavens! was ever simple woman so taken in and imposed upon? Oh, you wicked, foolish, thoughtless thing! do you know you're going to ruin? do you know you're seeking your own destruction? do you know?—Lord save us, I don't know what words to say to you! Haven't you heard what comes to young girls that behave so? Oh, you young scapegrace! how dare you bring such a disgrace on my house!"

"Hold your tongue, you old witch," said Harry, who was perfectly wild with rage, as I could hear by the sound of his voice, for I dared not turn my head to look at him. But there he was, grasping hold of my hand and holding me up. "Take your hand off my wife's arm, Mrs. Connor. What! you dare venture to speak about disgrace and destruction after sending her out defenceless day after day.

She has had somebody to defend her, though you took no trouble about it. Yes, Milly darling, I am thankful it has come at last. Madam, take away your hand; she is my wife.”

Aunt Connor fell back from me perfectly speechless, holding up her two hands. We two stood opposite, Harry holding my hand drawn through his arm. I thought I should have sunk into the ground; and yet I felt so happy and proud I could have cried with joy. Yes, it was quite true; I was not all by myself to fight my own battles. We two belonged to each other, and all the world could not make it otherwise. I could not say a word, and I did not mind. I could leave it all to Harry. Henceforward he would stand up for me before all the world.

I really cannot tell, after that, what Aunt Connor said. I remember that Harry wanted to take me away at once to his lodgings, and said he would not allow me to go home with her; and she took hold of my arm again, and declared she would not let me go till she had proof he was telling the truth about our marriage. The end of it all was that we both went home with her. She was dreadfully angry,—speechless with rage and dismay; but after just the first she managed to keep proper and decorous in what she said, being in the street, and not wishing to make a scene or gather a crowd. She took us into the library and had it out there. Oh, what names she called me!—not only deceitful and ungrateful, but, what was far worse, light and easily won; and warned Harry against me, that I’d deceive him as well. When she said *that* it roused me; and I don’t know what I should have said if Harry had not drawn me aside quite quietly and whispered, “Leave it all to me.” I did; I never said a word for myself. I put my cause into his hands. To be answered for, and have my defence undertaken so, did a great deal more than make up to me for anything that could be said. It was all very agitating and dreadful, however; and I could not help thinking that most likely Harry’s uncle, when he heard what a foolish marriage his nephew had made, would not send that money, and Harry would have me to provide for, and so little, so very little to do it with; and most likely all his brother officers making fun of him to each other for being so foolish. Ah! now I felt how foolish we had been.

“Milly must come home with me,” said Harry. “If I could scarcely endure her remaining here while it was all a secret, you may suppose how impossible it is that I can endure it now. I thank you very much, Mrs. Connor, for finding us out; and don’t think,” he said, changing his look in a moment, “that I forget or will forget what actual kindness you may have shown to my wife. But she is my wife: she must not do other people’s business, or live in any house but her own. Mrs. Connor will let you put your things together, Milly darling, for I cannot leave you behind again.”

“Well, young people,” said Aunt Connor, “I have seen a great deal, and come through a great deal in my life, but such boldness and unconcern I never did see before. Why, you don’t even look ashamed of yourselves!—not Miss here, that is going to be at the head of her own establishment, in the parlour over Mrs. Grogan’s shop, with boots lying about in all the corners, and a cigar-box on the mantelshelf. However, Mr. Langham, I am not such an old witch as you think for. I won’t let my poor Connor’s niece go off like this, all of a sudden, with a young man that has never made the least preparation for her. I am not throwing any doubt upon your marriage, nor meaning any scandal upon the lieutenant, Miss Milly,—you need not flush up; but what do you suppose his landlady would say if he came in with a young lady by his side, and said he had brought home his wife? Do you think she’d believe in you, or give you proper respect, you unfortunate young creature? No, no; I’ll do my duty by you, whether you will or no. Let Mr. Langham go home and make things a little ready for a lady. She’s a lady by both sides of the house, I can tell you, Mr. Langham; and I’ve heard her poor papa say might come in for a great estate, if she lived. Any how, she’s poor Connor’s niece, and she shan’t go out of my house in an unbecoming manner. Go home and set your place in order for a bride; and since it must be so, come back for Milly; but out of this door she’s not going to-night. Now be easy,—be easy. I have had to do with her for eighteen years, and you have had to do with her for a month or two. It’s not respectable, I tell you, you two young fools. What! do you think I’ll make away with her, if you leave her here while you make things decent at home?”

Neither Harry nor I could resist kindness; and Aunt Connor was kind, as nobody could deny; but he blushed, poor fellow, and looked uncomfortable, and looked at me to help him out this time. “Harry has no money, no more than I have,” said I; “it’s his wife that must make things tidy at home.”

A kind of strange spasm went over Aunt Connor’s face, as if she had something to say and couldn’t, or wouldn’t. She pursed up her lips all at once, and went away hastily to the other end of the room to pick up something,—something that had nothing at all to do with us or our business. “Well, well, do as you like,” she said, in a curious choked voice. When she turned away from us, Harry drew me close to him to consult what we should do. It was quite true about the boots, he said, with a blush and a laugh; should I mind? Certainly I didn’t mind; but I thought, on the whole, it was best not to vex Aunt Connor any more, but to take her advice,—he to leave me here to-night, and fetch me home to-morrow. Fetch me home! I that had never known such a thing in all my life.

We parted for another day with that agreement; and, strange as people may think it, I was quite a heroine in Aunt Connor’s house that night. The girls both came up to my room and made me tell them all about it, and laughed and kissed me, and teased me, and cried over me, and did all sorts of kind foolish things. They found out my ring tied round my neck, and made me put it on; and they kept constantly running back and forward from their own room to mine with little presents for me. Not much, to be sure; but I was only a girl, though I was married, and liked them. There was somebody to dinner, so I did not go downstairs, but when the strangers were gone, there was a little supper in my honour, and Aunt Connor made some negus with her own hand, and ordered them all to drink dear Milly’s health the last night she would be at home. I could have really thought they loved me that last night. They did not, however; only, though it might not be very steady or constant, they were kind, kind at the heart; and when one was just at the turn of one’s life, and all one’s heart moved and excited, they could no more have refused their sympathy than they could have denied their nature; and being very much shocked and angry at first did not make the least difference to this. The girls were twenty times fonder of me that night than if I had been married ever so properly,—dear, kind, foolish Irish hearts!

But all the while there was a strange uneasy look in Aunt Connor’s face. I divined somehow, I cannot tell by what means, that there was something she ought to tell me which she either was afraid or unwilling to let me know, or had some object in keeping from me. She must be an innocent woman, surely, or I never could have read that so clear in her face.

Chapter IV

THE next morning Harry came radiant, quite like a new man. Was it all for joy of taking me home? or, perhaps he had got the money on this most convenient of all mornings? but such things don't often happen just at the most suitable time. He came rushing in with a kind of shout,—“Milly, we've orders to march; we're going next week. Hurrah!” cried Harry.

“And why hurrah?” said I.

“We'll have ourselves to ourselves, and nobody in our way,” he said; but just then seeing Aunt Connor, who was at the other end of the room, stopped short and looked a little confused. He had not intended to say anything ill-natured to her.

“Oh, I am not affronted; you're excusable, you're quite excusable,” said Aunt Connor; “and I believe it *is* very lucky; you'll have a fresh start, and nobody will know how foolish you have been. I was too angry to ask yesterday, or to think of anything but that deluded child there, that thinks herself so happy;—but young Langham, dear, have ye any friends?”

“None to whom I am answerable,” said Harry.

“Then that means no father nor mother, no parents and guardians?” said my aunt. “Well, what you've done is done, and can't be undone; we must make the best of it. Have you put the boots into the corner, and tidied the cigars off the mantelshelf? and now Mrs. Grogam knows all about it,—when it happened, where it happened, and how you two took clever Mrs. Connor in?”

“Exactly,” said Harry, laughing; “you have quite described it all. I have done my best, Milly darling; come home.”

“You're glad, you two young fools?” said my aunt.

“I should think so! and shouldn't we be glad?” cried Harry. “If we have not a penny between us, we have what is much better. Milly, come.”

“Hush with your Milly, Milly,” said Aunt Connor, “and speak for yourself, young man. My poor Connor's niece, if she is undutiful, shall never be said to be penniless. Well, I've won the battle. I *will* tell you, for I ought. As sure as she's standing there in her white frock, she has five hundred pounds.”

“Five hundred pounds!” both Harry and I repeated the words with a little cry of wonder and delight.

She had said this with a flash of resolution, as if it were quite hard to get it out; now she fell suddenly into a strange sort of coaxing, persuading tone, which was sadly painful to me just as I was getting to like her better; and as she coaxed and grew affectionate she grew vulgar too. How strange! I had rather have given her the money than seen her humble herself so.

“But it's out at the best of interest, my dears; what you couldn't get for it elsewhere. Think of five-and-twenty pounds a-year; an income, Milly! My child, I'll undertake to pay you the half year's interest out of my own pocket to help you with your housekeeping; for, of course, you would never think of lifting the money, you nor young Langham, with such an income coming of it. No, no; let well alone, I say. I would not meddle with a penny of it if I were you. Rash young creatures that don't know the value of money, you'd just throw it away; but think what a comfort there is in five-and-twenty pounds a-year!”

Harry and I looked at each other; it was as clear as day that she had it herself, and did not want to give it up. He was angry; I was only vexed and distressed. I never in all my life had thought of money before.

“Five hundred pounds would be very useful to Milly just now, Mrs. Connor,” said Harry; “she has not a trousseau, as your daughters would have; and I can only give her all I have, which is little enough. At least it's my duty to ascertain all about it; where it is, and what it is, and—”

“Oh, what it is! half of it Uncle Connor's own gift to the ungrateful creature—half of it at the very least; and ascertain, to be sure!—ascertain, and welcome!—call it in if ye please, and spend it

all in three weeks, and don't come to me for help or credit. What do you mean, sir? Do ye think it's anything to me?"

"Oh, Aunt Connor, please don't be angry. I never had but half-a-sovereign all my life," cried I. "You'll tell us all about it afterwards, to be sure. Harry—I mean Mr. Langham—doesn't understand. But it would be so handy to have some of it. Aunt Connor, don't you think so? Only please don't be angry. I should like, all out of my own head, to spend ten pounds."

Aunt Connor did not speak, but went to her desk and took something out of it that was already prepared—one envelope she gave to Harry and the other to me.

"Here is the half year's dividend of your wife's little money; it's just come due," said Aunt Connor, "and here, Milly, dear, is your aunt's wedding-present to you. Now you can have your will, you see, without breaking in upon your tiny bit of fortune. See what it is to have thoughtful friends."

For in my envelope there was exactly the sum I wished for—ten pounds.

And what do you suppose I did? Harry standing there as sulky as a statue, looking as if he would like to tear up his share and throw it into the fire. I was so delighted I ran and threw my arms round her neck, and kissed Aunt Connor. I hugged her quite heartily. I did not understand five hundred pounds; but I knew I could get something nice for Harry, and a new dress and a wedding bonnet, with orange-blossoms, out of what she gave me. And she cried, too, and kissed me as if I had been her own child; and it was no hypocrisy, whatever you may think. Harry snatched me away, and quite turned me out of the room to get my bonnet. He looked the sulkiest, most horrid fellow imaginable. I almost could have made faces at him as he sent me away; it was our first *real* quarrel; but I can't say I was very much afraid.

When we got out of doors he was quite in a passion with poor Aunt Connor. "Kind! what do you mean by kind? why, you've been living on your own money. I am sure she has not spent more on you, besides making you her servant," cried Harry. "And to take her present! and kiss her—pah! I would not do it for a hundred pounds."

"Nobody asked you, sir," said I: "but come this way, please Harry, I want to look at one shop-window—just one. I saw something there yesterday that would just do for me; and now I can afford to buy a dress."

"By Jove!" cried Harry, "what creatures you women are; here we are, on as good as our wedding-day, walking home for the first time, and you are thinking of the shop-windows! Are you just like all the rest?"

"Oh, indeed, just precisely," said I. "Ah, Harry, I never was in the street before that I felt quite free and yet quite protected and safe. Only think of the difference! I am not afraid of anybody or anything to-day. I am going home. If you were not so grave and proper I think I could dance all the way."

Harry did not say another word; he held my arm close, and called me by my name. My name was Milly darling, to Harry; he said it sounded like the turn of an Irish song. He calls me Milly darling still, though we have been married two years.

And how pretty he had made that little parlour over Mrs. Grogram's shop! Not a boot about anywhere that I could see, nor the shadow of a cigar; clean new muslin curtains up, and flowers on the table; and the landlady curtsying, and calling me Mrs. Langham. It was the very first time I had heard the name. How odd it sounded! and yet an hour after I should have laughed if any one had called me Miss Mortimer, as if that were the most absurd thing in the world.

And to make *home* does not require many rooms or a great deal of furniture. I have not a "house of my own" yet, and, perhaps, may not have for years. A poor subaltern, with nothing but his pay, when he is so foolish as to marry, has to take his wife to lodgings; but the best house in the world could not have felt to me a warmer, safer, more delightful home than Mrs. Grogram's parlour above the shop.

Chapter V

"It is only right, however," said Harry, "that before we leave we should know all that Mrs. Connor can tell us, Milly darling, about your family and your relations. Though she's to have your five hundred pounds, she need not have your family archives too."

"Why, Harry, you almost speak as if you grudged her the five hundred pounds!"

"And so I do," said Harry. "Just now, while I am so poor, it might have made you a little comfortable. Please Heaven, after a while, five hundred pounds will not matter so much; at least it is to be hoped so. If there would only come a war—"

"Harry, you savage! how dare you say so!" cried I.

"Nonsense! what's the good of a soldier except to fight?" he said. "Active service brings promotion, Milly. You would not like to see me a subaltern at forty. Better to take one's chance of getting knocked on the head."

"Ah, it is very easy for you to talk," said I; "and if I could disguise myself and 'list like Lady Fanshawe—"

"'List! you five-foot creature! you could be nothing but a drummer, Milly; and besides, Lady Fanshawe did not 'list, she—"

"Never mind, I could contrive as well as she did," said I. "I could get upon stilts or something, and be your man, and never disclose myself till I had cut down all your enemies, and brought you safe out of the battle, and then fainted in your arms."

"Pleasant for me," said Harry; "but I do believe, in spite of romance, Fanshawe himself would have given his head to have had his wife safe at home that time. Do you think it would be a comfort to a man if he was shot down himself to think his wife was there with nobody to take care of her? No, Milly darling; the truest love would stay at home and pray."

"And die," said I; "I understand it better now. If I were 'listing and going after you, it would not be for your sake, Harry, but for my own. How do women keep alive, do you think, when those that belong to them are at the wars?"

Neither of us knew; but to think of it made us shudder and tremble,—I that should have to bear it some day! for the very people in the streets said that war was coming on.

"In the meantime let me remind you," said Harry, "that we're going to Aunt Connor's to bid them good-bye, and that I mean to ask her all about your relations, and get a full history of your family, in case you might happen to be a princess in disguise, or a great heiress. By the bye, she said something like that. Only don't be too sanguine, Milly; if there had been anything more to get on your account, Aunt Connor would have ferreted it out."

I thought he was rather hard upon her, but could not really say anything in her defence. I had myself begged Harry, after two or three talks with Aunt Connor about it, not to say any more to her about claiming the five hundred pounds. She had only her jointure, poor lady, and could not have paid it without ruining herself. And, after all, she had always paid Nurse Richards for me, and had kept me, and been kind enough to me. So it was settled she was to keep it, and give us the five-and-twenty pounds a-year. Not that she would allow, straight out, that she had it. She always pretended it was somebody else that paid her the interest, and that it was the very best investment in the world, and she wished she could get as much for her money. Poor Aunt Connor! her pretence did not deceive anybody; but I suppose it was a sort of comfort to herself.

I did not take any part in Harry's questions at first; it was all I could do to answer the girls, who wanted to know all how we were going to travel, and everything about it. Patricia brought me down her warm cloak that she had worn all last winter. She said, though it wasn't new, it would be a comfortable wrap for the journey, if I would have it; and indeed I thought so too, though Harry, I dare say, would have made a fuss about it, if I had consulted him. But when Aunt Connor really began to

talk about poor papa and mamma, I hushed the girls and listened. I never had heard anything about them. It was natural it should be very interesting to me.

"It was more from hearsay than knowledge, for, of course, Milly's papa was a great deal older than me," said Aunt Connor, with a little toss of her head. "He was forty when he married Maria, my poor Connor's only sister; and she was not very young either; and it went very hard with her when Milly there came into the world; but though she died, poor soul! he would not call the babe Maria, do what we would, but Millicent, because it was the great name in his family. That was how we came to hear about his family at all. His head was a little touched, poor soul! He said what if she should come into the Park property after all, and not be called Milly? He said Millicent Mortimer had been a name in the family from the Conquest, or the Restoration, or something; and the heiress that wasn't Millicent had no luck. When he got weakly, he maundered on for ever about his family. It was cousins or cousins' children had the property, and one of them had jilted him. He used to say, in his wandering way, that one would never come to good; *she'd* never bring an heir to the property. But whether there were sons, or if it was only a lady between him and the estate, or how the rights of it were, I could not tell you. We used to think half of it was maundering, and my poor dear Connor never put any faith in it. Except Maria Connor that married him being not so young as she once was, not a creature about knew Mr. Mortimer. He was an Englishman, and not much of a man any how. No offence to you, Milly, dear; he was the kind of man that never does any good after he's been jilted; so, if you should happen to meet with that cousin of his that did it, you can put out your anger upon her. He left no particulars, poor man. I don't believe it ever came into his head that it might really matter for his poor little girl to have friends that would help her on in the world. And to be sure, Milly was but a year old when papa died."

"But this was worth taking some pains and making some inquiries about," said Harry. "Where did those friends live? What county did he belong to?—you must surely have known."

"We knew no more than I tell you, Langham, dear. My poor dear Connor, as I tell you, never put any faith in it. There's some books in the house belonging to him, that I was always to have sought out and given to Milly. I'll get them to-day, if I can, before you leave. But if you'll trust my opinion, I don't think it's the least good in the world. At the best, he was but a distant cousin, if all was true, he said; and spoke about his little girl proving heir after all, more in spite against her that jilted him than anything else. Why, all he had, poor man, did not come to but a trifle over five hundred pounds;—I mean—dear! what a memory I have!—*three* hundred pounds, for poor dear Connor put a large slice to Milly's little fortune. Now that's all I have to tell you. But I'll get Milly her father's books."

And I have not the least doubt it was all she had to tell us; every word she knew. But that very night we got the books just as we were packing up. They were as damp and mouldy as they could be, odd volumes of one thing and another; one of Shakespeare, with Richard A. Mortimer written in it, and "Haworth" underneath; another was Hudibras; another was an old French school copy of Racine, with "Sarah Mortimer, the Park, May, 1810," upon it, and in it an old pencil drawing all curled up at the edges, and rubbed out in some places, of a great house with trees and gardens round it, and a young lady mounting her horse at the door; scribbled at the corner of this, in a strange scratchy hand, was a kind of little inscription: "Sarah as I saw her last, and the Park—I wonder was I in love with them both? R. M." The last of this was evidently written at a later time than the first. But that was all. Not a single clue to papa's grand friends, who they were, or where they were. I dare say there are a hundred thousand parks in England, and, unless we could find it out from the drawing (which, I am sorry to say, was a very poor one. Harry, being disappointed and spiteful, took the pains to point out to me that the house was leaning up against the trees, and off the perpendicular, and that the young lady was on the wrong side of the horse), there seemed no information at all in poor papa's books. Poor papa! it was very cruel of Harry! most likely his heart was breaking when he drew "Sarah as I saw her last." Do you say he might have put her on the right side of the horse for all that, you cruel savage? Perhaps there were tears in his eyes all the time, Mr. Langham. *You* are not sentimental. I

dare say you would not cry if you were looking at *me* for the last time. But that has nothing to do with poor papa. I have no doubt he must have been a very feeling man.

However, we did not make anything out of the books; and I am sure I should not have said half so much about it except that Harry really took an interest in it which quite surprised me. I never expected to turn out an heiress, nor cared much whether I had grand relations or not; and a journey with Harry in that sweet September weather was far too delightful to let me think of anything else. It was as good as a wedding tour.

Chapter VI

THE regiment was ordered to Edinburgh; and it was there we went accordingly in that lovely autumn weather. I don't think Harry quite liked to hear me talk of Nurse Richards and the way she brought me up; but he was pleased enough to take walks with me all round that castle which was the centre of my recollections. At first we used to spend every leisure moment we had wandering up and down the steep walks, and always pausing to look up at the great precipice of rock. It was like a friend to me, rising up out of the soft tiers and green slopes of grass: the two churches down at its foot looking so mean and tiny beside it. People should not build churches there. I almost think even a great noble cathedral would look shabby under the shadow of that rock; and only to think of that dreadful West Church and the other one! how they can dare venture to stand there and don't move and crumble down of themselves! They would if there was any feeling in stone.

We got our lodgings out to the south of the castle, two nice little cosy rooms. It was not a fashionable quarter, to be sure, nor were the rooms very grandly furnished; but we had *such* views from the windows! The Castle Rock, with its buildings jutting on the very edge, and yet standing so strong and firm; the harsh ridge of the crags behind, and the misty lion-head over all, gazing like a sentinel towards the sea. And it was not these only, but all the clouds about them. Such dramas every day! Now all sweet and serene like happiness; now all thundery and ominous like a great misfortune; now brightened up with streaks of home and comfort; now settling down leaden-dark, and heavy like death itself, or despair. I never was poetical that I know of; but it was like reading a very great poem every day to live in that little house at Bruntsfield. Harry enjoyed it as much as I did. We lived the very cheapest that ever was. We never went out anywhere; for Harry had always a little society with his brother officers and at mess, and I had him, and old Mrs. Saltoun, our landlady, to talk to when he was away, and was as happy as the day was long. All the pleasantest recollections I had as a child were connected with this place; and when I looked out of my window at night and saw the lights shining up on the top of the Castle Rock, and the stars higher still glimmering out above, or the moon revealing out of the dark where Arthur's Seat lay quiet, couched like a sentinel; and heard the recall trumpet pealing out high into the clear air, my mind used to wander from dear Nurse Richards, and the stories she used to tell me, back to my great happiness now. When Harry found me at the window crying to myself, he thought I was low-spirited. Low-spirited! I was crying for pure happiness; because I was too happy to tell it, or put it in words, or show it anyhow else.

All this time we had never heard a single word from Harry's uncle who promised him the present on his birthday. This uncle was the only relation he had except some cousins whom he did not know much about. He was very near as friendless as I was; only that he remembered his father and mother perfectly well, and had been brought up at home, which made a great difference. Harry of course had written to his uncle to say what had occurred; and he had never answered the letter. He was an old bachelor, and rather rich; and if he did not take offence, and nothing happened, it had always been supposed that Harry was to be his heir; though I did not know this till after we were married and could not untie ourselves, however angry any one might be.

One day, however, Harry came home to me with a wonderful face. I could not tell, though I knew what his face meant pretty well by this time, what it was that day; whether he was angry, or disappointed, or vexed, or only bursting with laughter. It turned out he was all of them together. He tossed a letter on the table, and laughed and stamped his foot, as if he did not quite know what he was doing.

"By Jove, it's too absurd!" cried Harry; for I could not get him to leave off that stupid exclamation: but I thought it must be a little serious too, as well as absurd, by the look in his eye.

And what should it be but a letter from his uncle, declaring that, though nothing else would have induced him to do such a thing, yet, to punish Harry's rashness and presumption, he had made

up his mind to a step which everybody assured him was the most prudent thing he could do, and which it was only a pity he had not thought of sooner; this was, in short, that he had married as well as Harry. Enclosed his nephew would find cards addressed to his new wife: and, as for the expenses of such an undertaking, he assured Harry that it would be ridiculous to look for any assistance to a man in similar circumstances with himself. On a clear understanding of which he could certainly afford to wish his nephew joy,—but nothing else,—for he meant now to have heirs of his own.

Harry stared at me while I read this letter with a sort of angry fun and indignation in his face, which would turn either one way or another, I could see, according to how I received it. I cannot say I was the least disappointed. I threw down the letter, and clapped my hands and laughed. It was the most whimsical letter you could imagine; and, as for the birthday present, or any other assistance to us, I had never looked for it since Harry wrote what we had done.

“Weel, weel, it’s no ill news, that’s a comfort. But, Captain, you maunna come in rampaging and disturbing the lady when we’re no looking for you,” said Mrs. Saltoun, who had been sitting with me. “Now I’ll gang my ways ben the house; and you ken where to find me, Mrs. Langham, my dear, when you want me again.”

I had it on my lips to beg her not to go away, but stopped in time, for Harry naturally, though he likes her very well, does not take comfort in the good old lady as I do. When she was gone he laughed out again, but a little abruptly, and not as if he felt particularly happy about the news.

“Why, Harry, what’s the matter; did you expect anything?” said I.

“Well, not exactly, to be sure,” said Harry, with a half-ashamed look; “except the first moment when I recognised the old fellow’s handwriting. I did think it would be pleasant, Milly darling, to get some little comforts about you just now.”

“I have quantities of comforts,” said I; “and such a jewel of an old lady to look after me when you are away. There is nobody in the world so lucky as me.”

“Lucky!” said Harry, with a little shout. “If you should turn out a great heiress to be sure; that’s always a possible contingency, according to your Aunt Connor. Otherwise, with all sorts of things going to happen to us, and only my subaltern’s pay—”

“Mr. Langham, you forget my five-and-twenty pounds a year!” cried I.

And how do you think the savage answered me? “The old witch!” exclaimed Harry, “to think of her stopping your simple mouth with that ten pounds! I’d have seen her ducked, or burned, or whatever they do to witches, before I’d have taken it!—and cheating you out of your little morsel of fortune! How long do you suppose you’ll get your five-and-twenty pounds?”

“As long as poor Aunt Connor can pay it,” said I. “Things might come in the way to be sure; but she *means* to pay it regularly, and always will when she can. What makes you so discontented, Harry? We have enough for to-day, and God knows all about to-morrow.”

“Ah, yes! but He’s far off, Milly, to a poor fellow like me. How can I tell that He cares much what’s to become of us,—unless, indeed, it were for your sake.”

“Oh, Harry, Harry! how dare you say so!” cried I. “And see how good He has been to us two orphans. Neither of us had any home or any one belonging to us; and only look round you *now*!”

Do you think it was not very much that he had to look round upon?—a little room, low-roofed, and humbly furnished. It was nothing to any other man or woman in the world; but we were two of us together in it, and it was our home. Could I help but cry when I thought how different I was from Aunt Connor’s niece in the nursery? And Harry was just as thankful as I was, though he had his little pretences of grumbling like this now and then. Does anybody think he was really anxious, either about his uncle’s present that was never to come now, or my five hundred pounds that was not much more to be relied on, or what was to happen to us? No! he was no more anxious than I was; only now and then he pretended to make a little fuss about it, and to be wanting something better for me.

Chapter VII

WE were nearly two years in Edinburgh; and it was there, of course, that baby Harry came into the world. He made a great difference in many things. I could not go out to walk with Harry any longer; I could not even sit and talk with him so much, and, however economical I was, it could not be denied that already three of us cost more than two of us had done. It is strange enough, but still it is true, baby, bless him, brought thorns upon the roses that came with him into the world. Harry had not lived in a family since his father died long ago; he had lived a young man's life, and had his own fastidious fancies like (I suppose) most young men. He was very much delighted when baby came, but he was not so much delighted when baby was always with us, and occupying almost all my time and attention; and it fretted him when he saw traces about that once nice cosy sitting-room, which was nursery now as well as dining-room and drawing-room; even baby's basket, all trimmed with white muslin and pink ribbons, which he thought very pretty at first, annoyed him now when he saw it about; and when I had to stop talking to him in order to see after baby, he would first laugh, then bite his lip, then whistle, then go to the window, and after a while say he had better smoke his cigar outside while I was so busy. I dare say this cost me a few tears, for of course I thought there was no occupation in the world so sweet as nursing baby, and was sadly disappointed just at first that Harry could not be content to watch his pretty ways every moment as I did; however, I had to make up my mind to it. And as it was my business to mind Harry as well as his son, I had to think it all over in my mind what was to be done. It was hard work considering what was best; for to think of getting a servant upon our small means went to my very heart. At last one day I formed a great resolution, and took Mrs. Saltoun into my confidence.

"Here is how it is," said I, "I must have a maid to help me with baby when Mr. Langham is at home. Men can't understand things; they think it so odd to see one always with a baby on one's lap; especially when they have not been accustomed to anything of the sort. Mrs. Saltoun, I shall be obliged to have a maid."

"I told you so, my dear, the very day the lammie was born," said Mrs. Saultoun; "but I'm one that never presses my advice. I know experience is far more effectual than anything I can say."

"But look here—I can't afford it—it's a disgrace to think of such a thing with our small means, while I am perfectly strong and quite able to take care of him myself; but what can I do?" said I.

"My dear," said Mrs. Saltoun, "poverty's dreadful, and debt is worse; but it's heaviest of all the three to make a young married man discontented with his ain house. Dinna be affronted; I'm no saying a word! the Captain's just extraordinary; but he's no the lad to be second to the baby for a' that; and it's nothing to sigh about. Thae's just the kind of troubles every woman has to set her face to, as sure's she's born. My dear, however much ye canna afford, you'll have to contrive."

"Well, I have been thinking. If you will promise faithfully never to tell anybody, and keep my secret, and above everything, whatever you do, never let Harry know!" cried I.

"I'll promise," said Mrs. Saltoun; "but I'll not promise to give my consent unless it's feasible and in reason; and no unbecoming the Captain's bonnie young wife."

"The Captain's wife!—ah, if he were only the Captain!—but he's just a subaltern yet," said I; "however, you will be disappointed if you think I am meaning anything great. I can't do anything to bring in money, and I am sure Harry would not let me if I could. No—it's only—oh, Mrs. Saltoun, if you would help me!—I could get up all the linen myself. I *can* do it, though you may not think so. All Harry's things that he is so particular about, the laundress here never pleases him; and baby's frocks. I think if you would contrive to help me, I could save so many shillings a week. I'll do those pretty collars of yours and your fine caps, and you shall see how pretty they'll look."

“But your pretty bits of hands, my dear?” said Mrs. Saltoun; “a small matter of work betrays itself on a lady’s hands that’s not used to do anything. They would let out your secret, however well I kept it. What would you do with your hands?”

“But it will not hurt my hands—such beautiful clean work—it is quite a lady’s work,” said I; “and then I can put gloves on when I am done, and get some of the kalydor stuff. Besides, it will be only one day in the week.”

Mrs. Saltoun sat thinking it over, but she could not say a single word against it. If I couldn’t have done it, it might have been slow work learning; but I had a genius for it! Ah, hadn’t I ironed out Aunt Connor’s lace much oftener than the clear-starcher did! So here was something at once that could be saved; and nobody knows how dreadful the laundress’s bill is when there’s a baby in the house; so now I thought I might venture to try and look for a maid.

“My great terror was you were thinking of giving lessons, or selling some trumpery of fancy work, begging your pardon, my dear,” said Mrs. Saltoun; “for the young ladies now-a-days would a’ break their necks to *make* money, before they would take a step out of their road to save it; and indeed, you’re not far wrong that clear-starching is lady’s work. It takes nice fingers, dainty, clean, and light. I was in an awfu’ fright it was lessons on the piano, or handscreens to take into the Repository. But it’s really very reasonable for a young creature of your years; if you’re quite clear in your own mind you can take the responsibility of shirts. Of all the things I’ve seen in my life I canna remember that I ever saw a man what you could call perfectly pleased.”

“I am not afraid about that; but remember, you have promised solemnly, upon your honour,” said I, “never, whatever you do, to tell Harry!”

“I’ll keep my word. But what put it into your head, a sensible young woman like you, to go and run away with the like of a young sodger officer, that everybody knows have scarcely enough for themselves, let alone a wife? And if it’s hard work now, what will it be when you’ve a large family? and how will you ever live or keep your heart if he goes to war?”

“Mrs. Saltoun, don’t speak!” cried I; “what is the use of making me miserable? He is not going to the war to-day. It is not certain there is to be a war at all. Why do you put such dreadful things in my mind? If he goes I’ll have to bear it like the other soldiers’ wives; but do you suppose I have strength to bear it now beforehand, before the time? God does not promise anybody so much. If such a dreadful, dreadful thing should be, I’ll get strength for it that day.”

The good old lady did not say a word, but stroked my hand that was resting on the table in a kind of comforting, coaxing way. I looked up very much alarmed, but I could not see anything particular in her face. I suppose she was sorry for me only in a general sort of way; because I was young, and poor, and just beginning my troubles. So strange! I was pitying her all the same for being old, and nearly at the end of hers. How different things must seem at that other end of the road! Some of her children were dead, some married, close at hand so far as space was concerned, but far distant lost in their own life. I dare say when she liked she could go back into memory and be again a young wife like me, or an anxious middle-aged mother like her own daughter-in-law—and here it had ended, leaving her all alone. But she was very cheerful and contented all the same.

Harry came in while I was busy with planning about my new maid. After I had decided that she would have to sleep somewhere, and wondered why neither Mrs. Saltoun nor myself had ever thought of that, I had begun to wonder what sort of a person I should get; whether, perhaps, she would be a dear good friend-servant, or one of the silly girls one hears about. If she were a silly girl, even, there might be good in her. But here Harry came in, and my thoughts were all dissipated. He looked a little excited, and had a paper in his hand, out of which he seemed just about to read me something. Then he paused all at once, looked first at me and then at baby’s cradle, and his face clouded all over. I got terribly alarmed; I rushed up to him and begged him to tell me, for pity, what it was.

"It's nothing but fancy," said Harry. "I was going to tell you great news, my Milly darling; but it came over me, somehow, what you would do, and who would take care of you if you should be left alone with your baby; even though I were not killed."

"God would take care of us," I cried out sharp, being in a kind of agony. "Say it out—you are going to the war?"

"No, no; nothing of the sort; only look here. It has thrown us all into great excitement; but we are not under orders, nor like to be," said Harry. "Don't tremble—we are all safe yet, you foolish Milly. Look here."

Though I was leaning upon him, and he held the paper before my eyes, I could not read a word. But I guessed what it was. It was the Proclamation of War.

"Come out with me and hear it read at the Cross. It is to be done at twelve o'clock. Come," said Harry, coaxing and soothing me; "it is something to see. Pluck up a heart, Milly! Come and hear it courageously, like a soldier's wife. But, oh! I forgot baby," he said, stopping short all at once with a soft of half-annoyed laugh.

"Baby shan't prevent me this time," I cried; for what between this dreadful news and the excitement in Harry's mind, and the sudden way he stopped when he recollected I couldn't rightly go out with him, I was desperate. "Mrs. Saltoun will keep him till I come back; and he will not wake, perhaps, for an hour."

The old lady came when I asked her; and was quite pleased to sit down by the cradle while I tied on my bonnet with my trembling hands. Harry was very kind—very pleased. We went along winding up the steep paths, through the gardens to the Castle, my favourite walk, and into that long, grand, noisy old street with the yellow haze lingering between the deep houses, down the long slope towards Holyrood. I could see the people clearly enough about the streets, the little groups all clustered about the outside stairs, and the stir of something going to happen. But I could not look at the official people coming to say it again and make it more certain. If the trumpet had been a gun and killed somebody, my heart could scarcely have leaped more. Harry's cheek flushed up; and I could almost fancy I felt the blood stir and swell in the arm I was leaning on. He was a soldier, and he forgot me as he held up his head and listened. Just then I could not hold up my head. The trumpet sounded to me, somehow, as if it came lonely out of the distance over some battle where men were dying who had wives and babies at home. A woman stood before me crying, and drew my attention for a moment. She dared say out what was in her heart, because, though perhaps she was no poorer, she was not a lady like me. "Eh, weary on them! it's your man and my man that's to pay for their fancies," she was saying among her tears. "Glad! do ye ask me to be glad at sound o' war? If our regiment doesna gang the day, it'll gang *some* day. I've five weans that canna fend for themsels', and I'm a sodger's wife. God help us a'!" I dropped my veil over my face to hide my eyes from Harry, and slid my hand out of his arm—he, all excited in his soldier-mind, scarcely knowing it—to speak to my neighbour who had spoken to my heart. I had nothing to give her but my hand and my own troubled fellow-feeling, too deep and sore to be called sympathy. "For I am a soldier's wife, too; and God help us, as you say!" I cried in her ear. She wiped off her tears, poor soul, to look at me as Harry drew me away. She and the other woman with her whispered about us as we went away through the crowd. They forgot their own anxiety to pity "the poor young thing, the young lieutenant's wife." I know they did, the kind creatures; for one of them said so another day.—God help us all, soldiers' wives!

"But do you know this is like a little coward, Milly darling," said Harry, as we walked home, when he found I could not speak, "and foolish as well. *We* are not going to the wars."

"If you are not going to-day, you will go some day," I cried, with a sob. She said true, poor soul; I felt it in my heart.

"To be sure we shall," said Harry; "and you care neither for glory nor promotion, nor to have your husband do his duty, you poor-spirited Milly! But you can't act Lady Fanshawe now; you will have baby to comfort you at home."

“Do you mean that you are going?” cried I.

“Hush, hush! why this is like a child. I am not going. But, Milly, understand; if I don’t go some day, I shall be wretched. Make up your mind; you are a soldier’s wife.”

So I went home with this in my heart. Oh, my poor little economies, my little vulgar cares about the housekeeping! And perhaps he was going away from me to be killed. But hush, hush! I could not be Lady Fanshawe any more, now that there were three of us in the world; and Harry said the truest love would stay at home and pray.

Chapter VIII

THE very next day after that, while I was singing baby to sleep, sitting all alone by the fire, there was a soft knock at the door. I said, "Come in!" thinking it was Mrs. Saltoun, when there suddenly appeared before me a figure as different as possible from the nice little cosy figure of our good old landlady. This was an overgrown girl, fourteen or thereabouts, in the strangest scanty dress. A printed cotton frock, very washed out and dingy, so short as to leave a large piece of legs, clothed in blue-grey stockings, uncomfortably visible; very red arms that somewhat looked as if they were all elbow and fingers; a great checked blue and white pinafore, much washed out like the frock, into the breast of which the hands were thrust now and then by way of relief to the awkwardness of their owner; hair disposed to be red, and superabundant in quantity, thrust back as far as was practicable under the shade of a queer big bonnet, not only a full-sized woman's bonnet, but one ten years old, and made in the dimensions common at that distant period. She stood at the door looking at me in a perfect agony of innocent awkwardness, shuffling one foot over the other, twisting her red fingers, holding down her bashful head, but all the time staring with wistful eyes at baby and myself, and so sincere a look of awe and admiration that of course I was touched by it. She did not say a word, but dropped a foolish curtsy, and grew violently red standing at the door. I could not think what such a strange apparition wanted with me.

"What do you want, my good girl?" said I at last.

"The mistress said I might come," with another curtsy. Then, after a violent effort, "They said you was wanting a lass."

A lass! Here she was then, the first applicant for the new situation of baby's personal attendant! Oh dear, what a spectre! I had to pause a little before I could answer her. Really, though I was not much disposed to laughter, the idea was too ludicrous to be treated gravely.

"Yes, I want a lass; but not one so young as you," said I. "I want somebody who can take care of my baby. Who sent you to me?"

"The mistress said I might come," answered the apparition; "I can keep wee babies fine."

"You can keep wee babies fine! How old are you?" cried I.

"I'm just fourteen since I was born, but some folk count different. I'm awfu' auld other ways," said my extraordinary visitor, with a kind of grotesque sigh.

The creature roused my interest with her odd answers and wistful round eyes. "Shut the door and come here," said I. "Do you know me? and what tempted you to think *you* could do for my servant? Were you ever in a place before?"

"No; but I've seen you gaun by, the Captain and you, and I would be awfu' glad if you would let me come. There's plenty things I can do if I could get leave to try," cried the girl with a wonderful commotion in her voice. "I've nursed bairns since ever I was a bairn myself, and I can wash, and I can sew. Oh, leddy, tak me! I'll no eat very much, and I dinna want no wage; and I'll learn everything you tell me, for the mistress says I'm awfu' quick at learning; and I'll serve you hand and foot, nicht and day!"

"But, my poor girl," said I, quite amazed by this burst of eloquence, "why do you want so much to come to me?"

Upon this another extraordinary change came upon my would-be maid. She fidgeted about, she blushed fiery red, she thrust her red hands into the bosom of her pinafore, she stood upon one heavy foot, making all sorts of wonderful twists and contortions with the other. At last in gulps, and with every demonstration of the most extreme confusion and shame-facedness, burst forth the following avowal. "Oh! because you're rael bonnie; and you smile—and oh, I would like to come!"

It was an extraordinary kind of flattery, certainly; but I felt my cheeks flush up, and I cannot deny my heart was touched. I remember too, when I was a little girl, taking fancies to people; I believe

I might have fallen in love with a lady and gone and offered myself to be her servant, as likely as not if I could have done it. The uncouth creature no more meant to flatter me than to offend me. She was deeply ashamed of having made her confession. Her shame, and her admiration, and her passionate childish feeling quite went to my heart.

“You are a very strange girl,” said I. “What is your name, and where do you live? and do your parents know what you want with me?”

“They ca’ me Leczie Bayne. My father died six months since,” said the girl, falling into a kind of vacant tone after her excitement, as if this account of herself was something necessary to go through, but not otherwise interesting. “I never had any mother, only a stepmother, and lots of little bairns. She’s gaun back to her ain place, among her friends, and I’m to be left, for I’ve naeboddy belonging to me. We live down the road, and I used ay to see you gaun by. Whiles you used to smile at me, no thinking; but I ay minded. And the folk said you we’re awfu’ happy with the Captain, and had a kind look for everybody,—and oh, leddy, I’ve naeboddy belonging to me!”

I could have cried for her as she stood there, awkward, before the little fire, with great blobs of tears dropping off her cheeks, rubbing them away with her poor red hands. I knew no more how to resist her, in that appeal she made to my happiness, than if I had been a child like a baby in my lap. The tears came into my eyes, in spite of myself. In the impulse of the moment I had nearly broken forth and confided to her my terror and grief about Harry, and this dreadful war that was beginning. She took possession of me, like the soldier’s wife, with a nearer fellow feeling than sympathy. Poor, forlorn, uncouth creature, she stood before me like my old self, strangely transmogrified, but never to be denied. I could not answer her—for what could I say? Could I cast her off, poor child, led by the instincts of her heart to me of all people? And oh dear, dear, what a ridiculous contrast to all the passionate, elevated feeling of her story, could I take her all in her checked pinafore and blue stockings, a pathetic grotesque apparition, to be baby’s nurse and my little maid?

There never was a harder dilemma: and imagination, you may be sure, did its very best to make things worse, by bringing up before me the pretty, tidy, fresh little maid I had been dreaming of, with a white apron and a little cap, and plump arms to hold my baby in. What could I do? and oh, if I could not resist my fate, what would Harry say to me? How he would shrug his shoulders and admire my good taste; how he would look at her in his curious way as if she were a strange animal; how he would laugh at me and my soft heart! I got quite restless as the creature stood there opposite to me, twisting her poor foot and clasping her hands hard as she thrust them into the bosom of her pinafore. I could not stand against her wistful eyes. I grew quite desperate looking at her. Could I ever trust my child in those long red arms that looked all elbow—and yet how could I send her away?

“Lizzie, my poor girl,” cried I, remonstrating, “don’t you see I am very, very sorry for you? But look here now: my baby is very young, not three months old, and I could never dare trust him to a young girl like you. You must see that very well, a girl with so much sense; and besides, I want somebody who knows how to do things. I don’t think I could teach you myself; and besides—”

Here I fairly broke down, stopped by the flood of arguments which rose one after another, not to be defeated, in Lizzie’s round anxious eyes.

“But I dinna need to learn,” she cried out whenever my voice faltered and gave her a chance. “I ken! I would keep that bonnie baby from morning to night far sooner than play; if practice learns folk, I’ve been learning and learning a’ my life; and I’m that careful I would rather break every joint in a’ my body than have a scratch on his little finger; and I can hem that you wouldna see the stitches; and I can sing to him when he’s wakin’, and redd up the house when he’s in his bed. I’m no telling lees; and I’ll serve you on my knees, and never have a thought but how to please you, oh, leddy, if you’ll let me come!”

Could I resist that? I do not believe Harry himself could if he had heard her. I gave in because I could not help myself. I did it in shame and desperation, but what could I do? She was too many for me.

“Go down stairs and ask Mrs. Saltoun to come up,” said I.

She went off in a moment, almost before I could look up, and vanished out of the room without any noise—I suppose because of the high excitement the poor child was in. Mrs. Saltoun came up rather flurried, casting very strange looks at Lizzie. When I saw the dear prim old lady beside that extraordinary creature, and saw the looks she cast at her, the ludicrous part of it seized hold upon me, and I was seized with such a fit of laughing that I could scarcely speak.

“Mrs. Saltoun,” said I, “I don’t know really what you will think of me. I am going to take her for my maid.”

Mrs. Saltoun looked at me and looked at Lizzie, who made her a curtsy. She thought I had gone out of my senses. “It’s to be hoped it’s for *lady’s* maid and not for bairn’s maid then,” she said, with dreadful sarcasm. If Mrs. Saltoun was so severe, what would Harry say.

“She is an orphan and all alone; and she says she understands about children,” said I, humbly, in self-defence.

“Oh, if you please, I can keep bairns fine,” said Lizzie; “if ye’ll ask the neebors they’ll a’ tell; and oh, if the ledly will try me, dinna turn her against me again! I’m no a lassie in mysel. I’m awfu’ auld in mysel. Afore harm would come to the baby I would die.”

“And, my lass, what good would it do the lady if ye were to die,” said Mrs. Saltoun entering the lists, “after maybe killin’ her bonnie bairn?”

“I would a’ fa’ in pieces first!” cried Lizzie. “I would let them burn spunks in my fingers, or crush my feet as they did langsyne; there’s no a creature in the world I wouldna fecht and fell afore harm came to the wean!”

Mrs. Saltoun was not prepared for such an address; nor for the true fire of enthusiasm and valour that burned through Lizzie’s tears; but she did not give in. I had the satisfaction to look on and listen while the old lady demonstrated in the clearest way that she would never do, without any particular regard for her feelings; and then quietly enjoyed the triumph when Lizzie burst forth upon Mrs. Saltoun, and in two minutes routed her, horse and foot. Half an hour after Mrs. Saltoun and I sat contriving what dress could be got up on the spur of the moment to make the creature presentable; and that very night, while Harry was at mess, she sat in the little kitchen downstairs helping to make up a fresh new printed dress for herself in a fashion which justified part of her assertions, and with a rapidity which I could explain only under the supposition that excitement had still forcible possession of her. I confess I was myself a little excited; though she was only a girl of fourteen and a servant, not to say the most grotesque and awkward-looking person imaginable, it is wonderful what an effect this sudden contact with so strange and characteristic a creature immediately had. My fears about the war faded off for the moment. I could not help being quite occupied with thoughts about the new-comer:—whether, after all, I ever would venture to trust baby with her,—what Harry would say when he saw that odd apparition;—whether I had only been very foolish;—whether I might have resisted. Lizzie Bayne had made herself the heroine of that night.

Chapter IX

TWO days after, when Lizzie made her appearance with a decently made dress, long enough and wide enough to suit her stature, whatever might be her age; with a clean collar, a white apron, and smooth hair, she looked quite presentable. I cannot say she was good-looking; but, undeniably, she looked a capable creature, and with her lively brown eyes, good colour, and clear complexion might improve even in looks by and by. But nobody could do anything for that grotesque awkwardness, which belonged to Lizzie's age, perhaps, rather than to herself. She still stood upon one foot, and twisted the other round the leg that supported her. She worked uneasily with her big hands, making vain efforts to thrust them into the pinafore which recent improvements had swept away; and she still hung her head in agonies of awkwardness and self-consciousness. A creature so sensitively aware of observation, how could she be trusted with the most precious baby in the world? I repeated this five hundred times the first morning; but never once after I had fairly ventured to place the child in her arms.

"What on earth is that sprite doing here? Has Mrs. Saltoun taken her in, or where does she come from?" said Harry the first day. I felt quite piqued and affronted. I felt myself bound to defend her with all the earnestness in the world.

"Sprite! What do you mean? Why, that is my new maid, Henry, that I told you of; and a capital maid she is," said I, firing up with all the consciousness of not having taken the wisest step in the world.

"Your new maid!" And Harry said, "Oh!" in the most aggravating manner in the world. I am obliged to confess that Lizzie's arrival, so much out of the ordinary way, and the excitement of getting her up, of making her fit to appear, and of testing her qualities, had very much aroused my mind out of the heavy thoughts I had been entertaining a few days ago; so that I was no longer so subdued nor so entirely devoted to Harry but what I could be provoked with him now and then.

"There is nothing to cry out about; she is rather young, to be sure, and not the most graceful figure in the world; but she's good and grateful, poor child, and I am quite content."

"You must recollect though, Milly, that we can't afford to keep anybody for charity," said Harry; "she does not look very gainly; and if she can't save you the half of your present trouble, I'll turn out a tyrant, I warn you, and send her away."

"I am quite the best judge, you may be sure," said I, with a little internal tremor; "and I tell you I am satisfied. If you attempt to be tyrannical, it is you who shall be sent away."

"Ah, Milly darling, how's that! I shall be sent away soon enough," said Harry, with a little sigh. "I have been thinking that all over since we talked of it the other day. What, you've forgot, have you, Milly? Thank heaven! I was only afraid you were fretting over it, and thinking where I should send you to be safe when the time came and I had to go away."

"Oh, Harry, how cruel!" said I. "I had got it out of my mind just then. Now, I shall never forget it again. And where could you send me? What would it matter, except to be near at hand for the post, and get the earliest news."

"Unless you were to go to your Aunt Connor; poor Milly," said he with a pitiful look at me.

"Have you got your orders?" cried I, clasping my hands.

He said, "Nonsense!" getting up hurriedly. "Indeed, Milly, you must consider this question without thinking it is all over the moment I speak of it; and don't burden yourself with an unsuitable maid. You know, whether we go to the Crimea or not, we are likely very soon to go somewhere. The regiment cannot be long here."

"Then, Harry, if there is nothing certain don't let us talk of it," said I; "when one's heart is to be broken, one cannot keep always anticipating the moment." "Don't make any arrangements; when

it comes, that will be time enough. I shall care about nothing but letters. So long as I can have letters I shall do."

Harry stayed, lingering about me before he went out. "I am not so sure that the Lady Fanshawe idea is a foolish one after all," he said after awhile. "What fetters you put a man into, you wives and babes! I wish I only knew somebody that would be very good to you if I have to go away. Nineteen! and to be left all by yourself in the world! It's hard work, Milly, to be a soldier's wife."

"If you don't mean anything particular—if there's no orders come—have pity on me, and don't talk, Harry!" I cried out. "When you must go, I'll bear it. I shall do as well as the other soldiers' wives. I can never be all by myself as long as you are in the world, though you should be ten thousand miles away. Don't talk of it. I shall get strength when the day comes; but the day has not come nor the strength; don't put me to needless torture, Harry."

"I won't," he said again, with that little sigh, and went away leaving me very miserable. Oh! if all this happy life were to finish and come to an end. If I was to waken up some dreadful morning and find him gone, and all the light gone out like the light in a dream! I durst not think upon it. I got up and rushed about my little occupations. Lizzie came upstairs when I was taking baby, who had just woke from his morning sleep, out of the cradle. She stood, shy and doubtful, looking at me, seeing in a moment that I was not so cheerful as usual. Poor child, with a strange self-recollection that was quite natural, but seemed very odd to me, she thought she had something to do with it. Her countenance fell directly. She came sidling up to me with her heart in her face. Mrs. Saltoun had taught her some faint outlines of common conventional civility, and succeeded in substituting "mem" for "leddy" in her style of address. She came up to me accordingly, with the tears ready to start, and every sign of grieved disappointment and restrained eagerness in her face. "Oh, mem," cried Lizzie, "have I been doing wrong? Are you no pleased wi' me?" The words went to my heart, I cannot tell how. It made me see more clearly than a dozen sermons how we were every one of us going about in a private little world of our own. To think that her shortcomings, the innocent grotesque creature, should throw me into such trouble! What a strange unconscious self-estimation that was not selfishness! In spite of myself, the load at my heart lightened, when I smiled up at the girl.

"Lizzie," said I on the impulse of the moment, not thinking that I might perhaps wound her; "if we did not suit each other, should we quite break our hearts?"

Lizzie coloured high, made a momentary pause, and dropped her queer curtsy, "Eh no, mem, no you; I couldn't expect it," said Lizzie, with a long sigh. Then, after another pause: "If it was a' to turn out a dream after twa haill days; and, to be sure, it's three days coming; but if it was a' to come to naething after a' this," smoothing down her new dress, "and a' the thoughts I've had in my mind, eh me! I think I would have nae heart ony mair either to break or bind."

Now, perhaps there was not very much in these words; but they were so exactly what I had been thinking myself, that they seemed to make a new link between me and my odd child-maid.

"That is just what I have been thinking—but with far, far more reason," said I; "for, oh, Lizzie! war's proclaimed, and Mr. Langham may have to leave me; it might happen any day; and what should I do alone?"

"Oh, mem, dinna greet!" said Lizzie loudly: "dinna let tears fa' on the wee baby; but I ken what you would do. Just nurse the bairn, and pray the Lord, and wait. If you were sending me awa', it would be never to come back again; but if the Captain gangs to the wars he'll come hame a great general; maybe he would have a ribbon at his breast and a Sir at his name!" cried Lizzie, glowing up suddenly. "Eh, wouldna we a' be proud! You might weary whiles, but the Captain would never forget you, nor be parted in his heart, if he was ten thousand miles away."

"You strange little witch," said I, crying, with the strangest feeling of comfort, "you say the very words that come into my heart!"

The creature gave me a bright affectionate look, with tears in her brown eyes. "And please can I take baby out for a walk?" she said, immediately falling back into her own department, with her

little bob of a curtsey. "I'll gang before the windows to let you see how careful I am. It's the bonniest morning ever was. Eh, mem, if you're pleased, I'll ay see the sun shining," cried my nursery-maid.

And I actually did trust her with my precious baby, and stood at the window watching her with breathless anxiety and satisfaction for a whole hour, afraid to lose sight of her for a moment. Steady as a judge walked Lizzie, grand and important in her "charge," disdaining the passing appeals of "neighbours," marching along on the sunny side of the way—for it was already cold enough to make that necessary—shading the child's eyes with such adroit changes of his drapery and her own, preserving him from the wind at the corners, and picking her steps over the unequal road with such care and devotion, that I could have run downstairs and kissed her on the spot. The sight, somehow, drove half the bitterness of my thoughts out of my head. The sky was clear with that "shining after rain" which has so much hope and freshness in it. The wind was brisk, with plenty of floating clouds to knock about. Before us, in the clear air, the castle rock looked almost near enough to have touched it, with the sun shining on its bold grey front, and all those white puffs of clouds blowing against and around it, like heavenly children at their play. How it stood there, everlasting! How the sun smiled and caressed those old walls where Harry was, and warmed and brightened the cheerful bit of road where, to and fro, before my eyes, unconscious in his baby state, went Harry's son. Ah, me! to-day is to-day, if one were to die to-morrow. I was too young to grope about for darkness to come, and lose the good of this beautiful hour. Besides, does not the good Lord know all about to-morrow? Beginning and end of it, one thing with another, it pleases Him. Presently we shall have it, and strength for it. So, away till your time, you dark hour! just now it is not God, but an enemy who sends you. The light is sweet, and it is a pleasant thing to behold the sun.

Chapter X

WHEN Harry came home that evening, I knew he had something to tell me; but after the first start was over, I felt sure it was not anything painful from the look of his face. I may venture to say now that he was a very handsome young man in those days; but the thing that first drew my heart to him was the way he always betrayed himself with his face. Whatever he was feeling or thinking, you could tell it by his eyes; and if he sometimes happened to say anything he did not think, as happens to everybody now and then, his eyes woke up to a kind of sly, half ashamed, half amused expression, and let you know he was fibbing in the oddest way in the world.

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