

Molesworth Mrs.

Blanche: A Story for Girls



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Chapter One The Sunny South

About a quarter of a century ago, a young English girl – Anastasia Fenning by name – went to pay a visit of a few weeks to friends of her family, whose home was a comfortable old house in the pleasantest part of France. She had been somewhat delicate, and it was thought that the milder climate during a part of the winter might be advantageous to her. It proved so. A month or two saw her completely restored to her usual health and beauty, for she was a very pretty girl; and, strange to say, the visit of a few weeks ended in a sojourn of fully twenty years in what came to be her adopted country, without any return during that long stretch of time to her own home, or indeed to England at all.

This was how it came about. The eldest son – or rather grandson of her hosts, for he was an orphan – Henry Derwent, fell in love with the pretty and attractive girl, and she returned his affection. There was no objection to the marriage, for the Derwents and Fennings were friends of more than a generation's standing. And Henry's prospects were good, as he was already second in command to old Mr Derwent himself, the head of the large and well-established firm of Derwent and Paulmier, wine merchants and vine-growers; and Anastasia, the only daughter of a widowed country parson of fair private means, would have a "dot" which the Derwents, even taking into account their semi-French ideas on such subjects, thought satisfactory.

Mr Fenning gave his consent, more readily than his friends and his daughter had expected, for he was a devoted, almost an adoring father, and the separation from him was the one drawback in Anastasia's eyes.

"I thought papa would have been broken-hearted at the thought of parting with me," she said half poutingly, for she was a trifle spoilt, when the anxiously looked for letter had been received and read. "He takes it very philosophically."

"Very unselfishly, let us say," her *fiancé* replied, though in his secret heart the same thought had struck him.

But the enigma was only too speedily explained. Within a day or two of the arrival of her father's almost perplexingly glad consent came a telegram to Mr Derwent, as speedily as possible followed by a letter written at his request by the friend and neighbour who had been with Mr Fenning at the last. For Anastasia's father was dead – had died after but an hour or two's acute illness, though he had known for long that in some such guise the end must come.

He was glad for his "little girl" to be spared the shock in its near appallingness, wrote Sir Adam Nigel; he was thankful to know that her future was secured and safe. For he had no very near relations, and Sir Adam himself, though Anastasia's godfather, was an old bachelor, living alone. The question of a home in England would have been a difficult one. And in his last moments Mr Fenning had decided that if the Derwents could without inconvenience keep the young girl with them till her marriage, which he earnestly begged might not be long deferred, such an arrangement would be the wisest and best.

His wishes were carried out. The tears were scarcely dried on the newly orphaned girl's face, ere she realised that for her husband's sake she must try again to meet life cheerfully. And in her case it was not difficult to do so, for her marriage proved a very happy one. Henry Derwent was an excellent and a charming man, an unselfish and considerate husband, a devoted though wise father. For twelve

years Anastasia's life was almost cloudless. Then, when her youngest child, a boy, was barely a year old, the blow fell. Again, for the second time in her life, a few hours' sharp illness deprived her of her natural protector, and she was left alone. Much more alone than at the epoch of her father's sudden death, for she had then Henry to turn to. Now, though old Mr Derwent was still living, the only close sympathy and affection she could count upon was that of her little girls, Blanche and Anastasia, eleven and nine years of age respectively, when this first and grievous sorrow overtook them.

For some months Mrs Derwent was almost totally crushed by her loss. Then by degrees her spirits revived. Her nature was not a very remarkable one, but it was eminently healthy and therefore elastic. And in her sorrow, severe as it was, there was nothing to sour or embitter, nothing to destroy her faith in her fellow-creatures or render her suspicious and distrustful. And her life, both as her father's daughter and her husband's wife, had been a peculiarly bright and sheltered one.

"Too bright to last," she thought sometimes, and perhaps it was true.

For trouble *must* come. There are those indeed from whom, though in less conspicuous form than that of death, it seems never absent – their journey is "uphill all the way." There are those again, more like Anastasia Derwent, whose path lies for long amid the flowers and pleasant places, till suddenly a thunderbolt from heaven devastates the whole. Yet these are not, to my mind, the most to be pitied. The happiness of the past is a possession even in the present, and an earnest for the future. In the years of sunshine the nature has had time to grow and develop, to gather strength against the coming of the storm. Not so with those who have known nothing but wintry weather, whose faith in aught else has but the scantiest nourishment to feed upon.

And the new phase of life to which her husband's death introduced Mrs Derwent called for qualities hitherto little if at all required in her. Her father-in-law, already old and enfeebled, grew querulous and exacting. He had leant upon his son more than had been realised; his powers could not rally after so tremendous a shock. He turned to his daughter-in-law, in unconscious selfishness, demanding of her more than the poor woman found it possible to give him, though she rose to the occasion by honestly doing her best. And though this "best" was but little appreciated, and ungraciously enough received, she never complained or lost patience.

As the years went on and in some ways her task grew heavier, there were not wanting those who urged her to give it up.

"He is not your own father," they said. "He is a tiresome, tyrannical old man. You should return to England with your children; there must still be many friends there who knew you as a girl. And this living in France, while *not* French, out of sympathy with your surroundings in many ways, is not the best school for your daughters. You don't want them to marry Frenchmen?"

This advice, repeatedly volunteered by one friend in particular, the aged Marquise de Caillemont, herself an Englishwoman, whose own marriage had not disposed her to take a rose-coloured view of so-called "mixed alliances," was only received by Mrs Derwent with a shake of the head. True, her eyes sparkled at the suggestion of a return to England, but the time for that had not come. Blanche and Stasy were too young for their future as yet to cause her any consideration. They were being well educated, and if the care of their grandfather fell rather heavily on them – on Blanche especially – "Well, after all," she said, "we are not sent into this world merely to please ourselves. I had too little of such training myself, I fear; my children are far less selfish than I was. Still, I will not let it go too far, dear madame. I do not want their young lives to be clouded. I cannot see my way to leaving the grandfather, but time will show what is right to do."

Time did show it. When Blanche, on whose strong and buoyant nature Mr Derwent learned more and more to rely, till by degrees she came almost to replace to him the son he missed so sorely, and whom she much resembled – when Blanche was seventeen, the old man died, peacefully and gently, blessing the girl with his last breath.

They missed him, after all, for he had grown less exacting with failing health. And while he was there, there was still the sense of protectorship, of a masculine head of the house. Blanche missed

him most of all, naturally, because she had done the most for him, and she was one of those who love to *give*, of their best, of themselves.

But after a while happy youth reasserted itself. She turned with fresh zest and interest to the consideration of the plans for the future which the little family was now free to make.

“We shall go back to England, of course, shan’t we, mamma?” said Stasy eagerly, as if the England she had never seen were the land of all her associations.

“Of course,” Mrs Derwent agreed. “The thought of it has been the brightest spot in my mind all through these last years. How your father and I used to talk of the home we would have there one day! Though I now feel that *anywhere* would have been home with him,” and she sighed a little. “He was really more English than poor grandfather, for he had a regular public school education.”

“But grandfather only came to France as a grown-up man, and papa was born here,” said Blanche. “Of the two, one would have expected papa to be the more French, yet he certainly was not. Perhaps it was just that dear old gran was a more clinging nature, and took the colour of his surroundings more easily. We are just the opposite: neither Stasy nor I could be called at all French, could we, mamma?”

She said it with a certain satisfaction, and Mrs Derwent smiled as she looked at them. Blanche, though fair, gave one the impression of unusual strength and vigour. Stasy was slighter and somewhat darker. Both were pretty, and promising to grow still prettier. And from their adopted country they had unconsciously imbibed a certain “finish” in both bearing and appearance, which as a rule comes to Englishwomen, when it comes at all, somewhat later in life.

“We are *not* French-looking, mamma; now, are we?” chimed in the younger girl.

“Well, no, not in yourselves, certainly,” said Mrs Derwent. “But still, there cannot but be a little something, of tone and air, not quite English. How could it be otherwise, considering that your whole lives have been spent in France? But you need not distress yourselves about it. You will feel yourselves *quite* English once we are in England.”

“We do that already,” said Blanche. “You know, mamma, how constantly our friends here reproach us with being so English. One thing, I must say I am glad of – we have no French accent in speaking English.”

“No, I really do not think you have,” Mrs Derwent replied. “It is one of the things I have been the most anxious about. For it always sets one a little at a disadvantage to speak the language of any country with a foreign accent, if one’s *home* is to be in the place. How delightful it is to think of really settling in England! I wonder if I shall find Blissmore much changed. How I wish I could describe my old home, Fotherley, better to you – how I wish I could make you *see* it! I can fancy I feel the breeze on the top of the knoll just behind the vicarage garden; I can *hear* the church bells sometimes – the dear, dear old home that it was.”

“I think you describe it beautifully, mamma,” said Stasy. “I often lie awake at night making pictures of it to myself.”

“And we shall see it for ourselves soon,” added Blanche; “that is to say, mamma,” she went on with a little hesitation, “if you quite decide that – ”

“What, my dear?” said her mother.

“Oh – that Blissmore will be the best place for us to settle at,” said Blanche, rather abruptly, as if she had been anxious to get the words said, and yet half fearful of their effect.

Mrs Derwent’s face clouded over a little.

“What an odd thing for you to say, my dear?” she replied. “You cannot have any prejudice against my dear old home, and where else could we go which would be so sure to *be* home, where we should at once be known and welcomed? Besides, the place itself is charming – so very pretty, and a delightful neighbourhood, and not very far from London either. We could at any time run up for a day or two.”

“Ye-es,” said Blanche; “the only thing is, dear mamma, I have heard so much of English society being stiff and exclusive – ”

“It’s not as stiff and exclusive as French,” Mrs Derwent interrupted; “only you cannot judge of that, having lived here all your life, and knowing every one there was to know within a good large radius, just as *I* knew everybody round about Blissmore when I was a girl.”

“But all these years! Will they not have brought immense changes?” still objected Blanche. “And it is not as if we were very rich or important people. If we were going to buy some fine château in England and entertain a great deal, it would be different. But, judged by English ideas, we shall not be rich or important. Not that I should wish to be either. I should like to live modestly, and have our own poor people to look after, and just a few friends – the life one reads about in some of our charming English tales, mamma.”

“And why should we not have it, my dear? We shall be able to have a very pretty house, I hope. I only wish one of those I remember were likely to be vacant; and why, therefore, should you be afraid of Blissmore? Surely my old home is the most natural place for us to go to: I cannot be quite forgotten there.” Blanche said no more, and indeed it would have been difficult to put into more definite form her vague misgivings about Blissmore. Her knowledge of English social life was of course principally derived from books, and from her mother’s reminiscences, which it was easy to see were coloured by the glamour of the past, and drawn from a short and youthful experience under the happiest auspices. And Blanche was by no means inclined to prejudice; there was no doubt, even by Mrs Derwent’s own account, that her old home had been in a peculiarly “exclusive” part of the country.

“I should not mind so much for ourselves,” she said to Stasy, that same afternoon, as they were walking up and down the stiff gravelled terrace in the garden at the back of their house – their “town house,” in Bordeaux itself, where eight months of the year had been spent by the Derwent family for three generations. “But I do feel so afraid of poor mamma’s being disappointed.”

Stasy was inclined to take the other view of it.

“Why should we get on *less* well at Blissmore than anywhere else?” she said. “Of course, wherever we go, it will be strange at first, but surely there is more likelihood of our feeling at home there than at a totally new place. I cannot understand you quite, Blanchie.”

“I don’t know that I quite understand myself,” Blanche replied. “It is more an instinct. I suppose I dread mamma’s old home, because she would go there with more expectation. It will be curious, Stasy, very curious, to find ourselves really in England. There cannot be many English girls who have reached our age without having even seen their own country.”

“And to have been so near it all these years,” said Stasy, “Oh, it is too delightful to think we are really going to live in England – dear, dear England! Of course I shall always love France; we have been very happy in many ways, except for our great sorrows,” and her bright, sparkling face sobered, as, at April-like sixteen, a face can sober, to beam all the more sunnily the next moment – “we have been very happy, but we are going to be still happier, aren’t we, Blanchie?”

“I hope so, darling. But you will have to go on working for a good while once we are settled again, you know. And I too. We are both very ignorant of much English literature, though, thanks to papa’s library and grandfather’s advice, I think we know some of the older authors better than some English girls do. I wonder what sort of teaching we can get at Blissmore; we are rather too old for a governess.”

“Oh dear, yes. Of course we can’t have a governess,” said Stasy. “We must go to *cours*— ‘classes,’ or whatever they are called. I suppose there is something of the kind at Blissmore.”

“I don’t know that there is. I don’t know what will be done about Herty,” said Blanche. “I’m afraid he may have to go to school, and we should miss him so, shouldn’t we?”

“There may be a school near enough for him to come home every evening,” said Stasy, who was incapable of seeing anything to do with their new projects in other than the brightest colours.

“There he is – coming to call us in. – Well, Herty, what is it?” as a pretty, fair-haired boy came racing along the straight paths to meet them.

“The post has come, and mamma has a letter from England, and dinner will be ready directly, and – and – my guinea-pigs’ salad is all done, and there is no more of the right kind in the garden,” said the little boy. “What shall I do?”

“After dinner you shall go with Aline to the vegetable shop near the market place and buy some lettuce – that is the proper word – not ‘salad,’ when it is a guinea-pig’s affair,” said Stasy.

For it was early summer-time, and the evenings were long and light.

Blanche smiled.

“My dear Stasy, your English is a little open to correction as well as Herty,” she said. “You must not speak of a vegetable shop – ‘greengrocers’ is the right name, and – there was something rather odd about the last sentence, ‘a guinea-pig’s affair.’”

“Well, you can’t say ‘a guinea-pig’s business,’ can you?” said Stasy. “Let us ask mamma. I am, above all, anxious to speak perfect English. Let us be most particular for the next few weeks; let us pray mamma to correct us if we make the slightest mistake.”

“I wonder what the letter is that has come,” said Blanche. “I think we had better go in now. Mamma may want us. After dinner, perhaps, she will come out with us a little. How difficult it is to picture this dear old house inhabited by strangers! I think it is charming here in summer; we have never been in the town so late before. I like it ever so much better than Les Rosiers – that is so modern. I wish we were going to stay here till we leave.”

She stood still and gazed on the long, narrow house – irregular and picturesque from age, though with no architectural pretensions at all – which for seventeen years had been her home. The greyish-white walls stood out in the sunshine, one end almost covered with creepers, contrasting vividly with the deep blue sky of the south. Some pigeons flew overhead on their way to their home high up in the stable-yard, the old coachman’s voice talking to his horses sounded in the distance, and the soft drip of the sleepy fountain mingled with the faint noises in the street outside.

“I shall often picture all this to myself,” thought Blanche. “I shall never forget it. Even when I am very old I shall be able to imagine myself walking up and down, up and down this path, with grandpapa holding my arm. And over there, near the fountain, how well I remember running to meet dear papa the last time he came back from one of his journeys to Paris! I suppose it is best to go to what is really our own country, but partings, even with things and places that cannot feel, are sad, very sad.”

Chapter Two

Fogs

The old house in Bordeaux was not to be sold, but let for a long term of years. An unexpectedly good offer was made for it, and a very short time after the evening in which in her heart Blanche had bidden it a farewell, the Derwents gave up possession to their tenants. For the few months during which Mrs Derwent's presence was required in France on account of the many and troublesome legal formalities consequent upon her father-in-law's death and the winding-up of his affairs, the family moved to Les Rosiers, the little country-house where they had been accustomed to spend the greater part of the summer months.

They would have preferred less haste. It would in many ways have been more convenient to have returned to Bordeaux in the autumn, and thence made the final start, selecting at leisure such of the furniture and other household goods as they wished to take to their new home. But the late Mr Derwent's partner, Monsieur Paulmier, and his legal adviser, Monsieur Bergeret, were somewhat peremptory. The offer for the house was a good one; it might not be repeated. It was important for Madame, in the interests of her children, to neglect no permanent source of income.

Their tone roused some slight misgiving in Mrs Derwent, and she questioned them more closely. Were things not turning out as well as had been expected? Was there any cause for anxiety?

Monsieur Paulmier smiled reassuringly, but looked to Monsieur Bergeret to reply. Monsieur Bergeret rubbed his hands and smiled still more benignly.

"Cause for uneasiness?" Oh dear, no. Still, Madame was so intelligent, so full of good sense, it was perhaps best to tell her frankly that things were not turning out *quite* so well as had been hoped. There had been some bad years, as she knew – phylloxera and other troubles; and Monsieur, the late head of the firm, had been reluctant to make any changes to meet the times, too conservative, perhaps, as was often the case with elderly folk. Now, if Madame's little son had been of an age to go into the business – no doubt he would inherit the excellent qualities of his progenitors —*that* would have been the thing, for then the family capital might have remained there indefinitely. As it was, by the terms of Monsieur's will, all was to be paid out as soon as possible. It would take some years at best, for there was not the readiness to come forward among eligible moneyed partners that had been expected. The business wanted working up, there was no doubt, and rumour exaggerated things. Still – oh no, there was no cause for alarm; but still, even a small certainty like the rent of the house was not to be neglected.

So "Madame" of course gave in – the offer was accepted; a somewhat hurried selection of the things to be taken to England made, the rest sold. And the next two months were spent at Les Rosiers, a place of no special interest or association, though there were country neighbours to be said good-bye to with regret on both sides.

The "letter from England" which little Hertford Derwent had told of the evening he ran out to his sisters in the garden, had been a disappointment to their mother, for it contained, returned from the dead-letter office, one of her own, addressed by her some weeks previously to her old friend, Sir Adam Nigel, at the house near Blissmore, which she had believed was still his home.

"Not known at Alderwood," was the curt comment scored across the envelope.

"I cannot understand it," she said to her daughters. "Alderwood was his own place. Even if he were dead – and I feel sure I should have heard of his death – some of his family must have succeeded him there."

"I thought he was an old bachelor," said Blanche.

"Yes, but the place – a family place – would have gone to some one belonging to him, a nephew or a cousin. He was not a *nobody*, to be forgotten."

“The place may have been sold,” Blanche said again. “I suppose even old family places are *sometimes* sold in England.”

But still Mrs Derwent repeated that she could scarcely think so; at least she felt an instinctive conviction that she would have heard of it.

“It may possibly be let to strangers, and some careless servant may have sent back the letter without troubling to inquire,” she said. “Of course I can easily find out about it once we are there, but I feel disappointed. I had counted on Sir Adam’s helping me to find a suitable house.”

“How long is it since you last heard from him?” said Stasy.

“Oh, a good while. Let me see. I doubt if I have written to him since – since I wrote to thank him for writing to me when – soon after your father’s death,” replied Mrs Derwent.

“That is several years ago,” said Blanche gently. “I fear, dear mamma, your old friend must be dead.”

“I hope not,” said her mother; “but for the present it is much the same as if he were. Let me see. No, I cannot think of any one it would be much use to write to at Blissmore. We must depend on ourselves.”

“Who is the vicar at Fotherley now – at least, who came after our grandfather?” asked Blanche.

Mrs Derwent looked up.

“That is not a bad idea. I might write to him. Fleming was his name. I remember him vaguely; he was curate for a time. But that is now twenty years ago: it is by no means certain he is still there, and I don’t care to write letters only to have them returned from the post-office. Besides, I have not an altogether pleasant remembrance of that Mr Fleming. His wife and daughter were noisy, pushing women, and it was said the living was given to him greatly out of pity for their poverty. Sir Adam told me about it in one of his letters: he regretted it. Dear Sir Adam! He used to write often in those days.”

“I daresay it will not make much difference in the end,” said Blanche. “No one can really choose a house for other people. Nothing could have been decided without our seeing it.”

“No; still it would have been nice to know that there were any promising ones vacant. However, we have to be in London for a short time, in any case. We must travel down to Blissmore from there, and look about for ourselves.”

The Derwents’ first experience of their own, though unknown country was a rather unfortunate one. Why, of all months in the year, the Fates should have conspired to send them to London in November, it is not for me to explain. No doubt, had Mrs Derwent’s memories and knowledge of the peculiarities of the English climate been as accurate as she liked to believe they were of everything relating to her beloved country, she would have set the Fates, or fate, at defiance, if such a thing be possible, by avoiding this mysteriously doleful month as the date of her return thither. But long residence in France, where, though often without any spite or *malice prepense*, people *are* very fond of taunting British foreigners with the weak points in their national perfection, had developed a curious, contradictory scepticism in her, as to the existence of any such weak points at all.

“People do talk such *nonsense* about England,” she would say to her daughters, “as if it were always raining there when it is not foggy. I believe they think we never see the sun at all. Dear me! when I look back on my childhood and youth, I cannot remember anything *but* sunshiny days. It seems to have been always summer, even when we were skating on the lake at Alderwood.”

She smiled, and her daughters smiled. They understood, and believed her – believed, Stasy especially, almost too unquestioningly. For when the train drew up in Victoria Station that mid-November afternoon, the poor girl turned to her mother with dismay.

“Mamma,” she exclaimed, “it isn’t three o’clock, and it is quite dark. And such a queer kind of darkness! It came all of a sudden, just when the houses got into rows and streets. I thought at first it was smoke from some great fire. But it can’t be, for nobody seems to notice it – at least as far as I can see anybody. And the porters are all going about with lanterns. Oh mamma, can it be – surely it isn’t always like this?”

And Stasy seemed on the point of tears.

Poor Mrs Derwent had had her unacknowledged suspicions. But she looked out of the window as if for the first time she had noticed anything amiss.

"Why, yes," she replied, "it is rather unlucky; but, after all, it will be an amusing experience. We have made our *début* in the thick of a real London fog!"

Herty, who had been asleep, here woke up and began coughing and choking and grumbling at what he called "the fire-taste" in his mouth; and even the cheerful-minded Aline, the maid, looked rather blank.

Blanche said nothing, but from that moment a vague idea that, if no suitable house offered itself at Blissmore, she would use her influence in favour of London itself as their permanent headquarters, was irrevocably dismissed from her mind.

"We should die!" she said to herself; "at least mamma and Stasy, who are not as strong as I, would. Oh dear, I hope we are not going to regret our great step!"

For they had left Bordeaux in the full glow of sunshine – the exquisite "autumn summer" of the more genial south, where, though the winter may not infrequently be biting cold, at least it is restricted to its own orthodox three months.

"And this is only November," proceeded Blanche in her unspoken misgivings. "Everybody says an English spring *never* really sets in till May, if then. Fancy fully five months of cold like this, and not improbable fog. No, no; we cannot stay in London: the cold must be faced, but not the fog."

Yet she could scarcely help laughing at the doleful expression of her sister's face, when the little party had disentangled themselves and their belongings from the railway carriage, and were standing, bewildered and forlorn, trying to look about them in the murky air.

"Mustn't we see about our luggage, mamma?" said Blanche, feeling herself considerably at a disadvantage in this strange and all but invisible world. "It is managed the same way as in France, I suppose. We must find the – what do they call the room where we wait to claim it?"

"I – I really don't know," said Mrs Derwent. "It will be all right, I suppose, if we follow the others."

But there were no "others" with any very definite goal, apparently. There were two or three little crowds dimly to be seen at different parts of the train, whence boxes seemed to be disgorging.

"It is much more puzzling than in France," said Blanche, her own spirits flagging. "I do hope we shall not have long to wait. This air is really choking."

She had Herty's hand in hers, and moved forward towards a lamp, with some vague idea that its light would lessen her perplexity. Suddenly a face flashed upon her, and a sense of something bright and invigorating came over her almost before she had time to associate the two together.

The face was that of a person standing just under the lamp – a girl, a tall young girl with brilliant but kindly eyes, and a general look of extreme, overflowing youthful happiness. She smiled at Blanche, overhearing her last words.

"You should call a porter," she said. "They are rather scarce to-night, the train was so full, and the fog is so confusing. Stay – there is one. – Porter! – He will see to your luggage. You won't have as long to wait as in Paris."

A sort of breath of thanks was all there was time for, then the girl turned at the sound of a name – "Hebe" – through the fog, and was instantly lost to view. But her face, her joyous face, in its strange setting of dingy yellow-brown, streaked with the almost dingier struggling gas-light, was impressed upon Blanche's memory, like a never-to-be-forgotten picture.

"Hebe," she said to herself, as she explained to her mother, just then becoming visible, that the porter would take charge for them – "Hebe: how the name suits her!"

An hour later saw them in their temporary haven of refuge – a private hotel in Jermyn Street. In this hotel Mrs Derwent had once spent a happy week with her father when she was eighteen, and

she was delighted when, in reply to her letter bespeaking accommodation for herself and her family, there came a reply in the same name as she remembered had formerly been that of the proprietor.

"It is nice that the landlord is still there: I wonder if they will perhaps recollect us," she said. "Your grandfather always put up there. They were such civil people."

"Civil" they still were, and had reason to be, for it is not every day that a family party takes up its quarters indefinitely in a first-class and expensive London hotel. And it had not occurred to Mrs Derwent to make any very special inquiry as to their charges.

So in the meantime ignorance was bliss, and the sitting-room, though small, with two bedrooms opening out of it on one side and one on the other, looked fairly comfortable, despite the insidious fog lurking in every corner. For there was a good fire blazing, and promise of tea on a side-table. But it was all so strange, so very strange! A curious thrill, almost of anguish, passed through Blanche, as she realised that for the time being they were – but for this – homeless, and as if to mock her, there came before her mental vision the dear old house – sunny, and spacious, and above all familiar, which they had left for ever! Had it been well to do so? The future alone could show.

But a glance at her mother's face, pale and anxious, under a very obtrusive cheerfulness, far more touching than expressed misgiving, recalled the girl to the small but unmistakable duties of the present.

"I mustn't begin to be sentimental about our old home," she said to herself. "Mamma has acted from the very best possible motives, and I must support her by being hopeful and cheerful."

And she turned brightly to Stasy, who had thrown herself on to a low chair in front of the hearth, and was holding out her cold hands to the blaze.

"What a nice fire!" said the elder girl. "How beautifully warm!"

"Yes," Stasy agreed. "I am beginning already to understand the English devotion to one's own fireside. Poor things! There cannot be much temptation – in London, at least – to stray far from it. Imagine walking, or even worse, *driving* through the streets! And I had looked forward to shopping a little, and to seeing some of the sights of London. How do people ever do *anything* here?"

Her extreme dolefulness roused the others to genuine laughter.

"My dearest child," said her mother, "you don't suppose London is always like this? Why, I don't remember a single fog when I was a girl, and though I did not live in London, I often paid visits here, now and then in the winter."

"Oh, but, mamma, you can't remember anything in England but delightfulness," said Stasy incredulously. "Why, I know one day you told us it seemed to have been summer even when you were skating. And I daresay fogs have got worse since then. Very likely we shall be told that they are beginning to spread all over the country. I know I read or heard somewhere that they were getting worse."

"Only in London," said Blanche, "and that is because it is growing and growing so. That does not affect the rest of England. The fogs are the *revers de la médaille* of these lovely, hot coal-fires, I suppose."

She stooped and took up the tongs to lift a red-hot glowing morsel that had fallen into the grate, taking advantage of the position to whisper into her sister's ears a word of remembrance.

"Do try to be a little brighter, Stasy, for mamma's sake."

The entrance of tea at that moment did more perhaps in the desired direction than Blanche's hint. Stasy got up from her low chair and looked about her.

"How long has there been fog like this?" she asked the waiter, as he reappeared with a beautifully toasted tea-cake.

"Yesterday, miss. No, the day before, I think," he replied, as if fog or no fog were not a matter of special importance.

"And how long do they last generally?" Stasy continued.

“As bad as this – not often over a day or two, miss,” he replied. “It may be quite bright to-morrow morning.”

“There now, Stasy,” said her mother. “I told you so. There is nothing to be low-spirited about. It is just – well, just a little unlucky. But we are all tired, and we will go to bed early, and forget about the fog.”

“Besides,” said Blanche, quietly, “we are not going to live in London. – Herty, you had better come close to the table; and if you mean to have any dinner, you had better not eat *quite* as much as you can, at present.”

“I don’t want any dinner,” said Herty. “English boys don’t have late dinner. They have no little breakfast, but a big one, early, and then a dinner instead of big breakfast, and just tea at night. Don’t they, mamma? And I am going to be quite English, so I shall begin now at once. Please may I have some more bread-and-butter, mamma?”

Mrs Derwent looked at him rather critically.

“Yes,” she said, “you may have some more if you really mean what you say. But it won’t do for you to come, in an hour or two, saying you are so hungry, you really must have some dinner, after all.”

“No,” said Herty, “I won’t do that.”

“And remember,” said Stasy severely, “that this is a hotel, not our own house. Whatever you eat here has to be paid for separately. It’s not like having a kitchen of our own, and Félicie going out and buying everything and cooking for us. *Then* it didn’t make much difference whether you ate a great deal or not.” Herty took the slice of bread-and-butter, in which he had just made a large semicircular hole, out of his mouth, and looked at Stasy very gravely. This was a new idea to him, and a rather appalling one.

“Yes,” his sister repeated, nodding her head to give emphasis to her words, “you’ll have to think about it, Herty. Mamma isn’t as rich as she used to be; we haven’t got vineyards and great cellars all full of wine now. And when you go to school, that will cost a lot. English schools are very dear.”

Herty slowly turned his head round and gazed, first at his mother, then at Blanche. The round of bread-and-butter had disappeared by this time, so he was able to open his mouth wide, which he proceeded to do preparatory to a good howl.

“Mamma,” he was beginning, but Blanche stepped in to the rescue.

“Stasy,” she said, though she could scarcely help laughing, “how can you tease him so?”

For it was one of Stasy’s peculiarities that, in a certain depressed mood of her very April-like temperament, the only relief to her feelings was teasing Herty. The usual invigoration seemed to have followed the present performance; her colour had returned, and her eyes were sparkling.

“Blanchie, Blanchie,” said Herty, wavering for moment in his intention, “is it true? Will poor mamma have to pay a great lot of money if I eat much bread-and-butter?”

“No, no; of course not. Can’t you see when Stasy’s teasing you, you silly boy?” said Blanche caressingly. “Why, you are eight years old now! You should laugh at her. Mamma has plenty of money to pay for everything we need, though of course you mustn’t be greedy.”

“But hotels *are* dear,” persisted Stasy calmly.

“Well, we are not going to live at a hotel for ever,” said Blanche.

“Nor for very long, I hope,” added her mother. “I do look forward to being settled. Though, if the weather were pretty good, it would be nice to be in London for a little. We must get to know some of the shops, for living in the country makes one rather dependent upon writing to London for things.”

Blanche was silent for a few moments. Then she looked up suddenly.

“Have you no friends to go to see here, mamma? Is there nobody who can give us a little advice how to set about our house-hunting?”

“I scarcely thought it would be necessary to have any,” said Mrs Derwent. “My plan was simply to go down with one or both of you to Blissmore for a day, and look about for ourselves. You see, I

shall feel quite at home once I am there, and it would be easy to ask at the inn or at the principal shop – old Ferris's – if any houses are vacant. They always used to have notice of things of the kind."

"But mamma, dear," said Blanche softly, "all that is more than twenty years ago."

Mrs Derwent was giving Herty a second cup of tea, and did not seem to catch the words.

Chapter Three

Then and Now

Negatively, the waiter's prediction was fulfilled the next morning. That is to say, the fog was gone; but as to the "quite bright" – well, opinions vary, no doubt, as to "quite brightness." Stasy stood at the window overlooking the street, when she felt a hand on her shoulder, and, glancing round, saw that it was her sister's.

"Well, dear," said Blanche, "it is an improvement on last night, isn't it?"

"I don't know," said Stasy dubiously. "It's certainly better than fog, but then, fog isn't *always* there; and this sort of dull grey look is the regular thing in London, I suppose. I have often heard it was like that, but I don't think I quite believed it before."

"But we are not going to live in London," said Blanche, "and the country in some parts of England is very bright and cheerful. Of course, this is the very dullest time of the year; we must remember that. Perhaps it is a good thing to begin at the worst; people say so, but I am not quite sure. There is a great deal in first impressions – bright ones leave an after-glow."

Just then their mother came into the room.

"Isn't it nice that the fog has gone?" she said. "And to me there is something quite exhilarating in the sight of a London street! Dear me, how it carries one back –"

She stood just behind the two girls, and as Blanche glanced round at her, she thought how very pretty her mother still was. Her eyes were so bright, and the slight flush on her cheeks made her look so young.

"You have slept well, mamma, haven't you?" she said affectionately. "You seem quite fresh and energetic."

"Yes, I feel so; and hungry too. I always think London air makes me hungry, even though people abuse it so. Here comes breakfast. – You look well too, Blanchie. – But Stasy, have you not got over your fatigue yet?"

"I don't know," said Stasy. "Perhaps not; everything feels so strange. I don't think I like London, mamma."

Mrs Derwent laughed, but she seemed a little troubled too. Stasy, like herself, was very impressionable, but less buoyant. She had been full of enthusiastic delight at the thought of coming to England, and now she seemed in danger of going to the other extreme.

Blanche darted a somewhat reproachful look at her sister.

"Mamma," she said, "are you going to make some sort of plans? It would be as well to do so at once, don't you think? For if we are to be settled in a home of our own by Christmas, as we have always hoped, there is not much time to lose about finding a house. And if there was nothing at Blissmore –"

"Oh, but there *must* be something at Blissmore," said Mrs Derwent confidently. "And I quite agree with you, Blanchie, about not losing time. I wonder what is the best thing to do," she went on, consideringly.

The waiter just then entered the room.

"Can you let me see a railway guide?" she asked.

"A Bradshaw, ma'am, or a 'Hay, B, C'?" said the man.

"A *what*?" enquired Mrs Derwent, perplexed.

"A 'Hay, B, C,'" he repeated. "They are simpler, ma'am, more suited to ladies, begging your pardon."

"Please let me see one, then. – It must be some new kind of guide since my time, I suppose," she added, turning to the others. "I must confess, Bradshaw would be a labyrinth to me. I want to see

exactly how long it takes to Blissmore, and if we could get back the same evening.” And as the waiter reappeared with the yellow-paper-covered guide in one hand, and the *Morning Post* in the other, she exclaimed, as soon as she had glanced at the former, “Oh, *what* a nice guide! B – ‘Blackheath,’ ‘Blendon’ – yes, here it is, ‘Blissmore.’”

There was silence for a moment or two. Then Mrs Derwent spoke again:

“Yes, I think we can manage it in a day – the first time, at any rate. There is a train at – let me see. – Blanchie, do you hear?”

But Blanche was immersed in the newspaper. The outside column of houses to let had caught her eye.

“Mamma,” she said suddenly, “is there more than one Blissmore?” And her fair face looked a little flushed. “If not, it is really a curious coincidence. Look here,” and she held the paper for her mother to see, while she read aloud:

“Shire. Country residence to be let unfurnished, one mile from Blissmore Station. Contains” – and then followed the number of rooms, stabling for three horses, ending up with “quaint and well-stocked garden. Rent moderate. Apply to Messrs Otterson and Bewley, house-agents, Enneslie Street, Blissmore.”

“Otterson and Bewley,” Mrs Derwent repeated. “Who can they be? I don’t remember the name at all. Enneslie Street? Let me see; that was – ”

“Never mind about that, mamma dear,” said Stasy, who had brightened up wonderfully as she listened to her sister; “I do feel so excited about this house. It seems the very thing for us. Shall we go down to Blissmore at once to see it? I do hope it won’t be taken.”

“That is not likely,” said Blanche. “It is not everybody that has any peculiar attraction to Blissmore. And just look at the list of houses to let!” she added, holding up the paper as she spoke. “But I do think it would be well to write about it, don’t you, mamma?”

“Certainly I will. And I am glad to know the name of a house-agent, though it seems strange that there should be such a person at a tiny place like Blissmore. I can’t even remember Enneslie Street, though there seems – oh yes, that must be why the name seems familiar. There was a family called Enneslie at a pretty place a short way from Blissmore – Barleymead – yes, that was it. The Enneslies must have been building some houses, I suppose.”

And as soon as the obliging waiter had removed the breakfast things, Mrs Derwent got out her writing materials, and set to work at a letter to Messrs Otterson and Bewley.

It was just a little difficult to her to write anything of a formal or business-like nature in English. For as a young girl, nothing of the kind had been required of her, and since her marriage, though the Derwent family had been faithful to their own language among themselves, all outside matters were of course transacted in French. So Blanche and Stasy were both called upon for their advice and opinion.

“How do you begin in English, when it is to a firm?” said Blanche. “In French it is so easy – ‘Messieurs’ – but you can’t say ‘Sirs,’ can you?”

Mrs Derwent hesitated.

“I really don’t know,” she said frankly. “You sometimes wrote for your grandfather to bankers and such people, didn’t you, Blanche? Can’t you remember?”

Blanche considered.

“I don’t recollect ever writing anything but ‘Sir’ or ‘Dear sir,’” she said.

The three looked at each other in perplexity.

Suddenly a bright idea struck Mrs Derwent.

“I will write it in the third person,” she said. “Mrs Derwent will be obliged, etc.”

“That is a capital plan,” said Blanche, and in a few minutes the letter was satisfactorily completed.

It read rather quaintly, notwithstanding the trouble that had been taken with its composition. The clerk in Messrs Otterson and Bewley’s small back office, whose department it was to open the

letters addressed to the firm, glanced through it a second time and then tossed it over to young Mr Otterson, who was supposed to be learning the business as a junior in his father's employ.

"Foreigners, I should say," observed the clerk.

"Better show it to the governor before you send an order to view," replied the other.

Mr Otterson, senior, looked dubious.

"Send particulars and an order," he said, "but mention that no negotiations can be entered upon without references. We must be careful: this school is bringing all sorts of impecunious people about the place."

So the reply which found its way to the private hotel in Jermyn Street, though, strictly speaking, civil, was not exactly inviting in its tone.

Mrs Derwent read it, then passed it on to her elder daughter. She felt disappointed and rather chilled. They had been looking for the letter very eagerly, for time hung somewhat heavy on their hands. They had no one to go to see, and very little shopping to do, owing partly to their still deep mourning. And the noise and bustle of the London streets, even at this dead season, was confusing and tiring; worst of all, there was an incipient fog about still, as is not unusual in November.

"What do you think of it?" said Mrs Derwent, when Blanche had read the letter.

"It is dear, surely," said Blanche. "Let me see – one hundred and twenty pounds; that is, three thousand francs. I thought small country-houses in England were less than that."

"So did I," her mother replied. "Still, we can afford that. Of course, if it had not been for my own money turning out so much less than was expected, we could have bought a little place, which would have been far nicer."

"I don't know that," said Blanche. "At least, it would not have been wise to buy a place till we had tried it. And you have still a little money, mamma, besides what we get from France. We shall have quite enough."

Mrs Derwent's "own money," inherited from her father, had been unwisely invested by him; when it came to be realised after his death, it proved a much less important addition to Henry Derwent's income than had been anticipated.

"Oh yes, we shall have *enough*," she replied, fingering the agents' letter as she spoke. "I don't understand," she went on again, "I don't understand what they mean by the 'recent rise in house rents owing to the improvements in the town.' What improvements can there be?"

"Gas, perhaps, or electric light," said Blanche.

"*Gas*, my dear child!" repeated her mother. "Of course, there has always been gas there. It was not such a barbarous, out-of-the-way place as all that. Still, I scarcely think they can have risen to the heights of electric lighting yet. But we must go down and see for ourselves. These agents ask for references, too: I wonder if that is usual in England? No doubt, however, it will be all right when I tell them who I was."

"But if they did want formal references," said Blanche hesitatingly, "have we any one whose name we could give?"

"My bankers," Mrs Derwent replied promptly. "Monsieur Bergeret opened a private account for me with the firm's bankers here. I do wish I could identify the house," she added. "I am sure I never heard the name before – 'Pinnerton Lodge' – and yet I have a vague remembrance of 'Pinnerton.'"

"Just as you had of 'Enneslie,' mamma," said Stasy. "Well, when are we to go to see it? To-morrow?"

"Yes; I see no use in delaying it," said Mrs Derwent.

So the next morning saw the mother and daughters again at Victoria Station, Master Herty having been given over with many charges to the care of the faithful Aline.

They were in more than good time; their train was not due for some twenty minutes or so, and as they walked up and down the platform, the picture of their first arrival there returned to Blanche's mind.

“Did you see that girl the other night, mamma?” she said. “The girl who hailed a porter for us. No, I don’t think you did. The fog was so thick. I never saw such a charming face: the very incarnation of youth and happiness she seemed to me;” and she related the little incident to her companions.

Stasy sighed.

“I daresay she has got a lovely home somewhere, and relations who make a great pet of her, and – and – oh, just everything in the world she wants,” she said.

Blanche looked at her sister doubtfully.

“Perhaps she has, but perhaps not,” she replied. “It isn’t always those lucky people who are the happiest. But, Stasy, I do wish you wouldn’t be so lugubrious: the air of London doesn’t seem to suit you.”

“I am not lugubri – what a dreadful word! – I am quite cheerful to-day. It is so interesting to be going to choose our new house. Mamma, shall we have to buy a lot of furniture, or will there be enough of what we had at home?”

“My dear Stasy – of course not. What a baby you are! Don’t you remember that we sold by far the greater part to the Baron de Var? Dear me, yes; we shall have to buy all sorts of things.”

Stasy’s eyes sparkled.

“That will be delightful,” she said. “I *am* so glad. So if we settle to take the house at once, we shall be ever so busy choosing things. That’s just what I like.”

Her good spirits lasted, and, indeed, increased, to the end of the journey. It was exhilarating to get out of the murky London air, even though in the country it was decidedly cold, and even slightly misty. As they approached her old home, Mrs Derwent grew pale with excitement.

“To think,” she said to her daughters, “of all that has happened since I left it, a thoughtless girl, that bright October morning, when my father drove me in to the station, and gave me in charge to the friend who was to take me to Paris, where young Madame de Caillemont, as we called her – the daughter-in-law of our old friend – met me, to escort me to Bordeaux. To think that I never came back again till now – with you two, my darlings, fatherless already in your turn, as I was so soon to be then.”

“But not *motherless*?” said Stasy, nestling in closer, “as you were, you poor, dear, little thing. And you hadn’t even a brother or sister! Except for marrying papa, you would have been very lonely. But I wish you’d look out of the window now, mamma, and see if you remember the places. We must be getting very near Blissmore.”

The train was an express one, which in itself had surprised Mrs Derwent a little: express trains used not to stop at Blissmore. They whizzed past some roadside stations, of which, with some difficulty the girls made out the names, in one or two instances familiar to their mother. Then signs of a more important stopping-place began to appear; rows of small, “run-up” cottages, such as one often sees on the outskirts of a town that is beginning to “grow;” here and there a tall chimney, suggestive of a brewery or steam-laundry, were to be seen, on which Mrs Derwent gazed with bewildered eyes.

“This surely cannot be Blissmore,” she exclaimed, as the train slackened. “I have not recognised the neighbourhood at all. It must be some larger town that I had forgotten, or else the railway comes along a different route now.”

But Blissmore it was. Another moment or two left no room for doubt; and, feeling indeed like a stranger in a strange land, Mrs Derwent stepped on to the platform of what was now a fairly important railway station.

“A fly, ma’am – want a fly?” said several voices, as the three made their way to the outside, where several vehicles were standing, and some amount of bustle going on.

Mrs Derwent looked irresolutely at her daughters. “I had thought of walking to the house-agents’,” she said; “but now I doubt if I should find the way. It all seems so utterly changed.”

“We should need a carriage in any case to get to the place we have come to see,” said Blanche. “It is a mile or more from the station, they said.”

“Pinnerton Lodge,” said Mrs Derwent to the foremost of the flymen; “do you know where that is?”

“Pinnerton Lodge,” repeated the man. Then, his memory refreshed by some of the standers-by, he exclaimed: “Oh, to be sure – out Pinnerton Green way. There’s two or three houses out there.”

“Then I shall want you to drive us there; but go first to Enneslie Street – Messrs Otterson and Bewley, the house-agents,” said Mrs Derwent, as she got into the fly, followed by her daughters.

“Pinnerton Green,” she repeated as they were driving off. “Oh yes; I remember now. That was what was in my mind. It was a sort of little hamlet near Blissmore, with an old-world well in the middle of the green. They must have built houses about there. How they have been building!” she continued, as the fly turned into the High Street of the little town. “I know where I am now; but really – it is almost incredible.”

Blanche and Stasy were looking about them with interest. But in comparison with London and Paris, and even Bordeaux, Blissmore did not strike them as anything but a small town. They had not their mother’s associations with grass-grown streets, and but one thoroughfare worthy the name, and two or three sleepy shops, whose modest windows scarcely allowed the goods for sale to be seen at all.

“It is a nice, bright, little place, I think,” said Blanche, as some rays of wintry sunshine lighted up the old church clock, which at that moment pealed out noon, sonorously enough, eliciting the exclamation, “Ah yes; there is a familiar sound,” from Mrs Derwent.

A moment later and they had turned into a side-street, to draw up, a few yards farther on, in front of a very modern, spick-and-span-looking house, half shop, half office, with the name they were in quest of, “Messrs Otterson and Bewley, House-agents, Auctioneers, etc,” in large black-and-gold letters, on the plate-glass.

“Enneslie Street,” said Mrs Derwent. “Why, this used to be Market Corner! There were only about half-a-dozen cottages, and, on market days, a few booths. Dear me! I feel like Rip Van Winkle.”

Chapter Four

Pinnerton Lodge

Mr Otterson received the strangers with formal and somewhat pompous civility, and a somewhat exaggerated caution, not to say suspiciousness of manner, which struck disagreeably on Mrs Derwent and Blanche, accustomed to have to do with people who knew as much about them as they did themselves.

The house could be seen at once, certainly; as to that there was no difficulty. But before entering further into the matter, Mr Otterson begged to be excused, but might he remind the ladies that his client empowered him to deal with no applicants whose references were not perfectly sufficient and satisfactory. Clear understanding in such cases was, according to his experience, the best in the end, even if it should cause a little delay at the outset.

“No delay need be caused in *my* case,” said Mrs Derwent, with a touch of haughtiness which her daughters enjoyed. “My references will be found perfectly satisfactory. Is this – this ultra caution, *usual* in such transactions,” she continued, flushing a little, “may I ask?”

And as she spoke, she drew out of her bag and deposited on the table two letters she had had the foresight to bring with her – one from the firm at Bordeaux, enclosing an acknowledgment to them of the money placed to the credit of “Mrs Anastasia Derwent” with their London bankers.

Mr Otterson’s keen eyes took in the nature of their contents even while scarcely seeming to glance at them. His manner grew a trifle less stilted.

“Cautious we have to be, madam,” he replied, “though you will not find us exaggeratedly so, I trust. And in the interests of our clients, we naturally feel it our duty to give the preference to the most desirable among the constantly increasing applications for houses here. In your case, possibly, being foreigners, a little extra – ”

“We are *not* foreigners,” said Blanche; “and if we were? I certainly am not surprised at the small number of upper-class ‘foreigners’ who come to England, if this is the sort of thing they have to go through.”

The house-agent glanced at her with a mixture of annoyance and admiration. She looked beautiful at that moment. Her fair face flushed, her usually gentle eyes sparkling.

“You – you misunderstand, madam,” he was beginning, when Mrs Derwent in her turn interrupted him.

“On the contrary, sir,” she said very quietly, “I think, it is distinctly you who have misunderstood us. As my daughter says, we are not foreigners. Beyond the statement of that fact, which you seem to consider important, I do not think we need waste time by entering into further particulars. The matter is a purely business one. If you do not find my references satisfactory, be so good as to say so at once, and I will apply to London agents about a house.”

In his heart Mr Otterson had no wish to let these really very promising applicants for the honour of inhabiting Pinnerton Lodge escape him. On the contrary, they struck him as just the sort of people its owner would approve of – not unwilling to lay out a little money on repairs and improvements, etc.

“I have in no way implied, madam, that the names you have submitted to me are unsatisfactory references,” he said, not without a touch of dignity. “As you observe, it is a matter of business, and if you approve, I will send a clerk at once to the house to have it all open for you.”

“He can go on the box of our fly,” said Mrs Derwent, with a glance out of the window; “I understand it is some little way off.” And as Mr Otterson touched a hand-bell standing beside him on the table, Mrs Derwent addressed him again.

“What has caused this increased demand for houses here?” she said. “What has led to the many changes in the place – the sudden growth of it?”

Mr Otterson raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Naturally, of course, in the first instance, the school,” he replied. “And the breweries – the two large companies of brewers have brought a great many working men to the place, and the school even more. It has led to an immense amount of building – private houses of all classes, as the advantages and cheapness of the education to be got here are now almost unparalleled.”

Mrs Derwent looked surprised.

“I do not remember any school here in the old days,” she said. “At least – there was a small old school – but – ”

“That is the same, no doubt,” said the house-agent. “The foundation has been altered, by Act of Parliament, of course. The accumulated funds were very large: it is now a first-rate school for middle-class, indeed for upper-class boys, where economy is a consideration. Families have been in consequence flocking to Blissmore. But the last year or two has cooled down the rush a little. At one time it was almost alarming; but things are settling themselves now.”

Just then the clerk appeared. Mr Otterson opened the door, speeding the parting guests with more urbanity than he had received them.

“I will look in here on my return,” said Mrs Derwent, with a sufficiently courteous bow, “and tell you what we think of the house.”

“Oh mamma,” exclaimed Stasy, as soon as the three found themselves again in the privacy of the fly, “how *horrid* England is – how horrid English people are! How dared that common man speak to you like that, when you think how Monsieur Bergeret, who was far, *far* more a gentleman than he, used to treat you, as if you were a queen! Why, he used to look as proud as anything if you shook hands with him! Oh Blanchie, do let us go back – go home again. I have been feeling it ever since we arrived, that first night with the dreadful fog, though I didn’t like to say so.”

And poor Stasy looked up with tearful and beseeching eyes as she repeated:

“Oh, do let us go home again.”

Mrs Derwent was sorry and distressed. But, on the whole, Blanche took it more seriously. For her mother was still to some extent under the glamour of her old associations, and “After all,” thought the elder girl to herself, “she must know better than we can. Perhaps it will come right in the end.”

So she said nothing, resolutely crushing back the strong inclination she felt to join in the cry, “Oh, do, mamma, do let us go home,” while she listened to her mother’s expostulations with poor Stasy.

“There are vulgar-minded and disagreeable people everywhere, my dear child. And perhaps, after all, the man only meant to do his duty. I daresay now, if we were going over to France for the first time, inexperienced and strange, we should find just as much to complain of there. You will feel quite different when we are settled in a pretty house of our own. And think how interesting it will be to choose the furnishing and everything. Do try, dear, to be more cheerful – for my sake, too.”

Stasy wiped off such of her tears as had found their way to the surface, and swallowed down the others, though the choking in her throat prevented her speaking for a moment or two. But she took hold of her mother’s hand and stroked it.

“I think,” said Blanche, smiling a little at the remembrance, “the man got as good as he gave. I hope that isn’t a very vulgar expression, mamma? I have read it often, though I never heard it. Was I too scornful to him? I did feel *so* angry; perfectly boiling for a moment or two. I don’t often feel like that.”

Stasy began to smile too.

“You were splendid, Blanchie. He was *shaking*; he was, really. I am so glad I was there to see it. And he had begun to look ashamed when mamma laid the letters on the table in that nice grand way. Oh yes, I do hope the house will be pretty. Are we getting near it, do you think, mamma? The road seems quite country now.”

Mrs Derwent looked out of the window scrutinisingly.

"I think we must be nearly there," she replied, "but I do not know this side of Blissmore nearly as well as *our* side. I am glad to see there is not so much building hereabouts. Oh yes," as the fly rather suddenly turned down a lane, "I know where we are now; it is all coming back to me. This lane comes out on to Pinnerton Green. There is an old well in the centre, and five or six cottages, and the church, and a pretty little vicarage. I will shut my eyes, and you girls tell me if I am not right. The church stands right opposite the side of the green, where we come out – now, doesn't it?"

Mrs Derwent was quite excited; the two girls scarcely less so. And as the fly emerged on to the opener ground, for a moment or two no one spoke. Then Blanche exclaimed, half hesitatingly:

"Yes, there is the church. A dear old church, just across the green, all covered with ivy. And the vicarage. But the cottages – where can they be? And mamma, there are ever so many big, or *rather* big houses, with gardens opening on to the green. Oh, you must open your eyes, dear. I can't make it out." Mrs Derwent did as she was told, and looked about her.

What a metamorphosis! There remained the church and the vicarage and the old well as landmarks certainly, but beyond these, everything was new.

The houses struck her herself less pleasantly than Blanche. They were of the essentially English modern "villa" class, a class really unknown in France, in old-world France especially. She gave a little gasp of surprise and disappointment, but without speaking. And the next moment she felt more than glad that she had not put her impression into words, when poor Stasy exclaimed brightly:

"Oh, what nice cheerful houses; so fresh and new looking. And what pretty, neat gardens. I do wonder which is Pinnerton Lodge! I feel quite happy again about living in England, mamma."

Mrs Derwent smiled back at her, of course, though her own heart was going down a little. Blanche's face expressed nothing but gentle and resigned expectancy.

They were not long left in doubt as to "which" was their destination. The fly, after some fumbling on the part of Messrs Otterson and Bewley's clerk at a rusty padlock on the chain, which fastened a gate, turned in at a short but shady drive, and Pinnerton Lodge in another moment stood full before them.

Mrs Derwent's heart went up again. And glancing at her, Blanche's face too relaxed into less constrained, or restrained lines; her eyes brightened, and looked ready for a smile.

It was several degrees better than the obtrusively smart villas, though, very possibly, less materially convenient and complete. It was nothing more nor less than an enlarged and transmogrified cottage. The gable end and deep-eaved roof were still to be seen at one side; the faithful, clinging, all-the-year-round ivy; the more fitful summer friends – old-fashioned climbing roses, honeysuckle, and the like – would reappear again in due season, one felt instinctively. And the additions had not been badly managed; there was no glaring incongruity between the new and the old, and already the busy, patient ivy was doing its utmost to soften with its veiling green all offensive contrasts.

"A nice little place of its kind," the boyish-looking clerk ventured to remark to the three strangers, gazing before them in silence. "What you call 'quaint;' but some admire that style. It's not up to the mark of the other houses on the green, but that's not to be expected. You see it was the first start here, and the owner added on to the two old cottages, instead of pulling them down and building all new, like the rest;" and he jerked his thumb in the direction of the villas.

"Thank Heaven he did nothing of the sort," ejaculated Mrs Derwent. And the clerk stared at her so, that she checked herself with a smile. "I like it just as it is," she said by way of explanation. "It is a picturesque-looking house; but it seems very small, I fear. From the rent named, I expected a larger place."

"Rents have gone up about Blissmore quite astonishing," said the young man. "And these odd houses are sometimes roomier than you'd think. You'd like to see through it, no doubt. I have all the keys."

He moved forward, as he spoke, to the front of the house.

“Perhaps you wouldn’t mind waiting in the porch for a minute or two,” he said. “The quickest way for me to get in is by the back door; the front one is barred inside.”

The porch was charming. Deep and shady, and with tiny lattice-windows high up at each side, through which the wintry sun was sending a few rays. There were seats and a red-tiled floor. The two girls gave a quick exclamation of pleasure.

“It is like a little room,” said Stasy. The clerk’s face brightened. He seemed to feel a personal interest in the matter.

“There is no one living in the house, then, to take care of it?” inquired Mrs Derwent. “Is that not necessary?”

“Not in the fine season,” was the reply. “We were just thinking of putting some one in against the winter, if nothing came of the advertisement. But in the summer it’s very dry – very dry, indeed.”

He turned away towards the back premises, and soon they heard his footsteps returning through the passages. Then some unbolting and unbarring ensued, and the door was thrown open.

They all entered eagerly. It was rather dark, but this their guide explained was partly the result of unnecessarily closed shutters and untrimmed ivy round some of the upper windows, though partly owing, no doubt, to the oak wainscoting of the small square hall itself.

“It would look much cheerfuller with a nice paper – picked out with a little gold, perhaps. But the woodwork has a style of its own; the late owner was all for the antique.”

“The *late* owner,” repeated Mrs Derwent. “Is he dead, then? Has the house been long uninhabited?”

“Only since last spring. Mr Bartleman scarce lived in it himself. He found the winters too cold. Then it was let to Major Frederic, and he and his family lived here five years, till the young gentlemen had finished their schooling. There were several after it in the summer, but they mostly objected to the distance from the school.”

“But how is it, then, that the villas are all let?” asked Blanche. “At least, I suppose they are.”

“They’re not let, Miss. They’re mostly lived in by their owners – parties from the town, who have moved out, finding they could get a good rent for their houses near the school. There’s Mr Belton, the principal draper at Blissmore, lives next door; and Mr Wandle, junior partner in Luckworth and Wandle’s brewery. The neighbours are highly respectable.”

Mrs Derwent did not speak. Stasy was smothering a laugh. Blanche led the way into the rooms opening on to the hall.

They were nice – decidedly tempting, though not large. But they were depressingly out of repair. The Frederic schoolboys had evidently bestowed upon the house more than the legitimate “wear and tear” during their five years’ occupancy. The drawing-room, especially, was scarcely deserving of the name: it looked as if it had been a playroom *pur et simple*. The attentive clerk was ready with his explanations.

“Major Frederic never furnished this room,” he said. “It was kept empty for the young gentlemen.”

“It might be a very pretty room,” said Blanche, “but it needs *everything* doing to it.”

The dining-room, though it had been furnished and used in a nominally orthodox way, was in not much better case. Still, a dining-room never, to ladies especially, seems such a serious matter. The library was the best-cared-for room, and it opened into a small boudoir or study, which was really charming. There were great capabilities about the house, though hitherto these had but scantily been made available. Up-stairs it was brighter. There was a sufficient number of rooms, though everywhere the same story of needful repair and embellishment.

Outside, to somewhat inexperienced eyes, it looked in fair order, for it needs the full luxuriance of summer vegetation to show how, in a neglected or semi-neglected garden, the weeds grow apace with or outrun the orthodox inhabitants of the soil.

The clerk was very patient. The minute attention bestowed by the visitors upon the little place seemed to him to savour of hope, and it was in his own interests, poor fellow, to secure a “let,” as it would increase his chances of promotion in the office. But at last Mrs Derwent and her daughters seemed satisfied.

“We shall miss our train to London,” said the former, “if we stay any longer; for I must see Mr Otterson on our way through the town.”

So saying, she led the way out, turning, as she stepped on to the drive, to give a last look at the house, with already a slight sense of prospective proprietorship. But she said nothing, and the two girls were quick-witted enough to follow her lead.

The flyman, for reasons best known to himself, had seen fit to drive out into the road again, and was waiting, more than half asleep, at the gate.

Blanche glanced round, and an idea struck her.

“Mamma,” she said, “if you are not tired, might we walk on a little way? I should like to have some idea of the neighbourhood, and to look in at the church for a moment.”

“Certainly,” said Mrs Derwent; “it cannot make five minutes’ difference. And, after all, even if it did, we could wait for a later train.”

“You won’t find the church open, madam, I’m afraid,” said the clerk. “But you might like to walk round it. From the other side there’s a nice view, Alderwood way. On a clear day you can see right across. And at the other end of the lane there’s one of the lodges of East Moddersham, Sir Conway Marth’s place – one of *the* places. You can see it any Thursday. The avenue is half a mile long by this approach.”

Chapter Five

The Girl with the Happy Face

As Derwent did not seem to feel any *very* lively interest in East Moddersham, and proud little Stasy reared her head at the very idea of going to see a show, like tourists, when, of course, they would there as guests!

But the mention of Alderwood had a different effect.

“Alderwood,” repeated Stasy’s mother, ignoring the young man’s last words. “Do you mean Sir Adam Nigel’s place? Why, it is quite at the other side of Blissmore, unless there are two Alderwoods. But that could scarcely be.”

“Sir Adam Nigel,” repeated the clerk in his turn, shaking his head. “I don’t recollect the name. Alderwood is the residence of Mrs Lilford – that’s to say, it is her property, but it has been let on a long lease to Lady Harriot Dunstan.”

“Ah,” said Mrs Derwent, turning to her daughters, “that explains it, then. Poor Sir Adam must be dead, for Mrs Lilford is a niece of his, a favourite niece, his brother’s only child. I am surprised at her letting a family place like that; and yet it must be the same. Only I can’t understand its being at this side of Blissmore.”

“It is three or four miles off, quite the other way,” said the young man, “but there is a view of it from this. It stands high, and I believe there is a short cut to it across the fields, skirting the town.”

“I see,” said Mrs Derwent consideringly. “Then you have never heard Sir Adam Nigel’s name? Perhaps you are not a native of the place, however.”

“No; I come from Yorkshire,” replied he. “I have only been down here a few months.”

“Ah; that explains it,” the lady said again.

They strolled round the church, and gazed over to where they were told Alderwood *should* be seen, if it were clearer. But a slight mist was already rising, and there was a mist over the older woman’s eyes too.

“Alderwood was close to my old home, you know,” she whispered to Blanche.

Then they walked round the green and down the short bit of lane separating it from the high-road, the clerk staying behind to tell the flyman to follow them.

“How does it all strike you, Blanchie dear?” said Mrs Derwent, with some anxiety in her tone.

“I like the house very much indeed,” the girl replied. “It might be made *very* nice. Would all that cost too much, mamma?”

“We must see,” Mrs Derwent replied. “But the place – the green, and all these other new houses. What do you think of the neighbourhood, in short?”

“They are pretty, bright little houses,” said Blanche, not fully understanding her mother’s drift. “But I think, on the whole, I like the old-fashionedness of – ”

“Of *our* house?” Stasy interrupted, clearly showing how the wind was setting in *her* direction. Blanche smiled.

“Of *our* house, best,” she concluded.

“Yes, oh yes, most decidedly,” agreed Mrs Derwent. “But that was not exactly what I meant. I was wondering if the close neighbourhood of this sort of little colony may not be objectionable in any way.”

“I scarcely see how,” Blanche replied. “Of course, they are not the sort of people we should *know*; but still, these other houses make it less practically lonely. And once you look up all your friends, we shall be quite independent, you see, mamma.”

“Of course,” said Mrs Derwent, and she was going on to say more, when at that moment the sound of a horse or horses’ feet approaching them rapidly, made her stop short and look round.

They were just at the end of the lane. A few yards higher up the road, on the opposite side, large gates, and the vague outline of a small house standing at one side of them, were visible. This was the entrance to the great house – East Moddersham – of which the clerk had spoken with bated breath. The sounds were coming towards where the Derwents stood, from the direction of the town, so, though they naturally turned to look, they in no way associated them with the near neighbourhood of the East Moddersham lodge.

There were two riders – a lady, and not far behind her, a groom. They were not going very fast; the horses seemed a little tired, and were not without traces of cross-country riding through November mud. Still they seemed to go by quickly, and as the first comer – a girl evidently, and quite a young girl – passed, a slight exclamation made both Mrs Derwent and Stasy start slightly.

“Did you speak, Blanchie?” said her sister; and as she glanced at Blanche’s face, she saw, with surprise, that she was smiling.

In her turn, Blanche started.

“I – I really don’t know if I said anything, or if it was she who did,” she replied. “Did you see her, Stasy? Did you, mamma? It was the girl at the station – the girl with the happy face.”

But neither her mother nor Stasy had known the little episode at the time, though they remembered Blanche’s telling them of it afterwards.

“I wish I had looked at her more,” said Stasy regretfully. “I didn’t notice her face; I was so taken up in looking at her altogether, you know – the horse, and the whole get-up. It *did* look so nice! Shall we be able to ride when we come to live here, mamma? It is one of the things I have longed to be in England for.”

“I hope so,” said Mrs Derwent. “At least we can manage a pony and pony-carriage. I think you could enjoy driving yourselves almost as much as riding. I wonder who the girl is. Did she look as happy this time, Blanche?”

“Yes; it seems the character of her face. I couldn’t picture her anything else,” Blanche replied. “I wonder, too, who she is.”

“She rode in at those big gates a little farther on,” Stasy said.

Just as she spoke, the clerk came up to them again, followed by the fly. He overheard Stasy’s last words, and ventured, though quite respectfully, to volunteer some information.

“That lady who just rode past,” he said, “is Lady Hebe Shetland; she is a ward of Sir Conway’s. A very fine-looking young lady she is considered. She has been hunting, no doubt. She is a splendid horsewoman.”

“Of course, there is a great deal of hunting hereabouts,” said Mrs Derwent. “It was my own part of the country in my young days.”

And something in her tone, though she was too kindly to indulge in “snubs,” made the young man conscious that the ladies were of a different class to most of the applicants for houses at the office in Enneslie Street.

They soon found themselves there again; Mr Otterson receiving them with urbanity, which increased when he found Mrs Derwent a prospective tenant, likely to do more than “nibble.”

“I should have *preferred* a house on the other side,” she said, “nearer Alderwood and Fotherley. Fotherley was my own old home.”

“Indeed,” said the agent, with secret curiosity. “I fear there is nothing thereabouts – really *nothing*. The new building has all been in the town, or quite close to it, with the exception of Pinnerton Green.”

“Ah well, then there is no use in thinking of another neighbourhood,” said Mrs Derwent.

And she went on to discuss the house that there *was* use in thinking of, after a very sensible and practical fashion, which raised Mr Otterson’s opinion of her greatly.

There would be a good deal to do to it; of that there was no doubt. And repairs, and alterations, and embellishments are not done for nothing. Mr Otterson looked grave.

“The first thing to be done,” he said, “is to get at an approximate idea of the cost.”

“You cannot make even a guess at it?” said Mrs Derwent, glancing at the clock.

For it had been already explained to her that all but the most absolutely necessary work must be at her own expense.

The agent shook his head.

“Not till to-morrow morning,” he said. “I have a very clever builder close at hand, who could give a rough idea almost at once, but not this evening. You are not staying the night at Blissmore, I suppose, madam?”

“We had not thought of doing so,” Mrs Derwent replied doubtfully.

“It would save a good deal of time, and indeed the man would almost need to see you to receive your personal instructions,” said Mr Otterson. “If it is impossible, perhaps you can manage to come down again next week.”

Blanche looked at her mother, as if to ask leave to speak.

“Yes, my dear?” said Mrs Derwent inquiringly.

“I think, mamma, it would be a good plan to stay the night,” she said. “It would be less tiring for you, and we should feel more settled if we knew a little more.”

“I think so too,” said Mrs Derwent. “We can telegraph to Jermyn Street, so that Herty and Aline will not be frightened. I suppose there is a good hotel here?”

Mr Otterson hesitated.

“There are one or two fairly comfortable, but not exactly what I should recommend for ladies,” he said.

“It is not very often hotel accommodation is needed here. People come down for the day. I did not know – I thought perhaps you had friends in the neighbourhood.”

“No, no one I could go to suddenly,” said Mrs Derwent. “I daresay we shall manage well enough,” and she was turning away, when a bright idea struck the agent.

“There are lodgings – private apartments – in the High Street,” he said, “where you could certainly be accommodated for the night, and though it might be in a plain way, it would be quieter and more retired for ladies alone than the hotels. It is at number – What is Miss Halliday’s number in the High Street, Joseph?” he called out to an invisible somebody in the inner office.

There was a moment’s delay. Then the invisible somebody replied.

“Twenty-nine, sir – number twenty-nine.”

“Exactly – twenty-nine. Miss Halliday has a small millinery establishment, but has more rooms than she wants – it is a good-sized house – and lets them to lodgers. And I happen to know that they are vacant at present.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs Derwent more cordially than she had yet spoken to the house-agent; “I think that sounds much better. We will drive round there at once.”

“Mamma,” said Blanche, when they were again in the fly, “it may be a very good thing to know of these rooms; for we may find it a convenience to come down here before the house is ready, to superintend its getting into order.”

“Yes, that is a good idea,” her mother agreed; “for I may find the hotel in London very dear. I really don’t know. I could not get them to say anything very definite, but English hotels are always dearer than abroad, I believe. Yes, I really think we are very lucky.”

This opinion increased when, in reply to the flyman’s knock at Miss Halliday’s door, it was opened by a neat, old-fashioned looking, little servant-maid of twelve or thirteen, who replied that her missis was in the shop, but she would see the ladies at once. It was evidently a case of lodgings, not bonnets, and the small damsel appreciated its importance.

Mrs Derwent and Blanche left Stasy, rather to her disgust, to wait for them in the fly, while they were shown into Miss Halliday’s best sitting-room. A very nice old sitting-room it was, at the back of the house, looking out upon a long strip of walled-in garden, which in summer bade fair to

be quaintly pleasant. And Miss Halliday matched her house. She was small and neat, with a certain flavour of “better days” about her, though without the least touch of faded or complaining, decayed gentility. On the contrary, she was briskly cheerful, though the tones of her voice were gentle and refined. She took in the situation at a glance, was honoured and gratified by the application, much obliged to Mr Otterson, and anxious at once to take upon her small shoulders the responsibility of making her visitors as comfortable as their sudden advent would allow.

“Tell Stasy to come in, Blanchie dear,” said Mrs Derwent. “I have no doubt Miss Halliday will make us a cup of tea quickly, for we are cold and rather tired. – Will your servant ask the flyman his fare?” she added, turning to the little landlady; “and, oh, by-the-by, I forgot. Can I easily send a telegram?”

“The post-office is only two doors off,” Miss Halliday replied. “Deborah shall run with it at once. And this room will soon be warm – the fire burns up very quickly once it is lighted – but if the ladies would honour me by stepping into my own little parlour across the passage. It is nice and warm, and tea shall be ready directly. Dear, dear, down from London to-day, and such cold weather! You must be tired, and longing for tea.”

Now that they were free to rest, they *did* begin to feel tired, and very glad to escape the dark journey back to town, and the cold drive from the station. The bedrooms up-stairs were aired and ready, as Miss Halliday was expecting visitors next week for a few days.

“There’s a good deal of coming and going at Blissmore, nowadays,” she said. “It’s a very improving place by what it used to be, every one says,” as she hospitably bustled about.

“You have not been here many years, I suppose,” said Mrs Derwent. “I cannot remember this house. I don’t think it used to be a shop in the old days, otherwise I should recollect it. There were not many shops here when I was a girl.”

Miss Halliday looked deeply interested, but she was too well-bred a little woman to ask questions.

“If you were here a good many years ago, madam,” she said, “you may remember my aunt, Mrs Finch, whom I succeeded. She had a nice little millinery business, and I came to her as a learner. Things had gone badly at home, after my dear old father died, and I was very glad to have the chance my aunt offered me. That was about seven years ago. There’s been many changes here even since then, but the most of the building had begun before I came.”

“Yes,” said Mrs Derwent, “I had not heard anything of it. I was quite astonished to find how the school had increased. Mrs Finch, did you say? Oh yes, I remember her very well, but she did not live here – not in this house.”

“No,” said Miss Halliday, “my aunt lived in the Market Place – a small corner house. But we got on pretty well, and then we moved here to join apartments to the millinery. So many ladies disliked the hotels: they were noisy and rough. And it’s answered pretty well on the whole.”

“Then your aunt is dead, I suppose,” said Mrs Derwent. “She must have been a good age, for when I remember her, she had already quite white hair and stooped a good deal. She used to retrim and alter my hats very nicely, and I remember how interested she was when my new ones came down from London. I was – my unmarried name was Fenning. My father was the rector of Fotherley, the village near Alderwood.”

Miss Halliday looked delighted at having her curiosity thus satisfied.

“Oh indeed, madam,” she said. “I’m sure I’ve heard my aunt speak of the late Mr Fenning. When I first came to Blissmore, the vicar of Fotherley was a Mr *Fleming*, and I recollect my aunt drawing a contrast, if you’ll excuse my naming it, between that gentleman and his predecessor.”

Mrs Derwent smiled.

“Yes,” she said, “by all accounts there was a very marked contrast.”

Then Deborah appeared to say that the fire was burning up nicely in the best parlour, and thither the ladies repaired to rest and talk. Blanche, the foreseeing, had taken the precaution of bringing a

bag with a few necessary articles “just *in case* we were kept too late,” and Miss Halliday was only too ready to lend anything she could, so the prospects for the night were not very alarming.

Altogether, the spirits of the little family improved; and when Miss Halliday’s neatly prepared little supper made its appearance, they drew their chairs round the table, prepared to do full justice to it.

“I really think,” said Mrs Derwent for the second time that day, “that we have been very lucky. It is nice to have found out these lodgings. We could stay here quite comfortably for a few weeks while the house is getting ready.”

“It would certainly be much less expensive than a London hotel,” said Blanche. “Yes, I do hope we may get to like Blissmore, if all goes through about the house.”

“You mean you hope we shall like Pinnerton Lodge,” said Stasy. “We needn’t have anything to do with Blissmore, except, of course, that it will be our station and post-town. And I suppose we shall do a little shopping here. But, *of course*, we shall not know any Blissmore people. Mamma, I wish you’d begin to look up some of your old friends. That big place now, near us – East Moddersham. Didn’t you know those people long ago?”

Mrs Derwent shook her head.

“It was as good as shut up in those days,” she said. “The Marths were scarcely ever there, as the then Lady Marth was very delicate. – Do the present owners of East Moddersham live there much, do you know?” she inquired of Miss Halliday, who just then re-entered the room to see that her guests had all they wanted.

“Sir Conway and Lady Marth?” she replied. “Oh yes, they are there most of the year; they have several sons, some grown up and some still at school, and one quite little daughter. They are very much liked and highly thought of in the county.”

“And,” began Blanche, “there is a grown-up girl, is there not? A niece or a ward of Sir Conway’s?” Miss Halliday’s face grew still brighter.

“Lady Hebe, Miss, you must mean; Lady Hebe Shetland. Yes, she is their ward, and Sir Conway’s niece too. A great heiress, and to my mind the most beautiful and charming young lady in all the country round. Her face makes one think of everything sweet and pleasant.”

“And happy,” said Blanche. “I never did see any one look so happy.”

“She has everything to make her so,” said Miss Halliday. “But that wouldn’t do it without a happy *nature*.”

“How old is she?” asked Stasy abruptly.

“Nineteen, I think, Miss. They do say she is engaged to young Mr Milward, a fine young gentleman, and well suited to her. But I don’t know if it is true.”

“Do you mean the Milwards of Crossburn?” said Mrs Derwent.

“Yes; that is where they live, I believe,” was the reply.

“I hope it’s not true that that girl of Blanche’s is engaged,” said Stasy, later in the evening, after she had been sitting silent for some time.

“Why?” said her sister, looking up in surprise; “what difference could it make to us?”

“All the difference. If she were married, she’d go away to a home of her own, and we would never see her. But living there, so near, she would be a nice friend for us. She is just about your age, Blanchie.”

“Well,” said Blanche, “we shall see. It is not even certain yet that we are going to live at Pinnerton at all.”

“I’m sure we shall. I have a presentiment that we shall,” said Stasy oracularly.

Chapter Six

The Doctor's Wife

Stasy's presentiment came true. The reports of the builder the next morning, when he called to enter into particulars with Mrs Derwent, were favourable; and later in the day the mother and daughters returned to London with very little doubt in their minds as to their future home being Pinnerton Lodge.

London looked very grim and dreary after the clear fine sky in the country, and Stasy shivered at the thought of how many days must yet forcibly be spent there, before they could install themselves in their new quarters.

But the things we dread are not always those that come to pass. Mrs Derwent, as I have said, was in some ways extremely inexperienced in English life and rates of expenses. Busy and eager about the arrangements for their new house, she put off asking for her hotel bill till fully a fortnight after the little party's arrival in London. And when she received it and glanced at the total, she was aghast!

"Blanche, my dear," she exclaimed, "just look at this. Is it not tremendous? Why, we might have lived at a hotel at home for nearly a year for what this fortnight has cost us!"

"Not quite that, mamma," said Blanche, smiling, though her own fair face was flushed with annoyance. "But, no doubt, it is very dear. And yet we seem to have lived plainly enough. Mamma," she went on decidedly, "we mustn't stay here; that is quite certain. All you have got in reserve for furnishing our house and paying for the alterations will be wasted, and what should we do then?"

Mrs Derwent sat silent, considering.

"You are quite right, dear," she said at last. "We must look out for lodgings. But I have a horror of London lodgings. They are so often detestable."

"Why stay in London at all?" said Stasy suddenly from her corner of the room, where, though engrossed with a story-book, her quick ears had been caught by the sound of vexation in her mother's voice. "I am sure it is horrid – so dull, and knowing nobody. Why shouldn't we go down to Blissmore, to that nice little Miss Halliday's, and stay there till the house is ready? We meant to go there for the last week or two, anyway."

Blanche's face lighted up, and she looked at her mother anxiously. But Mrs Derwent hesitated.

"It would certainly be comfortable enough," she said; "quite as comfortable as here. But to stay there for so long – for several weeks? Is it not rather lowering? I don't want to get mixed up with Blissmore people: they must be a very heterogeneous society; not like in the old days when there were just a very few thoroughly established people living in the town, whom everybody knew and respected."

"I don't see that we need know people we don't want to know, any more when living in the town than in the neighbourhood," said Blanche. "We can keep quite to ourselves; unless, of course, you can look up some of your old friends, who would understand how we were placed."

Mrs Derwent seemed perplexed.

"I wish I could," she said, "but I scarcely know how to begin. There seems nothing but changes. It is such a disappointment about dear old Sir Adam to start with."

"Still we are gaining nothing in that way by remaining in London," said Blanche. "And when at Blissmore you can find out about the people you used to know, and perhaps write to them."

"I can find out about them, certainly," Mrs Derwent agreed. "But I don't think I should actually write or suggest any one's calling, till we are in our own house, and have everything nice and settled. People are so prejudiced. They would immediately begin saying we lived poorly or messily because we had been so long in France."

“I don’t think any one could live ‘messily’ in Miss Halliday’s house if they tried. It is so beautifully neat,” said Stasy, who had taken a great fancy to their little landlady. “Do let us go there, mamma. I am so tired of being here. London is horrid in winter, especially if you have no friends. And why should you and Blanche worry about the hotel bills, when there is no need, and none of us want to stay?”

And in the end, as not unfrequently happened – for there was often a good deal of wisdom in her suggestions – Stasy’s proposal was adopted; so that about three weeks after their first arrival in England, the Derwents found themselves settled for the time being at Number Twenty-Nine in the old High Street of Blissmore.

It was not exactly the beginning of life in England which Mrs Derwent had pictured to herself. It was a trifle dreary to be back again, really back again in the immediate neighbourhood of her old home, with no one except Miss Halliday – herself a new-comer in the place – to welcome her and her children, or take the slightest interest in their advent.

“If there had been even one or two of our old servants left somewhere near,” she could not help saying to Blanche that night, when Stasy and little Hertford had gone to bed, in high spirits at having really got away from “that horrid London,” as they both called it. “But every one seems gone that I had to do with,” she concluded, in a depressed tone.

“You really can’t judge yet, mamma,” said Blanche. “You haven’t looked up anybody except Sir Adam Nigel, and you said you would rather wait till we were settled in our own house.”

“I know I did. Oh yes, I daresay it will all be right enough. I am going to make out a list of all the friends I remember, and inquire about them by degrees. Some day soon we must drive over to Fotherley, Blanchie. Just think, I have never even seen your dear grandfather’s grave! I am tired to-night, and everything seems wrong when one is tired.”

Things did brighten up even by the next morning. The weather, though cold, was clear and bracing; very different from the murkiness of London, which had been peculiarly trying to nerves and lungs accustomed to the pure smokeless air of southern France. And the work at Pinnerton Lodge was already begun. It was most interesting to go all over the house again with the delightful sense of proprietorship, planning which rooms should be for what and for whom; how the old furniture would “come in,” and what it would be necessary to add to it. And an occasional day in London, with definite shopping for its object, made Stasy allow that for some things, and in some ways, the great city was not altogether a bad place after all.

Still, though they were not “dull” in the sense of having nothing to do, and feeling in consequence listless and dreary, the little family felt curiously lonely.

Miss Halliday was no gossip – that is to say, she drew the line at the concerns of her visitors, and sternly refused to tell any of her cronies anything about them. And though this rule of hers was well known, still it added a slight element of mystery to her present lodgers, which, in reality, led to more gossip about them than they were in the least aware of. It was not often that visitors stayed so long at Miss Halliday’s; as a rule, her rooms were merely taken as a half-way house for a very few days, by families pitching their tents in the now sought-after little town. And for some time no one knew anything about Pinnerton Lodge, as the distance between it and Blissmore was sufficient, in winter especially, to prevent much passing by. Added to which one of the good qualities of the Otterson and Bewley firm was discretion carried to the limits of surliness, in their determination that all knowledge of their clients’ affairs should be confined to the office itself.

So Blanche and Stasy walked up and down the Blissmore streets, intent on such amount of shopping as Mrs Derwent would allow them to do there, or marched out bravely to Pinnerton and back, however cold it was, rejoicing in the “delightful English freedom,” as Stasy called it, which made it possible for them to do so without any breach of accepted rules, innocent of the remarks and comments their appearance in public called forth.

"I *can't* make them out," said the wife of one of the doctors – Blissmore now rejoiced in four or five, though formerly one and an assistant had been all that was required – the wife, unluckily, of *the* doctor whose house in the High Street was nearest to Miss Halliday's. "I *can't* make them out. Do they never mean to know anybody or tell who they are? People who have come from abroad *should* tell all about themselves, or how can they expect any one to notice them."

Which was, to say the least, a begging-the-question kind of reproach, seeing that in no way had the Derwent family expected, or seemed to expect, the "notice" of Mrs Burgess or any of her coterie!

But it is not only the brave that chance sometimes favours. It favours the idle and inquisitive and the busy-bodies too, now and then. And I am afraid, without judging her too harshly, Mrs Burgess might come under these heads.

The chance was that of Stasy getting a sore throat. It was not a very bad one, but she was rather subject to sore throats, and the change of climate made Mrs Derwent extra cautious about her. It got suddenly worse one evening, and though Stasy was not cowardly or impatient when she was ill, she had to own to feeling pretty bad, and depressing visions of a quinsy she had had on one or two occasions rose before her.

"We must not trifle with it," her mother decided, and Miss Halliday was summoned and consulted as to sending for the doctor. Her own doctor, the one of oldest standing in the place, was unfortunately away for a few days, she happened to know. But there were others. Mr Meyrick was considered second best, but he lived quite at the other side of the town, and —

"I do not think it is anything complicated," said Mrs Derwent. "If we were at home" – and she sighed just a little – "I should know how to treat it myself. But I have forgotten the names of English medicaments, and, indeed, I doubt if we could get the herbs and simple drugs here at all. No, it is best to have a doctor. Who is the nearest, Miss Halliday?"

"Mr Burgess lives only a few doors off," the little woman replied. "And he is clever, I believe."

"But you don't like him, I see," said Mrs Derwent. "Is there anything against him?"

"Oh dear, no. But they – Mr Burgess and his wife – are not like Dr Summers and Miss Summers. Mrs Burgess has the name of chattering a great deal, and rather spitefully sometimes," Miss Halliday admitted.

The Derwents only smiled.

"That really does not matter," said the mother. "We shall have nothing to do with the wife. I think you had better send round for Mr Burgess and ask him to look in at once."

The throat was not a quinsy, but still rather troublesome and painful. Mr Burgess doctored it – or Stasy rather – skilfully enough, and being pleasant and good-tempered, a certain amount of friendliness naturally sprang up between himself and his new patient's family, including Stasy herself.

"*He* is not his wife, and you can say anything to a doctor," she replied to Blanche, when, some days later – by which time Stasy was almost quite well again – the elder sister was remonstrating with her for talking too fast to her new friend, considering the warning they had been given. "Besides, there is no secret about who we are, and where we come from, or anything about us."

"Certainly not," said her mother, "but we do not want these Blissmore ladies to begin calling upon us simply out of curiosity, and I did hear you saying to the doctor this morning that it was very dull not to have any friends here. I daresay he will have sense enough not to pay any attention to it, otherwise, it almost sounded like asking his wife to call."

But Stasy was sure she could not have been so misunderstood, and the subject dropped. Only, however, to be revived more disagreeably when, two days later, Mrs Burgess *did* call. Her husband was really not to blame for it, but he was an easy-going man, and, by a great show of sympathy "with the poor things," feeling so lonely as they must be doing, she extracted from him a reluctant half-consent to her taking advantage of his professional acquaintance with the ladies, whose doings had so occupied her empty head.

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