

Molesworth Mrs.

Sweet Content



Mrs. Molesworth

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Содержание

Chapter One.	5
Chapter Two.	9
Chapter Three.	13
Chapter Four.	17
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

Mrs. Molesworth

Sweet Content

Chapter One. An “Only” Baby

“Sweet Content.” That was my name when I was a very tiny child. It may sound rather conceited to tell this of myself, but when I have told all the story I am now beginning, I don’t *think*, at least I *hope*, you, whoever you are that read it, won’t say I am conceited. Indeed, if I thought any one I knew, or rather that knew me, would be likely to read it and to know that the “I” of it was *me*, I am not by any means sure that I would write it. But, of course, it is not at all certain that it ever will be printed or seen by any one (except, perhaps, by my children, if, when I am grown up, I am married and have any) who ever heard of me. The world seems to me a very big place; there are such lots and lots of people in it, old ones and children, and middling ones; and they are all busy and taken up about their own affairs.

Some other children might like to read my story, just *as* a story, for I do think some parts of it are rather *extra* interesting; but it is not probable that any of them would recognise *me*, or the other “characters” (I think that is the right word) in it. Except – except some of the other characters themselves! They don’t know I am writing it, perhaps they never will know about it; but if they did – yes, even if they read every word of it – I don’t think I’d mind. They are so truly – no, I mustn’t begin telling about them like that; you will understand, all in good time, why, least of any people in the world, perhaps, I should mind their reading the exactly how it was of everything I have to tell. This shows how perfectly I can trust them.

And in saying even that, though I really couldn’t help it, I’m afraid I have already got rather out of the proper orderly way of telling a story.

I will start clearly now. What I have written already is a sort of preface or introduction. And it has a much better chance of being read than if I had put it separately.

As I began about my baby name, and as I am going to use it for a title – for several reasons, as you will see – I will first explain about it.

I have been an only child ever since I can remember. But I was not always an only child. When I was a baby of a very few months old, a terrible trouble came to our house: scarlet fever broke out very badly in the little town or big village, whichever you like to call it, where we lived then, and where we still live. And among the first deaths from it were those of my brothers and sister, the doctor’s own children! Fancy —*three* dear little children all dying together – in two days at least, I think it was. No one was to blame for their catching the infection; the fever broke out so suddenly that there was no time to send them away, and though papa, as the doctor, had of course to be constantly attending the fever cases, his own children must have caught it before there could possibly have been time for him to bring it to them. Even if he *could* have done so, which was doubtful, as for the two or three days before they got ill he never came into the house at all, and did not even see mamma, but eat his meals and slept in a room over the stables. I have always been glad for papa to know it could not have come through him, for even though it would have been in the way of duty – and papa is a perfect *hero* about duty – he might have blamed himself for some carelessness or forgetfulness. And once – though they seldom speak of that awful time – mamma said something of the kind to me.

I was the baby, as I have told you. A tiny, rather delicate little thing. And, strange to say, I did not catch the fever. They did not send me away; it seemed no use after all the risks I had already run. I could almost think that poor mamma must have felt as if it would not so very much matter whether

I got it or not; *my* dying then could not have made things much worse for her to bear! For, after all, a very little baby, even though it is nice and funny and even sweet in its way, can't be anything like as interesting or as much a part of your life as talking, understanding, loving children. So it seems to me, though mamma doesn't quite agree with me. She loves me so very much that I think she couldn't bear to think there ever was a time when I was less to her. I fancy the truth is that she does not very clearly remember what she felt during those dreadful days; I hope she does not, for even to think of them makes me shiver. They were such dear children; so bright and healthy and happy. Mamma seemed like a person in a dream or a trance, our old Prudence has often told me, after the last, Kenneth, the eldest, it was, died. Fancy the empty nurseries, fancy all the toys and books, and, worst of all, the little hats, and jackets, and *shoes* lying about just as usual! For they were only ill four days – oh, I think it must have been *awful*. And yet so beautiful too.

And the little, stupid, crying baby lived, and throve, and grew well and strong. When papa, weeks after, ventured at last to look at me, he could not believe I was the same! I *hope* he felt it was a little tiny bit of a reward to him for his goodness to others. To think of him going about as usual, no, not as usual, for he worked like *ten*, I have been told, to save others, though his own poor heart was breaking. And he did save many – that, too, must have been a real reward.

He kissed me gravely – Prudence told me this, too – but just then I smiled, a slow-coming baby smile, I think it must have been; you know how a baby stares first before it makes up its mind to smile – and he stopped; he had been turning away, and took me in his arms.

“My poor little darling,” he said, “I feel almost afraid to love you. But no, that would be faithless.”

And he carried me downstairs to mamma in the drawing-room. I can fancy how she must have been sitting there alone, looking out on to the pretty old-fashioned garden behind the house, and watching the spring flowers blossoming out, for it was in spring that all this happened, and thinking of *her* spring flowers. I have so often fancied it, and seen her there in her deep black dress, in my mind, that it has come to be like a real picture to me. But of course I don't know what actually happened, for Prudence wasn't there to see. Only I *think* that from that day they took me into their hearts in a quite wonderful way, for, ever since I can remember, they have been, oh, so *very* good to me – too good, I am afraid. I fear they spoiled me. And I for long, long, was not a good and grateful little daughter to them.

It is difficult to blame them for spoiling me; is it not? And perhaps there is just a *little* excuse for me in its having been so. I don't want to make excuses for myself, but looking back I do see that I didn't know in the least how selfish, and self-seeking, and vain and proud and stuck-up, and everything horrid like that, I was. Jealous, too; but that, you see, I had no reason to find out for a long while. What a good thing it was for me that a day came when I was really tested!

I was a fat, healthy, perfectly happy baby, and I grew into a fat, healthy, perfectly happy little girl. Nothing seemed to come wrong to me. I never got ill, and by nature I think I must have had a very even, comfortable temper. I was always smiling and satisfied. Now you see how I came by my name of “Sweet Content.” Mamma kept it for a sort of private pet name, but it did very well with my real name, which is Constantia. And this was naturally shortened into “Connie.” I remember papa and mamma laughing very much one day at a new servant, who must, I suppose, have overheard my private name, and wishing to be very respectful, spoke of me as “Miss *Content*.”

“Never let it get into ‘Discontent,’ Connie,” said papa.

“That she never will,” said mamma fondly. “I am sure all the good fairies, and none of the spiteful ones, were at my Sweet Content's christening.”

I was quite used to hearing pretty things like that said to me or of me, and I took them as a matter of course, never doubting that I deserved them. And as no one contradicted me, and I had everything I wanted, and as I was not naturally a cross-grained or ill-tempered child, the spoiling did not show as quickly, or quite in the same ways, that it usually does, though I cannot help thinking

that some people must have noticed it and thought me a selfish little goose. If they did, however, they were too kind to mamma, remembering her sad story, ever to say so. Besides, mamma was gentle and sweet to everybody, and she had too much good taste and feeling to go on fussing about me before people, in the way some *very* foolish parents do.

So altogether, up to the time I was ten or eleven years old, my fool's paradise was a very perfect one. I was quite satisfied that I was a model of every virtue, as well as *exceedingly* clever, and I am afraid papa and mamma thought so too; as to my looks, I have no doubt they were more than satisfied too; though to do myself justice, I really did not trouble myself about that part of my perfections, beyond being very particular indeed about my clothes, which I never would wear if they were the least shabby or spoilt. And as I was careless and extravagant, I must have cost a good deal in this way.

"Connie has such wonderful taste for a child of her age," I remember hearing mamma say. "She cannot bear anything ugly, or ill-assorted colours."

All the same, Connie had no objection to fishing for minnows in the pond with a perfectly new white muslin frock on, which was not rendered lovelier by streaks of green slime and brown mud stains all over the sash. I don't know if I thought those "well-assorted colours." And though I told mamma that my every-day hat was very common-looking without ostrich feathers, I never troubled myself that my best one was left out in the garden one Sunday afternoon, so that on Monday morning it was found utterly ruined by a shower of rain that had come on in the night!

If I had had any brothers or sisters I *could* not have been so indulged, for papa was not a rich man – no country doctors ever are, I think – though he was not poor. But no more babies came, and, in her devotion to me, I hardly think mamma wished for them. I remained the undisputed queen of my kingdom.

Mamma was never very strong after her three children's deaths I was obliged to be gentle and quiet; I learnt to be so almost unconsciously, and this, I think, helped to make me seem much sweeter and better than I really was. I had almost no companions; there did not happen to be many children near my age in the neighbourhood, and even if there had been I doubt if mamma would have thought them good enough to be allowed to play with me. Though she never actually spoke against any one to me, I saw things quickly, and I know I had this feeling myself. Once or twice papa, who was too wise not to know that companionship is good for children, tried to bring about more friendship between me and our clergyman's daughters. But I did not take to them. Anna, the eldest, was "stupid," I said, so old for her age (she was really three years older than I), and always "fussing about her Sunday-school class, and helping her father, as if she was his curate." How well I remember mamma's smiling at this clever speech! And the two little ones were "babyish." Then some other girls at Elmwood went to school, and even in their holiday time I did not care to play with "school-girls." Besides which poor mamma was quite dreadfully afraid of infection, and perhaps this was only to be expected.

Once during some summer holidays when we happened to be at home, for mamma and I generally went to the seaside in July, a little cousin came to stay with us. He was two years younger than I and the only first cousin I had, for papa was an only child. He was mamma's nephew, and I know now that he was really a nice little boy; he is a nice big boy now, and we are great friends. But perhaps he was rather spoilt too, though in a different way from me, and I, as I have said, was very selfish indeed. So we quarrelled terribly, and the end of it was that poor Teddy was sent home in disgrace; no one dreaming that it *could* have been "Connie's" fault in the least.

I think, now, I have explained pretty well about myself and my home when I was very little. Nothing very particular happened till after my tenth birthday. I had scarcely a wish ungratified, and yet everybody praised me for my sweet contented disposition! There were times when I used to wish or to *fancy* I wished for a sister, though if this wish had magically come true, I don't believe I *would* have liked it really, and now and then papa and mamma would pity me for having no friends of my own age. But I do not think I was to be pitied for this, except that it certainly is better training for a child to have companions of one's own standing, instead of grown-up people who can see no fault in you.

Things happen queerly sometimes. What are called “coincidences” are not so uncommon after all. The first great change in my life happened in this way. It was in the autumn of the year in which I was ten. The weather had been dull and rainy. I had caught cold and was not allowed to go out for some days. I was tired of the house and of myself, and though no one ever thought of saying so to me, I feel sure I was very cross. I took it into my head to begin grumbling about being lonely; grumbling, it is true, was not usually a fault of mine, and it distressed mamma very much.

“My darling, it must be that you are not at all well,” she said, one dreary afternoon – afternoon just closing into evening – when she and I were sitting in the drawing-room waiting for papa to come in. He had told mamma he might be late, so that she had had dinner early with me, and there was only some supper ready waiting for him in the dining-room, beside our tea. I always dined early of course, but when papa expected to be home pretty early and not to go out again, he and mamma dined at half-past six or seven.

“No, it isn’t that at all,” I replied to mamma’s anxious question. “I’m not a bit ill. I’m quite well, and I’m sure it couldn’t have hurt me to go a ride on Hop-o’-my-thumb to-day.”

Hop-o’-my-thumb was my pony. I often called him “Hoppo” for short.

“Dearest Connie, in the rain?” said mamma.

“Well – I forgot about the rain. But to-morrow, mamma, I really must go out. It isn’t for me like for most children, you know. *They* have each other to play with in the house if they have to stay in. My only pleasure is being out-of-doors,” and I sighed deeply.

“You wouldn’t like to send for Anna Gale or the twins to spend the day with you to-morrow, would you?” mamma suggested. “I am so afraid that if this east wind continues papa won’t let you go out.”

“Oh, mamma dear, how you do fuss about me,” I said. “No, I don’t care for any of the Gales. Anna doesn’t know how to play: when she’s not cramming at her lessons, she’s cleaning the store-closet or making baby-clothes for the parish babies,” I said contemptuously.

“Poor girl! I don’t think she is a very lively companion,” mamma agreed. “But then she has no mother, and her aunt is a dull sort of woman.”

It never struck me that, whether *I* cared for her or not, an afternoon among my pretty toys and books, and other luxuries, might have been a pleasant change for Anna, even if she were rather commonplace and very overworked.

“I wish,” I remarked, “I do wish there were some nicer people at Elmwood. I wish you knew some nice companions for me, mamma.”

“So do I, darling. But you know, dearest, *how* different all would have been if – ” But here there came a sort of break in mamma’s voice, and she turned away.

I gave myself an impatient wriggle; not so that she could see it, but still it was horrid of me.

“I know what she was going to say,” I thought; “‘if Eva and the others had lived.’ But they *didn’t* live. I wish mamma would leave off thinking about them and think more about me who *am* alive.”

In my heart I did feel tenderly for mamma about her lost children; but I was so selfish that whatever came before *me*, even for a moment, annoyed me.

I sighed again more deeply. I have no doubt mamma thought it was out of sympathy with her. But just then there came the sound of wheels – faintly, for the drawing-room was at the back of the house, and the street at the front; up I jumped, delighted at the interruption.

“It’s papa,” I said, as I ran off to welcome him.

Chapter Two.

Papa's Bit of News

Yes, it was papa. I opened the front-door a tiny bit just to make sure. He had already sprung out of the dog-cart, throwing the reins to the groom, who went round by a back way to the stables. As papa came close to the door he caught sight of me.

"Connie!" he exclaimed; "my child, keep out of the draught. Well, dear," when he had come in and was standing by me in the hall, where a bright little fire was burning – we have such a nice hall in our house, old-fashioned and square, you know, with a fireplace – "well, dear, how are you? And what have you been doing with yourself this dull day?"

"Oh, I *have* been so tired of myself, papa," I said, nestling up to him. If there is, or could be, any one in the world I love better than mamma, it's papa! "I am so glad you've come home, and now we may have a nice evening, mayn't we?"

"I hope so. Mamma must let you come in at the end of dinner, to make up for your dull day," said papa. But I interrupted him eagerly:

"It's not dinner to-night, papa – not proper dinner – because you were so uncertain, you know."

"All the better," he replied, "for I have some news for mamma and you."

News! What could it be? It was not often that news of much interest came to enliven our quiet life. I felt so curious and excited about it that by the time we were all three comfortably settled round the dining-table, my cheeks were quite rosy and my eyes bright.

"Connie is looking quite herself again," said papa. "I don't like to hear her complain of being dull and tired. It isn't like you, my little girl."

"No, indeed," mamma agreed, "it isn't like our Sweet Content."

"But I'm not Sweet Content at all just now," I said. "I've been just *boiling* for Peter to go out of the room so that papa can tell us his news."

Mamma had not heard of it. She, too, glanced up with interest in her eyes.

"It isn't anything *very* important," said papa. "No one has left us a fortune, and all my patients are much the same; it is only that I think – nay, I may say I am sure – I have got a tenant for the Yew Trees."

Mamma looked pleased.

"I am very glad indeed," she replied. "I am quite tired of seeing the place deserted, and it is a good deal of expense to keep it at all tidy. I hope the offer is from some nice people."

I had not spoken. I was very disappointed. I did not care at all whether the Yew Trees was let or not. I was far too unpractical to think anything about the money part of it. I suppose papa saw the expression on my face, for he turned to me as he answered mamma's question.

"Yes," he said, "that is the best part of it. I think they are certainly very nice people. And, Connie, there will be some companions for you among them – two girls just about your age, perhaps a little older. Their name is Whyte – a Captain Whyte and his family; he has been in the navy, but is shelved for the present. They are old friends of the Bickersteths."

"White?" I repeated. I think I pictured it with an "i," not a "y." "White: what a common name!"

Mamma smiled. I think my pert speech seemed to her rather clever; but papa turned upon me almost sharply.

"Nonsense, child!" he said; "where do you get such ridiculous notions from?"

"*Our* name is so pretty," I replied, "and not at all common. It is a very old name, everybody says."

Our name is Percy; papa is Dr Percy. I don't think "Dr" suits it as well as "Major," or "Colonel," or "Sir." "Sir something Percy," not "Thomas," which is papa's name, but some grander name, like "Harold" or "Bevis," would sound lovely before "Percy."

Papa looked at me, and he, too, smiled a little.

"It is a pretty name if you like, my dear," he said, "and I am glad it pleases you. But as for our family being 'old' in the usual sense, don't get any fancies into your head. My father was an honest yeoman, and *his* father was only a head-man on a farm, though thrifty and hardworking, and, best of all, God-fearing. So that, bit by bit, he came to own land himself, and my father, following in his steps, was able to give me a first-rate education."

I had heard this before, or some of it, but it rather suited me to ignore it. I gave my head a little toss.

"I don't see that that has anything to do with 'White' being a common name," I said.

"Perhaps not. But I don't want you to get silly fancies in your head, dear," said papa, gently. "Trust me that Captain Whyte and his family are *not* common. It would be a pity for you to lose the chance of nice companions by any prejudice."

"Oh, Connie would never be so foolish as that," said mamma; "and the Bickersteths' friends are sure to be nice people."

Mr and Lady Honor Bickersteth, I may as well explain, were the former rector of Elmwood and his wife. Mr Bickersteth was a very old man now, and had resigned the living some years ago in favour of Mr Gale, Anna's father, who had been his curate. Lady Honor was quite an old lady, and though she was very kind, I think most of our neighbours were a little afraid of her. She was what is called "a lady of the old school," and had very precise ideas about how children should be brought up. I think she was the only person who ever dared to hint that I was at all spoiled. The Bickersteths still lived at Elmwood, in a pretty house a little way out of the town. They had never inhabited the vicarage, but had let the curate have it, so when Mr Gale became vicar it made no difference in that way. And even now Mr Bickersteth still preached sometimes when he was feeling well enough.

"I am quite sure the Whytes are nice people," papa repeated in a settled sort of way; "and I shall be very glad for Connie to make friends with them."

His tone was so decided that neither mamma nor I *could* have made any kind of objection. In my heart, too, I was really pleased, and not a little excited, at the idea of some new friends of my own age.

"Have they only those two children – the girls you spoke of?" asked mamma.

"Those are the only girls, but there are ever so many boys of all ages – from fifteen or sixteen down to a baby, I believe," papa answered. "The elder boys are to be weekly boarders at Leam; that is one reason why they have chosen Elmwood."

Mamma raised her eyebrows a very little.

"Then they are not – not rich?" she said.

"Not at all rich," papa replied promptly. "I want to spare them all the expense I can. Captain Whyte is to pay a very fair rent for the Yew Trees – the same that old Mrs Nesbitt paid. I would have taken less had he pressed it, but he did not. He is very gentlemanlike and liberal – it is curious how you can see the liberal spirit even when people are poor – so I want to meet him half-way. I shall have his final decision to-morrow morning, and if it is closing with the thing, I should like you to drive over with me to the Yew Trees and have a look round. There are some things it is only fair we should do, and as it is your house, Rose, you have a voice in it."

The Yew Trees had been mamma's own home as a girl. Her father had been the Elmwood doctor before papa, and this house was left to her as she was older than her sister. Yet she had never lived there since her parents' death; it was larger than we required, and mamma fancied it was lonely.

"I should like very much to go with you," she replied. "Except – Connie, dear, I don't like leaving you alone."

“Connie is much better,” said papa; “and I think the wind is changing. I should not wonder if we have a bright, mild day to-morrow. If so, she might come too. Old Martha always has a good fire in the kitchen at the Yew Trees, and if the rest of the house is draughty, she can wait for us there.”

I was very pleased at this. Strange to say, the little prejudice, though it seems exaggerated to speak of it as that, which I had so ridiculously taken up on the mention of the Whyte family, had quite melted away when I heard they were not rich. I liked the idea of being kind and generous to people less well off than ourselves, and though there was, perhaps, a little love of patronage in this, I hope it was not *only* that.

“I should *so* like to go too,” I exclaimed. “I do hope it will be a fine day. Papa, if you are going to paint and paper any of the rooms, *mayn’t* I choose the paper for the little girls.”

Papa smiled. I saw he was pleased.

“How can we tell which room will be theirs?” he said.

“Oh, I *think* we can guess. They’re sure to have a room together as they’re so near of an age. I daresay their papa and mamma will let them choose, and if the paper is the kind of one I mean, it would *make* them fix on the room where it is. I saw it in Fuller’s shop-window the other day; roses, mamma, little climbing ones on a pale grey ground. And the painting shall be pale grey with a pink line. It’ll be lovely.”

I felt so eager about it I could scarcely sit still.

“I’m afraid that kind of paper is rather expensive,” said papa. “And though I want to make the house neat and nice, still I can’t spend very much. However, we shall see.”

“The room my sister and I had would be the nicest,” said mamma, quite entering into my plans. Dear mamma is not *very* sensible about money – she won’t mind my saying so, for she says it herself. She leaves everything to papa, and a good deal *now*, I am proud to say, to me. “You remember it, Connie? Mrs Nesbitt called it her best room. It looks out to the side with a sort of square bow-window, though that sounds very Irish!” she added, laughing.

Papa glanced at her with such pleasure. He is always *so* delighted when mamma laughs.

“I do hope it will go through with the Whytes,” I heard him say to himself in a low voice.

“I am so glad they are not rich,” I said, with such satisfaction that papa and mamma really looked rather startled.

“Dear child – ” mamma began.

I had scarcely known I was speaking aloud. I felt myself grow a little red.

“I mean,” I began confusedly – “If they had been rich, you know, we couldn’t have done anything for them, and – and – they might have been spoilt, and very likely they would have looked down on us.”

“Even though they have such a common name,” said papa, mischievously. “Eh, Connie? Try and keep your mind clear of all those prejudices, my dear. Take people as they really are, and be as good and kind to them in deed and thought, rich or poor, grand or lowly, as you *can* be, and you will find it will be all right. The real way to get on happily is to think as little of *yourself* as possible: then you will neither despise those below you, nor expect to be despised by those above you.”

I don’t know that I quite understood papa then; I think I understand it better now. But that night my dreams were very pleasant; they were not about myself at all, nor even about the unknown Whytes. They were all about a lovely room with roses growing up the walls, and as they grew higher and higher the walls seemed to melt away and I found myself in a beautiful garden. But just as I was rushing forward in delight I caught sight of old Lady Honor sitting in an arbour, knitting.

“Connie Percy,” she said solemnly, in her rather peculiar voice; “remember, the true way to gather roses is first to plant them.”

Wasn’t it a funny dream?

The postman’s knock came, as it generally does, while we were sitting at breakfast. There were two letters for papa, only. I had forgotten about Captain Whyte’s answer being expected by post; my

head was full of the Yew Trees and the climbing rose paper, and wondering if it was going to be a fine enough day for papa to say I might drive out. It was only when he looked up with a pleased exclamation that I remembered what a disappointment that letter *might* have brought.

“It is all right,” said papa. “Captain Whyte agrees to my terms. Indeed, I almost wish,” he went on less brightly, “that I had not named so high a rent. I’m afraid they are very – well, not at all rich, to put it mildly. He says they cannot afford to do anything to the house, and as it is quite healthy, they will be satisfied if it is just clean and tidy. Strictly speaking, you see, I am not bound to do much to it; I did it up so thoroughly for Mrs Nesbitt, and it is in perfectly good order, substantially speaking, only – ”

“The papers are *so* ugly,” said mamma. “You know Mrs Nesbitt chose them all, and her taste was dreadful, and there are several little things that would make it much nicer for a family of younger people. These two poky little rooms at the back would make a nice schoolroom if thrown into one.”

“Just what Captain Whyte said himself,” papa agreed. “Well, we must go over it, and I will see what I can afford.”

“If they are paying a good rent,” said mamma, “that might make up a little.”

Dear mamma! she looked quite delighted with herself for being so business-like.

“Any way,” I said, “you really *must* let me choose a paper for the girls’ room. I’d rather pay for it myself, or count it as one of my birthday presents, papa, than not have it.”

Papa laughed at us both.

“What delightful ‘landladies,’ I suppose that’s the feminine of ‘landlord,’ even in the sense of a ‘proprietor,’ you would make, you two,” he said.

But by the way he stroked my head when he went out I could tell he was pleased. I think, though he very seldom found fault with me, that papa was terribly afraid of my becoming selfish. Ah, dear, I see now that I was that already!

To my great delight papa’s prophecy about the weather proved true. The wind *had* changed; it was mild, and, for November, pleasant. If only a little bit of sun would come out, said mamma, it would be perfect.

And after luncheon – which was my dinner – the sun *did* come out, and papa came driving up just as we were beginning to be afraid he was going to be late.

“I’ve two hours free,” he called out cheerfully, as he came in. “I only want a scrap of luncheon, Rose; I won’t be two minutes. Run and get your hat, Connie. Wrap up well, though it is a fine day, for you’ve not been out lately.”

Chapter Three. The Yew Trees

When I said “a pleasant day *for November*,” I think I should have left out the two last words. For they rather sound as if November was rarely pleasant, and though this may be the case in some parts of England it is certainly not so with us. Our Novembers are generally this way: there are some perfectly horrible days, rain, rain, slow and hopeless; not heavy, but so steady that you long to give a shake to the clouds and tell them to be quick about it. And then for a day or two, everything and everywhere are just *sopping*; it’s almost worse than the rain, for the sky still looks grim and sulky and as if it more than half thought of beginning again. But *then*— there comes sometimes a little wind, and faint gleams of sunshine, sparkle out, growing steadier and fuller, and then we generally have a few days together of weather that for pleasantness can scarcely be matched. They are soft, quiet, dreamy days; the sunshine is never bright exactly, but gentle and a little melancholy. There is a queer feeling of having been naughty and being forgiven: the wind comes in little whispering sobs, like a tiny child that can’t leave off crying all at once; the whole world seems tired and yet calm and hopeful in a far-off sort of way. Somehow these days make me feel much *gooder* (“better” doesn’t do so well) than even the brightest and loveliest spring or summer-time. They make me think more of Heaven – and they make me dreadfully sorry for all the naughty selfish thoughts and feelings I have had. Altogether there is something about them I can’t put in words, though once – I will come to that “once” later on – some one said a thing that seemed to explain it almost exactly.

And this day – the day we went to the Yew Trees – it was the first time mamma and I had been there for very long – was one of those days. It was not late in November, so though it had been raining tremendously only the day before, the clearing-up process had been got through much more expeditiously than usual, and the sun had of course rather more strength still with which to help.

“The wind has been pretty busy in the night,” said papa. “He must have sent out all his elves to work. I scarcely remember ever seeing the roads dry up so quickly.”

“But they are rather untidy elves all the same, papa,” I replied – I do like when papa says these funny kinds of things – “just look what a lot of their brushes and dusters they have left about.”

We were driving along Crook’s Lane as I spoke – the road to the Yew Trees goes that way, right through Crook’s Wood, and I pointed to lots of boughs and branches, many of them still with their leaves on, that had been blown off in the night.

“Yes,” said papa, laughing.

We were in the pony-carriage; at least we call it the pony-carriage, though it is much too big for Hoppo to draw, and at that time we drove a rather small horse, a cob, of papa’s in it. I did feel so happy and nice. Papa was driving and I was beautifully wrapped up in the seat behind, which is really quite as comfortable as the front one. It seemed to me I had never scented the air so fresh and sweet before, nor heard the birds’ mild autumn chirpings so touching and tender.

The Yew Trees is only about a mile from us, and over the fields it is still nearer. We were soon there, and old Martha, knowing we were coming, had got the door open and the front steps cleaned. It did not look at all desolate outside, for the garden had been kept tidy in a plain sort of way. The trees which give their name to the house make a short avenue from the gate; some of them are very fine yews, I believe, though I always think them rather gloomy.

Inside, the rooms of course seemed bare and chilly. I had never thoroughly explored it before, and I was surprised to find how large it was. Mamma, of course, knew every chink and cranny, and she took me all over while papa was speaking to a man – a builder, who had come by appointment to meet him. It was found that the partition between the two odd little rooms on the ground floor was a very thin one and could be taken away quite easily, and, to mamma’s great pleasure, papa decided on this.

“It will make such a nice bright schoolroom,” she said, as we went upstairs. “And here,” she went on, “is the room Bessie and I used to have. Isn’t it a nice room, Connie? Long ago, I remember, I used to fancy that if ever my little Evie had a sister, and we came to live here some day, I would have it beautifully done up for my own girls.”

Mamma’s voice faltered a little as she said this. I was not feeling cross or impatient just then, so I answered her more gently than I am afraid I sometimes did when she alluded to my little dead brothers and sister.

“Well, mamma dear,” I said, “if you do it up very prettily now it will be a great pleasure to the one little girl you still have beside you, and *also* to the two stranger little girls. I am sure, too, that if Eva knew about it, *she* would be pleased. And perhaps she does.”

“Darling! My own Sweet Content!” said mamma. She thought me *so* good for what after all was a great deal a fancy, though a harmless one, to please myself.

“It shall be done, Connie dearest, if I can possibly manage it,” said mamma. “I wonder if the man downstairs has anything to do with the papering and painting?”

It turned out that he had – in little country towns you don’t find separate shops for everything, you know. This was the very man in whose window I had seen the lovely rose paper. So it was settled that on our way home we should call in and look at several wall papers. And soon after, we left the Yew Trees and drove off again.

Mr Bickersteth’s house was between the Yew Trees and the town. As we were passing the gate it opened, and Lady Honor came out. She was walking slowly, for she was not strong now, and she was an old lady. In my eyes *very* old, for I could not remember her anything else. Papa drew up when he saw her, and jumped down.

“We have just been at the Yew Trees,” he said. “My wife and Connie are so interested in getting it made nice for your friends.”

“Ah, yes!” said Lady Honor, looking pleased, “we heard from Frank Whyte this morning that it is settled. Very good of you to go yourself to look over the house, my dear Mrs Percy. And Connie, too! That is an honour – however in this case you will be rewarded. You will find the Whyte girls delightful and most desirable companions for her, Mrs Percy, Evey especially.”

Mamma grew rather white, and gave a little gasp.

“*Evie*,” she whispered (I spell it “*Evie*,” because I know that was how mamma *thought* it), “do you hear, Connie?”

“Yes, of course,” I said rather sharply. No one else noticed mamma, for Lady Honor had turned to papa. I felt half provoked. I wished the little Whyte girl had not been called “*Evie*.”

“Mamma will always be mixing her up with our *Evie*, and thinking her a sort of an angel,” I thought to myself, and something very like a touch of ugly jealousy crept into my heart. Just at that moment, unluckily, Lady Honor glanced my way again.

“Are you quite well again, Connie?” she said. “You don’t look very bright, my dear. She needs companionship, doctor – companionship of her own age, as I have always told you. It will do her good in every way, yes, in *every* way,” and she tapped the umbrella which she was carrying emphatically on the ground, while she nodded her head and looked at me with the greatest satisfaction in her bright old eyes. I am not sure that there was not a little touch of mischief mingled with the satisfaction – a sort of good-natured spitefulness, if there could be such a thing! And perhaps it was not to be wondered at: “bright” I certainly was not looking, and indeed I fear there must have been something very like sulkiness in my face just then. “Sweet Content,” Lady Honor went on, half under her breath, as if speaking to herself, “a very pretty name and a very lovely character. I was telling the Whyte children about it when I was with them the other day.”

Mamma flushed with pleasure, but I felt inwardly furious. I was sure the old lady was mocking at me; afterwards I felt glad that papa had not seen my face just then.

For the rest of the way, after we had said good-bye to Lady Honor, I was quite silent. If it had not been for very shame, I would have asked to be put down at our own house when we passed it instead of going on to Fuller's shop. And mamma's gentle coaxing only made me crosser.

"I am sure you are too tired, darling," she kept saying. "You don't think you have caught cold? Do say, if you feel at all chilly?"

And when I grunted some short, surly reply, she only grew more and more anxious, till at last papa turned round and looked at me.

"She is all right, Rose," he said. "It is as mild as possible – leave the child alone. At the same time, Connie," he added to me, "you must answer your mother more respectfully. You have nothing to be so cross about, my dear."

I felt startled and almost frightened. It was very seldom papa found fault with me. Yet there was something in his tone which prevented my feeling angry; something in his tone and in his eyes too. It was as if he was a little sorry for me. I felt myself redden, and I think one or two tears crept up.

"I am sorry," I said, gently.

Papa's face brightened at once, and this made it easier for me to master myself. We were just at Fuller's by this time. I went in with papa and mamma, and after a minute or two I found it was not difficult to talk as usual, and to feel really interested in the papers. Papa and mamma chose very nice ones for the dining- and drawing-rooms, and I was asked my opinion about them all, especially about the schoolroom one. Then came the bedroom ones, most of which were quickly decided upon. I grew very anxious indeed when mamma asked to see the pale-grey-with-roses one, which had been in the window a week or two ago. Fuller's man knew it at once and brought it out.

"It is beautiful," he said, "a French paper, but expensive."

And so it was, dearer than the one chosen for the dining-room! But papa glanced at it and then at me with a smile.

"Yes," he said, "I will have that one for the bedroom to the right – the room off the passage up the first stair."

"Oh, papa, *thank* you," I said earnestly. And I meant it.

I have told all these little things to make you understand as well as I can, the mixture of feelings I had about the Whyte children even before I ever saw them. Now I will skip a bit of time, and go on to tell about how things actually turned out.

Things *almost never* turn out as one expects, the older one gets the more one sees this, especially about things one has thought of and planned a good deal. I had planned the first seeing the Whytes ever so many times in my own mind, always in the same way, you know, but with little additions and improvements the more I thought it over. The general idea of my plan was this. It was to be a lovely day: I was to ride over with papa one morning, Hoppie was to be looking his sweetest, and as we rode up to the house I was to see (and pretend not to see, of course) a lot of heads peeping out of a window to admire the little girl and her pony. Then we should be shown into the drawing-room, which I had furnished in my own mind rather shabbily and stiffly, and Captain and Mrs Whyte would come in and begin thanking papa for all his kindness, and would speak to me *very* nicely and rather admiringly, and Mrs Whyte would sigh a very little as if she wished her daughters were more like me. She would say how *very* much they wanted to know me, and she would beg papa to stay a few minutes longer while she called them. She would be very kind, but rather fussy and anxious. Then the girls would come in, looking very eager but shy. They were to be smaller than I, and younger-looking, very shabbily dressed, but nice, and very admiring. I would talk to them encouragingly, and they would tell me how beautiful they thought the rose paper, and that Lady Honor had told them I had chosen it – at least, *perhaps* it should be Lady Honor, I was not quite sure – sometimes I planned that papa should smile and it should come out by accident, as it were. Then this should lead us to talk of flowers, and I would tell them how they might make winter nosegays to brighten up the drawing-room a little, and I would promise them some flowers out of our conservatory, and papa would ask Mrs Whyte to let

them come to have tea with me the next day, and they would look delighted though half afraid, and they would all come to the door to see me mount, and, and – on and on I would go for hours, in my fancies, of which “I” and “we” were always the centre, the pivot on which everything else revolved!

Now I will tell what really happened.

It was about six weeks after the day that I had gone with papa and mamma to the Yew Trees. So it was within a fortnight of Christmas. Mamma and I had been to the Yew Trees again once or twice to see how things were getting on, but for the last ten days or so we had not gone, as the Whytes’ two servants and their furniture had come, and the house was now, therefore, to all intents and purposes theirs, and one morning a letter from Captain Whyte to papa announced that he and Mrs Whyte and “some of our numerous youngsters” were to arrive the same day.

“Poor things,” said mamma, with a little shiver, “how I do pity them removing at this season.”

“But it isn’t cold,” said papa. “So far it has been an unusually mild winter, though certainly we have had a disagreeable amount of rain.”

He glanced out as he spoke. It was not raining, but it looked dull and gloomy.

“I suppose there is nothing we can do to help the Whytes?” said mamma. “You will tell me, Tom, if you think there is.”

“I almost think the kindest thing in such circumstances is to leave people alone till they shake down a little,” he replied. “However, I shall be passing that way this evening, and I’ll look in for a moment. Captain Whyte won’t mind me.”

I didn’t think any one could ever “mind” papa! I suppose it comes partly from his being a doctor and knowing so much about home things, children and illnesses, and so on, that he is so wonderfully sensible and handy and tender in his ways – “like a woman,” Prudence says; but indeed I don’t think there are many women like *him*– and I don’t think it can be all from his being a doctor, it must be a good deal from his own kind, tender, sympathising heart.

“Please find out how soon we can go to see them at the Yew Trees,” I said. “Perhaps I might ride there with you some morning on Hop-o’-my-thumb before mamma goes regularly to call.”

“We’ll see,” said papa, as he went off. Of course, I was thinking of my imaginary programme, but papa did not know that.

When he came home that night I was disappointed to find that he had not seen any of the Whytes. Captain Whyte was out, and Mrs Whyte, after all, had not yet come. “Only Miss Whyte and two of the young gentlemen,” the servant had said, and as papa had no very particular reason for calling, he had not asked to see “Miss Whyte.”

“Do you think she is one of the little girls?” I asked.

Papa shook his head.

“I don’t know. She may be an aunt who has come to help,” he said.

This idea rather annoyed me. I had not planned for a helpful aunt; it disarranged things.

“Never mind, Connie,” said mamma, thinking I was disappointed. “We shall soon know all about them. I should think we might call early next week. The old-fashioned rule in a country-place is to wait till you have seen people in church,” she added.

This was Wednesday. It was a good while to wait till next Monday or Tuesday. However, I set to work at my fancies again, determining all the same to ride past the Yew Trees, as often as I could this week. It would be rather nice and romantic for them to have seen me riding about without knowing who I was, before they actually met me.

Whom I meant by “they” I am not quite sure. I fancy I did the Whyte girls the compliment of placing them *next* in importance to myself in my drama.

“I wonder,” I thought, “if Lady Honor told them *nicely* of my being called ‘Sweet Content,’ or if she said it mockingly. It was horrid of her if she did.”

Chapter Four.

All My Own Fault

“What are you in such a brown study about, Connie?” asked mamma at breakfast the next morning.

I started.

“Nothing very particular,” I said, and I felt myself get red. I should not have liked mamma to know my thoughts – I was rehearsing for the hundredth time the scene of my first meeting with the Whytes, or rather, I should say, of their first meeting *me*

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