Molesworth Mrs.

The Green Casket, and other stories

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Molesworth M.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I. – RUTH'S START IN LIFE

'Then good morning, Mrs. Perry. It all promises very nicely, I think. You may depend upon our taking good care of Ruth, and doing our best to train her well. Naylor takes great pride in her training. You will tell Ruth what I say, and impress upon her those two or three broad rules, and if she attends to those, it will be all right.'

Mrs. Perry courtesied – her best courtesy, you may be sure; for it was not every day she was honoured with an interview by so grand a personage as old Lady Melicent Bourne of the Tower House, at Hopley. She had known Lady Melicent all her life, for before she married, Mrs. Perry's own home had been at Hopley; but I hardly think this in any way lessened her awe of the great old lady – rather the opposite. And there had been no small excitement in the neat cottage beside the forge at Wharton, five miles from Hopley, when the postman brought a letter from my lady's own maid, own cousin to Mrs. Perry, the blacksmith's wife, to say that the place of under-housemaid was vacant at last, and Ruth was to be sent over to be seen by Lady Melicent herself. Ruth went, and was approved of, and came home with a message desiring her mother to go in her turn to the Tower House for a talk with her daughter's future mistress. For Lady Melicent was old-fashioned enough to take personal interest in her servants; even the younger ones were safe to be 'known all about' by her.

'And she said it that nicely, mother,' Ruth added eagerly, for she had returned full of admiration and enthusiasm about the sweet old lady. 'You are not to ill-convenience yourself; any morning saving Friday would do, she said, from eleven to twelve, and Cousin Ellen is to see that you stay to dinner. Her ladyship remembers you as well as can be; she thinks I favour you a bit, and she hopes as I'll favour you in my ways too. And so do I, I'm sure, dear mother.'

And on the child chattered, for a child she was – not yet sixteen – and the only sister among several brothers who had joined with their parents in taking 'choice care' of little Ruth. Yet she was not spoilt; her mother was too sensible to have allowed anything of that kind. Ruth was unselfish, well-meaning, and straightforward, though with some weak points which her sheltered life at home had scarcely yet tested fairly.

She was standing at the cottage door – 'father' allowed no hanging about the forge or gossip with the neighbours – scarcely in sight herself, but eagerly looking out for her mother, when Mrs. Perry appeared, walking rather slowly up the hill which led from the little railway station. In a moment Ruth's hat was on, and she had flown to meet her mother.

'Yes, love,' said Mrs. Perry, in answer to the girl's breathless, half-unspoken inquiry. 'It's all right. You're to go on Thursday week. And a very lucky girl you are, take it all together. Eight pounds wages, to be raised to ten in a year if you stop on and do well, church and Sunday-school every Sunday, and now and then an evening service if Cousin Ellen can take you; pleasant work and not too much of it, and best of all, a real good kind lady for your mistress.'

'I don't see as how it could be nicer, and not so far from home neither,' said Ruth. 'Why do you say "take it all together," mother? I see no wrong side at all.'

Mrs. Perry smiled.

'There's that to most things in this world, I misdoubt me, Ruthie. But I'm rather tired, child. We'll have a talk when I've got my things off, and have rested a little. It's hot to-day, and I've been on my feet a good bit. Cousin Ellen, she would have me to see all there was to be seen – she took me round the fields and showed me the cows and the dairy and the poultry-yard and the gardens. It's a sweet place, though not large of course.'

'Lady Melicent's been there a good many years, hasn't she?' asked Ruth, as they slowly ascended the hill.

'Nigh upon twenty-five. Ever since her husband's death, when she had to leave Bourne Park. She had no son, only Miss Rosalind, who's now Mrs. Vyner; so the Park went to a cousin, and my lady took the Tower House, not caring to stay as a widow too near to where she had been so happy as a wife. I remember her coming – her and Miss Rosalind – as if it had been yesterday. I was a girl of fifteen. Well, here we are, and I shall be glad to sit me down, I can tell you, Ruth.'

'And there'll be a cup of tea for you in half a minute, mother. It's all ready. I set the kettle on when I heard the train whistling – and it's just on the boil now. There's some hot toast too. Father and the boys'll not be in for over an hour; we'll have nice time for our talk.'

She took her mother's shawl and bonnet and ran off with them, returning with the good woman's slippers. Then she drew close to Mrs. Perry's arm-chair the little table on which she had already set out the tea-things, and stooped for the crisp slice of toast, which she began to butter. It was all done neatly and carefully – with even more care than usual, for Ruth was touched and grateful for all her mother was doing for her, and the coming event of her leaving home for the first time was casting a tender shadow over these little duties and services – a shadow which the girl hardly herself as yet understood.

'Now then, mother,' she went on, when Mrs. Perry's first cup of tea had somewhat refreshed her, 'tell me the rest. What is it you're not so sure I'll like at the Tower House?'

'Nay, child. I didn't say that. It's nothing to mind. My lady spoke most kind and sensible. There's just two or three rules she's strict about, I was to tell you, and talkin' of them'll explain other things. She will have those about her to speak the truth, first and foremost, and to be civil and respectful when they're found fault with; and if you meet with any accident, Ruth – breaking or spoiling anything in your charge, you're to up and tell it, straight away. These rules she will have attended to. Others, like about being up in time in the morning, and never going out without the housekeeper's leave, you'd find in every house. But I can see that my lady's very keen about truth-speaking and no underhand ways.'

'*Of course*,' said Ruth, with a little surprise. 'But so would any right-thinking lady be, mother.'

'I don't know as to that – there's many as don't care much so long as the work's well done, about how things go on that don't come under their own notice. But of course no lady likes things broke and not told of.'

'I'd never think of not telling, never, mother,' said Ruth, proudly. 'I'd be only too anxious to make it good too, out of my own money.'

'There's many times that's impossible,' said Mrs. Perry. 'But here comes in the difficulty you may find yourself in. You'll not be under Cousin Ellen, you see, child – Mrs. Mossop, as they call her at the Tower House – being as she's the lady's-maid, but it's Naylor, the head-housemaid, you must look to. She's a good-principled woman, so my lady says, and so Ellen says; but she's inclined to be jealous, and she has a very queer temper. You must try and not put her out, and if so be as you should do so ever – for nobody's perfect – you must bear it patient, and not go complaining to Ellen. Ellen couldn't stand it, she says so herself: it'd make such trouble, and my lady couldn't have it neither. So it won't be all roses, Ruthie, but still nothing so very bad after all. A little patience, and taking care to be quite straightforward, and you'll make your way.'

Ruth looked grave.

'Do you mean, mother, that if I broke anything by accident I must tell Naylor and no one else? I'm sure I hope I shan't break anything; but if I did, I'd much rather tell Cousin Ellen, or even my lady herself. She seems that kind.'

'Well, but that's just what you mustn't do, my dear. It'd make ever such a deal of trouble. If there was anything very serious – but that I hope there never would be – you might better tell her ladyship than Ellen. It would never do to vex her, so kind as she is, and speakin' for you for the place and all

– and it would never do to trouble Lady Melicent if you could possibly make shift without. You must just try and be very careful, Ruth, and don't go and get afraid of Naylor; she's a good woman at heart.'

'Yes,' said the girl, 'I'll do my best;' but she gave a little sigh nevertheless. There is no such thing as perfect happiness in this world, Ruth was beginning to find.

The next few days were full of bustle, rather pleasant bustle than otherwise. There were her 'things' to see to, one or two new dresses to get made, the choosing of which had been deferred till her prospects were certain, though Mrs. Perry was far too neat and methodical not to have the rest of her daughter's modest wardrobe in good order. There was the purchase of her box, and the presenting of different little gifts by her brothers and some of her school-fellows; there was the bidding goodbye to the neighbours, and the farewell tea-drinking in the vicarage nursery, where Ruth was a great favourite, and had sometimes spent a few days when extra help had been needed. Altogether the little maiden felt herself something of a heroine in her way, and though the tears were not *very* far off when the eventful Thursday came, she managed to keep them from falling, and to wave back a last goodbye to mother, with a smiling face, from the window of the third-class railway carriage as the train whizzed out of Wharton station.

She had hardly time to realise she was off before it pulled up again at Hopley. Ruth could almost have found it in her heart to wish she had been going a *little* farther away; it would have seemed rather grander! But here she was; and there was Cousin Ellen on the platform looking out for her, a vision which Ruth was by no means sorry to see, in spite of her valour.

'How good of you to come to meet me, Cousin Ellen!' said the girl gratefully, as she kissed her.

'I thought you'd be glad to have me,' said Mossop, as we must call her. She glanced round a little nervously as she spoke. The Tower House dog-cart was standing at the gate, and a young groom was directing the porter to lift up the box. He was scarcely within earshot, but Mossop lowered her voice. 'I just wanted to tell you, Ruth, love,' she said, 'you must call me Mrs. Mossop now as the others do. And I must not seem to favour you, you know – mother explained, didn't she?'

'Yes,' said Ruth, 'yes, cou – , Mrs. Mossop I mean. I'll be particular,' but her heart sank a little – it seemed so formal and strange. Mossop saw the look on her face.

'Don't look so frightened, dear,' she said. 'You'll get used to it all, soon. Only I wanted you to understand, so that you won't feel hurt if I treat you just as I would another in your place. Now jump in – that's right. Yes, thank you, Joseph, that's all,' and off they drove.

It was not quite strange to Ruth. She had been several times at Hopley, and once, as we have seen, to the Tower House. But places wear a different air when we know we have come to them 'for good,' and though all looked bright and pleasant that still summer afternoon, Ruth caught herself wondering if she would ever think Hopley as pretty as Wharton, or the newly-restored church, of which she caught a glimpse through the trees, as beautiful as the old, ivy-covered one 'at home.'

There was no question of seeing Lady Melicent that evening, but to Ruth the making acquaintance with her seven or eight fellow-servants was even more formidable. Naylor, a thin, grave-faced, middle-aged woman, shook hands with her civilly enough, and told Betsy the kitchenmaid to take her up to the bedroom they were to share together. Then came tea in the servants' hall, at which Mrs. Mossop was not present. But the others were kindly, and after it was over Naylor took her up-stairs and showed her what there was to do in the evening, adding that she had better get her box unpacked, so as to be ready to begin work regularly the next morning.

'And if there's anything you don't understand,' the upper-housemaid went on, 'be sure you ask me. Don't go on muddling for want of a word or two.'

'Thank you,' said Ruth. But she felt rather confused. The house seemed very large to her, and compared with the vicarage at Wharton, which had been hitherto her model of elegance and spaciousness, it was so. And being rambling and old-fashioned, it appeared to a stranger larger than it really was.

'The first thing you have to do of a morning is to sweep and dust my lady's "boudore,"' said Naylor, 'and the book-room at the end of the passage opening from it. Then you'll come to me in the drawing-room, and I'll show you what to do. But there's no need for you to touch the ornaments, neither in the "boudore" nor the book-room. I do those myself, the last thing when the rooms are finished.'

'Yes, thank you,' said Ruth again.

'My lady is very particular about her china. She has some very rare, though the best is behind glass and under lock and key, I'm glad to say.'

Then she sent the girl off to her unpacking, which would not have taken her long had she not lost her way by wandering up a wrong stair, and having to come down again to the kitchen to ask for Betsy's guidance, which made all the servants laugh except Naylor, who looked rather sour. But she smoothed down again when Ruth reappeared in a quarter of an hour, armed with her little work-box, to announce that her things were all arranged, and she was ready to do any sewing required. Naylor soon found her some pillowcases in want of repair, and Ruth sat quietly at work till supper, for her, soon followed by bedtime.

And so her first evening passed, and if some tears fell on her Testament as she read her verses, they were not very many nor bitter.

'I'll do my best,' she thought, 'and it'll be nice to write home in a few days and tell dear mother and all, that I'm getting on well.'

CHAPTER II. – AN ACCIDENT AND A SCOLDING

The Tower House, as I have said, was rambling and old-fashioned. Lady Melicent's boudoir was a pretty, simply-furnished room on the first floor; a long passage with windows at one side led from this to what most people would have called the library, but for which my lady preferred the less imposing name of book-room. This book-room was in the square tower which gave its name to the house; it had a window on every side, and all the wall-space that was not window was covered with well-filled bookshelves. It had a second door besides the one out of the passage; this second door led on to another and narrower lobby from which a stair ran down to the back part of the house. So that when Ruth had finished her morning sweeping and dusting of these rooms, she did not need to pass through them again, but withdrew with her brushes and dusters down the back-stairs.

The ornaments of which Naylor had spoken were some delicate old china cups and saucers and teapots on the boudoir mantelpiece, and on one or two brackets in the corners. In the book-room there were fewer; only a handsome old timepiece above the fireplace and some punch-bowls and Indian vases on a side-table. It was all very interesting and wonderful to Ruth when she found herself installed in the boudoir for her cleaning the next morning. She took the greatest pains to do it thoroughly and neatly, and was careful to put back everything, even to my lady's paper-knife on her little table, exactly as she had found it.

Then, looking round with satisfaction, she turned to the passage leading to the book-room. The morning sun was streaming in brightly, for the windows were to the east, and as Ruth stepped along, her eyes fell with admiration on an old carved cabinet standing against the wall. It had glass doors, and was filled with delicate and costly china, principally figures, which Ruth admired more than cups and saucers. On the top of the cabinet, outside, were also some beautiful things. A box, or casket, especially attracted her; it was of bright green – malachite was the name of the stone, but that Ruth did not know – set in gold, and it gleamed brilliantly in the sunshine.

'My goodness!' thought the little housemaid, 'it is splendid. I never saw such a colour. But how dusty the top of the cabinet is! How I would like to lift all the things off – there's not so many – and dust it well; but I mustn't, I suppose. Naylor said none of the ornaments.'

So she only gave another admiring glance and hastened to the book-room, just finishing her work there in time to tidy herself a little for prayers.

Lady Melicent read these herself, and when they were over, she called back Naylor, who led Ruth forward.

'I am glad to see you, Ruth,' said the old lady with the smile that had so won her young handmaiden's heart. 'You will feel a little strange at first, but that will soon go off. Pay great attention to what Naylor tells you, and I have no doubt you will get on nicely.'

Then with a word or two of inquiry after her mother, she dismissed the eager blushing girl.

'A sweet girl and a good one, or I am much mistaken,' thought Lady Melicent, as she poured out her coffee. 'I am sure I shall be able to trust Flossie with her, and there will be some time before that for her to get used to the place, and for Naylor to judge of her.'

The next few days passed quickly. Ruth was fully occupied in learning her work, of which, though not too much, there was enough. It was only at night sometimes, if she happened to be lying awake after placid, good-natured Betsy was asleep, not to say snoring, that Ruth felt a little, 'a very little,' she said to herself, homesick. But it always passed off again by the next morning, and she wrote cheerfully to her mother. Of Cousin Ellen she saw little, but this she was prepared for. On Sundays, however, Mossop generally managed to have a little walk and talk with her young relative, and often got leave for Ruth to go with her to the evening service.

Ruth had been about three weeks at the Tower House when the first cloud appeared on her fair horizon. It happened thus. At eleven o'clock every morning a small basin of beef-tea was carried

up to Lady Melicent in her boudoir. Mrs. Mossop always saw to this herself, and herself as a rule carried down the pretty china bowl with a cover and stand in which the soup was served. For this bowl was a favourite of the old lady's; it had been a present from her daughter. Now one day Lady Melicent had a slight cold, and as it was chilly and rainy, a fire was lighted by Naylor at her desire in the boudoir, early in the morning. It so happened that Mossop was unusually busy, and after having carried up the beef-tea, she did not return to the boudoir to fetch the empty basin. Later in the day Ruth met Naylor on the back-stairs.

'Oh dear,' said the housemaid, whose arms were filled with linen from the laundry, 'I do hope my lady's fire's all right. Run in, Ruth, there's a good girl, and see to it. My lady's down at luncheon in the dining-room.'

Off flew willing Ruth. Doubly willing on account of Naylor's graciousness. For it was not often the upper-housemaid was so amiable. She was only just in time to rescue the fire, but with a little skill and patience she got it to burn brightly, and getting up from her knees she turned to leave the room. As she did so, she caught sight of the china basin.

'Cousin Ellen has forgotten it,' she said to herself; 'I'll take it down.'

She reached forward to lift it, but she was a little embarrassed by the wood and coals she was carrying, and somehow – who ever can say exactly how such things happen? – her hand slipped, or the bowl slipped, or her foot slipped – anyway the china fell to the ground, and darting forward to pick it up, Ruth saw to her horror that the basin was broken into several pieces. The poor girl was sadly distressed. Still she did not think it so *very* bad, for she knew nothing of the history of the china. She gathered it together, and went slowly down-stairs in search of Naylor. She met her just at the kitchen door.

'O Naylor,' she said anxiously, 'I am so sorry. I've had an accident, and my lady's soup-bowl is broke.'

She held it out as she spoke; she was not afraid; she was just simply, as she said 'so sorry,' but quite unprepared for the storm that burst upon her. How Naylor did scold! Every sharp word she could think of was hurled at Ruth; strangest of all she was almost the *most* blamed for having done as she had been told, in at once and straight-forwardly telling what had occurred.

'Bold, impudent, and impertinent girl that you are, to come like that, as cool as a cucumber. "O Naylor, I've broke my lady's bowl,"' and here she imitated the girl's tone and voice in a very insulting way, 'as if you'd something pleasant to tell.'

Pale and trembling, Ruth stood endeavouring to keep back her tears. 'If I could match it,' she said, 'I'd do anything.'

'Match it!' said Naylor contemptuously. 'Why, Mrs. Vyner brought it herself from Paris, or somewhere farther off still. It's china as you never sees the likes of in a shop. *Match* it, indeed!'

'I didn't know' – began the girl, but it was no use; her sobs and tears burst out, and she rushed away – up to her own room, nearly knocking down Mossop on the stair.

'Why, child, whatever's the?' – she began; but Ruth only shook her head and flew on. She had been warned not to complain to Cousin Ellen, and she wasn't going to do so. She cried till her eyes were 'like boiled gooseberries,' and then, suddenly remembering where she was, and that she had her work to do, she tried to cure them by plunging her face into cold water, and with aching head and still more sorely aching heart, crept down-stairs with her needlework to the corner of the servants' hall where she sat of an afternoon.

'If only I could run away! oh, if only I could run home!' she said to herself.

Betsy consoled her in her own way, which was not a very wise one, though kindly meant, when the two girls were alone in their room at night.

'*I* wouldn't take on like that for all the chinay bowls in the world,' she said. 'Things must get broken sometimes. Not but what you brought it on yourself by telling. I'd have left it there where it fell, and let them think the cat did it.'

'But, Betsy, I promised my lady and mother too, as I'd always tell if I had any accident,' wept Ruth.

'And what did my lady promise?' said Betsy. 'Leastways *I* was promised as I'd never be scolded if I up and told if I broke anything. Catch me! I'll not risk it. And if you'd any sense, you'd not trust their fine words no more than I do.'

'It wasn't my lady. I don't believe she'd scold. But Naylor is really *dreadful* when she loses her temper,' and Ruth shivered at the mere recollection.

'Then take my advice, and don't you tell on yourself never again, whatever happens.'

Ruth did not answer. She was tired out, and did not feel as if she could argue with Betsy. The next day things had calmed down again. Naylor was quiet and rather subdued, and nothing more, rather to Ruth's surprise, was said about the bowl. But the girl felt nervous and upset. It seemed to her as if it would be long before she got back the happy bright confidence she had been so full of.

But Ruth was very young; at her age troubles *do* melt away, however terrible they seem at the time. She had felt inclined at first to write off a long letter to her mother, telling her how miserable she was, and how she didn't think she *could* bear it. But a little reflection showed her that this would only make Mrs. Perry very dull and uneasy about her, and still more that if 'father or the boys' got hold of the letter – and it would, she knew, be rather hard for mother to keep it from them – they might insist on her being fetched home again, and there would be a nice ending to her first start in life! How everyone would laugh at her, and besides – would she not *deserve* to be laughed at, if she showed so little courage and patience? On the whole she decided to wait a bit, and in this I think she was right. It is a very different thing when a girl away from home conceals from her parents anything really *wrong*: Ruth had not done wrong; and indeed no one was much to blame for the trouble, except Naylor for losing her temper. And – and – after all, Ruth asked herself, would it be *quite* nice for her to write off a long description of the housemaid's infirmity, for a real infirmity it was? She did not want to lower Lady Melicent's household, and perhaps have Naylor gossiped about in the neighbourhood through her. For there was no saying how her indignant brothers might chatter. Anyway she would wait till she could have a talk with Cousin Ellen.

This came on Sunday. As Ruth was starting for the children's service in the afternoon, which she had been told she might always attend, as it only came once a month, she heard some one calling her, and standing still to see who it was, in another moment Mrs. Mossop appeared.

'O Cousin Ellen,' said Ruth joyfully, 'are you coming to church? I am so glad.'

'I thought maybe you'd like a walk and a talk with me,' said the lady's-maid. 'I've not seen you to speak to since Wednesday, and I thought it best not to seem to be seeking you. But I *was* sorry, child; sorry both for you and for the accident. You must be very careful, Ruth.'

'I was as sorry as sorry could be,' said the girl. 'Indeed I'd have done *anything* if I could have got another bowl. But – did you know how Naylor spoke to me, Cousin Ellen?' and Ruth hesitated a little. 'It was just awful.'

'I know how she is,' said Mossop, 'but it's no use thinking about it. I was just glad of one thing, and that was that you told at once.'

Ruth hardly seemed to feel this cheering.

'I could almost have wished I hadn't told,' she said. 'I don't know *what* I'll do if ever I have to tell anything again.'

'Don't say that, my dear,' said Mossop, eagerly. 'After all, Naylor isn't my lady, and it's her temper. You'll find it much worse in the end if you hid anything, believe me. Have you written to your mother about it?'

'No,' said Ruth, 'I thought I'd wait,' and she went on to explain her reasons. Mossop approved of them.

'Yes,' she said, 'wait a bit. Writing makes things seem so much worse. Telling is different. Maybe I'll be going over to Wharton some day, and I could tell your mother. You'll feel all right again

soon, and it's to be hoped you'll have no more bad luck. I can't say but what I was very put out myself about that basin – real "Severs" it was. I suppose, to go to the roots of things, it was my fault for having left it about. I said so to my lady.'

'Oh dear, Cousin Ellen, I'm sure no one could ever think *you* to blame,' said Ruth. 'Indeed, indeed, I will try to be careful.'

Her tone was rather melancholy still. Mossop looked at her with a little smile.

'I'm much mistaken if you won't be hearing something in a day or two that'll cheer you up. But I mustn't tell you about it.'

And Ruth could not persuade her to say more.

CHAPTER III. – THE OLD CABINET IN THE PASSAGE

The very day that Ruth was crying about the broken basin, a conversation which concerned her, though she little knew it, was going on a good many miles away.

In a pretty room in a large country-house – a much larger and 'grander' house than the Towers, a lady, sweet and young, was lying on a sofa. In front of her stood a little girl – a pretty little creature of eight or nine. She had a bright expression usually, but just now she seemed uncomfortable and ill at ease. She fidgeted from one foot to the other, and frowned as she looked down, and her face was flushed.

'Tell me, Flossie,' said the lady. 'You're quite old enough to explain. Why don't you want to go to grandmamma's? I should feel so happy about you with her while I am away, and then papa and I will come to fetch you when I am quite strong again.'

'Mayn't I go with you, mamma?' said the child.

Mrs. Vyner shook her head.

'No, dear, it is impossible. You must either go to grandmamma's or stay here with Miss Kelly. And if you don't go to the Towers, I must tell grandmamma that you don't want to go.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.