Oliphant Margaret

The Doctor's Family

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Содержание

Mrs. (Margaret) Oliphant
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CHAPTER I

Young Dr Rider lived in the new quarter of Carlingford: had he aimed at a reputation in society, he could not possibly have done a more foolish thing; but such was not his leading motive. The young man, being but young, aimed at a practice. He was not particular in the mean time as to the streets in which his patients dwelt. A new house, gazing with all its windows over a brick-field, was as interesting to the young surgeon as if it had been one of those exclusive houses in Grange Lane, where the aristocracy of Carlingford lived retired within their garden walls. His own establishment, though sufficiently comfortable, was of a kind utterly to shock the feelings of the refined community: a corner house, with a surgery round the corner, throwing the gleam of its red lamp over all that chaotic district of half-formed streets and full-developed brick-fields, with its night-bell prominent, and young Rider's name on a staring brass plate, with mysterious initials after it. M.R.C.S. the unhappy young man had been seduced to put after his name upon that brass plate, though he was really Dr Rider, a physician, if not an experienced one. Friends had advised him that in such districts people were afraid of physicians, associating only with dread adumbrations of a guinea a visit that miscomprehended name; so, with a pang, the young surgeon had put his degree in his pocket, and put up with the inferior distinction. Of course, Dr Marjoribanks had all the patronage of Grange Lane. The great people were infatuated about that snuffy old Scotchman – a man behind his day, who had rusted and grown old among the soft diseases of Carlingford, where sharp practice was so seldom necessary; and no opening appeared for young Rider except in the new district, in the smug corner house, with the surgery and the red lamp, and M.R.C.S. on a brass plate on his door.

If you can imagine that the young man bowed his spirit to this without a struggle, you do the poor young fellow injustice. He had been hard enough put to it at divers periods of his life. Ambition had not been possible for him either in one shape or another. Some people said he had a vulgar mind when he subsided into that house; other people declared him a shabby fellow when he found out, after the hardest night's thought he ever went through in his life, that he durst not ask Bessie Christian to marry him. You don't suppose that he did not know in his secret heart, and feel tingling through every vein, those words which nobody ever said to his face? But he could not help it. He could only make an indignant gulp of his resentment and shame, which were shame and resentment at himself for wanting the courage to dare everything, as well as at other people for finding him out, and go on with his work as he best could. He was not a hero nor a martyr; men made of that stuff have large compensations. He was an ordinary individual, with no sublimity in him, and no compensation to speak of for his sufferings – no consciousness of lofty right-doing, or of a course of action superior to the world.

Perhaps you would prefer to go up-stairs and see for yourself what was the skeleton in Edward Rider's cupboard, rather than have it described to you. His drag came to the door an hour ago, and he went off with Care sitting behind him, and a certain angry pang aching in his heart, which perhaps Bessie Christian's wedding-veil, seen far off in church yesterday, might have something to do with. His looks were rather black as he twitched the reins out of his little groom's hands, and went off at a startling pace, which was almost the only consolation the young fellow had. Now that he is certainly gone, and the coast clear, we may go up-stairs. It is true he all but kicked the curate down for taking a similar liberty, but we who are less visible may venture while he is away.

This skeleton is not in a cupboard. It is in an up-stairs room, comfortable enough, but heated, close, unwholesome – a place from which, even when the window is open, the fresh air seems shut out. There is no fresh air nor current of life in this stifling place. There is a fire, though it is not cold

– a sofa near the fire – a sickening heavy smell of abiding tobacco – not light whiffs of smoke, such as accompany a man's labours, but a dead pall of idle heavy vapour; and in the midst of all a man stretched lazily on the sofa, with his pipe laid on the table beside him, and a book in his soft, boneless, nerveless hands. A large man, interpenetrated with smoke and idleness and a certain dreary sodden dissipation, heated yet unexcited, reading a novel he has read half-a-dozen times before. He turns his bemused eyes to the door when his invisible visitors enter. He fancies he hears some one coming, but will not take the trouble to rise and see who is there – so, instead of that exertion, he takes up his pipe, knocks the ashes out of it upon his book, fills it with coarse tobacco, and stretches his long arm over the shoulder of the sofa for a light. His feet are in slippers, his person clothed in a greasy old coat, his linen soiled and untidy. That is the skeleton in young Rider's house.

The servants, you may be sure, knew all about this unwelcome visitor. They went with bottles and jugs secretly to bring him what he wanted; they went to the circulating library for him; they let him in when he had been out in the twilight all shabby and slovenly. They would not be human if they did not talk about him. They say he is very good-natured, poor gentleman – always has a pleasant word – is nobody's enemy but his own; and to see how "the doctor do look at him, and he his own brother as was brought up with him," is dreadful, to be sure.

All this young Rider takes silently, never saying a word about it to any human creature. He seems to know by intuition what all these people say of him, as he drives about furiously in his drag from patient to patient; and wherever he goes, as plain, nay, far more distinctly than the actual prospect before him, he sees that sofa, that dusty slow-burning fire – that pipe, with the little heap of ashes knocked out of it upon the table – that wasted ruined life chafing him to desperation with its dismal content. It is very true that it would have been sadly imprudent of the young man to go to the little house in Grove Street a year ago, and tell Bessie Christian he was very fond of her, and that somehow for her love he would manage to provide for those old people whom that cheerful little woman toiled to maintain. It was a thing not to be done in any way you could contemplate it; and with a heartache the poor young doctor had turned his horse's head away from Grove Street, and left Bessie to toil on in her poverty. Bessie had escaped all that nowadays; but who could have forewarned the poor doctor that his elder brother, once the hope of the family – that clever Fred, whom all the others had been postponed to – he who with his evil reputation had driven poor Edward out of his first practice, and sent him to begin life a second time at Carlingford – was to drop listlessly in again, and lay a harder burden than a harmless old father-in-law upon the young man's hands – a burden which no grateful Bessie shared and sweetened? No wonder black Care sat at the young doctor's back as he drove at that dangerous pace through the new, encumbered streets. He might have broken his neck over those heaps of brick and mortar, and it is doubtful whether he would have greatly cared.

When Dr Rider went home that night, the first sight he saw when he pulled up at his own door was his brother's large indolent shabby figure prowling up the street. In the temper he was then in, this was not likely to soothe him. It was not a much-frequented street, but the young doctor knew instinctively that his visitor had been away in the heart of the town at the booksellers' shops buying cheap novels, and ordering them magnificently to be sent to Dr Rider's; and could guess the curious questions and large answers which had followed. He sprang to the ground with a painful suppressed indignation, intensified by many mingled feelings, and waited the arrival of the maudlin wanderer. Ah me! one might have had some consolation in the burden freely undertaken for love's sake, and by love's self shared and lightened: but this load of disgrace and ruin which nobody could take part of – which it was misery so much as to think that anybody knew of – the doctor's fraternal sentiments, blunted by absence and injury, were not strong enough to bear that weight.

"So, Fred, you have been out," said Dr Rider, moodily, as he stood aside on his own threshold to let his brother pass in – not with the courtesy of a host, but the precaution of a jailer, to see him safe before he himself entered and closed the door.

"Yes, you can't expect a man to sit in the house for ever," said the prodigal, stumbling in to his brother's favourite sitting-room, where everything was tidy and comfortable for the brief leisure of the hard-working man. The man who did no work threw himself heavily into the doctor's easy-chair, and rolled his bemused eyes round upon his brother's household gods. Those book-shelves with a bust at either corner, those red curtains drawn across the window, those prints on the walls – all once so pleasant to the doctor's eyes – took a certain air of squalor and wretchedness to-night which sickened him to look at. The lamp flared wildly with an untrimmed wick, or at least Dr Rider thought so; and threw a hideous profile of the intruder upon the wall behind him. The hearth was cold, with that chill, of sentiment rather than reality, naturally belonging to a summer night. Instead of a familiar place where rest and tranquillity awaited him, that room, the only vision of home which the poor young fellow possessed, hardened into four walls, and so many chairs and tables, in the doctor's troubled eyes.

But it bore a different aspect in the eyes of his maudlin brother. Looking round with those bewildered orbs, all this appeared luxury to the wanderer. Mentally he appraised the prints over the mantelshelf, and reckoned how much of *his* luxuries might be purchased out of them. That was all so much money wasted by the Crœsus before him. What a mint of money the fellow must be making; and grudged a little comfort to his brother, his elder brother, the cleverest of the family! The dull exasperation of selfishness woke in the mind of the self-ruined man!

"You're snug enough here," he exclaimed, "though you shut me in up-stairs to burrow out of sight. By Jove! as if I were not good enough to face your Carlingford patients. I've had a better practice in my day than ever you'll see, my fine fellow, with your beggarly M.R.C.S. And you'd have me shut myself up in my garret into the bargain! You're ashamed of me, forsooth! You can go spending money on that rubbish there, and can't pay a tailor's bill for your elder brother; and as for introducing me in this wretched hole of a place, and letting me pick up a little money for myself – I, a man with twice the experience in the profession that you have – "

"Fred, stop that," cried the doctor – "I've had about enough. Look here – I can't deny you shelter and what you call necessaries, because you're my brother; but I won't submit to be ruined a second time by any man. If I am ever to do any good in this world – and whether I do any good or not," he added fiercely, "I'll not have my good name tarnished and my work interfered with *again*. I don't care two straws for my life. It's hard enough – as hard as a treadmill, and never a drop of consolation in the cup; though I might have had that if I had been anything but a fool. But look here, I do care for my practice – I won't have you put your confounded spoke in my wheel again. Keep on in your own way; smoke and drink and dream if you will; but I'll stand no interference with my work – and that I tell you once for all."

This speech was uttered with great vehemence, the speaker walking up and down the room all the while. The bitterness of ingratitude and malice had entered into the young man's soul. All the wrongs which the clever elder brother, to whose claims everybody else was subordinated, had done to his family, rose upon the recollection of the younger; all the still bitterer sting of that injury which had been personal to himself; all the burden and peril of this present undesired visit, the discontent, the threats, the evident power of doing evil, woke the temper and spirit of the young doctor. It was not Fred's fault that his brother had made that mistake in life which he repented so bitterly. Bessie Christian's bridal veil, and white ribbons; her joyful face untouched with any pensive reminiscences; and the dead dulness of that house, into which foot of woman never entered, were not of Fred's doing; but passion is not reasonable. The doctor gave Fred credit unconsciously for the whole. He walked up and down the room with a whole world of passionate mortified feeling – vexation, almost despair, throbbing within him. He seemed to have made a vast sacrifice for the sake of this brother who scorned him to his face.

"You're hot," said the disreputable figure in Dr Rider's easy-chair, "much hotter than there's any occasion for. Do I envy you your beggarly patients, do you suppose? But, Ned, you never were cut

out for the profession – a good shopkeeping business would have been a deal better for you. Hang it! you haven't the notions of a gentleman. You think bread and water is all you're bound to furnish your brother when he is under a cloud. As for society, I never see a soul – not even yourself, though you're no great company. Look here – I am not unreasonable; order in some supper – there's a good fellow – and let's have a comfortable evening together. You're not the man you used to be, Ned. You used to be a fellow of spirit; somebody's jilted you, or something – I don't want to pry into your secrets; but let's have a little comfort for once in a way, and you shall have the whole business about the old colony, and how I came to leave it – the truth, and nothing but the truth."

It was some time before the victim yielded; at last, half to escape the painful ferment of his own thoughts, and half with a natural yearning for some sympathy and companionship, however uncongenial, he fell out of his heat and passion into a more complacent mood. He sat down, watching with a gulp of hardly-restrained disgust that lolling figure in the chair, every gesture of which was the more distasteful for being so familiar, and recalling a hundred preliminary scenes all tending towards this total wreck and shame. Then his mind softened with fraternal instincts – strange interlacement of loathing and affection. He was tired, hungry, chilled to his heart. The spell of material comfort, even in such company, came upon the young man. They supped together, not much to the advantage of Dr Rider's head, stomach, or temper, on the following morning. The elder told his story of inevitable failure, and strange unexplainable fatality. The younger dropped forth expressions of disappointment and trouble which partly eased his own mind. Thus they spent together the unlovely evening; and perhaps a few such nights would have done as much harm to the young doctor's practice as had he introduced his disreputable brother without more ado into the particular little world of Carlingford.

CHAPTER II

Next morning Dr Rider rose mightily vexed with himself, as was to be supposed. He was half an hour late for breakfast: he had a headache, his hand shook, and his temper was "awful." Before he was dressed, ominous knocks came to the door; and all feverish and troubled as he was, you may imagine that the prospect of the day's work before him did not improve his feelings, and that self-reproach, direst of tormentors, did not mend the matter. Two ladies were waiting for him, he was told when he went down-stairs – not to say sundry notes and messages in the ordinary way of business – two ladies who had brought two boxes with them, and asked leave to put them in the hall till they could see Dr Rider. The sight of this luggage in his little hall startled the doctor. Patients do not generally carry such things about with them. What did it mean? What could two ladies want with him? The young man felt his face burn with painful anticipations, a little shame, and much impatience. Probably the sister who adored Fred, and never could learn to believe that he was not unfortunate and a victim. This would be a climax to the occupation of his house.

As the poor doctor gloomily approached the door of the room in which he had spent last evening, he heard a little rustle and commotion not quite consistent with his expectations – a hum of voices and soft stir such as youthful womankind only makes. Then a voice entirely strange to him uttered an exclamation. Involuntarily he started and changed his aspect. He did not know the voice, but it was young, sweet, peculiar. The cloud lightened a little upon the doctor's face. Notwithstanding Bessie Christian, he was still young enough to feel a little flutter of curiosity when he heard such a voice sounding out of his room. Hark! what did she say? It was a profoundly prosaic speech.

"What an intolerable smell of smoke! I shouldn't wonder a bit – indeed, I rather think he must be, or he wouldn't live in a place like this – if he were exactly such another as Fred."

"Poor Fred!" said a plaintive voice, "if we only can learn where he is. Hush, there is a footstep! Ah, it is not my poor fellow's footstep! Nettie, hark!"

"No, indeed! twenty thousand times sharper, and more like a man," said the other, in hurried breathless accents. "Hark! here he is."

The entire bewilderment, the amaze, apprehension, confusion with which Dr Rider entered the room from which this scrap of conversation reached him, is indescribable. A dreadful sense that something was about to happen seized the young man's mind with an indescribable curiosity. He paused an instant to recover himself, and then went boldly and silently into the room which had become mysterious through its new inmates. They both turned round upon him as he entered. Two young women: one who had been sitting at the table, looking faded, plaintive, and anxious, rose up suddenly, and, clasping her hands, as if in entreaty, fixed two bright but sunken eyes upon his face. The other, a younger, lighter figure, all action and haste, interposed between him and her companion. She put up one hand in warning to the petitioner behind her, and one to call the attention of the bewildered stranger before. Evidently the one thing which alarmed this young lady was that somebody would speak before her, and the conduct of the *situation* be taken out of her hands. She was little, very slight, very pretty, but her prettiness was peculiar. The young doctor, accustomed to the fair Saxon version of beauty given by Bessie Christian, did not at the first glance believe that the wonderful little person before him possessed any; for she was not only slender, but *thin*, dark, eager, impetuous, with blazing black eyes and red lips, and nothing else notable about her. So he thought, gazing fascinated, yet not altogether attracted – scarcely sure that he was not repelled – unable, however, to withdraw his eyes from that hurried, eager little figure. Nothing in the least like her had ever yet appeared before Dr Rider's eyes.

"We want to inquire about your brother," said the little stranger; "we know this was to be his address, and we want to know whether he is living here. His letters were to be sent to your care; but my sister has not heard from him now for a year."

"Never mind that! – never mind telling that, Nettie," cried the other behind her. "Oh, sir! only tell me where my poor Fred is?"

"So she began to fear he was ill," resumed the younger of the two, undauntedly; "though Susan will do nothing but praise him, he has behaved to her very shamefully. Do you happen to know, sir, where he is?"

"Did you say Fred – my brother Fred?" cried the poor young doctor in utter dismay; "and may I ask who it is that expresses so much interest in him?"

There was a momentary pause; the two women exchanged looks. "I told you so," cried the eager little spokeswoman. "He never has let his friends know; he was afraid of that. I told you how it was. This," she continued, with a little tragic air, stretching out her arm to her sister, and facing the doctor – "this is Mrs Frederick Rider, or rather Mrs Rider, I should say, as he is the eldest of the family! Now will you please to tell us where he is?"

The doctor made no immediate answer. He gazed past the speaker to the faded woman behind, and exclaimed, with a kind of groan, "Fred's wife!"

"Yes, Fred's wife," cried the poor creature, rushing forward to him; "and oh! where is he? I've come thousands of miles to hear. Is he ill? has anything happened to him? Where is Fred?"

"Susan, you are not able to manage this; leave it to me," said her sister, drawing her back peremptorily. "Dr Rider, please to answer us. We know you well enough, though you don't seem ever to have heard of us. It was you that my brother-in-law gave up his business to before he came out to the colony. Oh, we know all about it! To keep him separate from his wife cannot do you any benefit, Dr Edward. Yes, I know your name, and all about it; and I don't mean indeed to suffer my sister to be injured and kept from her husband. I have come all this way with her to take care of her. I mean to stay with her to take care of her. I have not parted with my money, though she gave all hers away; and I mean to see her have her rights."

"Oh, Nettie, Nettie, how you talk!" cried the unfortunate wife. "You keep him from answering me. All this time I cannot hear – where is Fred?"

"Be seated, please," said the doctor, with dreadful civility, "and compose yourselves. Fred is well enough; as well as he ever is. I don't know," added poor Rider, with irrestrainable bitterness, "whether he is quite presentable to ladies; but I presume, madam, if you're his wife, you're acquainted with his habits. Excuse me for being quite unprepared for such a visit. I have not much leisure for anything out of my profession. I can scarcely spare these minutes, that is the truth; but if you will favour me with a few particulars, I will have the news conveyed to my brother. I – I beg your pardon. When a man finds he has new relations he never dreamed of, it naturally embarrasses him at the moment. May I ask if you ladies have come from Australia alone?"

"Oh, not alone; the children are at the hotel. Nettie said it was no use coming unless we all came," said his new sister-in-law, with a half-sob.

"The children!" Dr Rider's gasp of dismay was silent, and made no sound. He stood staring blankly at those wonderful invaders of his bachelor house, marvelling what was to be done with them in the first place. Was he to bring Fred down all slovenly and half-awakened? was he to leave them in possession of his private sanctuary? The precious morning moments were passing while he pondered, and his little groom fidgeted outside with a message for the doctor. While he stood irresolute, the indefatigable Nettie once more darted forward.

"Give me Fred's address, please," said this managing woman. "I'll see him, and prepare him for meeting Susan. He can say what he pleases to me; *I* don't mind it in the very least; but Susan of course must be taken care of. Now, look here, Dr Edward; Susan is your sister-in-law, and I am her sister. We don't want to occupy your time. I can manage everything; but it is quite necessary in the first place that you should confide in me."

"Confide!" cried the bewildered man. "Fred is not under my authority. He is here in my house much against my will. He is in bed, and not fit to be awakened; and I am obliged to tell you simply,

ladies," said the unfortunate doctor, "that my house has no accommodation for a family. If you will go back to the hotel where you left the children" – and here the speaker gave another gasp of horror – "I'll have him roused and sent to you. It is the only thing I can do."

"Susan can go," said the prompt Nettie; "I'll stay here until Fred is ready, and take him to see them. It is necessary he should be prepared, you know. Don't talk nonsense, Susan – I shall stay here, and Dr Rider, of course, will call a cab for you."

"But Nettie, Nettie dear, it isn't proper. I can't leave you all by yourself in a strange house," remonstrated her sister.

"Don't talk such stuff; I am perfectly well able to take care of myself; I am not a London young lady," said the courageous Nettie. "It is perfectly unnecessary to say another word to me – I know my duty – I shall stay here."

With which speech she seated herself resolutely in that same easy-chair which Fred had lolled in last night, took off her bonnet, for hats were not in these days, and shed off from her face, with two tiny hands, exquisite in shape if a little brown in colour, the great braids of dark-brown silky hair which encumbered her little head. The gesture mollified Dr Rider in the most unaccountable way in spite of himself. The intolerable idea of leaving these two in his house became less intolerable, he could not tell how. And the little groom outside fairly knocked at the door in that softening moment with a message which could be delayed no longer. The doctor put his head out to receive the call, and looked in again perplexed and uncertain. Nettie had quite established herself in the easy-chair. She sat there looking with her bright eyes into the vacant air before her, in a pretty attitude of determination and readiness, beating her little foot on the carpet. Something whimsical, odd, and embarrassing about her position made it all the more piquant to the troubled eyes which, in spite of all their worldly wisdom, were still the eyes of a young man. He could not tell in the world what to say to her. To order that creature out of his house was simply impossible; to remain there was equally so; to leave them in possession of the field – what could the unfortunate young doctor do? One thing was certain, the impatient patient could no longer be neglected; and after a few minutes longer of bewildered uncertainty, Dr Rider went off in the wildest confusion of mind, leaving his brother's unknown family triumphant in his invaded house.

To describe the feelings with which the unfortunate doctor went fasting about his day's work – the manner in which that scene returned to him after every visit he made – the continual succession in which wrath, dismay, alarm, bitter disgust with the falsehood of the brother who, no further gone than last night, had pretended to confide in him, but never breathed a syllable of this biggest unconcealable secret, swept through the mind of the victim; all culminating, however, in the softening of that moment, in the tiny figure, indomitable elf or fairy, shedding back with dainty fingers those soft abundant locks – would be impossible. The young man got through his work somehow, in a maze of confusion and excitement – angry excitement, indignant confusion, determination to yield nothing further, but to defend himself and his house once for all from the inroads of what he angrily pronounced in his own mind "another man's family" – yet, withal, of curiosity and interest which gave zest greater than usual to the idea of going home. When he was able at last to turn his horse's head towards his own dwelling, it was with feelings very different from the usual unexpecting blank of sullen displeasure. What he should find there, was a curious, exciting, alarming question; perhaps an entire nursery with Nettie in charge; perhaps a recusant husband with Nettie mounting guard over him; perhaps a thrilling scene of family explanation and reconciliation. The day had been a specially long and hard one. He had been obliged to snatch a hurried lunch at one of his patients' houses, and to postpone his hard-earned dinner to the most fashionable of hours. It was indeed quite evening, almost twilight, when he made his way home at last. As he neared the scene of action, the tired man condoled with himself over the untimely excitement that awaited him. He said to himself with pathetic self-pity that it was hard indeed for a man who had earned a little repose to go in upon all the troubles of another man's family. He had denied himself – he had not undertaken upon his own

shoulders that pleasing burden; and now what was he to be saddled with? – the burden without the consolation – the responsibility without the companionship. All this Dr Rider represented to himself very pathetically as he wended his homeward way. Yet it is astonishing, notwithstanding, with what alacrity he hastened upon that path, and how much the curiosity, the excitement, the dramatic stir and commotion made in his monotonous life by this entirely new unexpected incident, occupied his mind. With expectations highly roused, he drew up once more before his own house. It was surprising to him to see how exactly it looked like itself. The blinds half-drawn down in the genteelest calm as they always were – no faces peeping at the windows – no marks of an arrival on the pavement, or in the composed countenance of Mary, who stood holding the door open for him. He went in with a little thrill of curiosity; the house was very quiet – dead-quiet in comparison with the commotion of his thoughts; so was the sitting-room where he had left Nettie resolutely planted in the easy-chair; there was nobody there now; the boxes were out of the hall, not a sound was to be heard in the house. He turned rather blankly upon Mary, who was going away quite composedly, as if there was nothing which she wanted to tell or he to hear.

"Where is my brother and the ladies?" said the amazed doctor.

"They all went off to the 'otel, sir, as soon as Mr Rider came down-stairs," said Mary, complacently. "I assured Miss as it was the best thing she could do, sir, for that I was 'most sure you'd never have the children here, – as to be sure there wasn't no room neither," said the doctor's factotum. "As soon as Mr Frederick came down, she called a cab, did Miss, and took 'em both away."

"Oh! so they're gone, are they?" said the doctor.

"Hours and hours ago," answered Mary; "dinner 'll be up in two minutes. But I wouldn't say much for the potatoes, sir. When a gentleman's irreg'lar, it's hard laws on the poor servants – nothink will keep, going on for two hours, and not take no harm; but all's quiet and comfortable in your room."

And with this assurance, which she evidently thought a very grateful one, Mary went off to get the doctor's dinner. He walked to the end of the room, and then back again, with solemnity – then threw himself into that easy-chair. "Blessed riddance!" said the doctor; but somehow he looked glum, wonderfully glum. There was no accounting for those blank looks of his; he who had been condoling with himself over the exciting scene he expected, so uncomfortable a conclusion to a long day's labour, how was it he did not look relieved when that scene was spared him? To tell the truth, when one has been expecting something to happen, of whatever description, and has been preparing one's courage, one's temper, one's fortitude, in anticipatory rehearsals – when one has placed one's self in the attitude of a martyr, and prepared to meet with fiery trials – it is mortifying, to say the least, when one finds all the necessities of the case disappear, and the mildest calm replace that tragical anticipation: the quiet falls blank upon the excited fancy. Of course Dr Rider was relieved; but it was with something mightily like disappointment that he leant back in his chair and knitted his brows at the opposite wall. Not for the world would he have acknowledged himself to be disappointed; but the calm was wonderfully monotonous after all those expectations. He was never so bored and sick of a night by himself. He tried to read, but reading did not occupy his mind. He grew furious over his charred chops and sodden potatoes. As for the tea Mary brought, he would have gladly pitched it at her by way of diversifying that blank evening with an incident. The contrast between what he had looked for and what he had, was wonderful. How delicious this stillness should have been, this consciousness of having his house to himself, and nobody to interrupt his brief repose! But somehow it appears that human nature takes best with not having its wishes granted. It is indescribable how Dr Rider yawned – how dull he found his newspaper – how few books worth reading there were in the house – how slow the minutes ran on. If somebody had chosen to be ill that night, of all nights the best for such a purpose, the doctor would not have objected to such an interruption. Failing that, he went to bed early, dreadfully tired of his own society. Such were the wonderful results of that invasion so much dreaded, and that retreat so much hoped for. Perhaps his own society had never in his life been so distasteful to him before.

CHAPTER III

Next day Dr Rider audibly congratulated himself at breakfast upon having once more his house to himself – audibly, as if it were really necessary to give utterance to the thought before he could quite feel its force. A week before, if Fred had departed, however summarily, there can be no doubt that his brother's feelings of relief and comfort would have been unfeigned; now, however, he began to think the matter over, and to justify to himself his extraordinary sense of disappointment. As he poured out his own coffee with a sober face, his eye rested upon that easy-chair which had been brought into such prominence in the history of the last two days. He kept looking at it as he sipped that gloomy coffee. Fred had faded from the great chair; his big image threw no shadow upon it. There sat a little fairy queen, tiny as Titania, but dark as an elf of the East, putting up those two shapely tiny hands, brown and beautiful, to push aside the flood of hair, which certainly would have veiled her little figure all over, the doctor thought, had it been let down. Wonderful little sprite! She, no doubt, had dragged her plaintive sister over the seas – she it was that had forced her way into Edward Rider's house; taken her position in it, ousted the doctor; and she doubtless it was who swept the husband and wife out of it again, leaving no trace behind. Waking up from a little trance of musing upon this too interesting subject, Dr Rider suddenly raised himself into an erect position, body and mind, with an involuntary movement, as if to shake off the yoke of the enchantress. He reminded himself instinctively of his brother's falsehood and ingratitude. After throwing himself a most distasteful burden on Edward's charity for five long dreary months, the bugbear of the doctor's dreams, and heavy ever-recurring climax of his uncomfortable thoughts, here had Fred departed without a word of explanation or thanks, or even without saying good-bye. The doctor thought himself quite justified in being angry. He began to feel that the suspicious uneasiness which possessed him was equally natural and inevitable. Such a thankless, heartless departure was enough to put any man out. To imagine that Fred could be capable of it, naturally went to his brother's heart.

That day there was still no word of the party who had disappeared so mysteriously out of the doctor's house. Dr Rider went to his hard day's work vaguely expectant, feeling sure he must hear of them somehow, and more interested in hearing of them than was to be expected from his former low ebb of fraternal affection. When he returned and found still no letter, no message, the blank disappointment of the former night closed still more blankly upon him. When one is all by one's self, and has nothing at best but an easy-chair to go home to, and goes home expecting a letter, or a message, or a visitor who has not arrived, and has no chance of arriving, the revulsion of feeling is not agreeable. It did not improve the doctor's temper in the first place. The chill loneliness of that trim room, with its drawn curtains and tidy pretence of being comfortable, exasperated him beyond bearing. He felt shut up in it, and yet would not leave it. Somebody certainly might come even to-night. Fred himself perhaps, if he could escape from the rigid guardianship he was under; or was that miraculous Australian Nettie a little witch, who had spirited the whole party in a nutshell over the seas? Never was man delivered from a burden with a worse grace than was Dr Rider; and the matter had not mended in these twenty-four hours.

Next morning, however, this fever of fraternal suspense was assuaged. A three-cornered note, addressed in an odd feminine hand, very thin, small, and rapid, came among Dr Rider's letters. He signalled it out by instinct, and opened it with an impatience wonderful to behold.

"Sir, – We are all at the Blue Boar until we can get lodgings, which I hope to be to-day. I am utterly ashamed of Fred for not having let you know, and indeed of myself for trusting to him. I should not wonder but we may have been under a mistake about him and you. If you could call about one, I should most likely be in to see you, and perhaps you could give me your advice about the lodgings. Neither of *them* have the least judgment in such matters. I am sorry to trouble you; but being a stranger, perhaps you will excuse me. I understand you are only at home in the evening, and

that is just the time I can't come out, as I have the whole of them to look to, which is the reason I ask you to call on me. Begging you will pardon me, I remain,

"Nettie Underwood."

"She remains Nettie Underwood," said the doctor, unawares. He laughed to himself at that conclusion. Then an odd gleam came across his face. It was probably the first time he had laughed in a natural fashion for some months back, and the unusual exertion made his cheeks tingle. His temper was improved that morning. He went off to his patients almost in a good humour. When he passed the great house where Bessie Christian now reigned, he recalled her image with a positive effort. Astonishing what an effect of distance had floated over the apparition of that bride. Was it a year since he saw her and gnashed his teeth at the thought of his own folly, or was it only last Sunday? The doctor could not tell. He put Nettie's note in his pocket-book, and was at the hotel door punctually at one o'clock. It was in the principal street of Carlingford, George Street, where all the best shops, and indeed some of the best houses, were. From the corner window of the hotel you could see down into the bowery seclusion of Grange Lane, and Mr Wodehouse's famous apple-trees holding tempting clusters over the high wall. The prospect was very different from that which extended before Dr Rider's window. Instinctively he marvelled within himself whether, if Dr Marjoribanks were to die – people cannot live for ever even in Carlingford – whether it might not be a disadvantage to a man to live so far out of the world. No doubt it was a temptation of the Evil One. Happily the young man did not take sufficient time to answer himself, but walked forward briskly through the mazy old passages of the old inn, to a room from which sundry noises issued. Dr Rider walked in with the natural confidence of a man who has an appointment. The room was in undisturbed possession of three children – three children making noise enough for six – all very small, very precocious, with staring round eyes and the most complete independence of speech and manners. The doctor confronted the little rabble thunderstruck; they were his brother's children, unrecognisable little savages as they were. One little fellow, in a linen pinafore, was mounted on the arm of a sofa, spurring vigorously; another was pursuing his sister about the room, trying to catch her feet with the tongs, and filling the air with repeated loud snaps of disappointment. They intermitted their occupations to stare at him. "Look here – here's a man," said the youngest, meditatively, beholding his dismayed uncle with a philosophic eye. "Can't some one go and tell Nettie?" said the little girl, gazing also with calm equanimity. "If he wants Nettie he'll have to wait," said the elder boy. A pause followed; the unhappy doctor stood transfixed by the steady stare of their three pair of eyes. Suddenly the little girl burst out of the room, and ran screaming along the passage. "Mamma, mamma, here's a man come," cried the wonderful colonial child. A few minutes afterwards their mother appeared, languid and faded as before. Perhaps she had been even prettier than Nettie in her bright days, if any days had ever been bright for Fred Rider's wife. She was fairer, larger, smoother than her sister; but these advantages had lapsed in a general fade, which transformed her colour into washy pinkness, made her figure stoop, and her footsteps drag. She came remonstrating all the way in feeble accents. It was not for her, certainly, that the doctor had taken the trouble to come to the Blue Boar.

"Please to sit down," said Mrs Fred, and stood leaning on the table, looking at her brother-in-law with a calm curiosity, not unlike that of her children. "Nettie and my husband have gone out together; but now that we are all so happy and united," she continued, with a sort of feeble spitefulness, "I am sure it is quite a pity to trouble you. You could not take us in, you know. You said that very plain, Mr Edward."

"It was perfectly true, madam," said the doctor. "I have not ventured on the step my brother has taken, and have naturally no accommodation for a family. But I am not here for my own pleasure. Your sister, I presume it is, wrote to me. I was requested to call here to-day."

"Oh, yes; Nettie is very self-willed – very; though, of course, we could not get on without her. She attacked Fred like a wild-cat for not writing you: but I daresay, if the truth were known, you

did not expect to hear from my husband," said the wife, recovering her voice, and fixing a vindictive gaze upon her visitor, who felt himself betrayed.

"I came by Miss Underwood's instructions and at her request," said the unfortunate man. "We need not enter into any question between Fred and myself."

"Ah, yes, that is very safe and wise for you," laughed Fred's wife.

The doctor was deeply exasperated, as was only natural: he eyed the feeble helpless creature for a moment angrily, provoked to answer her; but his gaze became one of wonder and dismay ere he withdrew it. Surely of all incomprehensible entities, the most amazing is a fool – a creature insensate, unreasoning, whom neither argument nor fact can make any impression upon. Appalled and impressed, the doctor's gaze left that pretty faded face to turn upon the children. Dreadful imps! If Fred had only taken to evil ways after he became possessed of such a family, his brother could have forgiven him. While these thoughts passed through Dr Rider's mind, however, deliverance approached. He heard Nettie's voice in the passage, long before she reached the door. Not that it was loud like the voices of this dreadful household; but the tone was sufficiently peculiar to be recognised anywhere. With a most penetrating clearness, it came through the long passages, words inaudible, only the sound of a voice, rapid, breathless, decided – with the distant sound of Fred's long, shambling, uncertain footsteps coming in as the strange accompaniment. Then they entered the room – the one tiny, bright, dauntless, an intrepid, undiscourageable little soul; the other with his heavy large limbs, his bemused face, his air of hopeless failure, idleness, content. Edward Rider gazed involuntarily from one to another of this two. He saw the sprite place herself between the husband and wife, a vain little Quixote, balancing these extremes of helplessness and ruin. He could not help looking at her with a certain unconscious admiration and amazement, as he might have looked at a forlorn hope. Thousands of miles away from her friends, wherever and whatever they might be, with Fred and his wife and children on her hands, a household of incapables – what was that little creature to do?

"Good morning, Dr Edward," said Nettie. "I thought I should have been back sooner; but Fred is so slow, I cannot manage to get him along at all. We have found some lodgings a little way out of Carlingford, near that chapel, you know, or church, or something, that stands a little off the road: where it's open, and there's morning service, and such a handsome young clergyman. Who is he? We went into the chapel, and it's so fine, you would not believe it. Well, just a hundred yards from there is the house. Four rooms, exactly what I wanted, with a garden for the children to play in – quite quiet, and fresh and pleasant. Tell me who the people are – their name is Smith. If they're respectable, I'll go back and take it. I can afford the rent."

"Near St Roque's? They belong to the church there. I daresay they are all right," said the doctor, "but it is a long way off, and inconvenient, and – "

"That is just why I want it," said Nettie. "We never were used to conveniences, and none of us want to be much in the town, so far as I know. It is the very thing. Why has not lunch come up? – what do these people mean, Susan, by not attending to their orders? Ring the bell, Freddy – ring loud; and after lunch, as your drag is at the door, Dr Edward, you'll drive me down to this place again, that I may secure it, won't you? I want to have a talk with you besides. – Lunch, please, immediately. I ordered it to be ready at one – now it is half-past. We can't have our time wasted this way. – Dr Edward, please, you'll stay."

The doctor gazed with ever-increasing amazement at the little speaker. Nobody else had spoken a word. Fred had nodded to him sullenly. Fred's wife had sunk back on the sofa – everybody seemed to recognise Nettie as supreme. He hesitated, it must be confessed, to put his grievances so entirely aside as to sit down in perfect amity with Fred and his household; but to refuse to drive Nettie to St Roque's was impossible. The blood rushed to the doctor's face at the thought. What the world of Carlingford would say to see his well-known vehicle proceeding down Grange Lane, through Dr Marjoribanks's territories, under such circumstances, was a question he did not choose to consider; neither did he enter too minutely into the special moment at which his next patient might be expecting him. The

young man was under the spell, and did not struggle against it. He yielded to the invitation, which was a command. He drew near the table at which Nettie, without hesitation, took the presiding place. A dull amount of conversation, often interrupted by that lively little woman, rose in the uncongenial party. Nettie cut up the meat for those staring imps of children – did them all up in snowy napkins – kept them silent and in order. She regulated what Susan was to have, and which things were best for Fred. She appealed to Dr Edward perpetually, taking him into her confidence in a way which could not fail to be flattering to that young man, and actually reduced to the calmness of an ordinary friendly party this circle so full of smouldering elements of commotion. Through all she was so dainty, so pretty, her rapid fingers so shapely, her eager talk so sweet-toned, that it was beyond the power of mortal man to remain uninterested. It was a development of womankind unknown to Dr Rider. Bessie Christian had exhausted the race for him until now; but Nettie was a thousand times more piquant than Bessie Christian. He gazed and wondered, and moralised secretly in his own mind, what was to become of the girl? – what could she do?

"You have left some of your things at my house, Fred," said the doctor, making an attempt to approach his sullen brother, who evidently expected no overtures of friendship.

"Yes. Mrs Rider, you see, arrived unexpectedly," said Fred, with confusion – "in fact, I knew nothing about it, or – or I should have told you – Nettie – "

"Nettie thought it best to come off at once, without writing," explained Fred's wife.

"What was the use of writing?" cried that little person. "You had written to Fred for six months without ever getting an answer. You made everybody unhappy round you with your fears and troubles about him. I knew perfectly he was quite well and enjoying himself; but, of course, Susan would not be convinced. So what was there for it but bringing her away? What else could I do, Dr Edward? And to leave the children would have been preposterous. In the first place, I should have been miserable about them; and so, as soon as she found Fred was all right, would Susan: and something would certainly have happened – scarlet fever or something – and at the end of all I should have had to go out again to fetch them. So the shortest way was to bring them at once. Don't you think so? And to see us all here so comfortable, I am sure is enough to repay any one for the trouble. Fred, don't drink any more beer."

Nettie put out her tiny hand as she spoke to arrest the bottle. Fred stared at her with a dull red flush on his face; but he gave in, in the most inexplicable way; it seemed a matter of course to yield to Nettie. The doctor's amazement began to be mingled with amusement. To see how she managed them all was worth the sacrifice of a little time – unconsciously he became more fraternal in his thoughts. He spoke to foolish faded Mrs Fred with a total forgiveness and forgetfulness of her spiteful speech. He hoped she would like Carlingford; he said something to the children. But it was not easy to talk in presence of that amazing family party, the existence of which he had not dreamed of a few days ago. To see his brother at the head of such a group had, in spite of himself, a wonderful effect upon Dr Rider. Their children, of course, must be supported somehow. Who was to do it? Was their father, grown incapable and useless in the middle of his days, to be forced into the current of life again? Was it a vague faith in Providence which had brought the helpless household here; or was it a more distinct, if not so elevated, confidence in Nettie? The doctor's heart sank once more within him as he looked round the table. Three helpless by nature – two equally helpless who ought in nature to have been the support of the whole – nothing but one bright ready little spirit between them all and destitution; and what could Nettie do to stave that wolf from the door? Once more Dr Rider's countenance fell. If the household broke down in its attempt at independence, who had they to turn to but himself? – such a prospect was not comfortable. When a man works himself to death for his own family, he takes the pleasure with the pain; but when another's family threatens to fall upon his hands, the prospect is naturally appalling – and even if Fred could do anything, what was Fred's life, undermined by evil habit, to depend upon? Silence once more fell over the little company – silence from all but Nettie and the children, who referred to her naturally instead of to their mother. Fred

was sullen, and his wife took her cue from him. Edward was uneasy and dismayed. Family parties suddenly assembled without due warning are seldom greatly successful; and even Nettie could not make immediate reconciliation and fraternal kindness out of this.

CHAPTER IV

"Take me down this long pretty road. There must be delicious houses inside the walls. Look here; drive slowly, and let us have a peep in at this open door," said Nettie. "How sweet and cosy! and who is that pretty young lady coming out? I saw her in the chapel this morning. Oh," added Nettie, with a little sharpness, "she knows *you*– tell me who she is."

"That is Miss Lucy Wodehouse – one of our Carlingford beauties," said Dr Rider.

"Do you know her very well?" asked the inquisitive Nettie. "How she stares – why does she stare, do you suppose? Is there anything absurd about my dress? Look here – don't they wear bonnets just like this in England?"

"So far as I am able to judge," said the doctor, looking at the tiny head overladen with hair, from which the bonnet had fallen half off.

"I suppose she is surprised to see me here. Drive on faster, Dr Edward, I want to talk to you. I see Fred has been telling us a parcel of stories. It would be cruel to tell Susan, you know, for she believes in him; but you may quite trust me. Is your brother good for anything, Dr Edward, do you suppose?"

"Not very much now, I fear," said the doctor.

"Not very much *now*. I suppose he never was good for much," said the indignant Nettie; "but he was said to be very clever when he first came out to the colony. I can't tell why Susan married him. She is very self-willed, though you would fancy her so submissive. She is one of those people, you know, who fall ill when they are crossed, and threaten to die, so that one daren't cross her. Now, then, what is to be done with them? He will not go back to the colony, and I don't care to do it myself. Must I keep them here?"

"Miss Underwood – " began the perplexed doctor.

"It would save trouble to call me Nettie – everybody does," said his strange companion; "besides, you are my brother in a kind of a way, and the only person I can consult with; for, of course, it would not do to tell one's difficulties to strangers. Fred may not be very much to depend upon, you know, but still he is Fred."

"Yes," said the doctor, with a little self-reproach, "still he is Fred; but pardon me, the name suggests long aggravations. You can't tell how often I have had to put up with affronts and injuries because it was Fred. I shouldn't like to grieve you – "

"Never mind about grieving me; —*I* am not in love with him; – let me hear all about it!" said Nettie.

Dr Rider paused a little; seeing the abyss upon the brink of which this brave little girl was standing, he had not the heart to aggravate her by telling the failures of the past. Better to soften the inevitable discovery if possible. But his hesitation was quite apparent to Nettie. With considerable impatience she turned round upon him.

"If you think I don't know what I am doing, but have gone into this business like a fool, you are quite mistaken, Dr Edward," she said, a little sharply. "I see how it is as well as anybody can do. I knew how it was when I left the colony. Don't be alarmed about me. Do you think I am to be turned against my own flesh and blood by finding out their follies; or to grumble at the place God put me in? – Nothing of the sort! I know the kind of situation perfectly – but one *may* make the best of it, you know: and for that reason tell me everything, please."

"But, Miss Underwood, consider," cried the doctor, in consternation. "You are taking responsibilities upon yourself which nobody could lay upon you; you! young – tender" (the doctor paused for a word, afraid to be too complimentary) – "delicate! Why, the whole burden of this family will come upon you. There is not one able to help himself in the whole bundle! I am shocked! – I am alarmed! – I don't know what to say to you – "

"Don't say anything, please," said Nettie. "I know what I am about. Do you call this a street or a lane, or what do you call it? Oh, such nice houses! shouldn't I like to be able to afford to have one of them, and nurses, and governesses, and everything proper for the children! I should like to dress them so nicely, and give them such a good education. I don't know anything particular to speak of, myself – I shall never be able to teach them when they grow older. If Fred, now, was only to be trusted, and would go and work like a man and make something for the children, I daresay I could keep up the house; – but if he won't do anything, you know, it will take us every farthing just to live. Look here, Dr Edward: I have two hundred a-year; – Susan had the same, you know, but Fred got all the money when they were married, and muddled it away. Now, how much can one do in Carlingford with three children upon two hundred a-year?"

"Fred will be the meanest blackguard in existence," cried the doctor, "if he takes his living from you."

"He took his living from *you*, it appears," said Nettie, coolly, "and did not thank you much. We must make the best of him. We can't help ourselves. Now, there is the pretty church, and there is our little house. Come in with me and answer for me, Dr Edward. You can say I am your sister-in-law, you know, and then, perhaps, we can get into possession at once; for," said Nettie, suddenly turning round upon the doctor with her brilliant eyes shining out quaintly under the little brow all puckered into curves of foresight, "it is so sadly expensive living where we are now."

To look at the creature thus flashing those shining eyes, not without a smile lurking in their depths, upon him – to see the triumphant, undaunted, undoubting youthfulness which never dreamt of failure – to note that pretty anxiety, the look which might have become a bride in her first troubles "playing at housekeeping," and think how desperate was the position she had assumed, how dreary the burden she had taken upon her – was almost too much for the doctor's self-control. He did not know whether to admire the little heroine as half-divine, or to turn from her as half-crazy. Probably, had the strange little spirit possessed a different frame, the latter was the sentiment which would have influenced the unimaginative mind of Edward Rider. But there was no resisting that little brown Titania, with her little head overladen with its beautiful hair, her red, delicate mouth closing firm and sweet above that little decided chin, her eyes which seemed to concentrate the light. She seemed only a featherweight when the bewildered doctor helped her to alight – an undoubted sprite and creature of romance. But to hear her arranging about all the domestic necessities within, and disclosing her future plans for the children, and all the order of that life of which she took the charge so unhesitatingly, bewildered the mistress of the house as much as it did the wondering doctor. The two together stood gazing at her as she moved about the room, pouring forth floods of eager talk. Her words were almost as rapid as her step, – her foot, light as it was, almost as decided and firm as her resolutions. She was a wonder to behold as she pushed about the furniture, and considered how it could be brightened up and made more comfortable. Gazing at her with his silent lips apart, Dr Rider sighed at the word. Comfortable! Was she to give her mind to making Fred and his children comfortable – such a creature as this? Involuntarily it occurred to Edward that, under such ministrations, sundry changes might come over the aspect of that prim apartment in which he had seen her first; the room with the bookcase and the red curtains, and the prints over the mantelpiece – a very tidy, comfortable room before any bewitching imp came to haunt it, and whisper suspicions of its imperfection – the doctor's own retirement, where he had chewed the cud of sweet and bitter fancies often enough, without much thought of his surroundings. But Nettie now had taken possession of the prosaic place, and, all unconscious of that spiritual occupation, was as busy and as excited about Mrs Smith's lodgings at St Roque's Cottage as if it were an ideal home she was preparing, and the life to be lived in it was the brightest and most hopeful in the world.

When Dr Rider reached home that night, and took his lonely meal in his lonely room, certain bitter thoughts of unequal fortune occupied the young man's mind. Let a fellow be but useless, thankless, and heartless enough, and people spring up on all sides to do his work for him, said the

doctor to himself, with a bitterness as natural as it was untrue. The more worthless a fellow is, the more all the women connected with him cling to him and make excuses for him, said Edward Rider in his indignant heart. Mother and sister in the past – wife and Nettie now – to think how Fred had secured for himself such perpetual ministrations, by neglecting all the duties of life! No wonder an indignant pang transfixed the lonely bosom of the virtuous doctor, solitary and unconsoled as he was. *His* laborious days knew no such solace. And as he fretted and pondered, no visions of Bessie Christian perplexed his thoughts. He had forgotten that young woman. All his mind was fully occupied chafing at the sacrifice of Nettie. He was not sorry, he was angry, to think of her odd position, and the duties she had taken upon herself. What had she to do with those wretched children, and that faded spiteful mother? Edward Rider was supremely disgusted. He said to himself, with the highest moral indignation, that such a girl ought not to be permitted to tie herself to such a fate.

CHAPTER V

St Roque's Cottage was considered rather a triumph of local architecture. A Carlingford artist had built it "after" the Church, which was one of Gilbert Scott's churches, and perfect in its way, so that its Gothic qualities were unquestionable. The only thing wanting was size, which was certainly an unfortunate defect, and made this adaptation of ecclesiastical architecture to domestic purposes a very doubtful experiment. However, in bright sunshine, when the abundance of light neutralised the want of window, all was well, and there was still abundance of sunshine in Carlingford in October, three months after the entrance of Fred Rider and his family into Mrs Smith's little rooms. It was a bright autumn day, still mild, though with a crispness in the air, the late season showing more in the destitution of the flower-borders than in any more sensible sign. It was a pretty spot enough for a roadside. St Roque's stood on the edge of a little common, over which, at the other margin, you could see some white cottages, natural to the soil, in a little hamlet-cluster, dropped along the edge of the grey-green unequal grass; while between the church and the cottage ran the merest shadow of a brook, just enough to give place and nutriment to three willow-trees which had been the feature of the scene before St Roque's was, and which now greatly helped the composition of the little landscape, and harmonised the new building with the old soil. St Roque's Cottage, by special intervention of Mr Wentworth, the perpetual curate, had dropped no intervening wall between its garden and those trees; but, not without many fears, had contented itself with a wooden paling on the side nearest the willows. Consequently, the slope of grass at that side, which Mrs Smith was too prudent to plant with anything that could be abstracted, was a pretty slope with the irregular willow shadows swept over it, thin, but still presenting a pale obstruction to the flood of sunshine on this special afternoon. There a little group was collected, in full enjoyment of the warmth and the light. Mrs Rider, still faded, but no longer travel-worn, sat farther up in the garden, on the green bench, which had been softened with cushions for her use, leisurely working at some piece of needlework, in lonely possession of the chrysanthemums and Michaelmas daisies round her; while on the grass, dropped over with yellow flecks of willow-leaves, lightly loosened by every passing touch of wind, sat Nettie, all brown and bright, working with the most rapid fingers at a child's frock, and "minding" with a corner of her eye the possessor of the same, the tiny Freddy, an imp of mischief uncontrollable by other hand or look than hers. A little lower down, poking into the invisible brook through the paling, was the eldest boy, silent from sheer delight in the unexpected pleasure of coating himself with mud without remark from Nettie. This unprecedented escape arose from the fact that Nettie had a visitor, a lady who had bent down beside her in a half-kneeling attitude, and was contemplating her with a mingled amaze and pity which intensified the prevailing expression of kindness in the mildest face in the world. It was Miss Wodehouse, in her soft dove-coloured dress and large soft checked shawl. Her mild eyes were fixed upon that brilliant brown creature, all buoyant and sparkling with youth. These wonderful young people perplexed Miss Wodehouse; here was another incomprehensible specimen – most incomprehensible perhaps of all that had ever crossed her mild elderly horizon with bewildering unintelligible light.

"My dear," said Miss Wodehouse, "things used to be very different when I was young. When we were girls we thought about our own pleasures – and – and vanities of all kinds," said the good woman, with a little sigh; "and, indeed, I can't think it is natural still to see you devoting yourself like this to your sister's family. It is wonderful; but dear, dear me! it isn't natural, Nettie, such self-devotion."

"I do wish you wouldn't speak!" said Nettie, with a sudden start – "self-devotion! stuff! I am only doing what must be done. Freddy can't go on wearing one frock for ever, can he – does it stand to reason? Would you have me sit idle and see the child's petticoats drop to pieces? I am a colonial girl – I don't know what people do in England. Where I was brought up we were used to be busy about whatever lay nearest to our hand."

"It isn't Freddy's frock," said Miss Wodehouse, with a little solemnity. "You know very well what I mean. And suppose you were to marry – what would happen supposing you were to marry, Nettie?"

"It is quite time enough to think of that when there is any likelihood of it happening," said Nettie, with a little toss of her head. "It is only idle people who have time to think of falling in love and such nonsense. When one is very busy it never comes into one's head. Why, you have never married, Miss Wodehouse; and when I know that I have everything I possibly could desire, why should I?"

Miss Wodehouse bent her troubled sweet old face over the handle of her parasol, and did not say anything for a few minutes. "It is all very well as long as you are young," she said, with a wistful look; "and somehow you young creatures are so much handier than we used to be. Our little Lucy, you know, that I can remember quite a baby – I am twice as old as she is," cried Miss Wodehouse, "and she is twice as much use in the world as I. Well, it is all very strange. But, dear, you know, *this* isn't natural all the same."

"It is dreadful to say so – it is dreadful to think so!" cried Nettie. "I know what you mean – not Freddy's frock, to be sure, but only one's whole life and heart. Should one desert the only people belonging to one in the world because one happens to have a little income and they have none? If one's friends are not very sensible, is that a reason why one should go and leave them? Is it right to make one's escape directly whenever one feels one is wanted? or what do you mean, Miss Wodehouse?" said the vehement girl. "That is what it comes to, you know. Do you imagine I had any choice about coming over to England when Susan was breaking her heart about her husband? could one let one's sister die, do you suppose? And now that they are all together, what choice have I? They can't do much for each other – there is actually nobody but me to take care of them all. You may say it is not natural, or it is not right, or anything you please, but what else can one do? That is the practical question," said Nettie, triumphantly. "If you will answer that, then I shall know what to say to you."

Miss Wodehouse gazed at her with a certain mild exasperation, shook her head, wrung her hands, but could find nothing to answer.

"I thought so," said Nettie, with a little outburst of jubilee; "that is how it always happens to abstract people. Put the practical question before them, and they have not a word to say to you. Freddy, cut the grass with the scissors, don't cut my trimmings; they are for your own frock, you little savage. If I were to say it was my duty and all that sort of stuff, you would understand me, Miss Wodehouse; but one only says it is one's duty when one has something disagreeable to do; and I am not doing anything disagreeable," added the little heroine, flashing those eyes which had confused Edward Rider – those brilliant, resolute, obstinate eyes, always with the smile of youth, incredulous of evil, lurking in them, upon her bewildered adviser. "I am living as I like to live."

There was a pause – at least there was a pause in the argument, but not in Nettie's talk, which ran on in an eager stream, addressed to Freddy, Johnnie, things in general. Miss Wodehouse pondered over the handle of her parasol. She had absolutely nothing to say; but, thoroughly unconvinced and exasperated at Nettie's logic, could not yet retire from the field.

"It is all very well to talk just now," said the gentle woman at last, retiring upon that potent feminine argument; "but, Nettie, think! If you were to marry – "

Miss Wodehouse paused, appalled by the image she herself had conjured up.

"Marrying is really a dreadful business, anyhow," she added, with a sigh; "so few people, you know, can, when they might. There is poor Mr Wentworth, who brought me here first; unless he gets preferment, poor fellow – . And there is Dr Rider. Things are very much changed from what they used to be in my young days."

"Is Dr Rider in the same dilemma? I suppose, of course, you mean Dr Edward," cried Nettie, with a little flash of mischievous curiosity. "Why? He has nobody but himself. I should like to know why he can't marry – that is, if anybody would have him – when he pleases. Tell me; you know he is my brother-in-law."

Miss Wodehouse had been thinking of Bessie Christian. She paused, partly for Dr Rider's sake, partly because it was quite contrary to decorum, to suppose that Bessie, now Mrs Brown, might possibly a year ago have married somebody else. She faltered a little in her answer. "A professional man never marries till he has a position," said Miss Wodehouse, abstractedly. Nettie lifted upon her, eyes that danced with mischief and glee.

"A profession is as bad as a family, then," said the little Australian. "I shall remember that next time you speak to me on this subject. I am glad to think Dr Edward, with all his prudence, is disabled too."

When Nettie had made this unguarded speech, she blushed; and suddenly, in a threatening and defiant manner, raised her eyes again to Miss Wodehouse's face. Why? Miss Wodehouse did not understand the look, nor put any significance into the words. She rose up from the grass, and said it was time for her to go. She went away, pondering in her own mind those singular new experiences of hers. She had never been called upon to do anything particular all her gentle life. Another fashion of woman might have found a call to action in the management of her father's house, or the education of her motherless young sister. But Miss Wodehouse had contented herself with loving Lucy – had suffered her to grow up very much as she would, without interference – had never taken a decided part in her life. When anything had to be done, to tell the truth, she was very inexpert – unready – deeply embarrassed with the unusual necessity. Nettie's case, so wonderfully different from anything she could have conceived, lay on her mind and oppressed her as she went home to Grange Lane.

As for Nettie herself, she took her work and her children indoors after a while, and tried on the new frock, and scolded and rehabilitated the muddy hero of the brook. Then, with those light fairy motions of hers, she spread the homely table for tea, called in Susan, sought Fred in his room up-stairs with a stinging word which penetrated even his callous mind, and made him for the moment ashamed of himself. Nettie bit her red lip till it grew white and bloodless as she turned from Fred's door. It was not hard to work for the children – to support and domineer over Susan; but it was hard for such an alert uncompromising little soul to tolerate that useless hulk – that heavy encumbrance of a man, for whom hope and life were dead. She bit her lip as she discharged her sharp stinging arrow at him through the half-opened door, and then went down singing, to take her place at the table which her own hands had spread – which her own purse supplied with bread. Nobody there showed the least consciousness of that latter fact; nobody fancied it was anything but natural to rely upon Nettie. The strange household demeaned itself exactly as if things were going on in the most regular and ordinary course. No wonder that spectators outside looked on with a wonder that could scarcely find expression, and half exasperated, half admiring, watched the astonishing life of the colonial girl.

Nobody watched it with half the amount of exasperation which concentrated in the bosom of Dr Rider. He gazed and noted and observed everything with a secret rage, indignation, and incredulity impossible to describe. He could not believe it even when it went on before his very eyes. Doctor though he was, and scientific, to a certain extent, Edward Rider would have believed in witchcraft – in some philtre or potion acting upon her mind, rather than in Nettie's voluntary folly. Was it folly? was it heroism? was it simple necessity, as she herself called it? Nobody could answer that question. The matter was as incomprehensible to Miss Wodehouse as to Dr Rider, but not of such engrossing interest. Bessie Christian, after all, grew tame in the Saxon composure of her beauty before this brown, sparkling, self-willed, imperious creature. To see her among her self-imposed domestic duties filled the doctor with a smouldering wrath against all surrounding her, which any momentary spark might set aflame.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.