

Meade L. T.

Wild Heather



L. Meade
Wild Heather

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23161467

Wild Heather:

Содержание

CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	17
CHAPTER III	22
CHAPTER IV	34
CHAPTER V	47
CHAPTER VI	64
CHAPTER VII	77
CHAPTER VIII	85
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	95

L. T. Meade

Wild Heather

CHAPTER I

There are all kinds of first things one can look back upon; I mean by that the first things of all. There is the little toddling journey across the floor, with father's arms stretched out to help one, and mother's smile to greet one when the adventurous journey is over. And there are other baby things, of course. Then there come the big things which one can never forget.

My big thing arrived when I was eight years old. I came home with father from India. Father's name was Major Grayson, and I was called Heather. I was petted a great deal on board ship, and made a fuss about, and, in consequence, I made a considerable fuss about myself and gave myself airs. Father used to laugh when I did this and catch me in his arms and press me close to his heart, and say:

"My dearest little Heather, I can quite perceive that you will be a most fascinating woman when you grow up."

I remember even now his words, and the look on his face when he said these things, but as I did not in the least comprehend them at the time, I merely asked in my very pertest voice for the nicest sweetmeats he could procure for me, on which he laughed more

than ever, and, turning to his brother officers, said:

"Didn't I say so? Heather will take the cake some time."

I suppose at that period of my life there was no one in the wide world whom I loved as I did father. There was my nurse, but I was not specially devoted to her, for she was fond of teasing me and sticking pins into my dress without being careful with regard to the points. When I wriggled and rushed away from her she used to say that I was a very naughty and troublesome child. She never praised me nor used mysterious words about me as father did, so, of course, I clung close to him.

I very, very dimly remembered my mother. As I have just said, my first memory of all was running across the nursery floor and being caught by my father, and my mother smiling at me. I really cannot recall her after that, except that I have a very dim memory of being, on one occasion, asked to stoop down and kiss her. My father was holding me in his arms at the time, and I stooped and stooped and pressed my lips to hers and said: "Oh, how cold!" and shuddered and turned away. I did not know then that she was dead. This fact was not told me until long afterwards.

We had a most prosperous voyage home on board the *Pleiades*, with never a storm nor any unpleasant sea complication, and father was in high spirits, always chatting and laughing and playing billiards and making himself agreeable all round, and I was very much petted, although one lady assured me that it was on account of father, who was such a very popular man, and not because I was little Heather Grayson myself.

By and by the voyage came to an end, and we were safe back in old England. We landed at Southampton, and father took Anastasia and me to a big hotel for the night. Anastasia, my nurse, and I had a huge room all to ourselves. It did look big after the tiny state cabin to which I had grown accustomed.

Anastasia was at once cross and sorrowful, and I wondered very much why she was not glad to be back in old England. But when I asked her if she were glad, her only answer was to catch me to her heart and kiss me over and over again, and say that she never, oh never! meant to be unkind to me, but that her whole one desire was to be my dearest, darling "Nana," and that she hoped and prayed I would ever remember her as such. I thought her petting almost as tiresome as her crossness, so I said, in my usual pert way:

"If you are really fond of me, you won't stick any more pins in me," when, to my amazement, she burst into a flood of tears.

Now I had a childish horror of tears, and ran out of the room. What might have happened I do not know; whether I should have lost myself in the great hotel, or whether Anastasia would have rushed after me and picked me up and scolded me, and been more like her old self, and forbidden me on pain of her direst displeasure to ever leave her side without permission, I cannot tell. But the simple fact was that I saw father in the corridor of the hotel, and father looked into my face and said:

"Why, Heather, what's the matter?"

"It's Anastasia who is so queer," I said; "she is sorry about

something, and I said, 'If you are sorry you will never stick pins in me again' – and then she burst out crying. I hate cry-babies, don't you, Daddy?"

"Yes; of course I do," replied my father. "Come along downstairs with me, Heather."

He lifted me up in his arms. I have said that I was eight years old, but I was a very tiny girl, made on a small and neat scale. I had little, dark brown curls, which Anastasia used to damp every morning and convert into hideous rows of ringlets, as she called them. I was very proud of my "ringerlets," as I pronounced the word at that time, and I had brown eyes to match my hair, and a neat sort of little face. I was not the least like father, who had a big, rather red face and grey hair, which I loved to pull, and kind, very bright, blue eyes and a big mouth, somewhat tremulous. I used to wonder even then why it trembled.

He rushed downstairs with me in his usual boisterous fashion, while I laughed and shouted and told him to go faster and faster, and then he entered a private sitting-room and rang the bell, and told the man who appeared at his summons that dinner was to be served for two, and that Miss Heather Grayson would dine with her father. Oh, didn't I feel proud – this was an honour indeed!

"I need not go back to the cry-baby, then, need I?" I said.

"No," replied my father; "you need not, Heather. You are to stay with me."

"Well, let's laugh and be very jolly," I said. "Let me be a robber, pretending to pick your pockets, and you must lie back

and shut your eyes and pretend to be sound, sound asleep. You must not even start when I pull your diamond ring off your finger. But, I say – oh, Daddy! – where *is* your diamond ring?"

"Upstairs, or downstairs, or in my lady's chamber," replied Daddy. "Don't you bother about it, Heather. No, I don't want to play at being burgled to-night. Sit close to me; lay your little head on my breast."

I did so. I could feel his great heart beating. It beat in big throbs, now up, now down, now up, now down again.

Dinner was brought in, and I forgot all about the ring in the delight of watching the preparations, and of seeing the grand, tall waiter laying the table for two. He placed a chair at one end of the table for father, and at the other end for me. This I did not like, and I said so. Then father requested that the seats should be changed and that I should sit, so to speak, in his pocket. I forget, in all the years that have rolled by, what we had for dinner, but I know that some of it I liked and some I could not bear, and I also remember that it was the dishes I could not bear that father loved. He ate a good deal, and then he took me in his arms and settled me on his knee, sitting so that I should face him, and then he spoke.

"Heather, how old are you?"

I was accustomed to this sort of catechism, and answered at once, very gravely:

"Eight, Daddy."

"Oh, you are more than eight," he replied, "you are eight and

a half, aren't you?"

"Eight years, five months, one week, and five days," I said.

"Come, that is better," he said, his blue eyes twinkling. "Always be accurate when you speak. Always remember, please, Heather, that it was want of accuracy ruined me."

"What is ruined?" I asked. "What in the world do you mean?"

"What I say. Now don't repeat my words. You will be able to think of them by and by."

I was silent, pondering. Daddy was charming; there never was his like, but he did say puzzling things.

"Now," he said, looking full at me, "what do you think I have come to England for?"

I shook my head. When I did not know a thing I invariably shook my head.

"I have come on your account," he replied.

"On mine, Daddy?"

"Yes. I am going back again to India in a short time."

"Oh, what fun!" I answered. "I love being on board ship."

He did not reply at all to this.

"Why don't you speak?" I said, giving his grizzled locks a lusty tug.

"I am thinking," was his answer.

"Well, think aloud," I said.

"I am thinking about you, Heather. Have you ever by any chance heard of a lady called Aunt Penelope?"

"Never," I answered. "Aunt Penelope – Aunt Penelope – what

is an aunt, Daddy?"

"Well, there is an Aunt Penelope waiting to see you in old England, and I am going to take you down to her to-morrow. She is your aunt – listen – think hard, Heather – use your brains – because she is your mother's sister."

"Oh!" I answered. "Does that make an aunt?"

"Yes, that makes an aunt; or if she were your father's sister she would also be your aunt."

I tried to digest this piece of information as best I could.

"I am taking you to her to-morrow, and you must learn to love her as though she were your mother."

I shook my head.

"I can't," I said.

"Well, don't think about it," was Daddy's reply. "Love her, without knowing that you love her. I believe she is a very good woman."

"I 'spect so," I said. "I don't much care for good womens."

As a rule I spoke quite correctly, but when excited I did make some lapses.

"Well, that's all," said father, suddenly putting me down on the floor. "Run up to bed now and to sleep. You will see Aunt Penelope to-morrow; you will like her very much. I have brought you all the way to England in order that you might see her."

I was a bit sleepy, and it was very late for me to be up. So I kissed Daddy two or three times and ran upstairs all alone. Anastasia was waiting for me at the head of the stairs.

"Anastasia," I shouted, "we are going to have a real jolly time. We are going to Aunt Penelope to-morrow. She is aunt because she is mother's sister; she would be aunt, too, if she was father's sister. I wonder how many people she is aunt to? Is she your aunt, Anastasia?"

"No, my dear child," said Anastasia, in quite a gentle tone.

"And isn't it fun, Anastasia?" I continued. "Daddy has brought me all the way to England just to see Aunt Penelope, and we are going back to India almost immediately – Daddy said so."

"Said what, Miss Heather?"

"That we were going back to India almost – almost at once. Isn't it just lovely? You will come too, of course, only you might remember about the pins."

Anastasia, who had placed me on a little chair, now went abruptly to the fire and stirred it into a brilliant blaze. I stared at it as a child will who has seldom seen fires. Anastasia stood with her back to me for a long time, even after she had done poking the fire, and when she turned round I thought her eyes looked funny.

"Are you going to cry again?" I said. "I don't like cry-babies."

"Of course not, Miss Heather. Now let me undress you."

A minute later I was in bed, the firelight playing on the walls. The bed was big and warm and soft. I felt tired and very happy. I dropped into profound slumber. When I awoke it was broad daylight, and Anastasia was shaking me.

"Get up, miss," she said. "If you want to be off in time you

must be stirring."

"Oh, hurrah!" I answered. "This is Aunt Penelope's day. Are we all going, Anastasia? And when we go, shall I ask her at once if she is your aunt, too?"

"Now, for goodness' sake, stay still, Miss Heather, while I tie your things. You are such an awful fidget."

I was dressed in an incredibly short space of time, and I had eaten a good breakfast, and Anastasia had taken me by the hand and brought me downstairs. Daddy was waiting for me in the hall, and he looked very big and broad and important. He went up to Anastasia and said a few words to her, and I think he slipped something into her hand, but I am not sure. She turned abruptly and walked away, and I said:

"Where is she going, father?"

"Never mind."

Then we got into a cab, and I said:

"But where's Anastasia?"

"Oh, if she's quick we may meet her at the railway station," said father; "and if she is slow she must come on by the next train."

"Oh, dear, what a nuisance!" I answered. "I did want her to come with us."

"It all depends upon whether she is quick or slow," said father.

"Well, at any rate," I answered, with a child's easy acceptance of a situation which she cannot understand, "it is lovely to go to Aunt Penelope."

We reached the railway station. Anastasia was slow – she was nowhere to be seen. Father said, in his cheerful voice:

"All right, little woman, she'll catch the next train." And then we found ourselves facing each other in two padded compartments of a first-class carriage, and the train moved out of the station, and we were off. There happened to be no one else in the carriage, but Daddy was very silent, and almost pale, for him. Once he said, bending towards me and speaking abruptly:

"Promise me one thing?"

"Yes, Daddy," I answered.

"You will never think badly of me whatever you hear?"

Now this was such a queer speech that I could not in the least understand it, but I answered at once, in the queer sort of metaphor that a child might use:

"I would not think badly of you, father, if the world rocked."

He kissed me two or three times after I said this, and so far recovered his usual self that he allowed me to sit on his knee and play with his watch chain. I was greatly taken with a little charm he wore, and when I said I liked it he told me that it had once belonged to a great idol in one of the most marvellous temples in the historic town of Delhi. He said it was supposed to be a charm and to bring luck, and then he detached it from his chain and slipped it on to a narrow gold chain which I wore round my neck. He told me to keep it always, for it was certain to bring luck. I said:

"What's luck?"

He answered: "Fair gales and a prosperous sail."

I nodded my head satisfactorily at that, and said:

"Then I will wear it, and you and me, Daddy" – I went wrong again with my grammar – "will have fair gales and a prosperous sail when we are returning to India."

He thrust his head out of the carriage window when I said this, and when he put it back again I noticed that for some reason his face was as red as ever.

Aunt Penelope's name was Penelope Despard, and she lived in a pretty little place outside a pretty little town about fifty miles away from Southampton. We got out at the station, which was called Cherton, and there a cab awaited us, which had evidently been sent by order, and some luggage was put on the roof. I was too excited by then to make any comment with regard to the luggage, although I noticed it afterwards and observed that it was all marked "H. G.," and there was nothing marked "G. G.," for father's name was Gordon Grayson. I said to father, as we got into the cab:

"I do wonder when Anastasia's train will arrive." And he said:

"So do I. I must make inquiries presently." But although I expected him to make these inquiries at once he did not do so, and the cab started off in the direction of Miss Despard's cottage.

Miss Penelope Despard lived in a little house with a little garden attached. The little house went by the name of Hill View, and the garden and tiny lawn were very pretty and very neatly kept. But I was accustomed to big things – that is, except on board

ship, when, of course, I had the sea to look at, which seemed to go on for ever and ever. So I was not excited about Aunt Penelope's garden. Father's face continued to be very red. He held my hand and took me up the neatly-kept gravel walk, and pushed a very brightly-polished brass button, which was instantly answered by a neat-looking boy, with a perfectly round face, in buttons.

"Is Miss Despard in?" asked father. And then a lady in spectacles came out of a room at one side of a narrow hall, and father said:

"Hallo, Penelope! It is years since we met, and, Penelope, this is Heather. Heather, my darling, here is your Aunt Penelope."

"I hope you are a good child and do what you are told always," said Aunt Penelope.

She spoke in a very prim voice, and stooping down, kissed me, hurting my face as she did so with the rim of her spectacles. I disliked her on the spot and told her so with the frank eyes of a child, although I was not quite rude enough to utter any words by my lips.

"Well, Gordon," said my aunt, "you were a little late, and I was beginning to fear that you had missed your train. We shall just have time to arrange everything before you return to Southampton."

"I am going to London to-night," said father.

"Well, well, it really doesn't matter to me. Child, don't stare."

I looked away at once. There was a parrot in a cage, and the parrot said, in his shrill voice at that moment: "Stop knocking

at the door."

I burst into a peal of laughter and ran towards him. I was about to approach his cage with my finger, when Aunt Penelope said: "He bites."

I did not want him to bite my finger, for his beak was so sharp. So I said:

"Please, Aunt Penelope, are you aunt also to Anastasia?"

"I have never heard of her," said Aunt Penelope. "Little girls should be seen and not heard."

At that moment the parrot again shouted out, "Stop knocking at the door," and I was so amused by him that I did not mind Aunt Penelope. After all, nothing much mattered, for I would be going to London immediately with Daddy.

I stood and stared at the parrot, hoping much that he would speak again. The parrot cocked his head to one side and looked at me, but he did not utter a word.

"Speak, oh! do speak," I said in a whisper; the parrot turned his back on me.

Aunt Penelope said, "Sit down, Heather."

CHAPTER II

A few minutes later we went into another room to lunch. It was a very small room, smaller than many of the state cabins on board the good ship *Pleiades*. There was a little table in the centre of the room, and there were places for three laid at the table. Opposite to me was a milk pudding, and opposite to Aunt Penelope was a tureen of soup, and opposite to Daddy I really forget what. The boy in buttons came up and helped me to a portion of pudding.

"I don't like it," I said at once. "Take it away, please, boy."

Aunt Penelope said: "Leave the pudding where it is, Jonas. Heather, my dear, you must invariably eat what is put before you. I consider milk pudding proper food for little girls, and had this made on purpose for you."

"But I hate milk puddings, Aunt Penelope," I answered, "and I never, never eat them."

"The child is accustomed to feed as I do," said my father, speaking in a harsh, grating sort of voice, and avoiding my eyes.

"Well, in future," said Aunt Penelope, "she will eat as I want her to eat. I must bring her up in my way or not at all, Gordon."

"Eat your pudding like a darling," said my father, and as Aunt Penelope had really made a most silly speech, for father and I were leaving for London almost immediately, I ate the horrid pudding just to please him.

When lunch was finished, Aunt Penelope went up to father

and spoke to him. He nodded, and I noticed that his face was very pale. Then he said:

"Perhaps so; perhaps it is the best thing." Then, all of a sudden, he stooped and took me in his arms and pressed me very, very close to his heart, and let me down on the floor rather suddenly. The next minute he had taken half-a-crown out of his pocket.

"Your Aunt Penelope and I want to have a little private talk," he said, "and I was thinking that you might – or rather your aunt was thinking that you might – go out for a walk with Buttons."

"His name is Jonas," said Aunt Penelope.

"I beg his pardon – with Jonas – and he will take you to a toy shop. You have never seen any English toys, and you might buy a new doll with this."

"I'd like to buy some sort of toy," I answered, "but I don't want dolls – I hate them. Can I buy a parrot, do you think, and would he talk to me? I'd rather like that, and it would be great, great fun to have him when we are sailing back with gentle gales and a prosperous sail to darling India."

"Well, go and buy something, darling," said father, and I nodded to him brightly and went out of the room.

Buttons, as I continued to call him in my own heart, for I could not get round his other name of Jonas, was really quite agreeable. He took me away to a high part of the town and very far from the shops, and on to a wild stretch of moor; here he told me all kinds of extraordinary stories about rats and cats and mice and caterpillars. He confided the fact to me that he kept white mice

in his attic bedroom, but that if Miss Despard found it out he would be sent about his business on the spot. He implored me to be extremely secret with regard to the matter, and I naturally promised that I would.

"You need not fear, Buttons," I said. "Ladies, who are true ladies, never repeat things when they are asked not."

"And you are a real, true lady, missy," was his answer.

He further promised to enlighten me with regard to the method of producing silk from silk-worms, and told me what fun it was to wind the silk off the big yellow cocoons.

"I think," I said, "I should like that very much, for if I got a big lot I should have enough silk to make a yellow silk dress for Anastasia."

"Whoever's she?" asked Buttons.

"I believe, Buttons," I said, dropping my voice, "that Aunt Penelope is really aunt to her, too, and she is coming on by the next train. She is very nice when she is not a cry-baby, and when she doesn't stick pins into you. She has a somewhat yellow complexion, so, of course, the yellow silk dress would suit her."

"Yes, miss, I am sure of that," said Buttons.

He took me so far that I began to get tired, and the sun was going down behind the hills when we returned to the town. We had very nearly reached the little house of Hill View when I remembered Daddy's half-crown, and that I had never bought a toy.

"It's too late to-day, miss," said Buttons, "but you can come

out walking with me to-morrow and we can get it then."

I laughed.

"I can get it in London, I expect," I said. "London's a great big place. Oh, I do hope," I continued, "that I haven't been keeping darling Daddy waiting!"

When Buttons opened the little gate of Hill View I ran up the neatly-kept avenue and pounded with my hands on the glass panels of the door. It was Aunt Penelope herself who opened it.

"Where's Daddy?" I said. "Am I late? Oh, I hope I am not! And has Anastasia come?"

Aunt Penelope looked quite gentle. She took my hand and led me into the drawing-room. The drawing-room was bigger than the dining-room, but was still a very tiny room.

"Now, Heather," she said, "I have something to say to you."

"Where's Daddy? I want Daddy," I said. "Where is he?"

I began to tremble for fear of I did not know what. The terror of something hitherto unknown came over me.

"He sent you his best love and his good-bye, and he will come and see you again before he sails."

Aunt Penelope tried to speak kindly, although she had not by nature a kind voice. I stared at her with all my might and main.

"He went away without me?" I said.

"He had to, dear. Now, Heather, I can quite understand that this is a trial for you, but you've got to bear it. Your father will come and see you again before he returns to India, and meanwhile you are my little girl and will live with me."

I stood perfectly still, as though I were turned into stone. Aunt Penelope put out her hand to touch me, and just at that moment the parrot cried, "Stop knocking at the door!" Aunt Penelope tried to draw me towards her, she tried to lift me on to her knee.

"Come," she said, "come – be a good little girl. I shall try to be good to you."

I raised my hand and slapped her with extreme violence on the face.

"I hate you and all aunts, and I will never, never be good to you or to anyone!"

And then, somehow or other, I think I lost consciousness, for I cannot remember, even after this lapse of years, what immediately followed.

CHAPTER III

The next thing that I recall was also connected with that most terrible day. I was lying on a tiny bed, a sort of cot bed, in a very small room. There was a fire about the size of a pocket-handkerchief burning in the wee-est grate I have ever looked at. A woman was sitting by the fire with her back to me, the woman was knitting and moving her hands very rapidly. She wore a little cap on her head with long black lappets to it. I noticed how ugly the cap was and how ugly the woman herself looked as she sat and knitted by the fire. I suppose some little movement on my part caused her to turn round, for she came towards me and then I observed that it was Aunt Penelope.

"That's a good girl," she said; "you are better now, Heather."

A sort of instinct came over me at that moment. Instead of bursting into a storm of rage and tears, I stayed perfectly quiet. I looked her calmly in the face. I remembered every single thing that had happened. Father had gone, and I was left behind. I said, in a gentle tone:

"I am much better, Aunt Penelope."

"Come," said Aunt Penelope, speaking cheerfully, "you shall have some nice bread and milk presently, and then I will undress you myself and put you to bed. Lie quite quiet now like a good child, while I go down to prepare the bread and milk."

I made no answer, but lay still, my eyes fixed on her face. She

turned and left the room.

The moment she had shut the door I sat up in bed. I had been acting a part. I was only eight years old, that is, eight years and a half, or very nearly so. Nevertheless, I was a consummate actress all the time Aunt Penelope was in the room. The instant she had gone I scrambled to my feet and slid off the little bed and stood upright on the floor. I saw the hat I had worn when I came from Southampton, lying on a chair, and also the little jacket. I further noticed with satisfaction that my boots were still on my feet. In a flash I had managed to button on my jacket and to slip the elastic of my hat under my thick hair, and then, with the half-crown which father had given me safely deposited in my pocket, I softly, very softly, opened my bedroom door. Oh, yes; I was acting splendidly! I was quite excited with the wonder of the thing, and this excitement kept me up for the time being. I heard Aunt Penelope's voice downstairs. She was saying something; her words reached me quite distinctly.

"Go at once to the chemist's, Jonas, and tell him to make up the prescription the doctor has given, and bring it back again as fast as ever you can. Wait for it until it is made up. The child is highly feverish, and must have the medicine at once."

Jonas said, "Yes, Miss Despard," and I heard the front door of the little house open and shut again. I also heard Aunt Penelope going away to the back part of the premises, and I further heard the shrill voice of the parrot, making use of his constant cry, "Stop knocking at the door!" Now was my opportunity.

I glided downstairs like a little ghost. I ran swiftly across the hall, I opened the front door – it was quite easy to open, for the door was a very small one – and then I let myself out. The next minute I was running down the street, running as fast as ever I could, and as far as possible from Hill View House. I had a distinct object in my mind. I did not mean to run away in the ordinary sense; my one sole desire was to go to the railway station to meet the train which would bring Anastasia. Father had said with his own lips that she would come by the next train. Of course, I had no idea where the railway station was. I felt that I must run as quickly as possible, for Jonas might see me, and although he was quite a kind boy, I did not want him to see me then. I hoped the chemist – whoever the chemist was – would keep him some time, and that the feverish person – whoever the feverish person was – would be kept waiting for whatever Jonas was fetching for that person. I did not meet Jonas, and I ran a long way. Presently I came bang up against a stout, red-faced woman, who said:

"Look out where you are going, little 'un."

I paused and looked into her face.

"Have I hurt you?" I asked.

The woman burst out laughing.

"My word!" she answered. "As if a mite like you would hurt *me*. Is it likely? And who are you, and where are you going?"

"I am going to the railway station to meet Anastasia," I said. Then I added, as a quick thought flashed through my mind,

"Anastasia is my nurse, and she's coming by the next train. I will give you some money if you will take me to the railway station to meet her."

"How much money will you give me?" asked the red-faced woman.

"I will give you a whole half-crown," I said. "Please, please take me – it is so dreadfully important, for the next train may come in, and Anastasia may not know where to go to."

"Well, to be sure," said the woman, looking me all over from top to toe; "I don't seem to know you, little miss, but there's no harm in me taking you as far as the station, and the next train will be due in a very few minutes, so we'll have to go as fast as possible."

"I don't mind running, if you don't mind running too," I answered.

"I can't run," said the woman; "I'm too big."

"Well," I said, "perhaps the best thing of all would be for you to show me how to get to the railway station. If you do that, I can run very fast indeed, and you shall have your half-crown."

"That would be much the best way," said the woman; "and look, missy, you haven't very far to go. Here we are at the foot of this steep hill. Well, you run up it as fast as ever you can, and when you get to the top you will see the railway station right in front of you, and all you have to do is to ask if the train is in. There's only one train in and one train out at a little railway station like ours, so you can't miss your way. You will have to ask

a porter, or any man you see, to show you the platform where the trains come in, and there you are. Now, my half-crown, please, missy."

"Yes. Here it is," I answered, "and I am very much obliged to you, woman."

I thrust the money into her hand and began to run as fast as ever I could up the hill. I was a very slight child, and ran well. With the fear and longing, the indescribable dread of I knew not what in my heart, there seemed to be wings attached to my feet now, for I went up the hill so fast – oh, so fast! – until at last I arrived, breathless, at the top. A man was standing leisurely outside an open door. He said, "Hallo!" when he saw me, and I answered back, "Hallo!" and then he said:

"What can I do for you, little miss?" and I said:

"I have come to meet the next train, and, please, when will it be in, for Anastasia is coming by it?"

"Whoever is Anastasia?" asked the man.

"My nurse," I answered; "and she's coming by the next train."

The man whistled.

"Please show me the right platform, man," I said. "I have no money to give you at all, so I hope you will be very, very kind, for I gave all the money I possessed in the world to a stout, red woman at the bottom of the hill. She showed me how to get here, but she could not run fast enough, for she was so very stout, so I left her and came on alone. Please show me the platform and Anastasia shall give you some money when she comes."

"I don't want any money, missy," said the man in a kind tone. "You come along of me. There's the London express specially ordered to stop here, because Sir John Carrington and his lady are expected. The expresses don't stop here as a rule, missy – only the slow trains; but maybe the person you want will be in this express."

"She's sure to be if it's the next train," I said. "Is it the next train?"

"Well, yes, miss, I suppose it is. Ah! she is signalled."

"Who is signalled?" I asked. "Is it Anastasia?"

"No, missy; the train. You grip hold of my hand, and I'll see you safe. What a mite of a thing you be."

I held the man's hand very firmly. I liked him immensely – I put him at once third in my heart. Father was first, Anastasia second, and the railway porter third.

The great train came thundering in, and a kind-looking gentleman, accompanied by a beautifully-dressed lady and a number of servants, alighted on the platform. But peer and peer as I would, I could not get a sight of Anastasia.

"Now, missy, you look out," said the porter. "Wherever do she be?"

"Hallo – hallo! Where have you dropped from?" said a voice at that moment in my ears, and, looking up, I saw that Sir John Carrington was a man who had come all the way from India on board the *Pleiades*, and that, of course, I knew him quite well.

"Why, Heather," he said. "My dear," he continued, turning to

his wife, "here's Major Grayson's little girl. Heather, child, what are you doing here?"

"I am looking for Anastasia," I said, in a bewildered sort of way.

Lady Carrington had a most sweet face. I had never noticed before how very lovely and kind it could be.

"You poor little darling," she said, "Anastasia isn't here." Then she began whispering to her husband and looking down at me, and her soft, brown eyes filled with tears, and Sir John shook his head and I heard him say, "Dear, dear, how very pathetic!" and then Lady Carrington said, "We must take her home with us, John."

"No, no," I answered at that; "I can't go home – I must wait until the *next* train, for Anastasia will come by the *next* train."

"We'll see that she's met," said Sir John. "Come, Heather, you've got to come home with us."

I have often wondered since what my subsequent life would have been had I really gone home that night with Sir John and Lady Carrington, whether the troubles which lay before me would ever have existed, and whether I should have been the Heather I now am, or not. But be that as it may, just as Lady Carrington had put sixpence into the hand of my kind porter and was leading me away towards the beautiful motor car which was waiting for her, a strong and very bony hand was laid on my shoulder, and a voice said fiercely, and yet with a tremble in it:

"Well, you are enough to try the nerves of anybody, you bad,

naughty child!"

"Oh, Aunt Penelope," I said. "Oh, Aunt Penelope, I can't go back with you!"

"We knew this little girl," said Sir John; "she came from India on board the *Pleiades* with us."

"Heather Grayson came from India on board the *Pleiades* to live with me," said Aunt Penelope. "Her father has just committed her to my care. She is an extremely naughty child. I haven't the least idea who you are."

"This is my card," said Sir John.

When Aunt Penelope read the words on the card she became kinder in her manner.

"I suppose I must welcome you back again, Sir John," she said. "It is years and years since you visited your native place. But I won't detain you now. Heather, come with me."

"Pray give us your name," said Lady Carrington.

"Miss Despard, of Hill View," was her answer, and then she took my hand and led me out into the street.

I suppose I was really feverish, or whatever that word signifies to a child, for I do not remember anything about what happened during the next few days; then by slow degrees memory returned to me. I was very weak when this happened. Memory came back in a sort of dim way at first, and seemed to be half real and half a dream. Once I was quite certain that I saw a tall and broadly-made man in the room, and that when he stood up his head nearly touched the ceiling, and that when he sat down by my cot

and took my hand I said "Daddy, daddy," and after that I had a comfortable sleep. There is no doubt whatever that I had a sort of dream or memory of this tall man, not once, but twice or thrice; then I did not see him any more.

Again, I had another memory. Anastasia had really come by a train at last, and was in my room. She was bending over me and smoothing my bed-clothes, and telling me over and over again to be a good girl, and I kept on saying, "Oh, Anastasia, don't let the pins stick in," but even that memory faded. Then there came more distinct thoughts that seemed to be not memories but realities. Aunt Penelope sat by my bedside. There was nothing dreamlike about her. She was very upright and full of purpose, and she was always knitting either a long grey stocking or a short sock. She never seemed to waste a moment of her time, and while I looked at her in a dazed sort of way, she kept on saying, "Don't fidget so, Heather," or perhaps she said, "Heather, it's time for your gruel," or, "Heather, my dear, your beef tea is ready for you."

At last there came a day when I remembered everything, and there were no shadows of any sort, and I sat up in bed, a very weak little child. Aunt Penelope was kinder than usual that day. She gave me a little bit of chicken to eat, and I was so hungry that I enjoyed it very much, and then she said:

"Now you will do nicely, Heather, and I hope in future you will be careful of your health and not give me such a fright again."

"Aunt Penelope," I said, "I want to ask you a question, or

rather, two questions."

"Ask away, my dear," she replied.

"Did father come here by any chance? While I was in that cloud sort of world I seemed to feel that he came to see me, and that he looked taller and broader than before."

"I should think he did," said Aunt Penelope. "Why, he had to stoop to get in at the door, and when he was in the room his head almost touched the ceiling."

"Then he was here?" I said.

"Yes. He came three times to see you. That was when you were really bad."

"When is he coming again?" I asked.

"Finish your chicken, and don't ask silly questions," snapped Aunt Penelope.

I did finish my chicken, and Aunt Penelope took the plate away.

"Was Anastasia here also?" I asked. "And did I say to her, 'Please, don't let the pins stick in'?"

"The woman who brought you back from India came to see you once or twice," said Aunt Penelope.

"Then she did catch the next train?" I said.

"You have talked enough now, my dear Heather. Lie down and go to sleep."

"When will she come again?" I asked.

"You have talked enough. I am not going to answer any silly questions. Lie down and sleep."

I was very sleepy, and I suppose that when you are really as weak as I was then, you don't feel things very much. Now I allowed Aunt Penelope to lay me flat down in my little bed, and closing my eyes I forgot everything in slumber.

Those are my first memories. I got well, of course, of that childish illness, and Aunt Penelope by and by explained things to me.

Anastasia was not coming back at all, and father had gone to India. Aunt Penelope was rather restrained and rather queer when she spoke of father. She told me also that she had the entire charge of me, and that I was being brought up at her expense, as father had no money to spend on me. She gave me to understand that she was a very poor woman, and could not afford any servant except Buttons, or Jonas, as she called him. She said she preferred a boy in the house to a woman, for he was smarter at going messages and a greater protection at night. I could not understand half what she said. Almost all her narrative was mixed with injunctions to me to be good, to be very good, to love my aunt more than anyone in the world, but to love God best. When I stoutly declared that I loved father better than anyone in any world, she said I was a naughty child. I did not mind that – I kept on saying that I loved father best.

Then I got quite well and was sent to school, to a funny sort of little day school, where I did not learn a great deal, but made friends slowly with other children. I liked school better than home, for Aunt Penelope was always saying, "Don't, don't!" or,

"You mustn't, you mustn't!" when I was at home; and as I never knew why I should not do the things she said I was not to do, I kept on doing them in a sort of bewilderment. But at school there were rules of a sort, and I followed them as attentively as I could.

Thus the years went by, and from a little girl of eight years of age I was a tall, slender girl of eighteen, grown up – yes, grown up at last, and I was waiting for father, who was coming back for good, and my heart was full to the brim with longing to see him.

CHAPTER IV

During all these long years I had grown to tolerate Aunt Penelope. I found that her bark was worse than her bite; I found, too, that if I let her alone, she let me alone. She was always changing Buttons, and the new boy was invariably called Jonas, just as the last had been. The parrot kept on living, and kept on shouting at intervals every day, "Stop knocking at the door!" but he never would learn any fresh words, although I tried hard to teach him. He did not like me, and snapped at me when I endeavoured to be kind to him. So I concluded that he was a kind of "double" of Aunt Penelope, and left him alone.

The little house was kept scrupulously clean, but the food was of the plainest, and Aunt Penelope wore the oldest and shabbiest clothes, and she dressed me very badly too. At that time in my career I did not greatly mind about dress. What I did mind was that she never would let me talk about father. She always shut me up or turned the conversation. She had an awful book of musty old sermons, which she set me to read aloud to her the very instant I began to ask her questions about my father, so that by degrees I kept my thoughts to myself. I wrote to father from the very first, but I never got a reply. I used to post the letters myself, so I knew they must have reached him, but he never answered, and as the years went on I wrote less often, for you cannot keep up a correspondence on one side only. I used to wonder at the

time if Aunt Penelope kept back his letters to me, but I did not like to accuse her of such a monstrous crime.

At last, however, just after I had passed my eighteenth birthday, and was a tall, shabbily-dressed girl, who had learnt all that could be taught at the High School – the only one to which Aunt Penelope could afford to send me – she herself came to me in a state of great excitement, and said that father was returning home.

"He is coming to settle in England," she said. "I must be frank with you, Heather, and tell you that it is not at all to your advantage that he should do so."

"Aunt Penelope," I answered, "why do you say words of that sort?"

"I say them," she replied, "because I know the world and you don't. Your father is not the sort of man who would do any girl the slightest good."

"You had better not speak against him to me," I said.

"I have taken great pains with you," said Aunt Penelope, "and have brought you up entirely out of my own very slender means. You are, for your age, fairly well educated, you understand household duties. You can light a fire as quickly and deftly as any girl I ever met, and you understand the proper method of dusting a room. You can also do plain cooking, and you can make your own clothes. I don't know anything about your intellectual acquirements, but your teacher, Miss Mansel, at the High School, says that you are fairly proficient. Well, my dear, all these things

you owe to me. You came to me a very ignorant, very self-opinionated, silly, delicate little girl. You are now a fine, strong young woman. Your father is returning – he will be here tomorrow."

I clasped my hands tightly together. There was no use in saying to this withered old aunt of mine how I pined for him, how his kindly, good-humoured face, his blue eyes, his grizzled locks, had haunted and haunted me for ten long years.

"I understand," said Aunt Penelope, "that your father, after running through all his own money, and all of yours – for your mother had as much to live on as I have – has suddenly come into a new fortune. In his last letter to me he wrote that he wished to take you to London to introduce you to the great world. Now, I earnestly hope, my dear Heather, that you will be firm on this point and refuse to go with him. I am an old woman now, and I need your presence as a return for all the kindness I have done for you, and the life with your father would be anything but good for you. I shall naturally not object to your seeing him again, but, to speak frankly, I think, after all the years of toil and trouble I have spent on you, it is your bounden duty to stay with me and to refuse your father's invitation to go to London with him."

"Stop knocking at the door!" called the parrot at that moment.

When Aunt Penelope had finished her long speech I looked at her and then said quietly:

"I know you have been good to me, and I have been many times a naughty girl to you, but, you see, father comes first, and

if he wants me I am going to him."

"I thought you would say so. Your ingratitude is past bearing."

"Fathers always do come before aunts, don't they?" I asked.

"Oh, please don't become childish again, Heather. Go out and get the tea. I am tired of the want of proper feeling of the present day. Do you know that this morning Jonas broke that valuable Dresden cup and saucer that I have always set such store by? It has spoiled my set."

"What a shame," I answered. And I went into the kitchen to prepare the tea.

The Jonas of that day was a small boy of thirteen. He wore the very antiquated suit of Buttons which the first Jonas had appeared in ten years ago. He had very fat, red cheeks, and small, puffy eyes, and a little button of a mouth, and he was always asleep except when Aunt Penelope was about, when he ran and raced and pretended to do a lot, and broke more things than can be imagined. He awoke now when I entered the kitchen.

"Jonas, you are a bad boy," I said; "the kettle isn't boiling, and the fire is nearly out."

"I'll pour some paraffin on the fire and it will blaze up in a minute," said Jonas.

"You won't do anything of the kind; it is most dangerous – and Jonas, what a shame that you should have broken that Dresden cup and saucer!"

"Lor', miss, it was very old," said Jonas. "We wears out ourselves, so does the chaney."

"Now don't talk nonsense," said I, half laughing. "Cut some bread and I'll toast it. Jonas, I am a very happy girl to-day; my dear father is coming back to-morrow."

"Lor'," said Jonas, "I wouldn't be glad if my gov'nor wor coming back. He's sarvin' his time, miss, but don't let on that you know."

"Serving his time?" I answered. "What is that?"

"Lor', miss, he's kept by the Government. They has all the expense of him, and a powerful eater he ever do be!"

I did not inquire any further, but went on preparing the tea. When it was ready I brought it to Aunt Penelope.

"Do you know," I said, as I poured her out a cup, "that Jonas says his father is 'serving his time'? What does that mean?"

Aunt Penelope turned red and then white. Then she said, in a curious, restrained sort of voice:

"I wouldn't use that expression if I were you, Heather. It applies to people who are detained in prison."

"Oh!" I answered. Then I said, in a low tone, "I am very sorry for Jonas."

The next day father came back. Ten years is a very long time to have done without seeing your only living parent, and if father had been red and grizzled when last I beheld him, his hair was white now. Notwithstanding this fact, his eyes were as blue as ever, and he had the same jovial manner. He hugged and hugged me, and pushed me away from him and looked at me again, and then he hugged me once more, and said to Aunt Penelope:

"She does you credit, Penelope. She does, really and truly. When we have smartened her up a bit, and – oh! you know all about it, Penelope – she'll be as fine a girl as I ever saw."

"I have taught Heather to regard her clothes in the light in which the sacred Isaac Watts spoke of them," replied Aunt Penelope:

"Why should our garments, made to hide
Our parents' shame, provoke our pride?
Let me be dressed fine as I will,
Flies, flowers, and moths, exceed me still."

"That's a very ugly verse, if you will permit me to say so, Penelope," remarked my father, and then he dragged me down to sit on his knee.

He was wonderfully like his old self, and yet there was an extraordinary change in him. He used to be – at least the dream-father I had thought of all these years used to be – a very calm, self-contained man, never put out nor wanting in self-possession. But now he started at intervals and had an anxious, almost nervous manner. Aunt Penelope would not allow me to sit long on my father's knee.

"You forget, Heather, that you are not a child," she said. "Jump up and attend to the Major's comforts. I do not forget, Major, how particular you used to be about your toast. You were an awful fidget when you were a young man."

"Ha! ha!" said my father. "Ha! ha! And I am an awful fidget

still, Pen, an awful fidget. But Heather makes good toast; she's a fine girl – that is, she will be, when I have togged her up a bit."

Here he winked at me, and Aunt Penelope turned aside as though she could scarcely bear the sight. After tea, to my infinite disgust, I was requested to leave the room. I went up to my tiny room, and, to judge from the rise and fall of two voices, an animated discussion was going on downstairs. At the end of half an hour Aunt Penelope called to me to come down. As I entered the room the parrot said, "Stop knocking at the door!" and my father remarked:

"I wonder, Penelope, you don't choke that bird!" Aunt Penelope turned to me with tears in her eyes.

"Heather, your father wishes you to join him in London at once. He has arranged, however, that you shall spend a certain portion of each year with me."

"Yes," remarked my father, "the dull time in the autumn. You shall always have her back then – that is, until she marries a duke or someone worthy of her."

"Am I really to go with you, Daddy?" I asked. "Really and truly?"

"Not to come with me to-night, pretty pet," he answered, pinching my cheek as he spoke. "I must find a habitation worthy of my little girl. But early next week your aunt – your kind aunt – will see you into the train and I will meet you at the terminus, and then, heigho! for a new life!"

I could not help laughing with glee, and then I was sorry,

for Aunt Penelope had been as kind as kind could be after her fashion, and I did wrong not to feel some regret at leaving her. But when a girl has only her father, and that father has been away for ten long years, surely she is to be excused for wishing to be with him again.

Aunt Penelope hardly spoke at all after my father left. What her thoughts were I could not define; I am afraid, too, I did not try to guess them. But early next morning she began to make preparations for my departure. The little trunks which had accompanied me to Hill View were placed in the centre of my room, and Aunt Penelope put my very modest wardrobe into them. She laid between my nice, clean, fresh linen some bunches of home-grown lavender.

"You will think of me when you smell this fragrant perfume, Heather," she said; and I thought I saw something of a suspicion of tears in her eyes. I sprang to her then, and flung my arms round her neck, and said:

"Oh, I do want to go, and yet I also want to stay. Can't you understand, Aunt Penelope?"

"No, I cannot," she replied, pulling my hands away almost roughly; "and, what is more, I dislike silly, nonsensical speeches. No one can wish to do two things directly opposite at the same time. Now, count out your handkerchiefs. I bought you six new ones for your last birthday, and you had before then, how many?"

I am afraid I forgot. I am afraid I tried Aunt Penelope very much; but, after all, her time of suffering was to be short, for that

very evening there came a telegram from father, desiring Aunt Penelope to send me up to London by the twelve o'clock train the following day.

"I will meet Heather at Victoria," he said.

So the next day I left Hill View, and kissed Aunt Penelope when I went, and very nearly kissed the parrot, and shook hands quite warmly with the reigning Jonas, and Aunt Penelope saw me off at the station, and I was as glad to go as I had been sorry to come. Thus I shut away the old life, and turned to face the new.

I had not been half an hour in the carriage before, looking up, I saw the kind eyes of a very beautiful lady fixed on mine. I had been so absorbed with different things that I had not noticed her until that moment. She bent towards me, and said:

"I think I cannot be mistaken, surely your name is Heather Grayson?"

"Yes," I answered.

"And you are going to meet your father, Major Grayson?"

"How do you know?" I said.

"Well, it so happens that I am going up to town to meet both him and my husband. It is long years since I have seen you; but you are not greatly altered. Do you remember the day when you went to the railway station at Cherton, and asked for a person called Anastasia, and my husband and I spoke to you?"

"Oh, are you indeed Lady Carrington?" I asked.

"Yes, I am; and I am going to town to meet your father and Sir John. You were a very little girl when I had the pleasure of

last speaking to you; now you are a young woman."

"Yes," I replied. Then I added, looking her full in the face, "I suppose I am quite grown-up; I am eighteen."

"Do you mind telling me, Miss Grayson, if you are going to live with your father?"

"I think so," I replied.

She looked very thoughtful. After a minute she said:

"You can confide in me or not, Miss Grayson. I ask for no confidences on your part that you are not willing to give, and if you would rather not tell me, I will not press you."

"What do you want to say?" I asked.

"Have you any idea why you have been separated from your father for ten long years?"

"My father was in India," I replied, "and Aunt Penelope says that India is not thought good for little girls. I liked it immensely when I was there, but Aunt Penelope says it injures them in some sort of fashion. Of course, I cannot tell how or why."

"And that is all you really know?"

"There is nothing else to know," I replied.

She was silent, leaning back against her cushions. Just as we were reaching Victoria she bent forward again, and said:

"Heather – for I must call you by that name – I have known your father for years, and whatever the world may do, I, for one, will never forsake him, nor will my dear husband. I have also known your mother, although she died many years ago. For these reasons I want to be good to you, their only child. So, Heather, if

you happen to be in trouble, will you come to me? My address is 15a, Princes Gate. I am at home most mornings, and at all times a letter written to that address will find me. Ah! here we are, and I see your father and – and my husband." She abruptly took my hand and squeezed it.

"Remember what I have said to you," was her next remark, "and keep the knowledge that I mean to be your friend to yourself."

The train drew up at the platform. Father clasped me in his arms. He introduced me to Sir John Carrington, who laughed and said: "Oh, what a changed Heather!" and then my father spoke to Lady Carrington, who began to talk to him at once in a very earnest, low voice. I heard her say:

"Where are you taking her?" but I could not hear my father's reply.

Then the Carringtons drove off in their beautiful motor-car, and father and I stepped into a brougham, a private one, very nicely appointed, my luggage – such very simple luggage – was placed on the roof, and we were away together.

"Now I want Anastasia," I said.

"We'll find her if we can," said father. "You'd like her to be your maid, wouldn't you, Heather?"

"Oh, yes," I answered. "I did miss her so awfully." And I told father how I had run to the railway station to meet the next train on that terrible day long ago and how Aunt Penelope had followed me.

He laughed, and said I was a rare plucky one, and then we drew up before a grand hotel and entered side by side. We were shown immediately into a private sitting-room, which had two bedrooms opening out of it, one for father and one for me. Father said:

"Heather, I mean to show you life as it is, and to-night we are going to the theatre. We shall meet a friend of mine there – a very charming lady, who, I know, will be interested in you, and I want you to be interested in her too, as she is a great friend of mine."

"But I only want you to be great friends with me," I said.

Father laughed at this, got a little red, and turned the conversation.

"What dress have you for the theatre?" he asked.

"I don't think I have any," I said. "I don't possess any evening dress."

"But that won't do," he replied. "What is the hour? We really haven't an instant to lose."

He looked at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"We can manage it," he said. He spoke down a tube, and presently was told that his carriage awaited him.

"Come, Heather, come," he said. "You must be toggged up properly for to-night."

After my very quiet life at Hill View this complete change made me so excited that I scarcely knew how to contain myself.

We got into the brougham and drove to a smart shop, where fortunately a pretty dress of soft black was able to be procured.

This was paid for and put into a box, and we returned to the hotel, but not before father had bought me also some lilies of the valley to wear with the dress.

I went up to our sitting-room alone, for he was busy talking to a lady who seemed to have the charge of a certain department downstairs, the result of which was that after tea a very fashionable hairdresser arrived, who arranged my thick dark hair in the latest and most becoming fashion, and who even helped me to get into my black dress. When I joined father my eyes were shining and my cheeks were bright with colour.

"Oh, what fun this is!" I said.

"Yes, isn't it?" he answered. "Where are your flowers?"

I had put them on, but he did not like the way I had arranged them, so he settled them himself in a more becoming manner, and then he slipped a single string of pearls round my white throat and showed me – lying on a chair near by – a most lovely, dainty opera cloak, all made in pink and white, which suited me just perfectly.

"Now, we'll have some dinner, and then we'll be off," he said. "Lady Helen Dalrymple will admire you to-night, Heather, and I want her to."

Who was Lady Helen Dalrymple?

CHAPTER V

It certainly was a wonderful night. Lady Helen Dalrymple had placed her box at the theatre at our disposal. She was a tall and slender woman, dressed in the extreme height of a fashion which I had never even dreamed about. Her cheeks had a wonderful colour in them, which was at once soft and vivid. Her lips were red and her eyes exceedingly dark. She greeted me with great *empressement*; her voice was high-pitched, and I cannot say that it impressed me agreeably.

"Welcome, welcome, my dear Heather," she said, and then she invited me to seat myself on the front chair near her own, whereas father sat behind at the back of the box.

The play began, and to me it was a peep into fairy land. I had never seen a play before, but, of course, I had read about plays and great actors and actresses, and this one — *As You Like It* — took my breath away. I could scarcely restrain my rapture as the different scenes flitted before my eyes, and as the characters — all real to me — fitted their respective parts. But in the midst of my delight Lady Helen bent towards me and said:

"Don't the footlights dazzle your eyes a little, child? Would you not prefer to take this chair and let your father come to the front of the box?"

Now, my eyes were quite strong, and the footlights did not dazzle them in the very least, but I slipped back into the other

seat, and, after that, if the truth must be known, I only got little glimpses of the play from time to time. Lady Helen and father, instead of being in raptures over the performance, kept up a running fire of whispered talk together, not one word of which could I catch, nor, indeed, did I want to – so absorbingly anxious was I to follow the story of Rosalind in the Forest of Arden.

When at last the performance was over, father suggested that we should all go to the Savoy Hotel for supper, where, accordingly, we went. But once again, although there was a very nice table reserved for us, father and Lady Helen did all the talking, and I was left in the cold. I looked around me, and for the first time had a distinct sense of home-sickness for the very quiet little house I had left. By this time Aunt Penelope would be sound asleep in bed, and Buttons would have gone to his rest in the attic, and the parrot would have ceased to say "Stop knocking at the door!" I was not accustomed to be up so late, and I suddenly found myself yawning.

Lady Helen fixed her bright eyes on my face.

"Tired, Heather?" she asked.

I had an instinctive sort of feeling that she ought not to call me Heather, and started back a little when she spoke.

"Oh, you need not be shocked, Heather," said my father. "Lady Helen is such a very great friend of mine that you ought to be only too proud when she addresses you by your Christian name."

"I shall have a great deal to do with you in future, my dear,"

said Lady Helen, and then she looked at father, and they both laughed.

"The very first thing I want you to see about, kind Lady Helen," said father, in his most chivalrous manner, "is this poor, sweet child's wardrobe. She wants simply everything. Will you take her to the shops to-morrow and order for her just what she requires?"

Lady Helen smiled and nodded.

"We shall be in time to have her presented." Lady Helen bent her face towards father's and whispered something. He turned very white.

"Never mind," he said; "I always thought that presentation business was a great waste of time, and I am quite sure that we shall do well for little Heather without it."

"I am so tired," I could not help saying.

"Then home we'll go, my girl. Lady Helen, I will call early to-morrow and bring Heather with me, if I may. Whatever happens, she must be properly dressed."

"I shall be ready to receive you, Major, at eleven o'clock," said Lady Helen, and then she touched my hand coldly and indifferently, but smiled with her brilliant eyes at my father. Her motor-car was waiting for her; she was whirled away, and we drove back in our brougham to the hotel.

"Well, Heather," said my father, "what a wonderful day this must have been for you. Tell me how you felt about everything. You used to be such an outspoken little child. Didn't you just

love the play, eh?"

"I loved the beginning of it," I said.

"You naughty girl! You mean to say you didn't like the end – all that part about Rosalind when she comes on the stage as a boy?"

"I could not see it, father – I could only see the back of your head; and oh, father, your head is getting very bald, but the back of Lady Helen's head isn't bald at all – it is covered with thick, thick hair, which goes out very wide at the sides and comes down low on her neck."

"It's my belief she wears a wig, Heather," said my father, bending towards me. "But we won't repeat it, will we, darling? So she and I took up all your view, poor little girl! Well, we did it in thoughtlessness."

"I don't think she did," I answered stoutly "I think she wanted to talk to you."

"She'll have plenty of time for that in the future," he said; "but tell me now, before we get to the hotel, what do you think of her ladyship? She's a very smart-looking woman – eh?"

"I don't know what that means, father, but I don't like her at all."

"You don't like her – why, child?"

"I can't say; except that I don't."

"Oh, you mustn't give way to silly fancies," said my father. "She's a very fine woman. You oughtn't to turn against her, my dear Heather."

"Do you like her, father?" I asked, nestling up to him and slipping my hand into his.

"Awfully, my dear child; she's my very dearest friend."

"Oh! not dearer than I am?" I said, my heart beating hard.

He made no reply to this, and my heart continued to beat a great deal faster than was good for it.

By and by I went to bed. I was very, very tired, so tired that the strange room, with its beautiful furniture, made little or no impression on me. The very instant I laid my head on the pillow I was far away in the land of dreams. Once more I was back with Aunt Penelope, once more the parrot screamed, "Stop knocking at the door!" once more Jonas broke some crockery and wept over his misdeeds, and once more Aunt Penelope forgave him and said that she would not send him away without a character this time. Then, in my dreams, the scene changed, and I was no longer in the quiet peace of the country, but in the bustle and excitement of London. Father was with me. Yes, after all the long years, father was with me again. How I had mourned for him – how I had cried out my baby heart for him – how glad I was to feel that I was close to him once more!

By his side was Lady Helen Dalrymple, and I did not like Lady Helen. She seemed to push herself between father and me, and when at last I awoke with the morning sun shining into my room, I found myself saying to father, as I had said to him in reality the night before, "Lady Helen is not dearer than I am?" and once again, as on the night before, father made no reply of any sort.

I was awakened by a nice-looking maid, who was evidently the maid in attendance on that special floor of the hotel, bringing me some tea and some crisp toast. I was thirsty, and the excitement of the night before had not yet subsided. I munched my toast and drank my tea, and then, when the maid asked me if I would like a hot bath in my room, I said "Yes." This luxury was brought to me, and I enjoyed it very much. I had to dress once again in the clothes that father thought so shabby, the neat little brown frock – "snuff-coloured," he was pleased to call it – the little frock, made after a bygone pattern, which just reached to my slender ankles and revealed pretty brown stockings to match and little brown shoes; for Aunt Penelope – badly as she was supposed to dress me – was very particular where these things were concerned. She always gave me proper etceteras for my dress. She expected the etceteras and the dress to last for a very long time, and to be most carefully looked after, and not on any account whatever to be used except for high days and holidays. But she had sufficient natural taste to make me wear brown ribbon and a brown hat and brown shoes and stockings to match my brown frock.

I went down to breakfast in this apparel and found father waiting for me in the private sitting-room which he had ordered in the Westminster hotel. He came forward at once when I appeared, thrusting as he did so two or three open papers into his coat pocket.

"Well, little girl," he said, "and how are you? Now, if I were an Irishman, I'd say, 'The top of the morning to you, bedad!' but

being only a poor, broken-down English soldier, I must wish you the best of good days, my dear, and I do trust, my Heather, that this will prove a very good day for you, indeed."

As father spoke he rang a bell, and when the waiter appeared he ordered *table d'hôte* breakfast, which the man hastened to supply. As we were seated round the board which seemed to me to groan with the luxuries not only of that season, but of every season since cooking came into vogue, father remarked, as he helped himself to a devilled kidney, that really, all things considered, English cooking was *not* to be despised.

"Oh, but it's delicious!" I cried – "at least," I added, "the cooking at a hotel like this is too delicious for anything."

"You dear little mite!" said father, smiling into my eyes. "And how did Auntie Pen serve you, darling? What did she give you morning, noon, and night?"

I laughed.

"Aunt Penelope believed in plain food," I said.

"Trust her for that," remarked my father. "I could see at an eye's glance that she was the sort of old lady who'd starve the young."

"Oh, no," I answered; "you are quite mistaken. Aunt Penelope never starved me and was never unkind to me. I love her very dearly, and I must ask you, father, please, not to speak against her to me."

"Well, I won't, child; I admire loyalty in others. Now then, leave those kidneys and bacon alone. Have some cold tongue.

What! you have had enough? Have a kipper, then. No? What a small appetite my little girl has got! At least have some bread and butter and marmalade. No again? Dear, dear – why, the sky must be going to fall! Well, I'll tell you what – we'll have some fruit."

"Oh, dad, I should like that," I said.

"Your bones are younger than mine, child," remarked the Major; "you must press that bell. Ah! here comes James. James, the very ripest melon you can procure; if you haven't it in the hotel, send out for it. Let us have it here with some powdered ginger and white sugar in less than ten minutes."

"Yes, sir," answered the man. He bowed respectfully and withdrew.

"What are you staring at, Heather?" asked my father.

"You called that man James," I said. "Is that his name?"

"Bless you, child, I don't know from Adam what his name is. I generally call all waiters 'James' when I'm in England; most of them are James, so that name as a rule hits the nail on the head. In Germany Fritz is supposed to be the word to say. But now, what are you thinking of? Oh, my little darling, it's I who am glad to have you back!"

I left the table, and when James – whose real name I afterwards heard was Edgar – came back, he found me throttling father's neck and pressing my cheek against his.

"Where's the charm I gave you, Heather? I trust you have it safe."

I pointed with great pride to where it reposed on a little chain

which held my tiny watch.

"By Jove," said father, "you are a good child to have kept it so long. It will bring you luck – I told you it was a lucky stone. It was about to be placed on the tomb of the prophet Mahomet when I came across it and rescued it, but it was placed before then on many other sacred shrines. It will bring you luck, little Heather. But now, in the name of fortune, tell me who gave you this gold watch?"

"Aunt Pen gave it to me," I said. "She gave it to me my last birthday; she said it had belonged to my mother, but that she had taken it after mother's death. She said she knew that mother would wish me to have it – which, of course, is the case. I love it and I love the little gold chain, and I love the charm, father."

"The charm is the most valuable of all, for it brings luck," said my father. "Now, sit down and enjoy your melon."

I don't think I had ever tasted an English melon before, and this one was certainly in superb condition. I rejoiced in its cool freshness and ate two or three slices, while father watched me, a pleased smile round his lips.

"I am going to take you to Lady Helen this morning, Heather."

"Yes, father," I answered, and I put down my last piece of melon, feeling that my appetite for the delicious fruit had suddenly faded.

"Why don't you finish your fruit, child?"

"I have had enough," I said.

"That's a bad habit," said my father, "besides being bad form."

Well-bred girls invariably finish what is put on their plates; I want you to be well-bred, my dear. You'll have so much to do with Lady Helen in the future that you must take advantage of a connection of that sort. Besides, being your father's daughter, it also behoves you to act as a lady."

"I hope I shall always act as a lady," I said, and I felt my cheeks growing crimson and a feeling of hatred rising within me towards Lady Helen; "but if acting as a lady," I continued, "means eating more than is good for you, I don't see it, father, and I may as well tell you so first as last."

"Bless you, child," said father, "bless you! I don't want to annoy you. Now, I'll tell you what your day is to be. Lady Helen will take you and get you measured for some smart dresses, and then you are to lunch at the Carringtons. Lady Carrington has been kind enough to send round this morning to invite you. She and Sir John are staying at their very smart house at Prince's Gate, Kensington. Lady Helen will put you down there in her motor, and then she and I will call for you later in the day. You will enjoy being with Lady Carrington. She is the sort of woman you ought to cultivate."

"Lady Carrington used to live not far from Hill View," I said. "Once I met her and she – she was going to be kind to me, when Aunt Penelope stepped in and prevented it."

"Eh, dear," said my father, "now what was that? Tell me that story."

I did not like to, but he insisted. I described in as few words

as possible my agony of mind after parting with him, and then my determination to find Anastasia, who, according to his own saying, was to come by the next train. I told him once again how I ran away and how I reached the railway station, and how the train came in and Lady Carrington spoke to me, as also did Sir John, but there was no Anastasia, and then Aunt Penelope came up, and – and – I remembered no more.

"You were a troublesome little mite that day," said my father, kissing me as he spoke, and pinching my cheek. "Well do I recall the frenzy your poor aunt was in, and the telegrams and messages that came for me; well do I recollect the hunt I had for Anastasia, and how at last I found her and brought her to see you, and how you quieted down when she sat by your bedside. Well do I remember how often I sat there, too."

"I remember it, too," I said, "only very dimly, just like a far-off dream. But, father, dear father, why didn't Anastasia stay?"

"Your aunt would not have her, child."

"And why didn't you stay? Why did you come when I could not recognise you and keep away when I could?"

"*Noblesse oblige*," was his answer, and he hung his head a little and looked depressed.

But just then there came a rustling, cheerful sound in the passage outside, and Lady Helen, her dress as gorgeous as it was the night before, with a very *outré* picture hat, fastened at one side of her head, and with her eyes as bright as two stars, entered the room. She floated rather than walked up to father's side, took

his two hands, then dropped them, and said, in her high-pitched, very staccato voice:

"How do you do, Major? You see, I could not wait, but have come for the dear little *ingénue*. I am quite ready to take you off, Heather, and to supply you with the very prettiest clothes. Your father has given me *carte blanche* to do as I please – is not that so, Major?"

"Yes," answered my father, bowing most gallantly and looking like the very essence of the finest gentleman in the land. "I shall be glad to leave Heather in such good hands. You will see that she is simply dressed, and – oh, I could not leave the matter in better hands. By the way, Lady Helen, I have had a letter this morning from Lady Carrington; she wants the child to lunch with her. Will you add to your many acts of goodness by dropping her at Prince's Gate not later than one o'clock?"

"Certainly," said Lady Helen.

"I shall have lunch ready for you, dear friend," said my father, "at a quarter past one precisely at the Savoy."

"Ah, how quite too sweet!" said Lady Helen. She gave the tips of her fingers to father, who kissed them lightly, and then she desired me to fly upstairs and put on my hat and jacket. When I came down again, dressed to go out, I found Lady Helen and father standing close together and talking in low, impressive tones. The moment I entered the room, however, they sprang apart, and father said:

"Ah, here we are – here we are! Now, my little Heather,

keep up that youthful expression; it is vastly becoming. Even Lady Helen cannot give you the look of youth, which is so charming, but she can bestow on you the air of fashion, which is indispensable."

Father conducted us downstairs and opened the door of the luxurious motor-car. Lady Helen requested me to step in first, and then she followed. A direction was given to the chauffeur, the door was shut behind us, father bowed, and stood with his bare, somewhat bald head in the street. The last glimpse I had of him he was smiling and looking quite radiant; then we turned a corner and he was lost to view.

"Well, and what do you think of it all?" said Lady Helen. "Is the little bird in its nest beginning to say, 'Cheep, cheep'? Is it feeling hungry and wanting to see the world?"

"All places are the world," I answered, somewhat sentimentously.

"For goodness' sake, child," said Lady Helen, "don't talk in that prim fashion! Whatever you are in the future, don't put on airs to me. You are about the most ignorant little creature I ever came across – it will be my pleasure to form and mould you, and to bring you at last to that state of perfection which alone is considered befitting to the modern girl. My dear, I mean to be very good to you."

"That is, I suppose, because you are so fond of father," I said. She coloured a little, and the hand which she had laid for a moment lightly on my hand was snatched away.

"That kind of remark is terribly *outré*," she said; "but I shall soon correct all that, my dear. You won't know yourself in one month from the present time. Child of nature, indeed! You will be much more likely to be the child of art. But dress is the great accessory. Before we begin to form style and manner we must be dressed to suit our part in this world's mummer show."

The car drew up before a large and fashionable shop. Lady Helen and I entered. Lady Helen did all the talking, and many bales of wonderful goods, glistening and shining in the beautiful sun, were brought forward for her inspection. Lady Helen chose afternoon dresses, morning dresses, evening dresses; she chose these things by the half-dozen. I tried to expostulate, and to say they would never be worn out; Lady Helen's remark was that they would scarcely drag me through the season. Then I pleaded father's poverty; I whispered to Lady Helen: "Father cannot afford them."

She looked at me out of her quizzical dark eyes and, laying her hand on my shoulder, said:

"You may be quite sure of one thing, little girl – that I won't allow your father to run into unnecessary expense."

I began to be sick of dresses. I found myself treated as a little nobody, I was twisted right way front, and wrong way back. I was made to look over my right shoulder at my own reflection in a long mirror; I was desired to stoop and to stand upright; I was given a succession of mirrors to look through; I got deadly tired of my own face.

When the choosing of the dresses had come to an end there were stockings and shoes and boots to be purchased, and one or two very dainty little jackets, and then there was a wealth of lovely chinchilla fur, and a little toque to match, and afterwards hats – hats to match every costume; in addition to which there was a very big white hat with a huge ostrich plume, and a black hat with a plume nearly as big. Gloves were bestowed upon me by the dozen. I felt giddy, and could scarcely at last take the slightest interest in my own wardrobe. Suddenly Lady Helen looked at her watch, uttered an exclamation, and said:

"Oh, dear me! It is ten minutes past one! What am I to do? I must not fail your father at the Savoy. Do you think, child, if I put you into a hansom, you could drive to the house at Prince's Gate? I would give all directions to the driver."

"I am sure I could," I answered.

I was not at all afraid of London, knowing nothing of its dangers.

"Then that is much the best thing to do," said Lady Helen. She turned to a man who was a sort of porter at the big shop, and gave him exact orders what he was to do and what he was to say. A hansom was called, the cabman was paid by Lady Helen herself, and at last I was off and alone.

I was glad of this. I had a great sense of relief when that patched-up, faded, and yet still beautiful face was no longer near me. When I reached the house at Prince's Gate I felt rested and refreshed. There was a servant in very smart livery standing in

the hall, and of him I ventured to inquire if Lady Carrington were at home.

"Is your name, madam, Miss Heather Grayson?" inquired the man.

I replied at once in the affirmative.

"Then her ladyship is expecting you. I will take you to her."

He moved across a wide and beautifully carpeted hall, knocked at a door at the further end, and, in answer to the words "Come in," flung the door open and announced "Miss Grayson, your ladyship," whereupon I found myself on the threshold of a wonderful and delightfully home-like room. A lady, neither young nor old, had risen as the man appeared. She came eagerly forward – not at all with the eagerness of Lady Helen, but with the eagerness of one who gives a sincere welcome. Her large brown eyes seemed to express the very soul of benevolence.

"I am glad to see you, dear," she said. "How are you? Sit down on this sofa, won't you? You must rest for a minute or two and then I will take you upstairs myself, and you shall wash your hands and brush your hair before lunch. It is nice to see you again, little Heather. Do you know that all the long years you lived at High View I have been wanting, and wanting in vain, to make your acquaintance?"

"Oh, but what can you mean?" I asked, looking into that charming and beautiful face and wondering what the lady was thinking of. "Would not Aunt Penelope let you? Surely you must have known that I should have been only too proud?"

"My dear, we won't discuss what your aunt wished to conceal from you. Now that you have come to live with your father, and now that you are my near neighbour, I hope to see a great deal of you. Your aunt was doubtless right in keeping you a good deal to herself. You see, dear, it's like this. You have been brought up unspotted from the world."

"I like the world," I answered; "I don't think it's a bad place. I am very much interested in London, and I am exceedingly glad to have met you again. Don't you remember, Lady Carrington, how tightly I held your hand on that dreadful day when I was first brought to Aunt Penelope?"

"I shall never forget the pressure of your little hand. But now I see you are quite ready to come upstairs. Come along, then – Sir John may be in at any moment, and he never likes to have his lunch kept waiting."

Lady Carrington's beautiful bedroom was exactly over her sitting-room. There I saw myself in a sort of glow of colour, all lovely and iridescent and charming. There was something remarkable about the room, for it had a strange gift of putting grace – yes, absolute grace – into your clothes. Even my shabby brown frock seemed to be illuminated, and as to my face, it glowed with faint colour, and my eyes became large and bright. I washed my hands and brushed back my soft, dark hair. Then I returned to the drawing-room with Lady Carrington.

CHAPTER VI

A tall man was standing on the hearthrug when I came in. There was a cheerful fire burning in the grate, and he was standing with his back to it, and apparently enjoying the pleasant glow which emanated from its bright depths. There was also a young man in the room who was nearly as tall as the elder gentleman. The younger man had very dark eyes and an olive complexion, straight, rather handsome features, and a strong chin and a good mouth.

"John," said Lady Carrington, "here is little Heather."

"How do you do, my dear – how do you do?" said Sir John.

He came forward as he spoke and wrung my hand, looking into my eyes with a curious mingling of affection and amusement.

"Ah!" he said; "you have grown a good bit since that wonderful night long ago, eh, Heather?"

"I am grown up," I answered, trying to speak proudly, and yet feeling, all of a sudden, quite inclined to cry.

"Yes, of course, you're grown up," responded Sir John, and then his wife introduced the strange gentleman to me. His name was Captain Carbury, but when the Carringtons spoke to him they addressed him as "Vernon." He had a nice, frank manner, and it was he who was deputed to take me into the next room to lunch.

"I have heard a lot about you," he said. "The Carringtons have been quite keen about you. They've been wondering what day you would arrive, and making up all sorts of stories about what you'd look like, and your life in the past and what your life in the future will be."

"Heather, you must not mind Vernon, he always talks nonsense," said Lady Carrington. "Will you have clear or thick soup, dear? We always help ourselves at lunch, it makes the meal so much less formal."

I said I would have thick soup, and Captain Carbury took clear. He looked at me again once or twice, and I thought that his expression was somewhat quizzical, but, all the same, I liked him.

I had made in the course of my life a little gallery of heroes; they were of all sorts and descriptions. In that gallery my father held the foremost place, he was the soldier *par excellence*, the hero above all other heroes. Then there were splendid persons whose names were mentioned in history. The great Duke of Marlborough was one, and Sir Walter Raleigh, and King Edward the First, and King Henry the Fourth. And there were minor lights, great men, too, in their way, statesmen and ambassadors and discoverers of new worlds. But besides the historical personages, there were those few whom I knew personally. Amongst these was one of the many "Jonases" who had lived with Aunt Penelope, and who was admitted into a somewhat dark and shadowy part of my gallery.

He was a very ugly Jonas, and slightly – quite slightly –

deformed; that is, one shoulder was hitched up a good bit higher than the other. In consequence, he never felt happy or comfortable in buttons, and used to coax me to let him play with me in the garden in the dress he wore at home, which was loose and unwieldy, but, nevertheless, fitted that misshapen, poor shoulder. Aunt Penelope had been very angry with him for not appearing in his buttons costume, and she was not the least concerned when he told her that it made his shoulder ache; she was more determined than ever that he should wear his livery, and never be seen out of it while in her employ. He told me, that poor Buttons, that he would have to wear it, notwithstanding the pain, for the very little money he earned helped his mother at home. It was after he said this, and after I found out that what he said was true, that I put him into my gallery of heroes. He never knew that he was there. He became ill quite suddenly of some sort of inflammation of the spine, and was taken away to the hospital to die. I wanted very badly to see him when I heard he was so ill, but Aunt Penelope would not hear of it. Then I gave her a message for him.

"Tell him, if you are going yourself," I said, "that he is in my gallery of heroes. He will know what it means."

But Aunt Penelope forgot to give the message, so that poor Jonas never knew.

But I had other heroes also. There was a pale young curate, like the celebrated curate in the song, and my heart went out to him – my girlish heart – in full measure, and I put him into my

gallery right away; there I gave him a foremost place, although I never spoke to him in my young life, and I don't think, as far as I remember, that his eyes ever met mine.

And now last, but by no means least, I put Captain Carbury into my gallery of heroes, and as I did so I felt my heart beating with pleasure, and I looked full up into my hero's face and smiled at him with such a look of contentment, admiration, and satisfaction that he smiled back again.

"What a nice child you are," he said. "I wonder what you are thinking about?"

Some visitors had now come in and had joined Sir John and Lady Carrington in the drawing-room, and Captain Carbury and I were alone.

"You ought to be very proud," I said, lowering my voice to meet his.

"What about?" he asked.

"Why, this," I answered; "I have done you a tremendous honour."

"Have you, indeed? I can assure you I am pleased and – quite flattered. But do tell me what it is."

"I have just put you, Captain Carbury, into my gallery of heroes."

"You have put me into what?" said the young man. He sat down by my side and lowered his voice. "You have put me into what, Miss Grayson?"

"I have a gallery," I said, "and it is full of heroes. It, of course,

lives in my imagination. You have just gone in; those who go in never come out again. There are a great many people in my gallery."

"Oh, but I say, this is interesting, and quite fascinating. Please tell me who else holds that place of vantage."

I mentioned the Duke of Marlborough and Sir Walter Raleigh and a few of the heroes of old, but I said nothing about father, nor about the pale curate, although I did mention Jonas.

"Who is Jonas?" asked Captain Carbury.

"Jonas is no longer in this world. When he was here he was a very great hero."

"But what was he? Army, navy, church, or what?"

"Oh, nothing of the sort," I answered; "he was only our Buttons, and he had one shoulder much higher than the other. I put him in because he bore the pain of his livery so bravely. You see, he had to wear his livery, or Aunt Penelope would have dismissed him. He wore it because he wanted the money to help his mother. I call him a real hero – don't you?"

"I do. And what have I done, may I ask, to be such a privileged person?"

"You haven't done much yet," I answered, "but I think you can do a great deal. For instance, if there was a big war against England, I think you'd fight and probably get your V.C."

"Bless you, child, you talk very nicely. Do you know, I have never met a little girl who talked like this before. I hope we shall see much more of each other, Miss Grayson."

"I hope we shall," I answered.

"I come here a good deal," continued Captain Carbury. "I am a sort of cousin of Lady Carrington's, and she always treats me as though I were her son. There are no people in the world like the Carringtons. By the way, you must be excited, coming up to town just in time for your – "

"In time for what?" I asked.

"Is it possible you don't know?" he said. And he looked full at me with his dark and serious eyes. Just then Lady Carrington came up.

"I am going to take Heather away now for a little time," she said. "Thank you so much, Vernon, for trying to entertain her. We will expect you to dinner this evening – no, I'm afraid Heather won't be here; she will be much occupied for the next few days."

"Well, good-bye, Miss Heather, and thank you so much for putting me into the gallery," said the Captain, and then he left the room.

"He is a very nice man," I said, when he had gone and I was back in the drawing-room. "Do you know many men as nice as Captain Carbury, Lady Carrington?"

"No, I do not," said Lady Carrington, not laughing at my remark, as some women would have done, but pondering over it. "He is one of the best – that is all I can say about him."

I looked across the room. The visitors had gone; Sir John had taken his leave; Captain Carbury was no longer there.

"I want to ask you a question," I said, looking full up into Lady

Carrington's face. "Captain Carbury said something to me."

"Yes, dear child. What?"

"He supposed I was glad or excited or something, at being in time for – and then he stopped. Please, Lady Carrington – I see you know it by your eyes – what is it I am in time for?"

"I was going to speak to you about that," said Lady Carrington, with extreme gravity.

"Please do," I said.

She took my hand and pressed it between both her own.

"Sir John and I," she said, "have never been blessed with a little daughter of our very own, so we want you, as much as your father and mother can spare you, to come and be with us. We want you morning, noon, and night – any day or any hour."

"My father and *mother!*" I said, raising my voice to a shriek. "Lady Carrington, who are you talking about?"

"Of course, dear, she will be only your stepmother."

"Whom do you mean?" I asked. "Please say it out quickly. Is father going to marry? No, it can't be – it shan't be! What is it, please, Lady Carrington – please say it quickly?"

"For many reasons I am sorry, Heather, but we must make the best of things in this world, dear, not the worst. Your father is to be married on Monday next to Lady Helen Dalrymple."

I sat perfectly still after she had spoken. Her news came on me like a mighty shock – I felt quite stunned and cold. At first, too, I did not realise any pain. Then, quickly, and, as it seemed to me, through every avenue in my body at the same moment,

pain rushed in – it filled my heart almost to the bursting point. It turned sweetness into bitterness and sunshine into despair. Father! Father! Father! Had I not waited for him, all during the long years? And now!

I felt so distracted that I could not keep still. I stood up and faced Lady Carrington; she put out her hand to touch me – I pushed her hand away. I began to pace up and down the floor. After a few minutes Lady Carrington followed me. Then I turned to her, almost like a little savage. I said:

"Is there anywhere in this big, grand, horrid house where I can be quite alone?"

"Yes, Heather, you shall be quite alone in my bedroom," said Lady Carrington.

I had no manners at that moment, no sense of civility.

"I know the way to your bedroom," I said. I dashed upstairs without waiting for her to lead me; I rushed into the room, I turned the key in the lock, and then I flung myself on the floor. I was alone, thank God for that! How I beat out my own terrible suffering, how I fought and fought and fought with the demon who rent me, I can never describe to any mortal. No tears came to my relief. After a time I sat up. I had so far recovered my self-possession that I could at least remain quiet. I went stealthily towards the big looking-glass; I saw my reflection in it, my little pale face, my dark hair in its orderly curls – those curls which even my tempest of grief could scarcely disarrange, my neat, snuff-coloured brown dress – so old-fashioned and therefore

none so beloved. That morning I had gone shopping with *her*— I had allowed her to buy me dresses on dresses, and hats and toques, and muffs, and gloves, and shoes — oh! I would not touch one of her things! I felt at that moment that I could have killed her! To be torn from father, to find him again and then to lose him, that was the crudest stroke of all!

I looked at my wan face in the glass and hoped that I should die soon; that was the only thing left to wish for — to live in such a way that I should die soon. I thought that I might effect this by a course of starvation. I would begin at once. To-day was Thursday — if I ate nothing at all from the present moment until Monday, there was a good chance of my dying on Monday. That would be the best plan.

There came a tap at the room door.

"It is I, dear," said Lady Carrington.

I even hated kind Lady Carrington at that moment. Had she not given me the news? I went unwillingly and slowly towards the door. I unlocked it and she entered.

"That is right," she said, looking at me and suppressing, as she told me afterwards, a shocked exclamation, "you are calmer now, darling."

"I cannot speak of it," I said.

"Dear child, no one wants you to; and I have been arranging with your father that you are to stay with me for the present."

"Oh, I don't want that," I said, a great lump rising in my throat; "I want to be with him while I can have him. There is only

between now – this Thursday – until Monday. I'd like to be with him for that little time."

"But you won't, dear Heather. He will be occupied almost entirely with Lady Helen Dalrymple."

"Then it doesn't matter," I said. "Did you say they were downstairs, Lady Carrington?"

"Yes; they are in the drawing-room; they are waiting for you. They asked me to break it to you, and I did my best."

"I am quite ready to – to see them," I said.

When we reached the drawing-room a servant flung open the door. Lady Carrington went first and I followed.

My father was standing with his profile towards me; he was looking at a newspaper, and I think, just for a second, he was rather shy, although I could not be sure. Lady Helen, however, made up for any awkwardness on his part. She rushed at me and clasped me in her arms.

"Dear little daughter!" she said. "Now you know everything; in future you will be my own little daughter. Think what a splendid time we'll have together! Why, I'll take you everywhere – you won't know yourself. Just tell her, Gordon, what a right good time she'll have with me."

"Jove! I should think so," said my father.

I struggled out of her arms. If I had remained in that hateful embrace for another moment I might have slapped her. I flung myself on father's neck, and kissed him many times, and then, all of a sudden, I began to whisper in his ear.

"Eh, eh? What, what?" he said. "Child, you're tickling me. Oh, you want to speak to me alone! Helen, you won't mind?"

"No, dear, I won't mind."

Lady Helen looked at me out of those strange dark eyes of hers. Her face was brimming all over with good humour, but I know she was not pleased with me at that moment. I had repulsed her advances, and now I was taking father away.

"Here is a little room," said Lady Carrington, "you can both have it to yourselves."

She opened a door, and father and I entered. The moment we were alone I ceased to whisper and stood before father, just a little way off, but at the same time so close that he could see me well.

"I have heard the news, Dad," I said.

"Well, and isn't it just rippin'?" he said. "Don't you congratulate me – I, a poor beggar – to get a wife like that, and you – a mother like that!"

"She will never be my mother, father, if you marry her a hundred times."

"Come, come, that is so *bourgeoise*, that kind of speech is so completely out of date; but Helen will explain to you. Now, what is it you want, little Heather? I'm sure Helen has spent enough money on your little person to satisfy you for one morning."

"Was it her own money she spent?" I asked.

"Gracious, child!" cried my father. "What other money could she spend?"

"Why, yours – I thought it was yours," I said, with a sob.

"Mine!" he said. "I haven't a stiver in the world to bless myself with. But there, I am a rich man for all that. Helen is rich, and what is hers is mine, and she's going to do the right thing by you, Heather – the right thing by you."

"Daddy," I said, very slowly, "I waited for you during all the years while I was growing up, and yesterday I found you again – or rather, I ought to say a few days ago, when you came to see me at Hill View, and now again I have lost you."

"*Bourgeoise, bourgeoisie,*" muttered my father; "those words are Penelope's words. She'd be sure to speak to you like that."

"Lady Carrington has asked me to stay here, and I should like to do it," I replied; "I am not going to wear any of the clothes *she* bought – no, not one, not one! But if you would come to see me to-morrow evening, perhaps we might have one long, last chat together. That is what I really wanted to ask you. Will you promise me, Dad?"

"Dear me, how afflicting!" said my father. "How afflicting and sentimental and unnecessary – and after all I have lived through! I didn't know you'd grow up that sort of child; you were such a jolly little thing when I took you down to your aunt. It's your aunt who has spoiled you. You can stay here, of course, if you prefer this house to the Westminster. Helen won't like it; she has got a box for us at the opera to-night."

"I can't go," I said.

"Very well. She would hate to see a dismal child, and your

clothes won't be ready for a day or two – at least, most of them – so perhaps you had better stay here. I'll just go and speak to Lady Carrington."

Father left the room. By and by Lady Carrington came back alone.

"They've gone, dear," she said, "and I have made arrangements with Major Grayson that you are to stay with us during the honeymoon, so that altogether you will be with us for quite a month, my child. Now, during that month I want you to be happy and to make the best of things. Do you hear me?"

"Yes. I think I shall be happy with you. But oh! I have got a blow – I have got a blow!" I said.

CHAPTER VII

Father did not come to see me on Saturday night, although I hoped against hope that he would do so, but, to my great surprise, on Sunday evening he walked in, just as Lady Carrington was preparing to go out to evening service. I had refused to accompany her – I am afraid I made myself unpleasant to my kind friend on that occasion. I was overcome by the shock I had received, and this fresh and most unexpected parting from father, so that I could only centre my thoughts on myself.

Father bustled into the house, and I heard his cheerful voice in the hall.

"Hallo!" he said. "And how is the little woman?"

Lady Carrington dropped her voice to a whisper, and father began to talk in low tones. Then they both approached the room where I was lying on a sofa by the fire. I was feeling cold and chilled, and the little colour I had ever boasted of in my face had completely left me. Now, as I heard steps coming nearer and nearer, my heart beat in a most tumultuous fashion. Then father and Lady Carrington entered the room.

"Heather, here's your father," said my kindest friend. "Sir John and I are going to church, so you will have him quite to yourself. Now, cheer up, dear. By the way, Major Grayson, won't you stay and have supper with us afterwards?"

"Will Carbury be here?" asked my father suddenly.

"Yes, I think so. We asked him to come."

"Then I'd better not – better not, you know." He exchanged glances with Lady Carrington, and I noticed a delicate wave of colour filling her smooth and still girlish cheeks. She went away the next moment, and left father and me alone.

"Well, pussy cat," he said, looking down at me, "what is the meaning of all this rebellion? I didn't know you were such a queer little girl."

"Oh, father!" I said.

"Well, here is father. What does the little one want him to do?"

"Pet me, pet me, pet me," I said, and I gave a great sob between each word.

"Why, Heather, you are as great a baby as ever! Lady Helen says you are the most babyish creature she has ever come across in her life. My word, Heather, if you but knew it, you are in luck to have such a stepmother. I tell you, my child, you are in wonderful luck, for she is downright splendid!"

"Please – please – may I say something?" My voice shook violently.

"Of course you may, little mite."

"Don't let us talk of her to-night. I'll try very hard to be good to-morrow, if you will promise not to speak of her once to-night."

"It's hard on me, for my thoughts are full of her, but I'll endeavour to obey your small Majesty."

Then I sprang into his arms, and cuddled him round the neck, and kissed his cheek over and over again.

"Oh, I am so hungry for your love!" I said.

"Poor mite! You will have two people to love instead – oh! I forgot – 'mum's' the word. Now then, Heather, let's look at you. Why, you're a washed-out little ghost of a girl! Even Aunt Penelope would be shocked if she saw you now."

"Never mind Aunt Penelope just for the present," I said. "I have so much to say to you, and this is the very last evening."

"Not a bit of it; there are hundreds of other evenings to follow."

"Oh, no," I said; "this is the very last between you and me, quite to ourselves, Daddy."

"I like to hear you say 'Daddy' – you have such a quaint little voice. Do you know, Heather, that when I was – when I was –"

"When you were what, Daddy?"

"Never mind; I was forgetting myself. I have lived through a great deal since you last saw me, child, since that time when you were so ill at Penelope Despard's."

"Weren't you enjoying yourself during those long years in India, Daddy?"

"Enjoying myself? Bless you, the discipline was too severe." Here my father burst out laughing, and then he unfastened my arms from his neck and put me gently down on the sofa and began to pace the room.

"As a wild beast enjoys himself in a cage, so did I, little Heather; but it's over, thank Heaven, it's over; and – oh, dash it! – I can't speak of it! Heather, how do you like your new clothes?"

"I haven't any new clothes," I answered demurely, "except the little black frock you gave me the night I came to you at the Westminster hotel. I put that on every evening because Lady Carrington wears something pretty at dinner-time."

"But what have you done with all your other clothes?"

"I told you, Daddy, I wouldn't wear them. *She* gave them to me."

"Now, look here, Heather, once and for all you must stop this folly. I presume you don't want me to cease to love you. Well, you've got to be good to your stepmother, and you have got to accept the clothes she gives you. She and I are taking a beautiful house in a fashionable part of London and you are to live with us, and she will be nice to you if you will be nice to her – not otherwise, you understand – by no means otherwise. And if I see you nasty to her, or putting on airs, why, I'll give you up. You'll have to take her if you want to keep me, and that's the long and short of it."

I trembled all over; my hero of heroes – was he tumbling from his place in my gallery?

"Promise, child, promise," said my father, brusquely.

"Will it make you happy if I do?" I said.

"Yes. I'll call you my little duck of all girls – I'll love you like anything, but we three must be harmonious. You will stay here until we come back, and on the day we come back you are to be in the new house to meet us, and you are to wear one of your pretty frocks, and you are to do just what *she* says. It's your own

fault, Heather, that I have to bring in her name so often. Bless her, though, the jewel she is! My little love, we'll be as happy as the day is long. It's terribly old-fashioned, it's low down, to abuse stepmothers now – don't you understand that, Heather?"

"I don't," I answered. "I suppose I must do what you wish, for I cannot live without you, but if – if – I find it *quite* past bearing – may I go back to Aunt Penelope?"

"Bless me, you won't find it past bearing! We need not contemplate such an emergency."

"But, promise me, Daddy darling – if I do find it past bearing, may I go back to Aunt Penelope?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes – anything to quiet you, child. You are just the most fractious and selfish creature I ever came across. You don't seem to realise for a single minute what anybody else is feeling."

"It's settled, and I will try to be happy," I said.

"That's right. Now, let's talk of all sorts of funny things. I haven't half heard about your different Jonases, nor about the parrot, who would only say, 'Stop knocking at the door!'"

"Daddy," I said, with great earnestness, "may I have Anastasia back? It would give me great, great help if she came back."

"Bless me!" said my father, rubbing his red face, "I must ask her ladyship. I'll see about it; I'll see about it, little woman. Now, then, stand up and let me look at you."

I stood up. I was wearing my snuff-coloured dress, and the electric light and the firelight mingled, fell over a desolate,

forlorn, little figure.

"Run upstairs this minute, Heather, and put on one of your pretty frocks. I know for a certainty they haven't gone back, because I told Lady Carrington she was to keep them. Find a servant who can tell you where they are, and put one on, and come down and let me see you in it."

He smiled at me. Surely there never was anyone with such a bewitching smile. You felt that you would cut your heart out to help him when he gave you that smile, that you would lie down at his feet to be trampled on when he looked at you with that expression in his bright blue eyes.

I went upstairs very slowly. Lady Carrington's maid happened to be in, and I said to her, in a forlorn voice:

"I want one of my pretty new frocks. May I have it?"

The woman gave me a lightning glance of approval, and presently I was dressed in softest, palest, shimmering grey, which fell in long folds around my young person. I held it up daintily, and ran downstairs.

"There's my rose in June!" said father, and he came and took me in his arms. He chatted in his old fashion after that, but he went away before Lady Carrington returned from church. She came back, accompanied by Captain Carbury. I was in the drawing-room then, and there was plenty of colour in my cheeks, for father's visit had excited me a great deal. Captain Carbury gave me a wistful glance and drew a chair near mine.

"Do you know what I was thinking of?" he said, suddenly.

"What?" I asked.

"That it would be very nice after the wedding to-morrow – "

I shivered, and clutched my chair to keep myself from falling. I felt his dark eyes fixed on my face.

"After the ceremony to-morrow," he continued, "if you and Lady Carrington and I went to Hampton Court to spend the day. We will go down in my motor-car, come back afterwards and dine in town, and then go to the theatre. What do you think? I know Lady Carrington is quite agreeable."

"Do you want me to go, Captain Carbury?"

"Yes, I want you very much."

"Well, I will do it, if it pleases you," I said.

He looked steadily at me, then he bent forward – he dropped his voice.

"I, too, have a gallery," he said, "in which I place, not my famous heroes, but my famous heroines, and just at this moment, when you gave up your real will to mine and – forgot yourself – I put you in."

"Oh, thank you," I said, and my eyes brimmed with tears.

Captain Carbury went away early, and after he had gone Lady Carrington sat down by my side and began to talk to me.

"You and he are famous friends," she said, "and I am so glad. Perhaps I ought to tell you, however, that Vernon is engaged to a most charming girl. I know he will want you to meet her – they are to be married next summer."

"Oh, I hope she is good enough for him."

"I hope so also. Her name is Lady Dorothy Vinguard. She is beautiful and – and rich – and her people live in a lovely place in Surrey."

Suddenly a memory flashed through my mind.

I asked a question:

"Why did father say he would not meet Captain Carbury to-night at supper?" I said.

Lady Carrington coloured. She got up and poked the fire quite vigorously.

"Why are you getting so red?" I said. "Why would not father meet him?"

"You see, he is an army man," answered Lady Carrington.

"But that has nothing to do with it," I replied. "Father's in the army, too."

"Don't ask so many questions, Heather."

"Has father a reason for not wanting to see him?"

"He may have, dear, but if he has I cannot tell you."

"That means you won't," I replied.

"Very well – I won't."

CHAPTER VIII

Lady Carrington and I went to St. Margaret's, Westminster, to see my father married to Lady Helen Dalrymple. I had never witnessed a marriage ceremony before, and thought it a very dull and dreary affair. My ideas with regard to a bride had always been that she must be exceedingly young and very beautiful, and now, when I saw Lady Helen, all drooping and fragile, and in my opinion quite old, not even her beautiful Honiton lace veil, nor her exquisite dress of some shimmering material, appealed to me in the very least. It was with difficulty I could keep the tears out of my eyes by fixing them firmly on the back of my father's head. I noticed again how bald he was getting, but then his shoulders were very broad, and he did not stoop in the least, and he had a splendid manly sort of air. As I listened to the marriage service, I could not help thinking of that other time, ages ago in his life, when he took my young mother to wife, my mother who had died when I was a baby. He was young then, and so was the bride – oh, I had no sympathy with his second marriage!

Lady Carrington insisted on my wearing a white dress, and when the ceremony was over, we all went to the Westminster hotel, where there were light refreshments, and tea and coffee, and champagne, which I hated, and would only take in the smallest sips. By and by, Lady Helen went upstairs to change her dress. She came down again in a magnificent "creation" – for

that was the word I heard the ladies around me describing it by – and a huge picture hat on her head. She kissed me once or twice at the very last moment, and told me to be a good child. I hated kisses as much as I hated her, but father, dear father, made up for everything. He caught me in his arms and squeezed me tightly to his breast, and said: "God for ever bless you, dear little woman!" and then they went away, and Lady Carrington and I gazed at each other.

"Now, my dear Heather," she said cheerfully, "we are going to motor back to my house in order to change our dresses, so as to be in time for Captain Carbury when he brings his car round for us. You remember, dear, that we are going to Hampton Court to-day, and we haven't a minute to spare."

"Oh, not a minute," I replied, and I tried to feel cheered up and excited.

After a time Captain Carbury made his appearance, and if I had no other reason for wishing to behave bravely just then, I would not for the world show cowardice before the man who had put me into his gallery of heroines.

We motored down to Hampton Court, and the Captain proved himself to be a very merry guide, so much so that I found myself laughing in spite of my sorrow, and whenever I did so Lady Carrington gave me an approving smile.

"I have been telling Heather about you and Dorothy, Vernon," she said, after we had been all over the old palace, and found ourselves having tea at one of the hotels which faced the river.

Captain Carbury gave me a quick glance, a little puzzled, a little sad, a sort of glance which amazed me at the time, and the meaning of which I was not to understand until afterwards.

"You must get to know Dorothy some day," he said. "I have her picture here" – he tapped his watch-pocket – "I will show it you by and by."

As he said this, he looked full into my eyes, and I noticed more than ever the sad expression in his. I wondered at this, and then my thoughts wandered to Lady Dorothy Vinguard. What sort of a girl was she? Was she nice enough to marry the man who occupied a place in my gallery of heroes?

I spent a fairly happy fortnight with Lady Carrington. She was kindness itself to me, and she gave me a great deal of valuable advice. She took me to see many interesting sights, and Captain Carbury came to the house almost every day. One day he brought Lady Dorothy to see me. I was seated in the inner drawing-room when a tall, very pale, slender girl, most beautifully dressed, entered the room. Her face was exactly like that of a waxen doll; it had not a scrap of expression in it, neither was it in the very least disagreeable. My first impression when I looked at her was that she wanted intelligence, but then I changed my mind, for her light-blue eyes were peculiarly watchful, and she kept looking and looking at me, as though she would read me through. It was impossible to tell whether Captain Carbury was devoted to her or not; she ordered him about a good deal, and he obeyed her slightest behests. She kept all the conversation to herself, too,

and neither he nor I could edge in a word. I never met anyone who talked so fast, and yet who seemed to say nothing at all. Each subject she began to speak about she changed for another before we had begun even to think of what we meant to reply. Thus her conversation gave me at last a feeling of intense fatigue, and I wondered how a really clever and earnest-minded man like Captain Carbury could endure the thought of spending his life with her.

He went out of the room after a time, and then she told me, with a great yawn, that he was a perfect lover, and that she herself was intensely happy.

"You, of course, will fall in love and get engaged some day," she said. "You are rather good-looking, in the old-world style; personally, I admire the up to date sort of beauty myself, and so, I know, does Vernon. He hates the people who are, as he expresses it, 'all fire and flash in the pan.' That is, I am sure, how he would describe you, if he troubled himself to describe you at all."

"I don't think he would," I said, turning very red. I longed to tell this haughty girl that I was in his gallery of heroines, but I felt instinctively that such a piece of information would only make her jealous, and therefore I refrained.

By and by Captain Carbury returned, and they both went away. She certainly was very dainty. She was like a piece of exquisite china, and, as I said afterwards to Lady Carrington, when she wanted to get my opinion with regard to her:

"I felt almost afraid to look at her, for fear she should break."

Lady Carrington laughed at my description, and said she did not know that I was such a keen observer of character.

This was my very last day with my kindest of friends, for on the next I was to go to Lady Helen's house in Hanbury Square. I knew nothing whatever with regard to this part of London, nor where the smartest houses were, nor where the "classy people," as they called themselves, resided, but Lady Carrington informed me that Hanbury Square was in the very heart of the fashionable world, and that Lady Helen's house was one of the largest and handsomest in the whole square.

"But why is it called Lady Helen's house?" I asked. "Surely it is my father's."

"Of course it is," she replied, and she looked a little grave, just as though she were holding something back. How often I had seen that look in her face – and how often, how very often, had it puzzled me, and how completely I had failed to understand it. I did love Lady Carrington; she was good to me, and when I bade her good-bye the next morning the tears filled my eyes.

"Now understand, Heather," she said, "that whenever you want me I am at your service. A new life is opening before you, my child, but I shall, of course, be your friend, for your dead mother's sake, and for –"

"Yes, yes?" I cried. "Say the rest, say the rest!"

"And, little Heather, for the memory of what your father was."

"I don't understand you," I said; "you hint and hint things against my own darling father – oh! don't do it again! Speak out

if you must, but don't hint things ever again!"

"Think nothing of my words," said Lady Carrington; "forget that they were uttered. Don't turn against me, little Heather; you may need my friendship."

I was, indeed, to need that friendship, and right soon. But I felt almost angry with Lady Carrington as I drove away.

Certainly the house in Hanbury Square was very smart; it had all been newly got-up, in preparation for the bride. There was new paint outside, and new paint and beautiful wainscots and soft papers within, and there were flower-boxes at every window, and the floors were covered with heavy-piled carpets, and there were knick-knacks and flowers and very costly furniture greeting one at each turn. It was a big house, in short a mansion, with front stairs and back stairs, and rooms innumerable. A very lovely room had been set aside for me. It was called the "Forget-me-not" room, and was on the first floor. I had a bathroom, with hot and cold water laid on, quite to myself; I also had a dressing-room, with a wonderful toilet table and wash-hand stand and appliances for the toilet. And in my bedroom was a great wardrobe made of walnut wood, and the beautiful little bed had lace-trimmed pillow-slips and sheets. Until I entered this room I had never even imagined such luxury.

A very neat, quiet-looking girl, who told me her name was Morris, met me on the threshold of my room.

"I am your special maid, miss," she said. "Lady Helen said I was to do everything in my power to help you."

"But you are not Anastasia," I replied.

The girl started back, and stared at me.

"Who is Anastasia, miss?" she asked, after a minute's pause.

"Oh," I answered, "Anastasia is my dear old nurse; she brought me home from India years and years ago, and afterwards I lost her. I want father to find her again for me, for I really wish her to be my maid."

"You will perhaps speak to my mistress, miss," replied Morris, in a demure voice.

"Why so?" I asked. "I shall speak to my father, Major Grayson."

The girl made no answer, but I noticed that a smile, a peculiar smile, lingered round her lips.

"Perhaps, miss," she said, after a pause, "I had best begin to unpack your trunks, for her ladyship and the Major may be here by tea time, and, of course, you will like to be ready to meet them, and you'd wish me to arrange your hair, and help you on with your afternoon frock before they come."

I took some keys out of a little bag I wore at my side.

"Do as you please," I said.

I sat on a low chair and watched her. Then I said, suddenly:

"I am horribly sick of dress!"

"Oh, miss!" remarked Morris, raising her placid face to mine, for she was on her knees by this time, unfastening my largest trunk, "I did think that young ladies lived for their dress."

"Well, I am not one of those young ladies," was my reply. "I

never thought of dress until a few weeks ago. I used to put on the dress I was to wear when I first got up in the morning, and I never thought of it again until I took it off to go to bed."

"You must have lived in a very quiet way, miss."

"I lived in a sensible way," I replied.

"I should not like it for myself, miss."

"Perhaps not, perhaps you are vain – I can't bear vain people."

The girl coloured, and bent again over the trunk. I rested my elbows on my knees, pressed my hands against my cheeks, and stared at her.

"I don't wish to offend you, Morris," I said; "I want us two to be friends."

"Thank you, miss."

"But I do wish to say," I continued, "that I consider it awfully frivolous to have to put on a special dress for morning, and another dress for afternoon, and yet another dress, just when tea comes in, and another dress for dinner. Privately, I think it quite wicked, and I am sure you must agree with me."

"It is what's done in society, miss," answered the girl. "They all do like that, those who move in the best society."

She began to unpack rapidly, and I watched her. I reflected within myself that I had left Hill View with no clothes except the ones I was wearing, and what were contained in my tiny trunks. Now I had several big trunks, and they were crammed, pressed full, with the newest and most wonderful dresses; and besides the dresses there were mantles, and coats, and opera cloaks, and

all sorts of the most exquisite, the most perfect underclothing in the world. Morris was a quick lady's maid; she evidently understood her duties thoroughly well. She had soon unpacked my trunks, and then she suggested that I should wear a dress of the palest, most heavenly blue, in order to greet her ladyship and Major Grayson. I said, "Is it necessary?" and she replied, "Certainly it is," and after that I submitted to her manipulations. She helped me into my dress, arranged my hair in a simple and very becoming manner, and then she looked at me critically.

"Am I all right now?" I asked.

"Yes, miss, I think you will do beautifully."

I thanked her, and ran downstairs. There were three, or even four drawing-rooms to the house, each one opening into the other. I chose the smallest drawing-room, ensconced myself in an easy-chair, and tried to imagine that I was about to enjoy everything; but my heart was beating horribly, and I came to the conclusion that every one of the four drawing-rooms was hideous. They were not the least like the reception rooms at Lady Carrington's. There the furniture was rich, and yet simple; there was no sense of overcrowding, the tables were not laden with knick-knacks, and there were comparatively few chairs and lounges, only just enough for people to use. The walls were undecorated, except by one or two pictures, the works of masters. There were not more than two pictures in each room, for Lady Carrington had assured me that pictures were the richest ornaments of all, and I fully agreed with her. Now these

rooms were totally different – the chairs, the tables, the sofas, the lounges, the grand piano, the little piano, the harpsichord, the spinning-wheel, the pianola, gave one a sense of downright oppression. The walls were laden with pictures of every sort and description – some of them I did not admire in the very least; and there was old china and old glass, very beautiful, I had little doubt, but to me extremely inharmonious. I discovered soon that what these rooms needed was a sense of rest. There was not a single spot where the eye could remain quiet; wherever one looked one felt inclined to start and exclaim, and jump up and examine. I came to the conclusion that I preferred Aunt Penelope's very plain little drawing-room at home to this.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.