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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE PARISH

THE parish THE parish of Brentburn lies in the very heart of the leafy county of Berks. It is curiously situated on the borders of the forest, which is rich as Arden on one side, and on the edge of a moorland country abounding in pines and heather on the other; so that in the course of a moderate walk the wayfarer can pass from leafy glades and luxuriant breadth of shadow, great wealthy oaks and beeches, and stately chestnuts such as clothe Italian hill-sides, to the columned fir-trees of a Scotch wood, all aromatic with wild fragrant odours of the moor and peat-moss. On one hand, the eye and the imagination lose themselves in soft woods where Orlando might hang his verses, and heavenly Rosalind flout her lover. On the other, knee-deep in rustling heather and prickly billows of the gorse, the spectator looks over dark undulations of pines, standing up in countless regiments, each line and rank marked against the sky, and an Ossianic breeze making wild music through them. At the corner, where these two landscapes, so strangely different,

approach each other most closely, stand the church and rectory of Brentburn. The church, I am sorry to say, is new spick-and-span nineteenth century Gothic, much more painfully correct than if it had been built in the fourteenth century, as it would fain, but for its newness, make believe to be. The rectory is still less engaging than the church. It is of red brick, and the last rector, so long as he lived in it, tried hard to make his friends believe that it was of Queen Anne's time – that last distinctive age of domestic architecture; but he knew very well all the while that it was only an ugly Georgian house, built at the end of the last century. It had a carriage entrance with the ordinary round "sweep" and clump of laurels, and it was a good-sized house, and comfortable enough in a steady, ugly, respectable way. The other side, however, which looked upon a large garden older far than itself, where mossed apple-trees stood among the vegetable beds in the distant corners, and a delicious green velvet lawn, soft with immemorial turf, spread before the windows, was pleasanter than the front view. There was a large mulberry-tree in the middle of the grass, which is as a patent of nobility to any lawn; and a few other trees were scattered about – a gnarled old thorn for one, which made the whole world sweet in its season, and an apple-tree and a cherry at the further corners, which had, of course, no business to be there. The high walls were clothed with fruit trees, a green wavy lining, to their very top – or in spring rather a mystic, wonderful drapery of white and pink which dazzled all beholders. This, I am sorry to say, at the time my story begins,

was more lovely than profitable; for, indeed, so large a garden would have required two gardeners to keep it in perfect order, while all it had was the chance attentions of a boy of all work. A door cut in this living wall of blossoms led straight out to the common, which was scarcely less sweet in spring; and a little way above, on a higher elevation, was the church surrounded by its graves. Beyond this, towards the south, towards the forest, the wealthy, warm English side, there were perhaps a dozen houses, an untidy shop, and the post-office called Little Brentburn, to distinguish it from the larger village, which was at some distance. The cottages were almost all old, but this hamlet was not pretty. Its central feature was a duck-pond, its ways were muddy, its appearance squalid. There was no squire in the parish to keep it in order, no benevolent rich proprietor, no wealthy clergyman; and this brings us at once to the inhabitants of the rectory, with whom we have most concern.

The rector had not resided in the parish for a long time – between fifteen and twenty years. It was a college living, of the value of four hundred and fifty pounds a year, and it had been conferred upon the Rev. Reginald Chester, who was a fellow of the college, as long ago as the time I mention. Mr. Chester was a very good scholar, and a man of very refined tastes. He had lived in his rooms at Oxford, and in various choice regions of the world, specially in France and Italy, up to the age of forty, indulging all his favourite (and quite virtuous) tastes, and living a very pleasant if not a very useful life. He had a little fortune of his

own, and he had his fellowship, and was able to keep up congenial society, and to indulge himself in almost all the indulgences he liked. Why he should have accepted the living of Brentburn it would be hard to say; I suppose there is always an attraction, even to the most philosophical, in a few additional hundreds a year. He took it, keeping out poor Arlington, who had the next claim, and who wanted to marry, and longed for a country parish. Mr. Chester did not want to marry, and hated everything parochial; but he took the living all the same. He came to live at Brentburn in the beginning of summer, furnishing the house substantially, with Turkey carpets, and huge mountains of mahogany – for the science of furniture had scarcely been developed in those days; and for the first few months, having brought an excellent cook with him, and finding his friends in town quite willing to spend a day or two by times in the country, and being within an hour's journey of London, he got on tolerably well. But the winter was a very different matter. His friends no longer cared to come. There was good hunting to be sure, but Mr. Chester's friends in general were not hunting men, and the country was damp and rheumatic, and the society more agricultural than intellectual. Then his cook, still more important, mutinied. She had never been used to it, and her kitchen was damp, and she had no means of improving herself "in this hole," as she irreverently called the rectory of Brentburn. Heroically, in spite of this, in spite of the filthy roads, the complaints of the poor, an indifferent cook, and next to no society, Mr. Chester held out for two long years.

The damp crept on him, into his very bones. He got incipient rheumatism, and he had a sharp attack of bronchitis. This was in spring, the most dangerous season when your lungs are weak; and in Mr. Chester's family there had at one time been a girl who died of consumption. He was just at the age when men are most careful of their lives, when, awaking out of the confidence of youth, they begin to realize that they are mortal, and one day or other must die. He took fright; he consulted a kind physician, who was quite ready to certify that his health required Mentone or Spitzbergen, whichever the patient wished; and then Mr. Chester advertised for a curate. The parish was so small that up to this moment he had not had any occasion for such an article. He got a most superior person, the Rev. Cecil St. John, who was very ready and happy to undertake all the duties for less than half of the stipend. Mr. Chester was a liberal man in his way. He let Mr. St. John have the rectory to live in, and the use of all his furniture, except his best Turkey carpets, which it must be allowed were too good for a curate; and then, with heart relieved, he took his way into the south and the sunshine. What a relief it was! He soon got better at Mentone, and went on to more amusing and attractive places; but as it was on account of his health that he had got rid of his parish, consistency required that he should continue to be "delicate." Nothing is more easy than to manage this when one has money enough and nothing to do. He bought a small villa near Naples, with the best possible aspect, sheltered from the east wind. He became a great authority on the antiquities of the

neighbourhood, and in this way had a constant change and variety of the very best society. He took great care of himself; was never out at sunset, avoided the sirocco, and took great precautions against fever. He even began to plan a book about Pompeii. And thus the years glided by quite peacefully in the most refined of occupations, and he had almost forgotten that he ever was rector of Brentburn. Young fellows of his college recollected it from time to time, and asked querulously if he never meant to die. "You may be sure he will never die if he can help it," the Provost of that learned community replied, chuckling, for he knew his man. And meantime Mr. St. John, who was the curate in charge, settled down and made himself comfortable, and forgot that he was not there in his own right. It is natural a man should feel so who has been priest of a parish for nearly twenty years.

This Mr. St. John was a man of great tranquillity of mind, and with little energy of disposition. Where he was set down there he remained, taking all that Providence sent him very dutifully, without any effort to change what might be objectionable or amend what was faulty; nobody could be more accomplished than he was in the art of "putting up with" whatsoever befell him. When once he had been established anywhere, only something from without could move him – never any impulse from within. He took what happened to him, as the birds took the crumbs he threw out to them, without question or preference. The only thing in which he ever took an initiative was in kindness. He could not bear to hurt any one's feelings, to make any one unhappy,

and by dint of his submissiveness of mind he was scarcely ever unhappy himself. The poor people all loved him; he never could refuse them anything, and his reproofs were balms which broke no man's head. He was indeed, but for his sympathy, more like an object in nature – a serene, soft hillside touched by the lights and shadows of changeable skies, yet never really affected by them except for the moment – than a suffering and rejoicing human creature.

> "On a fair landscape some have looked
> And felt, as I have heard them say,
> As if the fleeting time had been
> A thing as steadfast as the scene
> On which they gazed themselves away."

This was the effect Mr. St. John produced upon his friends and the parish; change seemed impossible to him – and that he could die, or disappear, or be anything different from what he was, was as hard to conceive as it was to realize that distinct geological moment when the hills were all in fusion, and there was not a tree in the forest. That this should be the case in respect to the curate in charge, whose position was on sufferance, and whom any accident happening to another old man in Italy, or any caprice of that old man's fancy, could sweep away out of the place as if he had never been, gave additional quaintness yet power to the universal impression. Nobody could imagine what Brentburn would be like without Mr. St. John, and he himself was of the

same mind.

At the period when this story commences the curate was a widower with "two families." He had been so imprudent as to marry twice; he had two daughters grown up, who were coming to him, but had not arrived, and he had two little baby boys, whose mother had recently died. But how this mother and these boys came about, to Mr. St. John's great surprise – and who the daughters were who were coming to take charge of him – I must tell before I go on any further. The whole episode of his second marriage was quite accidental in the curate's life.

CHAPTER II
THE PARISH

THE Reverend Cecil St. John started in life, not so much under a false impression himself, as conveying one right and left wherever he moved. With such a name it seemed certain that he must be a man of good family, well-connected to the highest level of good connections; but he was not. I cannot tell how this happened, or where he got his name. When he was questioned about his family he declared himself to have no relations at all. He was his father's only child, and his father had been some one else's only child; and the result was that he had nobody belonging to him. The people at Weston-on-Weir, which was his first curacy, had a tradition that his grandfather had been disowned and disinherited by his family on account of a romantic marriage; but this, I fear, was pure fable invented by some parish authority with a lively imagination. All the years he spent at Weston nobody, except an old pupil, ever asked for him; he possessed no family possessions, not even an old seal, or bit of china. His father had been a curate before him, and was dead and gone, leaving no ties in the world to his only boy. This had happened so long ago that Mr. St. John had long ceased to be sad about it before he came to Weston, and though the ladies there were very sorry for his loneliness, I am not sure that it

occurred to himself to be sorry. He was used to it. He had stayed in Oxford for some years after he took his degree, working with pupils; so that he was about five and thirty when he took his first curacy, moved, I suppose, by some sense of the monotony of an unprogressive life. At five and thirty one has ceased to feel certain that everything must go well with one, and probably it occurred to him that the Church would bring repose and quiet, which he loved, and possibly some quiet promotion. Therefore he accepted the curacy of Weston-on-Weir, and got lodgings in Mrs. Joyce's, and settled there. The parish was somewhat excited about his coming, and many people at first entertained the notion that his proper title was Honourable and Reverend. But, alas! that turned out, as I have said, a delusion. Still, without the honourable, such a name as that of Cecil St. John was enough to flutter a parish, and did so. Even the sight of him did not dissipate the charm, for he was handsome, very tall, slight, serious, and interesting. "Like a young widower," some of the ladies thought; others, more romantic, felt that he must have a history, must have sustained a blight; but if he had, he never said anything about it, and settled down to his duties in a calm matter-of-fact sort of way, as if his name had been John Smith.

Everybody who knows Weston-on-Weir is aware that Mrs. Joyce's cottage is very near the vicarage. The vicar, Mr. Maydew, was an old man, and all but incapable of work, which was the reason why he kept a curate. He was a popular vicar, but a selfish man, whose family had always been swayed despotically

by his will, though scarcely any of them were aware of it, for his iron hand was hidden in the velvetest of gloves, and all the Maydews were devoted to their father. He had sent one son to India, where he died, and another to Australia, where he had been lost for years. His eldest daughter had married a wealthy person in Manchester, but had died too, at an early age, for none of them were strong; thus his youngest daughter, Hester, was the only one left to him. Her he could not spare; almost from her cradle he had seen that this was the one to be his companion in his old age, and inexorably he had guarded her for this fate. No man had ever been allowed to approach Hester, in whose eyes any gleam of admiration or kindness for her had appeared. It had been tacitly understood all along that she was never to leave her father, and as he was very kind in manner, Hester accepted the lot with enthusiasm, and thought it was her own choice, and that nothing could ever tempt her to abandon him. What was to become of her when her father had left her, Hester never asked herself, and neither did the old man, who was less innocent in his thoughtlessness. "Something will turn up for Hester," he said in his cheerful moods, "and the Lord will provide for so good a daughter," he said in his solemn ones. But he acted as if it were no concern of his, and so, firm in doing the duty that lay nearest her hand, did she, which was less wonderful. Hester had lived to be thirty when Mr. St. John came to Weston. She was already called an old maid by the young and gay, and even by the elder people about. She was almost pretty in a quiet way, though many people

thought her *quite* plain. She had a transparent, soft complexion, not brilliant, but pure; soft brown eyes, very kind and tender; fine silky brown hair, and a trim figure; but no features to speak of, and no style, and lived contented in the old rotten tumble-down vicarage, doing the same thing every day at the same hour year after year, serving her father and the parish, attending all the church services, visiting the schools and the sick people. I hope good women who live in this dutiful routine get to like it, and find a happiness in the thought of so much humble handmaiden's work performed so steadily; but to the profane and the busy it seems hard thus to wear away a life.

When Mr. St. John came to the parish it was avowedly to relieve old Mr. Maydew of the duty, not to help him in it. Now and then the old vicar would show on a fine day, and preach one of his old sermons; but, except for this, everything was left to Mr. St. John. He was not, however, allowed on that account to rule the parish. He had to go and come constantly to the vicarage to receive directions, or advice which was as imperative; and many a day walked to church or into the village with Miss Hester, whom nobody ever called Miss Maydew, though she had for years had a right to the name. The result, which some people thought very natural, and some people quite absurd, soon followed. Quietly, gradually, the two fell in love with each other. There were people in the parish who were quite philanthropically indignant when they heard of it, and very anxious that Mr. St. John should be undeceived, if any idea of Hester Maydew having money

was in his thoughts. But they might have spared themselves the trouble. Mr. St. John was not thinking of money. He was not even thinking of marriage. It never occurred to him to make any violent opposition, when Hester informed him, timidly, fearing I know not what demonstration of lover-like impatience, of her promise never to leave her father. He was willing to wait. To spend every evening in the vicarage, so see her two or three times a day, going and coming; to consult her on everything, and inform her of everything that happened to him, was quite enough for the curate. He used to tell her so; while Hester's heart, wrung with pleasure and pain together, half stood still with wonder, not knowing how a man could bear it, yet glad he should. How much there is in the hearts of such good women which never can come into words! She had in her still soul a whole world of ideal people – the ideal man as well as the ideal woman – and her ideal man would not have been content. Yet *he* was, and she was glad; or rather I should say thankful, which is a different feeling. And thus they went on for ten years. Ten years! an eternity to look forward to – a lifetime to look back upon; yet slipping away so softly, day upon day, that Mr. St. John at least never realized the passage of time. He was a very good clergyman, very kind to the poor people and to the children, very ready to be of service to any one who wanted his services, seeking no diversion or ease except to go down to the vicarage in the evening by that path which his patient feet had made, to play backgammon with the vicar and talk to Hester. I cannot see, for my part, why they should not

have married, and occupied the vicarage together; but such an arrangement would not have suited Mr. Maydew, and Hester was well aware of the impossibility of serving two masters. So year came after year, and hour after hour, as if there were no changes in human existence, but everything was as steady and immovable as the surface of that tranquil rural world.

When Mr. Maydew died at last it was quite a shock to the curate; and then it was evident that something must be done. They hoped for a little while that Lord Weston might have given the living to Mr. St. John, who was so much beloved in the parish; but it had been promised years before to his old tutor, and there was an end of that expectation. I think Hester had almost come to doubt whether her curate had energy to marry her when she was thus set free; but there she did him injustice. Though he had not a notion how they were to live, he would have married her on the spot had decorum permitted. It was some time, however, before he heard of anything which would justify them in marrying. He had little interest out of the parish, and was shy of asking anything from the few people he did know. When they were told of Brentburn, and the rector's bad health, they both felt it a special providence that Mr. Chester's lungs should be weak. There was the rectory to live in, and two hundred pounds a year, which seemed a fortune to them both; and they married upon it with as much confidence as if it had been two thousand. They were almost old people when they set off from the little church at Weston bride and bride-groom; yet very young in the tranquillity

of their souls. Mr. St. John was thoroughly happy – not much more happy indeed than when he had walked down across the grass to the vicarage – but not less so; and if Hester felt a thrill of disappointment deep down in her heart at his calm, she loved him all the same, and knew his goodness, and was happy too. She was a woman of genius in her way – not poetical or literary genius – but that which is as good, perhaps better. She managed to live upon her two hundred a year as few of us can do upon three or four times the sum. Waste was impossible to her; and want appeared as impossible. She guided her house as – well, as only genius can – without any pitiful economies, without any undue sparing, making a kind, warm, beneficent, living house of it, and yet keeping within her income. I don't pretend to know how she did it, any more than I can tell you how Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. It was quite easy to him – and to her; but if one knew how, one would be as great a poet as he was, as great an economist as she. Mr. St. John was perfectly happy; perhaps even a little more happy than when he used to walk nightly to her father's vicarage. The thought that he was only curate in charge, and that his rector might get better and come back, or get worse and die, never troubled his peace. Why should not life always go as it was doing? why should anything ever happen? Now and then he would speak of the vicissitudes of mortal existence in his placid little sermons; but he knew nothing of them, and believed still less. It seemed to him as if this soft tranquillity, this sober happiness was fixed like the pillars of the earth, and would never

come to an end.

Nor is it possible to tell how it was, that to this quiet pair two such restless atoms of humanity as the two girls whose story is to be told here should have been born. Hester's old nurse, indeed, had often been heard to tell fabulous stories of the energy and animation of her young mistress in the days of her youth, but these had always been believed in Weston to be apocryphal. The appearance of her children, however, gave some semblance of truth to the tale. They were the most living creatures in all the parish of Brentburn. These two children, from the time they were born, were ready for anything – nothing daunted them or stilled them – they did not know what fear was. Sometimes there passed through the mind of their mother a regret that they were not boys: but then she would think of her husband and the regret was never expressed. Their very vitality and activity made them easy to train, and she taught them, poor soul, and spent her strength upon them as if she knew what was coming. She taught them her own household ways, and her economy as far as children could learn it, and to read and write, and their notes on the old piano. This was all she had time for. She died when Cicely was twelve and Mab eleven. God help us! what it must be when a woman has to consent to die and leave her little children to fight their own way through this hard world, who can venture to tell? For my part, I cannot so much as think of it. Something comes choking in one's throat, climbing like Lear's *hysterica passio*. Ah, God help us indeed! to think of it is terrible,

to do it – Poor Hester had to accept this lot and cover her face and go away, leaving those two to make what they could of their life. Her death stupefied Mr. St. John. He could not believe it, could not understand it. It came upon him like a thunderbolt, incredible, impossible; yet, to be sure, he had to put up with it like other men. And so tranquil was his soul that by-and-by he quite learned to put up with it, and grew calm again, and made himself a path across the common to the churchyard gate which led to her grave, just as he had made himself a path to her father's door. Everything passes away except human character and individuality, which outlive all convulsions. The parish of Brentburn, which like him was stupefied for the moment, could not contain its admiration when it was seen how beautifully he bore it – "Like a true Christian," the people said – like himself I think; and he was a good Christian, besides being so placid a man.

The two children got over it too in the course of nature; they had passions of childish anguish, unspeakable dumb longings which no words could utter; and then were hushed and stilled, and after a while were happy again; life must defend itself with this natural insensibility or it could not be life at all. And Mr. St. John's friends and parishioners were very kind to him, especially in the matter of advice, of which he stood much in need. His "plans" and what he should do were debated in every house in the parish before poor Hester was cold in her grave; and the general conclusion which was almost unanimously arrived at was – a

governess. A governess was the right thing for him, a respectable, middle-aged person who would have no scheme for marrying in her head – not a person of great pretensions, but one who would take entire charge of the girls (whom their mother, poor soul, had left too much to themselves), and would not object to give an eye to the housekeeping – of ladylike manners, yet perhaps not *quite* a lady either, lest she might object to the homelier offices cast upon her. Mrs. Ascott, of the Heath, happened to know exactly the right person, the very thing for poor Mr. St. John and his girls. And Mr. St. John accepted the advice of the ladies of the parish with gratitude, confessing piteously that he did not at all know what to do. So Miss Brown arrived six months after Mrs. St. John's death. She was not too much of a lady. She was neither old nor young, she was subject to neuralgia; her complexion and her eyes were grey, like her dress, and she had no pretensions to good looks. But with these little drawbacks, which in her position everybody argued were no drawbacks at all, but rather advantages, she was a good woman, and though she did not understand them, she was kind to the girls. Miss Brown, however, was not in any respect a woman of genius, and even had she been so her gifts would have been neutralized by the fact that she was not the mistress of the house, but only the governess. The maid who had worked so well under Hester set up pretensions to be housekeeper too, and called herself the cook, and assumed airs which Miss Brown got the better of with great difficulty; and the aspect of the house changed. Now and then indeed a crisis

arrived which troubled Mr. St. John's peace of mind very much, when he was appealed to one side or the other. But yet the life of the household had been so well organized that it went on *tant bien que mal* for several years. And the two girls grew healthy, and handsome, and strong. Miss Brown did her very best for them. She kept them down as much as she could, which she thought was her duty, and as what she could do in this way was but small, the control she attained to was an unmixed advantage to them. Poor Hester had called her eldest child Cecil, after her father, with a touch of tender sentiment; but use and fondness, and perhaps a sense that the more romantic appellation sounded somewhat weak-minded, had long ago improved it into Cicely. Mabel got her name from a similar motive, because it was pretty. It was the period when names of this class came into fashion, throwing the old-fashioned Janes and Elizabeths into temporary eclipse; but as the girls grew up and it came to be impossible to connect her with any two-syllabled or dignified word, the name lent itself to abbreviation and she became Mab. They were both pretty girls. Cicely had her mother's softness, Mab her father's more regular beauty. They spent their lives in the pure air, in the woods, which were so close at hand, in the old-fashioned garden which they partly cultivated, or, when they could get so far, on those bleaker commons and pine forests, where the breezes went to their young heads like wine. Miss Brown's friends in the parish "felt for her" with two such wild creatures to manage; and she occasionally "felt for" herself, and sighed with a gentle complacency to think

of the "good work" she was doing. But I don't think she found her task so hard as she said. The girls did not look up to her, but they looked very kindly down upon her, which came to much the same thing, taking care with youthful generosity not to let her see how much insight they had, or how they laughed between themselves at her mild little affectations. Children are terribly sharp-sighted, and see through these innocent pretences better than we ourselves do. They took care of her often when she thought she was taking care of them; and yet they learned the simple lessons she gave them with something like pleasure; for their natures were so vigorous and wholesome that even the little tedium was agreeable as a change. And for their father they entertained a kind of half-contemptuous – nay, the word is too hard – a kind of condescending worship. He was a god to them, but a god who was very helpless, who could do little for himself, who was inferior to them in all practical things, though more good, more kind, more handsome, more elevated than any other mortal. This was, on the whole, rather safe ground for two such active-minded young persons. They were prepared to see him do foolish things now and then. It was "papa's way," which they accepted without criticism, smiling to one another, but in their minds he was enveloped in a sort of feeble divinity, a being in whom certain weaknesses were understood, but whose pedestal of superiority no other human creature could approach. Thus things went on till Cicely was fifteen, when important changes took place in their lives, and still more especially in their father's

life.

CHAPTER III
AUNT JANE

THE STTHE ST. Johns had one relative, and only one, so far as they knew. This was Miss Jane Maydew, who lived in London, the aunt of their mother, a lady who possessed in her own right – but, alas, only in the form of an annuity – the magnificent income of two hundred and fifty pounds a year. To think that this old lady, with only herself to think of, should have fifty pounds more yearly than a clergyman with a family, and all the parish looking to him! More than once this idea had crossed even Hester's mind, though she was very reasonable and could make her pounds go further than most people. Miss Maydew was not very much older than her niece, but yet she was an old lady, sixty-five, or thereabouts. She liked her little comforts as well as most people, yet she had laid by fifty pounds of her income for the last twenty years, with the utmost regularity. A thousand pounds is a pretty little sum of money, but it does not seem much to account for twenty years of savings. A stockbroker might make it easily in a morning by a mere transfer from one hand to another; and to think how much wear and tear of humanity can be in it on the other hand! It is discouraging to poor economists to feel how little they can do, labour as they may; but I don't think Miss Maydew had anything of this feeling. She was on

the contrary very proud of her thousand pounds. It was her own creation, she had made it out of nothing; and the name of it, a thousand pounds! was as a strain of music in her ears, like the name of a favourite child. Perhaps it was the completion of this beautiful sum, rounded and finished like a poem, which gave her something of that satisfaction and wish for repose which follows the completion of every great work; and this brought about her visit to Brentburn, and all that directly and indirectly followed it. She had not seen the St. Johns since Hester's death, though they were her nearest relatives, the natural heirs of the fortune she had accumulated. And the summer was warming into June, and everything spoke of the country. Miss Maydew lived in Great Coram Street, Russell Square. She had two charming large rooms, her bedroom at the back, her sitting-room at the front, the two drawing-rooms in better days of the comfortable Bloomsbury mansion. But even when your rooms are airy and cool, it is hard to fight against that sense of summer which drops into a London street in the warm long days, waking recollections of all kinds, making eyelids drowsy, and the imagination work. Even the cries in the street, the "flowers a blowing and a growing" of the costermongers, the first vegetables, the "groundsel for your birds," and the very sight of the greengrocer opposite with his groves of young cabbages and baskets of young potatoes awoke this sensation of summer in the heart of the solitary woman at her window. Her youth, which was so full of summer, stirred in her once more, and old scenes all framed in waving foliage of

trees and soft enclosures of greensward, came before her closed eyes as she dozed through the long long sunny afternoon. A frugal old maiden, lodging in two rooms in a noisy Bloomsbury street, and saving fifty pounds a year, is as little safe as any poet from such visitations. As she sat there musing in that strange confusion of mind which makes one wonder sometimes whether the things one recollects ever were, or were merely a dream, Hester and Hester's children came into Miss Maydew's mind. She had not seen them since her niece's death, and what might have become of the poor children left with that incapable father? This thought simmered in her fancy for a whole week, then suddenly one morning when it was finer than ever, and the very canaries sang wildly in their cages, and the costermongers' cries lost all their hoarseness in the golden air, she took the decided step of going off to the railway and taking a ticket for Brentburn. It was not very far, an hour's journey only, and there was no need to take any luggage with her, as she could return the same night; so the excursion was both cheap and easy, as mild an extravagance as heart could desire.

The air was full of the wild sweet freshness of the pines as she landed on the edge of the common; the seed pods on the gorse bushes were crackling in the heat, the ragged hedges on the roadside hung out long pennons of straggling branches, blossomed to the very tips with wild roses delicately sweet. Miss Maydew was not long in encountering the objects of her interest. As she went along to the rectory, carrying her large

brown sunshade open in one hand, and her large white pocket-handkerchief to fan herself in the other, her ears and her eyes were alike attracted by a little group, under the shadow of a great tree just where the gorse and the pines ended. There were two tall girls in print frocks of the simplest character, and large hats of coarse straw; and seated on the root of the tree slightly raised above them, a plain little woman in a brown gown. Some well worn volumes were lying on the grass, but the book which one of the girls held in her hand, standing up in an attitude of indignant remonstrance, was a square slim book of a different aspect. The other held a huge pencil, one of those weapons red at one end and blue at the other which schoolboys love, which she twirled in her fingers with some excitement. Miss Maydew divined at once who they were, and walking slowly, listened. Their voices were by no means low, and they were quite unconscious of auditors and indifferent who might hear.

"What does 'nice' mean?" cried the elder, flourishing the book. "Why, is it not ladylike? If one is clever, and has a gift, is one not to use it? Not *nice?* I want to know what *nice* means?"

"My dear," said the governess, "I wish you would not always be asking what everything means. A great many things are understood without explanation in good society – "

"But we don't know anything about good society, nor society at all. Why is it not nice for Mab to draw? Why is it unladylike?" cried the girl, her eyes sparkling. As for the other one, she shrugged her shoulders, and twirled her pencil, while Miss Brown

looked at them with a feeble protestation, clasping her hands in despair.

"Oh, Cicely! never anything but why? – why?" she said, with lofty, yet pitying disapproval, "You may be sure it is so when I say it." Then, leaving this high position for the more dangerous exercise of reason. "Besides, the more one thinks of it, the more improper it seems. There are drawings of *gentlemen* in that book. Is that nice, do you suppose? Gentlemen! Put it away; and, Mabel, I desire you never to do anything so very unladylike again."

"But, Miss Brown!" said the younger; "there are a great many gentlemen in the world. I can't help seeing them, can I?"

"A young lady who respects herself, and who has been brought up as she ought, never looks at gentlemen. No, you can't help seeing them; but to draw them you must *look* at them; you must study them. Oh!" said Miss Brown with horror, putting up her hands before her eyes, "never let me hear of such a thing again. Give me the book, Cicely. It is too dreadful. I ought to burn it; but at least I must lock it away."

"Don't be afraid, Mab; she shan't have the book," said Cicely, with flashing eyes, stepping back, and holding the volume behind her in her clasped hands.

Just then Miss Maydew touched her on the sleeve. "I can't be mistaken," said the old lady; "you are so like your poor mother. Are you not Mr. St. John's daughter? I suppose you don't remember me?"

"It is Aunt Jane," whispered Mab in Cicely's ear, getting up with a blush, more conscious of the interruption than her sister was. The artist had the quickest eye.

"Yes, it is Aunt Jane; I am glad you recollect," said Miss Maydew. "I have come all the way from town to pay you a visit, and that is not a small matter on such a hot day."

"Papa will be very glad to see you," said Cicely, looking up shy but pleased, with a flood of colour rushing over her face under the shade of her big hat. She was doubtful whether she should put up her pretty cheek to kiss the stranger, or wait for that salutation. She put out her hand, which seemed an intermediate measure. "I am Cicely," she said, "and this is Mab; we are very glad to see you, Aunt Jane."

Miss Brown got up hastily from under the tree, and made the stranger a curtsy. She gave a troubled glance at the girls' frocks, which were not so fresh as they might have been. "You will excuse their schoolroom dresses," she said, "we were not expecting any one; and it was so fine this morning that I indulged the young ladies, and let them do their work here. Ask your aunt, my dears, to come in."

"Work!" said Miss Maydew, somewhat crossly, "I heard nothing but talk. Yes, I should like to go in, if you please. It is a long walk from the station – and so hot. Why, it is hotter here than in London, for all you talk about the country. There you can always get shade on one side of the street. This is like a furnace. I don't know how you can live in such a blazing place;" and

the old lady fanned herself with her large white handkerchief, a sight which brought gleams of mischief into Mab's brown eyes. The red and blue pencil twirled more rapidly round than ever in her fingers, and she cast a longing glance at the sketch-book in Cicely's hand. The girls were quite cool, and at their ease under the great beech-tree, which threw broken shadows far over the grass, – shadows which waved about as the big boughs did, and refreshed the mind with soft visionary fanning. Their big hats shadowed two faces, fresh and cool like flowers, with that downy bloom upon them which is the privilege of extreme youth. Miss Brown, who was concerned about their frocks, saw nothing but the creases in their pink and white garments; but what Miss Maydew saw was (she herself said) "a picture;" two fair slim things in white, with touches of pink, in soft shade, with bright patches of sunshine flitting about them, and the green background of the common rolled back in soft undulations behind. Poor lady! she was a great contrast to this picture; her cheeks flushed with the heat, her bonnet-strings loosed, fanning herself with her handkerchief. And this was what woke up those gleams of fun in Mab's saucy eyes.

"But it is not hot," said Mab. "How can you speak of a street when you are on the common? Don't you smell the pines, Aunt Jane, and the honey in the gorse? Come under the tree near to us; it is not the least hot here."

"You are a conceited little person," said Aunt Jane.

"Oh no! she is not conceited – she is only decided in her

opinions," said Cicely. "You see we are not hot in the shade. But come in this way, the back way, through the garden, which is always cool. Sit down here in the summer-house, Aunt Jane, and rest. I'll run and get you some strawberries. They are just beginning to get ripe."

"You are a nice little person," said Miss Maydew, sitting down with a sigh of relief. "I don't want any strawberries, but you can come and kiss me. You are very like your poor mother. As for that thing, I don't know who she is like – not our family, I am sure."

"She is like the St. John's," said Cicely solemnly; "she is like papa."

Mab only laughed. She did not mind what people said. "I'll kiss you, too," she said, "Aunt Jane, if you like; though you don't like me."

"I never said I didn't like you. I am not so very fond of my family as that. One can see you are a pickle, though I don't so much mind that either; but I like to look at this one, because she is like your poor mother. Dear, dear! Hester's very eyes, and her cheeks like two roses, and her nice brown wavy hair!"

The girls drew near with eager interest, and Mab took up in her artist's fingers a great handful of the hair which lay upon her sister's shoulders. "Was mamma's like that?" she said in awe and wonder; and Cicely, too, fixed her eyes upon her own bright locks reverentially. It gave them a new strange feeling for their mother to think that she had once been a girl like

themselves. Strangest thought for a child's mind to grasp; stranger even than the kindred thought, that one day those crisp half-curling locks, fall of threads of gold, would be blanched like the soft braids under Mrs. St. John's cap. "Poor mamma!" they said simultaneously under their breath.

"Brighter than that!" said Miss Maydew, seeing across the mists of years a glorified vision of youth, more lovely than Hester had ever been. "Ah, well!" she added with a sigh, "time goes very quickly, girls. Before you know, you will be old, too, and tell the young ones how pretty you were long ago. Yes, Miss Audacity! you mayn't believe it, but I was pretty, too."

"Oh yes, I believe it!" cried Mab, relieved from the momentary gravity which had subdued her. "You have a handsome nose still, and not nearly so bad a mouth as most people. I should like to draw you, just as you stood under the beech-tree; that was beautiful!" she cried, clapping her hands. Miss Maydew was pleased. She recollected how she had admired the two young creatures under that far-spreading shade; and it did not seem at all unnatural that they should in their turn have admired her.

"Mabel! Mabel!" said Miss Brown, who knew better, lifting a warning finger. Miss Maydew took up the sketch-book which Cicely had laid on the rough table in the summer-house. "Is this what you were all talking about?" she said. But at this moment the governess withdrew and followed Cicely into the house. She walked through the garden towards the rectory in a very dignified

way. She could not stand by and laugh faintly at caricatures of herself as some high-minded people are capable of doing. "I hope Miss Maydew will say what she thinks very plainly," she said to Cicely, who flew past her in a great hurry with a fresh clean white napkin out of the linen-press. But Cicely was much too busy to reply. As for Mab, I think she would have escaped too, had she been able; but as that was impossible, she stood up very demurely while her old aunt turned over the book, which was a note-book ruled with blue lines, and intended for a more virtuous purpose than that to which it had been appropriated; and it was not until Miss Maydew burst into a short but hearty laugh over a caricature of Miss Brown that Mab ventured to breathe.

"You wicked little thing! Are these yours?" said Miss Maydew; "and how dared you let that poor woman see them? Why, she is there to the life!"

"Oh! Aunt Jane, give me the book! She has never seen them: only a few innocent ones at the beginning. Oh! *please* give me the book! I don't want her to see them!" cried Mab.

"You hate her, I suppose?"

"Oh! no, no! give me the book, Aunt Jane! We don't hate her at all; we like her rather. Oh! please give it me before she comes back!"

"Why do you make caricatures of her, then?" said Miss Maydew, fixing her eyes severely on the girl's face.

"Because she is such fun!" cried Mab; "because it is such fun. I don't mean any harm, but if people will look funny, how can I

help it? Give me the book, Aunt Jane!"

"I suppose I looked funny too," said Miss Maydew, "under the beech-tree, fanning myself with my pockethandkerchief. I thought I heard you giggle. Go away, you wicked little thing! Here is your sister coming. I like her a great deal better than you!"

"So she is, a great deal better than me," said Mab, picking up her book. She stole away, giving herself a serious lecture, as Cicely tripped into the summer-house carrying a tray. "I must not do it again," she said to herself. "It is silly of me. It is always getting me into scrapes; even papa, when I showed him that one of himself!" Here Mab paused to laugh, for it had been very funny – and then blushed violently; for certainly it was wrong, very wrong to caricature one's papa. "At all events," she said under her breath, "I'll get a book with a lock and key as soon as ever I have any money, and show them only to Cicely; but oh! I must, I must just this once, do Aunt Jane!"

Cicely meanwhile came into the summer-house carrying the tray. "It is not the right time for it, I know," she said, "but I felt sure you would like a cup of tea. Doesn't it smell nice – like the hay-fields? Tea is always nice, is it not, Aunt Jane?"

"My darling, you are the very image of your poor mother!" said Miss Maydew with tears in her eyes. "She was always one who took the trouble to think what her friends would like best. And what good tea it is, and how nicely served! Was the kettle boiling? Ah! I recognise your dear mother in that. It used always to be a saying with us at home that the kettle should always be

boiling in a well-regulated house."

Then the old lady began to ask cunning questions about the household: whether Cicely was in the habit of making tea and carrying trays about, as she did this so nicely; and other close and delicate cross-examinations, by which she found out a great deal about the qualities of the servant and the governess. Miss Maydew was too clever to tell Cicely what she thought at the conclusion of her inquiry, but she went in thoughtfully to the house, and was somewhat silent as the girls took her all over it – to the best room to take off her bonnet, to their room to see what a pretty view they had, and into all the empty chambers. The comments she made as she followed them were few but significant. "It was rather extravagant of your papa to furnish it all; he never could have wanted so large a house," she said.

"Oh! but the furniture is the Rector's, it is not papa's," cried her conductors, both in a breath.

"I shouldn't like, if I were him, to have the charge of other people's furniture," Miss Maydew replied; and it seemed to the girls that she was rather disposed to find fault with all poor papa's arrangements, though she was so kind to them. Mr. St. John was "in the parish," and did not come back till it was time for the early dinner; and it was late in the afternoon when Miss Maydew, knocking at his study door, went in alone to "have a talk" with him, with the intention of "giving him her mind" on several subjects, written fully in her face. The study was a well-sized room looking out upon the garden, and furnished with heavy

book-shelves and bureaux in old dark coloured mahogany. The carpet was worn, but those mournful pieces of furniture defied the action of time. She looked round upon them with a slightly supercilious critical glance.

"The room is very well furnished," she said, "Mr. St. John; exceedingly well furnished; to rub it up and keep it in order must give your servant a great deal of work."

"It is not my furniture, but Mr. Chester's, my rector," said the curate; "we never had very much of our own."

"It must give the maid a deal of work all the same, and that's why the girls have so much housemaiding to do, I suppose," said Miss Maydew sharply. "To tell the truth, that was what I came to speak of. I am not at all satisfied, Mr. St. John, about the girls."

"The girls? They are quite well, I think, quite well," said Mr. St. John meekly. He was not accustomed to be spoken to in this abrupt tone.

"I was not thinking of their health; of course they are well; how could they help being well with so much fresh air, and a cow, I suppose, and all that? I don't like the way they are managed. They are nice girls, but that Miss Brown knows just about as much how to manage them as you – as that table does, Mr. St. John. It is ridiculous. She has no control over them. Now, I'll tell you what is my opinion. They ought to be sent to school."

"To school!" he said, startled. "I thought girls were not sent to school."

"Ah, that is when they have a nice mother to look after them

– a woman like poor Hester; but what are those two doing? You don't look after them yourself, Mr. St. John?"

"I suppose it can't be said that I do," he said, with hesitation: "perhaps it is wrong, but what do I know of girls' education? and then they all said I should have Miss Brown."

"Who are 'they all?' You should have asked me. I should never have said Miss Brown. Not that I've anything against her. She is a good, silly creature enough – but pay attention to me, please, Mr. St. John. I say the girls should go to school."

"It is very likely you may be right," said Mr. St. John, who always yielded to impetuosity, "but what should I do with Miss Brown?"

"Send her away – nothing could be more easy – tell her that you shall not want her services any longer. You must give her a month's notice, unless she was engaged in some particular way."

"I don't know," said the curate in trepidation. "Bless me, it will be very unpleasant. What will she do? What do you think she would say? Don't you think, on the whole, we get on very well as we are? I have always been told that it was bad to send girls to school; and besides it costs a great deal of money," he added after a pause. "I don't know if I could afford it; that is a thing which must be thought of," he said, with a sense of relief.

"I have thought of that," said Miss Maydew triumphantly: "the girls interest me, and I will send them to school. Oh, don't say anything. I don't do it for thanks. To me their improving will be my recompense. Put all anxiety out of your mind; I will

undertake the whole – ”

“But, Miss Maydew!”

“There are no buts in the matter,” said Aunt Jane, rising; “I have quite settled it. I have saved a nice little sum, which will go to them eventually, and I should like to see them in a position to do me credit. Don’t say anything, Mr. St. John. Hester’s girls! – poor Hester! – no one in the world can have so great a claim upon me; and no one can tell so well as I what they lost in poor Hester, Mr. St. John – and what you lost as well.”

The curate bowed his head. Though he was so tranquil and resigned, the name of his Hester went to his heart, with a dull pang, perhaps – for he was growing old, and had a calm unimpassioned spirit – but still with a pang, and no easy words of mourning would come to his lip.

“Yes, indeed,” said Aunt Jane, “I don’t know that I ever knew any one like her; and her girls shall have justice, they shall have justice, Mr. St. John. I mean to make it my business to find them a school – but till you have heard from me finally,” she added, turning back after she had reached the door, “it will be as well not to say anything to Miss Brown.”

“Oh no,” said the curate eagerly, “it will be much best to say nothing to Miss Brown.”

Miss Maydew nodded at him confidentially as she went away, and left him in all the despair of an unexpected crisis. *He* say anything to Miss Brown! What should he say? That he had no further occasion for her services? But how could he say so to a

lady? Had he not always gone upon the amiable ground that she had done him the greatest favour in coming there to teach his daughters, and now to dismiss her – to *dismiss* her! Mr. St. John's heart sunk down, down to the very heels of his boots. It was all very easy for Aunt Jane, who had not got it to do; but he, *he!* how was he ever to summon his courage and say anything like this to Miss Brown?

CHAPTER IV
MISS BROWN

MR. STMR. ST. John's mind was very much moved by this conversation. It threw a shadow over his harmless life. He could not say good night or good morning to Miss Brown without feeling in his very soul the horror of the moment when he should have to say to her that he had no further need for her services. To say it to Hannah in the kitchen would have been dreadful enough, but in that case he could at least have employed Miss Brown, or even Cicely, to do it for him, whereas now he could employ no one. Sometimes, from the mere attraction of horror, he would rehearse it under his breath when he sat up late, and knew that no one was up in the rectory, or when he was alone on some quiet road at the other extremity of the parish. "I shall have no further need for your services." Terrible formula! the mere thought of which froze the blood in his veins. This horror made him less sociable than he had ever been. He took no more of those evening walks which he had once liked in his quiet way, – when, the two girls speeding on before, with their restless feet, he would saunter along the twilight road after them, at ease and quiet, with his hands under his coat-tails; while little Miss Brown, generally a step or two behind, came trotting after him with her small steps, propounding little theological questions or

moral doubts upon which she would like to have his opinion. The evening stillness, the shadowy, soft gloom about, the mild, grey mist of imperfect vision that made everything dreamy and vague, suited him better than the light and colour of the day. As he wandered on, in perfect repose and ease, with the two flitting figures before him, darting from side to side of the road, and from bush to bush of the common, their voices sounding like broken links of music; notwithstanding all that he had had in his life to wear him down, the curate was happy. Very often at the conclusion of these walks he would go through the churchyard and stand for a moment at the white cross over his wife's grave. But this act did not change his mood; he went there as he might have gone had Hester been ill in bed, to say softly, "Good night, my dear," through the closed curtains. She made him no reply; but she was well off and happy, dear soul! and why should not he be so too? And when he went in to supper after, he was always very cheerful; it was with him the friendliest moment of the day.

But this was all over since Miss Maydew's visit; the thought of the moment, no doubt approaching, when he would have to say, "I shall have no further need for your services," overwhelmed him. He had almost said it over like a parrot on several occasions, so poisoned was his mind by the horror that was to come. And Miss Maydew, I need not say, did not let any grass grow under her feet in the matter. She was so convinced of Miss Brown's incapacity, and so eager in following out her own plan, and so much interested in the occupation it gave her, that her tranquil

life was quite revolutionized by it. She went to call upon all her friends, and consulted them anxiously about the young ladies' schools they knew. "It must not be too expensive, but it must be very good," she told all her acquaintances, who were, like most other people, struck with respect by the name of St. John. Almost an excitement arose in that quiet, respectable neighbourhood, penetrating even into those stately houses in Russell Square, at two or three of which Miss Maydew visited. "Two very sweet girls, the daughters of a clergyman, the sort of girls whom it would be an advantage to any establishment to receive," Miss Maydew's friend said; and the conclusion was, that the old lady found "vacancies" for her nieces in the most unexpected way in a school of very high pretensions indeed, which gladly accepted, on lower terms than usual, girls so well recommended, and with so well-sounding a name. She wrote with triumph in her heart to their father as soon as she had arrived at this summit of her wishes, and, I need not say, carried despair to his. But even after he had received two or three warnings, Mr. St. John could not screw his courage to the sticking point for the terrible step that was required of him; and it was only a letter from Miss Maydew, announcing her speedy arrival to escort the girls to their school, and her desire that their clothes should be got ready, that forced him into action. A more miserable man was not in all the country than, when thus compelled by fate, the curate was. He had not been able to sleep all night for thinking of this dreadful task before him. He was not able to eat any breakfast, and the girls

were consulting together what could be the matter with papa when he suddenly came into the schoolroom, where Miss Brown sat placidly at the large deal table, setting copies in her neat little hand. All his movements were so quiet and gentle that the abruptness of his despair filled the girls with surprise and dismay.

"Papa came flouncing in," Mab said, who was partly touched and partly indignant – indignant at being sent off to school, touched by the sight of his evident emotion. The girls believed that this emotion was called forth by the idea of parting with them; they did not know that it was in reality a mixture of fright and horror as to how he was to make that terrible announcement to Miss Brown.

"My dears," he said, faltering, "I have got a letter from your aunt Jane. I am afraid it will take you by surprise as – as it has done me. She wants you to – go – to school."

"To school!" they cried both together, in unfeigned horror and alarm. Miss Brown, who had been ruling her copybooks very nicely, acknowledging Mr. St. John's entrance only by a smile, let the pencil drop out of her hand.

"It is – very sudden," he said, trembling – "very sudden. Your poor aunt is that kind of woman. She means to be very kind to you, my dears; and she has made up her mind that you must be educated – "

"Educated! Are we not being educated now? Miss Brown teaches us everything – everything we require to know," said Cicely, her colour rising, planting herself in front of the

governess; as she had sprung up to defend her sister, when Miss Maydew saw her first. At that age Cicely was easily moved to indignation, and started forward perhaps too indiscriminately in behalf of any one who might be assailed. She was ready to put Miss Brown upon the highest pedestal, whenever a word was said in her disfavour.

"So I think, my dear; so I think," said the frightened curate. "I made that very remark to your aunt; but it is very difficult to struggle against the impetuosity of a lady, and – and perhaps being taken by surprise, I – acquiesced more easily than I ought."

"But we won't go – we can't go," cried Mab. "I shall die, and Cicely will die, if we are sent away from home."

"My dears!" said poor Mr. St. John – this impetuosity was terrible to him – "you must not say so; indeed you must not say so. What could I say to your aunt? She means to give you all she has, and how could I oppose her? She means it for the best. I am sure she means it for the best."

"And did you really consent," said Cicely, seriously, looking him straight in the eyes, "without ever saying a word to us, or to Miss Brown? Oh, papa, I could not have believed it of you! I hate Aunt Jane! Miss Brown, dear!" cried the girl, throwing her arms suddenly round the little governess, "it is not Mab's fault nor mine!"

Then it was Miss Brown's turn to fall upon the unhappy curate and slay him. "My dear love," she said, "how could I suppose it was your fault or Mab's? Except a little levity now and then,

which was to be expected at your age, you have been very good, very good children. There is no fault at all in the matter," she continued, turning with that magnanimity of the aggrieved which is so terrible to an offender, to Mr. St. John. "Perhaps it is a little sudden; perhaps a person so fond of the girls as I am might have been expected to be consulted as to the best school; for there is a great difference in schools. But Miss Maydew is very impetuous, and I don't blame your dear papa. When do you wish me to leave, sir?" she said, looking at him with a smile, which tortured the curate, upon her lips.

"Miss Brown, I hope you will not think badly of me," he said. "You can't think how hard all this is upon me."

The little woman rose up, and waved her hand with dignity. "We must not enter into such questions," she said; "if you will be so very kind as to tell me when you would like me to go."

I don't know what incoherent words the curate stammered forth: that she should stay as long as she liked; that she must make her arrangements entirely to suit herself; that he had never thought of wishing her to go. This was what he said in much disturbance and agitation of mind instead of the other formula he had rehearsed about having no further need for her services. All this Miss Brown received with the pale smiling of the injured and magnanimous; while the girls looked fiercely on their father, leaving him alone and undefended. When he got away he was so exhausted that he did not feel able to go out into the parish, but withdrew to his study, where he lurked, half paralyzed, all the

rest of the day, like the criminal abandoned by woman and by man, which he felt himself to be.

And I will not attempt to describe the commotion which this announcement raised in the rest of the house. Miss Brown kept up that smile of magnanimous meekness all day. She would not give in. "No, my dears," she said, "there is nothing to be said except that it is a little sudden. I think your papa is quite right, and that you are getting beyond me."

"It is not papa," said Cicely; "it is that horrible Aunt Jane."

"And she was quite right," said the magnanimous governess; "quite right. She saw that I was not strong enough. It is a little sudden, that is all; and we must not make mountains out of mole-hills, my dears." But she, too, retired to her room early, where, sitting forlorn at the window, she had a good cry, poor soul; for she had begun to grow fond of this rude solitude, and she had no home.

As for the girls, after their first dismay and wrath the tide turned with them. They were going out into the unknown, words which sound so differently to different ears – so miserable to some, so exciting to others. To Cicely and Mab they were exciting only. A new world, new faces, new people to know, new places to see, new things to hear; gradually they forgot their wrath alike and their emotion at this thought. A thrill of awe, of fear, of delicious curiosity and wonder ran through them. This checked upon their very lips those reproaches which they had been pouring forth, addressed to their father and to Aunt Jane.

Would they be miserable after all? should not they, rather, on the whole, *like* it, if it was not wrong to say so? This first silenced, then insinuated into their lips little broken words, questions and wonderings which betrayed to each the other's feelings. "It might be – fun, perhaps," Mab said at last; then looked up frightened at Cicely, wondering if her sister would metaphorically kill her for saying so. But then a gleam in Cicely's eyes looked as if she thought so too.

Miss Brown set about very bravely next morning to get their things in order. She was very brave and determined to be magnanimous, but I cannot say that she was cheerful. It is true that she kept smiling all day long, like Malvolio, though with the better motive of concealing her disappointment and pain and unjust feeling; but the effect of this smile was depressing. She was determined, whatever might happen, to do her duty to the last: and then, what did it matter what should follow? With this valiant resolution she faced the crisis and nobly took up all its duties. She bought I don't know how many dozens of yards of nice "long-cloth," and cut out and made up, chiefly with the sewing-machine, garments which she discreetly called "under-clothing" for the girls; for her delicacy shunned the familiar names of those indispensable articles. She found it needful that they should have new Sunday frocks, and engaged the parish dressmaker for a week, and went herself to town to buy the stuff, after the girls and she had spent an anxious yet not unpleasant afternoon in looking over patterns. All this she did, and never a word of murmur

escaped her lips. She was a heroic woman. And the busy days pursued each other so rapidly that the awful morning came, and the girls weeping, yet not uncheerful, were swept away by the "fly" from the station – where Miss Maydew, red and excited, met them, and carried them off remorseless on their further way – before any one had time to breathe, much less to think. Mr. St. John went to the station with his daughters, and coming back alone and rather sad, for the first time forgot Miss Brown; so that when he heard a low sound of the piano in the schoolroom he was half frightened, and, without thinking, went straight to the forsaken room to see what it was. Poor curate! – unfortunate Mr. St. John! and not less unfortunate Miss Brown. The music had ceased before he reached the door, and when he went in nothing was audible but a melancholy little sound of sobbing and crying. Miss Brown was sitting before the old piano with her head bowed down in her hands. Her little sniffs and sobs were pitiful to hear. When he spoke she gave a great start, and got up trembling, wiping her tears hastily away with her handkerchief. "Did you speak, sir?" she said, with her usual attempt at cheerfulness. "I hope I did not disturb you; I was – amusing myself a little, until it is time for my train. My th-things are all packed and r-ready," said the poor little woman, making a deplorable effort at a smile. The sobs in her voice struck poor Mr. St. John to the very heart.

"I have never had time," he said in the tone of a self-condemned criminal, "to ask where you are going, Miss Brown."

"Oh yes, I have a pl-place to go to," she said. "I have

written to the Governesses' Institution, Mr. St. John, and very fo-fortunately they have a vacant room."

"The Governesses' Institution! Is that the only place you have to go to?" he said.

"Indeed, it is a very nice place," said Miss Brown; "very quiet and lady-like, and not d-dear. I have, excuse me, I have got so fo-fond of them. I never meant to cry. It is in Harley Street, Mr. St. John, very nice and respectable, and a great b-blessing to have such a place, when one has no h-home."

Mr. St. John walked to the other end of the room, and then back again, twice over. How conscience-stricken he was! While poor Miss Brown bit her lips and winked her eyelids to keep the tears away. Oh, why couldn't he go away, and let her have her cry out? But he did not do that. He stopped short at the table where she had set so many sums and cut out so much underclothing, and half turning his back upon her said, faltering, "Would it not be better to stay here, Miss Brown?"

The little governess blushed from head to foot, I am sure, if any one could have seen; she felt thrills of confusion run all over her at such a suggestion. "Oh, no, no," she cried, "you are very kind, Mr. St. John, but I have nobody but myself to take care of now, and I could not stay here, a day, not now the girls are gone."

The poor curate did not move. He took off the lid of the big inkstand and examined it as if that were what he was thinking of. The Governesses' Institution sounded miserable to him, and what could he do? "Miss Brown," he said in a troubled voice, "if

you think you would like to marry me, I have no objection; and then you know you could stay."

"Mr. St. John!"

"Yes; that is the only thing I can think of," he said, with a sigh. "After being here for years, how can you go to a Governesses' Institution? Therefore, if you think you would like it, Miss Brown – "

How can I relate what followed? "Oh, Mr. St. John, you are speaking out of pity, only pity!" said the little woman, with a sudden romantic gleam of certainty that he must have been a victim of despairing love for her all this time, and that the school-going of the girls was but a device for bringing out his passion. But Mr. St. John did not deny this charge, as she expected he would. "I don't know about pity," he said, confused, "but I am very sorry, and – and I don't see any other way."

This was how it happened that three weeks after the girls went to school Mr. St. John married Miss Brown. She went to the Governesses' Institution after all, resolute in her propriety, until the needful interval had passed, and then she came back as Mrs. St. John, to her own great surprise, and to the still greater surprise and consternation of the curate himself, and of the parish, who could not believe their ears. I need not say that Miss Maydew was absolutely furious, or that it was a great shock to Cicely and Mab when they were told what had happened. They did not trust themselves to say much to each other on the subject. It was the only subject, indeed, which they did not discuss between

themselves; but by-and-by even they got used to it, as people do to everything, and they were quite friendly, though distant, to Mrs. St. John.

Only one other important event occurred to that poor little woman in her life. A year after her marriage she had twin boys, to the still greater consternation of the curate; and three years after this she died. Thus the unfortunate man was left once more with two helpless children on his hands, as helpless himself as either of them, and again subject as before to the advice of all the parish. They counselled him this time "a good nurse," not a governess; but fortunately other actors appeared on the scene before he had time to see the excellent creature whom Mrs. Brockmill, of Fir Tree House, knew of. While he listened hopelessly, a poor man of sixty-five, casting piteous looks at the two babies whom he had no right, he knew, to have helped into the world, Cicely and Mab, with bright faces and flying feet, were already on the way to his rescue; and here, dear reader, though you may think you already know something of it, this true story really begins.

CHAPTER V
THE GIRLS AT SCHOOL

THE school to which Miss Maydew sent the girls was in the outskirts of a seaside town, and it was neither the best nor the worst of such establishments. There were some things which all the girls had to submit to, and some which bore especially on the Miss St. Johns, who had been received at a lower price than most of the others; but on the whole the Miss Blandys were good women, and not unkind to the pupils. Cicely and Mab, as sisters, had a room allotted to them in the upper part of the house by themselves, which was a great privilege – a bare attic room, with, on one side, a sloping roof, no carpet, except a small piece before each small bed, and the most meagre furniture possible. But what did they care for that? They had two chairs on which to sit and chatter facing each other, and a little table for their books and their work. They had a peep at the sea from their window, and they had their youth – what could any one desire more? In the winter nights, when it was cold sitting up in their fireless room, they used to lie down in those two little beds side by side and talk, often in the dark, for the lights had to be extinguished at ten o'clock. They had not spoken even to each other of their father's marriage. This unexpected event had shocked and bewildered them in the fantastic delicacy of their age. They could not bear to

think of their father as so far descended from his ideal elevation, and shed secret tears of rage more than of sorrow when they thought of their mother thus superseded. But the event was too terrible for words, and nothing whatever was said of it between them. When the next great occurrence, the birth of the two babies, was intimated to them, their feelings were different. They were first indignant, almost annoyed; then amused; in which stage Mab made such a sketch of Miss Brown with a baby in each arm, and Mr. St. John pathetically looking on, that they both burst forth into laughter, and the bond of reserve on this event was broken; and then all at once an interest of which they were half ashamed arose in their minds. They fell silent both together in a wondering reverie, and then Mab said to Cicely, turning to her big eyes of surprise —

"They belong to us too, I suppose. What are they to us?"

"Of course our half-brothers," said Cicely; and then there was another pause, partly of awe at the thought of a relationship so mysterious, and partly because it was within five minutes of ten. Then the candle was put out, and they jumped into their beds. On the whole, perhaps, it was more agreeable to talk of their father's other children in the dark, when the half-shame, half-wonder of it would not appear in each face.

"Is one expected to be fond of one's half-brother?" said Mab doubtfully.

"There is one illusion gone," said Cicely, in all the seriousness of sixteen. "I have always been cherishing the idea that when

we were quite grown up, instead of going out for governesses or anything of that sort, we might keep together, Mab, and take care of papa."

"But then," said Mab, "what would you have done with Mrs. St. John? I don't see that the babies make much difference. *She* is there to take care of papa."

On this Cicely gave an indignant sigh, but having no answer ready held her peace.

"For my part, I never thought of that," said Mab. "I have always thought it such a pity I am not a boy, for then I should have been the brother and you the sister, and I could have painted and you could have kept my house. I'll tell you what I should like," she continued, raising herself on her elbow with the excitement of the thought; "I should like if we two could go out into the world like Rosalind and Celia.

> 'Were it not better,
> Because that I am more than common tall,
> That I did suit me all points like a man?'"

"But you are not more than common tall," said Cicely, with unsympathetic laughter; "you are a little, tiny, insignificant thing."

Mab dropped upon her pillow half-crying. "You have no feeling," she said. "Aunt Jane says I shall go on growing for two years yet. Mamma did – "

"If you please," said Cicely, "you are not the one that is like

mamma."

This little passage of arms stopped the chatter. Cicely, penitent, would have renewed it after an interval, but Mab was affronted. Their father's marriage, however, made a great difference to the girls, even before the appearance of the "second family;" the fact that he had now another housekeeper and companion, and was independent of them affected the imagination of his daughters, though they were scarcely conscious of it. They no longer thought of going home, even for the longer holidays; and settling down at home after their schooling was over had become all at once impossible. Not that this change led them immediately to make new plans for themselves; for the youthful imagination seldom goes so far unguided except when character is very much developed; and the two were only unsettled, uneasy, not quite knowing what was to become of them; or rather, it was Cicely who felt the unsettledness and uneasiness as to her own future. Mab had never had any doubt about hers since she was ten years old. She had never seen any pictures to speak of, so that I cannot say she was a heaven-born painter, for she scarcely understood what that was. But she meant to draw; her pencil was to be her profession, though she scarcely knew how it was to be wielded, and thus she was delivered from all her sister's vague feelings of uncertainty. Mab's powers, however, had not been appreciated at first at school, where Miss Maydew's large assertions as to her niece's cleverness had raised corresponding expectations. But

when the drawing-master came with his little stock of landscapes to be copied, Mab, quite untutored in this kind, was utterly at a loss. She neither knew how to manage her colours, nor how to follow the vague lines of the "copy," and I cannot describe the humiliation of the sisters, nor the half disappointment, half triumph, of Miss Blandy.

"My dear, you must not be discouraged; I am sure you did as well as you could; and the fact is, we have a very high standard here," the school-mistress said.

It happened, however, after two or three of these failures that Cicely, sent by Miss Millicent Blandy on a special message into that retired and solemn chamber, where Miss Blandy the elder sister sat in the mornings supervising and correcting everything, from the exercises to the characters of her pupils, found the head of the establishment with the drawing-master looking over the productions of the week. He had Mab's drawing in his hand, and he was shaking his head over it.

"I don't know what to say about the youngest Miss St. John. This figure is well put in, but her sky and her distance are terrible," he was saying. "I don't think I shall make anything of her."

When Cicely heard this she forgot that she was a girl at school. She threw down a pile of books she was carrying, and flew out of the room without a word, making a great noise with the door. What she ought to have done was to have made a curtsy, put down the books softly by Miss Blandy's elbow, curtsied again,

and left the room noiselessly, in all respects save that of walking backward as she would have done at Court. Need I describe the look of dismay that came into Miss Blandy's face?

"These girls will be my death," she said. "Were there ever such colts? – worse than boys." This was the most dreadful condemnation Miss Blandy ever uttered. "If their aunt does not insist upon drawing, as she has so little real talent, she had better give it up."

At this moment Cicely burst in again breathless, her hair streaming behind her, her dress catching in the door, which she slammed after her. "Look here!" she cried; "look here, before you say Mab has no talent!" and she tossed down on the table the square blue-lined book, which her sister by this time had almost filled. She stood before them glowing and defiant, with flashing eyes and flowing hair; then she recollected some guilty recent pages, and quailed, putting out her hand for the book again. "Please it is only the beginning, not the end, you are to look at," she said, peremptory yet appealing. Had Miss Blandy alone been in the seat of judgment, she would, I fear, have paid but little attention to this appeal; but the old drawing-master was gentle and kind, as old professors of the arts so often are (for Art is Humanity, I think, almost oftener than letters), and besides, the young petitioner was very pretty in her generous enthusiasm, which affected him both as a man and an artist. The first page at once gave him a guess as to the inexpediency of examining the last; and the old man perceived in a moment at once the

mistake he had made, and the cause of it. He turned over the first few pages, chuckling amused approbation. "So these are your sister's," he said, and laughed and nodded his kind old head. When he came to a sketch of Hannah, the maid-of-all-work at the rectory, the humour of which might seem more permissible in Miss Blandy's eyes than the caricatures of ladies and gentlemen, he showed it to her; and even Miss Blandy, though meditating downright slaughter upon Cicely, could not restrain a smile. "Is this really Mabel's?" she condescended to ask. "As you say, Mr. Lake, not at all bad; much better than I could have thought."

"Better? it is capital!" said the drawing-master; and then he shut up the book close, and put it back in Cicely's hands. "I see there are private scribblings in it," he said, with a significant look; "take it back, my dear. I will speak to Miss Mabel to-morrow. And now, Miss Blandy, we will finish our business, if you please," he said benevolently, to leave time for Cicely and her dangerous volume to escape. Miss Blandy was vanquished by this stratagem, and Cicely, beginning to tremble at the thought of the danger she had escaped, withdrew very demurely, having first piled up on the table the books she had thrown down in her impetuosity. I may add at once that she did not escape without an address, in which withering irony alternated with solemn appeal to her best feelings, and which drew many hot tears from poor Cicely's eyes, but otherwise so far as I am aware did her no harm.

Thus Mab's gifts found acknowledgment at Miss Blandy's. The old drawing-master shook his fine flexible old artist hand at

her. “You take us all off, young lady,” he said; “you spare no one; but it is so clever that I forgive you; and by way of punishment you must work hard, now I know what you can do. And don’t show that book of yours to anybody but me. Miss Blandy would not take it so well as I do.”

“Oh, dear Mr. Lake, forgive me,” said Mab, smitten with compunction; “I will never do it again!”

“Never, till the next time,” he said, shaking his head; “but, anyhow, keep it to yourself, for it is a dangerous gift.”

And from that day he put her on “the figure” and “the round” – studies, in which Mab at first showed little more proficiency than she had done in the humbler sphere of landscape; for having leapt all at once into the exercise of something that felt like original art, this young lady did not care to go back to the elements. However, what with the force of school discipline, and some glimmerings of good sense in her own juvenile bosom, she was kept to it, and soon found the ground steady under her feet once more, and made rapid progress. By the time they had been three years at school, she was so proficient, that Mr. Lake, on retiring, after a hard-worked life, to well-earned leisure, recommended her as his successor. So that by seventeen, a year before Mrs. St. John’s death, Mab had released Miss Maydew and her father from all responsibility on her account. Cicely was not so clever; but she, too, had begun to help Miss Blandy in preference to returning to the rectory and being separated from her sister. Vague teaching of “English” and music is not so profitable as an unmistakable

and distinct art like drawing; but it was better than setting out upon a strange world alone, or going back to be a useless inmate of the rectory. As teachers the girls were both worse off and better off than as pupils. They were worse off because it is a descent in the social scale to come down from the level of those who pay to be taught, to the level of those who are paid for teaching – curious though the paradox seems to be; and they were better off, in so far as they were free from some of the restrictions of school, and had a kind of independent standing. They were allowed to keep their large attic, the bare walls of which were now half covered by Mab's drawings, and which Cicely's instinctive art of household management made to look more cheery and homelike than any other room in the house. They were snubbed sometimes by "parents," who thought the manners of these Miss St. Johns too easy and familiar, as if they were on an equality with their pupils; and by Miss Blandy, who considered them much too independent in their ways; and now and then had mortifications to bear which are not pleasant to girls. But there were two of them, which was a great matter; and in the continual conversation which they carried on about everything, they consoled each other. No doubt it was hard sometimes to hear music sounding from the open windows of the great house in the square, where their old schoolfellow, Miss Robinson, had come to live, and to see the carriages arriving, and all the glory of the ball-dresses, of which the two young governesses got a glimpse as they went out for a stroll on the beach in the summer twilight, an indulgence

which Miss Blandy disapproved of.

"Now, why should people be so different?" Cicely said, moralizing; "why should we have so little, and Alice Robinson so much? It don't seem fair."

"And we are not even prettier than she is, or gooder – which we ought to be, if there is any truth in compensation," said Mab, with a laugh.

"Or happier," said Cicely, with a sigh. "She has the upper hand of us in everything, and no balance on the other side to make up for it. Stay, though; she has very droll people for father and mother, and we have a very fine gentleman for our papa."

"Poor papa!" said Mab. They interchanged moods with each other every ten minutes, and were never monotonous, or for a long time the same.

"You may say why should people be so different," said Cicely, forgetting that it was herself who said it. "There is papa, now; he is delightful, but he is trying. When one thinks how altered everything is – and those two little babies. But yet, you know, we ought to ask ourselves, 'Were we happier at home, or are we happier here?'"

"We have more variety here," said Mab decisively; "there is the sea, for one thing; there we had only the garden."

"You forget the common; it was as nice as any sea, and never drowned people, or did anything dangerous; and the forest, and the sunset."

"There are sunsets here," said Mab, – "very fine ones. We are

not forgotten by the people who manage these things up above. And there is plenty of work; and the girls are amusing, and so are the parents."

"We should have had plenty of work at home," said Cicely; and then the point being carried as far as was necessary the discussion suddenly stopped. They were walking along the sands, almost entirely alone. Only here and there another group would pass them, or a solitary figure, chiefly tradespeople, taking their evening stroll. The fresh sea-breeze blew in their young faces, the soft dusk closed down over the blue water, which beat upon the shore at their feet in the softest whispering cadence. The air was all musical, thrilled softly by this hush of subdued sound. It put away the sound of the band at Miss Robinson's ball out of the girls' hearts. And yet balls are pleasant things at eighteen, and when two young creatures, quite deprived of such pleasures, turn their backs thus upon the enchanted place where the others are dancing, it would be strange if a touch of forlorn sentiment did not make itself felt in their hearts, though the soft falling of the dusk, and the hush of the great sea, and the salt air in their faces, gave them a pleasure, had they but known it, more exquisite than any mere ball, as a ball, ever confers. One only knows this, however, by reflection, never by immediate sensation; and so there was, as I have said, just a touch of pathos in their voices, and a sense of superiority, comfortable only in that it was superior, but slightly sad otherwise, in their hearts.

"I don't know what makes me go on thinking of home," said

Cicely, after a pause. “If we had been at home we should have had more pleasure, Mab. The people about would have asked us – a clergyman’s daughters always get asked; and there are very nice people about Brentburn, very different from the Robinsons and their class.”

“We should have had no dresses to go in,” said Mab. “How could we ever have had ball-dresses off papa’s two hundred a year?”

“Ball-dresses sound something very grand, but a plain white tarlatan is not dear when one can make it up one’s self. However, that is a poor way of looking at it,” said Cicely, giving a little toss to her head, as if to throw off such unelevated thoughts. “There are a great many more important things to think of. How will he ever manage to bring up the two boys?”

Mab made a pause of reflection. “To be sure Aunt Jane is not their relation,” she said, “and boys are more troublesome than girls. They want to have tutors and things, and to go to the university; and then what is the good of it all if they are not clever? Certainly boys are far more troublesome than girls.”

“And then, if you consider papa,” said Cicely, “that he is not very strong, and that he is old. One does not like to say anything disagreeable about one’s papa, but what *did* he want with those children? Surely we were quite enough when he is so poor.”

“There is always one thing he can do,” said Mab. “Everybody says he is a very good scholar. He will have to teach them himself.”

"We shall have to teach them," said Cicely with energy; "I know so well that this is what it will come to. I don't mean to teach them ourselves, for it is not much Latin I know, and you none, and I have not a word of Greek – but they will come upon us, I am quite sure."

"You forget Mrs. St. John," said Mab.

Cicely gave a slight shrug of her shoulders, but beyond that she did not pursue the subject. Mrs. St. John's name stopped everything; they could not discuss her, nor express their disapprobation, and therefore they forbore religiously, though it was sometimes hard work.

"Blandina will think we are late," at last she said, turning round. This was their name for their former instructress, their present employer. Mab turned dutifully, obeying her sister's touch, but with a faint sigh.

"I hope they will be quiet at the Robinsons as we are passing," the girl said. "What if they are in full swing, with the 'Blue Danube' perhaps! I hate to go in from a sweet night like this with noisy fiddles echoing through my head."

Cicely gave a slight squeeze of sympathy to her sister's arm. Do not you understand the girls, young reader? It was not the "Blue Danube" that was being played, but the old Lancers, the which to hear is enough to make wooden legs dance. Cicely and Mab pressed each other's arms, and glanced up at the window, where dancing shadows and figures were visible. They sighed, and they went into their garret, avoiding the tacit disapproval of

Miss Blandy's good-night. She did not approve of twilight walks. Why should they want to go out just then like the tradespeople, a thing which ladies never did? But if Miss Blandy had known that the girls were quite saddened by the sound of the music from the Robinsons', and yet could not sleep for listening to it, I fear she would have thought them very improper young persons indeed. She had forgotten how it felt to be eighteen – it was so long ago.

On the very next morning the news came of their stepmother's death. It was entirely unexpected by them, for they had no idea of the gradual weakness which had been stealing over that poor little woman, and they were moved by deep compunction as well as natural regret. It is impossible not to feel that we might have been kinder, might have made life happier to those that are gone – a feeling experienced the moment that we know them to be certainly gone, and inaccessible to all kindness. "Oh, poor Mrs. St. John!" said Mab, dropping a few natural tears. Cicely was more deeply affected. She was the eldest and had thought the most; as for the young artist, her feeling ran into the tips of her fingers, and got expansion there; but Cicely had no such medium. She went about mournfully all day long, and in the evening Mab found her seated at the window of their attic, looking out with her eyes big with tears upon the darkening sea. When her sister touched her on the shoulder Cicely's tears fell. "Oh, poor Miss Brown!" she said, her heart having gone back to the time when they had no grievance against their kind little governess. "Oh, Mab, if one could only tell her how one was sorry! if she could

only see into my heart now!"

"Perhaps she can," said Mab, awe-stricken and almost under her breath, lifting her eyes to the clear wistful horizon in which the evening star had just risen.

"And one could have said it only yesterday!" said Cicely, realizing for the first time that mystery of absolute severance; and what light thoughts had been in their minds yesterday! Sighs for Alice Robinson's ball, depression of soul and spirit caused by the distant strains of the Lancers, and the "Blue Danube" – while this tragedy was going on, and the poor soul who had been good to them, but to whom they had not been good, was departing, altogether and for ever out of reach. Cicely in her sorrow blamed herself unjustly, as was natural, and mourned for the mystery of human shortsightedness as well as for Mrs. St. John. But I do not mean to say that this grief was very profound after the first sting, and after that startling impression of the impossibility of further intercourse was over. The girls went out quietly in the afternoon, and bought black stuff to make themselves mourning, and spoke to each other in low voices and grave tones. Their youthful vigour was subdued – they were overawed to feel as it were the wings of the great Death-Angel overshadowing them. The very sunshine looked dim, and the world enveloped in a cloud. But it was within a week or two of Miss Blandy's "breaking up," and they could not go away immediately. Miss Blandy half audibly expressed her satisfaction that Mrs. St. John was only their step-mother. "Had she been their own mother, what should we have done?" she said.

So that it was not till the end of July, when the establishment broke up, that the girls were at last able to get home.

CHAPTER VI
THE GIRLS AT HOME

WE are so proud in England of having a word which means home, which some of our neighbours we are pleased to think have not, that, perhaps, it is a temptation to us to indulge in a general rapture over the word which has sometimes little foundation in reality. When Cicely and Mab walked to the rectory together from the station a suppressed excitement was in their minds. Since they first left for school, they had only come back for a few days each year, and they had not liked it. Their stepmother had been very kind, painfully kind; and anxious above measure that they should find everything as they had left it, and should not be disappointed or dull; but this very anxiety had made an end of all natural ease, and they had been glad when the moment came that released them. Now, poor woman, she had been removed out of their way; they were going back to take care of their father as they might have done had there been no second Mrs. St. John; and everything was as it had been, with the addition of the two babies, innocent little intruders, whom the girls, you may be sure, could never find it in their hearts to be hard upon. Cicely and Mab took each others' hands instinctively as they left the station. It was the first of August, the very prime and glory of summer; the woods were at their fullest, untouched

by any symptom of decay. The moorland side of the landscape was more wealthy and glorious still in its flush of heather. The common was not indeed one sheet of purple, like a Scotch moor; but it was all lighted up between the gorse bushes with fantastic streaks and bands of colour blazing in the broad sunshine, and haunted by swarms of bees which made a hum in the air almost as sweet and all-pervading as the murmur of the sea. As they drew near the house their hearts began to beat louder. Would there be any visible change upon it? Would it look as it did when they were children, or with that indefinable difference which showed in *her* time? They did not venture to go the familiar way by the garden, but walked up solemnly like visitors to the front door. It was opened to them by a new maid, whom they had never seen before, and who demurred slightly to giving them admittance, "Master ain't in," said the girl; "yes miss, I know as you're expected," but still she hesitated. This was not the kind of welcome which the daughters of a house generally receive. They went in to the house nevertheless, Betsy following them. The blinds were drawn low over the windows, which were all shut, and though the atmosphere was stifling with heat, yet it was cold, miserably cold to Cicely and Mab. Their father's study was the only place that had any life in it. The rectory seemed full of nothing but old black heavy furniture, and heavier memories of some chilled and faded past.

"What a dreadful old place it is," said Mab; "it is like coming home to one's grave," and she sat down on the black haircloth

easy-chair and shivered and cried; though this was coming home, to the house in which she had been born.

"Now it will be better," said Cicely pulling up the blinds and opening the window. She had more command of herself than her sister. She let the sunshine come down in a flood across the dingy carpet, worn with the use of twenty years.

"Please, miss," said Betsy interposing, "missis would never have the blinds up in this room 'cause of spoiling the carpet. If master says so, I don't mind; but till he do – " and here Betsy put up her hand to the blind.

"Do you venture to meddle with what my sister does?" cried Mab, furious, springing from her chair.

Cicely only laughed. "You are a good girl to mind what your mistress said, but we are your mistresses now; you must let the window alone, for don't you see the carpet is spoiled already? I will answer to papa. What is it? Do you want anything more?"

"Only this, miss," said Betsy, "as it's the first laugh as has been heard here for weeks and weeks, and I don't like it neither, seeing as missis is in her grave only a fortnight to-day."

"I think you are a very good girl," said Cicely: and with that the tears stood in that changeable young woman's eyes.

No Betsy that ever was heard of could long resist this sort of treatment. "I tries to be, miss," she said with a curtsy and a whimper. "Maybe you'd like a cup of tea?" and after following them suspiciously all over the house, she left them at last on this hospitable intent in the fading drawing-room, where they had

both enshrined the memory of their mother. Another memory was there now, a memory as faded as the room, which showed in all kinds of feeble feminine decorations, bits of modern lace, and worked cushions and foolish foot-stools. The room was all pinafored and transmogrified, the old dark picture-frames covered with yellow gauze, and the needlework in crackling semi-transparent covers.

"This was how she liked things, poor soul! Oh, Mab," cried Cicely, "how strange that she should die!"

"No stranger than that any one else should die," said Mab, who was more matter of fact.

"A great deal stranger! It was not strange at all that little Mary Seymour should die. One saw it in her eyes; she was like an angel; it was natural; but poor Miss Brown, who was quite happy working cushions and covering them up, and keeping the sun off the carpets, and making lace for the brackets! It looks as if there was so little sense or method in it," said Cicely. "She won't have any cushions to work up there."

"I dare say there won't be anything to draw up there," said Mab; "and yet I suppose I shall die too in time."

"When there are the four walls for Leonardo, and Michel Angelo and Raphael and poor Andrea," said the other. "How you forget! Besides, it is quite different. Hark! what was that?" she cried, putting up her hand.

What it was soon became very distinctly evident – a feeble little cry speedily joined by another, and then a small weak

chorus, two voices entangled together. “No, no; no ladies. Harry no like ladies,” mixed with a whimpering appeal to “papa, papa.”

“Come and see the pretty ladies. Harry never saw such pretty ladies,” said the encouraging voice of Betsy in the passage.

The girls looked at each other, and grew red. They had made up their minds about a great many things, but never how they were to deal with the two children. Then Betsy appeared at the door, pushing it open before her with the tea-tray she carried. To her skirts were hanging two little boys, clinging to her, yet resisting her onward motion, and carried on by it in spite of themselves. They stared at the new-comers with big blue eyes wide open, awed into silence. They were very small and very pale, with light colourless limp locks falling over their little black dresses. The girls on their side stared silently too. There was not a feature in the children’s faces which resembled their elder sisters. They were both little miniatures of Miss Brown.

“So these are the children,” said Cicely, making a reluctant step forward; to which Harry and Charley responded by a renewed clutch at Betsy’s dress.

“Yes, miss; them’s the children! and darlings they be,” said Betsy, looking fondly at them as she set down the tea. Cicely made another step forward slowly, and held out her hands to them; when the little boys set up a scream which rang through the house, and hiding their faces simultaneously in Betsy’s gown, howled to be taken away. Mab put up her hands to her ears, but Cicely, more anxious to do her duty, made another attempt. She

stooped down and kissed, or tried to kiss the little tear-stained faces, to which caress each small brother replied by pushing her away with a repeated roar.

"Don't you take no notice, miss. Let 'em alone and they'll get used to you in time," said Betsy.

"Go away, go away! Harry no like 'oo," screamed the spokesman brother. No one likes to be repulsed even by a child. Cicely stumbled to her feet very red and uncomfortable. She stood ruefully looking after them as they were carried off after a good preliminary "shake," one in each of Betsy's red hands.

"There is our business in life," she said in a solemn tone. "Oh, Mab, Mab, what did papa want with these children? All the trouble of them will come on you and me."

Mab looked at her sister with a look of alarm, which changed, however, into laughter at sight of Cicely's solemn looks and the dreary presentiment in her face.

"You are excellent like that," she said; "and if you had only seen how funny you all looked when the little demons began to cry. They will do for models at all events, and I'll take to painting children. They say it's very good practice, and nursery pictures always sell."

These lighter suggestions did not, however, console Cicely. She walked about the room with clasped hands and a very serious face, neglecting her tea.

"Papa will never trouble himself about them," she said half to herself; "it will all fall on Mab and me. And boys! that they

should be boys. We shall never be rich enough to send them to the University. Girls we might have taught ourselves; but when you think of Oxford and Cambridge – "

"We can't tell," said Mab; "how do you know I shan't turn out a great painter, and be able to send them wherever you like? for I am the brother and you are the sister, Ciss. You are to keep my house and have the spending of all my money. So don't be gloomy, please, but pour out some tea. I wish, though, they were not quite so plain."

"So like their mother," said Cicely with a sigh.

"And so disagreeable; but it is funny to hear one speak for both as if the two were Harry. I am glad they are not girls. To give them a share of all we have I don't mind; but to teach them! with those white little pasty faces – "

"One can do anything when one makes up one's mind to it," said Cicely with a sigh.

At this moment the hall door opened, and after an interval Mr. St. John came in with soft steps. He had grown old in these last years; bowed down with age and troubles. He came up to his daughters and kissed them, laying his hand upon their heads.

"I am very glad you have come home," he said, in a voice which was pathetic in its feebleness. "You are all I have now."

"Not all you have, papa," said Mab; "we have just seen the little boys."

A momentary colour flushed over his pale face. "Ah, the babies," he said. "I am afraid they will be a great deal of trouble

to you, my dears."

Cicely and Mab looked at each other, but they did not say anything – they were afraid to say something which they ought not to say. And what could he add after that? He took the cup of tea they offered him, and drank it standing, his tall frame with a stoop in it, which was partly age and partly weakness, coming against one tall window and shutting out the light. "But that you are older looking," he said at last, "all this time might seem like a dream."

"A sad dream, papa," said Cicely, not knowing what to say.

"I cannot say that, my dear. I thank God I have had a great deal of happiness in my life; because we are sad for the moment we must not forget to thank Him for all His mercies," said Mr. St. John; and then with a change in his voice, he added, "Your aunt sends me word that she is coming soon to see you. She is a very strong woman for her years; I look older than she does; and it is a trouble to me now to go to town and back in one day."

"You have not been ill, papa?"

"No, Cicely, not ill; a little out of my usual," he said, "that is all. Now you are here, we shall fall into our quiet way again. The changes God sends we must accept; but the little worries are trying, my dear. I am getting old, and am not so able to brave them; but all will be well now you are here."

"We shall do all we can," said Cicely; "but you must remember, papa, we are not used to housekeeping, and if we make mistakes at first – "

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.