

Molesworth Mrs.

Robin Redbreast: A Story for Girls



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Molesworth Mrs. Robin Redbreast: A Story for Girls

CHAPTER I. THE HOUSE IN THE LANE

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

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

'What a quaint name! how uncommon and picturesque!'

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

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

She was an old woman now. Her name was Lady Myrtle Goodacre. The Goodacres, her husband's family, belonged to a distant county, and when *her* Mr Goodacre died, her connection with his part of the country seemed to cease, for she had no children, and her thoughts turned to the neighbourhood of her own old home, and the pretty quaint house not very far from it,

which had been left her by her father, the late earl. And thither she came. But she was not exactly a sociable old lady, and few of the Thetford people knew her. So that there grew to be a slight flavour of mystery about Robin Redbreast.

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

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

There was no rivalry between the two schools. Each had and held its own place and line. Ivy Lodge and Brook Bank were perfectly distinct, so distinct that neither trod on the other's toes. The former, that presided over by the Scarlett sisters,

was recognisedly for the daughters of the Thetford upper ten thousand; Brook Bank existed for the little maidens belonging to the shopkeepers and small farmers of and near the town. Nowadays a high-school would ignore such distinctions and absorb them all – whether for better or worse is a matter of opinion. But as things were, I don't think any harm came from the division of classes; thanks in great measure, very probably, to the good sense and feeling of the heads of the two schools. On the rare occasions on which the Misses Scarlett met the Misses Green – at great parish entertainments or fancy fairs – the latter gave precedence to the former with ready and smiling deference, sure to be graciously acknowledged by old white-haired Miss Scarlett with a kindly hand-shake or 'Many thanks, Miss Green;' the younger sisters following suit. For the Scarletts were well-born, much better born, indeed, than some of their pupils, and the Greens had got themselves educated with difficulty, and in their present position were higher on the social ladder than any of their progenitors had ever been – higher socially and more successful practically than they themselves had in past days dared to hope to be. Financially speaking, it was well known in Thetford that the Greens had made a much better thing of their school than the Scarletts. The Scarletts were inclined to be too liberal and too generous. Their boarders were in many instances the children of former friends or connections, who found it convenient to trade upon such ties when the questions and difficulties of education arose, and to suggest that *their*

daughters might be taken on a different footing.

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

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

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

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

It was late October: the days were drawing in; it was almost dark when the fly from the two-miles-off railway station – I should have explained that there was no station at Thetford; the inhabitants had petitioned against the railway coming near them, and now their children had to suffer the inconvenience of this

shortsightedness as best they might – drew up at Miss Mildmay's door, and out of it stepped four people – three children, and a young man scarcely more than a boy. There were two girls, looking about twelve and fourteen, a little fellow of six or seven, and the young man.

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

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

'I'm not afraid, Uncle Marmy,' replied the elder; 'I'm only *awfully* dull. If – oh, if Francie and I were old enough for you to be going to take us out to papa and mamma. Oh, if only' – 'Hush,' whispered Uncle Marmy. He looked young to be an uncle, younger still to be, as he was, a full-fledged lieutenant in the 200th. 'Hush, dear,' as the door opened.

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

though the reverse of demonstrative, it was dry rather than cold.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mildmay appreciate it thoroughly.'

A shade of stiffness returned again to her manner.

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

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

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

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

Again the feeling of relief stole over the young man.

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

'I wonder how that will work,' he thought. 'I wonder if it is only superficial or if it goes deeper? If so, I hope poor Jass will

have a wider life than has evidently fallen to the lot of this good lady.' And then, as it struck him that they were all sitting silent in most constrained discomfort, he thrust aside his reflections and forced his attention to return to the present.

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

'But you will return to dine – at least not to dine, but – well, call it high tea or supper, whichever you like,' said his hostess, cordially. 'Unless, of course, you prefer' – Marmaduke stood irresolute. He was desperately afraid of annoying Miss Mildmay.

'Oh no, of course not,' he began, 'but I'm' – A sudden impulse seized Jacinth. She felt as if she must do something – if she sat still a moment longer she would burst into tears. She sprang to her feet and caught her uncle's arm. 'Oh, *do* come back, Marmy,' she said. 'You don't know. – Aunt Alison, do say he must.'

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

This little incident seemed to have thawed them all.

'I will show you your rooms now,' said Miss Mildmay, when, the young man had gone. 'You two girls are to be together of

course, and Eugene's little room is on the next floor.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Ye – es,' began Jacinth, hesitatingly, 'I know' – But Frances here broke in eagerly.

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

Miss Mildmay the elder glanced at her with scant sympathy.

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

She was scarcely out of hearing when Jacinth turned upon her sister. 'I'm ashamed of you, Frances,' she said. 'Crying and sobbing like that, when you can see Aunt Alison isn't the sort

of person to have any patience with silliness! Such a beginning to have made! And it isn't as if it was really about – about poor granny.' Here it must be owned her voice faltered. 'It was just that you were vexed with me.'

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

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

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

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

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

She was right. It scarcely *was* to be expected. It was marvellous that the girls and their little brother were not more 'spoilt.' Mrs Denison adored them, and could see no fault in them. Nor was she in any sense a clever or strong-minded woman. Of

inferior birth to her late husband – the daughter of merely the village doctor – she had married him when she was nearly forty, making the kindest of stepmothers to his only child, now Mrs Mildmay; loving her in no sense less devotedly than she loved her own son, Marmaduke, the child of Mr Denison's old age – the Uncle Marmy, who was more like an elder brother than an uncle to the little trio sent home to his mother's care.

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

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

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

'Yes indeed – if only!' said Jacinth, as she said again that first

evening at Thetford.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jacinth laughed.

'No, that wouldn't do,' she said. 'You'd be getting married. No, it would be much the nicest for us to live here and you at Stannesley, and for us to pay each other lovely visits. Of course we'd always be together at Christmas and times like that. And your wife must be very, *very* nice – like a sort of elder sister to us, you know, and' – 'My darlings,' said poor Marmy, to whom it had suddenly occurred to look at his watch, 'time's up – or just about it. We must hurry back.'

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

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

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

Half-an-hour later he was gone.

CHAPTER II.

THE OLD LADY

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

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

'Aren't you glad to think to-morrow's Saturday, Jass?' said Frances. 'If only Aunt Alison would let us stay in bed half-an-

hour later on Saturday mornings, it *would* be nice.'

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

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

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

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

alone. *That's not loving us.'*

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

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

'No, indeed,' said Jacinth, very decidedly. 'I certainly wouldn't like it at all. School's all very well for lessons, but I should hate to be so tied up. I like being independent. Of course Aunt Alison knows we're to be trusted, but if we were at school we should have to ask leave for every single thing we wanted to do. And think of poor little Eugene without us.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eugene went to a small boys' school, a few doors only from his aunt's. He was certainly the least to be pitied in the children's somewhat lonely life, for his sisters were devoted to him, and their affection made up to him for the absence of other love. Yet this sounds too severe on Miss Mildmay, who in her own undemonstrative way *did* love her nephew and nieces. But she

had mapped out her life on lines independent of home ties, and she had not the breadth and nobility of nature to recognise that the charge unexpectedly laid upon her was as much a heaven-sent mission as the labours among the poor, which she fulfilled with such devotion and enthusiastic self-denial. Her 'duty,' her dry duty, she performed to the children, but it never entered her mind or imagination that more than this could, under the circumstances, be demanded of her.

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

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

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

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

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

So, though they shook the terrors of a probable dismissal over

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

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

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

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

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

Phebe did not understand him, but Jacinth explained.

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

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

'Phebe's thinking better of it,' said Frances laughing. 'Ah well, if you don't want to go a long walk, you'd better tell Aunt Alison

that you can't stand the hard work here – so late in bed, and up so *dreadfully* early in the morning.'

The maid's face flushed scarlet.

'Miss Frances!' she began reproachfully.

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

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

'I wasn't joking,' Frances replied.

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

Phebe shook her head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At one side there was a little clearing and a tempting stretch of

velvety-looking grass, disfigured, however, by blackened patches where gipsy-fires, amateur or professional, had recently been lighted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Frances was on the brink of a still more indignant reply, when

Phebe – one of whose best points was a very sweet temper, which made her always ready to avert a storm if she could – broke in, just in time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But the girl shook her head.

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

'Oh no,' said Jacinth, 'of course it wouldn't do to ask for anything at a *gentleman's* house. You must just bear it, Eugene dear, and perhaps we'll pass some cottage when we leave the lane; though I'm not very fond of drinking water at any cottage – one's never sure of its being good.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As for the young Mildmays, they stood motionless, not overawed, but both impressed and startled, gazing at the unexpected apparition in a way which Jacinth afterwards hoped

to herself had not seemed like ill-bred staring.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

it is very uncommon.'

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

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

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

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

Jacinth was tall and well grown for her age. She was not *pretty*— not as pretty as fair, fluffy-haired Frances – but there was promise of more than prettiness in her almost severely regular features, and her colouring when one examined her carefully, was good too. Her hair a rich dark brown, of a shade one hardly does justice to at the first careless glance; her complexion healthily pale, with a tinge of sun-burning, perhaps a few freckles; her eyes

clear, strong, hazel eyes, with long softening lashes. The whole was spoilt by a want of light – of the sunshine one loves to see in a young face – the expression was too grave and impassive; there was the suggestion of future hardness, unless time should mellow instead of stiffening and accentuating the already somewhat rigid lines.

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

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

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

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

She turned and walked quickly back towards the house – the

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

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

CHAPTER III.

TWO JACINTHS

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

Then Eugene glanced round in triumph.

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

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

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

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

quite eager and excited, a bright spot of colour on each cheek.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Mayn't Phebe have some milk and cake, too, please?' he said.

'We've been a drefful long walk. I'm sure Phebe's firsty too.'

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

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

Lady Myrtle smiled benignly. She liked 'tact.'

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

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

Lady Myrtle's face grew grave.

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

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

'*Denison!*' repeated Lady Myrtle, 'I was sure of it. But *Mrs*

Denison? I cannot understand it. Are you not making a mistake, my dear? Are you sure that your grandmother was *Mrs* Denison? Was she not' —

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

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

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

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

'Moreland?' said Lady Myrtle.

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

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

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

generally.'

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

'Yes,' said Jacinth, 'she is. She is very, *very* useful, I know. And one couldn't have expected her to give up all the things she'd been at so many years, all of a sudden, when we came. We don't mind, except that it seems a little lonely sometimes; but – I don't think Aunt Alison cares much for children or girls like us. She says she's got out of the way of it. But she's quite kind.'

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

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

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

'To Miss Scarlett's,' repeated Lady Myrtle. 'I have heard of it. I believe it is very nice, but still – I prefer home education. But perhaps I should not say so. No doubt your parents and guardians have acted for the best. I should like you to tell Miss Alison Mildmay all I have asked you, and I will write to her. And in the meantime, that she may not think me too eccentric an old woman, pray tell her that I was – that your own grandmother – I like you to call her that – Lady Jacinth Moreland, afterwards

Lady Jacinth Denison, and I, were the – yes, the very dearest of friends when we were young. It is possible that Miss Alison Mildmay may have heard my name from your mother. I think your mother – what is her name – "Eugenia," oh yes, I remember – I think your mother must have heard of me even in her childhood. My unmarried name was Harper, "Myrtle Harper;" your grandmother and I first took to each other, I think, because we had such uncommon names.'

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

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

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

Then a practical thought struck her.

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

Jacinth gave it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lady Myrtle seemed a little startled.

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

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

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

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

as nice as he can *possibly* be.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Frances looked rather ashamed. She was barely two years younger than her sister, but on almost every subject – on questions of good manners and propriety above all – Jacinth's verdict was always accepted by her as infallible, though whence Jacinth had derived her knowledge on such points it would have been difficult to say. No one could have been less a woman of the

world than the late Mrs Denison; indeed, the much misused but really sweet old word 'homely' might have been applied to her in its conventional sense without unkindly severity. And no life could have been simpler, though from that very fact not without a certain dignity of its own, than the family life at Stannesley, which was in reality the only training these girls had ever known.

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

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

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

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

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

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

then Lord Elvedon's family name is Harper.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Frances was at once melted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Suppose Lady Myrtle really gets very fond of us' – she said 'us,' but '*me*' would perhaps have been more correct, and after all this was scarcely unnatural, as it was she who had specially recalled the Jacinth Moreland of her enthusiastic youthful affection to the old lady – 'supposing she in a sort of way adopted us – or me' – for Jacinth was not selfish in the common acceptance of the word, though self-important and fond of ruling, 'what happiness it might bring us! She doesn't seem to have any relations, and she must be very well off.

Supposing she took us to live with her, and treated us just like her own children, I wonder if mamma wouldn't come home then, and papa too perhaps. For of course, if they knew we were going to be well off, papa wouldn't worry so about staying out in India his full time and all that. How I should *love* to be the one to be able to do everything for them all.'

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

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

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

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

'Of course we did,' said Frances, 'and I've got such a good

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

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

Frances's face fell.

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

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

But as regards the fancies which since yesterday had been so absorbing her, she was in the right. Even apparently harmless

hopes and wishes dependent on the caprice, or, if carried where they *may* lead to, contingent on the life or death of others, are better checked at once. Indulgence in such can do no good, and *may* do harm.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV.

A LETTER AND A DISCUSSION

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

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

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

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

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

'Have you – have you nothing to tell me – no message to give me?' she said at last, still fingering the letter.

She spoke to both girls, but it seemed to Jacinth as if her

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

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

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

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

Miss Mildmay turned upon her sharply.

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

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

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

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

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

Frances glanced at her, her face working with sympathy.

Miss Mildmay seemed perplexed.

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

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

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

would have told you everything there was to tell.'

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

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

She smiled a little.

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

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

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

Jacinth glanced at it.

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

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

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

'And she heard Jass's name,' interrupted Frances, 'and' —
'Let Jacinth tell it, if you please, Frances,' said Miss Mildmay.
So Jacinth took up the story again, and related all that had happened.

Her aunt listened attentively, her face softened.

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

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

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

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

'No, but the Elvedons have another place in the north near your grandmother's old home,' said Miss Mildmay, who was very

well posted up in such matters. 'They have never lived all the year round at Elvedon, I fancy, and now of course it is let.'

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

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

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

But her remark set Frances's imagination to work.

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

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

'Frances,' said Jacinth on their way up-stairs to their own little sitting-room, 'I do think you are the *silliest* girl I ever knew. Just after all that discussion – and I can tell you I was shaking in my shoes for ever so long – just when it had ended so well, you must

go and vex Aunt Alison by wanting to have the Harpers here at tea. I think you are absurd about those girls, as you always are about new friends. *I don't want them here at tea, or at anything.*'

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

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

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

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

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

Jacinth's sympathy was aroused. She herself was in a higher class than her sister, but she was greatly interested in Frances's success. For Frances was rather a giddy little person. Till the

companionship and emulation at school had roused her, she had never bestowed more attention on her lessons than was absolutely unavoidable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jacinth's patience began to give way.

'You are too bad, Frances,' she said. 'You are spoiling my work and losing any chance you have of getting the book. If you wait till the afternoon, most likely all the Miss Scarletts will be out or engaged, and I rather think – yes, I am sure the boarders told me that the school-books are locked up at noon on Saturday till Monday morning. Ask for Miss Marcia, if you like; you've just as good a chance of seeing her as the others. But you must decide.'

Are you going or not?'

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

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

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

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

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

Frances was like a veritable April day – gloom and sparkle, tears and laughter, succeeded each other with her as swiftly as the clouds rushing before the wind alternately veil and reveal

the sun's bright face, though underneath all this fitfulness and caprice lay a sturdy foundation of principle and loyalty which circumstances, so far, had scarcely brought out, and which Jacinth certainly did not as yet realise or appreciate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Well?'

Francie's face grew very grave.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

school, even the best, is the chatter and gossip that go on.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'It is always a pity when parents and children have to be

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

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

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

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

Miss Mildmay seemed pleased.

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

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

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

CHAPTER V.

AN OLD STORY

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

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

'If fate had sent me Jacinth alone,' thought Miss Mildmay, 'I rather think we should have got on very well, and have fitted into each other's ways. There is so much more in her than in Frances. I strongly suspect, in spite of her looks, that Jacinth takes after our side of the house – she almost seems older than Eugenia in some ways – whereas Frances, I suppose, is her mother over again.'

But here she checked herself. Any implied disparagement of

her sister-in-law she did not, even in her secret thoughts, intend or encourage, for Alison Mildmay was truly and firmly attached to her brother's wife, widely different though their characters were.

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

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

Frances on her side had enjoyed herself greatly. She was the

only outsider, otherwise day-scholar, at the garden tea, which fact in no way lessened her satisfaction while it increased her importance.

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

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

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

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

Margaret coloured with pleasure, but with some shyness too.

'I'm glad they think we're nice,' she said; 'and I'm sure, if your aunt knew father and mother, they'd think we *should* be far, far better than we are, at least than I am. I don't think Bessie *could* be much better than she is. But a good many others of the girls are very nice indeed; they are none of them not nice, except that Prissy Beckingham talks too much and says rather rude things

without meaning it, and Laura French certainly has a very bad temper. But she's always sorry for it afterwards. And who could be nicer than the Eves or Honor Falmouth.'

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

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

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

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

'What's this?' said Frances, as she unfolded it. 'Oh, I declare! Just look, Margaret – it's an old Christmas card of last year. I remember one of the children gave it me at the Sunday school,

and I've never had this frock on since. Isn't it strange?'

She stood looking at the card – an ordinary enough little picture of a robin on a bough, with 'Merry Christmas' in one corner – a mixture of sadness and almost reverence in her young face. 'Last Christmas' seemed so very long ago to Frances. And indeed, so much had happened since then to change things for herself and her brother and sister, that it did naturally seem like looking back to the other side of a lifetime to recall the circumstances which then surrounded them. How well she remembered that very Sunday, the last of the old year; how they had chattered and laughed as they ran home over the frosty ground, and Uncle Marmaduke, who had just joined them, had predicted skating before the week was out! How tenderly granny had kissed them that night when they went to bed, with some little remark about the ending of the year, and how the next morning she was not well enough to get up, anxious though she was in no way to cloud or damp their enjoyment; and how the doctor had begun to come every day, and then – and then – The tears started to Frances's eyes as she seemed to live through it all again, and for a moment or two she did not speak; she forgot that Margaret was standing beside her with sympathising face.

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

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

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

'Very, *very*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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