

Molesworth Mrs.

The Third Miss St Quentin



Mrs. Molesworth

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Molesworth Mrs. The Third Miss St Quentin

Chapter One Six Years Old

A very little girl was sitting on the rug in front of a brightly burning fire. She was amusing herself with picture books, a number of which were scattered about her, but her small face was flushed, her eyes were heavy, and she seemed restless and dissatisfied. She was suffering from a very bad cold.

"I can't read, and I can't see the picshures," she said complainingly, "my eyes hurts, and my head too. You read to me, Harvey."

The nurse to whom she spoke was busied in putting away the breakfast things.

"You must wait a bit, Miss Ella. I've got ever so many things to do this morning."

Ella looked far from pleased.

"Things must wait, not me," she said imperiously. "Mamma always reads to me this minute."

"Your mamma's ill, Miss Ella; and when there's illness in the house there's plenty for everybody to do without wasting one's time over nonsense."

Ella's face grew scarlet with anger.

"Tisn't nonsense," she said; "I'm ill too. I've got a cold, and you should amoose me."

But before Harvey had time to reply, except by a short laugh, the door opened, and both the occupants of the nursery looked round to see who was there. A young girl of thirteen or fourteen, but with something in her air and manner which made her seem older, came in quickly. She was tall and slight, and though very plainly dressed, one could not have passed her by without noticing her.

"Harvey," she said, and her tone, though not ungentle, was cold and even a very little haughty, "how is Miss Ella to-day? Mrs St Quentin is very anxious about her."

Harvey glanced round with a sort of affectation of indifference that was irritating.

"There's not the least need in the world to be anxious, miss," she said. "The child's got a cold, like everybody else in this changeable weather. There was no need for her mamma to hear nothing about it."

The girl looked at her still more severely.

"It is your fault that she has a cold, and you know it," she said. "She was out far too late the day before yesterday. I certainly do not wish Mrs St Quentin to be troubled, but if you are not more careful I shall speak to my father; I warn you plainly." Ella had been listening open-mouthed to this discussion, and in the interest of it had forgotten her own tribulations. She got up from the floor, and moved by the generous childish impulse of defending the oppressed, resenting too, perhaps, that her sister had taken no direct notice of her since entering the room, she ran to Harvey and caught hold of her hand.

"Naughty Maddie," she said, "you're not to scold poor Harvey; I don't like you, Maddie. Go away; I'll tell mamma."

Madelene glanced at the little girl, opened her lips as if to speak, but closed them again.

"If she is kind to Ella it is a good thing, I suppose, and perhaps I should not have said anything before the child," was the reflection that rapidly passed through her mind.

"You don't understand, Ella dear," she said quietly, and with unusual self-control, though her fair face coloured a little. "I am very glad that you don't like Harvey to be scolded."

And without saying more, she left the room.

”‘Scolded’ indeed, by a upsetting piece of goods like her. Very fine, Miss Madelene, but you’re not mistress yet, nor never shall be to *me*, I can promise you,” muttered Harvey.

But Ella was clinging to her.

“You must read to me now,” the child urged. “I’m very good to you, Harvey. I wouldn’t let sister Maddie scold you, so you should be nice to me.”

A slight and not pleasant smile crossed the maid’s face.

“Come along then, Miss Ella,” she said. “If you’ll be very good and not worrit-worrit if I’m out of your sight for half a minute, I’ll read to you for a little. What is it you want?”

She seated herself comfortably in a rocking chair by the fire, and took the child on her knee.

“Here now,” she said, carelessly picking up the first picture book that came to hand, “I’ll read you some of these nursery rhymes – ‘Little Boy Blue.’”

“No,” said Ella crossly, “I don’t like singy stories. Read me real ones. ‘Laddin’s’ very nice.” But Harvey’s eyes had caught sight of another of the bright-coloured books.

“Oh, no,” she exclaimed, with a little malicious laugh, “we’ll have ‘Cinderella,’ Miss Ella. ‘Cinderella, Miss Ella,’ there’s a rhyme for you! It’s like your name, and she’s like you too. She had two big sisters, and her mamma was – ” Here she coughed and stopped short.

“Her mamma was dead. I know the story,” put in Ella, “*my* mamma isn’t dead, so it isn’t like me. You’re talking nonsense, Harvey,” and she pushed the book aside and began to wriggle about impatiently.

“I’m not talking nonsense,” said Harvey sharply. “Just listen now, Miss Ella. Cinderella had two big sisters, and they were very cross to her – at least not always perhaps, but pretty often, and they’d come and scold for nothing at all.”

“Like Maddie this morning,” said Ella; “but it wasn’t me she scolded. It was you. The story isn’t like me; you’re very silly, Harvey.”

Harvey began to lose her temper; she was not going to be called “silly” even by a baby.

“Just you take care what you say, Miss Ella,” she said roughly, “you don’t know anything about it. The story doesn’t say the big sisters were bad to her when she was a little girl like you. But some day you’ll grow up and be a young lady, and then you’ll see. How would you like to have all the dirty work to do and old shabby clothes to wear, while Miss Maddie and Miss Ermie went flaunting about in silks and satins and feathers?”

And as she spoke she opened the book at one of the pictures, where the sisters were arraying themselves for the ball, while sweet Cinderella crouched forlorn in a corner.

Ella stared at the book with an attention she had never before bestowed upon it, her face very solemn indeed. Suddenly her expression changed.

“No,” she said, “it’s not like me and Maddie and Ermie. *Her* sisters are very ugly, and they’ve horrid black curls. Maddie and Ermie aren’t ugly, and they haven’t nasty cross faces. No; they’d never be so naughty,” and she looked up in triumph, though there was a little quaver of anxiety in her voice still.

“Oh, very well,” said Harvey, “if you’re so fond of your sisters as all that, however unkind they are to poor Harvey – ”

“I didn’t say *you*– I think Maddie was very naughty to scold you, dear Harvey. I only said they wouldn’t be so c’uel to me if I was big – not like these *piggy* sisters in the book,” said Ella, using the strongest language in her repertory.

“Oh, well, you’re not big yet. Perhaps you’ll wish for poor Harvey all the same some day, though you don’t care for her now. Of course poor Harvey’s only a servant, and Miss Maddie and Miss Ermie are grand, rich young ladies.”

“And I shall be a grand, rich young lady too,” said Ella.

Harvey only laughed.

Ella grew very excited.

“Harvey, say I shall be. You *must* say it,” she repeated, shaking the maid’s arm.

“Miss Ella, for shame. What a little fury you are. How can I say what you’ll be? You should be a grand, rich young lady if *I* was your sister, but I can’t speak for others.”

“What do you mean?” cried Ella. “*Mamma* will let me be a grand young lady. Maddie and Ermie aren’t over *mamma*. Harvey, do you hear?”

“Hush,” said the nurse, suddenly changing her tone, “your *mamma*’s very ill, Miss Ella, and if you make such a noise they’ll all think you very naughty. I was only joking – of course you’ll be a beautiful young lady too, some day.”

But Ella was not to be so easily smoothed down.

“You weren’t joking,” she said resentfully. “I’ll ask Maddie if it’s true,” and she began to scramble down. “I’ll take the book and tell her you said it was like me and them.”

Harvey caught hold of her.

“If you do, Miss Ella,” she said, “you’ll get such a scolding as you’ve never had in your life. And I’ll be sent away – you’ll see – and it’ll be all your fault.” Ella stopped short.

“Then why did you say it to me?” she asked, for she was a clever and quick-witted child.

“Oh, well – I shouldn’t have said it. When you’re older you’ll understand better, darling. You see Harvey loves you so – she’d like you to be the eldest and have everything like a little princess. The *third’s* never the same – and Harvey doesn’t like to think of her Miss Ella coming in for the old clothes and the leavings, and the worst of it all, so to say.”

Ella had calmed down now, but she sat listening intently with a startled, uneasy look, painful to see on her pretty little face.

“But *mamma* won’t let me have the shabby old clothes, *mamma* loves me too, Harvey,” she persisted.

“Yes, yes – but poor *mamma*’s very ill. But never mind, darling. While Harvey’s here no one shall put upon you, and then there’s your Auntie Phillis. *She* loves my Miss Ella, that she does.”

“Auntie’s not here,” said the child.

“No, but may be she’ll come some day soon,” said Harvey mysteriously, “only don’t you say I said so. You don’t want to get poor Harvey scolded again, do you, darling?”

“No,” said Ella, but that was all, and when Harvey kissed her, though she submitted quietly, she did not in any way return the caress.

Then she got down from her nurse’s knee and collected her picture books together, and put them away.

“Shan’t I read anything to you? There’s lots of other pretty stories,” Harvey asked.

“No,” said Ella again, “I don’t like no stories.”

And once or twice during that day, even Harvey was startled, and a little conscience-stricken at the expression on the child’s face.

That same morning in a pretty sitting-room on the ground floor of the house, Madelene St Quentin and her sister Ermine were reading, or rather preparing some lessons together, when the door opened and an elderly lady in walking dress came in. Madelene started to her feet.

“Oh, Aunt Anna,” she exclaimed, “I am so glad you have come. I have felt so fidgety all the morning, I couldn’t settle to anything. It is so good of you to have come over again so early.”

“I promised you I would, my dear,” the new-comer replied. “I knew you would be anxious to see me after your father being with us last night.”

“You had a long talk with *mamma* first, and then you and papa had time to consider it all?” said Madelene, “oh, I do hope – ”

Lady Cheynes interrupted her.

“I will tell you all about it,” she said, “but first tell me – how is poor Ellen this morning? Had she a good night?”

Madelene shook her head.

“Not very, I’m afraid. It is so provoking – with all our care to save her anxiety – last night when Ella was taken to say good-night to her, mamma found out in an instant that the child had a cold, and she has been worrying about it ever since. I spoke as severely as I could to Harvey this morning. Of course it is all her fault.”

Lady Cheynes in her turn shook her head.

“Of course it is her fault. But I am afraid it is no use for you to say anything, my dear Maddie. It is a vicious circle. Ellen’s faith in Harvey must not be destroyed, for it could only be done at a terrible risk to your poor mother – and yet the more Harvey is left to herself the more and more she presumes upon it.”

“I am not quite sure of that, Aunt Anna,” said Madelene. “There must be good in Harvey, I hope – Ella is very fond of her.”

Lady Cheynes tapped the umbrella she held in her hand, impatiently on the floor. She was a small, handsome old lady, scarcely indeed old in point of years, but looking so, thanks to her white hair and the style of dress she affected. She was never seen except in black, but black of the richest, though as she had not changed the fashion of her garments since her widowhood some thirty years ago, she had something quaint and old-world-like about her, decidedly pleasing however when combined with freshness of material and exquisite neatness of finish. She had bright dark eyes, and delicate features. A very attractive old lady, but somewhat awe-inspiring nevertheless.

“Rubbish, Maddie,” she said sharply. “I don’t mean,” she hastened to add, “that there is no good in the woman. If so, she would be a fiend. But as for the child being fond of her – that says nothing; people talk a good deal of nonsense about children’s innate discernment. There is nothing so easy as to humbug a child – up to a certain point, that’s to say. Harvey can easily wheedle Ella into fancying herself fond of her, when it suits the woman’s purpose. But at bottom I doubt if the child does care for her.”

“Ella has a generous nature,” said Madelene.

“Yes,” Ermine agreed, speaking for the first time; “she always flies up in defence of any one she thinks ill-used.”

Lady Cheynes glanced across the room at the last speaker.

“I did not notice you were there, Ernie,” she said abruptly, “Philip is kicking his heels somewhere about. Suppose you go out and look for him? The two of you can entertain each other for half an hour or so while I talk to Madelene. It’s no secrets – you needn’t feel hurt. But I never have been and never shall be able to talk comfortably *à trois*.”

Ermine got up from her place at the table and moved towards the door, turning a laughing face to Lady Cheynes as she did so.

“My feelings offended, auntie!” she said. “That would be something new, wouldn’t it? Now do make a nice and gratifying little speech to me for once.”

Lady Cheynes smiled at Ermine as she left the room.

“I wish Ella were as good tempered as Ernie,” said she, with a sigh. “The child is very spoilt; that is the worst of it. And that brings me to what you are so anxious about, my dear.”

“Yes?” said Madelene eagerly, her face flushing, and her large soft eyes lighting up.

But her aunt hesitated. She knew the extreme disappointment her next words must convey, and though her manner was abrupt, her heart was tender and sympathising.

“It is no use, Maddie. I said everything I could think of yesterday to poor Ellen. And your father, as we know, agrees with us. But of course he *cannot* but give in now to that poor child of a wife of his. It would be brutal not to do so.”

Madelene did not speak, but her eyes filled with tears.

“Oh, auntie,” she said at last.

“You must be *truly* unselfish, my dear, and not take it to heart too much.”

"I had thought it would have been a comfort to poor mamma, for she has been very good to Ermine and me. I think – I do think, considering she has had us herself since we were quite little, that she might trust us," said Madelene in a tremulous voice.

"She does – thoroughly," said Lady Cheynes, "don't make it more painful for yourself by any doubts of that kind, my dear child. And there is reason in what she says, too. Ellen is not a foolish woman."

"No," said Madelene, "I did not mean –"

"You are very young, you know, my dear, though older than your years. And even as it is, things will not be easy for you. That is what poor Ellen feels. There is your father – it is very hard upon him, still a young man, to be a second time left a widower. And he will never marry again – not a third time."

Madelene started. Her aunt patted her hand gently.

"Don't be shocked at my alluding to such a possibility," she said. "I know your father and Ellen would like you to understand all. So much hangs on you, Maddie. It is to you Ellen confides your father, and that is one of her great reasons for wishing the child to be away. It would be too much upon you. I see that myself. You would have to get a first-rate nursery-governess, or some one of that kind, or, worst of all, you might be bound to keep Harvey."

"But Harvey will stay with her as it is – stay and do her best to poison our little sister against us," said Madelene. "For you see, aunt, the – the position will be rather an awkward one afterwards, when we are all grown-up, I mean. And Ella must come back to her own home, some time."

"If she lives," said Lady Cheynes, "but that is another point. Ellen may be fanciful – I hardly agree with her myself; her own illness seems to me accidental. Her family is strong, but, rightly or wrongly, she thinks Ella very delicate. And Mrs Robertson lives in a mild climate and would take the child abroad if necessary. In that way there is something to be said in favour of the plan."

"Yes," said Madelene, but she still sighed. "Aunt Anna," she added in a moment or two, "I will try and bear the disappointment well, and be as cheerful as I can with poor mamma, for – for the little while that remains."

"Yes, dear, I am sure you will. Now, perhaps, we had better call in Ermine and Philip – he is anxious to see all he can of you before he goes. And next week Bernard will be here – they will go back to school together."

"Oh," exclaimed Madelene, "I am so glad Bernard is coming. Ermie and I have always wished so to see him. Only – everything is so sad here just now," and she hesitated.

"You and Ermie must come over once or twice to spend a day with us while the boys are still here. Ellen would like it – she was saying only yesterday how unhappy it makes her to see your young lives so saddened."

"Poor mamma, she is very unselfish," said Madelene.

Then Lady Cheynes got up, and followed by her grand-niece, made her way out of the room, down a long passage with a glass door at the end leading into the garden, where for a moment she stood looking out.

"I don't see them," she said; "get a shawl, Maddie, and we'll go and look for them. A breath of air will do you good."

She slipped her hand through the girl's arm, and together they walked slowly along the broad gravelled terrace, which ran round two sides of the house.

"They may have gone to the stables," said Madelene. "Ermine is always glad of an excuse for visiting the horses, and papa won't allow her to go alone."

"I should think not, indeed," said the old lady. "Even with Philip, I don't know – Philip is only a boy –"

Laughing voices were just then heard.

"There they are," said Lady Cheynes, as round a corner came the two she and Madelene had come out to look for. "Dear me, running races, are they? Ermie is really a tom-boy, I am afraid."

But a very attractive tom-boy, it must be allowed, she could not but add to herself, as Ermine, her cheeks flushed with running, her bright brown hair, some shades darker than Maddie's, flying behind her, her merry hazel eyes sparkling with fun, came rushing towards them.

"We've had such a race," she exclaimed breathlessly. "I expect it's about the last time I'll have a chance of gaining. Philip's legs *are* growing so long."

"Time they should," said Philip. "I think you forget, Ermine, that I was fourteen last week. And I'm not anything like as tall as most fellows of my age."

"Take your hands out of your pockets if you want to look taller," said Madelene in an elder-sisterly tone. "It makes boys slouch so dreadfully. And, by the by, Philip, you haven't even offered to shake hands with me."

The boy started and looked ashamed.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Madelene, I do, indeed," he said, "won't you forgive me?"

He looked up at her – she was a little taller than he – with real distress in his dark eyes. He was a strikingly handsome boy, with his grandmother's delicate features, though in his case sun-browned and stronger looking, and eyes which the old lady used to say confidentially to some of her friends, made her tremble for the mischief they might do in the future. Already in the present they were not to be resisted. Madelene laughed a little and held out her own hand, which Philip took eagerly.

"I am glad," she said, "to hear from Aunt Anna, that your friend Bernard is coming next week to keep you in order till you go back to school."

"Oh," Ermine exclaimed, "is *he* coming? I'm not glad at all. I hate prigs."

Rather to Madelene's surprise Philip said nothing. "Is he a prig?" she asked.

Philip coloured a little.

"No," he said, "of course he isn't. Ask granny. He's not a prig, but I'm cross."

Lady Cheynes looked rather puzzled.

"What's the matter, Phil?" she said. "You were pleased enough this morning about Bernard's coming."

"I know I was," said the boy. "But it's since coming over here and feeling the old jolly way. It's so horrid not to see more of each other. I'd rather have you girls than any one when I'm at home. And Bernard's older and you don't know him. He'll make you seem quite grown-up, and –"

"Maddie, perhaps – not me," Ermine interrupted. "Never mind, Phil. You and I will keep each other company."

"But I've scarcely seen you these holidays," said Philip. "Granny, can't they come over to us?" Madelene shook her head.

"Not just now," she said sadly. "We really have a good deal to do. One or other of us has to walk or ride with papa every afternoon – mamma fidgets so if she thinks he doesn't go out – and then one of us must be within hail in case she was worse. And then there's Ella –"

There *was* Ella in fact. For as she said the words, a little shrill voice came sounding over the lawn.

"Maddie, Ermie, I'm here. And oh there's big Phil. Take me a ride, Phil, on you's shoulders, do, *do*."

"Horrid little minx –" the boy was beginning to say, though in a low voice, but the words died on his lips. The little figure looked so bright and innocent as it flew towards them like a lapwing, heedless of Harvey and her remonstrances in the background, sure, with the irresistible confidence of childhood, of its welcome.

"Good morning, godmother," she said, holding up her sweet little face for a kiss. "I've got a bad cold," and she tried to cough, "but Harvey said it would do me good to come out a little in the

sun. And I'm going to see mamma when I go in, to let her see my cold isn't worse. Oh, big Phil, *do* take me a ride on your shoulders."

She clasped her hands entreatingly. Everything she did was full of pretty childish grace, when, that is to say, Ella chose to be in good temper.

"Hoist her up," said Philip, and between them the two elder sisters managed to settle the child on his shoulders.

"That's right – gallop away. Oh! how nice!" she exclaimed, and when after two or three canters round the lawn, which was really as much as ever Philip had breath for, he deposited her again safely on the ground, she thanked him as graciously as a little princess.

"What a pity Maddie and Ernie are too big for you to ride them too," she said condescendingly, at which they all laughed.

"Yes," said Lady Cheynes, smiling, but not for Ella to hear, "you can be generous enough, my little girl, when you get your own way."

"And when she is *first*" added Ermine. "It is too funny, auntie, to see that sort of feeling in Ella, already. I'm sure Maddie and I weren't like that when we were little."

Lady Cheynes looked round, Harvey was coming up the path, the old lady made a little sign to Ermine to take care.

"I think perhaps Miss Ella has been out long enough, if you'll excuse me, my lady," said the maid, in her smoothest tones.

"Take her in then by all means," said Lady Cheynes. "Ella, my dear, your nurse is waiting for you."

Ella was playing with Phil, a few paces off.

"I won't go in," she said coolly.

Madelene took her by the hand.

"Come, dear," she said, "you mustn't make your cold worse."

The child pulled away from her.

"You're very naughty, Maddie," she said. "You only want me to go away that you and Ernie may play with Phil yourselves. Phil, say I'm not to go."

"Not I," said Philip. "You're a spoilt, rude little girl, and I'm very sorry I gave you a ride."

Ella turned upon him like a little fury, but Harvey interposed.

"Come, Miss Ella, my dear," she said. "Sir Philip will think you're growing into a baby instead of a big girl if you dance about like that."

And by dint of coaxing and persuasion which Harvey knew how to employ skilfully enough when it suited her, the child was at last got away.

"Grandmother," said Philip Cheynes, half-an-hour or so later, when the two were on their way home in the old lady's pony-carriage, "don't you think it is a great pity that Colonel St Quentin married again? It has brought them all nothing but trouble – Mrs St Quentin so delicate, and that spoilt little brat."

"You mustn't abuse my godchild, Phil," Lady Cheynes replied. "She might be a charming child. And her poor mother – No, I think Madelene and Ernie owe a great deal to her."

"Oh, well," said Philip, boyishly, "I suppose they do. Maddie's awfully cut up about Ella's going away from them. For my part, I'm very glad she is going away. Still, she is a jolly little thing when she's in a good temper."

Chapter Two

Eleven Years After

Summer, not spring now. But the same garden and the same people in it – three of them, that is to say, little chance though there might be at the first glance, of our recognising them.

They were sitting together on the lawn – the two sisters Madelene and Ermine and their cousin Philip. They were less changed than he perhaps – Madelene especially, for she had always been tall, and at fourteen had looked older than her years, whereas now at five-and-twenty one could scarcely have believed her to be as much. She had fulfilled the promise of her girlhood for she was an undoubtedly beautiful woman, though to those who knew her but superficially, she might have seemed wanting in animation, for she was quiet almost to coldness, thoughtful and self-controlled, weighing well her words before she spoke and slow in making up her mind to any decision.

Ermine, brown-haired and brown-eyed, brilliantly handsome, was more popular than her elder sister. But rivalry or the shadow of it between the two was unknown. Never were two sisters more completely at one, more trusted and trusting friends.

“They are all in all to each other and to their father,” was the universal description of them. “Almost too much so indeed,” some would add. “It must be because they are so perfectly happy as they are that neither of them is married.”

For why the Misses St Quentin did *not* marry was every year becoming more and more of a puzzle to their friends and the world at large.

Sir Philip Cheynes got up from the comfortable garden chair on which he had been lounging and leant against the elm under whose wide-spreading branches the little party had established themselves. A table was prepared for tea, Ermine had a book on her knee which she imagined herself to be or to have been reading, Madelene was knitting.

“It will spoil it all,” said Philip at length after a silence which had lasted some moments, “spoil it all completely.”

“What?” asked Madelene, looking up, though her fingers still went on busily weaving the soft snowy fleece on her lap.

“Everything, of course. Our nice settled ways – this satisfactory sort of life together, knowing each other so well that we never have misunderstandings or upsets or – or bothers. Your father and my grandmother are a model aunt and nephew to begin with, and as for us three – why the world never before saw such a perfection of cousinship! And into the midst of this delightful state of things, this pleasant little society where each of us can pursue his or her special avocation and – and perform his or her special duties – for we’re not selfish people, my dears – I’m not going to allow that – into the midst of it you fling helter-skelter, a spoilt, ill-tempered, restless unmanageable school-girl – eager for amusement and impatient of control – incapable of understanding us or the things we care for. I never could have imagined anything more undesirable – I – ”

“Upon my word, Philip, I had no idea you could be so eloquent,” interrupted Ermine. “But it is eloquence thrown away, unless you want to prove that you yourself, if not we, are the very thing you have been denying, without having been accused of it.”

“Selfishness – eh?” said Philip.

“Of course, or something very like it.”

Philip was silent. To judge by his next remark Ermine’s reproof had not touched him much.

“I don’t know that, for some time to come at least,” he said, “it will matter much to me. I shall probably be very little here till Christmas and then only for a few weeks.”

His cousins looked up in some surprise.

“Indeed,” they said. “Where are you going? Abroad again?” – “You will miss all the hunting and shooting,” Ermine added.

“I know that,” said Philip. “I’m not going for pleasure. I am thinking of taking up my quarters at Grimswell for a while. The house there is vacant now, you know, and my grandmother thinks it a duty for me to live on the spot and look after things a little.”

Madelene’s eyes lighted up.

“I am so glad,” she said. “I quite agree with Aunt Anna.”

“I thought you would,” said Philip, “and so would never mind who. I can’t say I exactly see it myself – things are very fairly managed there – but still. I’m the sort of fellow to make a martyr of myself to duty, you know.”

Ermine glanced at him as he stood there lazily leaning against the tree – handsome, sunny and sweet-tempered, with a half mischievous, half deprecating smile on his lips, and a kindly light in his long-shaped dark eyes.

“You look like it,” she said with good-natured contempt.

“But to return to our – ” began Philip.

“Stop,” cried Ermine, “you are not to say ‘muttons,’ and I *feel* you are going to. It is so silly.”

“Really,” Philip remonstrated. “Maddie,” and he turned to Miss St Quentin appealingly, “don’t you think she is too bad? Bullying me not only for my taken-for-granted selfishness but for expressions offensive to her ladyship’s fastidious taste which she fancies I *might* be going to use.”

“My dear Philip, you certainly have a great deal of energy – and – breath to spare this hot afternoon,” said Ermine, leaning back as if exhausted on her seat, “I know you can talk – you’ve never given us any reason to doubt it, but I don’t think I ever heard you rattle on quite as indefatigably as to-day. One can’t get a word in.”

“I want you both to be quiet and let me talk a little,” said Madelene breaking her way in. She scented the approach of one of the battles of words in which, in spite of the “perfect understanding” which Philip boasted of between his cousins and himself, he and Ermine sometimes indulged and which were not always absolutely harmless in their results. “As Philip was saying when you interrupted him, Ermine, let us go back to our – subject. I mean this little sister of ours. I wish you would not speak of her return, or think of it as you do, Philip.”

“That’s meant for me too, I wish you to observe, Phil,” said Ermine. “It’s a case of evil communications, and Maddie is trembling for my good manners to the third Miss St Quentin when she makes her appearance among us.”

“On the contrary, Ermine,” said Madelene gravely, “if you are influenced by Philip’s way of speaking it is that the ground with you is ready for the seed.” Philip began to whistle softly – Ermine grew rather rosier than she was before.

“If so – well – what then? Go on, Maddie,” she said.

She got up from her seat and half threw herself on the grass beside Madelene. But Madelene did not speak. “Of course,” Ermine went on, “I know it’s all quite right, and not only right but inevitable. And you’re as good and wise as you can be, Maddie. It was only that this morning I felt rather cross about it, and Philip and I couldn’t help showing each other what we felt. But go on, Maddie – say what you were going to say.”

“It is only the old thing,” said Madelene. “I think, and I shall always think what I did at the time, though I was only a child then, that it was a mistake to send Ella away to be brought up out of her own home and separated from her nearest relations. Of course it was not anticipated that the separation would be so long and complete a one as it has turned out – at least I *suppose* not.”

“I don’t know why it need have been so,” said Ermine, “only every time there has been anything said of her coming to us her aunt has put difficulties in the way.”

"There seemed sense in what she said," Madelene replied; "it was not much use Ella's coming here, just to get unsettled and her lessons interrupted, for a short visit. And then, of course, papa's long illness was another reason."

"And Mrs Robertson's own wishes – the strongest reason of all," added Ermine. "She may be a kind and good enough woman, but I shall always say she is very selfish. Keeping the child entirely to herself all these years, and now when she suddenly takes it into her head to marry again in this extraordinary way – she must be as old as the hills – poor Ella goes to the wall!"

"That's probably the gentleman's doing," said Philip.

"Well then she shouldn't marry a man who would do so," said Ermine.

"I quite agree with you," he replied drily, "but we all know there's no fool like an old fool."

"It is hard upon Ella, with whomever the fault lies – that is what I've been trying to get to all this time," said Madelene. "If she had always looked upon this as her home, and felt that we were really her sisters, she would have grown up to understand certain things gradually, which, now when the time comes that she must know them, will fall upon her as a shock."

"You mean about our money and this place?" asked Ermine.

"Of course – and about papa's being, though I *hate* saying it, in reality a poor man."

"Do you think there is any need for her to know anything about it for some time to come?" asked Philip gently, completely casting aside the bantering tone in which he had hitherto spoken.

Madelene looked up eagerly.

"Oh, do you think so, Philip?" she said. "I am so glad. It is what I have been thinking, but I know papa respects your opinion and it will strengthen what I have said to him."

"Decidedly," said Philip. "It seems to me it would be almost – brutal – I am not applying the word to any person, but to the situation, as it were – to meet the poor child, already sore probably at having been turned out of the only home she can really remember, with the announcement that the new one she is coming to is only hers on sufferance, and that her future is, to say the least, an uncertain one."

"It would not be so for another day if we had more in our power," said Madelene hotly.

"No, I know that – know it and understand it. But – a child of – how much? fifteen, sixteen?"

"Seventeen, seventeen and a quarter."

"Well, even of seventeen and a quarter would have the haziest notions about law and legal obligations. No, gain her love and confidence first, by all means."

"It is papa," said Madelene rather disconsolately. "The best of men are, at times I suppose, a little unreasonable. Though he has given up the idea of a formal explanation to poor little Ella, still I am afraid he will wish us to be more – I don't know what to call it, less treating her just like ourselves, than Ernie and I would wish," and she looked up appealingly, her blue eyes quite pathetic in their expression.

"And she may misunderstand it – us," added Ermine.

"But it is right, necessary to a certain extent that she should *not* be placed in exactly the same position that she would have as your very own sister," said Philip firmly. "People should think of these awkward complications before they make second marriages, but once awkward positions do exist, it's no good pretending they don't. However, I think you are exaggerating matters, Maddie; unnecessarily anticipating an evil day which may, *will*, I feel sure, never come. Before this much-to-be-pitied young lady has to learn that she is not an heiress like her sisters, she may have learnt to love and trust those sisters as they deserve, and love casteth out other ugly things as well as fear."

"Thank you, dear Philip," said Miss St Quentin.

"And – grand discovery!" he exclaimed. "She's not 'out'. You can easily treat her more like a child at first, till she has got to know you. She cannot have been accustomed to much dissipation under the roof of the worthy Mrs Robertson."

“No, none at all I fancy. But she has had her own way in everything there was to have it in I feel sure,” said Madelene. “And if we begin by snubbing her – ”

“Snubbing her, not a bit of it. It will make her feel herself of all the more importance if you will tell her Uncle Marcus thinks it better for her not to come out till she’s eighteen – neither of you came out till then?”

“I was nineteen,” said Ermine; “you know we were abroad all the year before. I thought it very hard then, but now I’m very glad. It makes me seem a year at least younger than I am,” she added naïvely.

“It’s only staving off, after all, I’m afraid,” said Madelene. “When she *is* eighteen or even nineteen, and has to come out, and wonders why papa won’t let her have everything the same as us and – ”

“Oh, Maddie, don’t fuss so,” said Ermine.

“Twenty things may happen before then to smooth the way.”

“I hope so,” said Miss St Quentin. But her tone was depressed.

“Scold her, Philip, do,” said Ermine. “If she worries herself so about Ella it will make me dislike the child before I see her, and that won’t mend matters.”

“When does she come?” Sir Philip asked.

“Next month,” Madelene replied.

“Do you think she feels it very much – the leaving her aunt, and coming among strangers as it were?” he asked.

“I don’t know. She cannot but be fond of her aunt, but she has said distinctly that she would not wish to go on living with her and her new husband. And of course it is time and more than time for her to come to us if this is ever to be her home. And though Mrs Robertson is marrying a wealthy man, she loses all she had as a widow, and certainly we should not have liked *our sister* to be dependent on a stranger.”

“You could have given Mrs Robertson a regular allowance for her, if that had been the only difficulty. But if this Mr what’s his name?”

“Burton,” said Ermine.

“If that Burton fellow is rich he would possibly have disliked any arrangement of that kind,” said Philip.

“He evidently wants to get rid of her,” said Madelene, smiling a little. “Some things in Mrs Robertson’s letters make me imagine that the third Miss St Quentin has a will of her own, and a decided way of showing it. She speaks of ‘dear Ella’s having a high spirit, and that Mr Burton was not accustomed to young people.’”

“And Ella called him ‘old Burton’ in a letter to papa,” added Ermine. “We told papa she must have left out the ‘Mr’, but for my part, I don’t believe she did. I think that expression has made me more inclined to like her than anything else,” said Ermine, calmly.

“Ermine!” said Madelene.

But Philip turned to her with another question.

“Are you sure,” he said, “that Mrs Robertson may not already have explained things to Ella? If so, it would be better to know it.”

“I am sure she can’t have told her what she doesn’t know herself,” said Madelene. “Papa’s losses made no practical difference to her; she has always received anything she wanted for Ella – to do her justice she has never been the least grasping – from us, but in his name just as before. We begged him to let it be so, and it has never come to much.”

“Then do you think she has brought the child up very simply?” asked Philip.

“No – that is to say, I fancy she has been indulged a good deal as to her personal wishes. Mrs Robertson was comfortably off, though she had not a large house. I think all she has ever taken from

papa or us has been literally spent on little Miss Ella herself. And they went to the South of France two winters, you know.”

Philip did not speak for a minute or two.

Then he said slowly, —

“As things are, perhaps it is as well that Ella does not know more. But – had they remained as they were, I don’t know but that Mrs Robertson *had* a right to be told of Uncle Marcus’s losses. Indeed, it might have influenced her plans, possibly have prevented her marrying again, had she known the child had nothing to look to in the future.”

Madelene reddened.

“She *has* something to look to in the future,” she said, “she has *us*. And I’m quite sure nothing of the kind would have stopped her aunt’s marrying again.”

“‘No fool like an old fool,’ and everybody knows there’s nothing on earth as obstinate *as* a fool. You’re forgetting what you just said, Phil,” said Ermine.

“No, I’m not. I didn’t say it would have stopped it once she had got it into her head. I meant it might have prevented her ever thinking of it,” Philip replied.

“I don’t see that it would have made any difference. Mrs Robertson could never have *left* Ella anything except savings, which couldn’t have come to much. But do leave off talking about money, Philip – I perfectly hate it. Ernie and I have been driven into hating it in the last two or three years since we came of age.”

“And leave off talking about Ella, too, for a bit, do,” said Ermine. “I mean to do my duty by her when she comes, but oh! I am so tired of the subject! Don’t you think we might have tea now, Maddie? I don’t believe papa will be back for ever so long.”

“Certainly – it would be nonsense to wait for him – will you – oh, thank you, Philip, yes, just ring the bell at the side-door, twice. They understand. What a comfort it is to have some one who knows our little ways!”

“A tame cat,” said Philip meekly, “Well, thank you. You are not so lavish of civil speeches to me, you and Ermine, as to make me inclined to quarrel with even the ghost of one.”

“Come now, that’s not quite fair,” said Ermine, as the kettle and hot cakes duly made their appearance, “one doesn’t make civil speeches to one’s best friends, one keeps them, like calling cards, for acquaintances.”

“Well, not civil speeches then – nice, gratifying speeches.”

“I should have thought you must be tired of that sort of thing,” Madelene replied.

Philip looked at her with an expression of inquiry, but of annoyance, too.

“Do you mean, Maddie, that you think I am spoilt?” he said. “If you do, I wish you would say so plainly.”

Madelene felt a little conscience-stricken.

“No,” she said, “I don’t really. But I think it is a great wonder that you are not. You are a fair prey to flattery – rich, handsome, clever – ”

“Madelene, stop,” exclaimed Philip. “I might retaliate – why are you and Ermine not spoilt then?”

Miss St Quentin hesitated.

“I don’t know,” she said at last naïvely. “I don’t think women – girls – do spoil so easily. And then – there are heaps of girls, here in England, as good-looking and far better-looking than we are – it is much rarer to find a man as handsome as you, Phil. And then – we have had more anxieties and responsibilities than you, and they keep one from being spoilt.”

“I have granny,” said Philip. “I don’t mean that she is an anxiety or a responsibility, but she is – pretty sharp on one, you know. She wouldn’t let me be spoilt.”

“No,” said Madelene, “she is very sensible. And after all you needn’t look so cross, Philip. I didn’t say you *were* spoilt – I said on the contrary it was great credit to you that you were not.”

“You didn’t,” said Philip, “you allowed me no credit whatever in the matter. I do think it’s rather hard on me to have all this severe handling just because I said I liked nice speeches from people I cared for – mind you, people I care for. That’s quite a different thing from being open to flattery.”

“Well, of course, it is,” said Madelene. “We don’t seem to be understanding each other with our usual perfection of sympathy, somehow, to-day.”

“It’s all because of that tiresome child’s coming,” said Ermine crossly. “I’m afraid Philip is right in dreading it. ‘Coming events cast their shadows before them.’ I can’t say I think Ella’s advent is likely to add to our sunshine.”

Just then came the sound of wheels up the avenue. “What can that be?” said Madelene.

“Callers,” Philip suggested.

“No, it is getting too late. Besides – it sounds too slow and heavy for a carriage or pony-carriage. It is more like – ” and she hesitated.

“Maddie won’t commit herself,” said Ermine laughing. “She sets up for a sort of ‘Fine Ear’ in the fairy-story, don’t you know, Philip?”

“No,” said Madelene. “It isn’t that. I only hesitated because what I was going to say seemed so silly. I thought it sounded so like the old Weevilscoombe fly – and what *could* it be coming here for at this time? The old Miss Lyndens hire it when they come out for their yearly visit, but that is over and past a fortnight ago.”

That it was an arrival of some kind, however, became clear. In another minute the hall bell was heard to ring – it was a bell of ponderous clang, impossible to mistake for any other.

Then the figure of Barnes, the butler – Barnes who never disturbed himself except on occasions of peculiar importance – was seen hastening along the terrace. The three cousins stared at each other.

“What can it be?” said Madelene, growing rather pale. “Can papa have met with an accident?”

The same thought had struck Sir Philip: he did not reply, but looked apprehensively towards Barnes.

“If you please, ma’am,” said that functionary, puffing a little with excitement and quick movement, “if you please, ma’am, it’s – it’s a lady. A young lady, with luggage – from Weevilscoombe, I suppose – anyhow, it’s the Weevilscoombe fly as has brought her – ” but though there was plenty of time for Madelene to have here exclaimed “I knew it,” she did not avail herself of Barnes’s pause, for this purpose.

“A young lady;” she repeated; “there must be some mistake. We are not expecting any one. What is her name – she gave it, I suppose?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Barnes, hesitating still more – though he had all the air and bearing of an old servant he had not been more than five or six years in their service – “she did and she said as her name was ‘Miss St Quentin’.”

The three looked at each other again.

“Miss St Quentin,” they at last repeated, simultaneously, though not perfectly so – Madelene was a little behind the others and her “tin” came out last.

“I thought,” began Barnes again, “I took the liberty of thinking, it must be a mistake. From what I have ‘eard, ma’am, I should say it was, so to say, a slip of the tongue, the young lady being accustomed to be so addressed, living at a distance, if so be as I shrewbly suspect that her rightful desernation is Miss – Hella St Quentin, the third Miss St Quentin, ma’am.”

And again – too startled to feel any inclination to smile at the butler’s grandiloquence, which was often, almost more than any one’s risible nerves could stand unmoved – the three cousins looked at each other. And again they made simultaneously the same exclamation; this time consisting of but one word, —

“Ella!” they all three ejaculated.

Chapter Three

“It is Really Ella.”

“What shall we do? What can be the matter?” said Madelene, when after an instant’s silence she began to take in the fact of Ella’s arrival.

“Receive her cordially of course. What else in Heaven’s name can you do?” Sir Philip replied with a touch of impatience. “After all there is nothing so extraordinary in a girl’s coming to her own father’s house – even taking refuge there if, as is possible – ”

“She has been turned out of her aunt’s,” interrupted Ermine. “Yes, I’m certain that’s it – she and old Burton have come to blows and Ella’s high spirits or high temper have proved too much for him.”

“Ermine,” said Philip, warningly, “you should really,” and he glanced in Barnes’s direction.

But if Barnes did hear what they were saying he at least appeared so absolutely unconscious that Philip’s remonstrance fell rather flat. The butler had retired to a few paces distance, where he stood awaiting orders with an irreproachably blank expression.

“Is the young – is Miss Ella St Quentin in the library?” asked Sir Philip suddenly.

“Yes, my – I beg pardon – yes, Sir Philip,” Barnes replied. His former master had been a peer, and even after some years of serving a commoner Barnes found it difficult to ignore the old habit.

“Then go and tell her Miss St Quentin; mind you, say it distinctly, no Miss Madelene or Miss Ermine – the young lady is, as you supposed, Miss Ella St Quentin – say that Miss St Quentin will be with her immediately. You’d better go at once, Maddie.”

“She couldn’t have meant to call herself Miss St Quentin – it was just an accident, no doubt,” said Madelene nervously.

“Of course, but it’s just as well from the first to remind her that she is *not* Miss St Quentin,” said Philip. “Stupid of her aunt to have let her get into the habit. But Madelene – ”

“Yes, yes. Ermine, hadn’t you better get some fresh tea? – this will be cold,” said Madelene, touching the teapot. “Philip, hadn’t Ermine better come too?”

No one could have believed it of her – no one ever did believe it possible that the cold, stately Madelene was in reality a martyr to shyness and timidity. But the two or three who knew her well, knew the fact and pitied her intensely, her cousin Philip among them. But he knew, too, the best way to treat it, cruel as it sometimes seemed.

“No,” he said, “decidedly not. You will get on much better alone, Maddie. Off with you, there’s a good girl. And good-bye. I’m going round to the stable-yard and I’ll mount there. I’m dying with curiosity, but all the same I’m too high-principled to indulge it. It wouldn’t do for me to stay – you and Ermine are quite enough for the poor child to face at first.”

“Oh, Philip,” said Madelene, stopping short again, for by this time she had got a few yards on her way, “I thought you would have stayed to help us.”

“Not I,” Philip called after her. “It’s much better not, I assure you. I’ll look in to-morrow to see how you’re all getting on, and to hear the whole story. And if I meet Uncle Marcus on his way home, as I dare say I shall, I’ll tell him of the arrival, so as to save you having to break it to him.”

“And do beg him to come home as quickly as he can,” replied Madelene.

Philip got up from his seat and moved to go.

“Good-bye, Ermine,” he said.

Ermine looked at him dubiously.

“Are you in earnest, Philip?” she said. “I have more than half an idea that you are going off out of cowardice, and – and – that all your regard for Ella’s feelings, etc, is – ”

“What?” said Philip, smiling.

“Talk,” Ermine replied curtly.

Philip laughed.

"No, truly," he said. "All things considered it is much better for me to leave you. And it's quite true about my curiosity. I'm awfully curious both to hear about it all and to see this little personage who has descended among us in this thunder-and-lightning, bomb-shell sort of way. By Jove – " and he stopped short, while a different expression came into his face – "what a nuisance it is to think that all our jolly times together are over! I was grumbling at it prospectively this morning – to think that it has already come to pass."

He sighed. Ermine sighed too.

"Yes," she said, "it is horrid. For I know – as positively as if I could hear what is at this moment passing in the library – that the child has come to stay."

"Oh Lord, yes," Philip exclaimed, "not a doubt of it."

"I only wish she *were* a child," pursued Ermine. "It might be more of a bother in some ways, but in others – seventeen's an awful sort of age – most girls then are really children and full of fancying themselves grown-up, and standing on their dignity, and all the rest of it, and yet not really grown-up enough to be proper companions to – "

"Two full-fledged old maids like you and Maddie," put in Philip.

"Exactly," said Ermine.

"Well, good-bye again," he said, lifting his hat as he turned away in the direction of the stables.

Miss St Quentin made her way slowly to the house. She looked outwardly calm, indeed to look anything else had scarcely ever in her life occurred to Madelene, but inwardly she was greatly perturbed. To begin with, she was as I have said, a sufferer from intense shyness; shyness of that kind most painful and difficult to contend with, better perhaps defined as moral timidity, which shrinks with almost morbid horror from giving or witnessing pain or discomfort, which, but for the constraining and restraining force of a strong sense of duty, would any day gladly endure personal suffering or neglect, or allow wrong-doing to go unrebuked, rather than attempt the slightest remonstrance. Madelene could enter a roomful of strangers without a touch of nervousness, but the thought of reproving a servant would keep her awake for nights! and that something in the action of her young half-sister was about to call for rebuke or disapproval she felt instinctively certain. Then there were other reasons for her feeling far from able to meet Ella with the hearty welcome she would have wished; housekeeper's considerations were on her mind!

"I did so want to have the rooms arranged the way Ermine and I were planning," she said to herself. "It would have been so much better to have begun regularly at once. Now I really don't know what to do. Papa would certainly be displeased if I gave her one of the long corridor ones, and yet the two or three empty rooms in the south wing are so small and would seem shabby. But I am afraid there is nothing else to do. I must explain to her that the rooms intended for her can't possibly be ready for some time. And about the maids too – we had planned it so well. Now, there will really be no one able to look after her, for I can't trust Mélanie; she is so injudicious with that chattering tongue of hers."

Meantime, the cause of all these discussions was waiting alone in the library. She had seated herself when first shown in, in a matter-of-course, unrestrained manner, as if quite at her ease. But this had been for the benefit of Barnes and his subordinates. No sooner was she left alone, than the girl got up and strolled nervously towards the window, where she stood looking out. Now that the deed was done, her courage began to flag.

"I wonder," she said to herself, clasping her little hands together, "*I wonder* what they'll say. They surely can't blame me, when I tell them how unendurable it was, and that even Aunt Phillis, in her heart, though she wouldn't own it, wished I were gone, for I know she did. She'll have got my telegram by now. How delighted old Burton will be – that's the only bit of it I hate to think of! Still, staying there to spite him would have been quarrelling with my nose – is that it? – no, quarrelling with my face – oh bother, I can't get it right, I do so wonder what they'll all say here."

There was nothing to help her in what she saw outside – not a human being was in sight – only the lovely, perfectly kept grounds, looking perhaps at their very best in the soft mellowness of the summer afternoon.

“How delightful it is here!” she thought next; “what a beautiful room, and what splendid books,” and her girlish heart swelled with satisfaction to think that here was her home, the spot on earth where she had an undoubted, an unquestionable right to be! “How poky auntie’s house would seem in comparison – and Mr Burton’s ‘mansion’ even worse, for any way there was nothing vulgar or *parvenu* about our little house. Still – it does seem rather a shame that I should have been out of it all, all these years, I, that have just as good a right, as poor old Harvey used to tell me, to everything here as Madelene and Ermine. I do hope I shall be able to like them – of course I must not let myself be ‘put upon,’ but still – I consider they have kept the best of things to themselves hitherto and – oh I wish she’d be quick and come. I don’t want to seem nervous and yet I *am*, horribly so.”

She tapped her parasol on the floor, then she glanced furtively in a mirror to see how she was looking.

“My hair’s rather rough,” she thought, “but otherwise I don’t think I look bad. I wish I didn’t seem quite so young – and, oh, I do wish I were a little taller!”

She was small certainly, but as she was also slight and very well proportioned, this did not really detract from her —*beauty*, one could scarcely call it. Ella St Quentin was not beautiful; she was just exceedingly pretty. Her hair was brown, a shade lighter than Ermine’s perhaps, but dark in comparison with Madelene’s fair coils, and her eyes were hazel, lovely eyes, pathetic and merry by turns, as it suited their capricious little owner to make them, and her features were all charming. There were good points in this pretty face too, real sweetness in the curves of the mouth, frankness and honesty in the forehead and no lack of resolution in the chin – but the whole was the face of a child rather than a woman – a well-meaning, but fitful and undisciplined child, who had known little of life and its graver lessons, whom one would tremble to expose to the storms which, sooner or later, in one form or another, all must face. Yet there was latent strength too, if one looked more closely; it was a face to make one anxious but hopeful also.

She was well but simply dressed. Save for the extreme neatness of everything about her, she would have looked a mere school-girl; but the sweeps of her grey draperies, the poise of her head, nay, the very fit of her gloves, at once removed her from any possibility of being relegated to the category of girlish hobbledahoys. She had not a trace of awkwardness about her; she had passed through all the stages of teeth-changing, hair “doing up,” skirts lengthening and such crises, as one to the manner born – awkwardness and Ella were not to be thought of in the same century.

The door opening at last, Ella flashed round from the window – was it the door, or her fancy only? For now all seemed still again, no, yes – the handle was moving a very little – truth to tell, Madelene holding the outside knob, was making a last effort to screw up her courage so as to meet her young sister affectionately but with all her wits about her nevertheless.

There was no drawing back now that she had begun to turn the handle, and with a sigh which Ella could not hear, Miss St Quentin came in. Ella gasped slightly – “how beautiful,” was her first thought, to be however instantly followed by a second, “but how cold, and how horribly stuck-up! No, I feel it already – I shall never like her.”

But Madelene, pale and calm, was advancing across the room.

“Ella?” she said, as if till that moment she had had some lingering doubt on the matter, “Ella – it is really you! What a surprise – no, I would not have known you again in the least. Tell me, there is nothing wrong? Nothing the matter with your aunt, I hope?”

She had stooped to kiss the young girl as she spoke. It would be untrue to say that the kiss was a very affectionate one, but on the other hand there was no intentional coldness about it. But Ella was not of this opinion.

“No, thank you,” she replied, after submitting to, though not in any wise returning, the sisterly embrace. “Aunt Phillis is quite well – at this moment she must be, I am afraid, rather upset, for she will have got my telegram. I sent her one from Weevilscoombe station when I arrived.”

“And why should that upset her?” asked Madelene; “she asked you to telegraph your safe arrival, I suppose? But you didn’t travel alone?”

“Yes, indeed I did,” said Ella with a slight laugh. It was a nervous laugh in reality, but to her sister it sounded hard and a little defiant. “I not only travelled alone, but I came off without any one knowing. In fact auntie would only know that I *had* left her for good, when she got my telegram.”

Miss St Quentin’s pale face flushed a little, then the momentary colour faded, leaving her paler than before. She sat down, and motioned to her sister to do the same.

“I am very sorry, very, very sorry to hear this,” she said, nerving herself to speak. “Ella, I am afraid you have done very wrong, and foolishly. It is not using Mrs Robertson well after all her care of you – replacing a mother to you and giving you a home all these years. And – it is not a good beginning of your future life with us, to have done what we – what papa cannot approve of.”

Ella half rose from the chair on which she had only that moment seated herself. Her eyes sparkled ominously, her face flushed too, but after a different fashion from Madelene’s.

“I don’t know anything about your not approving, and as for papa – well at least he can tell me himself what he thinks. But as for Aunt Phillis – I am sorry if I have grieved her. I would not have done so if I could have helped it, but I don’t see that I could. It isn’t my fault that she is going to marry a vulgar, purse-proud old snob, who had already begun to cast up to me, yes, actually to cast up to *me*, the daughter of Colonel St Quentin of Coombesthorpe, what his wife-to-be had done for me and spent on me as if I were a charity-child! And that touches on the point of the whole. I am grateful to poor auntie for all her love and care,” and here the young, excited voice quivered a little, “but I don’t see that I need to be grateful to her for what you may call substantial things – she didn’t *need* to give me a home, as you say, or to spend her money on me – and a good deal of what was spent was my own money, or at least papa’s, which is the same thing; she has told me so herself. I had my own home, just as you and Ermine have – I am papa’s daughter just as much as you two are, even though we hadn’t the same mother. Do you think now – in the name of common-sense – do you see that I should be grateful for being taken away from my own proper home, such a home as *this*– for no reason at all that I can see except that auntie herself wished it.”

Madelene’s face looked unspeakably pained.

“It was your own mother’s wish,” she said, in a low voice.

“So I have been told – but – do you think dead people’s wishes should be allowed to affect the welfare of the living to such an extent?” asked the child in her sharp downright fashion. “For I don’t. Still that’s not the point – it was done and we’ll take it for granted it was done for the best. But now it was coming to an end – old Burton wasn’t going to have any trouble about me – he’s never been asked and never will be to spend a penny upon me, except once when he paid a fly for me and quarrelled with the driver, and on my last birthday when he gave me a *very* shabby prayer-book – sham ivory backs, you know, the kind that splits off – and it was auntie’s own doing, so I *don’t* see that I could have been expected to put up with his rudeness.”

“Had you done anything to irritate him?” asked Madelene.

Ella opened her eyes in surprise.

“Oh dear, yes,” she said, “heaps of things. I don’t suppose I ever did anything but irritate him. My very existence, at least my presence, in auntie’s household irritated him. I understand it all now,” she went on, speaking more and more naturally with the interest of the subject. “Don’t you see he didn’t know anything about us when he first made auntie’s acquaintance and began to think she’d just suit him for a wife, and he thought I was a homeless orphan, a poor dependent, and that he’d have to take me too. It was rather irritating, I’ll allow,” she continued, smiling to herself a little, “for he saw we’d never get on, and if he’d only been a little nicer when he found I wasn’t in his way, after

all, we might have ‘parted friendly,’ as servants say. But he was thoroughly put out by me – I *couldn’t* help trying to annoy him. And last night it came to a sort of crisis – he said I was impertinent and other things he had no business to say to papa’s daughter, who is no relation of *his*, and at last he told auntie, poor auntie, that she must choose between him and me.”

“And what did Mrs Robertson say?” asked Madelene.

“She didn’t say much. Indeed I didn’t give her any opportunity. She had a headache this morning, no wonder, and didn’t come down. So I just packed up a few things and told the servants to say I’d gone out, and I went to the railway and – came off here. *Naturally* I came here,” she repeated, her tone acquiring again a shade of defiance, in reality the veil of some unacknowledged misgiving.

Madelene did not at once reply. She sat there, her eyes gazing out of the window before her, in what Ella thought a very aggravating way.

“Do you not agree with me?” the younger sister asked after a moment’s silence. Shyness was unknown to Ella, as were hesitation and patience when she was much concerned about anything.

Madelene turned round and looked at her.

“She’s angry,” thought Ella. “It is not any other feeling that makes her look like that.” And she kept her own bright eyes fixed upon her sister, which did not add to Miss St Quentin’s composure.

“Of course if you were obliged to go *anywhere* in this – this strange sort of way, you did right to come here,” said Madelene quietly. “But that is not the question at all. Were you right to leave your aunt’s house as you have done? That is the thing.”

“Yes,” said Ella coolly, “under the circumstances I think I was quite right.”

“Without consulting papa, without talking it over with Mrs Robertson, without – without,” Miss St Quentin went on, a sudden sensation of something very like temper nerving her to say it – “without in the least considering our – Ermine’s and my – convenience?”

Ella gazed at her in unfeigned surprise, for a moment or two she was too astonished to feel indignant.

“I don’t understand you,” she said. “Is it usual for sisters to be upon such terms? Is a daughter expected to beg and apologise like a stranger, before getting leave to come home – home where she has a right to be, and from which she was banished without her wishes being consulted in the least?”

“You were a baby,” said Madelene. “You could not have been consulted. And – well the thing was done and this has *not* been your home, and it is no use talking in that exaggerated, theatrical sort of way, Ella. I shall do my best, my very best,” and here there was a little tremor in her voice, “to make you happy and content with us, and so I know will Ermine, but I can’t say that in what you have done to-day I think you have acted wisely, or – or rightly. What papa will say about it I don’t know. I – I did not mean to put forward any inconvenience to myself, or ourselves, in any prominent way.”

She had already regretted the allusion to her sister and herself that she had made. It was, she felt, both unwise and inconsistent with the resolution she had come to.

Ella did not answer.

“Will you come out for a little?” Madelene went on. “We have been having tea – Ermine and I and – and our cousin – on the lawn. You would like a cup of tea, would you not? I am afraid your room will not be ready yet. We have been making some changes, and the rooms we intend for you are to be papered and painted next week. In the meantime we must consider how best to arrange.”

“I am sorry to give you so much trouble,” said Ella coldly. “I should have thought – it surely cannot be difficult for the third daughter to have a room just as you and Ermine have. But of course you are right – I *am* a stranger, and it is no good pretending I am not.”

“That was not what I meant at all,” said Madelene. But again Ella made no reply.

“I must take care what I say,” she was thinking to herself, “or I shall be called ‘exaggerated’ and ‘theatrical,’ again.”

Madelene opened the window and stepped out. “Shall we go this way?” she said. “It is nearer than round by the front door.”

Ella followed her.

“I am to be a younger sister when it comes to questions of precedence and that kind of thing, it appears,” she thought. “But a stranger when it suits the rest of the family to consider me so.”

There was something soothing however to her impressionable feelings in the beauty all around her; it was a really exquisite evening and the girl was quick to respond to all such influences.

“How lovely!” she said impulsively.

Madelene turned. There was a smile on her face, almost the first Ella had seen there; the quiet, somewhat impassive countenance seemed transfigured.

“Yes,” she said, “it *is* lovely. I am glad for you to see it again for the first time on a day like this, though to us, and I think you will agree with us when you have lived here long enough, Coombesthorpe has a charm of its own in every season.”

Ella opened her lips to reply, but before she had time to do so, she caught sight of a figure hastening towards them over the lawn.

“Oh,” said Madelene, “here is Ermine. Yes! Ermie,” she called out, before the new-comer was quite close to them, “it is she – it is really Ella.”

Chapter Four

Back in the Nursery

Ella's eyes rested on her second sister with admiration scarcely less than that which her first glance at Madelene had aroused.

"At least," she thought to herself, for a moment throwing her prejudice and irritation aside, "at least I have no reason to be anything but *proud* of my belongings. They are both beautiful."

Ermine who was tall also, though an inch or two shorter than Madelene, stooped to kiss her. And her kiss seemed to Ella less cold than her elder sister's.

"I shall like her the best," she rapidly decided, for she was much given to rapid decisions.

"You have quite taken us by surprise, Ella," said Ermine, in a tone which told nothing. The truth was that she was on the look-out for some sign or signal from Madelene as to what was the meaning of this sudden invasion and in what spirit it was to be met. For though they were not absolutely free from small differences of opinion in private, the mutual understanding and confidence existing between the sisters were thorough and complete, and even had this not been the case, they would never have allowed any outsider to suspect it.

Madelene caught and rightly interpreted Ermine's unspoken inquiry.

"Ella has thought it right," she began in a somewhat constrained tone, "to come home sooner than was arranged, on – on account of annoyances which she has been exposed to at Mrs Robertson's and –"

"Annoyances," flashed out Ella, thereby giving Ermine her first glimpse of the fieriness of which Madelene had already in the last quarter of an hour seen a good many sparks, "annoyances, do you call them? I think that is a very mild term for unendurable, unbearable insult, and –"

"Ella," said Madelene quietly, "you have told me quite as much as I want to hear at present. Papa will be home soon and then you can see what he says. In the meantime it seems to me very much better to drop the subject – it would only leave a painful association with the beginning of your life here to do nothing but uselessly discuss disagreeables. The thing is done – you have left your aunt's and you are now with us. Neither Ermine nor I need to say anything about it and it is probably much better that we should not."

"Very well," said Ella, with as near an approach to sullenness in her tone, as such an essentially un-sullen person could be capable of. "I don't like it, but I don't want you to think me ill-natured or quarrelsome when I know I am neither, so I'll give in. But all the same I feel that you blame me and disapprove of me, and I hate to feel that."

She glanced up with a slight suspicious dewiness in her lovely brown eyes.

"Poor little thing," murmured Ermine half under her breath, but a glance from Madelene restrained her. "I know how she means, Maddie," she said aloud, "I hate the feeling of unexpressed blame or disapproval more than the worst scolding spoken out to me."

"But there is no question of either, just now," said Madelene smiling a little. "I did tell Ella openly what I thought, but she did not agree with me, and so I don't see that there's the least use in saying more. Do let us get into the shade – and I am sure Ella is longing for some tea."

"It is all ready," said Ermine, leading the way to the table under the trees, as she spoke. "I had some fresh made."

"And Philip?" asked Madelene with the very slightest possible touch of hesitation.

"He is gone," said Ermine. "He left immediately after you went in."

"I thought perhaps he would have stayed after all," she said vaguely.

Ella listened, not without curiosity.

“Who is Philip?” she had it on the end of her tongue to say, but she hesitated. “If they wanted to make me feel at home —*one of them*,” she said to herself, “they would have begun telling me all about everybody and everything, and if they don’t choose to tell I don’t choose to ask. ‘Philip,’ I remember something about some one of the name in a dreamy way. And just now in the house Madelene spoke of a cousin — ‘our cousin,’ I think she said. Well I suppose he is my cousin too, and if so, I can’t but hear about him before long, without asking.”

One question however occurred to her as a perfectly natural and permissible one.

“Is my godmother, Lady Cheynes, at home just now?” she asked abruptly.

Madelene looked a little surprised.

“My godmother,” she repeated to herself inwardly, “what a queer way of speaking of our aunt! Of course it is only because she is our aunt that she is Ella’s godmother, I remember her offering to be it ‘just to please poor Ellen,’ as she said. What does Ella want to know for? Perhaps she is thinking of making a descent upon Cheynesacre if she doesn’t find things to her mind here! I suppose our mention of Philip put it in her head.”

Ella repeated her question in another form.

“Lady Cheynes lives near here, does she not? and she *is* my godmother,” she said with a touch of asperity, as much as she dared show to Madelene, for there was something in Miss St Quentin’s calm, self-contained manner which awed even while it irritated her younger sister.

“Yes,” Madelene replied. “She lives at Cheynesacre, which is about five miles from here. But she is our aunt.”

“Oh,” said Ella, looking a little mystified, “then should I call her aunt? When I have written to her I have always said ‘godmother.’”

“She is not your aunt,” said Madelene gently. “Unless she particularly wished it, I should think it best for you just to call her by her name.”

Ella grew crimson.

“Another snub,” she said to herself.

“She is really our great-aunt,” Ermine said quickly, as if divining Ella’s feelings. “She was our mother’s aunt, and her grandson, Sir Philip Cheynes, is, therefore, only papa’s first cousin once removed. But he always calls papa uncle.”

“Oh,” said Ella. “Of course,” she went on bitterly, “I can’t be expected to understand all the family connections, considering I have been brought up a stranger even to my father. I *suppose* Colonel St Quentin is my father,” she went on sarcastically, “but I begin to feel a little doubtful even about that.”

“Ella,” said Ermine, “what do you mean? You must not take that tone. You are vexing and hurting Madelene,” for Miss St Quentin’s face was pale and her lips quivering, “and I can just tell you, my dear child, now at once, at the first start, that I won’t have Madelene vexed or hurt. You are a foolish baby, otherwise — ”

Ella’s crimson had turned to something still fierier by this, and her eyes were literally gleaming. She controlled herself for a moment or two to the extent of not speaking, but she lost no time in mentally retracting her decision that she “would like Ermine the best.” It was, perhaps, fortunate that at that moment Barnes reappeared upon the scene. He was not in the habit of so much condescension, but for once dignity had yielded to curiosity. Barnes was dying to have another look at the new arrival, and to be able to judge how things were going to turn out. So he seized the excuse of his master’s dog-cart being seen approaching to betake himself again to the lawn.

“If you please, ma’am,” he began, hesitating when he had got so far, partly because he did not feel quite at ease under Miss Ermine’s rather sharp glance, and partly because he was conscious of being rather out of breath —

“Well, Barnes?” said Madelene coldly.

"I thought you would like to know, ma'am, that the colonel will be here directly. James has just seen the dog-cart at the mile-end turn."

This was a land-mark visible by experienced eyes from Coombesthorpe gates, though at some considerable distance.

"Very well. Thank you, Barnes. You can tell my father he will find me in the library. I should like to see him as soon as he comes in," said Madelene composedly, and Barnes retired, very little the wiser for his expedition, though Ella's burning cheeks had not been altogether lost upon him, and he gave it as his private opinion to the housekeeper that less peaceful times were in store for "his" young ladies than hitherto.

Miss St Quentin got up.

"Ella," she said, "will you come with me at once to see papa?"

Ella looked a little taken aback. She had expected to find that Madelene was going to have a long, confidential talk with her father in the first place.

"If you like – if you think it best," she said, with the first approach to misgiving or shyness she had yet shown.

"Would you like better to see papa alone?" asked Madelene.

Ella instinctively made a little movement towards her.

"Oh no, no, thank you," she said, looking really, frightened.

"Well then, we will go together," said Madelene softened, though her manner scarcely showed it.

And in a few minutes Ella found herself again in the library where she had waited for her sister, little more than half-an-hour before.

Wheels crunching the gravel drive were heard almost immediately, then Barnes's voice and another in the hall.

"In the library, do you say?" this new voice repeated. And in a moment the door was opened quickly.

"Are you here, Madelene? There is nothing wrong, I hope? Barnes met me at the door to tell me you wanted me at once."

"Yes, papa," said Miss St Quentin, rising as she spoke. "You didn't meet Philip, then? No, there is nothing wrong. It is only that –" She half turned to look for Ella. The girl was standing just behind her, and it almost seemed to Madelene as if she had intentionally tried to conceal herself from Colonel St Quentin's notice at the first moment of his entering the room. And for the second time a softened feeling, half of pity, half almost of tenderness, passed through her towards her young sister. "Ella," she went on, and Ella came forward. "You see, papa," Madelene added, "*this* is why I wanted to see you at once. Ella has arrived – sooner than we expected." She tried to speak lightly, but Colonel St Quentin knew her too well not to detect her nervousness. He knew, too, that this sudden move on Ella's part could not but be annoying and disappointing to his elder daughters, who had been making all sorts of plans and arrangements for her joining them at the time already fixed upon.

"Ella!" he exclaimed. Then he held out his hand, and, drawing her towards him, kissed her quickly on the forehead. "Is there anything the matter with your Aunt Phillis? You have grown a good deal since last year."

For he had seen Ella from time to time, though but hurriedly.

The remark was not a happy one.

"I don't think I have grown at all for two years," she said. "I have certainly stopped growing now."

Her tone was not conciliating. Colonel St Quentin slightly raised his eyebrows.

"I beg your pardon, my dear," he said. "I had forgotten your mature age. And to what then are we indebted for this unexpected pleasure?" he went on.

Madelene looked distressed. This was exactly the tone she most dreaded to hear her father take. He did not mean to hurt Ella, up to now indeed he had no reason to feel displeased with her. For

all he knew she had been driven away from Mrs Robertson's by an outbreak of smallpox, or by the house having been burnt down! And Madelene and Ermine were accustomed to this half-satirical, bantering manner of his, and the good understanding between the three was complete, more perfect indeed than is often the case between father and daughters. For there was an element of something nearly allied to *gratitude* in Colonel St Quentin's affection for his elder daughters, which even on the parent's side, between generous natures is quite compatible with the finest development of the normal paternal and filial relations.

"It was nothing wrong – that is to say no illness or anything of that kind," Madelene hastily interposed, "but Ella thought it better to come away. Mr Burton, the old gentleman you know, papa, that Mrs Robertson –"

"Yes, yes, that Mrs Robertson is going to marry. Well, what about him?" he interrupted. Colonel St Quentin was much more vivacious than his eldest child.

"He seems to have been getting rather jealous, exacting, I don't know what to call it – annoyed at Ella's sharing her aunt's attention with him, I suppose. Is not that it, Ella? And he has shown it in a disagreeable, ill-bred way, it seems," said Madelene.

"He was actually rude, insulting," said Ella. "He seemed to think I was nothing and nobody, quite forgetting I was your daughter, and –"

"Insufferable, purse-proud old ruffian he must be," interjected her father.

Ella's eyes danced.

"Yes, papa – that's just what it is," she said, "He could not have been less – respectful," she added with a little hesitation, "if I had really been a penniless pauper, instead of having a family and home of my own."

Colonel St Quentin glanced at Madelene. He was on the point of speaking, but a sign from her, imperceptible to Ella, restrained him. He contented himself with a sigh. Ella imagined it to be one of sympathy with her wrongs, and her spirits rose – "penniless pauper," had been very telling, she said to herself.

"And so – and so, you and your aunt thought it best for you to come away," he said. "Well, well, it is a pity things could not have gone on smoothly a little longer, considering how many years you have been with her and how good she has always shown herself to you. In any case she surely might have written or telegraphed – I certainly think she might have considered us a *little* as well as old Burton. Of course she sent a servant with you."

"No, no," said Ella, hesitatingly. "I came alone."

Colonel St Quentin's face darkened.

"She let you – a child like you, travel here alone!" he exclaimed. "Upon my word, Madelene – you knew this?" he added, turning to her.

Madelene looked very uneasy.

"Papa," she said, "you don't quite understand. Mrs Robertson is not so much to blame as you think. Ella –" and she looked at her sister, "Tell papa yourself. It is no use concealing anything. Mrs Robertson will of course be writing herself, and then –"

"I have no wish to conceal anything," said Ella, haughtily. "I never dreamt of such a thing. Yes, what Madelene says is quite true, papa. Aunt Phillis did not send me away. She did not know of my leaving. She will only have heard it by a telegram I sent her from Weevilscoombe."

"Do you mean to say," said Colonel St Quentin slowly, "that you left your aunt's house without her sanction or even knowledge, as well as without writing to consult me – in short, that you ran away?"

"Something very like it," said Ella defiantly. Madelene looked grievously distressed.

"Oh, Ella," she said, "do not speak like that. She does not mean it really, papa – she has explained more about it to me. Ella, tell papa you are sorry if you have vexed him. It was natural for her to come to us, papa – even if she has acted hastily."

But Ella would say nothing. She stood there proudly obstinate, and Miss St Quentin's appeal in her favour fell on unheeding ears. One glance at her, and her father turned away and began walking up and down the room in a way which as Madelene well knew betokened extreme irritation.

"Little *something*," she heard him murmur, and she hoped Ella did not suspect that the half inaudible word was "fool" – "nothing, no conjunction of things could have been more annoying."

Then he stopped short and stood facing his youngest daughter.

"Ella," he said quietly, but there was something in his tone which made the girl inwardly tremble a little in spite of her determination, "you have acted very wrongly. You have placed me in a most disagreeable position – obliging me to apologise for your rudeness to your aunt, to whom already I was under heavy obligations for you," here Ella glanced up in surprise, and seemed as if about to speak, but her father would not listen, "and you have certainly given this Mr Burton a victory. The more vulgar he is, if he really is vulgar – I don't know that I feel inclined to take your word for it – the more he will enjoy it." Ella compressed her lips tightly. "And," Colonel St Quentin went on, his hard tone softening as he glanced at Madelene, "there are other reasons why I *extremely* regret the way you have chosen to behave. You have shown no sort of consideration for our – for your sisters' convenience."

Ella started up. This time she would be heard.

"That part of it I cannot in the least understand," she said. "It seems extraordinary to talk of *inconveniencing* one's own nearest relations by coming home when – when one had nowhere else to go," and her voice faltered a very little.

Her father looked at her with a sort of expression as if he were mentally taking her measure.

"Ah, well," he said, "I did not say I expected you fully to understand. You have shown yourself too childish. But you are not too childish to understand that when one does a distinctly wrong thing one may expect undesirable results in more directions than one. And this – the inconvenience to your sisters I lay stress upon, and I shall expect you to remember this. What room are you intending Ella to have?" he went on, turning rather abruptly to Madelene. "Those you meant for her of course are not ready."

"No," Miss St Quentin replied. "They are not yet begun, and what should be done will take some weeks. I wanted them to be so nice," she said regretfully.

"I know you did," said her father, and the sympathy in his tone made Ella unreasonably angry.

"In the meantime," Madelene continued, "I was thinking of giving Ella one of the rooms in the north wing. Indeed they are the only –"

"No," said Colonel St Quentin, "that will not do. We may need those rooms for visitors any day. It is much better for her to have the nursery on the south side. You can easily have what additional furniture is needed moved in, and, as it is Ella's own doing, she cannot object to less comfortable quarters than you had intended for her for a time."

Ella reared her little head, but said nothing.

"You must be tired," said Madelene, glad to suggest any change, "and I am sure you would like to take your hat and jacket off. Come with me to my room; and I will see about getting the nursery ready, papa."

Ella's head rose, if possible, still higher as she turned to leave the room. Madelene was leading the way, but as they got to the door her father called her back.

"I don't want to give her a room with a north exposure," he said to his eldest daughter in a low voice, "you know we cannot be sure of her health yet, and she has hitherto been always in such mild places. But of course we must not make her fanciful."

"No, papa. I quite understand," said Madelene, gently.

But this little incident did not tend to smooth down the ruffled wings of the small personage who followed her sister up the wide staircase with the gait of a dethroned queen.

“For to-night, Ella,” said Madelene, “I think you had better sleep in my dressing-room. There is a nice little sofa-bed there that Ermine sometimes uses when we have a fancy for being quite close together. Sometimes when papa is away this big house seems so lonely.”

“Is there no bed in the – the *nursery*?” she inquired icily.

“Oh, yes,” said Madelene, “there has always been a bed there. It is a comfortable little room; it is not what used to be the *night* nursery; that has been turned into a large linen room. But this is what was your day nursery when you were a tiny child. You can’t remember the house in the least of course?”

“Not in the least.”

“We have used the nursery, as we still call it, now and then for visitors when the house was very full,” Madelene went on.

“Oh, yes; for ladies’-maids, I suppose,” said Ella pleasantly.

“No,” said Madelene, “not for ladies’-maids. We would not put our sister in a room used for servants. And I do not wish you to sleep there till it has been made quite comfortable. It is perfectly clean and aired, but I shall change some of the furniture to make it look nicer, even though you are only to have it temporarily, and, to-night, as I said, you can sleep in my dressing-room. Here it is.” She threw open a door as she spoke and passed quickly through the large bedroom it opened into to a smaller one beyond. Both rooms were very pretty and handsomely furnished, with all sorts of girlish “household gods” about, telling of simple but refined tastes, and long association. For in the bookcase, side by side with the favourites of Madelene’s grown-up years, were old childish story-books in covers that had once been brighter than now, and behind the glass of the cabinets were many trifling ornaments of little value save for the memory of those by whom, or the occasions on which, they had been given.

Ella glanced around with a peculiar expression. The fresh admiration which had escaped her at sight of the garden was wanting. She said nothing, but stood looking in at the dressing-room door.

“Thank you,” she said, “if I may leave my hat and jacket here just now; I will fetch them again as soon as I know where to put them. But I should prefer not to sleep here – I suppose there is no actual objection – it is not particularly inconvenient,” with a slight accent on the two last words, “that I should sleep at once in what is going to be my room. I should very much prefer doing so.”

“No,” said Madelene in a rather perplexed tone, “it can be got ready at once if you really wish it.” She was anxious not to oppose Ella when not actually obliged to do so, and she determinedly swallowed her own not unnatural disappointment that the young girl should seem so reluctant to meet her in any direction “half-way.”

“Thank you,” said Ella, more heartily than she had yet spoken, “yes, I should like it very much better. Perhaps you would not mind showing me my room now,” she went on, “then when it is ready I can find my way to it alone without troubling you again.”

Miss St Quentin did not speak, but she turned to leave the room, followed as before by Ella. They crossed the landing and passed down another corridor.

“Down there,” said Madelene, pointing to the end of the passage, “are your real rooms – those that Ermine and I have been planning about for you. The nurseries are down this way,” and she descended a few steps leading on to another smaller landing, from which a flight of back stairs ran down to the ground floor. “I warn you that the room will not seem very attractive, but there is a nice look-out at this side. Our mother and – and yours – both liked these nurseries. They get all the sun going, in winter.”

It was a plain room certainly, old-fashioned-looking, for it was less lofty than the other side of the house, and the furniture, such as there was, was simple and seemed to have seen good service. The carpet was rolled up, and the small bed was packed into a corner; the window-curtains were pinned up to keep them clean, though enough was left visible to show that they were of faded chintz.

Ella in her turn was silent, but she at once deposited the little hand-bag she carried, and her parasol on the only available place, namely the top of the chest of drawers, with an air of taking possession.

"I suppose my little box – I only brought one quite small one with me – may be brought up here?" she said.

"Yes, certainly, but you *must* leave the room to the housemaids for an hour or two," Madelene replied. "Will you dress in Ermine's room, in preference to mine? It is nearer – just up the little flight of stairs."

"I don't mind in the least," said Ella. "I must say I had no idea, not the very slightest, that my coming would have caused such a fuss. Perhaps I should apologise, but – I begin to see I have been very foolish. I have been allowing myself to forget the real state of the case, I suppose."

"What do you mean by the real state of the case?" asked Madelene, calmly resting her eyes on her sister's face.

"Why – " began Ella, a little discomfited though she would not show it, "I mean that you and Ermine are not, after all, my own sisters. I seem to be a sort of nobody's sister – or nobody's anything, and yet this is my own father's house. I do not see why everybody should be so down upon me."

"Nobody wishes to be down upon you, Ella," said Madelene gently. "And I know that I have done and will do all I can to prevent papa being vexed with you. But it has not been a good beginning – there is no use in concealing it, and Ermine and I had wished to welcome you heartily. And won't you come to my dressing-room after all, Ella, and let me feel that things are not uncomfortable for you?"

But Ella stood firm. She shook her little head, though a slight smile quivered about her mouth too.

"No thank you," she said, "I like much better to begin as I am going to be. I hope you don't think me such a donkey as to mind what kind of a room I have."

"I mind," said Madelene, as she turned away. The housekeeper and hostess instincts were very strongly developed in Miss St Quentin and Ella had succeeded in wounding her in a tender place.

A few minutes later, when Ermine had come up stairs and was standing in her own room, thinking about getting ready for dinner, there came a knock at the door, and in answer to her "come in" Ella appeared. She was carrying a dress on her arm.

"Would you mind – ?" she began. "Oh I am afraid I am disturbing you – I thought Madelene said something about – that I might dress in here."

"So you may if you like," said Ermine, not too graciously it must be allowed, for she suspected Ella had been annoying her elder sister. "There is plenty of time. I will go to Madelene till you are ready. You can ring for Stevens, the second housemaid, to help you."

If Ella had had any idea of making friends with Ermine in preference to Madelene it was speedily discarded.

"I detest them both," she exclaimed, as soon as the door had closed on her sister, "nasty, cold, stuck-up things. I almost think I'd rather be back with aunt, if it wasn't for that *horrid* old Burton. But I'll never let auntie know – no *never*, that I'm not happy here. It would be such a triumph to that old wretch."

And this lively reflection stopped Ella's seeking relief for her outraged feelings in tears, which she had been very nearly doing.

"Nobody shall be able to say I'm a cry-baby who doesn't know her own mind," she said resolutely, as she dressed herself quickly but carefully, for Ella had no love of making a fright of herself!

Chapter Five

Ermine's Inspiration

When his daughters were leaving the room that evening after dinner, Colonel St Quentin detained Madelene by an almost imperceptible gesture. On her side Madelene glanced at Ermine, and by the slightest possible turn of her eyelids recommended Ella to her care. None of this was lost upon the young lady.

"Going to talk me over again," she said to herself as she followed Ermine, "well, they'll have plenty of opportunities of doing so before they've done with me, I'm afraid."

"Sit down for a minute or two, can't you, my dear?" said her father, as Madelene stood beside him; "it fidgets me to see you standing. Surely Ermine can look after that child for a few minutes."

"Oh, yes," Miss St Quentin replied, drawing a chair close to her father's as she spoke.

"It's about her I want to speak of course," Colonel St Quentin went on. "I have been thinking a great deal about her even in the hour or two since she came. What are we to do with her, Madelene?" Madelene could not help smiling a little at her father's overwhelmed tone. He who had faced unmoved all the dangers and vicissitudes of a soldier's life, who had not so many years ago borne with comparative equanimity the complete loss of all the fortune he could really call his *own*, now seemed quite unnerved by what was surely but a most natural, not to say agreeable event, the return of his youngest child to her home.

"Oh, papa, don't worry about her," she said. "Things will settle themselves, you'll see. It is only the awkwardness of her sudden arrival that makes you feel uneasy about her. She *must* be a nice child – she couldn't be your daughter and poor Ellen's – " since the death of her young stepmother, Miss St Quentin had half-unconsciously adopted the habit of speaking of her by her Christian name – "without having a true and good nature *au fond*."

"If she only were a child," said her father, "but it strikes me pretty forcibly," he went on, smiling a little, though rather grimly, in spite of himself, "that she is, and considers herself very decidedly a young woman. She's very pretty too, and knows how to set herself off, that little black frock with those fal-de-rals, rosettes – what do you call 'em?"

"Bows," corrected Madelene.

"Bows then – was very coquettishly managed."

"It was too old for her," said Miss St Quentin decidedly. "And – not altogether good style for so young a girl as she really is. I fancy Mrs Robertson has left her a good deal to herself, of late especially. I think it was time she came to us, papa," she added. "Indeed I only wish – " but she stopped.

"That she had never left us – but don't say it, Madelene. It's no use, and – I don't know that she would have been alive but for Phillis's care."

"Perhaps not," said Madelene. "Still, she is not like her mother – she has not that transparent look." She did not say more, reserving to herself her private opinion that Ella was and always had been, her slight make notwithstanding, a most sturdy little person, for which indeed there was every precedent, as young Mrs St Quentin had been the only delicate member of her own family. "It may perhaps soften papa to think her not strong," she said to herself.

"Like her mother," repeated Colonel St Quentin, "no, indeed. Ellen was the simplest, most gentle creature. I don't suppose she ever gave two thoughts to herself in any way – appearance or anything else. Yet – oh Madelene, I do wish I had not married again!" he burst out with a sigh.

"Papa?" said Madelene, and her tone sounded almost as if she were a little shocked. "I can't quite understand how you can say so, or feel so, dear papa," she went on, more softly. "When you say yourself, how perfectly sweet and gentle Ellen was – and not only sweet, sturdily true, and high-

principled, even for our sakes, Ermie's and mine, you should be glad we had such an influence as hers for the six or seven years she lived. I often think we don't know how much we owe her."

"Yes," said her father, "that is true, and I thank you for reminding me of it. If her own child had had the same advantage all might have been well. It has all gone wrong; the having to part with her for so long – and then my losses. Of course but for that I would probably have had her home sooner, but I could not bear you girls to have all the expenses of her education, and the running about with her to mild climates if the winter happened to be severe, as well as your poor old father on your hands!"

"Papa – I did not know you had thought of it that way," said Madelene, rather sadly. "It makes me feel as if we really have something to make up for to poor little Ella."

"No – don't begin fancying that," he said quietly. "There were other reasons, too – my health for a time; and then Phillis was able and willing. I wish I hadn't said it. For of all things I dread your spoiling Ella. And don't sacrifice yourselves to her for my sake in any way, I entreat you, my dear child."

He looked up anxiously.

Madelene smiled as she replied, though in her heart she sighed. Colonel St Quentin was not a selfish man, in intention even less so than in deed. And *the* sacrifice, a sacrifice of some years' duration already, which his eldest daughter had made to him, he suspected as little as she desired that he should.

"You needn't be afraid, papa," she said. "For her own sake it would be *wrong* to spoil her."

"But there's spoiling and spoiling," he went on. "In her place now, she should go on studying for some time. You know, Madelene, she *should* be prepared for contingencies. She may have to work for her living; there is no saying."

"Only in case of both Ermine and me dying," said Madelene calmly. "And that, to say the least, is not *probable*. Besides – we might easily increase our life insurance, papa?"

"No, no, nothing of the kind," said Colonel St Quentin excitedly. "I won't have you crippling your income any more – do you hear, Madelene? If such an awful catastrophe happened as your both dying before me – well, *surely* it would kill me?" he said. "Though such things don't kill! But there would be enough for me, as much as I have deserved, after mismanaging my own money."

"It wasn't your fault, papa. *Everybody* says so," his daughter replied. "I do wish you wouldn't speak of it that way."

"But besides that," Colonel St Quentin went on, "there are other and less terrible possibilities. If you married, Madelene, you and Ermine, and of course that may happen any day, though I know you are both of you rather, what the French call *difficile* – your husbands might not, naturally enough – care about being saddled with a little half-sister-in-law, even if he consented to the pensioning off of the old man himself."

"Papa," said Madelene again, but this time her tone was really stern, "you pain me indescribably, really indescribably, by speaking so. Anything reasonable —*anything*, really for Ella's good, you may depend on our carrying out. But you cannot expect us to sympathise with you when you become, I must say, really morbid on this subject."

Colonel St Quentin was silent for a moment or two. He sat, shading his face with his hand, so that Madelene could not judge as to his expression.

"There is another view of the case, too," said Madelene. "Ella is very attractive. Why should *she* not marry? Surely there are some few men in the world who don't look out for heiresses."

"Perhaps," said her father. "Well yes, I suppose we may allow that is a possibility. Still – that brings in complications too – there must be no sailing under false colours, and it would be so natural for her to be credited with her share of your fortunes by strangers. No, Madelene, till she is old enough to understand the whole – and I agree with you that till she has come really to *know* you and Ermine, it may be best to avoid explanations – I think the less society she sees the better. And one outlay I will not object to for her – let her have a few thoroughly good lessons, the best you can get;

it will give her occupation, and at the same time fit her to be independent – should the worst come to the worst so to speak?”

“Very well,” said Madelene. “I agree with you, that it will be good for her to have occupation –”

“And make her useful – practically useful, so far as you possibly can,” interrupted her father again.

“Very well,” she said again. “But, papa dear, as far as ‘the worst’s coming’ in any sense except that Ermie and I might die – is to be taken into account, do dismiss it for ever. We *couldn’t* marry men who would look at things in the way you put it. You wouldn’t wish us to marry selfish brutes, papa?”

And Colonel St Quentin was forced to smile.

Then Madelene and he joined the two others in the drawing-room.

“Can we not have a little music?” said Colonel St Quentin, a minute or two latter. “Ella, my dear, you play I suppose – or do you sing?”

His tone was kindlier again. Madelene’s spirits rose. She thought her talk with her father had done good. She went towards the piano and opened it, glancing smilingly at her young sister.

Ella was seated on a low chair in a corner of the room – the light of a lamp fell on her face and bright hair. It struck Madelene that she looked paler than on her first arrival.

“Will you play something, Ella?” she said, “or are you perhaps too tired?”

“I am not the least tired, thank you,” the girl replied, “but I hate playing. I never practise, on that account.”

“Upon my word,” muttered Colonel St Quentin.

“Do you sing then?” Ermine interposed, quickly. Ella hesitated.

“Your mother – mamma,” said Madelene, using purposely the old name for her stepmother, “mamma sang beautifully.”

Ella turned towards her.

“Do you mean *my* own mother?” she asked coldly.

“Of course,” Madelene replied. “I said so.” Colonel St Quentin moved impatiently.

“Why can you not answer Ermine’s question simply, Ella?” he said. “And why do you speak to Madelene in that tone? It is, to say the least, very questionable taste to accentuate in that way the fact that you and your sisters had not the same mother. And – if no one has told you so before, I tell you now that your mother, my second wife, loved my two elder daughters as if they had been her own, and her best wish for you was that you might resemble them. Where you have got these vulgar notions about half-sisters and so on – I see you are full of them – I can’t conceive. Is it from your Aunt Phillis?”

“No-o,” Ella replied, a little startled apparently by her father’s vehemence. “I did not intend to say anything to annoy you,” she added.

“But about the singing?” Ermine said again.

“Yes,” said Ella, “I do sing a little. I like it better than playing. I will try to sing if you – if papa wishes it.”

Her tone was humble – almost too much so. There was a kind of obtrusive dutifulness about it that was rather irritating. Still Madelene gave her credit for having put some force on herself to keep down her temper.

“Shall I play a little in the first place?” Miss St Quentin said, seating herself at the piano as she spoke.

Madelene played beautifully, though her style was very quiet. Ella rose gently from her seat and came nearer her; she stood silent and motionless till the last soft notes had died away.

“That is lovely, most lovely,” she said, her whole face and manner changing. “I should love the piano if I could play like that.”

“You must love music, I suspect,” Madelene replied. “Perhaps it is the actual mechanical part of playing that has discouraged you.”

“I have bad hands for it,” said Ella, looking at her very little fingers, as she spoke.

“You have peculiarly small ones,” said her sister; “that is like mamma. Still she managed to play very charmingly. Now what will you sing? I dare say we have some of your songs.”

Ella opened a book of songs and ran through its contents.

“Yes,” she said, “there are one or two of mine here. Perhaps,” she added more timidly, “they are some that mamma sang, as Aunt Phillis chose them. I will try this if you like,” and she pointed to what had been in fact one of Mrs St Quentin’s special favourites.

It was a simple enough song, calling for no great execution, still, though the observation may sound absurd, it was a song depending for its beauty on the voice of the singer. And Ella’s young voice suited it perfectly. There was complete silence till she ended. Then a slight sigh from her father made her glance at him.

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