Meade L. T.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

Philip Ogilvie and his pretty wife were quarrelling, as their custom was, in the drawing-room of the great house in Belgrave Square, but the Angel in the nursery upstairs knew nothing at all about that. She was eight years old, and was, at that critical moment when her father and mother were having words which might embitter all their lives, and perhaps sever them for ever, unconsciously and happily decorating herself before the nursery looking-glass.

The occasion was an important one, and the Angel's rosebud lips were pursed up in her anxiety, and her dark, pretty brows were somewhat raised, and her very blue eyes were fixed on her own charming little reflection.

"Shall it be buttercups, or daisies, or both?" thought the Angel to herself.

A box of wild flowers, which had come up from the country that day, lay handy. There were violets and primroses, and quantities of buttercups and daisies, amongst these treasures.

"Mother likes me when I am pretty, father likes me anyhow," she thought, and then she stood and contemplated herself, and pensively took up a bunch of daisies and held them against her small, slightly flushed cheek, and then tried the effect of the buttercups in her golden brown hair. By-and-by, she skipped away from the looking-glass, and ran up to a tall, somewhat austere lady, who was seated at a round table, writing busily.

"What do you want, Sibyl? Don't disturb me now," said this individual.

"It is only just for a moment," replied the Angel, knitting her brows, and standing in such a position that she excluded all light from falling on the severe-looking lady's writing-pad.

"Which is the prettiest, buttercups or daisies, or the two twisted up together?" she said.

"Oh, don't worry me, child, I want to catch this post. My brother is very ill, and he'll be so annoyed if he doesn't hear from me. Did you say buttercups and daisies mixed? Yes, of course, mix them, that is the old nursery rhyme."

The little Sibyl stamped a small foot encased in a red shoe with an impatient movement, and turned once more to contemplate herself in the glass. Miss Winstead, the governess, resumed her letter, and a clock on the mantelpiece struck out seven silvery chimes.

"They'll be going in to dinner; I must be very quick indeed," thought the child. She began to pull out the flowers, to arrange them in little groups, and presently, by the aid of numerous pins, to deck her small person.

"Mother likes me when I am pretty," she repeated softly under her breath, "but father likes me anyhow." She thought over this somewhat curious problem. Why should father like her anyhow? Why should mother only kiss her and pet her when she was downright pretty?

"Do I look pretty?" she said at last, dancing back to the governess's side.

Miss Winstead dropped her pen and looked up at the radiant little figure. She had contrived to tie some of the wild flowers together, and had encircled them round her white forehead, and mixed them in her flowing locks, and here, there, and everywhere on her white dress were bunches of buttercups and daisies, with a few violets thrown in.

"Do I look pretty?" repeated Sibyl Ogilvie.

"You are a very vain little girl," said Miss Winstead. "I won't tell you whether you look pretty or not, you ought not to think of your looks. God does not like people who think whether they are pretty or not. He likes humble-minded little girls. Now don't interrupt me any more."

"There's the gong, I'm off," cried Sibyl. She kissed her hand to Miss Winstead, her face all alight with happiness.

"I know I am pretty, she always talks like that when I am," thought the child, who had a very keen insight into character. "Mother will kiss me to-night, I am so glad. I wonder if Jesus Christ thinks me pretty, too."

Sibyl Ogilvie, aged eight, had a theology of her own. It was extremely simple, and had no perplexing elements about it. There were three persons who were absolutely perfect. Jesus Christ Who lived in heaven, but Who saw everything that took place on earth, and her own father and mother. No one else was absolutely without sin, but these three were. It was a most comfortable doctrine, and it sustained her little heart through some perplexing passages in her small life. She used to shut her eyes when her mother frowned, and say softly under her breath —

"It's not wrong, 'cos it's mother. Mother couldn't do nothing wrong, no more than Jesus could"; and she used to stop her ears when her mother's voice, sharp and passionate, rang across the room. Something was trying mother dreadfully, but mother had a right to be angry; she was not sinful, like nurse, when she got into her tantrums. As to father, he was never cross. He did look tired and disturbed sometimes. It must be because he was sorry for the rest of the world. Yes, father and mother were perfection. It was a great support to know this. It was a very great honor to have been born their little girl. Every morning when Sibyl knelt to pray, and every evening when she offered up her nightly petitions, she thanked God most earnestly for having given her as parents those two perfect people known to the world as Philip Ogilvie and his wife.

"It was so awfully kind of you, Jesus," Sibyl would say, "and I must try to grow up as nearly good as I can, because of You and father and mother. I must try not to be cross, and I must try not to be vain, and I must try to love my lessons. I don't think I am really vain, Jesus. It is just because my mother likes me best when I am pretty that I want to be pretty. It's for no other reason, really and truly; but I don't like lessons, particularly spelling lessons. I cannot pretend I do. Can I?"

Jesus never made any audible response to the child's query, but she often felt a little tug at her heart which caused her to fly to her spelling-book and learn one or two difficult words with frantic zeal.

As she ran downstairs now, she reflected over the problem of her mother's kisses being softest and her mother's eyes kindest when her own eyes were bright and her little figure radiant; and she also thought of the other problem, of her grave-eyed father always loving her, no matter whether her frock was torn, her hair untidy, or her little face smudged.

Because of her cherubic face, Sibyl had been called the Angel when quite a baby, and somehow the name stuck to her, particularly on the lips of her father. It is true she had a sparkling face and soft features and blue eyes; but she was, when all is said and done, a somewhat worldly little angel, and had, both in the opinions of Miss Winstead and nurse, as many faults as could well be packed into the breast of one small child. Both admitted that Sibyl had a very loving heart, but she was fearless, headstrong, at times even defiant, and was very naughty and idle over her lessons.

Miss Winstead was fond of taking complaints of Sibyl to Mrs. Ogilvie, and she was fond, also, of hoping against hope that these complaints would lead to satisfactory results; but, as a matter of fact, Mrs. Ogilvie never troubled herself about them. She was the sort of woman who took the lives of others with absolute unconcern; her own life absorbed every thought and every feeling. Anything that added to her own comfort was esteemed; anything that worried her was shut as much as possible out of sight. She was fond of Sibyl in her careless way. There were moments when she was proud of the pretty and attractive child, but she had not the slightest idea of attempting to mould her character, nor of becoming her instructress. One of Mrs. Ogilvie's favorite theories was that mothers should not educate their children.

"The child should go to the mother for love and petting," she would say. "Miss Winstead may complain of the darling as much as she pleases, but need not suppose that I shall scold her."

It was Sibyl's father, after all, who now and then spoke to her about her unworthy conduct.

"You are called the Angel, and you must try to act up to your name," he said on one of these occasions, fixing his own dark-grey eyes on the little girl.

"Oh, yes, father," answered the Angel, "but, you see, I wasn't born that way, same as you was. It seems a pity, doesn't it? You're perfect and I am not. I can't help the way I was born, can I, father?"

"No; no one is perfect, darling," replied the father.

"You are," answered the Angel, and she gave her head a defiant toss. "You and my mother and my beautiful Lord Jesus up in heaven. But I'll try to please you, father, so don't knit up your forehead."

Sibyl as she spoke laid her soft hand on her father's brow and tried to smooth out some wrinkles.

"Same as if you was an old man," she said: "but you're perfect, perfect, and I love you, I love you," and she encircled his neck with her soft arms and pressed many kisses on his face.

On these occasions Philip Ogilvie felt uncomfortable, for he was a man with many passions and beset with infirmities, and at the time when Sibyl praised him most, when she uttered her charming, confident words, and raised her eyes full of absolute faith to his, he was thinking with a strange acute pain at his heart of a transaction which he might undertake and of a temptation which he knew well was soon to be presented to him.

"I should not like the child to know about it," was his reflection; "but all the same, if I do it, if I fall, it will be for her sake, for hers alone."

CHAPTER II

Sibyl skipped down to the drawing-room with her spirits brimful of happiness. She opened the door wide and danced in.

"Here I come," she cried, "here I come, buttercups and daisies and violets and me." She looked from one parent to the other, held out her flowing short skirts with each dimpled hand, and danced across the room.

Mrs. Ogilvie had tears in her eyes; she had just come to the sentimental part of her quarrel. At sight of the child she rose hastily, and walked to the window. Philip Ogilvie went down the room, put both his hands around Sibyl's waist, and lifted her to a level with his shoulders.

"What a fairy-like little girl this is!" he cried.

"You are Spring come to cheer us up."

"I am glad," whispered Sibyl; "but let me down, please, father, I want to kiss mother."

Mr. Ogilvie dropped her to the ground. She ran up to her mother.

"Father says I am Spring, look at me," she said, and she gazed into the beautiful, somewhat sullen face of her parent.

Mrs. Ogilvie had hoped that Sibyl would not notice her tears, but Sibyl, gentle as she looked, had the eyes of a hawk.

"Something is fretting my ownest mother," she whispered under her breath, and then she took her mother's soft hand and covered it with kisses. After kissing it, she patted it, and then she returned to her father's side.

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Ogilvie knew why, but as soon as Sibyl entered the room it seemed ridiculous for them to quarrel. Mrs. Ogilvie turned with an effort, said something kind to her husband, he responded courteously, then the dinner gong sounded, and the three entered the dining-room.

It was one of the customs of the house that Sibyl, when they dined alone, should always sit with her parents during this hour. Mrs. Ogilvie objected to the plan, urging that it was very bad for the child. But Ogilvie thought otherwise, and notwithstanding all the mother's objections the point was carried. A high chair was placed for Sibyl next her father, and she occupied it evening after evening, nibbling a biscuit from the dessert, and airing her views in a complacent way on every possible subject under the sun.

"I call Miss Winstead crosspatch now," she said on this occasion. "She is more cranky than you think. She is, really, truly, father."

"You must not talk against your governess, Sibyl," said her mother from the other end of the table.

"Oh, let her speak out to us, my dear," said the father. "What was Miss Winstead cross about to-day, Sibyl?"

"Spelling, as usual," said Sibyl briefly, "but more special 'cos Lord Jesus made me pretty."

"Hush!" said the mother again.

Sibyl glanced at her father. There was a twinkle of amusement in his eyes which he could scarcely keep back.

"My dear," he said, addressing his wife, "do you think Miss Winstead is just the person – "

"I beg of you, Philip," interrupted the mother, "not to speak of the child's teacher before her face. Sibyl, I forbid you to make unkind remarks."

"It's 'cos they're both so perfect," thought Sibyl, "but it's hard on me not to be able to 'splain things. If I can't, what is to be done?"

She munched her biscuit sorrowfully, and looked with steadfast eyes across the room. She supposed she would have to endure Miss Winstead, crosspatch as she was, and she did not enjoy the task which mother and Lord Jesus had set her.

The footman was in the act of helping Mr. Ogilvie to champagne, and Sibyl paused in her thoughts to watch the frothy wine as it filled the glass.

"Is it nice?" she inquired.

"Very nice, Sibyl. Would you like to taste it?"

"No, thank you, father. Nurse says if you drink wine when you're a little girl, you grow up to be drunk as a hog."

"My dear Sibyl," cried the mother, "I really must speak to nurse. What a disgraceful thing to say!"

"Let us turn the subject," said the father.

Sibyl turned it with a will.

"I 'spect I ought to 'fess to you," she said. "I was cross myself to-day. Seems to me I'm not getting a bit perfect. I stamped my foot when Miss Winstead made me write all my spelling over again. Father, is it necessary for a little girl to spell long words?"

"You would not like to put wrong spelling into your letters to me, would you?" was the answer.

"I don't think I'd much care," said Sibyl, with a smile. "You'd know what I meant, wouldn't you, whether I spelt the words right or not? All the same," she added, "I'll spell right if you wish it – I mean, I'll try."

"That's a good girl. Now tell me what else you did naughty?"

"When Sibyl talks about her sins, would it not be best for her to do so in private?" said the mother again.

"But this is private," said Mr. Ogilvie, "only her father and mother."

Mrs. Ogilvie glanced at a footman who stood not far off, and who was in vain endeavoring to suppress a smile.

"I washed my doll's clothes, although nurse told me not," continued Sibyl, "and I made a mess in the night nursery. I spilt the water and wetted my pinny, and I *would* open the window, although it was raining. I ran downstairs, too, and asked Watson to give me a macaroon biscuit. He wasn't to blame – Watson wasn't."

The unfortunate footman whose name was now introduced hastily turned his back, but his ears looked very red as he arranged some glasses on the sideboard.

"Father," whispered Sibyl, "do you know that Watson has got a sweetheart, and – "

"Hush! hush!" said Mr. Ogilvie, "go on with your confessions."

"They're rather sad, aren't they, father? Now I come to think of it, they are very, very sad. I didn't do one right thing to-day 'cept to make myself pretty. Miss Winstead was so angry, and so was nurse, but when I am with them I don't mind a bit being naughty. I wouldn't be a flabby good girl for all the world."

"Oh, Angel, what is to become of you?" said her father.

Sibyl looked full at him, her eyes sparkled, then a curious change came into them. He was good – perfect; it was lovely to think of it, but she felt sure that she could never be perfect like that. All the same, she did not want to pain him. She slipped her small hand into his, and presently she whispered:

"I'll do anything in all the world to please you and mother and Lord Jesus."

"That is right," said the father, who gave a swift thought at the moment to the temptation which he knew was already on its way, and which he would never yield to but for the sake of the child.

The rest of the dinner proceeded without many more remarks, and immediately afterwards Sibyl kissed both her parents and went upstairs.

"Good-night, little Spring," said her father, and there was a note of pain in his voice.

She gave him an earnest hug, and then she whispered —

"Is it 'cos I'm a wicked girl you're sad?"

"No," he answered, "you are not wicked, my darling; you are the best, the sweetest in all the world."

"Oh, no, father," answered Sibyl, "that is not true. I am not the best nor the sweetest, and I wouldn't like to be too good, 'cept for you. Good-night, darling father."

Mr. and Mrs. Ogilvie returned to the drawing-room.

"You spoil that child," said the wife, "but it is on a par with everything else you do. You have no perception of what is right. I don't pretend to be a good mother, but I don't talk nonsense to Sibyl. She ought not to speak about nurse and governess before servants, and it is disgraceful of her to drag the footman and his concerns into the conversation at dinner. She ought not, also, to boast about doing naughty things."

"I wish you would leave the child alone," said Ogilvie in an annoyed voice; "she is good enough for me, little pet, and I would not have her altered for the world. But now, Mildred, to return to our cause of dissension before dinner, we must get this matter arranged. What do you mean to do about your invitation to Grayleigh Manor?"

"I have given you my views on that subject, Philip; I am going."

"I would much rather you did not."

"I am sorry." Mrs. Ogilvie shrugged her shoulders. "I am willing to please you in all reasonable matters; this is unreasonable, therefore I shall take my own way."

"It is impossible for me to accompany you."

"I can live without you for a few days, and I shall take the child."

"Sibyl! No, I do not wish it."

"I fear you must put up with it. I have written to say that Sibyl and I will go down on Saturday."

Ogilvie, who had been seated, now rose, and went to the window. He looked out with a dreary expression on his face.

"You know as well as I do the reasons why it would be best for you not to go to Grayleigh Manor at present," he said. "You can easily write to give an excuse. Remember, we were both asked, and the fact that I cannot leave town is sufficient reason for you to decline."

"I am going," said Mrs. Ogilvie. Her eyes, which were large and dark, flashed with defiance. Ogilvie looked at her with a frown between his brows.

"Is that your last word?" he inquired.

"It is, I go on Saturday. If you were not so disagreeable and disobliging you could easily come with me, but you never do anything to please me."

"Nor you to please me, Mildred," he was about to say, but he restrained himself. After a pause he said gently, "There is one thing that makes the situation almost unbearable."

"And what is that?" she asked.

"The attitude of little Sibyl toward us both. She thinks us – Mildred, she thinks us perfect. What will happen to the child when her eyes are opened?"

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," was Mrs. Ogilvie's flippant remark. "But that attitude is much encouraged by you. You make her morbid and sensitive."

"Morbid! Sibyl morbid! There never was a more open-hearted, frank, healthy creature. Did you not hear her say at dinner that she would not be a flabby good girl for anything? Now, I must tell you that perhaps wrong as that speech was, it rejoiced my heart."

"And it sickened me," said Mrs. Ogilvie. "You do everything in your power to make her eccentric. Now, I don't wish to have an eccentric daughter. I wish to have a well brought up girl, who will be good while she is young, speak properly, not make herself in any way remarkable, learn her lessons, and make a successful *debut* in Society, all in due course."

"With a view, doubtless, to a brilliant marriage," added the husband, bitterly.

"I am going to knock all of this nonsense out of Sibyl," was his wife's answer, "and I mean to begin it when we get to Grayleigh Manor."

Mrs. Ogilvie had hardly finished her words before an angry bang at the drawing-room door told her that her husband had left her.

Ogilvie went to his smoking-room at the other end of the hall. There he paced restlessly up and down. His temples were beating, and the pain at his heart was growing worse.

The postman's ring was heard, and the footman, Watson, entered with a letter.

Ogilvie had expected this letter, and he knew what its purport would be. He only glanced at the writing, threw it on the table near, and resumed his walk up and down.

"It is the child," he thought. "She perplexes me and she tempts me. Never was there a sweeter decoy duck to the verge of ruin. Poor little innocent white Angel! Her attitude toward her mother and me is sometimes almost maddening. Mildred wants to take that little innocent life and mould it after her own fashion. But, after all, am I any better than Mildred? If I yield to this" – he touched the letter with his hand – "I shall sweep in gold, and all money anxieties will be laid to rest. Little Sib will be rich by-and-by. This is a big thing, and if I do it I shall see my way to clearing off those debts which Mildred's extravagance, and doubtless my own inclination, have caused me to accumulate. Whatever happens Sibyl will be all right; and yet – I don't care for wealth, but Mildred does, and the child will be better for money. Money presents a shield between a sensitive heart like Sibyl's and the world. Yes, I am tempted. Sibyl tempts me."

He thrust the letter into a drawer, locked the drawer, put the key in his pocket, and ran up to Sibyl's nursery. She was asleep, and there was no one else in the room. The blinds were down at the windows, and the nursery, pretty, dainty, sweet, and fresh, was in shadow.

Ogilvie stepped softly across the room, and drew up the blind. The moonlight now came in, and shed a silver bar of light across the child's bed. Sibyl lay with her golden hair half covering the pillow, her hands and arms flung outside the bedclothes.

"Good-night, little darling," said her father. He bent over her, and pressed a light kiss upon her cheek. Feather touch as it was, it aroused the child. She opened her big blue eyes.

"Oh, father, is that you?" she cried in a voice of rapture.

"Yes, it is I. I came to wish you good-night."

"You are good, you never forget," said Sibyl. She clasped her arms round his neck. "I went to bed without saying my prayers. May I say them now to you?"

"Not for worlds," it was the man's first impulse to remark, but he checked himself. "Of course, dear," he said.

Sibyl raised herself to a kneeling posture. She clasped her soft arms round her father's neck.

"Pray God forgive me for being naughty to-day," she began, "and pray God make me better to-morrow, 'cos it will please my darlingest father and mother; and I thank you, God, so much for making them good, very good, and without sin. Pray God forgive Sibyl, and try to make her better.

"Now, father, you're pleased," continued the little girl. "It was very hard to say that, because really, truly, I don't want to be better, but I'll try hard if it pleases you."

"Yes, Sibyl, try hard," said her father, "try very hard to be good. Don't let goodness go. Grasp it tight with both hands and never let it go. So may God indeed help you." Ogilvie said these words in a strained voice. Then he covered her up in bed, drew down the blinds, and left her.

"He's fretted; it's just 'cos the world is so wicked, and 'cos I'm not as good as I ought to be," thought the child. A moment later she had fallen asleep with a smile on her face.

Ogilvie went to his club. There he wrote a short letter. It ran as follows: —

> "My Dear Grayleigh, —
>
> "Your offer was not unexpected. I thought it over even before it came, and I have considered it since. Although I am fully aware of the money advantages it holds out to me I have decided to decline it. Frankly, I cannot undertake to assay

the Lombard Deeps Gold Mine, although your offer has been a great temptation. No doubt you will find another man more suited for your purpose.

"Yours sincerely,

"Philip Ogilvie."

It was between one and two that same night that Ogilvie let himself in with his latchkey.

His wife had been to one or two receptions, and had not yet gone to bed. She was standing in the hall, looking radiant as he had seldom seen her. She was dressed beautifully, and her hair and neck were covered with diamonds.

"What," he cried, "up still, Mildred? You ought to be in bed."

He did not give her any glance of admiration, beautiful as she appeared. He shivered slightly with a movement which she did not notice as she stood before him, the lamplight falling all over her lovely dress and figure.

"I am so glad you have come back, Phil," she said. "I shall sleep better now that I have seen you. I hear that Lord Grayleigh has offered you the post of engineer on the board of the Lombard Deeps Mine Company."

Ogilvie did not answer. After a moment's pause he said in a sullen tone —

"Had you not better go to bed? It is much too late for you to be up."

"What does that matter? I am far too excited to sleep, and it is wrong of you to keep things of moment from your wife. This offer means a large addition to our income. Why, Phil, Phil, we can buy a country place now; we can do, oh! so many things. We can pay those terrible debts that worry you. What is the matter? Aren't you pleased? Why do you frown at me? And you are pale, are you ill?"

"Come into my smoking-room," he said, gravely. He took her hand and, drawing her in, switched on the electric light. Then he turned his wife round and looked full at her.

"This will make a great difference in our position," she said. Her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks were flushed, her pearly teeth showed between her parted lips.

"What do you mean by our position?" he said.

"You know perfectly well that we have not money enough to keep up this house; it is a struggle from first to last."

"And yet I earn close on six thousand a year, Mildred. Have you never considered that you are the person who makes it a struggle?"

"It is impossible; impossible to manage," she said, petulantly.

"It is, when you buy all these worthless baubles" – he touched her diamonds, and then he started away from her. "Why you should saddle yourself and me with debts almost impossible to meet for the sake of these is beyond my comprehension; but if you really do want a fresh toy in the way of an ornament to-morrow you have but to order it – that is, in moderation."

"Ah! I knew you had accepted," she said, making a quick dancing movement with her small feet. "Now I am happy; we can have a place if possible on the river. I have always longed to live close to the Thames. It is most unfashionable not to have a country seat, and the child will be well off by-and-by. I was told to-night by a City man who is to be one of the directors of the new company, that if you are clever you can make a cool forty thousand pounds out of this business. He says your name is essential to float the thing with the public."

"You know, perhaps, what all this means?" said Ogilvie, after a pause.

"Why do you speak in that tone, quite with the Sibyl air?"

"Don't dare to mention the child's name at a moment like this. I just wish to tell you, Mildred, in a few words, what it would mean to the world at large if I assayed the Lombard Deeps Gold Mine."

"Oh, your business terms do so puzzle me," she answered. "I declare I am getting sleepy." Mrs. Ogilvie yawned slightly.

"It would be better if you went to bed, but as you are here I shall put your mind at rest. If I accepted Grayleigh's offer – "

"If! But you have done so, of course you have."

"If I do, my name as engineer to the company will cause many people to buy shares. Now, Mildred, I am not sure of the Lombard Deeps Gold Mine. I know more about this business than I can explain to you, and you have a tongue, and women cannot keep secrets."

"As usual, you taunt me," she said, "but what does that matter? I could bear even an insult from you to-night, I am so excited and so pleased. I believe in the Lombard Deeps Gold Mine. I intend to put all the money I can lay hold of into it. Of course you will assay the Lombard Deeps? I never could make out what assaying meant, but it seems to be a way of raking in gold, and I was told to-night by Mr. Halkett that you are the most trusted assayer in London. Has the letter come yet? Has Lord Grayleigh yet offered you the post?"

"The letter has come."

"You would make thousands a year out of it. Phil, oh, Phil, how happy I am! You have replied, have you not?"

"I have."

"Then why do you keep me in suspense? It is settled. What are you so glum about?"

"I have declined the offer. I cannot assay the Lombard Deeps Gold Mine."

"Philip!" His wife's voice was at first incredulous, then it rose into a scream.

"You cannot be speaking the truth," she said.

"My answer is posted. I am not too scrupulous about small things, but I draw the line at a matter of that sort. Go to bed."

She did not speak for a moment, her face turned pale, then she went close up to him.

"I hate you," she said; "go your own way in the future," and she left him standing silent.

CHAPTER III

Sibyl and her mother went to Grayleigh Manor on the following Saturday. Sibyl was wild with excitement. Nurse was going, of course, to look after her, but Miss Winstead was to remain at home. Sibyl felt that she could manage nurse, but there were moments when Miss Winstead was a little obstinate. She would have a delightful time now in the country with her perfect mother. Of course, there was the pain of parting with father, who was just as perfect, if not a little more so. In her heart of hearts Sibyl felt that she understood her father, and that there were times when she did not quite understand her mother; but, never mind, her mother was the perfection of all feminine beauty and loveliness, and grace and goodness, and her father was the perfection of all masculine goodness and nobility of character. Sibyl in her heart of hearts wished that she had been born a boy.

"I am much more like a boy than a girl," she thought, "and that is why I understand father so well. But it will be lovely going to the country with mother, my ownest mother. I expect I'll have great fun; and, as mother doesn't care so very much whether I am perfect or not, perhaps I can be a little naughty on my own account. That will be lovely. I can't be really naughty with father, it is impossible; father is so very tall up, and has such grand thoughts about things; but I can with mother."

So Sibyl watched the packing of her dainty frocks and gay sashes and pretty ribbons, and then ran down to the smoking-room to kiss and hug her father.

Ogilvie was very grave and silent, and did not say a word, nor draw her out in any way, and her mother was out most of the time either paying calls or shopping, and at last the day dawned when they were to go away. Ogilvie had kissed Sibyl with great passion the night before.

"Don't forget me while you are away, little woman," he said, "and look after mother, won't you?"

"She won't need me to look after her, she's quite, quite perfect," said Sibyl; "but I'm going to watch her, and try to copy her."

"Child, don't do that," said the man.

"Not copy my ownest mother? What do you mean, father?"

"Well, well, darling, God will look after you, I do believe. You are not far from Him, are you, Sib? You know we call you the Angel. Angels are supposed to have their home in heaven."

"Well, my home is right down here on earth," said Sibyl in a very contented tone. "I'll have a real jolly time away, I 'spect."

"I hope there will be some nice little boys and girls there with whom you can play; and go to bed early, Sib, just for father's sake, and don't forget to pray for me."

"I will, I will," said the child; "I always thank God for you because he made you so beautiful and good."

"Well, I am busy now; go to bed, little woman."

That was the last Sibyl saw of her father before she went away, for he did not go to see his wife and daughter off, and Mrs. Ogilvie looked decidedly cross as they stepped into the train. But they soon found themselves at Grayleigh Manor.

Sibyl and her nurse were hurried off to the nursery regions, very much to the little girl's secret indignation, and Mrs. Ogilvie seemed to be swept into a crowd of people who all surrounded her and talked eagerly and laughed noisily. Sibyl gave them a keen glance out of those very blue eyes, and in her heart of hearts thought they were a poor lot.

She and nurse had two nice rooms set apart for their own special use, a sitting-room and a sleeping-room, and nurse proceeded to unpack the little girl's things, and then to dress her in one of her prettiest frocks.

"You are to go to tea in the schoolroom," she said. "There are two or three other children there, and I hope you will be very good, Miss Sibyl, and not spoil this beautiful frock."

It was a white cashmere frock, very much embroidered and surrounded by little frills and soft laces, and, while absolutely simple and quite suited to the little girl, was really a wonder of expense and art.

"It's a beautiful dress," she said; "you are wearing money now."

"Money," said Sibyl, "what do you mean?"

"This frock is money; you look very nice in it. Be sure, now, you don't spot it. It would be wicked, just as if you were throwing sovereigns into the fire."

"I don't understand," said Sibyl; "I wish it wasn't a grand frock. Did you bring any of my common, common frocks, nursie?"

"I should think not, indeed. Your fine lady mother would be angry if she saw you looking a show."

"If you speak again in that tone of my mother I'll slap you," said Sibyl.

"Highty-tighty!" said the nurse; "your spirit is almost past bearing. You need to be broke in."

"And so do you," answered Sibyl. "If mother is good you are not, and I'm not, so we both must be broke in; but I've got a bit of a temper. I know that. Nursie, when you were a little girl did you have a bit of a temper of your own?"

"That I did. I was a handful, my mother used to say."

"Then we *has* something in common," said Sibyl, her eyes sparkling. "I'm a handful, too. I'm off to the schoolroom."

"There never was such a child," thought the woman as Sibyl dashed away, banging the door after her; "she's not shy, and she's as sweet as sweet can be, and yet she's a handful of spirit, of uppishness and contrariness. Well, God bless her, whatever she is. How did that heartless mother come by her? I can understand her being the master's child, but her mother's! Dear me, I'm often sorry when I think how mistook the poor little thing is in that woman she thinks so perfect."

Sibyl, quite happy, her heart beating high with excitement, poked her radiant little face round the schoolroom door. There were three children already in the room – Mabel, Gus, and Freda St. Claire. They were Lord Grayleigh's children, and were handsome, and well cared for, and now looked with curiosity at Sibyl.

"Oh, you're the little girl," said Mabel, who was twelve years of age. She raised her voice in a languid tone.

"Yes, I *are* the little girl," said Sibyl. She came forward with bold, confident steps, and looked at the tea table.

"Where is my place?" she said. "Is it laid for me? I am the visitor."

Gus, aged ten, who had been somewhat inclined to sulk when Sibyl appeared, now smiled, and pulled out a chair.

"Sit down," he said; "you had better sit there, near Mabel; she's pouring out tea. She's the boss, you know."

"What's a boss?" said Sibyl.

"You must be a silly not to know what a boss is."

"I aren't no more silly than you are," said Sibyl. "May I have some bread and butter and jam? I'll ask you some things about town, and perhaps you can't answer me. What's a – what's a – oh, I'll think of something real slangy presently; but please don't talk to me too much while I'm eating, or I'll spill jam on my money frock."

"You are a very queer little girl," said Mabel; but she looked at her now with favor. A child who could talk like Sibyl was likely to be an acquisition.

"What a silly you are," said Gus. "What did you put on that thing for? We don't want frilled and laced-up frocks, we want frocks that girls can wear to climb trees in, and – "

“Climb trees! Oh,” cried Sibyl, “are you that sort? Then I’m your girl. Oh, I am glad! My ownest father would be pleased. He likes me to be brave. I’m a hoyden – do you know what a hoyden is? If you want to have a few big larks while I am here, see to ’em quick, for I’m your girl.”

Gus burst into a roar of laughter, and Mabel smiled.

“You are very queer,” she said. “I don’t know whether our governess will like our being with you. You seem to use strange words. We never get into scrapes – we are quite ladylike and good, but we don’t wear grand frocks either. Can’t you take that thing off?”

“I wish I could. I hate it myself.”

“Well, ask your servant to change it.”

“But my nurse hasn’t brought a single shabby frock with me.”

“Are all your frocks as grand as that?”

“Some of ’em grander.”

“We might lend her one of our own brown holland frocks,” said Freda.

“Oh, do!” said Sibyl; “that will be lovely.”

“We are going to do some climbing this afternoon, so you may as well put it on,” continued Freda.

Sibyl clapped her hands with delight. “It’s a great comfort coming down to this place,” she said finally, “’cos I can give way a little; but with my father and mother I have to keep myself in.”

“Why?”

“It’s mostly on account of my most perfect of fathers.”

“But isn’t Philip Ogilvie your father?” said Gus.

“Mr. Ogilvie,” corrected Sibyl, in a very proud tone.

“Oh, fudge! I heard father call him Philip Ogilvie. He’s not perfect.”

Sibyl’s face turned white; she looked full at Gus. Gus, not observing the expression in her eyes, continued, in a glib and easy tone:

“Father didn’t know I was there; he was talking to another man. I think the man’s name was Halkett. I’m always great at remembering names, and I heard him say ‘Philip Ogilvie will do what we want. When it comes to the point he’s not too scrupulous.’ Yes, scrupulous was the word, and I ran away and looked it out in the dictionary, and it means – oh, you needn’t stare at me as if your eyes were starting out of your head – it means a person who hesitates from fear of acting wrongly. Now, as your father isn’t scrupulous, that means that he doesn’t hesitate to act wrong.”

Sibyl with one swift, unerring bang struck Gus a sharp blow across the cheek.

“What have you done that for, you little beggar?” he said, his eyes flashing fire.

“To teach you not to tell lies,” answered Sibyl. She turned, went up the room, and stood by the window. Her heart was bursting, and tears were scorching her eyeballs. “But I won’t shed them,” thought the child, “not for worlds.”

Sibyl’s action was so unexpected that there was a silence in the room for a few moments, but presently Freda stole softly to Sibyl’s side and touched her on her arm.

“Gus is sorry he said anything to hurt you,” she said; “we didn’t understand that you would feel it as you do, but we are all sorry, and we like you all the better for it. Won’t you shake hands with Gus and be friends?”

“And I’ll never say a word against your father again,” said Gus.

“You had better not,” answered Sibyl. “No, I won’t shake hands; I won’t make friends with you till I know something more about you. But I’d like to climb trees, and to get into a holland frock.”

CHAPTER IV

It was great fun getting into the holland frock, more particularly when it was discovered to be too short, and also very dirty. It had a great ink-stain in front, and the sleeves were tight and showed a good bit of Sibyl's white arms. She looked at herself in the glass and danced about in her excitement.

"You can have this old sailor hat to match the frock," said Freda in conclusion. "Now no one will say you are too fine. Come out now, Gus and the others are waiting."

Yes, the sun shone once more for Sibyl, and she forgot for a time Gus's cruel words about her father. He was most attentive to her now, and initiated her into the mystery of climbing. Screams of laughter followed her valiant efforts to ascend the leafy heights of certain beech trees which grew not far from the house. This laughter attracted the attention of a lady and gentleman who were pacing the leafy alley not far away.

"What a noise those children make," said Lord Grayleigh to his companion.

"How many children have you, Lord Grayleigh?" asked Mrs. Ogilvie. She looked full at him as she spoke.

"I have three," he replied; "they are great scamps, and never for a single moment fit to be seen. Since their mother died" – he sighed as he uttered these words, he was a widower of over two years' standing – "I have kept them more or less with myself. There is no harm in them, although they are pickles. Come, I will introduce you to them. That reminds me, I have not yet seen your own little daughter."

Mrs. Ogilvie was very proud of Sibyl, but only when she looked her best. The mother now contemplated, with a feeling of satisfaction, the nice dresses which she had secured for the child before she came into the country. No one could look more lovely than this little daughter of hers, when dressed suitably, so abundant was her golden brown hair, and so blue were her eyes, so straight the little features, so soft the curves of the rosy lips. It is true those blue eyes had an expression in them which never in this world could Mrs. Ogilvie understand, nevertheless, the child's beauty was apparent to the most superficial observer; and Mrs. Ogilvie turned and accompanied Lord Grayleigh in the direction of the merry sounds willingly enough.

"I see four little figures dancing about among those trees," said Lord Grayleigh. "We will see them all together."

They turned down a side walk, and came face to face with Sibyl herself. Now, at that instant the little girl certainly did not look at her best. The holland frock, short and shabby, had a great rent above the knee, her soft cheek was scratched and bleeding slightly, and there was a smudge across her forehead.

Sibyl, quite unconscious of these defects, flew to her mother's side.

"Oh, Mummy," she cried, "I'm so happy. Gus has been teaching me to climb. Do you see that beech tree? I climbed as far as the second branch, and Gus said I did it splendid. It's lovely to sit up there."

Sibyl did not even notice Lord Grayleigh, who stood and watched this little scene with an amused face. Mrs. Ogilvie was by no means pleased.

"What do you mean, Sibyl," she said, "by wearing that disgraceful frock? Why did nurse put it into your trunk? And you know I do not wish you to climb trees. You are an extremely naughty girl. No, Lord Grayleigh, I will not introduce my little daughter to you now. When you are properly dressed, Sibyl, and know how to behave yourself, you shall have the honor of shaking hands with Lord Grayleigh. Go into the house, now, I am ashamed of you."

Sibyl turned first red and then white.

"Is that Lord Grayleigh?" she whispered.

"Yes, my dear, but I shall not answer any of your other questions at present. I am extremely displeased with you."

"I am sorry you are angry, mother; but may I – may I say one thing, just one, afore I go?"

Mrs. Ogilvie was about to hustle the child off, when Lord Grayleigh interfered. "Do let her speak," he said; "she looks a most charming little maid. For my part I like children best in *deshabille*. What is it, little woman?"

"It's that I don't want to shake hands with you – never, *never*!" answered Sibyl, and she turned her back on the astonished nobleman, and marched off in the direction of the house.

Mrs. Ogilvie turned to apologize.

"I am terribly ashamed of Sibyl, she is the most extraordinary child," she said. "What can have possessed her to put on that frock, and why did she speak to you in that strange, rude way?" Here Mrs. Ogilvie uttered a sigh. "I fear it is her father's doing," she continued, "he makes her most eccentric. I do hope you will overlook her naughty words. The moment I go into the house I shall speak to her, and also to nurse for allowing her to wear that disgraceful frock."

"I don't think your nurse is to blame," said Lord Grayleigh. "I have a keen eye for dress, and have a memory of that special frock. It happens to possess a green stain in the back which I am not likely to forget. I think my Freda wore it a good deal last summer, and I remember the occasion when the green stain was indelibly fixed upon it. You must know, Mrs. Ogilvie, that my three children are imps, and it was the impiest of the imps' frocks your little girl happened to be wearing. But what a handsome little creature she is! A splendid face. How I have come to fall under her displeasure, however, is a mystery to me."

"Oh, you can never account for Sibyl's whims," said Mrs. Ogilvie; "it is all her father's fault. It is a great trial to me, I assure you."

"I should be very proud of that child if I were you," answered Lord Grayleigh. "She has a particularly frank, fine face."

"Oh, she is handsome enough," answered Mrs. Ogilvie. "But what she will grow up to, heaven only knows. She has the strangest ideas on all sorts of subjects. She absolutely believes that her father and I are perfect – could you credit it? At the same time she is a very naughty child herself. I will go into the house, now, and give her a talking to."

"Don't scold her, poor little thing," said Lord Grayleigh. He was a kind-hearted man in the main. "For my part," he continued, "I like naughty children; I must force her confidence presently. She has quite roused my curiosity. But now, Mrs. Ogilvie, to turn to other matters, what can we do to persuade your husband to alter his mind? You know, of course, that I have asked him to assay the Lombard Deeps Mine?"

"I do know it," answered Mrs. Ogilvie, the color flushing into her face. "Philip is too extraordinary at times. For my part, I really do not know how to thank you; please believe that I am altogether on your side. If only we could persuade that eccentric husband of mine to change his mind."

"He is a strange fellow," answered Lord Grayleigh slowly; "but, do you know, I think all the more of him for a letter I received a few days ago. At the same time, it will be prejudicial to our interests if he should not act as engineer in this new undertaking. He is the one man the public absolutely trusts, and of course – "

"Why do you think more of him for refusing an advantageous offer?"

"I don't know that I can explain. Money is not everything – at least, to some people. Shall we go into the house? I need not say that I am glad you are on our side, and doubtless your husband's scruples" – Lord Grayleigh laid the slightest emphasis on the word, and made it, even to the obtuse ears of his hearer, sound offensive – "even your husband's scruples of conscience may be overcome by judicious management. A wife can do much on occasions of this sort, and also a friend. He and I are more than acquaintances – we are friends. I have a hearty liking for Ogilvie. It is a disappointment not to have him here, but I hope to have the pleasure of lunching with him on Monday. Trust me to

do what I can to further your interests and his own on that occasion. Now shall we go into the house? You will like to rest before dinner."

Mrs. Ogilvie often liked to affect weariness, it suited her peculiar style of beauty to look languid. She went slowly to her room. Her maid, Hortense, helped her to take off her travelling dress, and to put on a teagown before she lay down on the sofa. She then told the girl to leave her.

When alone Mrs. Ogilvie thought rapidly and deeply. What was the matter with Philip? What did Lord Grayleigh mean by talking of scruples? But she was not going to worry her head on that subject. Philip must not be quixotic, he must accept the good things the gods sent him. Additional wealth would add so immensely to their happiness.

"Money *is* everything," she thought, "whatever Lord Grayleigh may say. Those who refuse it are fools, and worse. Lord Grayleigh and I must bring Philip to his senses."

She moved restlessly on her sofa, and looked across the comfortable room.

With a little more wealth she could hold her own with her friends and acquaintances, and present a good figure in that world of society which was her one idea of heaven. Above all things, debts, which came between her and perfect bliss, could be cleared off. Her creditors would not wait for payment much longer, but if Philip assayed the new mine, he would be handsomely paid for his pains, and all her own cares would take to themselves wings and fly away. Why did he hesitate? How tiresome he was! Surely his life had not been so immaculate up to the present that he should hesitate thus when the golden opportunity to secure a vast fortune arrived.

Ogilvie came of one of the best old families across the border, and had a modest competence of his own handed down to him from a long line of honorable ancestors. He had also inherited a certain code which he could not easily forget. He called it a code of honor, and Mrs. Ogilvie, alas! did not understand it. She reflected over the situation now, and grew restless. If Philip was really such a goose as to refuse his present chance, she would never forgive him. She would bring up to him continually the golden opportunity he had let slip, and weary his very soul. She was the sort of soft, pretty woman who could nag a man to the verge of distraction. She knew that inestimable art to perfection. She felt, as she lay on the sofa and toyed with the ribbons of her pretty and expensive teagown, that she had her weapons ready to hand. Then, with an irritated flash, she thought of the child. Of course the child was nice, handsome, and her own; Sibyl was very lucky to have at least one parent who would not spoil her. But was she not being spoiled? Were there not some things intolerable about her?

"May I come in, Mumsy, or are you too tired?" There was something in the quality of the voice at the door which caused Mrs. Ogilvie's callous heart to beat quicker for a moment, then she said in an irritated tone —

"Oh, come in, of course; I want to speak to you."

Sibyl entered. Nurse had changed her holland frock, and dressed the little girl in pale pink silk. The dress was very unsuitable, but it became the radiant little face and bright, large eyes, and pathetic, sweet mouth, to perfection.

Sibyl ran up to her mother, and, dropping on one knee by her side, looked up into her face.

"Now you'll kiss me," she said; "now you're pleased with your own Sibyl. I am pretty, I'm beautiful, and you, darling mother, will kiss me."

"Get up, Sib, and don't be absurd," said Mrs. Ogilvie; but as she spoke a warm light came into her eyes, for the child was fascinating, and just in the mood to appeal most to her mother.

"Really," said Mrs. Ogilvie, "you do look nice in that dress, it fits you very well. Turn round, and let me see how it is made at the back. Ah! I told Mademoiselle Leroe to make it in that style; that little watteau back is so very becoming to small girls. Turn round now slowly, and let me get the side view. Yes, it is a pretty dress; be sure you don't mess it. You are to come down with the other children to dessert. You had better go now, I am tired."

"But Mummy – Mumsy!"

"Don't call me Mummy or Mumsy, say mother. I don't like abbreviations."

"What's that?" asked Sibyl, knitting her brows.

"Mummy or Mumsy are abbreviations of a very sacred name."

"Sacred name!" said Sibyl, in a thoughtful tone. "Oh yes, I won't call you anything but mother. Mother is most lovely."

"Well, I hope you will be a good child, and not annoy me as you have been doing."

"Oh, mother darling, I didn't mean to vex you, but it was such a temptation, you know. You were never, never tempted, were you, mother? You are made so perfect that you cannot understand what temptation means. I did so long to climb the trees, and I knew you would not like me spoil my pretty frock, and Freda lent me the brown holland. When I saw you, Mums – I mean, mother – I forgot about everything else but just that I had climbed a tree, and that I had been brave, although for a minute I felt a scrap giddy, and I wanted to tell you about what I had done, my ownest, most darling mother."

Mrs. Ogilvie sprang suddenly to her feet.

"Come here," she said. There was a sharpness in her tone which arrested the words on Sibyl's lips. "Look at me, take my hand, look steadily into my face. I have just five minutes to spare, and I wish to say something very grave and important, and you must listen attentively."

"Oh, yes, mother, I am listening; what is it?"

"Look at me. Are you attending?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Mother, Freda says she will give me a Persian kitten; the Persian cat has two, such beauties, snow-white. May I have one, mother?"

"Attend to me, and stop talking. You think a great deal of me, your mother, and you call me perfect. Now show that you put me in high esteem."

"That sounds very nice," thought Sibyl to herself. "Mother is just in her most beautiful humor. Of course I'll listen."

"I wish," continued the mother, and she turned slightly away from the child as she spoke, "I wish you to stop all that nonsense about your father and me. I wish you to understand that we are not perfect, either of us; we are just everyday, ordinary sort of people. As we happen to be your father and mother, you must obey us and do what we wish; but you make yourself, and us also, ridiculous when you talk as you do. I am perfectly sick of your poses, Sibyl."

"Poses!" cried Sibyl; "what's poses?"

"Oh, you are too tiresome; ask nurse to explain, or Miss Winstead, when you go home. Miss Winstead, if she is wise, will tell you that you must just turn round and go the other way. You must obey me, of course, and understand that I know the right way to train you; but you are not to talk of me as though I were an angel. I am nothing of the kind. I am an ordinary woman, with ordinary feelings and ordinary faults, and I wish you to be an ordinary little girl. I am very angry with you for your great rudeness to Lord Grayleigh. What did it mean?"

"Oh, mother! it meant – " Sibyl swallowed something in her throat. Her mother's speech was unintelligible; it hurt her, she did not exactly know why, but this last remark was an opening.

"Mother, I am glad you spoke of it. I could not, really and truly, help it."

"Don't talk nonsense. Now go away. Hortense is coming to dress me for dinner. Go."

"But, mother! one minute first, please – please."

"Go, Sibyl, obey me."

"It was 'cos Lord Grayleigh spoke against my – "

"Go, Sibyl, I won't listen to another word. I shall punish you severely if you do not obey me this instant."

"I am going," said the child, "but I cannot be – "

"Go. You are coming down to dessert to-night, and you are to speak properly to Lord Grayleigh. Those are my orders. Now go."

Hortense came in at that moment. She entered with that slight whirl which she generally affected, and which she considered truly Parisian. Somehow, in some fashion, Sibyl felt herself swept out of the room. She stood for a moment in the passage. There was a long glass at the further end, and it reflected a pink-robed little figure. The cheeks had lost their usual tender bloom, and the eyes had a bewildered expression. Sibyl rubbed her hands across them.

"I don't understand," she said to herself. "Perhaps I wasn't quite pretty enough, perhaps that was the reason, but I don't know. I think I'll go to my new nursery and sit down and think of father. Oh, I wish mother hadn't – of course it's all right, and I am a silly girl, and I get worser, not better, every day, and mother knows what is best for me; but she might have let me 'splain things. I wish I hadn't a pain here." Sibyl touched her breast with a pathetic gesture.

"It's 'cos of father I feel so bad, it's 'cos they told lies of father." She turned very slowly with the most mournful droop of her head in the direction of the apartment set aside for nurse and herself. She had thought much of this visit, and now this very first afternoon a blow had come. Her mother had told her to do a hard thing. She, Sibyl, was to be polite to Lord Grayleigh; she was to be polite to that dreadful, smiling man, with the fair hair and the keen eyes, who had spoken against her father. It was unfair, it was dreadful, to expect this of her.

"And mother would not even let me 'splain," thought the child.

"Hullo!" cried a gay voice; "hullo! and what's the matter with little Miss Beauty?" And Sibyl raised her eyes, with a start, to encounter the keen, frank, admiring gaze of Gus.

"Oh, I say!" he exclaimed, "aren't we fine! I say! you'll knock Freda and Mabel into next week, if you go on at this rate. But, come to the schoolroom; we want a game, and you can join."

"I can't, Gus," replied Sibyl.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"I don't feel like playing games."

"You are quite white about the gills. I say! has anybody hurt you?"

"No, not exactly, Gus; but I want to be alone. I'll come by-and-by."

"Somebody wasn't square with her," thought Gus, as Sibyl turned away. "Queer little girl! But I like her all the same."

CHAPTER V

Sibyl's conduct was exemplary at dessert. She was quiet, she was modest, she was extremely polite. When spoken to she answered in the most correct manner. When guests smiled at her, she gave them a set smile in return. She accepted just that portion of the dessert which her mother most wished her to eat, eschewing unwholesome sweets, and partaking mostly of grapes. Especially was she polite to Lord Grayleigh, who called her to his side, and even put his arm round her waist. He wondered afterwards why she shivered when he did this. But she stood upright as a dart, and looked him full in the face with those extraordinary eyes of hers.

At last the children's hour, as it was called, came to an end, and the four went round kissing and shaking hands with the different guests. Mrs. Ogilvie put her hand for an instant on Sibyl's shoulder.

"I am pleased with you," she said; "you behaved very nicely. Go to bed now."

"Will you come and see me, Mumsy – mother, I mean – before you go to bed?"

"Oh no, child, nonsense! you must be asleep hours before then. No, this is good-night. Now go quietly."

Sibyl did go quietly. Mrs. Ogilvie turned to her neighbor.

"That is such an absurd custom," she said; "I must break her of it."

"Break your little girl of what?" he asked. "She is a beautiful child," he added. "I congratulate you on having such a charming daughter."

"I have no doubt she will make a very pretty woman," replied Mrs. Ogilvie, "and I trust she will have a successful career; but what I was alluding to now was her insane wish that I should go and say good-night to her. Her father spoils that child dreadfully. He insists on her staying up to our late dinner, which in itself is quite against all my principles, and then will go up to her room every evening when he happens to be at home. She lies awake for him at night, and they talk sentiment to each other. Very bad, is it not; quite out of date."

"I don't know," answered Mr. Rochester; "if it is an old custom it seems to me it has good in it." As he spoke he thought again of the eager little face, the pathetic soft eyes, the pleading in the voice. Until within this last half-hour he had not known of Sibyl's existence; but from this instant she was to come into his heart and bear fruit.

Meanwhile the child went straight to her room.

"Won't you come to the schoolroom now?" asked Gus in a tone of remonstrance.

"No; mother said I was to go to bed," answered Sibyl.

"How proper and good you have turned," cried Mabel.

"Good-night," said Sibyl. She could be quite dignified when she pleased. She allowed the girls to kiss her, and she shook hands with Gus, and felt grown-up, and, on the whole, notwithstanding the unsatisfied feeling at her heart, rather pleased with herself. She entered the room she called the nursery, and it looked cheerful and bright. Old nurse had had the fire lit, and was sitting by it. A kettle steamed on the hob, and nurse's cup and saucer and teapot, and some bread and butter and cakes, were spread on the table. But as Sibyl came in the sense of satisfaction which she had felt for a moment or two dropped away from her like a mantle, and she only knew that the ache at her heart was worse than ever. She sat down quietly, and did not speak, but gazed fixedly into the fire.

"What is it, pet?" nurse said. "Is anything the matter?"

"No," answered Sibyl. "Nursie, can I read the Bible a bit?"

"Sakes alive!" cried nurse, for Sibyl had never been remarkable for any religious tendency, "to be sure, my darling," she answered. "I never go from home without my precious Bible. It is the one my mother gave me when I was a little girl. I'll fetch it for you, dearie."

"Thank you," replied Sibyl.

Nurse returned, and the much-read, much-worn Bible was placed reverently in Sibyl's hands.

"Now, my little darling," said nurse, "you look quite white. You'll just read a verse or two, and then you'll go off to your bed."

"I want to find a special verse," said Sibyl. "When I have read it I will go to bed." She knitted her brows and turned the pages in a puzzled, anxious way.

"What's fretting you, dear? I know the Bible, so to speak, from end to end. Can old nursie help you in any way?"

"I know the verse is somewhere, but I cannot find the place. I remember reading it, and it has come back to me to-night."

"What is it, dear?"

"'God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.'"

"Oh, yes, love," answered nurse promptly, "that's in the Epistle of St. James, fourth chapter, sixth verse. I learned the whole of the Epistle for my mother when I was young, and I have never forgotten a word of it. Here it is, dear."

"But what are you fretting your head over that verse for?" asked the puzzled old woman; "there's some that I could find for you a deal more suitable to little ladies like yourself. There's a beautiful verse, for instance, which says, 'Children, obey your parents in the Lord.' That means all those in charge of you, dear, nurses and governesses and all. I heard its meaning explained once very clear, and that was how it was put."

"There is not a bit about nurses and governesses in the Bible," said Sibyl, who had no idea of being imposed upon, although she was in trouble. "Never mind that other verse now, nursie, it's not that I'm thinking of, it's the one you found about 'God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.' It seems to 'splain things."

"What things, dear?"

"Why, about mother. Nursie, isn't my mother quite the very humblest woman in all the world?"

"Oh, my goodness me, no!" exclaimed the woman under her breath. "I wouldn't remark it, my dear," she said aloud.

"That's 'cos you know so very little. You can't never guess what my ownest mother said to me to-day, and I'm not going to tell you, only that verse comforts me, and I understand now."

Sibyl got up and asked nurse to take off her pink frock. She felt quite cheerful and happy again. She knelt down in her white nightdress and said her prayers. She always prayed for her father and mother in a peculiar way. She never asked God to give them anything, they had already got all that heart could wish. They were beautiful in person, they were lovely in character, they were perfect in soul. She could only thank God for them. So she thanked God now as usual.

"Thank You, Jesus, for giving me father and mother," said Sibyl, "and in especial for making my mother just so truly perfect that she is humble. She does not like me to think too much of her. It is because she is humble, and You give grace to the humble. It is a great comfort to me, Jesus, to know that, because I could not quite understand my mother afore dinner. Good-night, Jesus, I am going to sleep now; I am quite happy."

Sibyl got into bed, closed her eyes, and was soon sound asleep.

On the following Monday Lord Grayleigh went to town, and there he had a rather important interview with Philip Ogilvie.

"I failed to understand your letter," he said, "and have come to you for an explanation."

Ogilvie was looking worried and anxious.

"I thought my meaning plain enough," he replied, "but as you are here, I will answer you; and first, I want to put a question to you. Why do you wish me to be the assayer?"

"For many reasons; amongst others, because I wish to do you a good turn. For your position you are not too well off. This will mean several thousands a year to you, if the vein is as rich as we hope it will be. The alluvial we know is rich. It has washed at five ounces to the ton."

"But if there should not happen to be a rich vein beneath?" queried Ogilvie, and as he spoke he watched his companion narrowly.

Lord Grayleigh shrugged his shoulders. The action was significant.

"I see," cried Ogilvie. He was silent for a moment, then he sprang to his feet. "I have regarded you as my friend for some time, Grayleigh, and there have been moments when I have been proud of your acquaintanceship, but in the name of all that is honorable, and all that is virtuous, why will you mix up a pretended act of benevolence to me with – you know what it means – a fraudulent scheme? You are determined that there shall be a rich vein below the surface. In plain words, if there is not, you want a false assay of the Lombard Deeps. That is the plain English of it, isn't it?"

"Pooh! my dear Ogilvie, you use harsh words. Fraudulent! What does the world – our world I mean – consist of? Those who make money, and those who lose it. It is a great competition of skill – a mere duel of wits. All is fair in love, war, and speculation."

"Your emendation of that old proverb may be *fin de siècle*, but it does not suit my notions," muttered Ogilvie, sitting down again.

Grayleigh looked keenly at him.

"You will be sorry for this," he said; "it means much to you. You would be quite safe, you know that."

"And what of the poor country parson, the widow, the mechanic? I grant they are fools; but – "

"What is the matter with you?" said Lord Grayleigh; "you never were so scrupulous."

"I don't know that I am scrupulous now. I shall be very glad to assay the mine for you, if I may give you a – "

"We need not enter into that," said Grayleigh, rising; "you have already put matters into words which had better never have been uttered. I will ask you to reconsider this: it is a task too important to decline without weighing all the *pros* and *cons*. You shall have big pay for your services; big pay, you understand."

"And it is that which at once tempts and repels me," said Ogilvie. Then he paused, and said abruptly, "How is Sibyl? Have you seen much of her?"

"Your little daughter? I saw her twice. Once, when she was very dirty, and rather rude to me, and a second time, when she was the perfection of politeness and good manners."

"Sibyl is peculiar," said Ogilvie, and his eyes gleamed with a flash of the same light in them which Sibyl's wore at intervals.

"She is a handsome child, it is a pity she is your only one, Ogilvie."

"Not at all," answered Ogilvie; "I never wish for another, she satisfies me completely."

"Well, to turn to the present matter," said Lord Grayleigh; "you will reconsider your refusal?"

"I would rather not."

"But if I as a personal favor beg you to do so."

"There is not the slightest doubt that the pay tempts me," said Ogilvie; "it would be a kindness on your part to close the matter now finally, to relieve me from temptation. But suppose I were to – to yield, what would the shareholders say?"

"They would be managed. The shareholders will expect to pay the engineer who assays the mine for them handsomely."

Ogilvie stood in a dubious attitude, Grayleigh went up and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"I will assume," he said, "that you get over scruples which after all may have no foundation, for the mine may be all that we wish it to be. What I want to suggest is this. Someone must go to Australia to assay the Lombard Deeps. If you will not take the post we must get someone else to step into your shoes. The new claim was discovered by the merest accident, and the reports state it to be one of the richest that has ever been panned out. Of course that is as it may be. We will present you, if you give a good assay, with five hundred shares in the new syndicate. You can wait until the shares go up, and then sell out. You will clear thousands of pounds. We will also pay your expenses

and compensate you handsomely for the loss of your time. This is Monday; we want you to start on Saturday. Give me your decision on Wednesday morning. I won't take a refusal now."

Ogilvie was silent; his face was very white, and his lips were compressed together. Soon afterward the two men parted.

Lord Grayleigh returned to Grayleigh Manor by a late train, and Ogilvie went back to his empty house. Amongst other letters which awaited him was one with a big blot on the envelope. This blot was surrounded by a circle in red ink, and was evidently of great moment to the writer. The letter was addressed to "Philip Ogilvie, Esq.," in a square, firm, childish hand, and the great blot stood a little away from the final Esquire. It gave the envelope an altogether striking and unusual appearance. The flap was sealed with violet wax, and had an impression on it which spelt Sibyl. Ogilvie, when he received this letter, took it up tenderly, looked at the blot on the cover of the envelope, glanced behind him in a shamefaced way, pressed his lips to the violet seal which contained his little daughter's name, then sitting down in his chair, he opened the envelope.

Sibyl was very good at expressing her feelings in words, but as yet she was a poor scribe, and her orthography left much to be desired. Her letter was somewhat short, and ran as follows: —

> "Daddy Dear, – Here's a blot to begin, and the blot means a kiss. I will put sum more at the end of the letter. Pleas kiss all the kisses for they com from the verry botom of my hart. I have tried Daddy to be good cos of you sinse I left home, but I am afraid I have been rather norty. Mother gets more purfect evry day. She is bewtiful and humbel. Mother said she wasn't purfect but she is, isn't she father? I miss you awful, speshul at nights, cos mother thinks its good for me not to lie awake for her to come and kiss me. But you never think that and you always com, and I thank God so much for having gived you to me father. Your Sibyl."
>
> "Father, what does 'scroopolus' mean? I want to know speshul. – Sib."

The letter finished with many of these strange irregular blots, which Ogilvie kissed tenderly, and then folded up the badly-spelt little epistle, and slipped it into his pocket-book. Then he drew his chair forward to where his big desk stood, and, leaning his elbows on it, passed his hands through his thick, short hair. He was puzzled as he had never been in all his life before. Should he go, or should he stay? Should he yield to temptation, and become rich and prosperous, or should he retain his honor, and face the consequences? He knew well – he had seen them coming for a long time – the consequences he was about to face would not be pleasant. They spelt very little short of ruin. He suddenly opened a drawer, and took from its depths a sheaf of accounts which different tradespeople had sent in to his wife. Mrs. Ogilvie was hopelessly reckless and extravagant. Money in her hand was like water; it flowed away as she touched it. Her jeweler's bill alone amounted to thousands of pounds. If Ogilvie accepted the offer now made to him he might satisfy these pressing creditors, and not deprive Sibyl of her chance of an income by-and-by. Sibyl! As the thought of her face came to him, he groaned inwardly. He wished sometimes that God had never given him such a treasure.

"I am unworthy of my little Angel," he said to himself. Then he started up and began to pace the room. "And yet I would not be without her for all the wealth in the world, for all the greatness and all the fame," he cried; "she is more to me than everything else on earth. If ever she finds out what I really am, I believe I shall go raving mad. I must keep a straight front, must keep as clean as I can for Sibyl's sake. O God, help me to be worthy of her!"

He read the badly-spelt, childish letter once again, and then he thrust the bills out of sight and thought of other liabilities which he himself had incurred, till his thoughts returned to the tempting offer made to him.

"Shall I risk it?" he said to himself. "Shall I risk the chance of the mine being really good, and go to Australia and see if it is as rich as the prospectuses claim it to be. But suppose it is not? Well, in that case I am bound to make it appear so. Five ounces of gold to every ton; it seems *bona fide*

enough. It it is *bona fide*, why should not I have my share of the wealth? It is as legitimate a way of earning money as any other," and he swerved again in the direction of Lord Grayleigh's offer.

Lord Grayleigh had given him until Wednesday to decide.

"I am sorry to seem to force your hand," that nobleman had said to him at parting, "but if you distinctly refuse we must send another man, and whoever goes must start on Saturday."

A trip to Australia, how he would enjoy it! To be quite away from London and his present conventional life. The only pain was the thought of parting with Sibyl. But he would do his business quickly, and come back and clasp her in his arms, and kiss her again and look into her eyes and – turn round; yes, he would turn short round and choose the right path, and be what she really thought him, a good man. In a very small degree, he would be the sort of man his child imagined him.

As these thoughts flashed before his mind he forgot that dinner was cooling in the dining-room, that he himself had eaten nothing for some hours, and that a curious faintness which he had experienced once or twice before had stolen over him. He did not like it nor quite understand it. He rose, crossed the room, and was about to ring the bell when a sudden spasm of most acute pain passed like a knife through his chest. He was in such agony that for a moment he was unable to stir. The sharpness of the pain soon went off, and he sank into a chair faint and trembling. He was now well enough to ring his bell. He did so, and the footman appeared.

"Bring me brandy, and be quick," said Ogilvie.

The man started when he saw his face. He soon returned with the stimulant, which Ogilvie drank off. The agony in his chest subsided by degrees, and he was able to go into the dining-room and even to eat. He had never before had such terrible and severe pain, and now he was haunted by the memory of his father, who had died suddenly of acute disease of the heart.

After dinner he went, as usual, to his club, where he met a friend whom he liked. They chatted about many things, and the fears and apprehensions of the puzzled man dropped gradually from him. It was past midnight when Ogilvie returned home. He had now forgotten all about the pain in his chest. It had completely passed away. He felt as well and vigorous as ever. In the night, however, he slept badly, had tiresome dreams, and was much haunted by the thought of his child. If by any chance he were to die now! If, for instance, he died on his way to Australia, he would leave Sibyl badly provided for. A good deal of his private means had already been swallowed up by his own and his wife's extravagant living, and what was left of it had been settled absolutely on his wife at the time of their marriage. Although, of course, this money at her mother's death would revert to Sibyl, he had a presentiment, which he knew was founded on a firm basis, that Mrs. Ogilvie might be careless, inconsiderate – not kind, in the true sense of the word, to the little girl. If it came to be a tussle between Sibyl's needs and her mother's fancied necessities, Ogilvie's intuitions told him truly that Sibyl would go to the wall.

"I must do something better than that for my little daughter," thought the man. "I will not go to Australia until I have decided that point. If I go, I shall make terms, and it will be for Sibyl's sake."

But again that uncomfortable, tiresome conscience of his began to speak; and that conscience told him that if he went to Australia for the purpose of blinding the eyes of possible shareholders in London, he would in reality be doing the very worst possible thing for his child.

He tossed about between one temptation and another for the remainder of the night, and arose in the morning unrefreshed. As he was dressing, however, a thought came to him which he hailed as a possible relief. Why not do the right thing right from the beginning; tell Grayleigh that the proposed commission to visit Australia was altogether distasteful to him; that he washed his hands of the great new syndicate; that they might sweep in their gold, but he would have nothing to say to it? At the same time he might insure his life for ten thousand pounds. It would be a heavy interest to pay, no doubt, and they would probably have to live in a smaller house, and he and his wife would have to put down their expenses in various ways, but he would have the comfort of knowing that whatever happened Sibyl would not be without means of subsistence.

"When I have done that, and absolutely provided for her future, I shall have a great sense of rest," thought the man. "I will go and see Dr. Rashleigh, of the Crown and Life Insurance Company, as soon as ever I get to the City. That is a happy thought."

He smiled cheerfully to himself, ran downstairs, and ate a hearty breakfast. A letter from his wife lay upon his plate. He did not even open it. He thrust it into his pocket and went off to the City, telling his servant as he did so that he would be back to dinner.

As soon as he got to his office he read his letters, gave his clerks directions, and went at once to see Dr. Rashleigh, of the Insurance Company.

Rashleigh happened to be one of his special friends, and he knew his hours. It was a little unusual to expect him to examine him for an insurance without an appointment; but he believed, in view of his possible visit to Australia, that Rashleigh would be willing to overlook ceremony.

He arrived at the office, saw one of the clerks downstairs, heard that Rashleigh was in and would soon be disengaged, and presently was shown into the doctor's consulting room.

Rashleigh was a grey-haired man of about sixty years of age. He spent a couple of hours every day in the consulting room of the Crown and Life Insurance Company. He rose now, and extended his hand with pleasure when Ogilvie appeared.

"My dear Ogilvie, and what do you want with me? Have you at last listened to my entreaties that you should insure your life in a first-class office?"

"Something of the kind," said Ogilvie, forcing a smile, for again that agony which had come over him yesterday assailed him. He knew that his heart was throbbing faintly, and he remembered once more that his father had died of heart disease. Oh, it was all nonsense; of course he had nothing to fear. He was a man in his prime, not much over thirty – he was all right.

Rashleigh asked him a few questions.

"I may have to go to Australia rather suddenly," said Ogilvie, "and I should like first to insure my life. I want to settle the money on my child before I leave home."

"How large a sum do you propose to insure for?" asked the doctor.

"I have given the particulars to the clerk downstairs. I should like to insure for ten thousand pounds."

"Well, I daresay that can be managed. You are an excellent client, and quite a young man. Now just let me sound your lungs, and listen to your heart."

Ogilvie removed his necktie, unbuttoned his shirt, and placed himself in the doctor's hands.

Dr. Rashleigh made his examination without comment, slowly and carefully. At last it was over.

"Well?" said Ogilvie, just glancing at him. "It's all right, I suppose."

"It is not the custom for a doctor at an insurance office to tell his patient anything about the result of the examination," was Rashleigh's answer. "You'll hear all in good time."

"But there really is no time to lose, and you are an old friend. You look grave. If it cannot be done, of course it cannot, but I should like to know."

"When do you propose to go to Australia?"

"I may not go at all. In fact if – " Ogilvie suddenly leaned against the table. Once again he felt faint and giddy. "If this is all right, I shall probably not go."

"But suppose it is not all right?"

"Then I sail on Saturday."

"I may as well tell you the truth," said Rashleigh; "you are a brave man. My dear fellow, the office cannot insure you."

"What do you mean?"

"Heart," said Rashleigh.

"Heart! Mine? Not affected?"

"Yes."

"Seriously?"

"It is hard to answer that question. The heart is a strange organ, and capable of a vast amount of resuscitation; nevertheless, in your case the symptoms are grave; the aortic valve is affected. It behooves you to be very careful."

"Does this mean that I – " Ogilvie dropped into a chair. "Rashleigh," he said suddenly, "I had a horrible attack last night. I forgot it this morning when I came to you, but it was horrible while it lasted. I thought myself, during those moments of torture, within a measurable – a very measurable distance of the end."

"Describe your sensations," said Rashleigh.

Ogilvie did so.

"Now, my dear fellow, I have a word to say. This insurance cannot be done. But, for yourself, you must avoid excitement. I should like to prescribe a course of living for you. I have studied the heart extensively."

"Will nothing put me straight? Cure me, I mean?"

"I fear not."

"Well, good-by, Rashleigh; I will call round to see you some evening."

"Do. I should like you to have the advice of a specialist, Anderson, the greatest man in town on the heart."

"But where is the use? If you cannot cure me, he cannot."

"You may live for years and years, and die of something else in the end."

"Just what was said to my father, who did not live for years and years," answered the man. "I won't keep you any longer, Rashleigh."

He left the office and went down into the street. As he crossed the Poultry and got once more into the neighborhood of his own office, one word kept ringing in his ears, "Doomed."

He arrived at his office and saw his head clerk.

"You don't look well, Mr. Ogilvie."

"Never mind about my looks, Harrison," replied Ogilvie. "I have a great deal to do, and need your best attention."

"Certainly, sir; but, all the same, you don't look well."

"Looks are nothing," replied Ogilvie. "I shall soon be all right. Harrison, I am off to Australia on Saturday."

CHAPTER VI

On that same Tuesday Lord Grayleigh spent a rather anxious day. For many reasons it would never do for him to press Ogilvie, and yet if Ogilvie declined to go to Queensland matters might not go quite smoothly with the new Syndicate. He was the most trusted and eminent mine assayer in London, and had before now done useful work for Grayleigh, who was chairman of several other companies. Up to the present Grayleigh, a thoroughly worldly and hard-headed man of business, had made use of Ogilvie entirely to his own benefit and satisfaction. It was distinctly unpleasant to him, therefore, to find that just at the most crucial moment in his career, when everything depended on Ogilvie's subservience to his chief's wishes, he should turn restive.

"That sort of man with a conscience is intolerable," thought Lord Grayleigh, and then he wondered what further lever he might bring to bear in order to get Ogilvie to consent to the Australian visit.

He was thinking these thoughts, pacing up and down alone in a retired part of the grounds, when he heard shrill screams of childish laughter, and the next moment Sibyl, in one of her white frocks, the flounces badly torn, her hat off and hair in wild disorder, rushed past. She was closely followed by Freda, Mabel and Gus being not far behind.

"Hullo!" said Lord Grayleigh; "come here, little woman, and account for yourself."

Sibyl paused in her mad career. She longed to say, "I'm not going to account for myself to you," but she remembered her mother's injunction. She had been on her very best behavior all Sunday, Monday, and up to now on Tuesday, but her fit of goodness was coming to an end. She was in the mood to be obstreperous, naughty, and wilful; but the thought of her mother, who was so gently following in the path of the humble, restrained her.

"If mother, who is an angel, a perfect angel, can think herself naughty and yet wish me to be good, I ought to help her by being as good as I possibly can," she thought.

So she stopped and looked at Lord Grayleigh with the wistful, puzzled expression which at once repelled and attracted him. His own daughters also drew up, panting.

"We were chasing Sib," they said; "she challenged us. She said that, although she does live in town, she could beat us."

"And it looked uncommonly like it when I saw you all," was Grayleigh's response. "Sibyl has long legs for her age."

Sibyl looked down at the members in question, and put on a charming pout. Grayleigh laughed, and going up to her side, laid his hand on her shoulder.

"I saw your father yesterday. Shall I tell you about him?"

This, indeed, was a powerful bait. Sibyl's soft lips trembled slightly. The wistful look in her eyes became appealing.

"Pathetic eyes, more pathetic than any dog's," thought Lord Grayleigh. He took her hand.

"You and I will walk by ourselves for a little," he said. "Run away, children. Sibyl will join you in a few moments."

Sibyl, as if mesmerized, now accompanied Lord Grayleigh. She disliked her present position immensely, and yet she wondered if it was given to her by Lord Jesus, as a special opportunity which she was on no account to neglect. Should she tell Lord Grayleigh what she really thought of him? But for her mother she would not have hesitated for a moment, but that mother had been very kind to her during the last two days, and Sibyl had enjoyed studying her character from a new point of view. Mother was polite to people, even though they were not quite perfect. Mother always looked sweet and tidy and ladylike, and beautifully dressed. Mother never romped, nor tore her clothes, nor climbed trees. It was an uninteresting life from Sibyl's point of view, and yet, perhaps, it was the right life. Up to the present the child had never seriously thought of her own conduct at all. She accepted

the fact with placidity that she herself was not good. It was rather interesting to be “not good,” and yet to live in the house with two perfectly angelic beings. It seemed to make their goodness all the whiter. At the present moment she longed earnestly to be “not good.”

Lord Grayleigh, holding her hand, advanced in the direction of a summer-house.

“We will sit here and talk, shall we?” he said.

“Yes, shall us?” replied Sibyl.

Lord Grayleigh smiled; he placed himself in a comfortable chair, and motioned Sibyl to take another. She drew a similar chair forward, placed it opposite to her host, and sat on it. It was a high chair, and her feet did not reach the ground.

“I ’spect I’m rather short for my age,” she said, looking down and speaking in a tone of apology.

“Why, how old are you?” he asked.

“Quite old,” she replied gravely; “I was eight at five minutes past seven Monday fortnight back.”

“You certainly have a vast weight of years on your head,” he replied, looking at her gravely.

She did not see the sarcasm, she was thinking of something else. Suddenly she looked him full in the face.

“You called me away from the other children ’cos you wanted to speak about father, didn’t you? Please tell me all about him. Is he quite well?”

“Of course he is.”

“Did he ask about me?”

“Yes, he asked me how you were.”

“And what did you say?”

“I replied, with truth, that I had twice had the pleasure of seeing you; once when you were very rude to me, once when you were equally polite.”

Sibyl’s eyes began to dance.

“What are you thinking of, eight-year-old?” asked Lord Grayleigh.

“Of you,” answered Sibyl with promptitude.

“Come, that’s very interesting; what about me? Now, be quite frank and tell me why you were rude to me the first time we met?”

“May I?” said Sibyl with great eagerness. “Do you really, truly mean it?”

“I certainly mean it.”

“You won’t tell – mother?”

“I won’t tell – mother,” said Lord Grayleigh, mimicking her manner.

Sibyl gave a long, deep sigh.

“I am glad,” she said with emphasis. “I don’t want my ownest mother to be hurt. She tries so hard, and she is so beautiful and perfect. It’s most ’portant that I should speak to you, and if you will promise – ”

“I have promised; whatever you say shall be secret. Now, out with it.”

“You won’t like it,” said Sibyl.

“You must leave me to judge of that.”

“I am going to be fwightfully rude.”

“Indeed! that is highly diverting.”

“I don’t know what diverting is, but it will hurt you.”

“I believe I can survive the pain.”

Sibyl looked full at him then.

“Are you laughing at me?” she said, and she jumped down from her high chair.

“I would not dream of doing so.”

The curious amused expression died out of Lord Grayleigh’s eyes. He somehow felt that he was confronting Sibyl’s father with all those unpleasant new scruples in full force.

"Speak away, little girl," he said, "I promise not to laugh. I will listen to you with respect. You are an uncommon child, very like your father."

"Thank you for saying that, but it isn't true; for father's perfect, and I'm not. I will tell you now why I was rude, and why I am going to be rude again, monstrous rude. It is because you told lies."

"Indeed!" said Lord Grayleigh, pretending to be shocked. "Do you know that that is a shocking accusation? If a man, for instance, had said that sort of thing to another man a few years back, it would have been a case for swords."

"I don't understand what that means," said Sibyl.

"For a duel; you have heard of a duel?"

"Oh, in history, of course," said Sibyl, her eyes sparkling, "and one man kills another man. They run swords through each other until one of them gets killed dead. I wish I was a man."

"Do you really want to run a sword through me?"

Sibyl made no answer to this; she shut her lips firmly, her eyes ablaze.

"Come," said Lord Grayleigh, "it is unfair to accuse a man and not to prove your accusation. What lies have I told?"

"About my father."

"Hullo! I suppose I am stupid, but I fail to understand."

"I will try and 'splain. I didn't know that you was stupid, but you do tell lies."

"Well, go on; you are putting it rather straight, you know."

"I want to."

"Fire away then."

"You told someone – I don't know the name – you told somebody that my father was unscroopolus."

"Indeed," said Lord Grayleigh. He colored, and looked uneasy. "I told somebody – that is diverting."

"It's not diverting," said Sibyl, "it's cruel, it's mean, it's wrong; it's lies – black lies. Now you know."

"But whom did I tell?"

"Somebody, and somebody told me – I'm not going to tell who told me."

"Even suppose I did say anything of the sort, what do you know about that word?"

"I found it out. An unscroopolus person is a person who doesn't act right. Do you know that my father never did wrong, never from the time he was borned? My father is quite perfect, God made him so."

"Your father is a very nice fellow, Sibyl."

"He is much better than nice, he is perfect; he never did anything wrong. He is perfect, same as Lord Jesus is perfect."

The little girl looked straight out into the summer landscape. Her lips trembled, on each cheek there flushed a crimson rose.

Lord Grayleigh shuffled his feet. Had anyone in all the world told him that he would have listened quietly, and with a sense of respect, to such a story as he was now hearing, he would have roared with laughter. But he was not at all inclined to laugh now that he found himself face to face with Sibyl.

"And mother is perfect, too," she said, turning and facing him.

Then he did laugh; he laughed aloud.

"Oh, no," he said.

"So you don't wonder that I hate you," continued Sibyl, taking no notice of that last remark. "It's 'cos you like to tell lies about good people. My father is perfect, and you called him unscroopolus. No wonder I hate you."

"Listen now, little girl." Lord Grayleigh took the hot, trembling hand, and drew the child to his side.

"Don't shrink away, don't turn from me," he said; "I am not so bad as you make me out. If I did make use of such an expression, I have forgotten it. Men of the world say lots of things that little girls don't understand. Little girls of eight years old, if they are to grow up nice and good, and self-respecting, must take the world on trust. So you must take me on trust, and believe that even if I did say what you accuse me of saying, I still have a great respect for your father. I think him a right down *good* fellow."

"The best in all the world?" queried Sibyl.

"I am sure at least of one thing, that no little girl ever had a fonder father."

"And you own up you told a lie? You do own up that father's quite perfect?"

"Men like myself don't care to own themselves in the wrong," said Lord Grayleigh, "and the fact is – listen, you queer little mortal – I don't like perfect people. It is true that I have never met any."

"You have met my father and my mother."

"Come, Sibyl, shall we make a compromise? I like you, I want you to like me. Forget that I said what I myself have forgotten, and believe that I have a very great respect for your father. Come, if he were here, he would ask you to be friendly with me."

"Would he?" said the child. She looked wistful and interested. "There are lots of things I want to be 'splained to me," she said. Then, after a moment – "I'll think whether I'll be friends with you, and I'll let you know, may be to-morrow."

As she said the last words she pushed aside his detaining hand, and ran out of the summer-house. He heard her eager, quick steps as she ran away, and a moment later there came her gay laughter back to him from the distance. She had joined the other children, and was happy in her games.

"Poor little maid!" he said to himself, and he sat on grave and silent. He did not like to confess it, but Sibyl's words had affected him.

"The faith she has in that poor fellow is quite beautiful," was his inward thought; "it seems a sin to break it. If he does go to Queensland it will be broken, and somewhat rudely. I could send Atherton. Atherton is not the man for our purpose. His report won't affect the public as Ogilvie's report would, but he has never yet been troubled by conscience, and Sibyl's faith will be unshaken. It is worth considering. It is not every man who has got a little daughter like Sibyl."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.