

Molesworth Mrs.

The Laurel Walk



Mrs. Molesworth
The Laurel Walk

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Molesworth Mrs. The Laurel Walk

Chapter One A Rainy Evening

There was a chemist's shop at Craig Bay, quite a smart chemist's shop, with plate-glass windows and the orthodox "purple" and other coloured jars of Rosamund fame. It was one of the inconsistencies of the place, of which there were several. For Craig Bay was far from being a town; it was not even a big village, and the two or three shops of its early days were of the simplest and quaintest description, emporiums of a little of everything, into which you made your way by descending two or three steps below the level of the rough pavement outside. The chemist's shop was the first established, I think, of the new order of things, when the place and neighbourhood suddenly rose into repute as peculiarly bracing and healthy from the mingling of sea and hill air with which they were favoured. It was kept in countenance now by several others, a draper's, a stationer's, a photographer's, of course, besides the imperative butcher's, fishmonger's, and so on, some of which subsided into closed shutters and vacancy after the "season" was over and the visitors had departed. For endeavours which had been made to introduce a *winter* season had not been crowned with success. The place was too out-of-the-way, the boasted mildness of climate not altogether to be depended upon. But the chemist's shop stood faithfully open all the year round, doing a little business in wares not, strictly speaking, belonging to it, such as note-paper and even books, when the library-and-stationer's in one had gone to sleep for the time.

On a cold raw evening in late November, Betty Morion stood waiting for her sister Frances on the door-step of the shop. It would have been warmer inside, but Betty had her fancies, like many other people, and one of them was a dislike to the smell of drugs, with which "inside," naturally, was impregnated. And she was thickly clad and fairly well used to cold and to damp – even to rain – for to-night it was drizzling depressingly.

"I wish Francie would be quick," thought the girl more than once during the first few moments of her waiting, though she knew it was certainly not poor Frances' fault. Their father's prescriptions had always some very special and peculiar directions accompanying them, and Betty knew of old that the waiting for them was apt to be a long affair.

And she was not of an impatient nature. After a while she forgot about the tiresomeness, and fell to watching the reflections of the brilliant colours of the jars in the puddles and on the surface of the wet pavement just below her, as she had often watched them before. They were pretty – in a sense – and yet somehow they made the surrounding dreariness drearier.

"I wonder if it does rain more here than anywhere else," she said to herself dreamily. "What a splashing walk home we shall have! I wish we did not live up a hill – at least I think I wish we didn't, though perhaps if our house was down here I should wish it was higher up! Perhaps it doesn't really rain more at Craig Bay than at other places, but we notice it more. For nearly everything pleasant that ever comes to us depends on the weather." And Betty sighed. "I could fancy," she went on, "living in a way that would make one scarcely care what it was like out of doors. A beautiful big house with ferneries and conservatories, and lovely rooms to wander about in, and a library full of delightful books, and lots of people to stay with us and – well, yes, of course, it would be nice to go drives and rides and walks too, and to have exquisite gardens. But still life might be very pleasant even when it did rain," and again Betty sighed. "It needn't be anything so *very* tremendous, after all," she added

to herself. “Craig-Morion might be – ” but a gentle touch on her shoulder made her turn. It was her sister, packages in hand, and rather embarrassed by her umbrella.

“Can you open it for me, dear?” she said, and Betty hastened to do so. “I am so afraid,” Frances went on, when Betty’s own umbrella was ready for business too, and they were both under way, “I am so afraid of dropping any of these things. Papa is so anxious to have them at once. Do you remember the day that Eira dropped the bottle of red ink – wasn’t it dreadful?” and Frances laughed a little at the recollection.

Her laugh was very sweet, but scarcely merry. There are laughs which tell of sadness more quickly almost than tears. But it was not that kind either; it was the laugh of one who is resolutely cheerful, who has learnt by experience the wisdom of making the best of things – a lesson not often learnt by the young while young, though by some it is acquired so gradually and unconsciously that on looking back from the table-land of later years they do not realise it had ever been a lesson to be learnt at all.

For its roots lie deeper than philosophy. They are to be found in unselfishness, in self-forgetting, and earnest longing to carry the burdens of others, or at least to share them.

And Frances Morion was still young, though twenty-seven. She by no means looked her age. Her life in many ways had been a healthy one in its material surroundings, and she herself had made it so in other ways.

Betty scarcely laughed in return. It is doubtful if she heard what her sister said.

“Isn’t it *horribly* wet?” she said. “I was really wondering just now if it rains more here than anywhere else, or if – ” and after a moment’s hesitation – “if we notice it more, Francie, because, you see, there is so little else to notice.”

Miss Morion turned quickly and glanced at her sister, forgetting that it was far too dark to discern the girl’s features. She always felt troubled when Betty spoke in that way, when her voice took that particular tone. She could be philosophical for herself far more easily than for her younger sisters.

“Well, on the other hand,” she said cheerfully, “doesn’t it show that we have no very great troubles to bear if we have leisure to think so much about small ones?”

“I don’t say we *have* any very big troubles to bear,” said Betty. “I – I almost sometimes find myself wishing we had – ”

“Oh, Betty, *don’t*,” said her sister quickly, “don’t wish anything like that!”

“No,” said Betty, “I wasn’t going to say quite what you thought. I mean I wish anything big would come into our lives! Anything really interesting, and – well, yes! I may as well own it – anything exciting! It is all on such a dull, dead level, and has always been the same, and always will be, it seems to me. And when one is no longer very young the spring and buoyancy seem to go. When I was seventeen or eighteen I’d all sorts of happy fancies and expectations, but now – why, Francie, I’m twenty-four, and *nothing* has come.”

For a moment or two Frances walked on in silence.

“I dare say,” she said at last, “if we knew more of other lives, we should find a good many something like ours. And after all, Betty, one’s real life is what one is oneself.”

Betty laughed slightly. Her laugh was not bitter, but without any ring of joyousness.

“I know that,” she said. “But it doesn’t do me any good. It’s just *myself* that depresses me. I’m not big enough, nor brave enough, nor anything enough, to rise above circumstances, as people talk about. I want circumstances to help me a little! And I don’t ask anything very extravagant, I know.

“No, Frances,” she added, “you’re not – not quite right. I think I could bear things better and feel more spirit if you would allow that our lives *are* exceptional in some ways.”

“Perhaps so,” the elder sister agreed.

“You know,” continued Betty, “it isn’t fallings in love or marriage that I’m talking about. I really and truly very seldom think of anything of that kind, though of course, in the abstract, I can see that

a home of one's own, and the feeling oneself a centre, is the ideal life; but heaps of girls don't marry, and there are plenty, lots of other interests and objects to live for, which we *are* unusually without!"

Frances opened her mouth with an intention of remonstrating, but the words died away before she gave them utterance. There was so much truth in what Betty said, and Frances was too thorough-going to believe in the efficacy of any consolation without a genuine root, so she said nothing.

"And I'm afraid," pursued Betty, who certainly could not be accused this evening of having donned rose-coloured spectacles, "I'm afraid," she repeated, "that it's coming over Eira too, though she has kept her youngness marvellously, so far."

In her turn Frances gave a little laugh which could scarcely be called mirthful.

"Betty dear," she said, "you are rather unmerciful to-night, piling on the agony! You think me very philosophical, but I must confess I am not proof against our present depressing circumstances. I don't think I've ever come up the hill in such rain and darkness, and so horribly cold too." And in spite of herself she shivered a little.

In a moment Betty's mood had changed to penitence.

"Oh, Frances, I'm a brute," she exclaimed, "for I know you were tired before we came out; reading aloud to papa for so long together is really exhausting. I know what I'll do," she went on, with a tone of defiance; "if I have to carry the coals and wood myself upstairs, you shall have a fire in your room as soon as we go in, you shall!"

Frances laughed again, this time with real amusement. She was always happier about Betty when the younger girl's latent energy asserted itself.

"I'm all right, dear," she said, "and we're getting near home now. We must be near the lodge gates. I thought I saw a light a moment ago."

In spite of the drenching rain, Betty stood still an instant to reconnoitre.

"Yes," she said, "I see a light, more than one, two or three, but they're not from the lodge. Francie!" with a sudden excitement in her voice, "they're up at the house. We'll see them more clearly as we go on. Who can be there? It's not likely Mrs Webb would have chosen an evening like this to be making the rounds, or lighting fires in the big house."

"Oh, I don't know," said Frances, half indifferently. "They may have been doing some extra cleaning or something of that kind earlier in the day, and not have finished yet. There's nobody at the lodge itself, anyway," as at this moment they approached the gates. "There's no light in the windows except from the kitchen fire and – oh dear! I'm sorely afraid that the gates are locked, and neither of the Webbs there to let us through;" and she sighed ruefully, for this meant a quarter of a mile's further walk – there being an understanding that the Morion family should have a right of way through the grounds of the deserted home of their far-away relatives, to their own little house which stood just beyond the enclosure. "It is unlucky," she added, "to-night of all nights, when every step of the way is an aggravation of our miseries!"

Strangely enough, Betty's depression seemed, for the time being, to have vanished. For some passing moments, the sisters might almost have changed characters. Frances was honestly, physically tired. She had had a trying, fatiguing day at home, and the walk to the village, which had in a sense invigorated Betty (who, to confess the truth, had spent the day in doing little or nothing), had really been too much for the elder sister.

"Never mind," said Betty briskly; "we'll soon be there now. I shall keep a sharp lookout when we turn the corner to see if there are lights at the back of the big house too."

Frances, for once, was feeling too tired to rise to her sister's little fit of excitement, though she smiled to herself in the darkness with pleasure, as she realised that if Betty's spirits were apt to sink very much below par, they were ready enough to rise again on very small provocation.

"She is still so young," thought the elder sister; "so much younger than most girls of her age. If only I had a little more in my power for her and Eira!" And the smile gave way, all too quickly,

to a sigh, which in its turn was intercepted by an eager exclamation from Betty, for they had turned the corner of the road by this time.

“Look, Francie!” she said, in an involuntary whisper, as if by some extraordinary possibility her remarks could have been overheard at the still distant big house; “look, Francie, it *is* something out of the common! The offices are lighted up – some of them, anyway; and don’t you see lights moving about too, as if there were several people there? What can be going to happen?”

“Your curiosity will soon be satisfied,” returned Frances; “that’s one good thing of living in a little world like this. By to-morrow at latest, any news there is will be all over the place.” And then she relapsed into silence; and Betty, always quick of perception, seeing that her sister was really tired, said no more, though her little head kept turning round from under the shelter of her umbrella as long as the back precincts of Craig-Morion remained visible.

This was not for long, however. A few moments more, and their path skirted a thickly-planted belt of Scotch firs, which here bordered the park. They had almost to feel their way now, so dark had it become.

“Oh dear,” said Betty, when there was no longer anything to distract her attention from the woes of the present moment. “Oh dear, Francie, did the way home ever seem quite so long before? I do hope the next time papa wants his medicine in a hurry that he’ll choose a fine evening.”

“Dear,” said Frances regretfully, “I shouldn’t have let you come with me.”

“Rubbish! nonsense!” cried Betty, “as if Eira and I would have let you go alone. I do believe in my heart that we’re both quite as strong as you, though you won’t allow it. Poor little Eira, she would have come too, except for her chilblains. It is unlucky that she has got them so early this year. And they spoil her pretty hands so.”

“It’s only from the unusual cold,” said Frances, “and – ” she hesitated. “I am sure I could cure them,” she resumed, “if I had my own way, or if I had *had* it when you were both growing up. What makes me really stronger is, I am sure, that I had so much better a time as a child than either of you, before papa gave up his appointment and we were better off.”

“I wish you’d leave off repeating that old story,” said Betty. “After all, I’m not four years younger than you, and whatever Eira and I have *not* had, we’ve had you, darling – a second mother as people say, a great, great deal better than a second mother *I* say, and oh joy! here we are at last; I see the white gate-posts.” And in another moment they were plodding the short, badly kept gravel path, not to be dignified by the name of a drive, which led to their own door.

“Take care of the big puddle just in front of the steps; it must be a perfect lake to-night,” Betty was saying, when, before they had quite reached it, the door was cautiously opened, and a girl’s face peered out, illumined by the light, faint though it was, of the small hall behind her. It was Eira, the third and youngest of the Morion sisters.

“It’s you at last,” she said in a low voice; “come in quickly, and I’ll take the medicine to papa, he’s been fussing like a – I don’t know what, and if he gets hold of you he’ll keep you waiting in your soaking things for half-an-hour while he goes on about your having been so long! Now go straight upstairs,” she continued, when she had got her sisters inside, and extricated them from their dripping umbrellas and waterproofs. “I’ll see to these things as soon as I’ve been to papa. Go straight up to your room, Frances; there’s a surprise for you there. Go up quickly and keep the door closed till I come.”

She took the parcel from her elder sister’s hands as she spoke, and, without wasting time in more words, gave her a gentle little push toward the staircase. Frances and Betty went up softly, but as quickly as their feet, tired and stiffened with cold and wet, would allow. The staircase, like everything in the house, was meagre and dingy, the steps steep and the balusters rickety. At the top a little landing gave access to the best rooms, and a long narrow passage at one side led to the sisters’ own quarters.

Betty ran on in front and threw open the door of her elder sister’s room eagerly. She had hard work to repress an exclamation of delight at what met her eyes. It was a fair-sized, bare-looking room, though scrupulously neat and not without some simple and tasteful attempts at ornamentation, and

to-night it really looked more attractive than was often the case, for a bright glowing fire sent out its pleasant rays of welcome, and on a little table beside it stood, neatly arranged, everything requisite for a good, hot cup of tea.

“How angelic of Eira!” exclaimed Betty. “How has she managed it? Just when I was planning how I could possibly get you a fire, Francie.”

The eldest sister sat down with a smile of satisfaction in front of the warm blaze.

“Run into your own room, Betty, and take off your wet things as quickly as possible, and then come back here for tea. We have still over an hour till dinner-time.”

Betty hurried across the room and threw open the door, almost running into Eira as she did so.

“Oh! this is lovely,” she exclaimed, “especially as you’ve got away too, Eira. Do tell us how you managed it.”

“No, no,” remonstrated Frances, “tell her nothing. Don’t answer her till she has taken off her wet things. She will be all the quicker if you don’t begin speaking.”

So Betty ran off and Eira joined her elder sister at the fireside.

“Wasn’t it a good idea?” she said, smiling at the cheering glow.

“Yes, indeed,” said Frances. “Betty was meditating something of the kind as we were coming home, but I doubt if she could have managed it. Anyway it wouldn’t have been ready to welcome us in this comfortable way. Oh dear! it was wet and dreary coming home, and we were kept waiting such a long time for papa’s medicine! By-the-by, is it all right?”

Before Eira could answer, the door reopened to admit Betty.

“Haven’t I been quick?” she exclaimed brightly. “Do pour out the tea, Frances. And tell me, Eira, I am dying to hear what good fairy aided and abetted you in this unheard-of extravagance.”

“Nobody,” said Eira. “I simply did it. After all, I think it’s the best way sometimes to go straight at a thing. And if papa had met me carrying up the tea-tray I should have reminded him that it was better to have some hot tea ready for you, than to risk you both getting rheumatic fever. I didn’t meet him, as it happened, but just now when I gave him the medicines I took care, by way of precaution, to dilate on the drenched state you had arrived in and the long time you had been kept waiting at the chemist’s. The latter fact I made a shot at.”

Frances drew a breath of relief.

“Then we may hope for a fairly comfortable evening,” she said.

“Yes,” said Betty; “to give the – no, Frances, you needn’t look shocked, I won’t finish it. I must allow that papa is more sympathising about physical ills than about some other things.”

“And so he should be,” said Eira, “considering that he says he never knows what it is to feel well himself. Mamma is worse than he about being hardy and all that sort of thing. I often wonder how children grew up at all in the old days if they really were so severely treated as we’re told.”

“It’s the old story,” said Frances; “the delicate ones were killed off, and those who did survive must have been strong enough to be made really hardy. How are your chilblains, Eira dear?”

“Pretty bad,” the girl replied cheerfully; “at least I feel some premonitory twinges of another fit coming on! I mustn’t stay so near the fire. Talk of something else quick to make me forget them.”

“Drink up this tea, in the first place,” said Frances. “That kind of warmth is good for them.”

“And, oh, I have something to tell you,” said Betty, “something quite exciting! What do you think? I believe something has happened or is going to happen at Craig-Morion. It was all lighted up as we passed. No, I mustn’t exaggerate! There were lights moving about in several of the rooms, and the old Webbs were not at the lodge. It was all dark, and the gates locked, so they must have been up at the big house. That helped to make us late, you see.”

“You poor things!” exclaimed Eira, though her pity was quickly drowned by this exciting news. “Can they be expecting some one? After all these years of nothing ever happening and nobody ever coming!”

“It looks like it,” said Betty shortly. Then she gave herself a little shake, as if some unexpressed thought was irritating her. “Anything about Craig-Morion makes me cross,” she went on in explanation, “even though there’s something fascinating about it, too – tantalising rather. Just to think how different, how utterly different our lives would have been, if that stupid old woman had done what she meant to do, or at least what she promised. It wouldn’t have been anything so wildly wonderful! We should scarcely have been rich even then, as riches go. But it would have been enough to make a starting-point, a centre, for all the interests that make life attractive. We could make it *so* pretty!”

“And have lots of people to stay with us, and whom we could stay with in return,” said Eira. “Just think what it would be to have really nice friends!”

“Yes,” said Frances, in her quiet voice; “and as it is, the people it belongs to scarcely value it. It is so little in comparison to what they have besides. Yet,” and she hesitated, for she was a scrupulously loyal daughter, “unless papa and mamma had been able to interest themselves in things as we three would, *perhaps* it wouldn’t have made much radical difference, after all?”

“Oh, yes, it would,” said Betty quickly. “It would have made all the difference. Papa wouldn’t have got into these nervous ways, if he had had things to look after and plenty of interests, and money, of course. And mamma would have been, oh! quite different.”

“Perhaps so,” Frances agreed, “but it isn’t only circumstances that make lives. There are people, far poorer than we, I know, whose lives are ever so much *fuller* and wider. It is that,” she went on, speaking with unusual energy, “it is that that troubles me about you two! I want to see my way to helping you to make the best you can – in the very widest sense of the words – of your lives;” and her sweet eyes rested with almost maternal anxiety, pathetic to see in one still herself so young, on her two sisters.

“And you, you poor old darling!” said Eira, “what about your own life?”

“Oh!” said Frances, “I don’t feel as if I had any, separate from yours. All my day-dreams and castles in the air and aspirations are for you;” and in the firelight it seemed as if tears were glistening in her eyes.

She was, as a rule, so self-contained and calm that this little outburst impressed her sisters almost painfully, and, with youthful shrinking from any expression of emotion, Eira answered half-jestingly:

“I’m ashamed to own it, but do you know really sometimes that life would be quite a different thing to me – twice or three times as interesting – if I could have – ”

“What?” said Betty.

“Heaps and heaps of lovely clothes?” said the girl. At which they all three laughed, though half-reuefully, for no doubt their present wardrobe left room for improvement.

Chapter Two

A Break in the Clouds

Things, externally at least, had brightened up by the next morning. The rain had ceased during the night, and some rays of sunshine, doubly welcome after its late absence, though not without the touch of pathos often associated with it in late autumn, came peeping in at the dining-room window of Fir Cottage, when the family assembled there for breakfast. For Mr Morion, valetudinarian though he was, had not even the “qualités de ses défauts” in some respects. That is to say, he was exasperatingly punctual, and at all seasons and under almost all circumstances an exemplary early riser.

Naughty Eira groaned over this sometimes. “If he would but stay in bed, and enjoy his ill-health comfortably, and let us breakfast in peace, I could face the rest of the day ever so much more philosophically,” she used to say. “Or at least if he wouldn’t expect us to praise him for coming down in time when he hasn’t closed an eye all night!”

“I always think that rather an absurd expression,” said Frances, “begging poor papa’s pardon; for when one can’t sleep, one both opens and shuts one’s eyes a great deal oftener than when you go straight off the moment your head touches the pillow.” At which her sisters laughed. The spirit of mischief latent in both the younger ones enjoyed decoying their sister into the tiniest approach to criticism of their elders. But this morning the rise in the barometer seemed to have affected Mr Morion’s nerves favourably; he even went the unusual length of congratulating himself openly on the promptitude with which the impending attack had been warded off, thanks to Frances.

“Yes, indeed,” Lady Emma agreed, “it was a very good thing that the girls went themselves. If we had sent the boy he would have come back with some ridiculous nonsense about its being too late to make up the prescriptions last night. What are you fidgeting about so, Eira?” she went on; “you make me quite nervous.”

“It’s only my chilblains, mamma,” the girl replied, holding up a pair of small and naturally pretty, but for the moment sadly disfigured hands, while a gleam, half of amusement, half of reproach, came into her bright blue eyes.

“Really,” said her mother, “it is very provoking! I don’t know how you manage to get them, and you so strong. If it were Betty now, I shouldn’t be so surprised.”

And certainly her youngest daughter, little hands excepted, looked the picture of health. She had the thoroughly satisfactory and charming complexion, a tinge of brown underlying its clearness, which is found with that beautiful shade of hair which some people would describe as red, though in reality it is but a rich nut-brown. Betty, on the contrary, was pale, and looked paler than she actually was from the contrast with darker eyes and dusky hair. The family legend had it that she “took after” her mother, whose still remaining good looks told of Irish ancestry. And for this reason, possibly, it was taken for granted that the second girl was her mother’s favourite, though, even if so, the favouritism was not of a nature or an amount to rouse violent jealousy on the part of her sisters, had they been capable of it, for Lady Emma Morion had certainly never erred on the side of over-indulgence of her children. She was a good woman, and meant to be and believed herself to be an excellent mother, but under no circumstances in life could she have fulfilled more than one *rôle*, and the *rôle* which she had adopted since early womanhood had been that of wife. It simply never occurred to her that her daughters could have any possible cause of complaint, beyond that of the very restricted condition in which the family were placed by the prosaic fact of limited means.

That she or her husband could have done ought to soften or improve these for their children would have been a suggestion utterly impossible for her to digest. The privations, such as they were, she looked upon as falling far more hardly on herself and their father than on the daughters, who, when all was said and done, had youth and health and absence of cares.

That their youth was passing; that absence of cares may on the other side mean absence of interest; that the due supply of mere physical necessities can or does ensure health in the fullest sense of the word to eager, capable natures longing for work and “object” as well as enjoyment, never struck her. Nor, had such considerations been put before her in the plainest language, could she have understood them, for she was not a woman of much intellect or, what matters more in a mother, of any width of sympathy.

Greater blame, had he realised the position, would have lain at her husband’s door. He was a cultivated, almost a scholarly man, but the disappointments of life had narrowed as well as soured him. His was a sad instance of the dwarfing and stunting effects of self-pity, yielded to and indulged in till it comes to pervade the whole atmosphere of a life.

The brighter morning had cheered the sisters half-unconsciously, and Frances felt sorry at any friction beginning again between her mother and Eira. For though Lady Emma was not sympathising by temperament, she was not indifferent to annoyances, and that chilblains should be described by any stronger term she would have thought an exaggeration. Yet the fact of them worried her, and Frances felt about in her usual way for something to smooth the lines of irritation on her mother’s face.

“I have often heard, mamma,” she said, “that strong people suffer quite as much from chilblains as delicate ones, and they sometimes are worse the first cold weather than afterwards.”

“I believe they come from want of exercise,” said Lady Emma, in a somewhat softened tone. “If this bright dry weather lasts, you must go some good long walks, Eira.”

Eira made a wry face.

“I am sure I’ve no objection, mamma,” she said; “there’s nothing I like better than walking, but it’s a vicious circle, don’t you see? I dare say my not walking makes my circulation worse, but then again the chilblains make walking, for the time being, simply impossible.” Perhaps it was lucky that at this juncture Betty’s voice made a sudden interruption. Betty, though the quietest of the three, was rather given to sudden remarks.

“Papa,” she said, “have you possibly heard any sort of news about Craig-Morion?”

Her father glanced at her sharply over his eyeglasses.

“What do you mean, child?” he said. “News about Craig-Morion! What sort of news?”

“Oh, that it’s going to be sold or let, or something of that kind,” replied Betty calmly.

“Going to be *sold*, Craig-Morion!” exclaimed her father, his voice rising to a thin, high pitch. “What on earth has put such a thing in your head? Of course not.” But the very excitement of his tones testified to a certain unacknowledged uneasiness.

“Oh, well,” said Betty, “I didn’t really suppose it was going to be *sold*. But none of its present owners ever care to come there, so I thought perhaps there was to be a change of some kind.”

“And why should you suppose there was to be a change of any kind?” repeated Mr Morion, with a sort of grim repetition of her words, decidedly irritating, if his daughters had not been inured to it.

Betty flushed slightly.

“It was only something we noticed last night,” she replied, going on to relate the incidents that had attracted their attention. Her father would not condescend to comment on her information, but Lady Emma did not conceal her interest, and cross-questioned both her daughters. And from behind his newspaper her husband listened, attentively enough.

“It is curious,” she said. “If you pass that way to-day, girls, try to see old Webb and find out if anything has happened. Can any of the Morions possibly be coming down, Charles, do you suppose?”

Mr Morion grunted.

“Any of the Morions! How many of them do you think there are?” he said ironically. “You know very well that the present man was an only son, and his father before him the same.”

“Yes,” replied Lady Emma meekly, “but there were sisters in both cases. When I spoke of the Morions I meant any members of the family. Though I suppose it is very unlikely that any of them

would suddenly come down here, when they care nothing about the place, and have got homes of their own.”

“That to me,” said Betty, speaking again abruptly, “is the aggravating part of the whole affair. If people lived at the big house who enjoyed it and appreciated it, it would be quite different. One couldn’t grudge it to them, but to see it empty and deserted year in and year out, when –” she stopped short, a touch on her foot from Frances’, under the table, warning her that it would scarcely be wise to dwell further on what was a sore subject.

Mr Morion rose, pushing back his chair with a rasping sound on the thin, hard carpet, and left the room.

“I hope the fire in his study is all right,” said Lady Emma anxiously.

“Yes,” said Frances; “I glanced in on my way. Is there anything you want us to do this morning, mamma?” she added.

“I cannot possibly say till I have seen the cook,” her mother replied. “There is pretty sure to be something forgotten – servants are so stupid – if you are going to the village.”

“It’s my morning for reading to old Gillybrand,” said Frances rather drearily, “so while I am there Betty can do any messages there are – that’s to say if you care to come with me, Betty.”

“Tell me before you start, then,” said their mother, as she, in her turn, left the room for her kitchen interview. Poor woman! Housekeeping at the Firs was no sinecure, for Mr Morion was, like all hypochondriacs, difficult to please in the matter of food, firmly believing that his life depended on a special dietary. And such a state of things, when there is no financial margin, taxes invention and ingenuity sorely enough.

“What are you going to do to-day, Eira?” asked Frances. “You can’t possibly go out, I’m afraid.”

For all reply Eira extended first one foot and then the other, both encased in woolly slippers, each of which was large enough to have held two inmates at once, under ordinary circumstances.

“You poor child,” said her elder sister. “But those slippers are a comfort to you, I hope.”

“My dearest Frances,” Eira replied, “but for them I really don’t think I should be alive at the present moment. But I *must* pay you for them with the first money I can lay hands on. You don’t suppose I didn’t notice your shabby gloves last Sunday?”

“Oh, what does it matter in winter?” said Frances indifferently. “One can always use a muff.”

“When you’ve got one to use,” said Eira. “Mine looks more fit to be a mouse’s nest than anything else.”

Betty had been standing at the window, gazing out at the oval grass plot, not imposing enough to be dignified by the name of lawn, and at the shrubberies enclosing it.

“Do you see those berries?” she said, wheeling round as she spoke. “If only all the bushes were not so dreadfully wet still, I could make up some lovely bunches and trails for the drawing-room vases, if mamma would let me.”

“It will be dry enough by the afternoon,” said Frances, “or we may find some treasures on our way through the grounds, without having to paddle over wet grass to reach them.”

“The best plan,” said Eira, “is to arrange the vases first, and then let mamma see the effect. It doesn’t do to ask leave beforehand, for if we do we are sure to be told not to fill the house with rubbish and weeds. Bring in the prettiest things you can find, Betty, and we’ll do them after luncheon. It will help to pass the afternoon for poor me. Oh dear! things are never so bad but they might be worse. I’m beginning to feel now as if life would be worth having if only I could go a good long walk! And before my chilblains got bad, I didn’t think anything could be duller or drearier than the way we were going on.”

“We’ll try to bring you in some lovely berries and tinted leaves to cheer you,” said Frances, but Betty’s next remark did not follow up her elder sister’s determined effort to make the best of things.

“What’s the good?” she said lugubriously, “what’s the good of trying to make the drawing-room look better? It’s hopelessly ugly, and even if we could make it pretty, who would care? There’s nobody to see it.”

“Come now, Betty,” said Frances, “don’t be untrue to your own belief. Beauty of any kind is always worth having. Let us be thankful that, living in the country, we never can be without the possibility of some, even in our indoor life. What would you do, Betty, if we lived in a grey – no, drab-coloured – street in some terrible town?”

“Do? I should die!” replied Betty.

“I shouldn’t,” said Eira. “I’d get to know some people, and that, after all, is more interesting than still life. But the present question is what shall I do with myself all this long morning?”

“You must stay in a warm room, whatever you do, if you want to cure those poor hands and feet. The only thing you can do is to read, and oh! by-the-by, I was forgetting – I got one or two books at the lending library yesterday that I want to look through before I read them aloud. I think they seem rather interesting. So if you can glance at one of them for me this morning it would really be a help.”

Eira brightened up a little at this, and before her sisters left her, they had the satisfaction of seeing her comfortably established on the old sofa.

“Yes,” she said, as they nodded good-bye from the doorway, “I repeat, things never are so bad but that they might be worse. We might have a dining-room without a sofa.”

Frances and Betty, despite their curiosity to spy the state of the land – that is to say, of the big house – at close quarters, had to make their way to the village this morning by the road, as one of their mother’s messages took them to the laundress’ cottage which stood at some little distance from the Craig-Morion grounds. Further on, however, they passed the lodge, and there for a moment they halted, on the chance of a word with the old gate-keeper. But she was evidently not there and the gates were still locked.

“What a good thing we didn’t come through the grounds,” said Betty. “But what can have become of old Webb and his wife? There must be something agog, Francie.”

“We shall see on our way back,” her sister replied; “they’re sure to come home for their dinner.”

“If they don’t,” said Betty, “I shall try to climb the gates, and invent some excuse for going up to the house to see what they are about.”

But fate was not so cruel; for assuredly, with all the good-will in the world and disregard of appearances, Miss Elizabeth Morion could never have succeeded in scaling the entrance.

An hour or two later, when Frances had dutifully accomplished her self-imposed task of reading to Gillybrand, a pitifully uncomplaining, almost entirely blind old man, and had picked up Betty at the village reading-room, which the sisters often found a convenient *rendezvous*, the two made their way back to the lodge, where their misgivings were agreeably dispersed.

For not only were the gates unlocked – they stood hospitably open, while traces of the wheels of some tradesman’s cart were clearly to be seen on the still damp gravel; and standing at the door of her little abode was old Mrs Webb, her wrinkled face aglow with excitement, and lighting up with increased satisfaction as she caught sight of the young ladies – newcomers on whom she might bestow some of the news which was evidently too important to be suppressed.

But it was Betty who began the colloquy.

“What have you been about, Mrs Webb,” she said, teasingly, “locking the gates so early last night, and opening them so late this morning? You must have been asleep half the day as well as the night!”

“Bless you, no, miss,” said the old woman, eagerly. “Quite the contrary, I do assure you. We was working hard up at the big house last night, and this morning too, was me and Webb, for never a girl, let alone a woman, could he get to help us. And no wonder neither, with such short notice to get two or three rooms ready by to-night, and the rest of the house dusted up for the gentlemen as is coming down to stay for a day or two.”

“Gentleman?” exclaimed the sisters. “Who? Not Mr Morion?”

“No, miss, not the master himself, but friends of his. First there was a telegraph, and this morning a letter. I’d show them to you, but Webb’s got them in his pocket,” and she jerked her head in the direction of the house. “I’ve just run down to open the gates for the butcher and the other carts from the village, for I’ve got to have dinner for eight o’clock to-night, so you may fancy we’ve had to bustle about.”

“Do you know the gentlemen’s names?” asked Betty, eagerly.

“Mr Milner for one,” said Mrs Webb, at which the sisters’ faces fell. “But the other’s a Mr – no, to be sure, I’ve forgotten it; but it’s some gentleman as is thinking of taking the place for a while!”

Chapter Three

Mr Milne and Another

Luncheon at Fir Cottage was not an attractive meal. Perhaps the least so of the three principal repasts of the day. There was a certain flavour of early dinner about it, recalling the days of the sisters' childhood, when roast mutton and rice pudding formed, with but little variety, the *pièce de résistance* of the daily menu, though for Mr Morion himself there was usually some special and more attractive little dish.

But to-day the walk in the fresh invigorating air had given the two elder sisters a satisfactory appetite, in which, chilblains notwithstanding, Eira was seldom deficient.

Frances and Betty had returned only just in time enough to make their appearance punctually in the dining-room, and in the first interest of hearing how her commissions had been executed, Lady Emma forgot to question them as to the result of their intended inquiries at the Craig-Morion Lodge. Not so Eira. She was fuming with impatience all the time that Frances was repeating the laundress' excuses for the faulty condition in which Mr Morion's shirt-fronts had been sent home, or Betty explaining, for her part, the reason why she had brought a packet of oblong instead of square postcards. Eira's opportunity came at last.

"And what about the big house?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, yes," said her mother, eagerly enough; for which her youngest daughter mentally blessed her, saying to herself that, after all, "mamma was not without some points of sympathy."

"I have been wondering all the morning if there was going to be anything to hear. Did you see the Webbs?"

"We saw Mrs Webb," said Frances, "on our way home. She really is in a flutter of excitement," and here Frances became conscious of a half-suppressed movement on her father's part, showing that he, too, was listening with interest. "It appears," she went on, "that Mr Milne is expected here this evening –"

"About time," interrupted Mr Morion. "There are several things waiting for him to decide. Tomlinson shelters himself behind Milne in an absurd way, whenever he's asked to do anything. There's that gate – coming this evening, do you say?" he broke off. "Why should any one be excited about that?"

"You didn't let me finish, papa," said Frances, for in her quiet way she could sometimes hold her own very effectually with her father. "Mr Milne is coming for a special reason; he is accompanied by, or accompanying, a Mr – somebody else – Mrs Webb couldn't remember his name – who is thinking of taking Craig-Morion for a time."

Her father started.

"They are going to let it?" he exclaimed, for he had all the old-world prejudice against the modern fashion of everybody living in somebody else's house. "They're actually going to let it? More shame to them – the real birthplace of the family as it is – and just because it's small they care nothing about it in comparison with their other houses."

"But it isn't like selling it," said Betty. "For my part, I shall be only too delighted if they do let it. Anything for a change, and at worst a *chance* of nice neighbours."

"Yes," said Lady Emma, agreeing for once, not uncordially, with her daughter's point of view. "I don't see why you need feel sore about it, Charles. Far better for the house to be lived in and aired, than to be shut up in that damp dreariness."

"We do very well without neighbours," said Mr Morion hastily. "Far better have none than objectionable ones."

“Why should they be objectionable?” said Eira. “There must be plenty of nice people in the world as well as disagreeable ones.”

“Yes,” said Betty, “why should we take for granted that, if new people come to Craig-Morion, they shouldn’t be nice and pleasant?”

“Nice and pleasant they might be,” replied her father, “in their own world of wealth and luxury and among themselves. But in such a case your common-sense might tell you that it is most unlikely that they would give a thought to your existence, or even know of it, living in poverty as we do. And one thing I shall never allow,” he went on, working himself up into assuredly very premature irritation, “I give you fair warning, and that is I will allow no sort of patronising.”

Not only his three daughters but even poor Lady Emma looked aghast at this unexpected fulmination.

“It is too bad,” thought the younger girls to themselves, “that we should be scolded beforehand for a state of things which will probably never come to pass.”

“And it is no good,” said Betty afterwards, when she found herself alone with Eira, “no good trying to get up the tiniest little bit of excitement or variety in our lives. Papa is too bad! I’m going to give up trying for anything, except a sort of stupid lethargic contentment. Perhaps that’s what people mean by the discipline of life.”

“I can’t quite think that,” Eira replied. “Look at Francie, now. You can’t say she’s in a state of lethargic resignation. She looks out for any little pleasure as eagerly as for the first primroses in the spring.” For Eira was on the whole less impressionable than Betty, or perhaps constitutionally stronger, and therefore more able to repel the insidious attacks of not-to-be-wondered-at depression, before which Betty felt frequently all but powerless.

But this conversation took place later in the afternoon. At the luncheon table her father’s bitter and hurting words incited Frances as usual to exert her calming influence.

“It would be such a terrible pity,” she thought to herself, “for papa to begin nursing up prejudices against these possible neighbours.”

“I scarcely think,” she said aloud, gently, “that any people coming to Craig-Morion *could* altogether ignore us, or rather,” with a bright inspiration, “that it would be possible for us altogether to ignore *them*. Our very name would forbid it; and surely, papa, you, who know far more of the world than any of us, would hesitate to say that even in this material age money is everything.”

Mr Morion fell unsuspectingly into the innocent little trap laid for him by his eldest daughter.

“I have never said such a thing, or thought such a thing,” he replied, turning upon her sharply. “Money by itself everything? Faugh! Nonsense! All I say is, what every person with any common-sense must say, that without money very few other things are worth having from a worldly point of view. It is certainly the oil without which no machine can be worked, let it be the most perfect of its kind,” and having emitted these sentiments, he looked round for his family’s approval, having talked himself almost into a good humour.

“There is a great deal in what you say,” murmured his wife, while Frances remarked that she scarcely saw how it could be otherwise from a worldly standpoint, and she did not add the second part of her reflection, namely, Was the worldly standpoint the truest or best from which to look out on the problems of life? The younger girls had given but scant attention to their father’s dictum, or the comments it had drawn forth.

As the day went on, the look of the outside world grew gloomier again.

“I really agree with you, Betty,” said Eira, “that there’s not much use or satisfaction in our trying to do anything with this terrible old room. It *is* so ugly!” and she gazed round her in a sort of despair.

“No,” said Betty, “I don’t quite think so. It is more dull than offensively ugly. A few things would make a great difference – more than you realise. Pretty fresh muslin curtains to begin with – I think it’s the greatest mistake not to have them in winter as well as in summer —*besides* the thick ones, of course – and two or three big rich-coloured rugs, and a few nice squashy sofa cushions, and – ”

“My dearest child, start by providing yourself with Aladdin’s lamp in the first place,” said Eira; but Betty had worked herself up into a small fit of enthusiasm, as was her “way,” and would not be snubbed.

“Yes,” she went on, “I could do wonders with the room without any very important changes; you see, its present monotony would do well enough as a background, and – oh, Francie, do come in, and listen to my ideas about this room.”

Frances, who had been employing herself since luncheon, if not really usefully, at least with the honest intention of being so, by writing various letters to her father’s dictation – for a new source of personal uneasiness had lately suggested itself to Mr Morion in the shape of fears that his eyesight was failing – Frances came forward into the room and looked about her.

“Those trails and bunches of leaves are lovely,” she said heartily, “they make all the difference in the world, and it will all look still prettier when the fire has burnt up a little,” for one of the changeless rules at Fir Cottage was that the drawing-room fire should only be lighted at four o’clock.

She moved towards it as she spoke, and gave it an audacious touch with the poker.

“Dear me, how chilly it is!” she went on. “Aren’t you both half-frozen, or is it the change from papa’s study, where I’ve been sitting? He does keep it so hot. And oh! by-the-by, you will be interested to hear that I’ve just been writing a note to his dictation making an appointment for to-morrow with Mr Milne, for a letter came by the afternoon post saying he was to be down here this evening for a couple of days, and would see papa about those repairs that the bailiff couldn’t order without his authority, and – now wouldn’t you like to know the name of the man who’s coming down with him? – all that old Webb told us was quite correct.”

“*How* interesting,” exclaimed Eira, “how extraordinarily interesting! Yes, of course, do tell us his name at once.”

“He is a Mr Littlewood,” Frances replied. “I don’t know his first name, nor whether he is young or old, or indeed anything about him, except that – ”

“What?” said Eira quickly.

“Oh, it is only the tone of Mr Milne’s letter which papa showed me. He seems to take for granted that we know something about this man, and when I asked papa he said he had some vague remembrance of one of Mr Morion’s sisters having married some one of the name several years ago. One of the elder sisters he thinks it was, so in this case Mr Littlewood must be a middle-aged man,” Frances added.

“I’m sure I don’t mind in the least whether he’s old or young,” said Eira, “if only they bring a little life about the place. I only hope they’re not going to turn out invalids coming down here for perfect quiet and rest, and all that kind of thing.”

“It’s sure to be something of that sort,” said Betty, speaking for the first time, rather drearily. “What else, in the name of everything that’s sensible, would any one come to Craig Bay for?”

“Craig-Morion isn’t quite the same as Craig Bay,” said Eira. “A country house makes its own *entourage*. There are lots of places – delightful to stay at – which must look more isolated and out of the world than this place does, when they are shut up. But do tell us, does he actually say that Mr Littlewood’s going to take it?”

Frances considered.

“If you want his very words,” she replied, “I think they are that Mr Littlewood is coming to see the house with ‘a view to a possible tenancy.’ Dear me! what a long day this has seemed! Isn’t it tea-time yet?”

“It’s,” said Betty, peering up at the timepiece, for the room was already growing dusky, “it’s a quarter or twenty minutes past four. There’s one thing I do thank papa for,” she added, speaking more briskly at the prospect of afternoon-tea in ten minutes, “that he keeps the clocks going correctly. It would be too horrible if they were all standing still and out of repair. Frances,” she went on, “it’s a worn-out subject, I’m afraid, but can you think of *any* way in which we three, or any one of us,

could make a little money? It has come into my head so this afternoon how delightful it would be to brighten up this room a little. Even the thought of old Milne looking in makes me long for it to be rather more like other people's."

Before this, Frances, who rarely allowed her hands to be idle, had ensconced herself in a corner as near a window as she could manage, anxious to benefit by the last remains of daylight for a beautiful bit of embroidery, which represented her special fancy work, and this for practical reasons. Her materials were of the simplest, being merely white lawn and embroidery cotton, with which, nevertheless, thanks to her quickness at transferring designs, she was often able to add beauty to her younger sisters' otherwise undecorated attire.

Before replying, she glanced at her handiwork.

"Personally, I can think of nothing but my work," she said. "But there are such beautiful imitations of hand embroidery nowadays that I don't believe I should get much for it, so that really it's better to use it ourselves; and I must say that the first thing *I* want money for is to help *us* to be better dressed, rather than our drawing-room."

She looked at her sisters regretfully. Nature had not done badly by either of them, and each had a distinct style of her own, which, however, even their sister's partial eyes could not but own was shown to the very smallest advantage by the *chefs d'oeuvre* of Miss Tobias, the village seamstress, who spent a few days at Fir Cottage two or three times a year for the purpose of manipulating new material, or transmogrifying old, into clothes for the sisters' wear.

"Yes," said Betty, agreeing with the expression she saw in her sister's eyes, "we are *atrociously* dressed: there's no other word for it I know; and what makes it doubly hard to bear is the old story. If mamma would allow us even fifteen pounds a year each, in our own hands, there would be some hope of better things. I am *sure* we could manage better, but as things are it is quite hopeless. That was what made me speak of this room instead of ourselves."

Frances sighed and folded up her work for the time, for there came the welcome sound of the tea-tray and its contents.

"They both might look *so* pretty," she thought to herself. She watched Betty's slight figure as she helped to arrange the cups and saucers with her little white hands, and Eira's lovely hair as it glimmered and glowed in the firelight. "How is it that people will see things with such different eyes? If mamma *could* but see them as I do! and how, comparatively speaking, small effort might make them and their lives so different."

For Frances thought a great deal more than she expressed. She had an almost morbid terror of adding or exaggerating any new grounds of discontent to the two, who often seemed to her more her children than her sisters, slight as was in reality the difference of age which separated her from them.

An approaching rustle – somehow or other their father always announced his advent by a rustle; this time it was that of the afternoon paper he had just opened – made her look up in expectation of some request or complaint. This time, by good luck, it was the former.

"Sorry to disturb you, young ladies," he said in an unwontedly amiable tone, "but if you'll allow me a *little* bit of the fire, I should be grateful. Where is your mother?" and as at that moment Lady Emma made her appearance, "I have a letter from Milne at last, you will be glad to hear," he said, addressing her, "so I hope these wretched repairs will now be seen to."

Lady Emma replied with unusual animation. "You mean that he is really coming down?" she said; "and what about the second arrival expected? Is it true that we are to have neighbours at Craig-Morion, as the girls heard?"

"Dear, dear!" said her husband; "what incorrigible gossips women are!" But his tone was still agreeable. "It is true that a Mr Littlewood is thinking of the place. And, by-the-by, Emma, your memory may be better than mine. Is there not some connection between the Littlewoods and – the Morions?"

“To be sure,” said Lady Emma, a spot of colour appearing on her cheeks with gratification at his flattering appeal. “To be sure: the present man’s eldest sister married one of the Littlewoods of Daeshire. No doubt it’s one of them – perhaps the very one.” But on Eira’s following up this promising beginning by further inquiries, her mother declared herself unable to give any more particulars, and the conversation lapsed into its usual monotonous and scarcely more than monosyllabic character.

Still, throughout the rest of the evening the sisters were conscious of a slight stir in the moral atmosphere; very little, it must be confessed, was enough to give them this sensation; and when the next morning at breakfast their father announced his intention of shortening his usual – when the weather was fine enough – afternoon constitutional, by reason of the probability “of Milne looking in about tea-time,” they felt justified in harbouring a definite expectation of some break in the regular routine.

The weather was somewhat milder, thanks to which and to Frances’ nursing, Eira’s chilblains were decidedly on the mend, in itself enough to raise her spirits to an extent which would appear disproportionate to the happy beings who know not the woe and misery occasioned by these unwelcome visitors.

Lady Emma was heard to give certain injunctions as to afternoon-tea, which encouraged Frances to follow suit.

“You would like us to be in by four o’clock or thereabouts, I suppose?” she said, “in case of Mr Milne’s coming,” for the old lawyer was sufficiently man of the world for a little gossip with him to be a by no means disagreeable variety.

Lady Emma looked up vaguely.

“He may only have time for a talk with your father,” she replied. “But – well, yes, you may as well be at hand. For one thing, your father may want you, and there’s no reason why you all shouldn’t be here at tea-time as usual.”

“Or not as usual,” said Betty, as they ran upstairs to put on their outdoor things. “I warn you both that whatever *you* do, *I* am going to try to make myself fit to be seen, for once, and I advise you to do the same. It stands to reason that if these Littlewoods are coming down here, they’ll be asking Mr Milne about possible and impossible neighbours, and as they are connections of the other Morions, our name must catch their attention.”

“And we certainly don’t want to be described as dowdy – no, I won’t say old maids – but getting on in that direction sort of people,” said Eira. “Yes, Betty, I back you up. Let’s, at any rate, do the best we can. Our best serge skirts aren’t *so* bad, as country clothes go, and we may as well wear our black silk blouses – the ones mamma gave us when Uncle Avone died – they’re such a much better cut than poor Tobias can achieve.”

“But we’re not supposed to wear them till some other old relation dies,” said Frances. “There are ever so many still, a generation or so older than mamma! It’s wonderful how Irish people cling to life! And I don’t suppose we’d get such nice blouses again in a hurry.”

“Well, you needn’t wear yours,” said Eira; “somehow you always manage to look better than we do!” In which there was a certain truth, for Frances had the advantage of superior height, and her undeniable good looks more nearly approached beauty, though of a somewhat severe type, than Betty’s delicate sweetness or Eira’s brilliant colouring.

“My old velveteen looks wonderful still by candle-light, I must allow,” said Frances, not ill-pleased by her sister’s innocent flattery, “and I dare say mamma won’t notice your blouses.”

“Any way she can’t scold us before old Milne,” said Eira, “and I don’t care the least bit if she does after he’s gone. All I do care for is that he should be able to speak of us with a certain amount of – not exactly deference, nor admiration, nor even appreciation, but simply as not being completely ‘out of the running,’ we may say, so far as appearance goes.”

The result of this confabulation was not altogether unsatisfactory. The two younger girls, at least, had a certain childlike pleasure in the sensation of being better dressed than usual, which was

not without a touch of real pathos, being as far removed from any shadow of vanity or even self-satisfaction as could be the case in feminine nature.

They were sitting in the drawing-room in the half-light of the quickly waning day, brightened by the ruddy reflections from a much better fire than usual, when their mother came in hastily, glancing round with her short-sighted eyes.

“Frances,” she said, “are you there? I told you to be ready. Your father has just looked out of his study calling for you, and I said I would send you.”

Frances started up, not hastily – her movements were never hasty, but had a knack of inspiring the onlooker with a pleasant sense of readiness, of completed preparation for whatever she was wanted for.

“I am here, mamma,” she said. “I will go to the study at once. Is papa alone?”

“Of course not,” said her mother, “Mr Milne has been with him for quite half-an-hour. I was just wondering if we should ring for tea.”

“I will go to the pantry, if you like,” said Betty, “and see that it’s quite ready, so that the moment you ring it can come in.”

Frances by this time had already left the room, but she returned again almost immediately.

“It was only some papers that papa couldn’t find,” she said, “but he’s got them now. They’re just coming in to tea; shall I ring for it, mamma?”

Betty and the tea-tray made their appearance simultaneously, as did the lamps, and a moment or two later Mr Morion and his visitor crossed the little hall to the drawing-room.

Lady Emma greeted Mr Milne with what, for her, was unusual affability; the truth being that she was by no means devoid of curiosity as to the talked-of changes at the big house, though she would have scorned direct inquiry on the subject. The old lawyer glanced kindly at the two younger girls, saying to himself as he did so that their appearance had decidedly altered for the better.

“Not that they were ever plain-looking,” he reflected, “but they seem better turned out somehow – a touch less countrified.”

And he felt honestly pleased, for he had known the young people at Fir Cottage the greater part of their lives, and it had often struck him that their lines could scarcely be said to have fallen in pleasant places.

“You have brought us rather better weather,” said Frances, when her mother’s first remarks had subsided into silence. It seemed to her that Mr Milne’s manner was a trifle preoccupied, and neither Mr Morion nor his wife could be said to possess much of the art of conversation.

“Yes, really?” replied the lawyer. “I’m glad we put off a day or two in that case, for much depends on first impressions of a place.”

“You are not alone, then?” said Lady Emma; and three pairs of ears, at least, listened eagerly for his reply.

“Why, don’t you remember, my dear?” said Mr Morion, intercepting it. “I told you that Milne was coming down with a Mr Littlewood, who is thinking of renting Craig-Morion for a time. By-the-by,” he went on, “what does he think of the place?”

“He’s taken by it, decidedly,” said the lawyer, “and though my clients have no very special reason for letting it, still they will not be sorry to do so. A house always deteriorates more or less if left too long uninhabited, and – ”

At that moment came the unusual sound of the front door bell ringing – an energetic ring too, as if touched by a hand whose owner neither liked nor was accustomed to being kept waiting.

Chapter Four

Betty in Arms

Mr Milne started to his feet half involuntarily.

And – “He has been expecting this summons,” thought Frances.

“I am afraid,” he said, turning to his hostess apologetically, “I am afraid I must not allow myself to enjoy a cup of your excellent tea, for that must be Mr Littlewood. He’s been looking round the place with the bailiff this afternoon, and we arranged that he should call for me here, as we have a good deal of business before us this evening; so may I ask you to excuse – ”

“By no means,” said Mr Morion in a tone of unwonted heartiness. “We can’t think of excusing you, Milne. On the contrary, can you not ask Mr Littlewood to join us? A few moments’ delay in tackling your business cannot possibly signify.”

The three pairs of ears could scarcely credit what they heard, the three pairs of eyes exchanged furtive glances, while Lady Emma murmured something vaguely civil by way of endorsement of her husband’s proposal.

It was the lawyer who hesitated. To tell the truth, knowing the peculiarities of his present host as he did, he had been feeling during the last quarter of an hour somewhat nervous, and he now devoutly wished that he had not suggested Mr Littlewood’s calling for him at Fir Cottage, seeing that his talk with Mr Morion had been so much longer than he had anticipated.

“I should not have let myself be persuaded to come in to tea,” he thought, “and then I could have met Littlewood just outside.”

And now his misgivings, thanks to Mr Morion’s unusual amiability, turned in the other direction.

“Ten to one,” so his inner reflections ran on, “Littlewood will be annoyed at being asked to come in.” For by way of precautionary excuse for any possible surliness on the part of the representative Morion of the neighbourhood, should he and the stranger come across each other, poor Mr Milne had thought it politic to describe Fir Cottage and its inmates in no very attractive terms.

“I think, perhaps,” he began aloud, addressing his hostess, and rising as he spoke, “I think perhaps I had better not suggest Mr Littlewood’s joining us, though I shall take care to convey to him your kind wish that he should do so. I have been decoyed,” with a smile in his host’s direction, “into staying an unwarrantable time already, and as I must positively return to town to-morrow morning, I have really a good deal of work to get through to-night.”

Lady Emma would have yielded the point, and was beginning to say something to that effect, when her husband interrupted her. Mr Morion was nothing if not obstinate, and now that the fiat had gone forth that the stranger was to be admitted, enter he must at all costs.

“Nonsense, my good sir,” he said, in what for him was a tone of light jocularly. “There now! I hear them answering the door and your friend inquiring for you. Just ask him to come in,” and he opened the drawing-room door as he spoke. “I’ll step out with you myself.”

There was no longer any getting out of it for Mr Milne. He hurried forward with the intention of an explanatory word or two with Mr Littlewood, but in this he literally reckoned without his host, for Mr Morion was at his heels, and there was nothing for it but a formal introduction on the spot.

“Pray, come in,” said Mr Morion; “we are just having tea. My wife and daughters are in the drawing-room,” he said, with a wave of his hand in that direction, “and Mr Milne always pays us a visit when he comes down.”

The newcomer glanced at the lawyer in some surprise. This was scarcely the boorish hermit who had been described to him. All the same, he was not desirous of embarrassing himself with the

acquaintanceship of this family, whose very existence he had almost ignored, or at least forgotten, till Mr Milne took occasion to refer to them.

But the afternoon was drawing in to evening; it was raw and chilly outside, and disagreeably draughty in the doorway where he stood, and the prospect of a hot cup of tea was not without its attraction.

“Thanks, many thanks,” he said. “We haven’t long to spare, but I should be sorry to hurry Milne,” and so saying he entered the little hall.

In the drawing-room, meantime, the suppressed excitement of the two younger of its four inmates was increasing momentarily, Eira, indeed, being so far carried away by it as to approach the half-open door, or doorway, so as to lose no word of the colloquy taking place outside.

“Betty! Frances!” she exclaimed, though in a whisper, her cheeks growing momentarily pinker, “he’s coming in! I do believe he’s coming in, and his voice doesn’t sound as if he were old at all. He’s tall, too, and” – with another furtive jerk of her head – “as far as I can see, I do believe he’s *very* good-looking.”

Frances was springing forward with uplifted finger, in dismay at Eira’s behaviour, when for once, to her relief, her mother took the matter out of her hands.

“Eira,” she said quickly, so that, even if her voice had been overheard by those outside, no chiding tone could have been suspected, “Eira, I am really ashamed of you. Sit down quietly and take your tea.”

Eira obeyed without a word, feeling, in point of fact, rather small; so no signs of agitation were discernible in the little group as the door was thrown open more widely to admit of Mr Morion ushering in his guests, the stranger naturally first.

“I have persuaded Mr Littlewood to join us for a few moments,” said the master of the house, as he introduced him to his wife. “Frances, another cup of tea, if you please.” And Betty quietly rang the bell as he spoke, returning immediately to her seat near the large table, on which was placed a lamp.

Mr Littlewood glanced at her, and then at her sisters, without appearing to do so.

“Milne has not much power of description,” he thought to himself; “if they were decently dressed they would not be bad-looking girls; indeed,” – and for a moment his glance reverted to Betty.

He would have been quite ready to open a conversation with her or with any of them, but, humiliating as it is to confess it, both the younger girls were by this time consumed by an agony of shyness. It was to Frances as she handed him some tea that he addressed his first observation – some triviality about the weather, to which she replied with perfect self-possession, taking the first opportunity of drawing her mother into the conversation, for such a thing as independent action on the part of even the eldest daughter would certainly have been treated by her parents as a most heinous offence.

By degrees Betty and Eira gained courage enough to glance at the stranger, now that his attention was taken up by their mother and sister.

He was young and – yes – he was decidedly good-looking. Rather fair than dark, with something winning and ingratiating about his whole manner and bearing, in spite of the decided tone and air of complete self-possession, if not self-confidence – almost amounting to lordly indifference to the effect he might produce on others.

As in duty bound, Mr Littlewood responded at once to Lady Emma’s first remark – some commonplace inquiry as to whether this was his first visit to that part of the country.

“Yes,” he replied, “practically so, though my mother informs me that as children we spent some months in this neighbourhood, but I don’t remember it. That’s to say, I remember nothing of the country, though I do recollect the house and garden, which seemed to me all that was charming and beautiful – and mysterious too. The garden was skirted by a wood, fascinating yet alarming. Children’s memories are queer things.”

“Do you think it was near here?” said Frances, “anywhere about Craig Bay? If so, it would be interesting to revisit it.”

Betty and Eira glanced at her in mute admiration. How could she have the courage to address this exceedingly smart personage with such ease and self-possession? Nor did the manner of his reply diminish their wonder. He seemed to look at Frances as if he had not seen her before, though at the same time no one could possibly have accused him of the slightest touch of discourtesy.

“I haven’t the vaguest idea,” he said, “and there would be small chance of my recognising the place if I did see it.”

“How does Craig-Morion strike you?” asked Lady Emma, and the well-bred indifference of her tone was greatly appreciated by Betty and Eira, who by this time had labelled the newcomer as “horridly stuck-up and affected.”

“Craig-Morion?” he repeated. “Oh, I think it may serve our purpose very well for the time. Of course it *should* have a complete overhauling, but Morion doesn’t think it worth while to do much to it, and, substantially speaking, it’s not in bad repair. I think, however, I shall be able to report sufficiently well of it to make my sisters – or sister more probably – come down to see it for themselves.”

Even Lady Emma was slightly nettled at his tone of half-contemptuous approval of the place which to the family at Fir Cottage represented so much.

“It is a pity,” she said, speaking more stiffly than before, “that the head of the family should never live at what was – is – really their original home.”

Mr Littlewood raised his eyebrows.

“Why should he?” he said carelessly; “he’s got everything in the world he wants at Witham-Meldon and at his Scotch place. He’d feel this awfully out-of-the-world.”

This last speech was too much for the feelings of one person in the company. Shyness disappeared in indignation, and, to the utter amazement of her audience, Betty’s voice, pitched in a higher key than usual, broke the silence.

“I think,” she said, while a red spot glowed on each cheek, “I think it’s a perfect shame and utterly unfair that any one should own a place which they never care to see; and of course it is *actually* unfair, as everybody knows it should be ours!”

“Betty?” murmured Eira, as if she thought her sister had taken leave of her senses.

“Betty!” repeated Lady Emma and Frances in varying tones of amazement and reproof, while Mr Morion and the lawyer abruptly stopped talking, as they turned round to see what in the world was happening.

Only Mr Littlewood smiled, as he might have done with amusement at a sudden outburst from a silly child, which stung her still more; and without vouchsafing another word, she rose quickly and left the room, followed by the stranger’s eyes, while an expression half of perplexity, half of concern, overspread his face.

“I am afraid,” he began, somewhat ruefully, though the smile still lingered, “I am afraid I have unwittingly annoyed the – the young lady – your sister, I suppose?” he added to Frances, who had half started up with the instinctive wish to put things somehow to rights.

“Oh, no,” she said, half nervously, far more afraid of the parental displeasure than caring for what the stranger might think. After all, his face was pleasant and kindly, and how could he know what the very name of Craig-Morion meant to *them*? “Oh, no, it won’t matter at all. We are terribly stay-at-home people, you see, and Craig-Morion seems a sort of earthly Paradise to us!”

“Nonsense, Frances!” said her father harshly. “Betty is a foolish, spoiled child, and must be treated accordingly. Don’t give another thought to it, Mr Littlewood.”

The young man murmured something intended to be gracious, indeed apologetic, though his words were not clearly heard, and then with a feeling of relief he turned to Frances with an instinct that here was the peace-maker.

“You will tell her how sorry I am,” he said in a low voice, for the vision of Betty’s troubled little face as she passed him in her swift transit across the room was not to be quickly banished from his mind’s eye.

Frances nodded slightly with a smile, Lady Emma’s attention being by this time happily distracted by some tactful observation from Mr Milne, who, to confess the truth, was not a little amused by what had just passed. And a few moments later the two visitors took their leave, the old lawyer shaking hands punctiliously with the four members of the family present; Mr Littlewood contenting himself with a touch of his hostess’ cold fingers, a more cordial clasp of Frances’ hand, and a vague bow in the direction of Eira, still in the sheltered corner so abruptly deserted by Betty.

Mr Morion accompanied his guests to the hall door, leaving, by his studied urbanity, the impression in Mr Littlewood’s mind that the master of Fir Cottage was far less of a bear than the lawyer had depicted him.

This opinion would probably have been modified had he been present at the scene which ensued in the drawing-room when the head of the house rejoined his wife and daughters, who listened in silence to his not altogether unjustifiable irritation against Betty, for as he went on he worked himself up, as was his way, to exaggerated anger, concluding with a comprehensive command that, till she could learn to behave properly to her father’s guests, he must insist on Lady Emma’s banishing the culprit to her own quarters when any visitors were present. Not that this command was in reality as severe as it sounded, judging at least by past experiences at Fir Cottage, where visitors were scarcely if ever to be found, and the deprivation of seeing such as on rare occasions were admitted was certainly not what Betty would have considered a punishment.

Poor Betty! punishment indeed was little needed by her at the present time. Up in the room which she shared with Eira, she was lying prostrate on her little bed, sobbing as if her heart would break, with a rush of mingled feelings such as she had never before experienced to the same extent.

There was reaction from the pleasurable excitement of a break in their monotonous life, indignation at the manner and bearing of “that detestable man;” worst of all, mortification, deep and stinging, at having behaved, so she phrased it to herself, like “an underbred fool.” Altogether more than the poor child’s nerves could stand. And added to everything else was the fear of what lay before her in the shape of reproof, cutting and satirical, from her father. She would have given worlds to undress and go to bed, and thus avoid facing her family with swollen eyes, from which she felt as if she could never again drive back the tears.

“How I wish I could leave home for good!” she said to herself. “I don’t believe Frances and Eira would miss me much, and papa would have one less to scold. At least I wish I could go away just now rather than risk meeting that man again, and if his people do come here it will be unendurable. Even if they condescend to be civil to us, there would be the terrible feeling of being patronised and probably made fun of behind our backs. It is too late for us to improve now, we are not fit for decent society; at least Eira and I are not, and poor Frances would suffer tortures if – ”

A knock at the door interrupted the depressing soliloquy.

“Come in,” said Betty, hoping that in the gloom her disfigured face might escape notice, and jumping up as she spoke, she hurried across to the dressing-table, where she pretended to be busying herself in rearranging her hair.

It was Frances who came in. For the first moment Betty felt disappointed that it was not Eira, but when the kind elder sister came forward and threw her arms round her, saying tenderly and yet with a little smile:

“My poor, silly little Betty, this is what I was afraid of. You really *mustn’t* take it to heart in this way. You poor little things making yourselves look so nice, and for it to end like this, though after all it is more to be laughed at than cried over.”

“No, no, it isn’t, Francie,” sobbed Betty, hiding her face on her sister’s shoulder. “I’ve disgraced myself and all of us, and it’s no good your trying to say I haven’t. I don’t know what came over me to say what I did.”

“I think it was not unnatural,” said Frances; “even mamma was slightly ruffled by Mr Littlewood’s tone, and yet – I’m *quite* sure he didn’t in the least mean to hurt us. How could he? We are complete strangers to him, and we were doing our best to be hospitable and – and nice. And – he has a good sort of face, and kind, straightforward eyes, in spite of his – I scarcely know what to call it – ultra-fashionableness, which seems to us like affectation.”

Betty was interested, in spite of herself, by her sister’s comments.

“All *I* feel,” she said, “is the most earnest hope that we may never see him again, and that his people will not take Craig-Morion.”

“Come now, Betty, don’t be exaggerated,” said Frances. “By the way, he left a message with me for you: it was to say that he was *very* sorry if he had annoyed you, and he said it so simply that it made me like him better than I had done before; and he took care that no one else should hear it, which was thoughtful too.”

“I don’t see that it much matters,” answered Betty, too proud to show that she was a little mollified, in spite of herself. “Heaven knows *what* I’m not going to have to bear from papa.”

“Well, dear,” said Frances, “you must just bear it as philosophically as you can. It may be a good lesson in self-restraint. And after all there is *no* lesson of more importance. I don’t agree with you in hoping that we may never see this Mr Littlewood again; on the contrary, far the best thing would be to get to know him a little better, so that any sore feeling you have – ”

“Any sore feeling indeed!” interrupted Betty, with a groan, “I’m sore feeling from top to toe. It seems as if I should scarcely mind what papa says in comparison with this wretched hateful disgust at having lowered myself so.”

Frances smiled.

“That *will* all soften down,” she said, “see if it doesn’t; and perhaps papa won’t be so down upon you as you expect.”

Nor was this encouragement without grounds, for in the interval between his first burst of irritation and Frances’ seeking her sister, Lady Emma had exerted herself with some success to smoothing down Mr Morion’s displeasure, reminding him that Betty’s family feeling could scarcely be called ill-bred, and that it had evidently had no ill effect upon their guest, whose tone had struck herself at first as deficient in deference. For Betty, as has been said, was her mother’s favourite.

On the whole, Frances’ words had a soothing effect on her sister.

“Oh well, I must just bear it, I suppose, even if he is very down upon me, for this time I can’t say that I was blameless, and, compared to the terrible feeling as to what that man must think of me, it doesn’t seem to matter. Oh, Frances, how I do hope and pray those people won’t come down here! And only a few hours ago I should have been so disappointed at the idea of the whole thing falling through. Frances,” she went on again after a moment or two’s silence, “do you know I don’t believe they *would* come if they knew everything.”

Frances looked slightly annoyed.

“I wish, dear,” she said, “that you and Eira wouldn’t let your minds run so constantly on that old grievance. We are not in Italy, where vendettas go on from generation to generation; and what *would* the Littlewoods care as to whom the place should rightly belong?”

“I don’t mean that,” said Betty. “Of course, how could that matter to them? I was thinking of,” and here involuntarily she dropped her voice and gave a half-timorous glance over her shoulder, “what they say about here of the big house – about, you know, Frances, great-grand-aunt Elizabeth’s ‘walking,’ as the country people call it.”

The cloud on her sister’s brow deepened. “Betty, you promised me, you know you did,” she said, “both you and Eira promised me, that you would leave off thinking of that silly nonsense.”

“I know we did,” said Betty meekly. “I’m sure I don’t want to talk about it; the very mention of her name frightens me. I do so wish it wasn’t mine! For it gives me a feeling as if she had something special to do with me. All the same, I shouldn’t be a bit sorry if that Mr Littlewood got a good fright,” and her eyes twinkled, in spite of their swollen lids. “If it’s true that she repents of her negligence, if negligence it was, she certainly can’t feel pleased at being disturbed by any one connected with the elder branch of the family!”

“I had no idea you were so vindictive, Betty,” said Frances; “but I’m afraid it’s not likely that our poor old great-grand-aunt would have power to oust either him or his people from her old home.”

Chapter Five

Autumn Leaves

The next day passed so uneventfully that Betty began to think that for once the Fates had taken her at her word, and that the episode of Mr Littlewood's visit might be forgotten without fear of their meeting him again, to revive its annoying associations.

"He must have left with Mr Milne after all, I hope," she said on the following afternoon, alluding to something he had said to Frances about staying a day or two longer to see if the head-keeper's roseate account of shooting was to be depended upon. "Oh, I do hope he has!"

"I hope he hasn't," said Eira. "I dare say we should like him very much if we knew him better. I think you were absurdly exaggerated about what he said. And even if we didn't like him, I'd be glad of anything for a change."

"You don't mean to say," said Betty, reproachfully, "that you still hope these people will come here?"

"Yes, of course I do," said Eira. "But there's Frances waiting for us, as usual. Oh! how glad I am that my chilblains are better."

For once the three sisters were setting off for a walk unburdened by commissions of any kind, but as the route through the park was the starting-point for rambles in almost every direction, they, by common accord, turned that way and were soon at the end of the side-path which led to the main entrance.

Somewhat to their surprise, the lodge gates were open, though neither Mrs Webb nor her husband was to be seen, as usual, peering out like spiders in hopes of alluring some human fly to provide them with a dish of gossip. Eira stood still and looked about her.

"Betty," she said, after some little scrutiny, "I don't believe your arch-enemy *has* left, after all."

"If so," said Frances, "I wish we hadn't come through the park. I certainly don't want the Morions or their friends to think we claim right of way across it." And she hastened her steps to regain the road as quickly as possible.

Once on it she turned in the opposite direction from Craig Bay.

"Where are you steering for, Frances?" asked Betty.

"I don't think I quite know," her sister replied, "except that I do not want to go to the village."

"No wonder," said Eira, "I am *so* tired of the sight of those dreary little shops. In the spring there's a certain interest in them – the looking out for the 'novelties' they try to attract the visitors with."

"Yes," said Betty, "and even at Christmas they get up a little show – good enough to tempt *me*," she went on, in her plaintive way. "I see lots of things I'd like to buy if only I had some money. I know I could trim hats lovelily for us all, if only I'd some decent materials. Oh, Frances, if you don't mind, do let us go through the copse: it'll be quite nice and dry to-day, and we might get some more of those beautiful leaves. They're even prettier there than in the park, and as 'silence means consent,' I suppose we may take for granted that mamma has given us negative permission to 'litter the drawing-room with withered branches!'"

"I believe," said Eira, "that at the bottom of their hearts both papa and mamma were very glad that we had made it look so nice the day before yesterday when those men called."

Betty groaned.

"Oh, Eira!" she ejaculated, "for mercy's sake let that wretched subject drop. Let's get over this stile," she added: "I've a sort of remembrance of some lovely berries a little farther on. There they are!" with a joyous exclamation; "*could* anything be prettier? I wonder if there is any possible way

of drying them and pressing some of the leaves without their losing colour? I feel as if I could make our hats look quite nice with them.”

“They would last a few days, anyway, as they are,” said Frances. “But, Betty, if you begin loading yourself already, I don’t see how we can go much of a walk.”

“I know what I’m about,” said Betty, as she drew out of her pocket a sturdy pair of unpointed scissors. “I shall cut a lot of things now and put them ready to pick up on our way back. One must have clear light to choose the prettiest shades.”

Some minutes passed in this occupation. Then when her spoils were carefully tied together, Betty having also provided herself with string, they set off at a good pace, soon leaving the little copse behind them, and crossing the high-road in the direction of a long hilly path ending in a stretch of table-land which was a favourite resort of the sisters. The grass was so short and thymy that it was rarely even damp, and on one side the view was certainly attractive.

“I have always liked this place,” said Betty, “ever since I was quite tiny. Do you remember, Eira, the dreams we had of catching a lamb and taking it home for a pet? We were to hide it somewhere or other.”

“Yes,” replied Eira, “in the china closet out of the nursery, and get up in the night to play with it, and then put it to sleep in each of our beds in turn. It was never to grow any bigger, it was always to be a lambkin.”

“And so it has remained,” said Frances, smiling, “and always will! That is one of the comforts of dream-life: nobody gets older, or uglier, or anything they shouldn’t. And real life would be very dull without it.”

“It’s dull enough *with* it,” said Betty, “or perhaps the truth is that we’re growing incapable of it for want of material to build with.”

“No,” said Frances; “I don’t agree with that. ‘Necessity is the mother of invention,’ and when one has a real fit of castle-building one creates the stones.”

“I wish one of us were poetical,” said Eira. “I’ve a vague feeling that something might be made of those ideas of yours and Betty’s, Frances, if either of you had the least knack of versification. And then perhaps we might send your poem to some magazine and get a guinea or half a guinea for it. Fancy how nice that would be!”

Betty gave a deep sigh.

“What is the matter?” said Frances.

“Oh, it’s only a bit of the whole,” said Betty. “Why wasn’t one of us a genius, to give some point to life? Just because it is so monotonous, we are monotonous too – not the least tiny atom of a bit of anything uncommon about us.” Frances laughed.

“I don’t know about being uncommon,” she said; “but assuredly, Betty, nobody could accuse you of being monotonous! Why, you are never in the same mood for three minutes together!”

“But her moods are monotonous,” said Eira. “She’s either up in the skies about nothing at all, or down in the depths about – no, I can’t say that there’s often nothing at all as an excuse for descending in that direction.”

Thus chattering, with the pleasant certainty of mutual understanding, they had walked on for some distance, when a glance at the red autumn sun already nearing the horizon made Frances decide that it was time to turn.

“It’s always extra dull to go back the way we came,” said Betty, “and to-day it’s my fault, for I do want to pick up my beautiful leaves and berries.”

“We must walk quickly, then,” said Frances; “or you’ll scarcely be able to distinguish your nose-gay. Dear me! the days are getting depressingly short already.”

“And then they will begin to get long again, and you will be saying how cheering it is,” said Betty. “You are so terribly good, Francie. I quite enjoy when I catch you in the least little ghost of a grumble. It really exhilarates me.” A few minutes’ rapid walking brought them to the steep path

again. Then they crossed the road and were soon over a stile and in the copse. None too soon – here under the shade of the trees it was almost dark already, and Betty’s soft plaintive voice was heard in lamentation.

“I don’t believe we shall ever find the bundle,” she said. “Francie, Eira, do help me – can you remember if it was as far on as this, or – ”

“Oh, farther, some way farther,” interrupted Eira. “Much nearer the other stile. Don’t you see – ”

She started and did not finish her sentence, for at that moment a figure suddenly made its appearance on a side-path joining the rather wider one where the sisters were. And, though it was almost too dark to distinguish the action, a hand was instinctively raised to remove the wearer’s cap, and a voice, recognisable though not familiar, was heard in greeting.

“Good-evening,” it said. “Can I be of any use?” for its owner had heard enough to guess that the sisters had met with some small mishap.

“Oh,” replied Betty, who was the first to identify the newcomer, “no, thank you. It’s only Frances,” with a significant change of tone, “it’s Mr Littlewood.”

Frances, self-possessed as usual, came forward quietly and held out her hand.

“We are hunting for some lost treasures,” she said, “which it is too dark to distinguish.”

“Anything of value?” he said quickly, glancing about him.

His tone of concern was too much for Eira’s gravity. A smothered laugh added to Mr Littlewood’s perplexity, for Eira’s person had till now been hidden behind some bushes where she was groping to help her sister in her search. Frances turned upon her rather sharply, for, despite her comforting tone to Betty two evenings before, she had no wish for any further gaucherie on the part of her sisters.

“What are you laughing at, Eira?” she said, and then, without waiting for an answer, she went on in explanation to Mr Littlewood: “Oh, no, thank you; nothing of value in one sense. It’s only a large bunch of shaded leaves and berries that we gathered on our way out: they were too heavy to carry, so we hid them somewhere about here, and now we can’t find them – it has got so dark.”

Mr Littlewood smiled.

Perhaps it was fortunate that only Frances was near enough to him to perceive it. He was turning towards the hedges where the two younger girls were still poking about, when a joyful cry from Betty broke the momentary silence.

“Here they are!” she exclaimed. “Help me to get them out, Eira;” which Eira did so effectually that there was no occasion for the young man’s offered help.

And once laden with her booty, a share of which she bestowed on her sister, Betty hurried onward, Eira accompanying her, leaving Frances to dispose of Mr Littlewood as she thought well.

He did not intend to be disposed of just at once. As Frances walked on slowly towards home in her sisters’ rear, he suited his step to hers with an evident intention of beguiling the way with a little conversation.

“I’m afraid,” he began, with a touch of hesitation which scarcely seemed consistent with his ordinary tone and bearing, “I am afraid that your – your sister – I do not know if she is the youngest? – has not quite forgiven me for my stupid speech the other day.”

Frances tried to answer lightly, but in her heart she felt annoyed with Betty.

“I hope she is not so silly,” she replied. “More probably she is still vexed with herself for having taken offence at – at really nothing.”

“Nothing in intention, most assuredly,” he replied, with a touch of relief in his tone. “But still, she *was* annoyed. And – if I am not making bad worse – would you mind giving me some idea, Miss Morion, what it was that she referred to? In case, you see, of my people coming down here, as seems very probable, it would be just as well – it might avoid friction if I understood just a little how the land lies.” Frances hesitated.

“It is such an old story,” she said, “and rather an involved one, and really not of any interest except to ourselves!”

“I don’t know that,” he replied quickly. “To tell you the truth —*you* mustn’t be vexed with me – I asked Milne about it, but he was rather muddled, I think. Possibly he scarcely felt free to explain it, so he ended up by saying he was too busy to go into it then, all of which, of course, whetted my curiosity.”

There was something *naïf*, almost boyish, in his manner, which Frances had not before been conscious of, and it gave her a feeling of greater sympathy with him.

“There is really no secret or mystery of any kind,” she said. “I mean nothing that I could have the least hesitation in telling you, or any one who cared to hear. Though a mystery there is, a commonplace enough one too, I suppose: a lost or hidden will! It was long ago – ” but by this time they were at the stile, over which the two younger girls had already clambered, and now stood waiting on the road, evidently expecting that at this juncture their companion would take himself off.

“It’s getting so chilly, Frances,” said Betty, “I think we had better walk quicker.” With which faint approach to apology for her abruptness, she was starting off, when Mr Littlewood interposed.

“Why don’t you go through the park?” he said. “I thought you always did. It must make quite half a mile’s difference.”

“Yes,” said Frances, “it does. Come back to the lodge, Betty and Eira!” for she felt it would look too ridiculous to depart from their usual habit merely because this young man happened to be staying a night or two at the big house. Furthermore, she was conscious that her companion was really anxious to hear what she had to tell, and if she and the others went home by the road, he would scarcely have a pretext for accompanying them.

“Oh, Frances,” said Betty, “I think at this time of day the road is much the best. It’s so gloomy in the park.”

“Only the last little bit,” replied her sister, with a certain intonation which the younger ones understood, “and it is considerably shorter.”

“And,” interposed Mr Littlewood, so quickly as to seem almost eager, “you will of course allow me to see you through the gloomy part.”

“Thank you,” said Frances courteously, “it is not that we are the least afraid. We are far too well accustomed to looking after ourselves, and this is not a part of the country much frequented by tramps, I am glad to say.”

She had turned already, however, in the direction of the big gates, so there was no occasion for further discussion, and the old programme was soon resumed, Betty and Eira hurrying on well in front, though not so far in advance but that a faint sound of laughter – laughter with a touch of mischief or mockery in it which made their elder sister’s cheeks burn with annoyance – from time to time was carried back by the breeze to the ears of the two following more slowly. This made Frances the more anxious to divert her companion’s attention from her sisters.

“I really must pull them up when we get home,” she thought to herself. “They will have no one but themselves to thank for it if Mr Littlewood puts them down as a couple of silly school-girls.”

She was turning over in her mind how best to revert to the subject of their conversation before Betty’s interruption, when, to her relief, her companion himself led the way to it.

“Won’t you go on with what you were telling me?” he said, with a slight touch of diffidence, “that is to say, if you are sure you don’t in the least mind doing so. Perhaps you wouldn’t think so of me,” he went on, “but there’s something of the antiquary about me. Old bits of family history always have a fascination for me.”

“*This* bit,” said Frances, “is, as I was saying, rather commonplace. It is simply that an ancestress of ours – no, scarcely an ancestress – a certain Elizabeth Morion, a grand-aunt of my father’s, in whom the whole of the family possessions at that time centred, played *his* father false by promising what she never did. That is, by leaving a will which gave everything to the elder of her two nephews,

the – yes, the great-grandfather of your – ” here she hesitated and looked up inquiringly. “What is the present Mr Morion to you, by-the-by?” she asked.

“Nothing, nothing whatever,” said Mr Littlewood. “A brother’s brother-in-law is no relation.”

“N-no,” Frances half agreed, “but it’s a connection. Let me see, your brother married his sister?”

“Yes, that’s it,” he answered. “Ryder Morion’s sister is my sister-in-law. There, now, that puts it neatly. Then, this capricious spinster broke her word to your grandfather, did she?”

“Well, yes, we must suppose so, unless – there has always been the alternative possibility that she *did* make the right will, and that it got lost or mislaid.”

“H-m-m!” murmured Mr Littlewood thoughtfully. “I suppose that does happen sometimes, but rarely, I should think. I don’t know if I have peculiarly little faith in human nature, but in a general way there’s been something worse than accident at work in such cases. Was the old lady on good terms with both nephews?”

“I believe so,” Frances replied. “Though she was much more in awe of the elder. He had made an extremely good marriage, and, besides coming into the more important Morion place, his wife had heaps of money. I have always thought,” she went on, “that great-grand-aunt Elizabeth was a little afraid of telling him that she had left this property, small as it is, away from him. For, you see, it has the family name; yet, elder branch though they are, its owners have never cared for it. So,” with a slightly rising colour which it was too dark for him to see, and a half-deprecating tone in her voice which he was quick to hear, “there is some excuse for the way we feel about it, though certainly Betty need not have blurted it out as she did the other day for your benefit!”

“On the contrary,” exclaimed her companion, “I enter most thoroughly into her feelings. And it is delightful to come across some one that isn’t afraid to speak out her mind. But – now, do scold me if I am indiscreet – considering these very natural feelings, which your father must realise to the full, is it not rather a pity to have settled down here, in constant, hourly view of what should have been your home?”

“Well, yes,” said Frances, “on the face of it I can understand it striking you so, but circumstances often lead up to the very things one would originally have avoided. So it has been with us. My grandfather bought our present little house, which did not belong to the Morions though surrounded by the property, for a very small sum: he kept a sort of foothold in the place I fancy, in case – just *in case*– of the will, in whose existence he never lost faith, turning up; and also perhaps out of a sort of not unnatural self-assertion. And when papa retired – he was many years in India, you know, and married rather late – it seemed the best place for us to come to. We three were tiny children, and Anglo-Indians of all people believe in country air for their children, and here we have been ever since, our income, unfortunately, having creased as time went on, instead of improving.”

For a moment or two Mr Littlewood walked on in silence. He was really of an impressionable nature, despite appearances, and the girl’s simple words told him even more than she was conscious of.

“Dull little lives,” he thought to himself. “Poor children! If my people come down here they must try to do something for them, though I see it must be done with tact. Dear me! what a clumsy fool I must have seemed to that sweet little Betty.”

Then turning to Frances:

“Thank you,” he said gently, “thank you so much for telling me about it. I quite see the whole thing. I wonder,” he went on, with a slight laugh, “I wonder if anything will turn up some day?”

“Oh, no,” said Frances, “it’s far too long ago now. We amuse ourselves sometimes by building castles in the air about it, but I am not sure that it is a very wholesome occupation.”

“It would be very good fun,” said the young man, “if our living in the house somehow led to any discovery! By-the-by,” he added suddenly, “it would make a splendid groundwork for a ghost story. If the old lady is repentant for breaking her word, she shouldn’t be having a peaceful time of it; or even if she were not to blame, and the will were in existence, that’s the sort of thing ghosts should come back to set right, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes,” said Frances, “I suppose so, but the queer thing about ghosts is that they so much more often appear for no reason than for a sensible one.” But there was a certain repression in her tone which returned to his mind afterwards.

They had crossed the park by this time, and were close to the door into the road, where a little way farther on stood Fir Cottage. The voices of the two girls in front sounded softly now, and here in this more sheltered spot the evening breeze had grown gentle and caressing in its dainty touch. The moon, too, had come out, and the whole feeling of the evening breathed peace and restfulness.

“It scarcely seems like late autumn now, does it?” said Frances. “And, oh!” she went on, “isn’t the glimpse of the old church pretty, Mr Littlewood?”

From where they stood, the windows at one side and the ivy-covered tower of the venerable building, more picturesque than beautiful in the full daylight, had caught the silvery gleam.

“Yes,” he agreed, “it looks at its best, doesn’t it? If Ryder was more here, he’d have gone in for restoring it by now; and, inside, I must say, it would be an improvement, though it would almost seem a pity to tear down that ivy. I looked over it this morning.”

“Oh, did you?” said Frances. “It is getting to be almost a survival. The day must come, I suppose, for overhauling it, if it is to hold its own much longer. Papa says the masonry is becoming very bad. I should like to see it really well done, though I am heathen enough to have a queer affection for it as it stands.”

“Do the visitors from Craig Bay come up here?” Mr Littlewood inquired.

“Not regularly,” Frances replied. “There is a very modern, tidy little church near the station. Were you thinking of funds for restoring this one when you spoke of the visitors? Our old vicar is too old, I suppose, to take any interest in doing it up, otherwise something might be done.”

“Oh, *funds* can’t be the difficulty,” said Mr Littlewood quickly. “Ryder Morion has far more money than he knows what to do with. I dare say he has restored other people’s churches more than once; that sort of thing is rather in his line.”

“Then, why doesn’t he begin at home?” asked a clear voice, startling them a little. It was Eira’s. Frances and Mr Littlewood, gazing at the church, which stood just outside the park wall in the opposite direction from Fir Cottage, had not observed that the two younger girls had retraced their steps some little way, and now were standing close behind them.

Again Frances felt annoyed, though she could not help being glad that this time the offender was not Betty. But her companion was on his guard: he answered gently, in a matter-of-fact tone, of itself conciliatory, “You may well ask. I shall tell Ryder what I think about it when I see him,” he said. “Why, he has never been here that any of you can remember, has he?” There was no immediate reply. It was, naturally enough, a trifle mortifying that on the few occasions – rare enough, it must be allowed – on which the owner of Craig-Morion had visited the place, he had taken no notice, direct or indirect, of his kindred at Fir Cottage. But the three sisters were nothing if not candid – candid and ingenuous in a very unconventional degree – and the silence was almost immediately broken by Frances’ clear, quiet voice.

“Oh, yes,” she said, “he has been here several times for a few days together, but we don’t know him at all, not even by sight.” Again Mr Littlewood anathematised his bad luck.

“Really?” he said, with apparent carelessness.

“I can’t call him exactly a genial person,” he went on, “and you know, I suppose, that his wife died a few years ago, which has not made him less of a recluse. All the same,” – for the young man was on common ground with his new friends so far as a constitutional love of candour goes – “all the same, I’m very much attached to him. He’s been a good friend to me in more ways than one.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Frances. “One can never be without interest in the head of one’s family, it seems to me.”

They had been strolling on during the last few moments towards their own gate, and, there arrived, Frances held out her hand.

“Good-night, Mr Littlewood,” she said simply, adding no invitation to come in with them.

“Good-night,” he repeated, shaking hands with each in turn, “but – it need not be ‘Good-bye,’ as I don’t leave till the day after to-morrow. Do you think Lady Emma would allow me to look in some time in the afternoon?”

“Y-yes, I will tell her,” was Frances’ rather ambiguous reply; and as the young man re-entered the park, his thoughts busied themselves with the glimpse, the almost pathetic glimpse, he had had into these young lives.

Chapter Six

“Not at Home.”

“What in the world,” said Betty, “what in the whole world, Frances, did you get to talk about to him, all that long way across the park?”

“Really, Betty,” said Frances, for *her*, almost crossly, “you are too bad! Did I elect to have a *tête-à-tête* with Mr Littlewood? If it were worth while I might blame you and Eira seriously for the way you behaved – like two – ”

Betty was on the point of interrupting with some vehement repetition of the dislike she had taken, and that not causelessly, to their uninvited visitor, when a significative tug at her sleeve from Eira startled her into silence, though thereby Frances’ intended lecture made no further way, as the interruption came from Eira instead.

“You are not to say ‘silly school-girls,’” she exclaimed. “I know that’s what you were going to say. We simply walked on because three women and one man seem – are – so stupid. Why does it always seem as if there were too many women?”

“In a family where there are no brothers it couldn’t very well seem anything else,” replied Frances, rather shortly; but she did not resume her remonstrances, for by this time they were by the front door, and she hurried into the drawing-room, where, as she expected, tea, and a somewhat ruffled Lady Emma, were awaiting them.

“You are very late, why – ” were the words that greeted her; but before hearing more, Eira softly closed the door, holding back Betty for a moment’s confabulation in the hall.

“What is it, Eira?” said Betty impatiently. “You tug my sleeve, and then you pull me back when I’m tired and want some tea. What is it you want to say?”

“We had better leave our cloaks outside,” said Eira, rapidly unbuttoning her own garment as she spoke. “What I want to say can’t be said in a moment, it is something too tremendous! I only felt that I must give you a hint to be more careful in your way of speaking about Mr Littlewood.”

“Why?” asked Betty, opening her dark eyes to their widest.

“Because,” said Eira, “I am not at all sure but what a most wonderful thing is going to happen, or, for that matter, has happened. Betty, suppose – just suppose – that *he* has fallen in love with Frances.”

Betty gasped, unable for a moment to articulate.

“That man!” she at last ejaculated.

“Well, why not?” returned Eira. “*You’ve* taken a dislike to him of some kind, or you fancy you have, and of course I don’t mean to say that I think he’s good enough, but still – but I can’t speak about it just now, only take care!”

She had certainly succeeded in taking Betty’s breath away. The girl would scarcely have been capable of a coherent reply, but she was not called upon for one. The drawing-room door opened, and their elder sister’s voice was heard.

“Do come in to tea,” she said, “and, Eira, you run and tell papa it is ready. I had no idea it was so late,” she went on. “Poor mamma has been wondering what was keeping us,” she added, in a deprecatory tone, as Betty followed her into the room.

“We can’t blame Mr Littlewood for it,” said Betty eagerly; “we were walking almost all the time we were talking to him, so *he* can’t have delayed us!”

“Mr Littlewood?” repeated Lady Emma, in the high-pitched tone which with her was one of the signs of disturbed equanimity. “Mr Littlewood? What is she talking about? You don’t intend to say that you have been a walk with a – perfect stranger! Frances, what does this mean? I insist on your telling me.”

“I have not the very *least* objection to telling you, mamma,” said Frances. “In fact, I have a message for you from Mr Littlewood, which I was just going to deliver.”

Her tone was absolutely respectful, but there was a touch of coldness in it, not without its effect on her mother. In her heart Lady Emma not only trusted her eldest daughter entirely, but looked up to her in a way which showed her own involuntary consciousness of the superiority in many ways of the girl’s character to her own. But any approach to acknowledgment of this real underlying admiration and respect would have seemed to her so strange and paradoxical, considering their mutual relations, as to be almost equivalent to a reversal of the fifth commandment.

She contented herself with replying in a calmer tone, “Did you meet Mr Littlewood, then? Naturally I can’t understand things till you explain them.”

“Yes,” Frances replied, “we met him on our way home, not in the park, but in the little copse on the Massingham road.”

“I am glad you were not in the park,” said Lady Emma.

“But we did come through it after meeting him,” said Frances. “It would have been affected to do otherwise just because he is staying at the house, and I suppose, as he was walking our way, he could scarcely have avoided walking on beside us. He asked me if he might call to say good-bye to you, mamma, to-morrow afternoon?”

The last words, unfortunately as it turned out, were overheard by Mr Morion as he entered the room. His wife, taught by long experience, made no reply, so the message remained uncommented upon, unless a doubtful grunt from the depths of the arm-chair where the master of the house had settled himself could have been taken as referring to it.

Silence, not an unusual state of things at Fir Cottage, ensued, and as soon as the two younger girls could escape from the room they hastened to their own quarters, a small and in wintertime decidedly dreary little chamber, which in old days had been used as their schoolroom. It looked out to the side of the house and was ill lighted. But its propinquity to the kitchen was, practically speaking, in cold weather no small boon, preventing its ever becoming very chilly, for, though it boasted a fireplace, the restrictions as to fuel formed one of the most disagreeable economies in practice at Fir Cottage. In summer, on the other hand, the schoolroom was apt to become unbearably hot; but in summer, if it is anything like a normal season, and in the country, life usually presents itself under a very different aspect. Such things as fires and chilblains do not enter into one’s calculations; one’s own room, in nine cases out of ten, is a pleasant resort, and even if not so, are there not out-of-doors boudoirs by the dozen?

Dreary enough, though, the little room looked this evening, when by the light of one candle Betty and Eira established themselves as comfortably as circumstances allowed of, that is to say, on two little low basket-chairs, dismissed from the drawing-room long ago as too shabby, which had been one of their few luxuries in lessons days. Just now, also, the extraordinary possibilities which they were about to discuss so filled their imaginations that the uninviting surroundings over which they often groaned would have passed unnoticed had they been ten times worse. And worse they might have been most assuredly! For one fairy gift was shared alike by the three sisters – the gift of dainty orderliness; and where this reigns one may defy poverty to do its worst, for with such a background the tiniest attempt at prettiness or grace is trebled in pleasing effect.

“Eira,” said Betty in an almost awe-struck whisper, “do you really, really mean what you said? Do you think it *possible*? And –” with a touch of hesitation, quaint and almost touching in its contrast to the outspoken treatment of such subjects by the typical maiden of to-day, “if – if he had – fallen in love with Frances, *could* she ever care for him, I wonder?”

A dreamy questioning came into her eyes as she spoke.

“I don’t see why she shouldn’t,” said Eira. “Of course neither you nor I can picture to ourselves *any* man being good enough for Frances, so we need not expect the impossible. But taking that for granted, I don’t see why she mightn’t get to care for this man. Indeed, she has liked him from the

beginning, and stuck up for him against you. And as men go – of course we really don't know any, but I suppose *some* books are more or less true to life? – as men go, I suppose any one would consider him very attractive.”

“Perhaps,” said Betty gently, for she was already beginning to see her *bête noire* through very different spectacles, “perhaps. And then,” she added, with an amusing little air of profound worldly wisdom, “he must be rich, and made a good deal of, and all that sort of thing, and for a man of that kind to find out what a girl really *is*, in spite of her plain simple life, and way of dressing, and all that – though, of course, nobody can say that Francie is not good-looking, far more than merely pretty – don't you think, Eira, that that of itself shows that he must have a great deal of good in him?”

“Yes,” Eira agreed, “I do. Though it doesn't do to be too humble, Betty, even about external things. Remember, however poor we are, that as far as family and ancestry go we could scarcely be better. No one need think it a condescension to marry a Morion.”

“Of course,” said Betty, speaking half absently. “Oh, Eira, how interesting it will be when he comes to-morrow! Do let us think what we can do to – to show everything to advantage. If we *could* persuade Francie to sing, for her voice is so lovely!”

“She never would,” said Eira, “not to any one like that, who is pretty sure to be a good judge, for she knows her voice is untrained. Why, she has never had a lesson in her life! Can't we do anything about her *dress*, however? She always looks nice, perfectly nice, but almost too plain, too severe, as if she had retired from the world and was above such things as dress and looks.”

“Perhaps it's just that that attracts him in her,” said Betty – “the difference, I mean, between her and the fashionable girls he is accustomed to.”

“Yes,” replied Eira, “up to a certain point that's all very well, but no man would like to have a wife, however beautiful she was, who did not to some extent look like other people. Betty, how could we contrive to make her wear her own black silk blouse to-morrow? It is even more becoming to her than ours are, and a little handsomer. Don't you remember her saying when we got them that hers mustn't look too young? She is rather absurd about her age, for certainly she doesn't look older than twenty-four at most.”

“I wonder how old Mr Littlewood is?” said Betty, thoughtfully: “I'm *afraid* not more than twenty-seven; and Frances is one of those people who would think it almost a crime to marry a man younger than herself.”

“We can easily keep off the subject,” said Eira. “Indeed, after he has left, I think we had better say very little about him, though we may go on planning all the time by ourselves, you know, how to help it on in every possible way, once he comes back again.”

“Oh, Betty!” and she clasped her hands in excitement, “isn't it nice to have something to make plans about?”

Somewhat to their surprise and still more to their satisfaction, the two girls found their sister, the next morning, much more amenable to their tactfully administered suggestions than they had anticipated.

“Yes,” she said simply, “I should like to make the room nice, and ourselves too, so that he may take as favourable an impression as possible back with him to his people and the other Morions, and you will be careful, Betty dear, won't you, not to hoist your flag of war again?”

“Don't be afraid,” said Betty, kissing her sister as she spoke. “I see now that I behaved idiotically, and I see too how kind he was to take it as he did.”

In their uncertainty as to the time at which their acquaintance might call, the sisters decided on taking their usual walk in the morning, and remaining about the premises after luncheon. There was not much fear of their mother's not being at home, in the literal as well as conventional sense of the words, for Lady Emma was not given to constitutionals, or, except on the rarest occasions, to returning the formal calls of the few neighbours with whom she was on visiting terms, and in her heart she was rather gratified than otherwise at the stranger's overtures, due, as she imagined, to

some extent at least, to the impression made upon him by her own cold dignity of manner, seconded, however childishly, by Betty's outburst of self or family assertion.

All, therefore, promised propitiously for the expected visit of farewell, though at luncheon a not unfamiliar gloom was to be discerned on the paternal countenance which sent a thrill through the hearts of the two younger girls, Betty's especially, the most sensitive to such misgivings.

"Let us keep out of his way," she whispered to Eira as they left the dining-room: "if he had the least, the very least, idea that we wanted to stay at home he would be sending us off on some message to that wretched chemist's, as sure as fate!"

"But how about Frances?" said Eira, in alarm.

"I think it's all right," Betty replied. "Both she and mamma, though they don't perhaps say so, want it all to be nice, I feel sure. I saw Frances giving some finishing touches to the drawing-room, which really looks its best, and I heard mamma saying something about tea cakes, and you know how in reality mamma depends on Frances: *she* won't let her go out, even for papa."

Mr Morion's "den," as in jocund moments he condescended to call it, opened unfortunately on to the hall, almost opposite the drawing-room. In some moods he had a curious and inconvenient habit of sitting with the door open, and though he sometimes complained of advancing years bringing loss of hearing, there were times at which his ears seemed really preternaturally acute, and this afternoon, thanks to this peculiarity, aided possibly by some occult intuition of anticipation in the air, he was somewhat on the *qui-vive* for – he knew not what. Suffice to say he was in a raw state of nervous irritability, ready to quarrel with his own shadow, could that meek and trodden-upon phantom have responded to his need.

Four o'clock struck, the light was rapidly waning, when he issued an order to whatever daughter was within hearing to have tea hastened, as he wanted it earlier than usual.

It was Frances who heard him, and she at once rang the bell, though not without a silent regret as to this unusual precipitancy.

"For Mr Littlewood is pretty certain not to call before half-past," she reflected, "and afternoon-tea looks so untidy when it has been up some time."

Some little delay, however, ensued. It was between a quarter and twenty minutes past the hour when she summoned her sisters, hidden till then in their little sitting-room.

"Has he come?" whispered Betty.

Frances shook her head.

"No," she replied, in the same voice, "but papa would have tea extra early. Help me to keep the table tidy."

Mr Morion, by this time, had taken possession of an arm-chair by the drawing-room fire, which he pulled forward out of its place, as he was feeling chilly. As Frances was handing him his cup of tea the front door bell rang. A thrill of expectancy passed through Betty and Eira.

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