

Molesworth Mrs.

The House That Grew



Mrs. Molesworth

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Molesworth M.

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CHAPTER I 'IT'S DREADFUL, ISN'T IT?'

Mamma sat quite quietly in her favourite corner, on the sofa in the drawing-room, all the time papa was speaking. I think, or I thought afterwards, that she was crying a little, though that isn't her way at all. Dods didn't think so, for I asked him, when we were by ourselves. She did not speak any way, except just to whisper to me when I ran up to kiss her before we went out, 'We will have a good talk about it all afterwards, darling. Run out now with Geordie.'

I was very glad to get out of the room, I was so dreadfully afraid of beginning to cry myself. I didn't know which I was the sorriest for – papa or mamma – mamma, I think, though I don't know, either! Papa tried to be so cheerful about it; it was almost worse than if he had spoken very sadly. It reminded me of Dods when he was a very little boy and broke his arm, and when they let me peep into the room just after the doctor had set it, he smiled and whistled to make out it didn't hurt much, though he was as white as white. Poor old Doddie! And poor papa!

'It'll be worse for us and for mamma than for papa, won't it, Dods?' I said, as soon as we were outside and quite out of hearing. 'They always say that it's the worst for those that are left behind – the going-away ones have the change and bustle, you see.'

'How can I tell?' said Dods; 'you ask such stupid things, Ida. It's about as bad as it can be for everybody, and I don't see that it makes it any better to go on counting which it's the worst for.'

He gave himself a sort of wriggle, and began switching the hedge with the little cane he was carrying; by that and the gruff tone of his voice, I could tell he was feeling very bad, so I didn't mind his being rather cross, and we walked on for a minute or two without speaking.

Then suddenly Dods – I call him Dods, but his real name is George, and mamma calls him Geordie – stopped short.

'Where are you going, Ida?' he said. 'I hear those children hallooing over there in the little planting. They'll be down upon us in another moment, tiresome things, if we don't get out of the way, and I certainly don't want them just now.'

I didn't either, though I'm very fond of them. But they're *so* much younger, only seven and eight then, and Dods and I were thirteen and fourteen. And we have always gone in pairs. Dods and I, and Denzil and Esmé. Besides, of course, the poor little things were not to be told just yet of the strange troubles and sorrows that had come, or were coming, to us.

So I agreed with Dods that we had better get out of the way.

'Esmé is so quick,' I said; 'she'd very likely see there was something the matter, and papa did so warn us not to let them know.'

'Humph,' said Dods. 'I don't think we need worry about *them*. Denzil is as dense as a hedgehog, and as comfortable as a fat dormouse. *He'd* never worry as long as he has plenty to eat and a jolly warm bed to sleep in. And Esmé's just a –'

'A what?' I said, rather vexed, for Esmé *is* a sweet. She's not fat or lazy, and I don't think Denzil is – not extra, for such a little boy.

'She's just a sort of a butterfly,' said Geordie. '*She'd* never mind anything for long. She'd just settle down for half a moment and then fly up again as merry as a sandboy.'

I could not help bursting out laughing. It was partly, I daresay, that I felt as if I must either laugh or cry. But Dods did mix up his – 'similes,' I think, is the right word – so funnily! Hedgehogs and dormice and butterflies and sandboys, all in a breath.

'I don't see what there is to laugh at,' said Geordie, very grumpily again, though he had been getting a little brighter.

'No more do I, I'm sure,' I replied, sadly enough, and then, I think, Dods felt sorry.

'Where shall we go?' he said gently.

'Wherever you like – to the hut, I think. It is always nice there, and we can lock ourselves in if we hear the children coming,' I answered.

The hut, as we called it, was our very most favourite place. It was much more than you would fancy from the name, as you will hear before long. But we did not wait to go on talking, till we got there. The children's voices did not come any nearer, but died away in the distance, so we walked on quietly, without hurrying.

'Ida,' said Geordie after a bit, 'it's dreadful, isn't it?'

'Yes,' I agreed; 'I think it is.'

The 'it' was the news poor papa had been telling us. We were not quite like most other children, I think, in some ways. I think we – that is, Dods and I – were rather more thoughtful, though that sounds like praising ourselves, which I am sure I don't mean. But papa and mamma had always had us a good deal with them and treated us almost like companions, and up to now, though he was getting on for thirteen, Dods had never been away at school, only going to Kirke, the little town near us, for some lessons with the vicar, and doing some with me and our governess, who came over from Kirke every day. So papa had told us what had to be told, almost as if we were grown-up people.

We did not understand it quite exactly, for it had to do with business things, which generally mean 'money' things, it seems to me, and which, even now, though I am sixteen past, I don't perfectly understand. And I daresay I shall not explain it all as well as a quite grown-up person would. But I don't think that will matter. This story is just a real account of something rather out of the common, and I am writing it partly as a kind of practice, for I do hope I shall be able to write stories in books some day, and partly because I think it is interesting even if it never gets into a book, and I should like Denzil and Esmé to read it all over, for fear of their forgetting about it.

I must first tell what the news was that we had just heard. Poor papa had lost a lot of money!

We were not very rich, but we had had quite enough, and our home was – and *is*, I am thankful to say – the sweetest, nicest home in the world. Our grandfathers and great-grandfathers back to papa's great-great ones have always lived here and seen to everything themselves, which makes a home nicer than anything else. But a good deal of *papa's* money came from property a long, long way off – somewhere in the West Indies. It had been left to *his* father by his godmother, and ever since I was quite little I remember hearing papa say what a good thing it was to have some money besides what came from our own property at home. For, as everybody knows, land in England – especially, I think, in our part of it – does not give half as much as it used to, from rents and those sorts of things.

And we got into the way – I mean by 'we,' papa and mamma, and grandpapa, no doubt, in his time – of thinking of the West Indian money as something quite safe and certain, that could not ever 'go down' like other things.

But there came a day, not very long before the one I am writing about, which brought sudden and very bad news. Things had gone wrong, dreadfully wrong out at that place – Saint Silvio's – and it was quite possible that *all* our money from there would stop for good. The horrid part of it was, that it all came from somebody's wrongdoing – not from earthquakes or hurricanes or outside troubles of that kind – but from real dishonesty on the part of the agents papa had trusted. There was nothing for it but for poor papa himself to go out there, for a year at least, perhaps for two years, to find out everything and see what could be done.

There was a *possibility*, papa said, of things coming right, or partly right again, once he was there and able to go into it all himself. But to do this it was necessary that he should start as soon as could be managed; and with the great doubt of our *ever* being at all well off again, it was also necessary that mamma and we four should be very, very careful about expenses at home, and just spend as little as we could.

A piece of good fortune had happened in the middle of all this; at least *papa* called it good fortune, though I am afraid George and I did not feel as if it was good at all! Papa had had an offer from some people to take our house – our own dear Eastercove – for a year, or perhaps more. We had often been asked to let it, for it is so beautifully placed – close to the sea, and yet with lovely woods and grounds all round it, which is very uncommon at the sea-side. Our pine woods are almost famous, and there are nooks and dells and glens and cliffs that I could not describe if I tried ever so hard, so deliciously pretty and picturesque are they.

But till now we had never dreamt of letting it. Indeed, we used to feel quite angry, which was rather silly, I daresay, if ever we heard of any offer being made for it. And now the offer that had come was a very good one; it was not only more money than had ever been proposed before, but it came from very nice sort of people, whom the agent knew were quite to be trusted in every way.

'They will take good care of the house and of all our things,' said papa, 'and keep on any of the servants who like to stay.'

'Shall we not have *any* servants then?' Dods had asked. 'Do you mean that mamma – mamma and Ida and the little ones – I don't mind for myself, I'm a boy; I'll go to sea as a common sailor if it would be any good – but do you mean, that we shall be like *really* poor people?' And here there came a choke in his voice that made me feel as if I could *scarcely* keep from crying. For I knew what he was thinking of – the idea of mamma, our pretty mamma, with her merry laugh and nice dresses, and soft, white hands, having to work and even scrub perhaps, and to give up all the things and ways she was used to – it was too dreadful!

Papa looked sorry and went on again quietly —

'No, no, my boy,' he said; 'don't exaggerate it. Of course mamma and you all must have every comfort possible. One servant, anyway – Hoskins is sure to stay, and a younger one as well, I *hope*. And there must be no thought of your going to sea, George, or going anywhere, till I come back again. I look to you to take care of them all – that is why I am explaining more to you and Ida than many people would to such young ones. But I know you are both very sensible for your age. You see, we are sure of the new rent, thanks to this Mr. Trevor's offer – and even *that* would prevent us from being in a desperate position. And, of course, the usual money will go on coming in from the property, though the most of it must go in keeping things in order, in case – ' but here papa broke off.

'I know what you were going to say, papa,' said poor Dods, growing scarlet; he was certainly very quick-witted, – "in case we have to sell Eastercove!" Oh, papa! anything but that! I'll work – I'll do *anything* to make money, so long as we don't have to do that. Our old, old home!'

He could not say any more, and turned away his head.

'It has not come to that yet, my boy,' said papa, after a moment or two's silence. 'Let us keep up heart in the meantime, and hope for the best.'

Then he went on to tell us some of the plans he and mamma had already begun to make – about our going to live in some little house at Kirke, where we should not feel so strange as farther away, though there were objections to this too, – anything at all *nice* in the shape of even a tiny house there would be dear, as the neighbourhood was much sought after by visitors in winter as well as in summer. For it was considered so very healthy for delicate people; the air was always clear and dry, and the scent of the pine woods so strengthening. Papa, however, was doing his best; he and mamma were going there that very afternoon, 'To spy the land,' papa said, trying to speak cheerily.

So now I come back to where I began my explanation as to what the 'it' was, that Geordie and I agreed was so dreadful.

We were walking on slowly to the hut, and just as I had replied, 'I think it is,' we came in sight of it, and something – I don't know what – made us both stop and look at this favourite spot of ours. It was so pretty to-day – perhaps that was it. A sudden clearing brought us out of the wood, through which we had been following a well-worn, narrow path, and the bright, soft light of the early afternoon – of an April afternoon – was falling on the quaint little place. It was more like two or three huts than one, and indeed it really did consist of three or four rooms, which we children had been allowed to consider our own quarters, and to decorate and improve according to our fancy and taste. To begin with, it had been a bathing-house, of two rooms, partly of stone, partly of wood, standing on a little plateau, just at the edge of the pine trees, and well above the sea, so that even in stormy weather the water could not possibly reach it; besides which, I must say that stormy weather in the shape of high tides or great waves never did show itself in this cove. Often and often we had sat there, listening to the boom and crash at the foot of the cliffs, round at the other side, as snug and peaceful as if we had been miles inland.

And the sands that sloped down from our hut were just perfection, both as to prettiness and niceness for bathing. They shone to-day like gold and silver mixed in the sunshine; and the hut itself, though queerly shaped, looked pretty too. We had managed, in spite of the sandy soil, to get some hardy creepers to grow over it on the inland side, and we had sunk some old tubs filled with good soil in front of the porch – for there was a porch – in which flourished some nice, bushy evergreens, and there was even a tiny terrace with long flower-boxes, where, for six months of the year at least, geraniums and fuchsias, and for part of the time, nice, big, white and yellow and straw-coloured daisies seemed quite at home. It was a *lovely* place for children to have of their own; and the year before, papa had added two other rooms to it, for our photographing — *iron* rooms, these were, and not at all ugly, though that would not have mattered much, as they were at the back, beside the little kitchen, where we were allowed to cook our luncheons and teas when we were spending a whole day on the shore.

'Dods!' I exclaimed, as we stood there in silence, admiring our mansion, 'we must see about the flowers for the long boxes. It's getting quite time, for Bush has settled all about the bedding-out plants – he told me so yesterday – so he'll be able to tell us what he has to spare.'

I spoke in utter forgetfulness – but it only lasted a moment – only, that is to say, till I caught the expression of Geordie's mournful blue eyes – he *can* make them look so mournful when he likes – fixed upon me in silent reproach.

'Ida,' he said at last, 'what are you thinking of? *What's the use?*'

'Oh, Dods! oh, dear, dear Doddie!' I cried – I don't think I quite knew what I was saying, – 'forgive me. Oh, how silly and unfeeling I seem! *Oh, Doddie!*'

And then – I am not now ashamed to tell it, for I really had been keeping it in at the cost of a good deal of forcing myself – I just left off trying to be brave or self-controlled or anything, and burst out crying – regular loud crying. I am afraid I almost howled.

George looked at me once more, then for a minute or so he turned away. I am not sure if he was crying, anyway he wasn't *howling*. But in an instant or two, while I was rubbing at my eyes with my handkerchief, and feeling rather, or very ashamed, I felt something come round my neck, crushing it up so tightly that I was almost choked, and then Doddie's voice in my ear, very gruff, very gruff indeed of course, saying —

'Poor Ida, poor old Ida! I know it's quite as bad or worse for you. For a *man* can always go out into the world and fight his way, and have some fun however hard he works.'

'That wouldn't make it any better for *me*, Dods,' I said – we both forgot, I think, that he was a good way off being a man just yet, – 'you're my only comfort. I don't mean that mamma isn't one, of course; but it's our business now to cheer her up. Papa said so ever so many times. I don't really know, though, how I *could* have cheered her up, or even tried to, if you had been away at school already!'

Poor George's face darkened at this. It was rather an unlucky speech. He had thought of things already that had never come into my head. One was that it seemed unlikely enough now that papa would ever be able to send him to school at all – I mean, of course, to the big public school, for which his name had been down for ever so long, and on which, like all English boys, his heart was set. For he knew how expensive all public schools are.

'Don't talk of school, Ida,' he said huskily. 'Luckily it's a good year off still,' for it had never been intended that he should go till he was fourteen; 'and,' with a deep sigh, 'we must keep on hoping, I suppose.'

'Yes, and working,' I added. 'Whatever happens, Dods, you must work well, and I'll do my best to help you. Mightn't you perhaps gain a scholarship, or whatever you call them, that would make school cost less?'

This remark was as lucky as the other had been unfortunate. Dods brightened up at once.

'By Jove,' he said, 'what a good idea! I never thought of it. I'll tell you what, Ida; I'll ask Mr. Lloyd about it the very first time I see him – that'll be the day after to-morrow, as to-morrow's Sunday.'

Mr. Lloyd was the vicar of Kirke.

I felt quite proud of having thought of something to cheer Geordie up, and my tears stopped, and by the time we had got to the hut, we were both in much better spirits.

'It is to be hoped,' I said, 'that papa and mamma *will* find some kind of a house at Kirke, however poky. For you would be very sorry not to go on with Mr. Lloyd – wouldn't you, Dods?'

'Of course I should,' he replied heartily. 'He's very kind and very strict. And if I mean to work harder than ever before, as I do now, since you put that jolly idea into my head, it's a good thing he *is* strict.'

When we got to the hut and unlocked the door, we found a good deal to do. For on Saturdays we generally – we *meant* to do it regularly, but I am afraid we sometimes forgot – had a sort of cleaning and tidying up. Photographing is very nice and interesting of course, and so is cooking, but they are rather messy! And when you've been doing one or the other nearly all day, it's rather disgusting to have to begin washing up greasy dishes, and chemicalised rags and glasses, and pots and pans, and all the rest of it. I don't mean that we ever cleaned up the photographing things with the kitchen things; we weren't so silly, as, of course, we should not only have spoilt our instruments, but run a good risk of poisoning ourselves too. But the whole lot needed cleaning, and I don't know which were the tiresomest.

And the last day we had spent at the hut, we had only half-tidied up, we had got *so* tired. So there were all the things about, as if they'd been having a dance in the night, like Hans Andersen's toys, and had forgotten to put themselves to bed after it.

Dods and I looked at each other rather grimly.

'It's got to be done,' I said. 'It's a shame to see the place so bright and sunny outside and so *dreadfully* messy indoors.'

'Yes,' said Dods, 'it is. So fire away, Ida. After all – ' but he didn't finish his sentence and didn't need to. I knew what he meant – that quite possibly it was the very last time we'd need to have a good cleaning up in the dear old hut.

CHAPTER II

'MUFFINS, FOR ONE THING, I HOPE'

The first thing we had to do was really to 'fire away.' That is to say, to light a fire, for of course nothing in the way of washing up or cleaning can be done without hot water, and you cannot get hot water without fire of some kind. But that part of our work we did not dislike at all. We had grown quite clever at making fires and getting them to burn up quickly in the little stove, and we had always, or nearly always, a nice store of beautifully dry wood that we picked up ourselves. And though the hut was so near the sea, it was wonderfully dry. We could leave things there for weeks, without their becoming musty or mouldy.

And as the fire crackled up brightly, and after a bit we got the kettle on and it began to sing, our spirits began to rise again a little, to keep it company.

'After all,' I said, 'there really is a good strong *likelihood* that things won't turn out so badly. Papa is very clever, and once he is out there himself, he will find out everything, and perhaps get them put straight once for all. It wouldn't so much matter our having less money than we have had till now, if all the muddle and cheating was cleared up.'

'No, it wouldn't,' Geordie agreed, 'and of course it's best to be hopeful. So long as there's no talk of our selling Eastercove, Ida, I don't feel as if I minded anything.'

'And the great thing is to cheer up poor mamma while papa's away,' I said, 'and not to seem dull or miserable at having to live differently and go without things we've always been used to have. I don't think I shall mind that part of it so *very* much, Dods – shall you?'

Dods sighed.

'I don't know; I hope not for myself – of course what matters to *me* is the perhaps not going to a big school. But you have cheered me up about that, Ida. I shall hate you and mamma not having a carriage and nice servants and all that, though we must go on hoping it will only be for a bit.'

'And I *do* hope we can stay on near here,' I said, 'so that at least we can feel that home is close-to. I would rather have ever so little a house at Kirke than a much better one farther off – except that, well, I must say I shouldn't like it to be one of those dreadfully stuffy-looking little ones in rows in a street!'

'I'm afraid that's just what it is likely to be,' said Dods. 'It will be pretty horrid; there's no use trying to pretend it won't be. But, Ida, we're not working at all. We must get on, for papa and mamma will like to find us at home when they come in.'

'Especially as to-morrow's Sunday,' I added; 'and very likely, if it's as fine as to-day, we may all come down here to tea in the afternoon,' for that was a favourite habit of ours. We children used to consider that we were the hosts on these occasions, and papa and mamma our visitors.

So we set to work with a will, without grumbling at the rather big collection of things there were to wash up, and the amount of sweeping and brushing to do. To begin with, we knew we had ourselves to thank for it, as we had left things in a very untidy way the last day we had spent at the hut. Then too, even though only an hour or so had passed since we had heard the bad news, I think we had suddenly grown older. I have never felt thoroughly a child again since that morning. For the first time it seemed to come really home to me that life has a serious side to it, and I think – indeed I know – that George felt the same. I don't mean that we were made sad or unhappy, for I don't count that we had ever been very thoughtless children, but we both began to feel that there were certain things we could do, and should do, that no one else could do as well.

I think it must be what people call the sense of 'responsibility,' and in some ways it is rather a nice feeling. It makes one feel stronger and braver, and yet more humble too, though that sounds

contradictory, for there comes with it a great anxiety to prove worthy of the trust placed in one to do one's best.

And just now it was very specially a case of being trusted. Papa said he would go away happier, or at least less unhappy, for knowing that he left two 'big' children to take care of mamma, and though I cannot quite explain how, the feeling left by his words had begun to influence us already. We even were extra anxious to do our tidying very well and quickly, as we knew it would please mamma to see we were keeping the promises we had made when she first persuaded papa to let us have the hut for our own, and got it all made nice for us.

And by four o'clock or so it did look very nice – I never saw it neater, and we felt we might rest for a few minutes.

We had put everything ready for Sunday afternoon's tea-party – everything that could be ready, I mean. The cups and saucers and fat brown tea-pot were arranged on the round table of the room we counted our parlour; it was in front of the kitchen, looking towards the sea, and here we did the unmessy part of the photographing, and kept any little ornaments or pictures we had. Of the other two rooms one was the 'chemical room,' as we called it, and in a cupboard out of it we hung up our bathing-clothes, and the *fourth* room, which had originally been the front bathing-house, so to say, or dressing-room, was now a bedroom, all except the bed. That does sound very 'Irish,' does it not? But what I mean is that it was furnished simply as a bedroom usually is – only that there was no bed.

We had often begged to be allowed to spend a night in the hut, for there was an old sofa that Geordie could have slept on quite comfortably in the parlour, or even in the kitchen, and we had saved pocket-money enough to buy a camp bedstead, for which mamma had two or three mattresses and pillows and things like that among the spare ones up in the long garret. But so far we had never got leave to carry our picnicking quite so far. Papa would not have minded, for of all things he wanted us to be 'plucky,' and did not even object to my being something of a tomboy; but mamma said she would certainly not sleep all night if she knew we were alone in the hut, and perhaps frightened, or ill, or something wrong with us.

So *that* plan had been put a stop to.

'I wonder what Hoskins will give us in the shape of cakes for to-morrow,' I said. 'There is enough tea and sugar for two or three more afternoons' – 'more than we shall want,' I added to myself with an inside sigh.

Hoskins was a sort of half-nurse, half-housekeeper person. She had not been with us *very* long, only since Esmé was born – but she really was very good and dear, and I know she cared for us in a particular way, for her father had been gardener for ages, though ages ago now, as she herself was pretty old, at Eastercove. And she wasn't cross, like so many old servants both in books and real life – rather the other way – too "spoiling" of us. She had only one fault. She was a little deaf.

'Muffins, for one thing, I hope,' said Dods. 'They don't leave off making them till May, and it isn't May yet.'

There was a baker in the village – I think I have forgotten to say that there was a very tiny village called Eastercove, close to our gates – who was famed for his muffins.

'Humph,' I said. 'I don't very much care about them. They are such a bother with toasting and buttering. I think bread and butter – thin and rolled – is quite as good, and some nice cakes and a big one of that kind of gingerbread that you hardly taste the ginger in, and that's like toffee at the top.'

I was beginning to feel hungry, for we had not eaten much luncheon, which was our early dinner, and I think that made me talk rather greedily.

'You are a regular epicure about cakes,' said Dods.

I did not like his calling me that, and I felt my face get red, and I was just going to answer him crossly when I remembered about our great trouble, and thought immediately to myself how silly it would be to squabble about tiny things in a babyish way now. So I answered quietly —

'Well, you see, it is only polite to think of what other people like, if you invite them to tea, and I know papa likes that kind of gingerbread. He ate such a big piece one day that mamma called him a greedy boy.'

Geordie did not say anything, but I always know when he is sorry for teasing me, and I could see that he was just now.

Then we locked up and set off home again. As we came out of the pine woods and in sight of the drive we saw the pony carriage, and we ran on, so as to be at the front door when papa and mamma got there.

They smiled at us very kindly, and papa said in what he meant to be a cheery voice —

'Well, young people, what have you been about? Run in, Ida, and hurry up tea. Mamma is tired.'

Yes, poor mamma did look dreadfully tired, and through the outside cheeriness of papa's words and manner I could see that he was feeling very sad and dull.

I hurried in, and we were soon all at tea in the pretty drawing-room. George and I did not always have tea downstairs, but to-day somehow there seemed no question of our not doing so. I waited till mamma had had some tea and was looking a little less white and done up, and then I said half-frightenedly —

'Did you see any nice little house at Kirke?' though in my heart I felt sure they hadn't, or they would not have come back, looking so disappointed.

Mamma shook her head.

'I am afraid, dearie,' she began, but papa interrupted her —

'No,' he said decidedly, 'we saw nothing the least possible to call "nice," except one or two places far and away too dear. And of course we knew already that there are plenty of nice houses to be got, if expense had not to be considered so closely. There is no good beating about the bush with George and Ida,' he went on, turning to mamma. 'Now that we have so thoroughly taken them into our confidence it is best to tell them everything. And the truth is,' he continued, leaning back in his chair with a rather rueful smile, 'I am really feeling almost in despair. I am afraid we shall have to give up the idea of staying at Kirke.'

'Yet there are so many advantages about it,' said mamma quickly. 'And there is, after all, that tiny house in the Western Road.'

'Horrid poky little hole,' said papa. 'I cannot bear to think of you in it. I would almost rather you went about in a caravan like the gypsies we passed on the road.'

'Yes,' I agreed, 'I wouldn't mind that at all – not in summer, at least.'

'Ah, but unluckily, my dear child, "it is not always May,"' he replied, though I was pleased to see he held out his cup for some more tea (I have found out that things do seem much worse when one is tired or hungry!) and that his voice sounded more like itself.

'And it isn't always winter either,' said mamma cheerfully. 'Let us be as happy as we can while we are together, and enjoy this nice spring weather. I *am* glad, if sad things had to happen, that they did not come to us in November or December. Perhaps Mr. Lloyd will find some nicer house for us.'

'Does he know about – about our having to leave Eastercove?' I asked.

Mamma nodded.

'Yes,' she replied. 'We stopped there on our way back, and papa went in and told him.'

I felt glad of that. It would prepare him for Dods's anxiety about a scholarship.

'By the bye,' mamma continued, 'how fast they are getting on with the new parish room! I was looking at it while I was waiting for you, Jack' (that's papa), 'and it seems really finished. Are they not beginning to take away the iron room already?'

'Lloyd says it is to be sold here, or returned to the makers for what they will give, next week,' papa replied. 'It has served its purpose very well indeed these two or three years. If –'

'If what?' said mamma.

Poor papa shrugged his shoulders.

'Oh, it's no good thinking of it now,' he answered. 'I was only going to say – forgetting – that if Geordie and Ida liked I might buy it and add it on to the hut. It would make into two capital little bedrooms for very little cost, and Lloyd happened to say to-day that the makers would rather sell it for less where it stands than have the expense of taking it back to London. They keep improving these things; it is probably considered old-fashioned already.'

Geordie and I looked at each other. How lovely it would have been! Just what we had always longed for – to be allowed really to *live* at the hut now and then. And with two more rooms we could have had Hoskins with us, and then mamma wouldn't have been nervous about it. But as papa said, there was no use in thinking about it *now*.

'Will the people who are coming to live here have the hut too?' I asked.

Papa did not seem to pay much attention to what I said. He was thinking deeply, and almost started as I turned to him with the question.

'I do not know,' he replied. 'It has not been alluded to.'

'I hope not,' said mamma. 'If we stay at Kirke, as I still trust we may, it would be nice to come up there to spend an afternoon now and then. It is so far from the house that we would not seem like intruders. Though, of course, once they see how nice it is, they may want to have it as a bathing-box.'

'That's not very likely,' said papa. 'They seem elderly people, and the son is a great sufferer from rheumatism. That is why they have taken such a fancy to this place – the scent of pine woods and the air about them are considered so good for illnesses of that kind. And sea-air suits him too, and they think it a wonderful chance to have all this as well as a dry climate and fairly mild winters. Yes – we who live here *are* uncommonly lucky.'

He strolled to the window as he spoke and stood looking out without speaking. Then he turned again.

'I'll remember about the hut,' he said. 'I don't fancy these good people would be likely to be fussy or ill-natured or to think you intruding. Their letters are so well-bred and considerate.'

We felt glad to hear that.

'Mamma,' I said, 'we have made the hut so nice and tidy for to-morrow – Sunday, you know. You and papa will come and have tea there, won't you? It will be the first time this year' (and 'the last perhaps' seemed whispered into my mind, though I did not utter the words), for the spring-coming had been uncertain and we had all had colds.

Mamma looked at papa.

'Yes,' he said; 'certainly we will. And the little ones too, Ida?'

'Of course,' I said, and then I went off to talk about cakes – and muffins if possible, to please Dods – to Hoskins, the result of the interview proving very satisfactory.

When I came back to the drawing-room the little ones were there – Denzil, solemn as usual; Esmé hopping and skipping about and chattering thirteen to the dozen, as usual, too! She is three or four years older now, and beginning to 'sober down,' as they say, so I hope if she ever reads this, which certainly will not be for three or four or more years from now, she will have gone on sobering down, enough to understand what a 'flibbertigibbet' (that is a word of Hoskins's which I think very expressive) she was, and not to be hurt at my description of her. For I do love her dearly, and I always have loved her dearly, and I should be sorry for her ever to lose her good spirits, though it is already a comfort that she *sometimes* sits still now, and listens to what is said to her.

All the same, that part of our lives which I am writing this story about, would have been much duller and harder but for our butterfly's funny, merry ways.

This afternoon she was especially laughing and mischievous, and it made me feel a little cross. I was tired, I daresay, with all the work we had been doing, *and* the sadness that had come upon us so suddenly, and I did want to be quiet and talk sensibly. It was a little papa's fault too, I must say. He is sometimes rather like a boy still, though he has four big children. He hates being unhappy! I

don't think he would mind my saying so of him, and he got mischievous and teased Esmé, to make her say funny things, as she often does.

And I suppose I looked rather too grave, for, after a little, mamma whispered to me —

'Ida, dear, don't look so dreadfully unhappy; you almost make me wish we had not told you anything till we were obliged to do so.'

'I don't look worse than Geordie,' I replied, in a whisper too, 'or — or,' as I happened just then to catch sight of my younger brother's face, 'than Denzil.'

At this mamma did burst out laughing — a real merry laugh, which, in spite of my crossness, I was pleased to hear.

'My dear!' she exclaimed, 'who has ever seen Denzil anything but solemn! And as he knows nothing, it has certainly not to do with what *we* are all thinking about. He was the solemnest *baby* even that ever was seen, though many babies are solemn. I used to feel quite ashamed of my frivolity when Denny was only a couple of months old. And — no, poor old Geordie is trying to cheer up, so you must too.'

Yes, it was true. Geordie was laughing and playing with Esmé and papa, though I know his heart was quite as heavy as mine. Geordie is very particularly good in some ways. So I resolved to choke down, or at least to hide, my sadness — and still more the sort of crossness I had been feeling. It was not exactly real ill-tempered crossness, but the kind of hating being unhappy and thinking that other people are unhappy too, which comes with troubles when one isn't used to them especially, and isn't patient and unselfish, though one wants to be.

However, I managed to look more amiable after mamma's little warning — still more, I think, after her hearty laugh. Her laughing always seems to drive away crossness and gloominess; it is so pretty and bright, and so real.

And I was helped too by another thing, though as yet it had scarcely taken shape in my mind, or even in my fancy. But it was there all the same, fluttering about somewhere, as if waiting for me to catch hold of it and make something of it. Just yet I did not give myself time to think it out. All I felt was a sort of presentiment that somewhere or somehow there was a way out of our troubles, or rather out of one part of them, and that I was going to find it before long. And I am quite sure that sometimes the thinking a thing out is more than half done by our brains before we know it — much in the same way that we — Dods and I — are quite sure that putting a lesson-book under your pillow at night helps you to know what you have to learn out of it by the next morning. Lots of children believe this, though none of us can explain it, and we don't like to speak of it for fear of being laughed at. But I don't mind writing about it, as I shall not hear if people do laugh at it or not.

Anyway it *did* happen to me this time, that *something* worked the cobweb ideas that were beginning to float about in my brain into a real touchable or speakable plan, before the 'awake' side of it — of my brain, I mean — knew that anything of the kind was there.

I will try to tell quite exactly how this came about. But first I must say that I don't think George was feeling so *very* bad after all, for the last thing he said to me that evening as we went up to bed was, 'I do hope Hoskins has managed to get some muffins for to-morrow.'

CHAPTER III

'IT'S A WONDERFUL IDEA, IDA'

I remember that I fell asleep very quickly that night. Of course, like most children when they are well, I generally did. But that night it would not have been very surprising if I had kept awake and even got into a tossing-about, fidgety state, just from thinking about the strange, sudden trouble and change that were coming into our lives.

On the contrary, I seemed to drop straight down into unconsciousness almost as soon as my head touched the pillow, and I must have slept several hours straight off without even dreaming, or at least dreaming anything that I could remember. For when I awoke the dawn was creeping in, and though I felt too lazy and comfortable to get up to look out, I knew that sunrise could not be far off. It was that time of early morning when one almost fancies that sun and moon stop a moment or two to say a word to each other on their way, though of course I know enough astronomy now to understand that those fancies *are* only fancies. And yet there is a kind of truth in them, for the sun and moon, and the stars too, *have* to do with all of us people living on this earth; indeed, we owe everything to the sun; and so it is not altogether fancy to think of him, great big kind thing that he is, as a wonderful friend, and of the little gentle moon as taking his place, as it were, when he is at work on the other side. And the curious, mingled sort of light in the room, faint and dreamy, though clear too, made me think to myself, 'The sun is saying, "How do you do?" and the moon, "Good-bye."'

But I soon shut my drowsy eyes again, though not to fall asleep again at once. On the contrary, I grew awaker and awaker, as I began to feel that my mind or memory or brain – I don't know which to call it – had something to tell me.

What was it?

I seemed almost to be listening. And gradually it came to me – the knowledge of the idea that had been working itself out during my sleep from the thoughts that had been there jumbled up together the day before. And when I got clear hold of what it was, I nearly called out, I felt so struck and startled at first, just as if some one had said it to me, though with astonishing quickness it spread itself out before me as a really possible and even sensible plan, with nothing dreamy or fanciful about it.

It was this.

'Why should not we all – mamma, that is to say, and we four children – why should we not live altogether at the hut during the year, or more perhaps, that papa would have to be away?'

It may seem to those who read this story – if ever there are readers of it – a wild idea that had thus come to me. But 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating,' as Hoskins is fond of saying. So please wait a little before you judge.

And no sooner had the idea got into words than all the bits of it began to place themselves in order like the pieces of a dissected puzzle-map, or, still better, like the many-coloured skeins of silk in the pretty fairy story where the touch of the wand made them all arrange themselves. Still more – no sooner had the first vague thoughts settled down than others came to join them, each finding its own corner in the building that I began to see was not a castle in the air but a good solid piece of work.

It would be so healthy and airy, and yet not damp; nor, with proper care, need it be very cold, even in winter. It would be near enough to Kirke for Geordie to go on with his lessons with Mr. Lloyd, and for us to feel we had old friends close at hand, who would understand all about us, and very likely be kinder than ever. It would be near enough to home – dear Eastercove – indeed, it would be Eastercove – for us to take lots of furniture and things from the house to furnish as much more as was needed and to make it comfortable and even pretty, without emptying Eastercove house at all. There was, as I have said, such a lot of stored-away extra furniture and old carpets and curtains

and blankets and all sorts of things up in the great attic, and Hoskins kept them all so nice and tidy, and without moths or mildew or horrible things like that, that it was quite a pleasure to go up there sometimes. It was like a very neat shop for second-hand things, which is more than can be said for most box-rooms or lumber-rooms, I fancy.

And the moving these things would be no expense, and there would be no travelling expenses for any of us, and – the last idea that came into my head was the best of all. The old parish room! The iron room that Mr. Lloyd had told papa about the afternoon before! They wanted to get rid of it and would sell it for almost nothing. Even if 'almost nothing' meant – I could not guess how much or how little – a few pounds, perhaps – it would be far, far less than the rent of a house, however small, and it would make into two or even three little rooms, easily. Perhaps it would be enough just to divide it by screens or curtains, perhaps —

Oh, the 'perhapes' that came crowding into my head when I had thought of the old parish room! I could scarcely lie still another minute – I felt in such a desperate hurry to tell Geordie of the wonderful thought that had come to me. But it was still far from getting-up time; I knew it would be very selfish and unkind to wake up poor old Dods in what would seem to him the middle of the night, for he was a very sound sleeper, and had hard enough work to get his eyes properly open by seven o'clock.

No – there was nothing for it but to lie still and be as patient as I could. It would be interesting to watch the light growing stronger and changing; it was already doing so in a curious way, as the cold, thin moonshine gave place to the sun, even then

warmer somehow in its tone than the fullest moon-rays ever are.

'Yes,' I thought, 'they have met and passed each other by now, I should think. I wonder – if –'

Strange to say, I cannot finish the sentence, for I don't know *what* I was going to wonder! In spite of all my eagerness and excitement I knew nothing more, till – the usual summons, in Hoskins's voice —

'Miss Ida, my dear, it's the quarter-past. You were sleeping soundly – I could scarcely find it in my heart to awake you. But it's Sunday morning, and you know it doesn't do to be late – and a beautiful spring morning too as ever was seen.'

I could scarcely believe my ears.

'Oh, Hoskins!' I exclaimed, 'I *am* sleepy. I was awake a good bit quite early, and I had no idea I had gone off again. I was *so* awake, thinking.'

The talking thoroughly roused me, and almost at once all the 'thinking' came back to me, so that by the time I was dressed, even though Sunday morning dressing needed a little more care and attention than every day's, I had got it all clear and compact and ready, as it were, for Geordie's cool inspection.

To my great satisfaction he had had a good fit that morning of getting up promptly and being down the first after me, instead of, as often happened, the last after everybody.

'Geordie,' I exclaimed, when I caught sight of him standing at the dining-room window, staring out – or perhaps I should say 'gazing,' for staring is an ugly word, and the garden that morning was looking so particularly pretty – 'Geordie, I am just bursting to talk to you. Is it any use beginning before papa and mamma come down, do you think?'

Geordie looked at the clock on the mantelpiece.

'Yes,' he said; 'we have five minutes, or ten perhaps. Is it anything particular?'

'Of course it is,' I replied, 'or I wouldn't say I was bursting to tell it you. And I think and hope it is something that will please you very much. You are to listen well and not interrupt me and say "nonsense," before you have taken it into your mind and thought it over.'

I saw he already was looking interested, and I was glad of it. His face had been so sad when he first turned at the sound of my voice, and I well knew why. I can almost always understand Geordie and very often guess what he is thinking of. He has such dear blue eyes, but they are the kind that

can look very melancholy sometimes. I do hope he will have a happy life when he grows up – I am pretty sure he will deserve it. Even now that he has been a good long while at school – big public school, I mean – he is just the same to me as ever. When he comes home for the holidays it seems as if he had never been away.

'I won't interrupt you – or say "nonsense," if I can help it,' he answered, with a little fun in his voice and smile coming in his eyes.

Then I told him. I need not repeat all I said, as I have written a lot of it already. But it must have been rather hard for Geordie not to interrupt me. It all bubbled out so fast – all the splendid ideas and good reasons and perhapses – one on the top of the other, so that if he hadn't been pretty well accustomed to my ways he could scarcely have understood. It was quite interesting and exciting, as I went on, to watch the expression in his face – his cheeks grew pink, then crimson, and his eyes brighter and brighter. I soon saw I was not going to be snubbed.

But real want of breath, and then the sound of mamma's skirts coming across the hall with a pretty soft rustle – I don't think any one else's skirts move so nicely; they seem to match her, not like that noisy flustering that is like saying, 'Here I am; I expect to be attended to' – made me stop at last. There was only time for George to whisper —

'It's a wonderful idea, Ida. I'll think a lot and then we'll talk about it, by ourselves, first, of course.'

'We mustn't think about it in church,' I replied in the same tone; 'we must *try*, I suppose, Dods, not to think of it in church – part of the time, at least. I don't see that it would matter so much during the first lesson, and *perhaps* one of the psalms, if they are very long ones.'

'No – o, perhaps not,' he said, and then we both ran forward to kiss mamma.

She looked at us, and I saw her face brighten when she saw that ours were not very sad or dull. I think she had been afraid that in his wish to help *her*, papa had put too much of the burden on us two, considering how young we were then.

'My darlings!' she said, in a rather low voice, 'my own brave boy and girl,' and I am almost sure the tears came into her eyes. But the smiles came too.

'What a lovely day it is going to be!' she went on, as she glanced out of the window. 'I am so glad. We must put cares aside as much as we can and try to be happy and hopeful.'

'Yes, dear mamma,' I answered cheerfully, and with all the delightful exciting ideas in my head, it was quite easy to be bright, as you can understand, 'yes, we *are* going to have a nice day. Geordie and I' – I glanced at him; he had not exactly said so, but I knew he would not mind, – 'Geordie and I want to go down to the hut very soon after luncheon, if you say we may, to get it all ready for you and papa and the little ones, to come to tea.'

'All right,' said mamma, though I saw a tiny shadow cross her face as I spoke, and I knew she was thinking to herself that very likely it would be our last Sunday afternoon tea-party for a very long time, perhaps for ever, as far as the hut was concerned! But these solemn kinds of 'perhapses' are always in our lives, and if we were always thinking of them, it would be more than our minds and hearts could bear. We should not *forget* them, but I am sure we are not meant to be gloomy about them. Still, at the best, even if my grand plan was carried out, there was plenty to be sad about, I knew. Poor papa's going so far away, first and worst of all, and worst of course for mamma, for though we loved him dearly, she must love him, I suppose, still more.

He came into the room just as these thoughts were flying about my brain. I thought he looked more tired and troubled than mamma – men are not so patient and not always so good at hiding their feelings as *some* women. At least *I* think so!

We two, however, were really feeling cheerful, and I think our brightness made it easier for mamma to be, at least, less sad than she would otherwise have been. And I said to myself —

'Papa will cheer up too *if* he likes our idea, and I really can't see why he should not like it.'

So breakfast got on pretty well on the whole, and as soon as it was over, Dods and I went off for a talk. How we did talk! But first of all – that was so like Dods – he pulled out his watch and looked what o'clock it was.

'It's just half-past nine, Ida,' he said, 'and we must be quite ready by half-past ten. So let's talk till ten, no longer; it always takes you twenty minutes or half an hour to get dressed for church, and you know it vexes papa to be kept waiting. And to-day it's really very important not to vex him at all, if anything is to come of our plan.'

'Very well,' I said; 'I promise to go in at ten.'

Then we went to one of our favourite garden seats and set to work at our idea. It grew and grew; we kept thinking of new bits to it, each saying something which made the other think of something else, till by ten o'clock we began to feel as if it were all quite settled – 'cut and dry.'

The very last thing I called out to Geordie as we ran in was about a certain old breakfast set of china we had espied in one of our visits to the garret.

'Yes,' I was saying, 'those willow pattern cups and things would do beautifully. It wouldn't matter their being odd, for then mamma wouldn't mind if some got broken. And very likely, Doddie, things *will* get broken, more than –'

'What are you talking about, my dear child?' said mamma's voice, and, looking round, I saw that she was just coming out of the drawing-room on her way upstairs to get ready for church. 'You don't mean to say that your tea-things at the hut are all broken?'

'Oh no, no, mamma dear,' I replied in a great hurry, and feeling myself grow red, though I don't think she noticed it; 'they are all right – none broken, and only one saucer chipped. But – I was only saying – we *might* need more some time.'

'Ah, well!' said mamma, with a little sigh, 'not at present, at any rate.'

And oh how I wished I could tell her of the plan at once! But of course it was best to wait a little.

I shall never forget that morning at church, and how *awfully* difficult it was to give my attention. I found myself counting up the things we should need to make the hut comfortable, even while my voice was saying the responses quite correctly, and any one noticing me would very likely have thought I was being quite good and listening rightly. Dods, whom I glanced at now and then, was looking very grave but not unhappy. I felt sure he was being much better than I – I mean about listening to what he heard and thinking of the words he said – though afterwards he told me that he too had found it difficult.

'What was most bothering me,' he said, 'was about the new rooms – the old parish room, I mean. What do you think, Ida – should it be made into a dining-room and drawing-room, or –'

'Oh no,' I interrupted, 'certainly not. The two front ones looking to the sea must decidedly be the sitting-rooms – the one to the left of the porch, in front of the kitchen, must be the dining-room, and the big dressing-room, the one we have always meant to be a real bedroom, must be the drawing-room. It is quite a nice, large room, and behind it, the 'messy' room must be *yours*, Dods, which leaves the parish room to be divided for mamma and Esmé and me. Denzil can be with you – there's plenty of room.'

'But,' said Geordie, 'you're forgetting the servants?'

My face fell at this – I should have said that this conversation was on our way down to the hut that afternoon. We could not talk much before then, as we drove back from church with the others, but we set off as soon as we could after we had had dinner.

'Yes,' I said, 'I was forgetting them altogether, and what's more, Geordie, I haven't the least idea who they are to be, or how many we should have.'

'We must let mamma settle that of course,' he replied. 'Hoskins will be one, anyway. Still – it's a pity we can't propose some place for them, Ida. It makes the whole plan seem rather unfinished and – childish.'

'Like the man who built a house for himself and when it was all finished found he had forgotten a staircase!' I said, half laughing, but feeling rather mortified all the same.

George did not at once reply. He was thinking. We were close to the hut by this time, and he did not say anything till we had unlocked the door and put down our packages and looked round us.

Everything was just exactly as we had left it the evening before, but somehow everything seemed different!

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