

Molesworth Mrs.

The Carved Lions



Mrs. Molesworth

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CHAPTER I OLD DAYS

It is already a long time since I was a little girl. Sometimes, when I look out upon the world and see how many changes have come about, how different many things are from what I can remember them, I could believe that a still longer time had passed since my childhood than is really the case. Sometimes, on the contrary, the remembrance of things that then happened comes over me so very vividly, so very *real*-ly, that I can scarcely believe myself to be as old as I am.

I can remember things in my little girlhood more clearly than many in later years. This makes me hope that the story of some part of it may interest children of to-day, for I know I have not forgotten the feelings I had as a child. And after all, I believe that in a great many ways children are very like each other in their hearts and minds, even though their lives may seem very different and very far apart.

The first years of my childhood were very happy, though there were some things in my life which many children would not like at all. My parents were not rich, and the place where we lived was not pretty or pleasant. It was a rather large town in an ugly part of the country, where great tall chimneys giving out black smoke, and streams – once clear sparkling brooks, no doubt – whose water was nearly as black as the smoke, made it often difficult to believe in bright blue sky or green grass, or any of the sweet pure country scenes that children love, though perhaps children that have them do not love them as much as those who have not got them do.

I think that was the way with me. The country was almost the same as fairyland to me – the peeps I had of it now and then were a delight I could not find words to express.

But what matters most to children is not *where* their home is, but *what* it is. And our home was a very sweet and loving one, though it was only a rather small and dull house in a dull street. Our father and mother did everything they possibly could to make us happy, and the trial of living at Great Mexington must have been far worse for them than for us. For they had both been accustomed to rich homes when they were young, and father had never expected that he would have to work so hard or in the sort of way he had to do, after he lost nearly all his money.

When I say "us," I mean my brother Haddie and I. Haddie – whose real name was Haddon – was two years older than I, and we two were the whole family. My name —*was* I was going to say, for now there are so few people to call me by my Christian name that it seems hardly mine – my name is Geraldine. Somehow I never had a "short" for it, though it is a long name, and Haddie was always Haddie, and "Haddon" scarcely needs shortening. I think it was because he nearly always called me Sister or "Sis."

Haddie was between ten and eleven years old and I was nine when the great change that I am going to tell you about came over our lives. But I must go back a little farther than that, otherwise you would not understand all about us, nor the meaning of the odd title I have chosen for my story.

I had no governess and I did not go to school. My mother taught me herself, partly, I think, to save expense, and partly because she did not like the idea of sending me to even a day-school at Great Mexington. For though many of the families there were very rich, and had large houses and carriages and horses and beautiful gardens, they were not always very refined. There were good and kind and unselfish people there as there are everywhere, but there were some who thought more of being rich than of anything else – the sort of people that are called "purse proud." And as children

very often take after their parents, my father and mother did not like the idea of my having such children as my companions – children who would look down upon me for being poor, and perhaps treat me unkindly on that account.

"When Geraldine is older she must go to school," my father used to say, "unless by that time our ship comes in and we can afford a governess. But when she is older it will not matter so much, as she will have learnt to value things at their just worth."

I did not then understand what he meant, but I have never forgotten the words.

I was a very simple child. It never entered my head that there was anything to be ashamed of in living in a small house and having only two servants. I thought it would be *nice* to have more money, so that mamma would not need to be so busy and could have more pretty dresses, and above all that we could then live in the country, but I never minded being poor in any sore or ashamed way. And I often envied Haddie, who did go to school. I thought it would be nice to have lots of other little girls to play with. I remember once saying so to mamma, but she shook her head.

"I don't think you would like it as much as you fancy you would," she said. "Not at present at least. When you are a few years older I hope to send you for some classes to Miss Ledbury's school, and by that time you will enjoy the good teaching. But except for the lessons, I am quite sure it is better and happier for you to be at home, even though you find it rather lonely sometimes."

And in his way Haddie said much the same. School was all very well for boys, he told me. If a fellow tried to bully you, you could bully him back. But girls weren't like that – they couldn't fight it out. And when I said to him I didn't want to fight, he still shook his head, and repeated that I wouldn't like school at all – some of his friends' sisters were at school and they hated it.

Still, though I did not often speak of it, the wish to go to school, and the belief that I should find school-life very happy and interesting, remained in my mind. I often made up fancies about it, and pictured myself doing lessons with other little girls and reading the same story-books and playing duets together. I could not believe that I should not like it. The truth was, I suppose, that I was longing for companions of my own age.

It was since Haddie went to school that I had felt lonely. I was a great deal with mamma, but of course there were hours in the day when she was taken up with other things and could not attend to me. I used to long then for the holidays to come so that I should have Haddie again to play with.

My happiest days were Wednesdays and Saturdays, for then he did not go to school in the afternoon. And mamma very often planned some little treat for us on those days, such as staying up to have late tea with her and papa when he came in from his office, or reading aloud some new story-book, or going a walk with her in the afternoon and buying whatever we liked for our own tea at the confectioner's.

Very simple treats – but then we were very simple children, as I have said already.

Our house, though in a street quite filled with houses, was some little way from the centre of the town, where the best shops were – some years before, our street had, I suppose, been considered quite in the country. We were very fond of going to the shops with mamma. We thought them very grand and beautiful, though they were not nearly as pretty as shops are nowadays, for they were much smaller and darker, so that the things could not be spread out in the attractive way they are now, nor were the things themselves nearly as varied and tempting.

There was one shop which interested us very much. It belonged to the principal furniture-maker of Mexington. It scarcely looked like a shop, but was more like a rather gloomy private house very full of heavy dark cabinets and tables and wardrobes and chairs, mostly of mahogany, and all extremely good and well made. Yes, furniture, though ugly, really was very good in those days – I have one or two relics of my old home still, in the shape of a leather-covered arm-chair and a beautifully-made chest of drawers. For mamma's godmother had helped to furnish our house when we came to Mexington, and she was the sort of old lady who when she *did* give a present gave it really good of its kind. She had had furniture herself made by Cranston – that was the cabinet-maker's name – for

her home was in the country only about three hours' journey from Mexington – and it had been first-rate, so she ordered what she gave mamma from him also.

But it was not because the furniture was so good that we liked going to Cranston's. It was for quite another reason. A little way in from the front entrance to the shop, where there were glass doors to swing open, stood a pair of huge lions carved in very dark, almost black, wood. They were nearly, if not quite, as large as life, and the first time I saw them, when I was only four or five, I was really frightened of them. They guarded the entrance to the inner part of the shop, which was dark and gloomy and mysterious-looking, and I remember clutching fast hold of mamma's hand as we passed them, not feeling at all sure that they would not suddenly spring forward and catch us. But when mamma saw that I was frightened, she stopped and made me feel the lions and stroke them to show me that they were only wooden and could not possibly hurt me. And after that I grew very fond of them, and was always asking her to take me to the "lion shop."

Haddie liked them too – his great wish was to climb on one of their backs and play at going a ride.

I don't think I thought of that. What I liked was to stroke their heavy manes and fancy to myself what I would do if, all of a sudden, one of them "came alive," as I called it, and turned his head round and looked at me. And as I grew older, almost without knowing it, I made up all sorts of fairy fancies about the lions – I sometimes thought they were enchanted princes, sometimes that they were real lions who were only carved wood in the day-time, and at night walked about wherever they liked.

So, for one reason or another, both Haddie and I were always very pleased when mamma had to look in at Cranston's.

This happened oftener than might have been expected, considering that our house was small, and that my father and mother were not rich enough often to buy new furniture. For mamma's godmother seemed to be always ordering something or other at the cabinet-maker's, and as she knew mamma was very sensible and careful, she used to write to her to explain to Cranston about the things she wanted, or to look at them before he sent them home, to see that they were all right. And Cranston was always very polite indeed to mamma.

He himself was a stout, red-faced, little, elderly man, with gray whiskers, which he brushed up in a fierce kind of way that made him look like a rather angry cat, though he really was a very gentle and kind old man. I thought him much nicer than his partner, whose name was Berridge, a tall, thin man, who talked very fast, and made a great show of scolding any of the clerks or workmen who happened to be about.

Mr. Cranston was very proud of the lions. They had belonged to his grandfather and then to his father, who had both been in the same sort of business as he was, and he told mamma they had been carved in "the East." I didn't know what he meant by the East, and I don't now know what country he was alluding to – India or China or Japan. And I am not sure that he knew himself. But "the East" sounded far away and mysterious – it might do for fairyland or brownieland, and I was quite satisfied. No doubt, wherever they came from, the lions were very beautifully carved.

Now I will go on to tell about the changes that came into our lives, closing the doors of these first happy childish years, when there scarcely seemed to be ever a cloud on our sky.

One day, when I was a month or two past nine years old, mamma said to me just as I was finishing my practising – I used to practise half an hour every other day, and have a music lesson from mamma the between days – that she was going out to do some shopping that afternoon, and that, if I liked, I might go with her.

"I hope it will not rain," she added, "though it does look rather threatening. But perhaps it will hold off till evening."

"And I can take my umbrella in case it rains," I said. I was very proud of my umbrella. It had been one of my last birthday presents. "Yes, mamma, I should like to come very much. Will Haddie come too?"

For it was Wednesday – one of his half-holidays.

"To tell the truth," said mamma, "I forgot to ask him this morning if he would like to come, but he will be home soon – it is nearly luncheon time. I daresay he will like to come, especially as I have to go to Cranston's."

She smiled a little as she said this. Our love for the carved lions amused her.

"Oh yes, I am sure he will like to come," I said. "And may we buy something for tea at Miss Fryer's on our way home?"

Mamma smiled again.

"That will be two treats instead of one," she said, "but I daresay I can afford two or three pence."

Miss Fryer was our own pet confectioner, or pastry-cook, as we used to say more frequently then. She was a Quakeress, and her shop was very near our house, so near that mamma let me go there alone with Haddie. Miss Fryer was very grave and quiet, but we were not at all afraid of her, for we knew that she was really very kind. She was always dressed in pale gray or fawn colour, with a white muslin shawl crossed over her shoulders, and a white net cap beautifully quilled and fitting tightly round her face, so that only a very little of her soft gray hair showed. She always spoke to us as "thou" and "thee," and she was very particular to give us exactly what we asked for, and also to take the exact money in payment. But now and then, after the business part had been all correctly settled, she would choose out a nice bun or sponge-cake, or two or three biscuits, and would say "I give thee this as a present." And she did not like us to say, "Thank you, Miss Fryer," but "Thank you, friend Susan." I daresay she would have liked us to say, "Thank *thee*," but neither Haddie nor I had courage for that!

I ran upstairs in high spirits, and five minutes after when Haddie came in from school he was nearly as pleased as I to hear our plans.

"If only it does not rain," said mamma at luncheon.

Luncheon was, of course, our dinner, and it was often mamma's dinner really too. Our father was sometimes so late of getting home that he liked better to have tea than a regular dinner. But mamma always called it luncheon because it seemed natural to her.

"I don't mind if it does rain," said Haddie, "because of my new mackintosh."

Haddie was very proud of his mackintosh, which father had got him for going to and from school in rainy weather. Mackintoshes were then a new invention, and very expensive compared with what they are now. But Haddie was rather given to catching cold, and at Great Mexington it did rain very often – much oftener than anywhere else, I am quite sure.

"And Geraldine doesn't mind because of her new umbrella," said mamma. "So we are proof against the weather, whatever happens."

It may seem strange that I can remember so much of a time now so very long ago. But I really do – of that day and of those that followed it especially, because, as I have already said, they were almost the close of the first part of our childish life.

That afternoon was such a happy one. We set off with mamma, one on each side of her, hanging on her arms, Haddie trying to keep step with her, and I skipping along on my tiptoes. When we got to the more crowded streets we had to separate – that is to say, Haddie had to let go of mamma's arm, so that he could fall behind when we met more than one person. For the pavements at Mexington were in some parts narrow and old-fashioned.

Mamma had several messages to do, and at some of the shops Haddie and I waited outside because we did not think they were very interesting. But at some we were only too ready to go in. One I remember very well. It was a large grocer's. We thought it a most beautiful shop, though nowadays it would be considered quite dull and gloomy, compared with the brilliant places of the kind you see filled with biscuits and dried fruits and all kinds of groceries tied up with ribbons, or displayed in boxes of every colour of the rainbow. I must say I think the groceries themselves were quite as good as they are now, and in some cases better, but that may be partly my fancy, as I daresay I have a partiality for old-fashioned things.

Mamma did not buy all our groceries at this grand shop, for it was considered dear. But certain things, such as tea – which cost five shillings a pound then – she always ordered there. And the grocer, like Cranston, was a very polite man. I think he understood that though she was not rich, and never bought a great deal, mamma was different in herself from the grandly-dressed Mexington ladies who drove up to his shop in their carriages, with a long list of all the things they wanted. And when mamma had finished giving her order, he used always to offer Haddie and me a gingerbread biscuit of a very particular and delicious kind. They were large round biscuits, of a nice bright brown colour, and underneath they had thin white wafer, which we called "eating paper." They were crisp without being hard. I never see gingerbreads like them now.

"This is a lucky day, mamma," I said, when we came out of the grocer's. "Mr. Simeon never forgets to give us gingerbreads when he is there himself."

"No," said mamma, "he is a very kind man. Perhaps he has got Haddies and Geraldines of his own, and knows what they like."

"And now are we going to Cranston's?" asked my brother.

Mamma looked at the paper in her hand. She was very careful and methodical in all her ways, and always wrote down what she had to do before she came out.

"Yes," she said, "I think I have done everything else. But I shall be some little time at Cranston's. Mrs. Selwood has asked me to settle ever so many things with him – she is going abroad for the winter, and wants him to do a good deal of work at Fernley while she is away."

CHAPTER II

A HAPPY EVENING

Haddie and I were not at all sorry to hear that mamma's call at Cranston's was not to be a hurried one.

"We don't mind if you are ever so long," I said; "do we, Haddie?"

"No, of course we don't," Haddie agreed. "I should like to spend a whole day in those big show-rooms of his. Couldn't we have jolly games of hide-and-seek, Sis? And then riding the lions! I wish you were rich enough to buy one of the lions, mamma, and have it for an ornament in the hall, or in the drawing-room."

"We should need to build a hall or a drawing-room to hold it," said mamma, laughing. "I'm afraid your lion would turn into a white elephant, Haddie, if it became ours."

I remember wondering what she meant. How could a lion turn into an elephant? But I was rather a slow child in some ways. Very often I thought a thing over a long time in my mind if I did not understand it before asking any one to explain it. And so before I said anything it went out of my head, for here we were at Cranston's door.

There was only a young shopman to be seen, but when mamma told him she particularly wanted to see Mr. Cranston himself, he asked us to step in and take a seat while he went to fetch him.

We passed between the lions. It seemed quite a long time since we had seen them, and I thought they looked at us very kindly. I was just nudging Haddie to whisper this to him when mamma stopped to say to us that we might stay in the outer room if we liked; she knew it was our favourite place, and in a few minutes we heard her talking to old Mr. Cranston, who had come to her in the inner show-room through another door.

Haddie's head was full of climbing up onto one of the lions to go a ride. But luckily he could not find anything to climb up with, which was a very good thing, as he would have been pretty sure to topple over, and Mr. Cranston would not have been at all pleased if he had scratched the lion.

To keep him quiet I began talking to him about my fancies. I made him look close into the lions' faces – it was getting late in the afternoon, and we had noticed before we came in that the sun was setting stormily. A ray of bright orange-coloured light found its way in through one of the high-up windows which were at the back of the show-room, and fell right across the mane of one of the lions and almost into the eyes of the other. The effect on the dark, almost black, wood of which they were made was very curious.

"Look, Haddie," I said suddenly, catching his arm, "doesn't it really look as if they were smiling at us – the one with the light on its face especially? I really do think there's something funny about them – I wonder if they are enchanted."

Haddie did not laugh at me. I think in his heart he was fond of fancies too, though he might not have liked the boys at school to know it. He sat staring at our queer friends nearly as earnestly as I did myself. And as the ray of light slowly faded, he turned to me.

"Yes," he said, "their faces do seem to change. But I think they always look kind."

"They do to *us*," I said confidently, "but sometimes they are quite fierce. I don't think they looked at us the way they do now the first time they saw us. And one day one of the men in the shop shoved something against one of them and his face frowned – I'm sure it did."

"I wonder if he'd frown if I got up on his back," said Haddie.

"Oh, do leave off about climbing on their backs," I said. "It wouldn't be at all comfortable – they're so broad, you couldn't sit cross-legs, and they'd be as slippery as anything. It's much nicer to make up stories about them coming alive in the night, or turning into black princes and saying magic words to make the doors open like in the Arabian Nights."

"Well, tell me stories of all they do then," said Haddie condescendingly.

"I will if you'll let me think for a minute," I said. "I wish Aunty Etta was here – she does know such lovely stories."

"I like yours quite as well," said Haddie encouragingly, "I don't remember Aunty Etta's; it's such a long time since I saw her. You saw her last year, you know, but I didn't."

"She told me one about a china parrot, a most beautiful green and gold parrot, that was really a fairy," I said. "I think I could turn it into a lion story, if I thought about it."

"No," said Haddie, "you can tell the parrot one another time. I'd rather hear one of your own stories, new, about the lions. I know you've got some in your head. Begin, do – I'll help you if you can't get on."

But my story that afternoon was not to be heard. Just as I was beginning with, "Well, then, there was once an old witch who lived in a very lonely hut in the middle of a great forest," there came voices behind us, and in another moment we heard mamma saying,

"Haddie, my boy, Geraldine, I am quite ready."

I was not very sorry. I liked to have more time to make up my stories, and Haddie sometimes hurried me so. It was Aunty Etta, I think, who had first put it into my head to make them. She was *so* clever about it herself, both in making stories and in remembering those she had read, and she *had* read a lot. But she was away in India at the time I am now writing about; her going so far off was a great sorrow to mamma.

Haddie and I started up at once. We had to be very obedient, what father called "quickly obedient," and though he was so kind he was very strict too.

"My children are great admirers of your lions, Mr. Cranston," mamma said; and the old man smiled.

"They are not singular in their taste, madam," he said. "I own that I am very proud of them myself, and when my poor daughter was a child there was nothing pleased her so much as when her mother or I lifted her on to one of them, and made believe she was going a ride."

Haddie looked triumphant.

"There now you see, Sis," he whispered, nudging me.

But I did not answer him, for I was listening to what mamma was saying.

"Oh, by the bye, Mr. Cranston," she went on, "I was forgetting to ask how your little grandchild is. Have you seen her lately?"

Old Cranston's face brightened.

"She is very well, madam, I thank you," he replied. "And I am pleased to say that she is coming to stay with us shortly. We hope to keep her through the winter. Her stepmother is very kind, but with little children of her own, it is not always easy for her to give as much attention as she would like to Myra, and she and Mr. Raby have responded cordially to our invitation."

"I am very glad to hear it – very glad indeed," said mamma. "I know what a pleasure it will be to you and Mrs. Cranston. Let me see – how old is the little girl now – seven, eight?"

"*Nine*, madam, getting on for ten indeed," said Mr. Cranston with pride.

"Dear me," said mamma, "how time passes! I remember seeing her when she was a baby – before we came to live here, of course, once when I was staying at Fernley, just after –"

Mamma stopped and hesitated.

"Just after her poor mother died – yes, madam," said the old man quietly.

And then we left, Mr. Cranston respectfully holding the door open.

It was growing quite dark; the street-lamps were lighted and their gleam was reflected on the pavement, for it had been raining and was still quite wet underfoot. Mamma looked round her.

"You had better put on your mackintosh, Haddie," she said. "It may rain again. No, Geraldine dear, there is no use opening your umbrella till it does rain."

My feelings were divided between pride in my umbrella and some reluctance to have it wet! I took hold of mamma's arm again, while Haddie walked at her other side. It was not a very cheerful prospect before us – the gloomy dirty streets of Mexington were now muddy and sloppy as well – though on the whole I don't know but that they looked rather more cheerful by gaslight than in the day. It was chilly too, for the season was now very late autumn, if not winter. But little did we care – I don't think there could have been found anywhere two happier children than my brother and I that dull rainy evening as we trotted along beside our mother. There was the feeling of *her* to take care of us, of our cheerful home waiting for us, with a bright fire and the tea-table all spread. If I had not been a little tired – for we had walked a good way – in my heart I was just as ready to skip along on the tips of my toes as when we first came out.

"We may stop at Miss Fryer's, mayn't we, mamma?" said Haddie.

"Well, yes, I suppose I promised you something for tea," mamma replied.

"How much may we spend?" he asked. "Sixpence – do say sixpence, and then we can get enough for you to have tea with us too."

"Haddie," I said reproachfully, "as if we wouldn't give mamma something however little we had!"

"We'd offer it her of course, but you know she wouldn't take it," he replied. "So it's much better to have really enough for all."

His way of speaking made mamma laugh again.

"Then I suppose it must be sixpence," she said, "and here we are at Miss Fryer's. Shall we walk on, my little girl, I think you must be tired, and let Haddie invest in cakes and run after us?"

"Oh no, please mamma, dear," I said, "I like so to choose too."

Half the pleasure of the sixpence would have been gone if Haddie and I had not spent it together.

"Then I will go on," said mamma, "and you two can come after me together."

She took out her purse and gave my brother the promised money, and then with a smile on her dear face – I can see her now as she stood in the light of the street-lamp just at the old Quakeress's door – she nodded to us and turned to go.

I remember exactly what we bought, partly, perhaps, because it was our usual choice. We used to think it over a good deal first and each would suggest something different, but in the end we nearly always came back to the old plan for the outlay of our sixpence, namely, half-penny crumpets for threepence – that meant *seven*, not six; it was the received custom to give seven for threepence – and half-penny Bath buns for the other threepence – seven of them too, of course. And *Bath* buns, not plain ones. You cannot get these now – not at least in any place where I have lived of late years. And I am not sure but that even at Mexington they were a *spécialité* of dear old Miss Fryer's. They were so good; indeed, everything she sold was thoroughly good of its kind. She was so honest, using the best materials for all she made.

That evening she stood with her usual gentle gravity while we discussed what we should have, and when after discarding sponge-cakes and finger-biscuits, which we had thought of "for a change," and partly because finger-biscuits weighed light and made a good show, we came round at last to the seven crumpets and seven buns, she listened as seriously and put them up in their little paper bags with as much interest as though the ceremony had never been gone through before. And then just as we were turning to leave, she lifted up a glass shade and drew out two cheese-cakes, which she proceeded to put into another paper bag.

Haddie and I looked at each other. This was a lovely present. What a tea we should have!

"I think thee will find these good," she said with a smile, "and I hope thy dear mother will not think them too rich for thee and thy brother."

She put them into my hand, and of course we thanked her heartily. I have often wondered why she never said, "thou wilt," but always "thee will," for she was not an uneducated woman by any means.

Laden with our treasures Haddie and I hurried home. There was mamma watching for us with the door open. How sweet it was to have her always to welcome us!

"Tea is quite ready, dears," she said. "Run upstairs quickly, Geraldine, and take off your things, they must be rather damp. I am going to have my real tea with you, for I have just had a note from your father to say he won't be in till late and I am not to wait for him."

Mamma sighed a little as she spoke. I felt sorry for her disappointment, but, selfishly speaking, we sometimes rather enjoyed the evenings father was late, for then mamma gave us her whole attention, as she was not able to do when he was at home. And though we were very fond of our father, we were – I especially, I think – much more afraid of him than of our mother.

And that was such a happy evening! I have never forgotten it. Mamma was so good and thoughtful for us, she did not let us find out in the least that she was feeling anxious on account of something father had said in his note to her. She was just perfectly sweet.

We were very proud of our spoils from Miss Fryer's. We wanted mamma to have one cheesecake and Haddie and I to divide the other between us. But mamma would not agree to that. She would only take a half, so that we had three-quarters each.

"Wasn't it kind of Miss Fryer, mamma?" I said.

"Very kind," said mamma. "I think she is really fond of children though she is so grave. She has not forgotten what it was to be a child herself."

Somehow her words brought back to my mind what old Mr. Cranston had said about his little grand-daughter.

"I suppose children *are* all rather like each other," I said. "Like about Haddie, and that little girl riding on the lions."

Haddie was not very pleased at my speaking of it; he was beginning to be afraid of seeming babyish.

"That was *quite* different," he said. "She was a baby and had to be held on. It was the fun of climbing up *I* cared for."

"She wasn't a baby," I said. "She's nine years old, he said she was – didn't he, mamma?"

"You are mixing two things together," said mamma. "Mr. Cranston was speaking first of his daughter long ago when she was a child, and then he was speaking of *her* daughter, little Myra Raby, who is now nine years old."

"Why did he say my 'poor' daughter?" I asked.

"Did you not hear the allusion to her death? Mrs. Raby died soon after little Myra was born. Mr. Raby married again – he is a clergyman not very far from Fernley –"

"A clergyman," exclaimed Haddie. He was more worldly-wise than I, thanks to being at school. "A clergyman, and he married a shopkeeper's daughter."

"There are very different kinds of shopkeepers, Haddie," said mamma. "Mr. Cranston is very rich, and his daughter was very well educated and very nice. Still, no doubt Mr. Raby was in a higher position than she, and both Mr. Cranston and his wife are very right-minded people, and never pretend to be more than they are. That is why I was so glad to hear that little Myra is coming to stay with them. I was afraid the second Mrs. Raby might have looked down upon them perhaps."

Haddie said no more about it. And though I listened to what mamma said, I don't think I quite took in the sense of it till a good while afterwards. It has often been like that with me in life. I have a curiously "retentive" memory, as it is called. Words and speeches remain in my mind like unread letters, till some day, quite unexpectedly, something reminds me of them, and I take them out, as it were, and find what they really meant.

But just now my only interest in little Myra Raby's history was a present one.

"Mamma," I said suddenly, "if she is a nice little girl like what her mamma was, mightn't I have her to come and see me and play with me? I have never had any little girl to play with, and it is so dull sometimes – the days that Haddie is late at school and when you are busy. Do say I may have her

– I'm sure old Mr. Cranston would let her come, and then I might go and play with her sometimes perhaps. Do you think she will play among the furniture – where the lions are?"

Mamma shook her head.

"No, dear," she answered. "I am quite sure her grandmother would not like that. For you see anybody might come into the shop or show-rooms, and it would not seem nice for a little girl to be playing there – not nice for a carefully brought-up little girl, I mean."

"Then I don't think I should care to go to her house," I said, "but I would like her to come here. Please let her, mamma dear."

But mamma only said,

"We shall see."

After tea she told us stories – some of them we had heard often before, but we never tired of hearing them again – about when she and Aunty Etta were little girls. They were lovely stories – real ones of course. Mamma was not as clever as Aunty Etta about making up fairy ones.

We were quite sorry when it was time to go to bed.

After I had been asleep for a little that night I woke up again – I had not been very sound asleep. Just then I saw a light, and mamma came into the room with a candle.

"I'm not asleep, dear mamma," I said. "Do kiss me again."

"That is what I have come for," she answered.

And she came up to the bedside and kissed me, oh so sweetly – more than once. She seemed as if she did not want to let go of me.

"Dear mamma," I whispered sleepily, "I *am* so happy – I'm always happy, but to-night I feel so *extra* happy, somehow."

"Darling," said mamma.

And she kissed me again.

CHAPTER III

COMING EVENTS

The shadow of coming changes began to fall over us very soon after that.

Indeed, the very next morning at breakfast I noticed that mamma looked pale and almost as if she had been crying, and father was, so to say, "extra" kind to her and to me. He talked and laughed more than usual, partly perhaps to prevent our noticing how silent dear mamma was, but mostly I think because that is the way men do when they are really anxious or troubled.

I don't fancy Haddie thought there was anything wrong – he was in a hurry to get off to school.

After breakfast mamma told me to go and practise for half an hour, and if she did not come to me then, I had better go on doing some of my lessons alone. She would look them over afterwards. And as I was going out of the room she called me back and kissed me again – almost as she had done the night before.

That gave me courage to say something. For children were not, in my childish days, on such free and easy terms with their elders as they are now. And kind and gentle as mamma was, we knew very distinctly the sort of things she would think forward or presuming on our part.

"Mamma," I said, still hesitating a little.

"Well, dear," she replied. She was buttoning, or pretending to button, the band of the little brown holland apron I wore, so that I could not see her face, but something in the tone of her voice told me that my instinct was not mistaken.

"Mamma," I repeated, "may I say something? I have a feeling that – that you are – that there is something the matter."

Mamma did not answer at once. Then she said very gently, but quite kindly,

"Geraldine, my dear, you know that I tell you as much as I think it right to tell any one as young as you – I tell you more, of our plans and private matters and such things, than most mothers tell their little daughters. This has come about partly through your being so much alone with me. But when I *don't* tell you anything, even though you may suspect there is something to tell, you should trust me that there is good reason for my not doing so."

"Yes," I said, but I could not stifle a little sigh. "Would you just tell me one thing, mamma," I went on; "it isn't anything that you're really unhappy about, is it?"

Again mamma hesitated.

"Dear child," she said, "try to put it out of your mind. I can only say this much to you, I am *anxious* more than troubled. There is nothing the matter that should really be called a trouble. But your father and I have a question of great importance to decide just now, and we are very – I may say really *terribly*– anxious to decide for the best. That is all I can tell you. Kiss me, my darling, and try to be your own bright little self. That will be a comfort and help to me."

I kissed her and I promised I would try to do as she wished. But it was with rather a heavy heart that I went to my practising. What *could* it be? I did try not to think of it, but it would keep coming back into my mind. And I was only a child. I had no experience of trouble or anxiety. After a time my spirits began to rise again – there was a sort of excitement in the wondering what this great matter could be. I am afraid I did not succeed in putting it out of my mind as mamma wished me to do.

But the days went on without anything particular happening. I did not speak of what mamma had said to me to my brother. I knew she did not wish me to do so. And by degrees other things began to make me forget about it a little. It was just at that time, I remember, that some friend – an aunt on father's side, I think – sent me a present of *The Wide, Wide World*, and while I was reading it I seemed actually to live in the story. It was curious that I should have got it just then. If mamma had

read it herself I am not sure that she would have given it to me. But after all, perhaps it served the purpose of preparing me a *little*— a very little — for what was before me in my own life.

It was nearly three weeks after the time I have described rather minutely that the blow fell, that Haddie and I were told the whole. I think, however, I will not go on telling *how* we were told, for I am afraid of making my story too long.

And of course, however good my memory is, I cannot pretend that the conversations I relate took place *exactly* as I give them. I think I give the *spirit* of them correctly, but now that I have come to the telling of distinct facts, perhaps it will be better simply to narrate them.

You will remember my saying that my father had lost money very unexpectedly, and that this was what had obliged him to come to live at Mexington and work so hard. He had got the post he held there — it was in a bank — greatly through the influence of Mrs. Selwood, mamma's godmother, who lived in the country at some hours' distance from the town, and whose name was well known there, as she owned a great many houses and other property in the immediate neighbourhood.

Father was very glad to get this post, and very grateful to Mrs. Selwood. She took great interest in us all — that is to say, she was interested in Haddie and me because we were mamma's children, though she did not care for or understand children as a rule. But she was a faithful friend, and anxious to help father still more.

Just about the time I have got to in my story, the manager of a bank in South America, in some way connected with the one at Great Mexington, became ill, and was told by the doctors that he must return to England and have a complete rest for two years. Mrs. Selwood had money connection with this bank too, and got to hear of what had happened. Knowing that father could speak both French and Spanish well, for he had been in the diplomatic service as a younger man, she at once applied for the appointment for him, and after some little delay she was told that he should have the offer of it for the two years.

Two years are not a very long time, even though the pay was high, but the great advantage of the offer was that the heads of the bank at Mexington promised, if all went well for that time, that some permanent post should be given to father in England on his return. This was what made him more anxious to accept the proposal than even the high pay. For Mrs. Selwood found out that he would not be able to save much of his salary, as he would have a large house to keep up, and would be expected to receive many visitors. On this account the post was never given to an unmarried man.

"If he accepts it," Mrs. Selwood wrote to mamma, "you, my dear Blanche, must go with him, and some arrangement would have to be made about the children for the time. I would advise your sending them to school."

Now I think my readers will not be at a loss to understand why our dear mother had looked so troubled, even though on one side this event promised to be for our good in the end.

Father was allowed two or three weeks in which to make up his mind. The heads of the Mexington bank liked and respected him very much, and they quite saw that there were two sides to the question of his accepting the offer. The climate of the place was not very good — at least it was injurious to English people if they stayed there for long — and it was perfectly certain that it would be madness to take growing children like Haddie and me there.

This was the dark spot in it all to mamma, and indeed to father too. They were not afraid for themselves. They were both strong and still young, but they could not for a moment entertain the idea of taking *us*. And the thought of separation was terrible.

You see, being a small family, and living in a place like Great Mexington, where my parents had not many congenial friends, and being poor were obliged to live carefully, *home* was everything to us all. We four were the whole world to each other, and knew no happiness apart.

I do not mean to say that I felt or saw all this at once, but looking back upon it from the outside, as it were, I see all that made it a peculiarly hard case, especially — at the beginning, that is to say — for mamma.

It seems strange that I did *not* take it all in – all the misery of it, I mean – at first, nor indeed for some time, not till I had actual experience of it. Even Haddie realised it more in anticipation than I did. He was two years older, and though he had never been at a boarding-school, still he knew something of school life. There were boarders at his school, and he had often seen and heard how, till they got accustomed to it at any rate, they suffered from home-sickness, and counted the days to the holidays.

And for us there were not to be any holidays! No certain prospect of them at best, though Mrs. Selwood said something vaguely about perhaps having us at Fernley for a visit in the summer. But it was very vague. And we had no near relations on mamma's side except Aunty Etta, who was in India, and on father's no one who could possibly have us regularly for our holidays.

All this mamma grasped at once, and her grief was sometimes so extreme that, but for Mrs. Selwood, I doubt if father would have had the resolution to accept. But Mrs. Selwood was what is called "very sensible," perhaps just a little hard, and certainly not *sensitive*. And she put things before our parents in such a way that mamma felt it her duty to urge father to accept the offer, and father felt it *his* duty to put feelings aside and do so.

They went to stay at Fernley from a Saturday to a Monday to talk it well over, and it was when they came back on the Monday that we were told.

Before then I think we had both come to have a strong feeling that something was going to happen. I, of course, had some reason for this in what mamma had said to me, though I had forgotten about it a good deal, till this visit to Fernley brought back the idea of something unusual. For it was *very* seldom that we were left by ourselves.

We did not mind it much. After all, it was only two nights and one *whole* day, and that a Sunday, when my brother was at home, so we stood at the door cheerfully enough, looking at our father and mother driving off in the clumsy, dingy old four-wheeler – though that is a modern word – which was the best kind of cab known at Mexington.

But when they were fairly off Haddie turned to me, and I saw that he was very grave. I was rather surprised.

"Why, Haddie," I said, "do you mind so much? They'll be back on Monday."

"No, of course I don't mind *that*," he said. "But I wonder why mamma looks so – so awfully trying-not-to-cry, you know."

"Oh," I said, "I don't think she's quite well. And she hates leaving us."

"No," said my brother, "there's something more."

And when he said that, I remembered the feeling I had had myself. I felt rather cross with Haddie; I wanted to forget it quite.

"You needn't try to frighten me like that," I said. "I meant to be quite happy while they were away – to please mamma, you know, by telling her so when she comes back."

Then Haddie, who really was a very good-natured, kind boy, looked sorry.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said; "perhaps it was my fancy. I don't want to be unhappy while they're away, I'm sure. I'm only too glad that to-day's Saturday and to-morrow Sunday."

And he did his very best to amuse me. We went out a walk that afternoon with the housemaid – quite a long walk, though it was winter. We went as far out of the town as we could get, to where there were fields, which in spring and summer still looked green, and through the remains of a little wood, pleasant even in the dullest season. It was our favourite walk, and the only pretty one near the town. There was a brook at the edge of the wood, which still did its best to sing merrily, and to forget how dingy and grimy its clear waters became a mile or two farther on; there were still a few treasures in the shape of ivy sprays and autumn-tinted leaves to gather and take home with us to deck our nursery.

I remember the look of it all so well. It was the favourite walk of many besides ourselves, especially on a Saturday, when the hard-worked Mexington folk were once free to ramble about – boys and girls not much older than ourselves among them, for in those days children were allowed to work

in factories much younger than they do now. We did not mind meeting some of our townsfellows. On the contrary, we felt a good deal of interest in them and liked to hear their queer way of talking, though we could scarcely understand anything they said. And we were very much interested indeed in some of the stories Lydia, who belonged to this part of the country, told us of her own life, in a village a few miles away, where there were two or three great factories, at which all the people about worked – men, women, and children too, so that sometimes, except for babies and very old people, the houses seemed quite deserted.

"And long ago before that," said Lydia, "when mother was a little lass, it was such a pretty village – cottages all over with creepers and honeysuckle – not ugly rows of houses as like each other as peas. The people worked at home on their own hand-loom then."

Lydia had a sense of the beautiful!

On our way home, of course, we called at Miss Fryer's – this time we had a whole shilling to spend, for there was Sunday's tea to think of as well as to-day's. We had never had so much at a time, and our consultation took a good while. We decided at last on seven crumpets and seven Bath buns as usual, and in addition to these, three large currant tea-cakes, which our friend Susan told us would be all the better for toasting if not too fresh. And the remaining threepence we invested in a slice of sweet sandwich, which she told us would be perfectly good if kept in a tin tightly closed. The old Quakeress for once, I have always suspected, departed on this occasion from her rule of exact payment for all purchases, for it certainly seemed a very large slice of sweet sandwich for threepence.

We were rather tired with our walk that evening and went to bed early. Nothing more was said by Haddie about his misgivings. I think he hoped I had forgotten what had passed, but I had not. It had all come back again, the strange feeling of change and trouble in the air which had made me question mamma that morning two or three weeks ago.

But I did not as yet really believe it. I had never known what sorrow and trouble actually are. It is not many children who reach even the age I was then with so sunny and peaceful an experience of life. That anything could happen to us – to *me* – like what happened to "Ellen" in *The Wide, Wide World*, I simply could not believe; even though if any one had talked to me about it and said that troubles must come and *do* come to all, and to some much more than to others, and that they might be coming to us, I should have agreed at once and said yes, of course I knew that was true.

The next day, Sunday, was very rainy. It made us feel dull, I think, though we did not really mind a wet Sunday as much as another day, for we never went a walk on Sunday. It was not thought right, and as we had no garden the day would have been a very dreary one to us, except for mamma.

She managed to make it pleasant. We went to church in the morning, and in the evening too sometimes. I think all children like going to church in the evening; there is something grown-up about it. And the rest of the day mamma managed to find interesting things for us to do. She generally had some book which she kept for reading aloud on Sunday – Dr. Adams's *Allegories*, "The Dark River" and others, were great favourites, and so were Bishop Wilberforce's *Agathos*. Some of them frightened me a little, but it was rather a pleasant sort of fright, there was something grand and solemn about it.

Then we sang hymns sometimes, and we always had a very nice tea, and mamma, and father too now and then, told us stories about when they were children and what they did on Sundays. It was much stricter for them than for us, though even for us many things were forbidden on Sundays which are now thought not only harmless but right.

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