

Molesworth Mrs.

Imogen: or, Only Eighteen



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Molesworth M.

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Chapter One The Spirits of the Fells

“Grey Fells Hall” was, I believe, the real name of the old house – the name by which it was described in the ancient deeds and documents, some of them *so* ancient as to be perfectly illegible, of which more than one chestful still existed in the squire’s safe, built into the wall of his business room. But “The Fells” it had been called from time immemorial, and would no doubt continue to be thus known. It was a cheerful, comfortable, and not unpicturesque old place, with nothing grim about it except the dark, rugged rocks at one side, from which it took its name, whose very grimness, however, but enhanced the calm beauty of the pleasant slope of pasture land to the south.

On this side, too, it was well wooded, and by trees of a respectable size, notwithstanding the northern latitude and the not very distant sea. But it is no story of a lonely, dreary, half-deserted grange I have to tell. The Fells was deserted but during three months of the orthodox London season; for the rest of the year it was full, sometimes to overflowing. For the Belmont family who inhabited, it were a legion in themselves, and seldom content without congenial society in the persons of the innumerable visitors whose list every summer seemed to lengthen. “The boys” had their friends, a host to start with, for “the boys” began with Captain Belmont in a cavalry regiment, and ended with Cecil at Eton. And the girls were all grown up; two married, three still at home intent on finding as much fun and amusement in life as wealth, health, and good looks could unite in achieving. To assist them in this untiring pursuit, the companionship of kindred spirits was of course eminently desirable.

Papa and Mamma Belmont had their cronies too, though scarcely as many as their children. So one way and another The Fells was rarely free from visitors. “A family party” was almost unknown, and not desired. The young Belmonts were all more or less spoilt; nature and circumstances had done their part as well as the father and mother. The Squire was very rich and very liberal; he liked to see people about him happy, and saw no reason why he should not do so. Trouble of any kind had come near the family but slightly; perhaps their organisations were not of the most sensitive order to begin with, still they passed muster as good-natured and kindly, and to a certain extent this was true. If the other side of the medal revealed a touch of coarseness, of inconsiderateness for others, verging upon undisguised selfishness, it was scarcely perhaps surprising; prosperity, in some directions, is by no means the unalloyed blessing one might esteem it, to judge by the universal envy it arouses.

But the Belmonts are not, after all, the most prominent characters in my story. They serve as a background merely – a substantial and not displeasing one on the whole, with their handsome persons, their genial ways; best of all, perhaps, their rough-and-ready honesty.

I have said that they were hospitable – to a fault. Curiously enough, however, the first words we hear from them would almost seem to contradict this.

It is Alicia, the eldest daughter at home, the second in actual order of seniority in the family, who is speaking.

“You needn’t exaggerate so about it, Florence. It is tiresome and provoking, just when we had got our set so nicely arranged. Still, after all, a girl of that age – almost a child.”

“That’s the very point,” said Florence, impatiently. “I wonder you don’t see it, Alicia. If she were older and had seen anything – an ordinary sort of a girl – one might leave her to look after herself. But when mother puts it to us in that way, appealing to us to be kind to the child for her

sake, for old association's sake, what can one say? I call it ridiculous, I do really. I didn't think mother was so sentimental."

"It is a great bore, certainly," Miss Belmont agreed. "But I wouldn't worry myself about it, Florence. Take it easy as I do."

Florence gave a little laugh. It was not an ill-natured laugh, though there was a touch of contempt in it. For Alicia's "taking things easily" was proverbial in the family, and was probably as much to be traced to a certain amount of constitutional indolence, as to the imperturbable good temper which it must be allowed she possessed. Florence's laugh in no way disconcerted her.

"Or," she continued, with for once a little sparkle of mischief in her rather sleepy brown eyes, "give her over to Trixie's tender mercies. Trixie and Mabella Forsyth can take her in hand."

Florence turned upon her sister almost fiercely. She was the least placid, though decidedly the cleverest of the Belmont daughters.

"Alicia!" she exclaimed, "you can't think that you are making things easier for me by talking like that. I have *some* little sense of what is due to a guest, especially after the way mother has put it. Trixie indeed! Why, I mean to do my best to keep the girl out of Trixie's and Mabella's notice altogether. I pity her if she is what I expect, if she should come in their way. They are particularly wild just now, too."

"Mother should have waited till Mabella was gone," said Alicia, calmly.

"Of course she should. But she couldn't, by the bye. Mrs What's-her-name – Wentworth – this Mrs Wentworth wrote offering a visit before Christmas, when they are going abroad somewhere. Oh, it really is too bad –"

The sisters were together in a sitting-room, appropriated to themselves, and in which they firmly believed that an immense amount of important business was transacted. It was a pretty little room, not specially tidy it must be confessed; but with the comfortable, prosperous air peculiar to everything to do with the Belmont family.

"Yes," Florence repeated, "it is too bad."

She pushed her chair back impatiently from the table at which she had been writing; as she did so, the door opened. Her brother Oliver and another man came in.

"What's the matter? Florence, you look, for you, decidedly – how shall I express it? – not cross, 'discomposed' shall we say? Scold her, Rex; she has an immense respect for you, like every one else. Impress upon her that there is nothing and nobody in this weary world worth putting one's self out about."

The person addressed – a man ten years at least the senior of Oliver Belmont, who was the brother next in age to Florence – smiled slightly.

"What is the matter, Florence?" he repeated in turn, as he took up his station on the hearthrug; for it was November, and chilly.

"Ask Alicia," said Florence. "She's patienter than I. I'm too cross to explain."

Major Winchester looked towards Miss Belmont.

"It's nothing to make such a fuss about," she said. "It's only Florrie's way."

"It's not the *family* way, it must be allowed," remarked Oliver, complacently.

Major Winchester glanced at him quickly, not to say sharply.

"No," he said drily, "it is not. – Well, Alicia?"

"It's only that some stupid people are coming to stay here next week – a mother and daughter, and we have too many women already, for one thing. And the girl is almost a child, only just out, and the mother's not much better, I fancy. They have been living in some out-of-the-way place, I forget where, for some years, since the father's death, and he was an old friend of mother's, and his parents were very good to her long ago, when her parents died. So she wants to be kind to this girl, and she's rather put her upon Florence and me, and – I don't see that it's anything to fuss about, but –"

“As you have never fussed about anything since you were born, Alicia, it isn’t to be expected you will begin now,” said Florence.

“No, Rex, it’s on my shoulders altogether, and I do say it’s too bad. It’s seven years ago since I was eighteen, I’ve forgotten all about it. I don’t understand girls of that age, and I have my hands full of other things, too. And – ”

“Make her over to Trixie,” said Oliver.

“Trixie’s only a year older.”

Florence glanced at him with contempt. This second time of the suggestion as to Trixie being made, she did not condescend to notice it in words.

“Don’t interrupt your sister, Noll,” said Major Winchester. – “Well, Florence?”

“Well?” she repeated. “Ill,’ I say. What more do you want, Rex? Haven’t I told you enough?”

“Who are these unfortunate people?” he asked after a moments pause. “What is their name?”

“Wentworth,” said Alicia. Florence didn’t seem inclined to speak. “Mrs and Miss Wentworth. The mother herself can’t be very old, I fancy, and the daughter, as we said, is only seventeen or eighteen.”

“Poor little soul!” said Major Winchester.

Florence faced round upon him.

“Now Rex,” she said, “if you call that comforting me, and – ”

“I never said I was going to comfort you,” he said. “I never had the very slightest intention of doing anything of the kind, I can assure you. You don’t need comforting, and if you think you do, it only proves the more that you don’t.”

“What do I need, then?” she asked more submissively than she would have spoken to many. “Scolding?”

“Something like it,” he began. But here he was interrupted. Both Alicia and Oliver turned to leave the room.

“Rather you than I, Florrie,” said her brother.

“I’ve had my lecture from him this morning, and I don’t want any more.”

“And I must go to have a dress tried on, I’m sorry to say,” said Alicia. “Besides which,” she added confidentially to Oliver when the door was safely closed behind them, “Rex is a very fine fellow, we all know, but his sermonisings are rather too much of a good thing now and then. And if it’s Florrie he’s at, there’s never any saying when he’ll leave off, for you see she answers him back, and argues, and all the rest of it. How she can be troubled to do it, I cannot conceive!”

“She’s not cast in *quite* the same mould as the rest of us, I’m afraid,” said Oliver.

“For that reason I suppose Rex thinks her the most promising to try his hand on.”

“He might be satisfied with Eva,” said Miss Helmont. “He can twist and turn and mould her as it suits him. Why can’t he let other people alone?”

“He’s looking out for new worlds to conquer, I suppose,” said Oliver. “Eva’s turned out; complete, perfect, hall-marked.”

“Well, he might leave poor Florrie alone,” said Alicia.

“My dear child, you are unreasonable. As far as I remember, you and she poured out your woes and grievances to him, and he was bound to answer.”

“He might have sympathised with her and let her grumble,” said Miss Helmont. “However, perhaps it will distract her attention. Poor Florrie,” with a gentle little sigh, “it’s a pity she takes things to heart so.”

“There’s a lot of vicarious work of that kind to do hereabouts for any one who’s obliging enough to do it,” said Oliver. “But I agree with you, Florrie’s had plenty; she needn’t go about hunting up worries for herself. After all, I daresay the little schoolgirl will be very good fun,” and he went off whistling.

It was true. Florrie was not a Belmont out and out. She had had some troubles too. Of the whole family she was the only one who had been misguided enough to fall in love with a – or the – wrong person. And she had done it thoroughly when she was about it. He was a very unmistakably wrong person, judged even by the not exaggeratedly severe standard of the family of The Fells. He was a charming, unprincipled ne'er-do-weel, who had run through two, if not three fortunes, and in a moment of depression had amused himself by falling in love with Florence Belmont, or allowing her to do so with him. They had been childish friends, and the touch of something big and generous in the girl's nature, a something shared by all the Belmonts, but which in her almost intensified into devotion, had made her always "stand up for Dick." Foolish, reckless, even she allowed that he was; but selfish, heartless, unprincipled, no, she could not see it, and never would. So it was hard necessity and not conviction that forced her to give in and promise her father to have nothing more to say to him.

"He'd be starving, and you with him, within a couple of years," said Mr Belmont. "For stupid as he is in many ways, he'd manage to get hold of your money somehow, tie it up as I might, and I would never get at the truth of things till it was too late; you would be hiding it and excusing him. Ah, yes! I know it all," and the Squire shook his head sagely, as if he had been the father of half a dozen black sheep, at least; whereas, all the Belmont boys had turned out respectably, if not brilliantly.

So Florence gave in, but it changed her: it was still changing her. There was a chance yet, if she fell under wise influence, of its changing her "for good," in the literal sense of the words. But she was sore and resentful, impatient of sympathy even; it would take *very* wise and tactful and loving influence to bring the sweet out of the bitter.

Her second-cousin Rex, like the rest of her family and some few outsiders, knew the story and had pitied her sincerely. He had hoped about her, too; hoped that trouble was to soften and deepen the softer and deeper side of Florence's character. But there was the other side, too – the pleasure-loving, rough-and-ready, selfish Belmont nature. Major Winchester sighed a little, inaudibly, as he looked down at the girl and caught sight of the hardening lines on her handsome, determined face.

"If she could have been alone with Eva, just at that time," he thought to himself.

"Florence," he said at last, after a little pause. They two were alone in the room.

"Well? say on; pray don't apologise."

"I think you are really rather absurd about this little girl, Miss Wentworth; is that her name? It is the smallest of troubles, surely, to have to look after her for a day or two. Are you not making a peg of her to hang other worries on?"

"Well, yes, perhaps so," said Florence, honestly. She would bear a good deal from Rex. "Perhaps I am. But that is just what I *do* complain of. I'm tired, Rex, and cross, and they all know it. They needn't put anything fresh on me just now."

"Who are *they*? It is only my aunt's doing, as far as I understand, is it not?" he said.

"Of course mamma is responsible for the people's coming. But it's just as much the others' fault that it's all to fall on me. Alicia is too indolent for anything, and Trixie – you know, Rex, Trixie is going too far. She really forgets she's a lady sometimes. That's why mamma has to appeal to me in any difficulty of the kind."

"Well, my dear child, you should be proud to feel it is so."

Florence's face softened a little.

"I might be," she said, "if I felt myself the least worthy of her confidence. I don't mean that I won't do what she asks; but look at the way I am doing it. I have wasted a couple of hours and any amount of temper this very morning over the thing. No, Rex, it's too late for me to learn to be unselfish and self-sacrificing, and all these fine things. I'm not Eva."

"No, but you're Florence, which is much more to the purpose. And, if you care about my affection and interest in you – you have both, Florrie dear, and in no scant measure."

Florence's head was turned away; for a moment she did not speak. Was it possible that a tear fell on her lap? Rex almost fancied it, and it touched him still more.

“May not this very opportunity of self-denial, and having to take some trouble for another person, for perhaps small, if any, thanks – may it not perhaps be just the very best thing that could come in your way just now, dear?” he said, very gently. No one could have detected a shadow of “preachiness” in the words; besides there was that about the man, his perfect manliness, his simple dignity, that made such an association of ideas in connection with him impossible.

Florence looked up. There *were* tears in her eyes, but she was smiling, too.

“Perhaps,” she said. “How you do put things, Rex! Well, if I do try to be good about it, will you promise to praise me a little – just a little, quite privately you know, for encouragement; beginners need encouragement, and I’ve never tried to be unselfish in my life. At least – oh I *could* have been, Rex!”

“You could have been devotion itself, Florrie, I know,” he said. “But devotion to a bad cause? However,” seeing that she shrank from the allusion, “we need not touch upon that. I’ll do what *I* can to help you in this little matter, I promise you.”

“At least you can help me to keep the girl out of Trixie’s way – Trixie and that horrid Mabella Forsyth. There is no saying what they mightn’t do if she’s an innocent, inexperienced sort of creature, as she can’t but be. And very pretty, too – extraordinarily pretty, by her mother’s account; that won’t make ugly Mab like her any better either.”

“I thought she – Miss Forsyth – prided herself on being plain, and was sincerely indifferent about looks,” said Major Winchester, rather inconsequently.

Florence laughed scornfully.

“My dear Rex,” she said. “So you believe *that*! You are not more than a child yourself in some ways. I shall have to protect you as well as Miss Imogen.”

“Imogen! What a pretty name!” he said.

“I don’t like it; high-flown and romantic, I call it,” said Florence as she left the room.

Chapter Two

“The Girl” and her Mother

November outside – a less attractive November than even up in the north among the Fells. For there, at least, though chilly and raw, it was clear and *clean*. Here, in a London lodging, very unexceptionable as to respectability and practical cleanliness, but not much above the average of London lodgings as regards attractiveness, it – whatever “it” means, the day, the weather, the general atmosphere – was assuredly not the former, and did not *look* the latter. For it was a morning of incipient fog; a state of things even less endurable – like an ailment before it has thoroughly declared itself – than full-fledged fog at its worst. Naturally so, for mature fog cannot last more than a day or two after all, whereas indefinite fog may be indefinite as to duration as well as quality. And besides this, thorough fog has its compensations; you draw down the blinds and light the lamps, and leave off pretending it is a normal day; you feel a certain thrill of not unpleasing excitement; “it is surely *the* worst that has yet been known” – what may not be *going* to happen next; the end of the world, or a German invasion?

Hoarse cries from the streets, rendered still more unearthly by the false sound of distance that comes with the thickened air, garbled tales of adventure filtering up through the basement from the baker’s boy, who, through incredible perils, has somehow made his way to the area gate; the children’s shouts of gleeful excitement at escaping lessons, seeing that the daily governess “can’t possibly be coming now, mamma;” all and everything adds to the general queerness and vague expectancy, in itself a not unexhilarating sensation.

But things were only at the dull unromantic stage of fog this morning at Number 33 Bouverie Terrace, where two ladies were seated at breakfast. It was not a bad little breakfast in its way. There were temptingly fried bacon and London muffins, and the coffee looked and scented good. But the room was foggy, and the silver was electroplate of the regulation lodging-house kind, and there was nothing extraordinarily cheering in the surroundings in general, nothing to call up or explain the beaming pleasure, the indescribable sunshininess, pervading the whole person of the younger of the two companions; brightness and pleasure reflected scarce undiminished on the older face of her mother as she sat behind the breakfast tray.

“It is just too beautiful, too lovely, mamsey dear. And oh, how clever it was of you to think of it! We might have been years and years without ever coming across these old friends, mightn’t we?” she exclaimed.

“We might never have come across them; probably we never should, if I had left it to chance,” said Mrs Wentworth, with a little tone of complacency. “But that I would scarcely have thought it right to do, considering the old friendship and the kindness Mrs Helmont when a girl received from my people. Not that I can remember it clearly, of course; she is ever so much older than I,” – and here the complacency became a little more evident. “Why, her eldest daughter, Mrs Poland, can’t be much under thirty-five.”

“*Almost* as old as you, mamsey,” said Imogen.

“For you know you’re not forty yet, and I don’t think I’m *ever* going to allow you to be forty.”

“You silly child,” said her mother, smiling. “Why, you may be married before we know where we are, and it would not do at all to be a grandmother – fancy me a grandmother! – and not forty. I should have to pretend I was.”

“Wait till the time comes,” said Imogen, sagely. “I’m not at all sure that I ever *shall* marry. I should be so terribly afraid of finding out he had a bad temper, or was horribly extravagant, or – or – ”

“You absurd child, who ever put such ideas into your mind?” said her mother, looking at her with fond pride.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Imogen replied, with a little coquettish toss of her head; “I *think* a lot of things, and then you know, in books mamsey, too often men who seem very nice are really dreadful tyrants or something horrid after they’re married.”

“Well, darling, there shall be choice care taken as to whom we give *you* to,” said her mother. “I daresay it won’t be the first comer, nor the second, nor third whom I shall think worthy of my Imogen.”

“I wonder when he will come,” thought the girl to herself, but she did not express the thought. She only smiled and blushed a little at her mother’s words.

“Tell me more about the Helmonts, mamsey,” she said. “You have been there once, didn’t you say?”

“Yes, but only for a day or two, not long before your dear father and I went out to India,” said Mrs Wentworth with a little sigh. “I don’t remember it very distinctly – it was a great big house, an ideal country-house for a large merry party. Of course, a good many of the young people were not grown up then – there was a baby if I remember rightly. Oh yes, the youngest daughter Beatrix, so she must be only a year or so older than you, darling. How very odd that Mrs Helmont and I have children so nearly of an age, when *she* might really be my mother!” and Mrs Wentworth gave the little self-complacent laugh she often indulged in when her comparative youth, or youthful appearance, was alluded to.

“How delightful!” exclaimed Imogen, ignoring entirely, though with no intention of disrespect, her mothers last sentence. “How delightful that there should be one daughter, anyway, of my age. There are lots older, I suppose?”

“Two, if not three, married, and three at home,” Mrs Helmont said. “In her letter this morning you see she speaks of Florence as hoping to do all she can to make your visit pleasant. Florence – can that be the youngest daughter? I have such a remembrance of the baby being Beatrix, because I thought it such a pretty name; and when you were born I wanted to call you by it, but your dear father would have Imogen. I’ve always thought it rather an eccentric name, but some people like it. I always forget who Imogen was exactly, and it looks so foolish. I must read up about it, or her, again.”

“Oh, bother, never mind about my name, mamsey. Go on about the Helmonts. I daresay Florence is the youngest. You often muddle about people’s names, you know, mamsey dear. And there are lots of sons, too, I suppose?”

“Oh dear, yes; but remember, dear, I don’t *think* I want you to fall in love with any of them. They won’t be particularly well off, except the eldest one, and he, of course, not till his father’s death.”

“How horrid!” said Imogen. “I can’t bear counting on people’s fathers and mothers dying. But I don’t care about being rich a bit, mamsey. You have such funny ideas sometimes. We’re not rich, and we’re very happy – now especially that I’ve left school, and we’re not obliged to live all the year round at that stupid old Eastbourne, but can go visits – lovely, delightful visits! And oh, mamsey, *do* you think you’ll let Thorn Bush and take a dear little house in London, anyway for a year or two?”

“We must see. I think very likely the Helmonts will be able to give me some practical advice, as they are so cordial and friendly. Nothing could be kinder than her letter, and you see she says a fortnight *at least*, Imogen; though she adds that the house is full already, and will be overflowing by next week.”

“How lovely!” said Imogen again. She was at a loss for adjectives this morning. “Just fancy, mother, how the girls at Miss Cotton’s will envy me. I must write to one or two of them from ‘The Fells’ to tell them of my adventures.”

“Ye-es, perhaps,” said her mother. “But you are not obliged to keep up those schoolgirl friendships *too* closely, darling. You may find yourself in such a different sphere before long, and then it becomes just a little embarrassing sometimes.”

“Not with Dora Barry,” said Imogen. “I don’t care *awfully* for any one else, but I have perfectly *promised* Dora that she is to be my bridesmaid – ” She stopped suddenly, blushing as she did so.

“Ah, Imogen,” said her mother, “I have caught you. I thought you were never going to marry! But seriously, dear, you should be a little careful now; even Dora, though she is a nice girl, she is not – not exactly in the same position. I should have much *preferred* your never going to school at all, you know; only everybody said it would have been so very lonely for you;” and Mrs Wentworth sighed – a simple and unaffected sigh.

“Of course it was good for me to go to school,” said Imogen. “I was as happy as possible there. And, mother, I’m *not* going to give up all my friends there, whatever you say,” she maintained stoutly, with the slight want of deference in her tone which sometimes bordered rather nearly on disrespect in her way of speaking to her mother. “Above all, not Dora; she’s every bit as much a lady as I am, every bit, even though her father’s only a country doctor.”

She glanced up with a touch of half-saucy defiance in her merry eyes.

“*How* pretty she looks!” thought Mrs Wentworth; and in her gratification she forgot to feel any annoyance at Imogen’s persistency.

Then a good deal of talk and consultation on the absorbing and inexhaustible subject of “clothes” ensued – talk which demonstrated the absolute necessity of an immediate shopping expedition. Indeed, in shopping expeditions, and instructions endless, minute, and contradictory to the somewhat tried, but patient Colman, promoted *pro tem*, from the post of house-and-parlour-maid to that of the Wentworth ladies’ personal attendant, passed the next few days, till the eventful Thursday which was to see the little party *en route* for Grey Fells Hall.

Other visitors were expected to arrive there that day – visitors more welcome and more congenial – yet on the Wentworths an unusual amount of anticipatory attention had been bestowed, attention which, had they known of it, they would certainly not have coveted. Not that it was all unfriendly; Mrs Belmont, and the Squire himself, so far as he ever interfered in the details of such matters, were anxious that the strangers, rather specially thrown on their hospitality, should be happy and at home under their roof. But the precautions they took to this end were not of the most judicious.

“It is Trixie I am uneasy about,” said Mrs Belmont to her husband. “She, and indeed the others too – though Alicia never worries, and Florence, I must say, is good about it – are annoyed at having any ‘outsiders,’ as they call the Wentworths. I almost think, Ronald, you had better say a word to Trixie yourself. It comes with better effect from you, as you seldom do find fault with her.”

“Certainly, my dear, certainly,” said Mr Belmont, whose strongest instincts, as I have said, were those of hospitality. “Nothing would vex me more than for any guests of ours not to receive proper attention.”

“It is rather *too much* attention I dread for them, for the girl at least, at Trixie’s hands,” said Mrs Belmont, rather mysteriously. But the Squire was a little deaf, and did not catch the words.

“I will speak to Beatrix this very morning,” he repeated reassuringly. And speak, unfortunately, he did. He had better have left it alone. Trixie had had the bit between her teeth for too long to be pulled up all at once, even by the most skilful hands. And the Squire had no thought of skill or tact; his only notion of “speaking” was to come down upon the girl with heavy, rather clumsy authority. It was with flashing eyes and compressed lips that Beatrix Belmont left her father’s so-called study that day, as she flew to confide her grievances to her second and not *better* self, Mab Forsyth.

“I’ll pay them out; see if I won’t,” she muttered. “It’s Rex who’s at the bottom of it, I could swear. He and his saintly Eva.”

“Let us put our heads together, Mab,” she wound up, when the whole had been related. “You and I should be a match for the rest of them. Florence has gone over to the enemy, it appears, but I can manage her; she’s not in such a very Christian frame of spirit. It’s Rex I’m furious at; he’s been setting dad against me.”

“But the worst of it is, we shall be spotted at once if we plan anything,” said Mab. “You’re so stupid, Trixie, flying into a temper and showing your colours.”

“Don’t talk nonsense. Did *I* show any colours? Had I any to show? Till this very moment did I care one farthing what became of the little fool of a girl? Even now it’s not to spite her – it’s that prig of a Rex. Didn’t you hear him yesterday, Mab; his stilted, preachy tone: ‘Is that exactly a young lady’s place, Beatrix?’ when I was doing nothing at all? I hate him, and so would you if – ”

“I do,” said Miss Forsyth, calmly; “but if what?”

“If you knew how he speaks of us behind our backs,” said Beatrix, mysteriously. “I’ve promised not to tell; but Jim let out something the other day that he’d heard in the smoking-room.”

“I wonder what it was,” said Mab. “You might as well tell me. You’re so absurd about promises like that; they’re never meant to be kept between friends like us. However, it doesn’t matter. I hate Major Winchester about as much as I *can* hate, and that’s pretty bad.”

“And I’m not going to tell you; there are some things we should never agree about, you see,” said Trixie. “But what was I going to say. Oh! about showing my colours; no, indeed, I hid them pretty completely. I opened my eyes and stared at papa, and asked him what *could* make him think so poorly of me; it really distressed me. I knew I had high spirits, but that was a Belmont peculiarity, and would probably cure with time; but as for disregarding the duties of hospitality, etc, etc, when had I ever done so? I didn’t know I could have spoken so well, and I looked so innocent – poor old dad, it ended in making him feel rather foolish, I do believe. But he said some nasty things – things I shan’t forget in a hurry,” and the girl clenched her hands.

“Don’t be theatrical,” said Mab, scornfully. “Keep to the point. Tell me about this girl, and why you’re so excited about her.”

“I’m not excited about her, I tell you. She’s a fool. I would probably never have noticed her if they had let me alone; it’s Rex I’m boiling at.”

“Ah yes, I see, and there I sympathise,” said Mabella. “And I have a good fund of dislike to silly little bread-and-butter misses at all times which may come in handy. So the plot thickens, Trixie; it’s quite exciting, upon my word. We must be cautious and watchful; first get to know our materials thoroughly. They are arriving to-day, you say, about the usual time?”

“Yes, the four o’clock train; that gets them here for tea in the drawing-room. There are several people coming. The young Girards, newly married, you know; but no nonsense about them, and up to any fun. They were both engaged to other people, you remember, and threw them over in the neatest way. And Gerty Custance and her brother, etc, etc.”

“When is Gerty going to retire; she must be nine-and-twenty?” said Miss Forsyth. But Trixie took no notice beyond an interjected “She’s Alicia’s friend, not mine,” and went on with her list. “So that you see, among so many, it will not be difficult to feel our way. The girl will be frightened out of her wits, and ready to cling to the first that offers. She’s never been anywhere, and thinks herself a peerless beauty; and they’re not rich, or clever, or anything. *Fancy* mamma asking such sticks of people!”

“And does Major Rex know anything of them? Why is he taking them up in this way?” asked Miss Forsyth.

“For no reason in the world except spite – spite at me, and priggishness,” said Trixie.

Mabella smiled. Her smile was not a pleasant one, and did not, as some smiles do, lighten up or soften her undeniably plain face.

“Spite at *you*, Trixie,” she said. “Excuse me; you like straightforward speaking, you always say. I scarcely think Major Winchester would give himself the trouble of going out of his way to spite *you*; he doesn’t think you worth it.”

“Thank you,” said Beatrix.

“It’s more likely priggishness, as you say, or contradiction,” pursued Miss Forsyth. “I wouldn’t even flatter him by calling it quixotry. It’s all conceit and love of meddling and thinking himself a saint. Oh, I do detest him, cordially!”

“After all, he’s my cousin,” said Trixie; “you might as well be civil when you speak of him, and if you know so much about his motives, why do you ask me what they are?”

Her tone was snappish, but her friend did not seem to notice what she said. Her eyes – Mabella had rather good dark eyes, they were her one “feature” – were fixed on vacancy, but her lips moved, though no words were audible. Suddenly she moved to Beatrix.

“I have it!” she exclaimed; “or I’m beginning to have it. No! I’m not going to tell you yet. I must know my ground and my puppets better first. But something I must say to you, my dear; you’re too clumsy for anything; you’ll be overdoing your part, I’m certain. Now, oblige me by telling me how you are intending to receive Miss Wentworth and her adoring mamma.”

“Oh, of course, very nicely,” said Beatrix, opening her eyes. “I shall be particular how I speak, and I shall try to seem – well, rather more of an *ingénue* than *you* consider me. And I’ll trouble *you*, to keep out of my way, if you please, Mab, and not come out with any of your agreeable, ladylike, little remarks or reminiscences.”

Miss Forsyth looked at her calmly.

“I always knew you were a goose,” she said, “but I never thought you quite *such* a goose. Don’t you see that if you take up that *rôle*, your people – Florence for certain, and even the others; one wouldn’t need to be very sharp in such a case – would see there was mischief brewing, *especially* if you kept *me* at a distance, and the whole thing would collapse.”

“I don’t know, in the first place, what ‘the whole thing’ is,” said Trixie, sulkily. “But if I’m not to do as I propose, what am I to do? Remember, I *must* behave decently, or father will be down on me in hot earnest. There’s a limit to his patience, especially if he began to think I had been humbugging him this morning.”

“Of course you must behave decently, and more than decently,” said Mabella. “You must look rather *snubbed*, if you can manage it; and if I tease you a little, you must bear it in a good-girl sort of way, as if you were turning over a new leaf, and it was too bad of me to make it harder for you. Oh, I could do it to perfection! I only wish I could be you and myself too.”

“But I don’t see that that style of thing will attract Miss What’s-her-name to me,” objected Trixie.

“Oh, you can come round her if you try. Confide in her that you’ve been very self-willed, and wild, and rackety, but that you see the error of your ways, and would like to make a friend of her. I’ll give you a helping hand when I can. I’ll hint that Florence is rather down on you – that you’re not a bad sort after all. You can take them all in if you like. Major Winchester will be quite hoodwinked – it will be delicious.”

Trixie’s face cleared.

“I must say you’re not a bad ally, Mab, when you give your mind to it,” she said. “But I wish I knew what it is you’re planning.”

“Wait a bit,” said Miss Forsyth. “It’s first-rate – I can tell you that much.”

Chapter Three

A Friend in Need

It is sometimes almost worse to arrive too soon than too late. In the latter case you have at least the certainty of being expected, and even if people are cross and irritated at having been kept waiting, still your place is there for you; there is no question about it. Above all, if the case be that of arriving on a first visit, I for one should prefer the risk of the disagreeables attending a tardy appearance to the far from improbable humiliations consequent upon turning up prematurely. Not to speak of the positive inconveniences of no carriage at the station, or no room for you in the one that may have come to fetch some other guest by the previous train to your orthodox one, there is the blank look on your hostess's face – “more for luncheon” it seems to say; and the extraordinarily uncomfortable announcement that your room is not *quite ready* – will be so directly, but “the So-and-so's only left this morning, and the house has been so full;” and a sense of outraged and scurrying housemaids when it is suggested that you should just “leave your wraps in the dressing-room till after luncheon.” The visit must develop into something extraordinarily agreeable which succeeds in entirely living down the annoying contrariety of such a *début*.

It was unfortunate, most unfortunate, that the Wentworths' visit to Grey Fells Hall should have been inaugurated in this uncomfortable way. They were not expected at Cobbolds, the small station five miles off, but the nearest, nevertheless, till four in the afternoon, whereas it was barely twelve o'clock when they found themselves, their boxes and their bewildered attendant stranded on the platform in a drizzling rain and biting north-country wind, absolutely at a loss what to do and whither to betake themselves. How had they managed it? you may well ask, for the journey from London to Cloughshire is a matter of some six or seven hours even by express train, and the travellers had not started in the middle of the night. This was what had happened. In an evil moment some mischievous imp had suggested to Mrs Wentworth the expediency of “breaking the journey” seven-eighths of the way, or thereabouts, at a country town where a cousin of hers was the wife of the vicar.

“They will be so delighted to see us,” she said to Imogen, when Imogen, not unnaturally, demurred.

“But I don't want to see them; not the very least bit in the world, mamma,” she said. “It will be such a nuisance to undo our things for one night when they're all nicely packed, and my new frocks will be *so* crushed – two days instead of one. And very likely we'll get into the wrong train or something, the next morning, just when Mrs Helmont has told us exactly what time to leave London, and all about it.”

But in Mrs Wentworth, for all her gentleness – and it was genuine, not superficial – there was a curious touch of obstinacy; obstinacy in this instance grounded on a strong motive which her daughter did not suspect. The truth was she was dying to show off Imogen – Imogen in the freshness of her beauty and her new clothes – to the old school-friend, whose small means and large family prevented from often enjoying such sights. And Mrs Wentworth pleased herself by taking credit for the pleasure she believed she was unselfish in giving; “it will brighten up poor dear Henrietta to hear of all we are doing, as well as to see Imogen,” she thought; not reflecting that the advent of a party of three in an already overcrowded parsonage would entail considerable trouble and, indeed, expense to their entertainers.

She enjoyed it however, whether “Henrietta” and her husband did or not. And Imogen made herself very happy with the children, especially the big boys; though she disappointed her mother by not in the least posing as a “come-out” fashionable young woman, and gave Colman an hour or two's unnecessary stitching by tearing the skirt of her pretty new travelling dress.

So far, however, no great harm was done. That was reserved for the next morning, when, on consulting the time-table at the early breakfast for his guests' benefit, worthy Mr Stainer made the appalling discovery that the train by which they were expected at Cobbolds did not stop at Maxton, their present quarters!

What was to be done?

"No matter – stay till the next. It gets to – stay, let us see – yes, it gets there at six. Plenty of time to dress for dinner. I suppose these smart friends of yours don't dine at soonest till half-past seven," said the vicar.

"Oh, not till eight, *certainly*," said Mrs Wentworth with a faint touch of reproach. "But I don't know – the evenings are drawing in so, and it is so cold. No, I think we had better go by the *earlier* train you mentioned, reaching Cobbolds at – when did you say?"

"Somewhere between eleven and twelve," Mr Stainer replied. "Well, as you like," for a glance from behind the tea-urn had warned him not to press the guests to stay over another luncheon; "of course you know best. But you will have to hurry. Shall I telegraph them?"

"You are very kind – yes please, at once. It is some miles from the post-office I fancy, but that won't signify; I can settle about the portage when I get there," said Mrs Wentworth airily, though not without some internal tremors. "Mrs Belmont will be all the more pleased to have us sooner than she expects." Blissful ignorance! The Fells was a good seven miles from the telegraph office, and there was a standing order that unless telegrams were doubly dubbed "immediate," they were to be confided to the groom who rode over to fetch the afternoon letters – an arrangement known of course to the *habitués* among the Belmont guests, as belonging to which Mrs Wentworth gave herself out.

Thus and thus did it come to pass that, as already described, a forlorn group of three shivering women was to be seen on the uncovered platform of the little wayside station that dreary, drizzling November morning.

"There *must* be a carriage for us," said Mrs Wentworth; "there has been heaps of time for the telegram to reach them. You may be sure they would send a man on horseback with it."

"All the same there just *isn't* a carriage nor the ghost of one. I told you how it would be, mamma," said Imogen, unsympathisingly.

Mrs Wentworth felt too guilty to resent the reproach. Suddenly came the sound of wheels. "There now!" she exclaimed, "I believe it's coming. Can you see," she went on anxiously, peering out from the very inefficient shed-like roof, which was the only shelter at that side of the station; "can you see," to the station-master, or porter, or station-master and porter mixed together, who was the only visible functionary, and whose good offices and opinion she had already sought, "if that is the carriage for us?"

"It's from The Fells, sure enough, but it's naught but a dogcart," he replied, disappearing as he spoke to reconnoitre the dogcart and inquire its errand.

"A dogcart!" ejaculated Mrs Wentworth aghast. Imogen could scarcely help laughing at her horrified expression.

"Well, mamma," she was beginning, "you know you – " But she was interrupted. The station-master returned, followed by a tall, a very tall man – a gentleman; of that there was no doubt, notwithstanding the coarseness and muddiness of his huge ulster and his generally bespattered appearance. Who could he be? Mrs Wentworth jumped to one of her hasty conclusions; he must be the agent or bailiff. She was profoundly ignorant of English country life, and was not without a strain of the Anglo-Indian arrogance so quickly caught by the small-minded of our country-folk in the great Eastern Empire – yes, that was it. They had doubtless sent him on quickly to say that the brougham, or omnibus, was on its way.

"Are you," she was commencing; but the new-comer had begun to speak before he heard her.

"I'm very sorry," he said, lifting his rough cap as he spoke, "I'm afraid there's some mistake – that is, if I am speaking to Mrs Wentworth?"

“Yes, of course I am Mrs Wentworth. Is the carriage not coming? I thought they – Mrs Belmont, I mean – had sent you to say it was coming. I telegraphed quite early this morning from Maxton. It’s really too – ”

“Mamma,” whispered Imogen. Her young eyes had detected a slight, though not unkindly, smile stealing over the stranger’s face at her mother’s tone. “Mamma, I – ”

“No,” he replied, interrupting again, though so gently, that one could scarcely have applied to the action so harsh a word. “No, I was not sent, indeed I could not even have volunteered the office, for I happen to know no telegram had reached the Fells this morning. I came out on my own account to have a battle with a young horse.” He glanced in the direction of his dogcart and groom. “It’s all right now, he is thoroughly mastered; and, as far as *safety* is concerned, you would both be quite safe if you would let me drive you to the Fells. Upon my word, I think it would be the best thing to do.” Imogen all but clapped her hands.

“Oh yes, it would be delightful,” she said.

“How good of you! Do say you will, mamma.” Mrs Wentworth looked both frightened and undecided.

“Are you sure it would be safe?” she said. “And, may I ask who you are?” she added with some hesitation, for that she had been on the verge of some rather tremendous mistake was beginning to be clear to her, “and it is so raining.”

The stranger glanced upwards.

“Not quite so heavily now,” he said. “I think we shall have a fine afternoon. And, after all, shall you not be better off under mackintoshes and umbrellas for half an hour or so, and then safe and warm in the house up there, than shivering down here in that wretched little waiting-room for two or three hours?”

“But, if they knew, would they not send down to fetch us at once?” said Mrs Wentworth feebly. Major Winchester considered.

“Not *within* two hours,” he said. “The stable arrangements at my uncle’s are, to say the least, complicated. I *think* the wagonette that was to fetch you was bringing some ‘parting guest’ to the station to go on by the two o’clock train and then wait for you, so you see – ”

“Of course,” cried Imogen. “Mamsey, you *must*; only – there’s the luggage, and – your groom?”

“He can come up on the wagonette, and see that the luggage comes too. The more important question,” he went on, smiling again, “is your maid. But Smith can look after her: he’s a very decent fellow, and I daresay he knows the station-master’s wife.”

“Oh, Colman will be all right,” said Imogen. “She’s not at all stuck-up, and very good-natured.” Colman had very discreetly retired a few paces. “Mamma, you must see it’s by far the best thing to do, as Mr – ” She stopped short.

“Of course, I have not introduced myself; my name is Winchester,” said their new friend. “I call Mr Belmont my uncle, or rather, I should say, *Mrs Belmont* is my aunt *à la mode de Bretagne*.”

Mrs Wentworth’s face cleared.

“I must have heard of you,” she said. “You are really very kind, and, perhaps – ”

Imogen had run off; in an instant she reappeared.

“The back seat of your dogcart, or whatever it is – it’s larger than a dogcart, isn’t it?” – she said, “is a very good size, larger than usual. You would be quite comfortable in it, mamma, and then,” she went on, turning confidently to Major Rex, “she wouldn’t *see* the horse whatever he did. Then you’d be all right, wouldn’t you, dear? You know we should be really safe.”

And so it was arranged. Imogen’s first care, it must be owned, was for her mother; to Mrs Wentworth were appropriated the best of the wraps and rugs and mackintoshes disinterred from their own travelling gear, or extricated from some mysterious inner receptacle of the “trap,” by the obliging Smith. And as the rain was evidently clearing, the prospects in every sense grew brighter, as Imogen stepped back a pace or two to contemplate admiringly the result of their joint efforts in the person

of Mrs Wentworth, so swathed and packed that really, as her daughter said, she “couldn’t get wet if she tried, and *certainly* couldn’t fall out.”

“And what about yourself, Miss Wentworth?” said Major Winchester kindly, as he seconded Smith in his efforts to tuck up the young lady, if not so completely as her mother, yet sufficiently to keep her dry. “Have you no objection to watching Paddy’s antics?” for a dance or two and a playful plunge showed that the “old man” was not as yet entirely exorcised from the young horse. But he was well under control. No sooner had they started than it became evident that Paddy knew who held the reins. They went fast but steadily; notwithstanding the cold, and the rain, and the mist – now slowly rising on all sides, for the freshening breeze to chase it away – the sensation was exhilarating and exciting.

“I,” replied the girl, after a moment’s silence, given to watching Paddy gradually settling to work like a child after a feint of resistance; “I! no, of course I’m not frightened – It’s delightful,” and her glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes showed that she meant what she said. She did look exceedingly pretty just then.

“What a charming child!” thought Rex. “Quite as plucky as even bold Trixie herself, and so simple and unspoilt and refined. I only hope that two or three weeks hence, if they stay as long, I may be able to say as much of her.” He glanced at her involuntarily, with a certain look of anxiety in his kind eyes.

“I’m all right, thank you,” said Imogen, detecting the glance. “I’m not getting a bit wet.”

“It wasn’t – ” he began, then stammered, and broke off, for he felt himself colouring a little. Imogen’s face expressed some surprise. “It would almost be better for those girls to be uncivil and unkind to her, to the verge of endurance, than for them to ‘take her up,’ and make her like themselves,” had been the parent thought of the misgiving in his face. He turned round to Mrs Wentworth. “I do hope you are not *too* uncomfortable?” he said. “That back seat, as Miss Wentworth discovered, is a degree better than is often the case, but still it must be rather wretched.”

“No, truly; I am very fairly comfortable,” she replied, “and I almost think you are right, and that the rain is going off.”

Mrs Wentworth had a sweet voice, suggesting the possession of a sweet temper. Major Winchester began to like her better than he had done hitherto. “I should not think her the wisest of women, but a good creature all the same, though the daughter strikes me as having the more character of the two. Poor souls, I do trust they will never have cause to repent their expedition to The Fells. I will do what I can to make their visit pleasant,” he said to himself, with short-sighted chivalry.

And he outdid himself in little kindnesses of talk and manner during the remainder of the drive, pointing out any objects of interest which they passed, amusing them with little descriptions of the guests and the family at The Fells, into which he endeavoured, so far as loyalty to his hosts permitted, to infuse some slight touches of warning.

“Yes, Beatrix Helmont, my youngest cousin, is the baby – at least, the youngest sister – and as is often the case, I suppose, very fairly spoilt. I don’t fancy you will take to her as much as to Florence, Miss Wentworth. There is a great deal of good in Florence, though she requires knowing.”

“But she is twenty-three or twenty-four – ever so old, isn’t she?” said Imogen, in a disappointed tone.

“Ye-es, quite that; but still, that is not very old, is it?” and he looked round to Mrs Wentworth to have his opinion endorsed.

Mrs Wentworth, however, had not caught his last remarks.

“Are we close to The Fells now?” she asked, eagerly. “I fancy I remember this part of the way. Don’t we come to the lodge at a turn up that hilly road?”

“Yes,” Major Winchester replied. “What a good memory you have! We are regularly on the Fells now. Take care your wraps don’t blow off.”

They were just turning as he spoke. The road came right out on the moorland, and the wind met them straight in the face – the two in the front, that is to say – Mrs Wentworth was protected.

“Oh, how splendid!” said Imogen. “What delicious air! And what a great stretch of country, and those grim rocks. Are those what you call the Fells, Mr – are you Mr – Winchester?”

“Major,” Rex corrected, smiling. “Yes, Grey Fells Hall is just in front of those rocks, but on the other side. You will see in a minute. The gardens and lawn are over there.”

“Oh, I think it’s delightful! Mamma, you didn’t tell me it was half so nice,” the girl exclaimed.

And as they passed through the lodge gates and up the long and rather steep drive, her face grew increasingly radiant.

“What a dear old house! I should love to explore it from top to bottom,” she said. “I do hope the girls won’t be out. I am longing so to see them. Of course, they can’t be looking out for us, as we have come so much too early.”

Chapter Four

As Ill-Luck would have it

Major Winchester did not reply. He appeared engrossed with Paddy, for as Imogen uttered the last words, they had driven to the front of the house, and he was preparing to draw up.

"I don't quite know how best to manage," he said, after a moment or two, glancing round him doubtfully. "Paddy has been very good, so far; but he will probably begin now to be fidgety, and to long for his stable. So I must not get down to ring. Can – ?"

"Oh yes," said the girl, starting up as she spoke, and very nearly precipitating herself to the ground, "I'll jump down in an instant."

"Get down, please, but don't talk of jumping. There now, very cautiously. It needs an apprenticeship to get out and in of vehicles like this. Yes, that is the bell, the chain at your right;" and a ponderous resounding clang told that Miss Wentworth's vigorous pull had taken effect. Imogen looked round half alarmed.

"What a noise!" she said.

It was not too quickly responded to, nevertheless, and when a footman at last made his appearance, he raised his eyebrows with an expression of surprised inquiry, which would not have conduced to the two ladies' equanimity had they been alone and unprotected by Major Winchester's presence.

"Quick, Thomas," he said, with a touch of imperiousness. "Call some one, or catch hold of his head yourself. Don't you see the horse won't stand, and the lady has to get down?"

Thomas bestirred himself to the extent of hallooing to an assistant gardener, who happened to be passing; then, when Paddy's impatience was perforce calmed, he himself condescended to approach the back of the cart in a gingerly fashion. But Major Winchester was before him.

"I will help Mrs Wentworth down," he said.

"Go at once and tell your mistress, or – or Miss Florence – no, unluckily, she's out – Miss Belmont, if you can find her, that Mrs and Miss Wentworth have arrived by an earlier train. And tell Brewer to speak to me before he goes to the station; there's some luggage to come up."

Most of The Fells domestics liked "the Major," as he was dubbed in the servants' hall; but Thomas, lazy and conceited, was an exception. He disappeared, however, as he was told, but not without some inaudible mutterings.

"Queerish ladies," he said to himself, "arriving before lunch and no luggage, nor maid, nor nothing. The luggage won't be much to show when it do come, I'll take my – " But here he was interrupted, and by no less a person than Trixie. Thomas's face cleared: he wasn't going to scour the country in search of Mrs Belmont, nor Miss neither. Here was *one* of the ladies; it did not in the least signify that Miss Beatrix was a byword for never doing anything she was asked to do, or being of any use to any one. She would serve *his* purpose, which was to get back to his morning paper and glass of beer "comfortable" in the pantry without delay.

"If you please, ma'am," he began, "the Major's at the hall door with two ladies, arrived unexpected, and I was to tell you."

To his delight and rather to his surprise, instead of telling him to hunt up her sisters, Trixie stopped short with evident interest.

"Two ladies?" she inquired. "Did you hear their name? And did Major Winchester tell you to find *me*?"

Thomas was obliged to equivocate.

"Not – not exactly yourself persinly, ma'am, but one of the ladies."

“All right, I’ll go at once,” and Beatrix, enchanted at the first act in the drama opening so auspiciously, rushed off.

“Of course it’s the girl and her mother, I’m sure of it, just because Rex evidently *didn’t* mean me,” she said to herself. “Mab shan’t be able to say I’m stupid; I won’t tell her how it happened, and she’ll be all the more impressed by my cleverness when she sees me hand and glove with the little fool at the very first go.” She looked very handsome and attractive as, moderating her rate of progress, she approached the front hall. It was a large square room, with corners screened off, containing couches and tables invitingly grouped. There were two fireplaces, in which for many months in the year great logs were always to be seen in glowing cheeriness. There was the usual display of antlered heads and stuffed glassy-eyed reynards and other trophies of the kind. To Imogen, new to English country life on this scale, it was entrancing, and as Beatrix in her trim sailor-blue serge, with wavy dark hair and the brilliant Belmont complexion and eyes, appeared at the curtained doorway, an unusual gentleness, almost appeal, in her expression and bearing, the poor little stranger’s heart went out to her with a great leap. Considerably to his surprise, much more considerably to his disgust, when Rex Winchester turned round from his instructions to Brewer on the hall steps, the two girls were, so to say, already in each other’s arms – literally speaking, they were just concluding their greeting with a kiss, while Mrs Wentworth stood by in smiling approval.

“Yes,” she said. “I was sure I was right, and you are baby Beatrix; just – let me see – two years and a few weeks older than Imogen.”

“How interesting!” said Trixie sweetly. “We must be *great* friends, must we not?”

“Yes, *indeed*,” said Imogen. “I’m so glad to have seen you first, as you are so much the nearest me in – ”

“Is Alicia not in, Trixie?” interrupted Major Winchester. “I sent for her.”

His tone was dry, to say the least. Beatrix turned away for half a second: he did not see the flash of rage and malice in her eyes – she had calmed it down before she replied in the same soft, almost timid tones.

“I don’t know, I’m sure. Florence is out. I daresay Alicia’s resting: she generally is at this time of day.”

“And every other,” thought her cousin.

“What mischief in Heaven’s name is the girl up to now?” he went on to himself. Then half shocked at his suspiciousness he glanced at her sharply: she had not anticipated this and her eyes fell. “I knew it could not be sincere,” he thought, with a curious mixture of regret and satisfaction.

“I knew Florence was out,” he said aloud.

“But before hunting up mamma or Alicia, had I not better take our guests to the morning-room?” said Beatrix prettily.

And Rex could not oppose so natural a suggestion.

Mrs Belmont was not in the morning-room. Truth to tell, she had dedicated the hours before luncheon to-day to some necessary household discussions with her upper servants.

“The Meldons will have gone, and the Wentworths not coming till nice and late in the afternoon,” she had said to herself with satisfaction; “all the other people can be left to themselves – not like strangers.”

So that, in spite of her really friendly feelings to the mother and daughter – her own peculiar guests indeed – it can easily be understood that the announcement of their premature arrival was not a joyful one in her ears.

“*Come!*” she repeated to the maid who had disinterred her and the old housekeeper in the linen-room, where she was really enjoying herself, “you don’t say so. At *this* time of day! it is too provoking. My cap is all on one side, I’m certain, and we were just getting into the new pillow-cases, Baxter. The girls will be so put out too. And Florence gone for me to Culvey! Alicia is sure to be asleep. I

must go – it will all have to stand over, Baxter; you must put everything back again,” and with a very natural sigh the poor lady prepared to descend to the morning-room.

She was hospitable and kind, but of a slightly less easy-going nature than her husband and family in general: in reality she was less selfish. But she did not show to advantage as the *châtelaine* of The Fells, when she entered the morning-room, feeling and looking worried and perplexed.

“So glad to see you, so sorry I was not down-stairs!” she said in a somewhat constrained tone, as Mrs Wentworth pressed forward effusively. And the cheek which received the visitor’s kiss was quickly turned away. “Your daughter? ah, yes, of course. I remember. You have a son too? No? Oh, I am confusing you with Mrs – Why, Trixie, you here!” in a tone of extremest surprise. “Wonders will never cease! *Can* she be going to turn over a new leaf?” she asked herself mentally. Anyway, it was a convenience for the time being to have one daughter at hand; “perhaps what her father said to her this morning is going to have some effect,” she went on to herself, feeling by no means disposed in the present emergency to quarrel with the goods the gods sent her, even though they were but Beatrix.

“I was just thinking that, perhaps, Mrs Wentworth and Miss – No?” In response to a smiling gesture of deprecation from her new friend, “am I really to call you Imogen; that *is* sweet of you.” This was going a little too far. An undisguised frown on her cousin’s face startled Trixie a little. “I was thinking,” she repeated in a more natural tone, “that, perhaps, they would like to see their rooms.”

“Very decidedly so, I should say,” replied Major Winchester sharply.

Beatrix turned to her mother.

“Which rooms, mamma?” she said in a low tone. But Imogen overheard it. “Fancy,” she thought, with a little thrill of disappointment, “fancy her not knowing. Why, if they had been coming to stay with us, I would have been running about to get flowers for their toilet-tables, and all sorts of things like that. But, I suppose, it is different when people have so many visitors.”

The momentary feeling, however, was visible, as were most of the girl’s feelings to quick observation at least, on her transparent countenance. As she raised her sweet eyes, she caught Major Winchester’s fixed on her with a curious expression. She felt herself flush a little.

“I do believe he knows what I am thinking,” she said to herself, with a strange mingling of pleasure and annoyance, “and I have not known him two hours!”

But the sound of Mrs Belmont’s voice recalled her to practical matters.

“The brown room and the little pink room beside it; you know, Trixie, in the corner by the west staircase. Only – I am really so vexed – I am afraid your room is not quite ready, Mrs Wentworth, you see – ”

“Mrs Wentworth,” repeated the owner of the name reproachfully, “am I not to be ‘Lucy’ to you, dear Mrs Belmont?”

At another time the good lady would probably have been touched and would have responded kindly, but just now she was thoroughly put out.

“It is twenty years, if not more, since we met, and then only for a couple of days. I really had not the least idea what your name was; but the question is your room. – Trixie!” glancing round despairingly.

Mrs Wentworth put a brave effort on herself; she was determined that Imogen should not suspect she was feeling mortified.

“What does it matter about my room?” she said, laughingly. “I can’t allow you to treat me as *quite* a stranger, even though you had forgotten my name. Can’t I take off my wraps in – ” “In Beatrix’s room,” she was going to have said, but she was interrupted.

“In mine,” said a new-comer. “It is Mrs and Miss Wentworth, is it not? I heard of some arrival, and knowing Florence was out, and you busy, dear Mrs Belmont, mayn’t I be of a little *use for once*?” and Miss Forsyth – for she it was – drew near her hostess with an air of half-timid deprecation. Mrs Belmont felt completely bewildered. She had little presence of mind at any time,

and this extraordinary metamorphosis was too much for her. Major Winchester, be it observed, had before this taken his departure.

“I – I am sure I have never refused to let you be of use, Mabella,” said the elder lady, rather stiffly.

Miss Forsyth drew still nearer, and whispered a word or two in her ear. Mrs Belmont’s face softened.

“Now, Mrs Wentworth, do come with me,” said the young woman. “My room is next to Trixie’s, where I know she is dying to take your daughter. I can lend you anything – slippers, brushes, combs – even a tea-gown if your dress is damp, and if you would so far condescend?”

Mrs Wentworth looked at her. Miss Forsyth was undeniably plain, almost coarse-looking. Her features were large, her complexion swarthy; the only redeeming point, as not infrequently is the case with otherwise ugly people, was her eyes. They were large and dark, and therefore supposed to be beautiful.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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