

Molesworth Mrs.

Silverthorns



Mrs. Molesworth

Silverthorns

«Public Domain»

Molesworth M.

Silverthorns / M. Molesworth — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Chapter One | 5 |
| Chapter Two | 10 |
| Chapter Three | 16 |
| Chapter Four | 21 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 26 |

Molesworth Mrs. Silverthorns

Chapter One Charlotte and Jerry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And who is the girl?" asked Jerry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Charlotte laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly she looked up again.

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

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

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

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

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

Charlotte sighed.

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

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

“About what, Jerry dear?”

In his turn Jerry’s face flushed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

His calm philosophy made Charlotte laugh.

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

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

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

At six o’clock Charlotte started up.

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

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

“All out, papa, except me,” Jerry replied.

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

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

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

“Very likely nothing half so important,” Jerry replied.

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

"Papa, mightn't I?" he exclaimed. "I really can drive – at least I am sure I could drive old Dolly." His father looked at him doubtfully.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He rose from the table as he spoke.

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

Chapter Two

In the Moonlight

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No, no – no need to put up. My son will wait for me. It is all right.”

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

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

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

“Who’s Mr Bright, do you think, Jerry?” Charlotte whispered.

“That fellow in black – the butler, I suppose,” Jerry replied.

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

“Her? – who?” said Jerry, in bewilderment. “Lady Mildred, do you mean?”

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

“Oh,” said Jerry, “I had forgotten all about her.”

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

“I wonder you didn’t tell mamma about her,” said Jerry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There now – you have found out one thing you don't envy her for," said Jerry, triumphantly. "But the door's opening, Charlotte. There's papa."

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

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

Charlotte gave a little sigh.

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

"My dear child," he exclaimed in surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

"But, papa –" Charlotte began.

"Well, my dear?"

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

Mr Waldron gave a little laugh.

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

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

"Just so. No – it has been tried many times, and will be tried as many more perhaps, but with the same result. I don't say that the *tremendous* disproportions that one sees might not be equalised a little without injustice. But I don't want to give you a lecture on political economy. Only don't mistake

me. All I mean is, that in some ways the narrow road is harder for rich people than for others. But when they do walk in it, they are not seldom the best men and women this world knows. Still you can perhaps understand my meaning when I say that the possession of great riches would make me afraid.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Papa,” said Charlotte, “what is the kind thing Lady Mildred has done lately? Is it about – the girl?”

“What girl? – what do you know about it?” said Mr Waldron, rather sharply.

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

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

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

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

“Papa, can you doubt it?” exclaimed Charlotte.

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

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

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

“One could do without a good mother? Nay, my Gipsy, I can’t – ”

“Papa, papa, I don’t mean that – you know I don’t,” exclaimed Charlotte, almost in tears.

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

Suddenly Charlotte gave a little scream.

“Jerry, don’t. How can you, Jerry?”

“What’s the matter?” asked Mr Waldron.

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

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” said Jerry penitently. “It was only – when papa said that – I thought – there’s another thing.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Papa, you have seen her,” exclaimed Charlotte in great excitement. “And you didn’t tell us.”

“You didn’t give me time, truly and really, Charlotte.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Charlotte,” said Jerry reprovingly, “of course papa’s in fun. Mamma is darker than you.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Papa!” said Charlotte, half reproachfully.

But I think she understood.

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

“What’s the good?” said Jerry.

Chapter Three

A Family Party

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

“It is all with being poor – all,” she said to herself.

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

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

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

“Come, Ted, that’s not fair. It’s not only for herself Charlotte’s tidy!” Arthur exclaimed.

“No, indeed,” said Noble, chiming in.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m not particularly cold, papa, thank you,” she said drily.

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

"Papa," he said, "were you in earnest when you said there was a haunted room at Silverthorns?" Every one pricked up his or her ears at this question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs Waldron turned to Ted uneasily.

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

Ted looked rather foolish.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But – she need not interfere with Charlotte. It is not probable that she will be as talented.”

“That was one of Jerry’s consolations,” said Mr Waldron with a smile. “It was rather a pity I happened to take Charlotte to Silverthorns to-night. It seems to have deepened the impression.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr Waldron smiled.

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

“Not prettier than Charlotte?” asked Charlotte’s mother, half laughing at herself as she put the question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Four

The New Pupil

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

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

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

Charlotte’s face cleared.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Again Charlotte reddened a little.

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

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

“Oh, yes. They don’t mean it, they don’t know better. Mamma, I don’t think you can know quite as well as I do how common some of the people here are,” and Charlotte’s face took an expression almost of disgust. “When you see the ladies you call on, they are on their good behaviour, I suppose,

and if they did begin to gossip you would somehow manage to discourage it. Oh, mamma, you should be glad you weren't brought up here."

Mrs Waldron was half distressed and half amused.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"*She's* not a snob, any way," thought Charlotte, and then she half reluctantly allowed her eyes to turn to the girl standing beside the lady-principal. "Papa" had said she was lovely, so had Dr Lewis, but papa's opinion carried of course far more weight. But, even without it, even without any prepossession or expectation on the subject, Charlotte felt that her very first glance decided it. The girl *was* lovely – far, far more than "pretty," like little Isabel Lewis, with her merry eyes and turned-up nose, or "interesting," like pale-faced Gueda Knox. She was really lovely. Not very fair, but with a brightness rather than brilliance about her which came from one scarcely knew where – it seemed

a part of herself, of her sunny hair, of her slightly flushed cheeks, of her smiling and yet appealing eyes, of her whole self. Her very attitude suggested full, springing, and yet gentle, youthful life as she stood there, one foot slightly advanced, her hand half upraised, as if ready and desirous to be friends and friendly with every one; and a slight, very slight shade of disappointment seemed to pass over her face when she saw that nothing followed the little formal speech, that no one among the several girls came forward to greet or welcome her. And as Miss Lloyd turned towards her the hand dropped quietly, and the speaking eyes looked gravely and inquiringly at her conductress.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So far as it is in my power, I shall of course be guided by them,” Miss Lloyd had replied somewhat stiffly. “All my pupils come here to learn, not to amuse themselves. But I can only act

by Miss Meredon precisely as I do by the others. It would be completely contrary to the spirit of the – the establishment,” – Miss Lloyd’s one weakness was that she could not bring herself to speak of her “school,” – “of my classes, were I to keep any one girl apart from the others, ‘hedging her round’ with some impalpable dignities, as it were,” she went on with a little smile, intended to smooth down her protest.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I do hope, Gueda,” whispered Charlotte to Miss Knox, as they made their way to the German master’s presence, “I do hope that that stupid Edith Greenman has learnt her lessons for once, and

that Isabel Lewis will try to pay attention. She is the worst of the two; it is possible to shield poor Edith sometimes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.