

Molesworth Mrs.

The Old Pincushion: or, Aunt Clotilda's Guests



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Содержание

CHAPTER I.	5
CHAPTER II.	9
CHAPTER III.	14
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

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CHAPTER I. THE LETTER WITH BAD NEWS

No, Kathie, I don't believe you care one bit; I really don't,' said Neville reproachfully.

Kathie was seated as she loved to be – on the edge of a rather high table. Her skirts were short and her legs were long; from her present elevation she could swing the latter about delightfully. She gave them an extra energetic fling before she replied to her brother, and then, trying her best to look concerned and distressed, and only succeeding in giving to her funny little face an expression of comical demureness, she turned to Neville, —

'I do care. You haven't any right to say I don't. If I didn't care for myself, I'd care because you do, and because *they* do. I'm not a – a – unnatural monster. I'd cry if it was my way, but you know it isn't; and a good thing too. A nice life I'd have had *here*,' with great contempt, 'if I'd been a crying child like little Philippa Harley. She's tired everybody out. But what's more, I do care for myself too. I've been looking forward to them coming home, and nice proper holidays, like other children. Yes, indeed, I should just think I had.'

'Holidays only!' Neville repeated. 'It would have been much better than holidays – for you, any way. They wouldn't have left you here. I'd have stayed at school, I suppose – boys must; but I don't mind school. I'd like it very well if I had a home besides.'

Kathie did not seem to have noticed his last words. A new expression had come into her face, as she repeated softly to herself, 'They wouldn't have left me here. I never thought of that.'

'You'll begin to care really now, I suppose,' said her brother, rather bitterly. 'I didn't think you were so selfish.'

The little girl faced about at that.

'I'm not selfish – at least, if selfish means only caring about oneself and not about other people. I don't pretend not to care about myself *too*. I'm one of the people in the world as well as being myself. I should care for myself. But I care for others too. I'm sorry for you, and for *them*, though not as sorry as for you, because I know you and I don't know them. That's natural. I can't pretend to care for them the same as if I knew them. People who want their children to care a lot for them shouldn't leave them when they're too little to remember, and never see them again for years and years.'

'It isn't much "shouldn't" about it,' the boy replied. 'It's nothing but "can't." Papa and mamma would be only too glad to come home if they could. I'm sure you might know that, Kathie.'

'Well, I've been looking forward to their coming as well as you,' said Kathie, rather grumpily. 'I'm sure I've thought about it ever since last year, when mamma wrote they'd be *sure* to come before this next summer. I don't see but what if that hor – ' she stopped; 'if that old aunt wouldn't leave papa anything else, she might at least have left him money enough to come home on a visit, as she had promised to pay it.'

'Kathie,' said Neville, in a rather awe-struck tone, 'you shouldn't speak that way when she is dead.'

'I don't see any harm in it,' the little girl replied, undauntedly. 'She should have settled things properly, and then we could have felt nicely sorry about her. I don't understand you, Neville – I don't think you're fair to me. First you scold me for not being sorry and not caring, and then when you've regularly worked me up, you turn upon me for saying what I feel.'

Neville looked rather at a loss.

'I don't mean to do that,' he said. 'I suppose the truth is, I'm so dreadfully disappointed that I don't know what to say. But I must be going, Kathie. I suppose you don't want me to leave you the letter?' and as he spoke he half held out to her an envelope he held in his hand.

Kathie shook her head.

'No, you'd better keep it. You'll answer it at once, I suppose. I shouldn't know what to say. You tell them from me that I'm awfully sorry, and I'll write next week.'

'And,' Neville went on, 'about writing to Aunt Clotilda? Can't you write to her, Kathie? Mamma says one of us should.'

'Well, you'd do it far better than I. I shouldn't like to send it without you seeing it first, any way. I don't feel inclined to write to her – I think she's been very stupid – she might have managed better if she really cares for them as she makes out.'

'Kathie!' said Neville – this time with real displeasure in his tone, 'I do think that's too bad of you. Poor Aunt Clotilda! You see, papa says she is almost the most to be pitied of anybody. And there's another thing, Kathie: I don't think it's right of you always to speak of papa and mamma as "they" or "them." It's not – not respectful; not as if you cared for them.'

'Oh, bother!' said Kathie; 'if you're going to begin again about my not caring, Neville, I just wish you'd go. I'm tired of explaining to you, and – there; I must go. Miss Eccles is sending for me;' and as the footsteps her quick ears had heard coming along the passage stopped at the door, Kathleen slid down from the table, and stood erect and demure, as a girl of seventeen or so, with a sharp, dark face looked in.

'Miss Powys,' she said, 'it is time to get ready for dinner. You must be up-stairs in five minutes;' and so saying, disappeared.

'Good-bye, Kathie,' said Neville, as he kissed her. 'It was kind of Mr. Fanshaw to let me come, wasn't it? And – oh! I forgot – Mrs. Fanshaw's going to write to Miss Eccles to ask if you may spend next Wednesday with us – all day: that's to say, to come to dinner and stay till the evening. I'm to fetch you walking, and bring you back in a hansom.'

'That will be *splucious*!' said Kathie, her eyes sparkling. 'Oh! I say, I do hope old Eccles will let me go.'

A slight look of annoyance crossed the boy's face. He disliked to hear his little sister talking slang, or any approach to it.

'Old Eccles!' he repeated. 'I wish you wouldn't say that, Kathie. "Splucious" I don't mind – it was our own nursery word.'

'Neville, you *are* a prig!' said Kathie. 'However, I'll forgive you in return for the good news. Good-bye till Wednesday, and do thank them awfully. I do wish old Eccles was like them.'

And already, in the prospect of the immediate pleasure, more than half forgetting the important bad news which her brother had come to tell her, Kathleen flew along the passage, and up-stairs two steps at a time, by way of working off some of her excitement.

She was only twelve years old, though, to judge by her height, she might have been older. But she had the thin, lanky look of a fast-growing child; there was nothing the least precocious about her.

'She is such a baby still,' thought Neville, as he made his way soberly along the street. 'I suppose she can't help it,' he went on, with a vague idea of excusing her to himself for he scarcely knew what. 'But I do wish, oh! how I do wish they were coming home! Five years more, papa says; five years more it will be. It won't matter for me so much. I've been so fortunate in being with the Fanshaws; and any way, I'd have had to be going to a big school by now. But for Kathie, she'll be seventeen, and she won't have been with mamma for eleven years. It doesn't seem *right*, somehow. And just now, when everything might have been easy. Oh dear! I wonder why things go wrong when they might just as well go right!'

Neville Powys was only thirteen and a half, barely eighteen months older than Kathleen. But in mind and temperament he was twice her age. And he seemed to himself to have grown years older

since that very same morning when the Indian mail had brought the letter which had been the reason of his visit to his sister.

It had been a terrible disappointment to him, and he had hoped for thorough sympathy from Kathie. Yet again, perhaps it was well that she had not taken it to heart so acutely as he. She was less happily placed under Miss Eccles' trustworthy, but cold and unloving care, than he in the Fanshaw family. And had she been of a more sensitive or less buoyant nature, she might have been in some ways dwarfed and crushed painfully. But she was strong and elastic; so far, her six years of stiff and prim school life had done her no harm beyond leaving her, in several ways, as much of a 'baby' as when they had first begun. Still, Neville's instinct that it was more than time that Kathie should be in other hands, that the 'womanliness' in her would suffer unless there were some change, was a correct one.

'If only Mrs. Fanshaw could have had her too,' he said to himself, as he had often said before.

But that he knew was impossible. The Fanshaws had four boys of their own, and no daughter, which had naturally led to their taking only boy boarders.

'I don't like to make things worse by writing to mamma that I don't think Kathie is improving,' he went on, thinking. 'I know it must be very difficult for them to pay what they do for us. And Mrs. Fanshaw always says that Miss Eccles' school is far better, though it is old-fashioned and prim, than many of those great, big, fashionable, girls' schools, which cost twice as much.'

Suddenly a thought struck him.

'I don't see why I shouldn't write about Kathie to Aunt Clotilda,' he said to himself. 'She is free now, even though she's poor. She might surely have Kathie with her if papa gave what he does to Miss Eccles. And she's often said she would have had us every holiday if Mrs. Wynne hadn't been so old and queer. I think Aunt Clotilda must be nice – she is so fond of papa. She might at least have Kathie there on a visit.'

And with a rather more hopeful feeling about things in general since this idea had struck him, poor Neville rang at Mr. Fanshaw's door, which he had now reached.

He had met with plenty of sympathy from his kind friends in his disappointment. It was Mrs. Fanshaw who had suggested to her husband to give the boy an hour or two's holiday to go off to see his sister, though not an orthodox day for the two meeting, and who had furthermore promised the invitation which had so delighted Kathleen. But a feeling of loyalty prevented Neville's telling how slightly the bad news seemed to have affected the little girl, and besides this, a sort of instinct that the less family matters are talked of out of the family the better, made him resolve not to say very much more about the matter in the Fanshaw household.

What the bad news was it is quite time to explain.

Neville and Kathleen Powys were the children of an officer in the army. Captain Powys was poor, but not without reasonable hopes of becoming much richer before his boy and girl should have reached the age at which education and the other many advantages which good parents desire for their children, grow expensive and difficult to obtain for those who have very small means. One disadvantage – a disadvantage at all ages – that of separation from their parents, had to be submitted to, however, when Neville and Kathleen were only five and six years old. For at that time Captain Powys's regiment was ordered to India, and he had, of course, to accompany it.

'Never mind – or, at least, mind it as little as you can,' he said to his wife. 'Let us be thankful they are still so young. By the time they are at an age when it really would matter greatly, we may quite hope to be settled at home again.'

And in this hope the last few years had been passed. It was not an unreasonable hope by any means, as you shall hear. Captain Powys had an old cousin, who was also his godmother, by name Mrs. Wynne. And for many years this lady had openly announced her intention of making him her heir. Only last year she had written to beg him to try to get leave to come home for some months, as she felt she had not long to live, and there were many things she wished to say to him. She undertook to pay all the expenses of this visit for himself and his wife, and the little girl Vida, who had been born

since their return to India. And as a reason the more for it, she reminded him that it was high time Neville and Kathleen should see their parents again. Captain Powys, as may be imagined, was only too glad to agree to her proposal, and for the last few months the parents in India and the children at home had been counting the weeks – in Neville's case, indeed, almost the days – till they should meet, when, alas! all these plans were dashed to the ground!

Mrs. Wynne died suddenly, and after her death no will was to be found. In consequence of this, all her property would go to a nephew of her husband's, already a rich man, who did not need it, and, to do him justice, scarcely cared for it. This was the news which Miss Clotilda Powys, the children's aunt, who had lived with the old lady and helped to manage her affairs, had to write to her brother in India. And this too was the news contained in the letter from his father which had so distressed poor Neville.

It was a curious story altogether. Clotilda was completely puzzled. Mrs. Wynne was a careful and methodical person, not likely to have delayed seeing to business matters, and just the sort of woman to have prided herself on leaving everything in perfect order. And a day or two before her death she had given her cousin a sealed envelope, on which was written, 'Directions where to find my will,' saying to her at the same time, 'You will see – all will be right for David.' So Miss Clotilda's mind had been quite at rest, till on opening the envelope, a few hours after the old lady's death, she drew forth a blank sheet of note-paper! Even then, however, she was not completely discouraged. That the will was somewhere in the house she felt certain, for she had often heard Mrs. Wynne say that she would trust no important papers to any one's keeping but her own. And in the presence of the lawyer, Mr. Jones, and of Mr. Wynne-Carr, the nephew, a thorough search was made. Every cupboard, every bookcase, every wardrobe, every chest of drawers was turned out – nay, more, the walls were tapped, the planks of the floors examined, for it was a very old and quaintly contrived house, to see if there was any secret place where the will could have been concealed. But all in vain. Every other paper or document of importance was found in its place, neatly labelled in the old lady's own handwriting, in her private *secrétaire* in the library. But no will! And even though poor Miss Clotilda went on for days and weeks searching, searching, thinking of nothing else by day, dreaming of nothing else by night, all was useless, and it became evident that there would not much longer be any pretext for preventing Mr. Wynne-Carr's taking possession.

Mr. Wynne-Carr behaved well. He had never expected to succeed, and was not eager about it. He could not, however, help himself – he had a son and grandson – he could not give up the property even if Captain Powys could have been brought to accept it from him. But he told Miss Clotilda to take her time. He gave her leave to stay on in the house as long as she liked, and to continue searching. But as weeks went on, her last hopes faded, and she wrote again to her brother, advising him to make up his mind that the will would never be found. Then Captain Powys wrote to Neville – he had put off doing so as long as he could – telling him all, and saying that even the visit to England must be given up, as he had no money to spare for it, and no hopes of gaining anything by it. If Miss Clotilda had not succeeded in finding the will, there was no chance that any one else would.

Neville was old enough, and thoughtful enough, thoroughly to understand the whole. No wonder he was troubled and distressed, and disappointed by Kathie's childishness. He wished his Aunt Clotilda had written to him. It would have made it much easier for him to have confided to her his feelings about his sister. It was many years since Miss Clotilda had seen the children, for she had not left Wales for long, and Mrs. Wynne had never invited the children to visit her. She was too old for it, she said, and she had never had children of her own, and did not understand their ways. So Neville and Kathleen had been entirely left to the care of strangers, though Neville had once or twice been asked to spend some holidays at a companion's house, and Kathie was taken every year to the seaside with two other 'little Indians,' for three weeks by Miss Eccles.

But of real happy home-life neither knew anything, except by hearsay. And Kathleen was not the sort of child to trouble herself much about anything which did not actually come in her way.

CHAPTER II. PHILIPPA'S IDEA

Kathleen was met at the schoolroom door by a little, pale-faced, fair-haired girl, who was just coming out.

'Oh, Kathie!' she said anxiously, 'do be quick if you're not ready for dinner. The bell's just going to ring. Have you washed your hands? No? Then let's go at once.'

'Why, are you not ready, either?' said Kathie. 'There's no excuse for you, Philippa; you've not been called downstairs to see your brother.'

'I am ready,' said Philippa. 'I've been ready ever so long. But when you didn't come at once after Miss Fraser went for you, I was so frightened that I asked if I might go to fetch a handkerchief, and I thought I'd run along the passage to see if you were coming, and to hurry you.'

'You're a good little soul,' said Kathleen condescendingly, 'but you really needn't bother about me. I've had scoldings enough by this time not to mind, I should rather think.'

Philippa looked up at her doubtfully. Kathie's hard, careless way of speaking distressed her vaguely, much as it did Neville, though she scarcely understood it. She was new to school life, and she had had the happiness till a few months ago of never being separated from her mother. So, though she was three years younger than Kathleen, there were some things she knew more of.

'I don't think you should speak that way,' she said. 'It can't be a good thing not to mind. I do think they scold us too much. *Mamma* never scolded at all, though of course she was sometimes vexed with me, only there was always sense in it. But I think there's *generally* some sense in Miss Eccles' scolding. I try to find it out, only it's rather hard,' and her soft eyes filled with tears.

'Come now, Philippa,' said Kathleen, 'don't begin to cry. You'd be ever so much nicer if you wouldn't. There, now; I'm all ready,' and she flung the towel, with which she had been wiping her hands, on to the rail as she spoke. 'Let's race back; see if you can run as fast as I without making any noise. Don't I do it splendidly? There now; the bell hasn't sounded. Won't Miss Fraser be disappointed not to have to scold?'

And it was true that a rather sour look overspread the under-teacher's face as the two children demurely entered the room.

'Did your brother bring you any letters, Kathie?' whispered Philippa, as they filed downstairs to dinner with the seven or eight girls who made up Miss Eccles' school. 'I do so want to know.'

'Yes; I have lots to tell you,' said Kathie, 'and no good news either. If I were *you*, Philippa, I should be crying my eyes out by this time.'

Philippa covered her ears with her hands.

'Oh! don't tell me, then, please don't,' she said. 'If it's anything sad about your *mamma*, or anything like that, I shall begin crying: I know I shall, whether you do or not, and then they'll all see. Don't tell me till after dinner, Kathie.'

'I've no intention of doing so,' said Kathleen, smiling rather importantly. 'I'll tell you in the garden this afternoon.'

Her smile somewhat reassured the tender-hearted little friend; still more so the fact that Kathleen's appetite was in no way affected by the news, whatever it was, that she had just heard. There was a gooseberry pudding for dinner that day, and Philippa marvelled to herself when she saw Kathie's plate sent up for a second allowance.

'I can't finish my first helping even,' she whispered, disconsolately. 'I can't help wondering if your *mamma's* ill, and it makes me think of *my* *mamma*. Oh, Kathie!' she went on, 'do just tell me it isn't that your *mamma's* ill, is it? Do tell me, or I'll never be able to finish my pudding, and they will so scold me!'

'You goose!' whispered Kathie. 'No; of course it isn't that my mamma's ill, or your mamma's ill, or anybody's mamma's ill.'

'Miss Powys and Miss Harley *whispering*! I am surprised at you,' said Miss Eccles' voice from behind the now diminished gooseberry pudding at the other end of the table.

'There, now,' muttered Kathie; and Philippa, feeling that her friend's reproaches as well as her teacher's disapproval would be more than she could bear, subsided, and set to work to clear her plate in earnest.

The friendship between these two was rather an odd one. It had been brought on in the first place by a sort of half-contemptuous, half-pitying curiosity, with which Kathleen had seen Philippa's agony of distress on having to part with her mother. And poor Mrs. Harley, in her bewilderment, had credited Kathie with more feeling and sympathy than the girl was really conscious of.

'You will be good to her – you look as if you were sorry for her,' she said, struck by the interest in Kathleen's pretty bright eyes. '*You* know what it is to be separated from your mother.'

'I – I haven't seen mamma for a long time,' Kathie replied, too honest to 'sham,' and yet feeling rather ashamed of herself. 'There are several girls here whose mothers are in India. But I will be good to Philippa. We'll all be sorry for her. I suppose it's worse when one's as big as she is. I was very little.'

And Mrs. Harley thanked her, and Philippa clung to her, and having given the promise, Kathleen kept it, even though it was sometimes a little tiresome to have to forsake the society of the merry, hearty, older girls, in order to devote herself to the poor little home-sick child. But during the last few months things had changed. Two or three of the older girls had left, and Kathleen did not care much for those that remained. And by degrees Philippa had grown to some extent reconciled to her new life, and had transferred to Kathleen some considerable share of the devotion with which her loving little heart was running over. And Philippa, young as she was, was a friend worth having; in after-years Kathleen came to see how much she owed to the child's unconscious influence.

The hour in the garden after dinner, and before lessons began again, was the hour of all the twenty-four during which Miss Eccles' pupils were the most at liberty. Before Philippa came it had usually been spent by Kathleen in playing; she was so tall and nimble that she was in great request among the older girls for lawn-tennis, or any other games, and it had been one of her small acts of self-denial – acts showing that, for all her heedless talking and surface indifference, her heart was in the right place – to give up joining in these for the sake of talking or listening to the disconsolate little stranger. But now that Philippa had learnt to understand things better, she would not allow Kathleen to make such sacrifices. Though not strong enough herself for much active exercise, she loved to watch her friend's successes, and her pale face would glow with excitement when Kathie specially distinguished herself. But to-day was to be an exception.

'You're going to play lawn-tennis, aren't you, Kathie?' said Philippa. 'I don't want to play anything; and Miss Fraser doesn't mind, when it's so hot that I won't catch cold. I'll sit near and watch you.'

'No, you just won't,' said Kathie. 'I'm not going to play. I know you are dying to hear what Neville came about, and I want to tell it to somebody, and you're the only person I can tell it to. So let's sit quietly in the old arbour – nobody will want us, and I'll tell you everything. You'll be sorry enough for me, Philippa, when you hear the first bit of it, even though it isn't nearly the worst. Just fancy' – by this time the two children were settled in the summer-house – 'papa and mamma are not coming home this year, after all.'

Philippa's blue eyes opened very widely, and a look of consternation spread over her face.

'Your papa and mamma aren't coming home?' she repeated, as if she could not take in the sense of the words. 'Oh, Kathie!' and the corners of her mouth went down, and her eyelids began to quiver in a suspicious way.

'Now, Phil, no crying,' said Kathleen, sharply. 'If I don't cry for myself, I don't see that you need to do it for me.'

'I'm so – so dreadfully sorry for you,' said Philippa apologetically.

'Thank you. I knew you'd be. But though their not coming's a dreadful disappointment, there's worse than that. It isn't only that it's put off, Philippa: it's given up altogether. I don't hardly think they'll *ever* come home now. I believe they'll stay out there always, till I'm grown up, and then when I'm seventeen or so, I'll be sent out to them – to a father and mother I shan't know a bit. Isn't it *horrid*, Philippa?'

'But why is it? What's made them change so?' asked the little girl.

'I'll tell you. Only you must listen a great deal. It's really rather hard to understand: just like a story in a book, Phil, about wills, and heirs, and lawyers, and all that.'

And in her own fashion, as intelligibly as she could, Kathleen proceeded to narrate the contents of her father's letter to Neville, and all Neville's comments thereupon, to her most interested and attentive listener.

'What a shame it seems!' was Philippa's first remark. 'All to go to somebody that doesn't need it. How unfair it is! Kathie, if he was really a very good, nice man, don't you think he'd give it all back to your father?'

'Papa wouldn't take it, not from *him*,' said Kathie indignantly, though, truth to tell, her own first idea on hearing the story had been a similar one; 'and besides – that other man's got children, and Neville says there's some law that you can't give away what comes to you if you've got children.'

'Oh,' said Philippa, meekly. 'I didn't know.'

'Of course not. How could you know, a little, girl like you? Why, *I* didn't till Neville told me,' said Kathie condescendingly. 'But, all the same, that part of it doesn't matter. Papa wouldn't take anything from anybody like that.'

Philippa sat silent for a little while. But though silent, she was thinking deeply. Her eyes were gazing before her, though seeing but little of the objects in view – the prim bit of London garden, with the evergreen shrubs bordering the gravel-walk, and the figures of the girls darting backwards and forwards in their light-coloured frocks, while they called out to each other in the excitement of the game. And the child's lips were compressed as if she were thinking out some knotty problem. Kathie looked at her in surprise and with growing impatience. She did not fully understand Philippa, for in reality the nine years old maiden was in some respects older than Kathleen herself. Her thoughtfulness and powers of reflection had been brought out by living in close companionship with her mother, and the dearth of playfellows of her own age had made her what servants call 'old-fashioned,' quaint, and in a sense precocious.

'What are you going to sleep about Philippa?' said Kathleen at last, irritably. 'I thought you'd have had lots of questions to ask. It's not every day one hears anything so queer and interesting as what I have been telling you.'

Philippa slowly unfastened her eyes, so to speak, from staring at vacancy, and turned them on her friend. 'It's not that I don't care, Kathie; you might know that, I'm sure. I think it's *dreadful*! I can't bear to think of how unhappy your papa and mamma must be, '*specially* your mamma, just when she'd been planning about coming home and having you with her. I daresay she made a day list – you know what I mean – and that she'd been scratching out every day to see the long rows get shorter. I know,' she added mysteriously, 'I know *mamm*as *do* do that sometimes, just as well as children.'

'I don't think mine would be quite so silly,' said Kathleen disdainfully. 'She must be pretty well used to being at the other side of the world from us by now. For my part, I don't think people should marry if they know they're going to have to live in India – not, at least, till doctors find out some sort of medicine that would keep children quite strong and well there. I do think doctors are too stupid. But still, of course,' she went on, 'I *am* very sorry for mamma, and I'm very sorry for us all. Not quite so sorry for myself, perhaps. I don't think I do mind so very much. I'd feel more disappointed if I couldn't go to the Fanshaws on Wednesday, and come home in a hansom with Neville. I'm made so, I suppose.'

And she flung herself back on her seat with a would-be 'Miller of the Dee' air, which, however, was rather lost on Philippa, who just glanced at her calmly.

'I don't believe you,' she said. 'You're not as bad as you would make yourself out. But I do wonder you haven't thought of one thing, Kathie, you that are so quick and clever. It came into my head the moment I heard it all.'

'What?' said Kathleen carelessly.

'Why, it's what I'd do in your place. I'd settle to *find the will!*'

'To find the will!' repeated Kathie, sitting bolt upright, and staring at Philippa as if she thought the little girl was taking leave of her senses. '*Me* find the will! You little goose! how could I find it when that stupid Miss Clotilda and all the lawyers and people haven't been able to find it? Why, even Neville never thought of such a thing.'

'Perhaps he will, though; and if he doesn't, if I were you, I'd put it into his head. If Miss Clotilda is really stupid' —

'Oh! I don't know that she is — it's just my way of speaking.' Philippa looked rather disappointed. 'I don't know anything about her except that she's an old maid, and old maids are either crabbed or stupid; and they say she's not crabbed,' said Kathie. 'But seriously, Phil, what do you mean? How could I find the will, or even look for it? It isn't here in London, and very likely it's nowhere at all. Very likely old Mrs. Wynne never wrote it.'

'Oh, Kathie!' exclaimed Philippa, 'I do think you can't have a very good mind to fancy such things. She would have had to be a really naughty old lady to have pretended so, and tricked everybody for nothing. Of course she must have written it; you told me the letter with nothing in it was marked "Directions where to find my will."'

'Ye-es,' said Kathleen, 'so it was. But what then? It seems to me the first thing to do would be to find the paper that should have been in that envelope.'

'Of course,' said Philippa, her face flushing. 'I never thought of that. You see, Kathie, you are quick and clever when you really think.'

'I never said I wasn't,' Kathleen replied composedly. 'But that's the beginning and end of my thinking about this thing. Let's talk about something else now, Phil.'

'No,' said the little girl decidedly. 'I don't care to talk of anything else. Just *think*, Kathie, how lovely it would be if you did find it, and all came right, and your papa and mamma came home to that beautiful place in Wales; you'd invite me sometimes for the holidays, wouldn't you?'

'Of course,' said Kathie heartily. 'I never thought of that. But by-the-by, Phil, you should be glad of this going wrong if you care for me. I'd have been leaving school if it had been all right.'

'I know,' said Philippa quietly. 'I did think of that, and of course it would break my heart for you to go. But I'd rather it did break — *quite*,' she went on, as if she understood thoroughly all about the process, 'rather than that your poor papa and mamma shouldn't be able to come home, and you all be happy together at that lovely place.'

'I don't know that it's lovely,' observed Kathie. 'I fancy it's just a funny old-fashioned place. But it's in the country and near the sea — I love the country and the sea — of course it would be awfully nice. It's very good of you, Phil, to care about it all so much. I only wish it would come right. If I *could* find that paper or the will! It wouldn't matter which. If I were *there*, I'd hunt. I'd poke into all sorts of corners, that perhaps Aunt Clotilda has never thought of.'

'Well, I think you should manage to go there,' said Philippa. 'I don't see why your aunt shouldn't ask you to pay her a visit while she's still there, now that the old lady is dead.'

'Yes; I think she might,' Kathleen agreed. 'Any way, it would be a change from that going to Bognor for three weeks that I dislike so. I am so sick of Bognor. And you won't be there, Phil; you're going to your grandmother's.'

'Yes,' said Philippa; 'I didn't much want to go while I thought you were to be here. But if you were going away, I shouldn't mind.'

'I'll ask Neville about it,' said Kathie. 'He has said something once or twice about wishing I could go to Aunt Clotilda, but I always told him I shouldn't like it, and that unless papa and mamma regularly *ordered* me to go, I wouldn't. I do so dislike old maids.'

'Why, who do you know that's old maids?' asked Philippa. 'Why do you dislike them?'

'Oh! there's Miss Eccles – and, after all, I'm not sure that I do dislike her. No, I don't think I do,' she went on, meditatively. 'But there's Miss Fraser; there now, Philippa, we *may* dislike her – nasty, spying, sharp, spiteful thing!'

Philippa considered. It never occurred even to her to dispute the right of all the school to dislike Miss Fraser – her mind was considering another aspect of the question.

'But are you sure she is an old maid?' she said. 'She can't be more than twenty. When do old maids begin?'

'I don't know,' Kathie replied vaguely. 'I don't think there's any settled age. I suppose it's just that some are always going to be old maids. But let's talk of something nicer, Phil. Let's plan that place in Wales – Ty – Tig – I can't say the name of it in Welsh, but I know it means the White House. Let's plan all about it, how the rooms go, and everything, and fancy you're coming to stay with us there. Let me see – shall it be haunted?'

'No, no,' cried Philippa, with a little scream, putting her hands over her ears, relapsing suddenly into the sort of plaintive childishness which made her such an inconsistent little person. 'No, no, Kathie. It's very unkind of you to frighten me. I'll *never* come to stay with you if you're going to plan that it's haunted.'

'Then it shan't be,' said Kathie reassuringly. 'Don't be silly, Phil.'

CHAPTER III.

AUNT CLOTILDA'S REPLY

Wednesday came in due course, and as Mrs. Fanshaw's invitation had been received, and graciously accepted by Miss Eccles for Kathleen, the young lady was ready and waiting when her brother called for her.

'Good-bye, Kathie darling,' whispered a little voice over the balusters, 'and don't forget.'

'No, dear, and good-bye,' Kathleen replied.

'Who was that on the stairs?' Neville asked, when the two were making their way down the street.

'Philippa – Philippa Harley,' Kathie answered.

'The little girl who cries so?' inquired Neville.

'Oh, she's rather left off crying. She's very sensible in some ways,' said Kathleen.

'*That's* sensible,' said Neville. 'Still I don't know that I don't like her for having cried a good deal. I like people to *mind* things.'

He spoke quite naturally, but Kathleen was rather porcupinish on this subject. She stood quite still, and faced round upon her brother. Fortunately the street was not at all a crowded one.

'Now, Neville,' she said, 'I'm not going to have you go on again like that about my not caring. I know it's that you mean, and I just won't have it. I care a great deal more than if I sat down and cried about it.'

Neville stared at her.

'Kathie,' he said, 'I wasn't thinking about you when I said that. I wasn't indeed. I know you do care when you really think about things. And if you didn't, it wouldn't in a way be your fault. You've been so alone as it were; nobody except me, and we've not been much together after all, to talk about home things to. But don't be vexed with me, Kathie.'

Kathleen's face had softened while Neville spoke. She turned and walked on quietly beside him.

'Yes,' she said, 'it's true what you say. I've felt it still more since Philippa's been there. She's been so much with her mother, and she is so fond of her. It must be dreadfully nice to have a mother you know so well that you can love her like that. Neville,' she went on, 'it does seem hard that I should just be getting to feel more like you about it, when there's no chance of them coming home, and our being with them.'

Neville sighed.

'Yes,' he said, 'it does seem hard. All the same, Kathie, I'm very glad you're getting to feel more that way. Philippa must be a nice little girl.'

'She's a *very* nice little girl,' said Kathie heartily. 'But she's funny – she's such a queer mixture of babyishness and old-for-her-age-ness.'

And then, as her own words recalled some of her conversation with Philippa, she suddenly exclaimed —

'Neville, are you sure, quite sure, that there's no chance of things coming right for papa?'

'What do you mean?' asked Neville in surprise.

'Do you think there's no chance of the will ever being found – or the paper telling where it is? The paper that should have been in the envelope?'

'I should think *that's* the least likely thing of all – a little sheet of paper! A will's rather a big thing – at least, generally. Mr. Fanshaw says it's written on parchment, and that even a short will is rather a bulky thing. That's why it seems so queer it should be lost. But the bit of paper could easily have been lost. Aunt Clotilda thinks that the blank bit was put in by mistake, you know, so most likely the right bit was torn up long ago. Mrs. Wynne was getting a little blind.'

'Still,' persisted Kathleen, 'as the *will* can't be found, *I* think they should have a hunt for the paper. You see, if the will's rather a big thing, it's pretty sure they'd have found it unless it had been really hidden. And, besides, Mrs. Wynne's meaning to leave directions where to find it, shows it wasn't anywhere to be found easily.'

'Yes, of course,' said Neville, surprised at Kathleen's reasoning powers.

'Well then,' she went on, 'I'd look for the paper. It might be in ever so many places where the *will* couldn't be. I wonder if they've hunted through Mrs. Wynne's desk and blotting books, and places like that?'

'I wonder too,' said Neville. 'But they'd only laugh at us if we said anything, you see, Kathie, because we're children.'

'Yes,' Kathleen agreed. 'People are very stupid about children, often.'

Neville did not answer for a moment. Then, 'Kathie,' he said half hesitatingly.

'Well.'

'I think I'll tell you something' – but he was interrupted. They had got into a crowded part by this time, and Neville had to catch hold of Kathleen and make a sudden rush for it, to avoid being knocked down by an unexpected hansom appearing round a corner which they had not been observing. 'There now,' Neville went on, 'it would have been very nice if I had got you run over, Kathie. We mustn't talk where it's so crowded. Wait till we get into Mayhew Street.'

But when they reached Mayhew Street, at the farther end of which was Neville's present home, they were overtaken by Mr. Fanshaw himself. So there was no more opportunity for talking privately. And kind Mrs. Fanshaw had arranged a sight-seeing expedition in the afternoon for the two Powys children and two of the other boys. From this they did not get home till tea-time, and after tea there were games in the schoolroom, and then music in the drawing-room when Mr. and Mrs. Fanshaw and the elder boys came up from dinner. It was all very delightful, and Kathleen enjoyed it thoroughly. But it drove other thoughts out of her head, and gave her endless subject for chatter in the hansom on her way home. It was not till they drew up at Miss Eccles' gate that she suddenly remembered Neville's unfinished sentence.

'What was it you were going to say to me just when that cab came up, this morning?' she asked. Neville hesitated.

'I'll tell you the next time. It would take too long now. Perhaps it will never come to anything; perhaps you wouldn't like it if it did, and perhaps you'd be disappointed if it didn't. And it's best to say no more about it yet.'

And this oracular reply was all Kathie could extract from Neville before they had to bid each other good-night.

Philippa was a good deal disappointed the next day that Kathleen had no more to tell her.

'You promised to speak to your brother about looking for the paper,' she said.

'Well, so I did,' said Kathie.

'Yes; but what you said was no good. You should have planned with him about going there. It'll be too late soon; once your aunt has left the house you'd never have a chance of going there.'

'Oh, bother!' said Kathleen; 'I've no chance as it is. I don't believe it'll ever be found – the paper or the will either. It's no good thinking any more about it.'

Philippa's face flushed.

'I think you're a very silly girl, and a very selfish one too,' she said. 'I'm sure if there was the least little tiniest bit of a chance of my finding any paper that would do *my* papa and mamma any good, I'd – I'd –'

'What would you do, Miss Unselfish?' said Kathie teasingly.

'I'd run away and dress myself like a little servant so as to get into the house, or – or – anything,' said Philippa.

'And get put into prison for poking about among other people's things. That would be *very* nice for papa and mamma! Your head's far too full of fanciful stories and rubbish!' said Kathleen.

And for some days there was a decided coolness between the friends.

But on the fourth day something happened which quickly set this unusual state of things to rights. A rather thick letter arrived for 'Miss Powys' by the morning post. It was addressed in Neville's clear, boyish handwriting; and as this was at once recognised by Miss Eccles, she gave it to Kathleen without any remark or inquiry. And though there was only a quarter of an hour between breakfast and morning lessons beginning, Kathie managed to gain a pretty fair idea of its contents before taking her place in the schoolroom. But it was not till the after-dinner play-time in the garden that she was able to tell what the letter contained to her little confidante. All she had time to whisper to her – for it was a very busy morning – was, 'I *have* got something to tell you, Phil, so you're not to look cross at me any more. You will open your eyes when you hear it.'

Philippa opened her eyes wide enough only to know she was *going* to hear it! What could it be? Kathie looked so pleased and excited that Philippa almost fancied news must have come of the will having been found. Of course it would be very nice, she said to herself, *very* nice, if it were so; but still she was conscious of a little feeling of disappointment at the idea. She was rather what is called a romantic little girl; she liked to make up wonderful stories in her head; but this was the first time that she had ever come across in actual life anything to make a really good one about, so, naturally, she felt that it would be quite a pity for it to come to an end too soon. It would be like a book finishing up all in a hurry in the middle. She thought so much about it that she was very sharply reproved by Miss Fraser for inattention and carelessness, which forced her out of her dreams, though the pleasant feeling of having something out of the common to look forward to prevented her taking the scolding much to heart.

And at last – at last, though really it did seem as if the morning would never come to an end – the two friends found themselves together in the arbour again, and Kathleen drew the fat-looking letter out of her pocket.

'Oh, Kathie,' Philippa exclaimed, 'I'm all trembling to know what it is! Only just tell me quick! Is it that the will's found?'

She could hardly for the moment have said whether she wished the answer to be 'yes' or 'no,' but she was not long left in suspense.

'You goose!' said Kathleen, which was answer of itself; 'of course not. I do believe you thought it was in this letter. I don't believe, for my part, it ever will be found. But that's not the question. What I've got to tell you is just what you've been wishing for. I – we – Neville and I – are to go to Aunt Clotilda's for the holidays.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Philippa, in a tone of deep satisfaction. 'Then *did* you speak of it to your brother, Kathie? Were you only teasing me when you said you hadn't?'

'No, no. It was done before. I mean Neville had thought of it before. He began to tell me something, and then he stopped; I think he wasn't sure if I'd like it. He's not sure now; you'll see when you read what he says. And to tell you the truth, Phil, if you hadn't put it into my head about hunting for that paper' —

'No,' interrupted Philippa; 'it was your own thought about looking for the *paper*. I said the will.'

'Never mind,' said Kathie impatiently; 'it's the same thing. You put the hunting into my head. And, as I was saying, if you hadn't, I don't believe I would have wanted to go there. You see, it's left to my own wishes principally,' she went on importantly. '*That's* sensible of Aunt Clotilda, anyway. There,' and she held out the letter to Philippa, 'you may read it all. Can you make out the writing? If not, I'll read it to you. Neville's writing is plain enough; read it first.'

Philippa eagerly obeyed. Neville's letter was just a short one, sending on to his sister a larger one which he had received from their aunt, and saying how much he hoped Kathleen would like the idea of the visit Miss Clotilda proposed, and which he frankly said he had written to suggest.

'I've read Neville's,' said Philippa; 'but the writing of the other is rather difficult. Please read it to me, Kathie.'

Kathleen unfolded it, and made Philippa come quite close to her.

'I don't want to speak loud,' she said. 'I don't care for the other girls to hear.'

'My dear Neville,'

the letter began,

'I am very glad you wrote to me. I have thought a great deal about you and dear Kathleen since the terrible disappointment which you heard all about from your father. It is very sad for both of you, and perhaps especially so for Kathleen, to be so long separated from your dear parents, and to have now – alas! – such a very uncertain prospect of seeing them again for long. I had already been considering if it would not be possible for you both to spend your next holidays with me here. Mr. Wynne-Carr has – I suppose I must say *kindly*, but I think you are old enough to understand that it is difficult for me to feel grateful under the circumstances – given me leave to stay here till October, when I must go I know not where. But I am very poor. I have for the time a house in which to receive you, but that is about all. All the servants are dismissed already, except old Martha. And I am obliged to live in the simplest way. Then, again, I had a feeling that it would be painful and tantalising for you to come here, and to get to know and love the dear old place which should have been by now your own home. I should like you and little Kathleen' —

'*Little* Kathleen, indeed!' said Kathie, with a snort.

'to think it over' —

'Yes; that's sensible of her, isn't it?'

'and to let me know what you feel about it before I do anything in the matter.

I am quite sure your dear papa and mamma' —

'Did you ever see such a lot of "dears" as she sticks in? I'm afraid she must be rather a kissey-cry-ey sort of person, Phil.'

'would have no objection to your coming, and if you both think you would like it, and will let me know as soon as possible, I will write to Miss Eccles and to Mr. Fanshaw, and try to get all arranged. I think you could safely make the journey alone, as there is no change from Paddington to Frewern Bay, where you leave the railway, and where I should meet you by the coach. Of course, had things been as we hoped, I should have sent some one to town to escort you, but that, alas! is now out of the question. With love to Kathleen, and hoping to hear from you very soon – Believe me, my dear Neville, your affectionate aunt,

'*Clotilda Wynne Powys.*'

'She writes as if she would have sent a couple of powdered footmen for us, doesn't she?' said Kathie. 'I say, Phil, it won't be very cheerful if she's going to go on groaning all the time over departed grandeur, will it? And I'm rather afraid about the' – Kathleen hesitated. She was in an excited, mischievous mood, and she wanted to shock Philippa by using slang. But she wasn't sure whether the proper expression for what she wanted to say was 'tuck,' or 'grub,' or 'prog,' or no one of the three, so she discreetly changed the form of the sentence. 'I've just a little misgiving that we shall not have enough to eat,' she went on. 'Do you suppose she'll give us porridge three times a day? I always think of porridge when people speak of living very simply.'

'Porridge is very good,' said Philippa; 'with *cream*

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