Molesworth Mrs.

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Содержание

Mary Louisa Molesworth
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CHAPTER I
LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

I could fancy it was only yesterday! That first time I saw them. And to think how many years ago it is really! And how many times I have told the story – or, perhaps, I should say the *stories*, for after all it is only a string of simple day-by-day events I have to tell, though to me and to the children about me they seem so interesting and, in some ways, I think I may say, rather out of the common. So that now that I am getting old, or 'beginning to think just a tiny bit about some day getting old,' which is the only way Miss Erica will let me say it, and knowing that nobody else *can* know all the ins and outs which make the whole just as I do, and having a nice quiet time to myself most days (specially since dear tiresome little Master Ramsey is off to school with his brothers), I am going to try to put it down as well as I can. My 'as well as I can' won't be anything very scholarly or fine, I know well; but if one knows what one wants to say it seems to me the words will come. And the story will be there for the dear children, who are never sharp judging of old Heather – and for

their children after them, maybe.

I was standing at our cottage door that afternoon – a beautiful summer afternoon it was, early in June. I was looking idly enough across the common, for our cottage stood – stands still, perhaps – I have not been there for many a year – just at the edge of Brayling Common, where it skirts the pine-woods, when I saw them pass. Quite a little troop they looked, though they were scarcely near enough for me to see them plainly. There was the donkey, old Larkins's donkey, which they had hired for the time, with a tot of a girl riding on it, the page-boy leading it, and a nursemaid walking on one side, and on the other an older little lady – somewhere about ten years old she looked, though she was really only eight. What an air she had, to be sure! What a grand way of holding herself and stepping along like a little princess, for all that she and her sisters were dressed as simple as simple. Pink cotton frocks, if I remember right, a bit longer in the skirts than our young ladies wear them now, and nice white cotton stockings, – it was long before black silk ones were the fashion for children, – and ankle-strap shoes, and white sun-bonnets, made with casers and cords, nice and shady for the complexions, though you really had to be close to before you could see a child's face inside of them. And some way behind, another little lady, a good bit shorter than Miss Bess – I meant to give all their names in order later on, but it seems strange-like not to say it – and looking quite three years younger, though there was really not two between them. And alongside of her a boy, thin and pale

and darkish-haired – that, I could see, as he had no sun-bonnet of course, only a cap of some kind. He too was a good bit taller than Miss – , the middle young lady I mean, though short for his age, which was eleven past. They were walking together, these two – they were mostly always together, and I saw that the boy was a little lame, just a touch, but enough to take the spring out of his step that one likes to see in a young thing. And though I couldn't see her face, only some long fair curls, long enough to come below the cape of her bonnet, a feeling came over me that the child beside him was walking slow, keeping back as it were, on purpose to bear him company. There was something gentle and pitying-like in her little figure, in the way she went closer to the boy and took his hand when the nurse turned round and called back something – I couldn't hear the words but I fancied the tone was sharp – to the two children behind, which made them press forward a little. The other young lady turned as they came nearer and said something with a sort of toss-up of her proud little head to the nurse. And then I saw that she held out her hand to her younger sister, who kept hold all the same of the boy's hand on the other side. And that was how they were walking when they went in among the trees and were lost to my sight.

But I still stood looking after them, even when there was nothing more of them to be seen. Not even the dog – oh, I forgot about him – he was the very last of the party – a brisk, shortish haired, wiry-looking rough terrier, who, just as he got to the entrance of the wood, turned round and stood for a moment

barking, for all the world as if he might be saying, 'My young ladies have gone a-walking in the wood now, and nobody's to come a-troubling of them. So I give you fair notice.' He did think, did Fusser, that was *his* name, that he managed all the affairs of the family. Many a time we've laughed at him for it.

'Dear me,' thought I to myself, 'I could almost make a story out of those young ladies and gentleman, though I've only seen them for a minute, or two at the most.'

For I was very fond of children even then, and knew a good deal about their ways, though not so much – no, nor nothing like – what I do now! But I was in rather a dreamy sort of humour. I had just left my first place, – that of nursery-maid with the family where my mother had been before me, and where I had stayed on older than I should have done by rights, because of thinking I was going to be married. And six months before, my poor Charles had died suddenly, or so at least it had seemed to us all. For he caught cold, and it went to his chest, and he was gone in a fortnight. The doctor said for all he looked strong, he was really sadly delicate, and it was bound to be sooner or later. It may have been true, leastways the doctor meant to comfort me by saying so, though I don't know that I found much comfort in the thought. Not so much anyhow as in mother's simple words that it was God's will, and so it must be right. And in thinking how happy we had been. Never a word or a coldness all the four years we were plighted. But it was hard to bear, and it changed all my life for me. I never could bring myself to think of another.

Still I was only twenty-one, and after I'd been at home a bit, the young ladies would have me back to cheer me up, they said. I travelled with them that spring; but when they all went up to London, and Miss Marian was to be married, and the two little ones were all day with the governess, I really couldn't for shame stay on when there was no need of me. So, though with many tears, I came home, and was casting about in my mind what I had best do – mother being hale and hearty, and no call for dress-making of a plain kind in our village – that afternoon, when I stood watching the stranger little gentry and old Larkins's donkey and the dog, as they crossed the common into the firwood.

It was mother's voice that woke me up, so to say.

'Martha,' she called out in her cheery way, 'what's thee doing, child? I'm about tidied up; come and get thy work, and let's sit down a bit comfortable. I don't like to see thee so down-like, and such bright summer weather, though mayhap the very sunshine makes it harder for thee, poor dear.'

And she gave a little sigh, which was a good deal for her, for she was not one as made much talk of feelings and sorrows. It seemed to spirit me up somehow.

'I wasn't like that just now, mother,' I said cheerfully. 'I've been watching some children – gentry – going over the common – three little young ladies and a boy, and Larkins's donkey. They made me think of Miss Charlotte and Miss Marian when first I went there, though plainer dressed a good deal than our young ladies were. But real gentry, I should say.'

'And you'd say right,' mother answered. 'They are lodging at Widow Nutfold's, quite a party of them. Their father's Sir – ; dear, dear, I've forgot the name, but he's a barrowknight, and the family's name is Penrose. They come from somewhere far off, near by the sea – quite furrin parts, I take it.'

'Not out of England, you don't mean, do you?' I asked. For mother, of course, kept all her old country talk, while I, with having been so many years with Miss Marian and her sisters, and treated more like a friend than a servant, and great pains taken with my reading and writing, had come to speak less old-fashioned, so to say, and to give the proper meaning to my words. 'Foreign parts really means out of this country, where they talk French or Italian, you know, mother.'

But mother only shook her head.

'Nay,' she said, 'I mean what I say. Furrin parts is furrin parts. I wouldn't say as they come from where the folks is nigger blacks, or from old Boney's country neither, as they used to frighten us about when I was a child. But these gentry come from furrin parts. Why, I had it from Sarah Nutfold's own lips, last Saturday as never was, at Brayling market, and old neighbours of forty years; it's not sense to think she'd go for to deceive me.'

Mother was just a little offended, I could see, and I thought to myself I must take care of seeming to set her right.

'Of course not,' I said. 'You couldn't have it surer than from Mrs. Nutfold. I daresay she's pleased to have them to cheer her up a bit. They seem nice little ladies to look at, though they're on

the outside of plain as to their dress.'

'And more sense, too,' said mother. 'I always thought our young ladies too expensive, though where money's no consideration, 'tis a temptation to a lady to dress up her children, I suppose.'

'But they were never *over*-dressed,' I said, in my turn, a little ruffled. 'Nothing could be simpler than their white frocks to look at.'

'Ay, to look at, I'll allow,' said mother. 'But when you come to look *into* them, Martha, it was another story. Embroidery and tucks and real Walansian!' and she held up her hands. 'Still they've got it, and they've a right to spend it, seein' too as they're generous to those who need. But these little ladies at Sarah's are not rich, I take it. There was a deal of settlin' about the prices when my lady came to take the rooms. She and the gentleman's up in London, but one or two of the children got ill and needed country air. It's a heavy charge on Sarah Nutfold, for the nurse is not one of the old sort, and my lady asked Sarah, private-like, to have an eye on her.'

'There now,' I cried, 'I could have said as much! The way she turned just now so sharp on the poor boy and the middle little lady. I could see she wasn't one of the right kind, though I didn't hear what she said. No one should be a nurse, or have to do with children, mother, who doesn't right down love them in her heart.'

'You're about right there, Martha,' mother agreed.

Just then father came in, and we sat round, the three of us,

to our tea.

'It's a pleasure to have thee at home again, my girl, for a bit,' he said. And the kind look in his eyes made me feel both cheered and sad together. It was the first day I had been with them at tea-time, for I had got home pretty late the night before. 'And I hope it'll be a longish bit this time,' he went on.

I gave a little sigh.

'I'd like to stay a while; but I don't know that it would be good for me to stay very long, father, thank you,' I said. 'I'm young and strong and fit for work, and I'd like to feel I was able to help you and mother if ever the time comes that you're laid by.'

'Please God we'll never need help of that kind, my girl,' said father. 'But it's best to be at work, I know, when one's had a trouble. The day'll maybe come, Martha, when you'll be glad to have saved a little more for a home of your own, after all. So I'd not be the one to stand in your way, a few months hence – nor mother neither – if a good place offers.'

'Thank you, father,' I said again; 'but the only home of my own I'll ever care for will be here – by mother and you.'

And so it proved.

I little thought how soon father's words about not standing in my way if a nice place offered would be put to the test.

I saw the children who were lodging at Mrs. Nutfold's several times in the course of the next week or two. They seemed to have a great fancy for the pine-woods, and from where they lived they could not, to get to them, but pass across the common within sight

of our cottage. And once or twice I met them in the village street. Not all of them together – once it was only the two youngest with the nurse; they were waiting at the door of the post-office, which was also the grocer's and the baker's, while she was inside chattering and laughing a deal more than she'd any call to, it seemed to me. (I'm afraid I took a real right-down dislike to that nurse, which isn't a proper thing to do before one has any certain reason for it.) And dear little ladies they looked, though the elder one – that was the middle one of the three – had rather an anxious expression in her face, that struck me. The baby – she was nearly three, but I heard them call her baby – was a little fat bundle of smiles and dimples. I don't think even a cross nurse would have had power to trouble *her* much.

Another time it was the two elder girls and the lame boy I met. It was a windy day, and the eldest Missy's big flapping bonnet had blown back, so I had a good look at her. She was a beautiful child – blue eyes, very dark blue, or seeming so from the clear black eyebrows and thick long eyelashes, and dark almost black hair, with just a little wave in it; not so long or curling as her sister's, which was out-of-the-way beautiful hair, but seeming somehow just to suit her, as everything about her did. She came walking along with the proud springing step I had noticed that first day, and she was talking away to the others as if to cheer and encourage them, even though the boy was full three years older than she, and supposed to be taking charge of her and her sister, I fancy.

'Nonsense, Franz,' she was saying in her decided spoken way, 'nonsense. I won't have you and Lally treated like that. And I don't care – I mean I can't help if it does trouble mamma. Mammas must be troubled about their children sometimes; that's what being a mamma means.'

I managed to keep near them for a bit. I hope it was not a mean taking-advantage. I have often told them of it since – it was really that I did feel such an interest in the dear children, and my mind misgave me from the first about that nurse – it did so indeed.

'If only – ' said the boy with a tiny sigh. But again came that clear-spoken little voice, 'Nonsense, Franz.'

I never did hear a child of her age speak so well as Miss Bess. It's pretty to hear broken talking in a child sometimes, lisping, and some of the funny turns they'll give their words; but it's even prettier to hear clear complete talk like hers in a young child.

Then came a gentle, pitiful little voice.

'It isn't nonsense, Queen, darling. It's *howid* for Franz, but it wasn't nonsense he was going to say. I know what it was,' and she gave the boy's hand a little squeeze.

'It was only – if aunty *was* my mamma, Bess, but you know she isn't. And *aunts* aren't forced to be troubled about not their own children.'

'Yes they are,' the elder girl replied. 'At least when they're instead of own mammas. And then, you know, Franz, it's not only you, it's Lally too, and – '

That was all I heard. I couldn't pretend to be obliged to walk

slowly just behind them, for in reality I was rather in a hurry, so I hastened past; but just as I did so, their little dog, who was with them, looked up at me with a friendly half-bark, half-growl. That made the children smile at me too, and for the life of me, even if 'twas not good manners, I couldn't help smiling in return.

'Hasn't her a nice face?' I heard the second little young lady say, and it sent me home with quite a warm feeling in my heart.

It was about a week after that, when one evening as we were sitting together – father, mother, and I – and father was just saying there'd be daylight enough to need no candles that night – we heard the click of the little garden gate, and a voice at the door that mother knew in a moment was Widow Nutfold's.

'Good evening to you, Mrs. Heatherdale,' she said, 'and many excuses for disturbing of you so late, but I'm that put about. Is your Martha at home? – thank goodness, my dear,' as I came forward out of the dusk to speak to her. 'It's more you nor your good mother I've come after; you'll be thinking I'm joking when you hear what it is. Can you slip on your bonnet and come off with me now this very minute to help with my little ladies? Would you believe it – that their good-for-nothing girl is off – gone – packed up this very evening – and left me with 'em all on my hands, and Miss Baby beginning with a cold on her chest, and Master Francis all but crying with the rheumatics in his poor leg. And even the page-boy, as was here at first, was took back to London last week.'

The good woman held up her hands in despair, and then by

degrees we got the whole story – how the nurse had not been meaning to stay longer than suited her own convenience, but had concealed this from her lady; and having heard by a letter that afternoon of another situation which she could have if she went at once, off she had gone, in spite of all poor Widow Nutfold could say or do.

'She took a dislike to me seein' as I tried to look after her a bit and to stop her nasty cross ways, and she told me that impertinent, as I wanted to be nurse, I might be it now. She has a week or two's money owing her, but she was that scornful she said she'd let it go; she had been a great silly for taking the place.'

'But she might be had up and made to give back some of her wages,' said father.

'Sir Hulbert and my lady are not that sort, and she knows it,' said Mrs. Nutfold. 'The wages was pretty fair – it was the dulness of the life down in Cornwall the girl objected to most, I fancy.'

'Cornwall,' repeated mother. 'There now, Martha, if that isn't furrin parts, I don't know what is.'

But I hadn't time to say any more. I hurried on my shawl and bonnet, and rolled up an apron or two, and slipped a cap into a bandbox, and there I was.

'Good-night, mother,' I said. 'I'll look round in the morning – and I don't suppose I'll be wanted to stay more than a day or two. My lady's sure to find some one at once, being in London too.'

'I should think so,' said old Sarah, but there was something in her tone I did not quite understand.

CHAPTER II
AN UNEXPECTED PROPOSAL

We hurried across the common – it was still daylight though the sun had set some little time. The red and gold were still lingering in the sky and casting a beautiful glow on the heather and the gorse bushes. For Brayling Common is not like what the word makes most people think of – there's no grass at all – it's all heather and gorse, and here and there clumps of brambles, and low down on the sandy soil all sorts of hardy, running, clinging little plants that ask for nothing but sunshine and air. For of moisture there's but scanty supply; it no sooner rains than it dries up again. But oh it is beautiful – the colours of it I've never seen equalled – not even in Italy or Switzerland, where I went with my first ladies, as I said before. The heather seems to change its shade a dozen times a day, as well as with every season – according as the sky is cloudy or bright, or the sun overhead or on his way up or down. I cannot say it the right way, but I know that many far cleverer than me would feel the same; you may travel far before you'd see a sweeter piece of nature than our common, with its wonderful changefulness and yet always beautiful.

There's little footpaths in all directions, as well as a few wider tracks. It takes strangers some time to learn their way, I can tell you. The footpaths are seldom wide enough for two, so it's

a queer sort of backwards and forwards talking one has to be content with. And we walked too fast to have breath for much, only Widow Nutfold would now and then throw back to me, so to say, some odds and ends of explaining about the children that she thought I'd best know.

'They're dear young ladies,' she said, 'though Miss Elisabeth is a bit masterful and Miss Baby – Augusta's her proper name – a bit spoilt. Take them all together, I think Miss Lally's my favourite, or would be if she was a little happier, poor child! I can't stand whiney children.'

I smiled to myself – I knew that the good woman's experience of children was not great – she had married late and never had one of her own. It was real goodness that made her take such an interest in the little Penroses.

'Poor child,' I said, 'perhaps the cross nurse has made her so,' at which Sarah gave a sort of grunt. 'What is her real name – the middle young lady's, I mean?'

'Oh, bless you, I couldn't take upon me to say it – it's too outlandish. Miss Lally we call her – ' and I could hear that Mrs. Nutfold's breath was getting short – she was stout in her later years – and that she was a little cross. 'You must ask for yourself, Martha.'

So I said no more, though I had wanted to hear about the boy, who had spoken of their mother as his aunty, and how he had come to be so delicate and lame. And in a few minutes more we found ourselves at the door of Clover Cottage; that was Mrs.

Nutfold's house, though 'Bramble Cottage' would have suited it better, standing where it did.

She took the key out of her pocket.

'I locked them in,' she said, nodding her head, 'though they didn't know it.'

'Gracious,' says I, 'you don't mean as the children are all alone?'

'To be sure – who'd be with them? I wasn't going to make a chatter all over the place about that impident woman a-goin' off. And Bella, my girl, goes home at five. 'Twas after she left there was all the upset.'

I felt rather startled at hearing this. Suppose they had set themselves on fire! But old Sarah seemed quite easy in her mind, as she opened the door and went in, me following.

'Twas a nice roomy cottage, and so clean. Besides the large kitchen at one side, with a good back-kitchen behind it, and a tidy bedroom for Mrs. Nutfold, there was a fair-sized parlour, with casement windows and deep window-seats – all old-fashioned, but roomy and airy. And upstairs two nice bed-rooms and a small one. I knew it well, having been there off and on to help Mrs. Nutfold with her lodgers at the busy season before I went away to a regular place. So I was a little surprised when she turned to the kitchen, instead of opening the parlour door. And at first, what with coming out of the half-light and the red glow still in my eyes, and what with that there Fusser setting upon me with such a barking and jumping – all meant for a welcome, I soon

found – as never was, I scarce could see or hear. But I soon got myself together again.

'Down Fusser, naughty Fuss,' said the children, and, 'he won't bite, it's only meant for "How do you do?"' said the eldest girl. And then she turned to me as pretty as might be. 'Is this Martha?' says she, holding out her little hand. 'I *am* pleased to see you. It's very good of you, and oh, Mrs. Nutfold, I'm so glad you've come back. Baby is getting so sleepy.'

Poor little soul – so she was. They had set her up on Sarah's old rocking-chair near the fire as well as they could, to keep her warm because of her cold, and it was a chilly evening rather. But it was past her bed-time, and she was fractious with all the upset. I just was stooping down to look at her when she gave a little cry and held out her arms to me. 'Baby so tired,' she said, 'want to go to bed.'

'And so you shall, my love,' I said. 'I'll have off my bonnet in a moment, and then Martha will put Miss Baby to bed all nice and snug.'

'Marfa,' said a little voice beside me. It was the middle young lady. 'I like that name, don't you, Francie?'

That was the boy – they were all there, poor dears. Old Sarah had thought they'd be cosier in the kitchen while she was out. I smiled back at Miss Lally, as they called her. She was standing by Master Francis; both looking up at me, with a kind of mixture of hope and fear, a sort of asking, 'Will she be good to us?' in their faces, which touched me very much. Master Francis was

not a pretty child like the others. He was pale and thin, and his eyes looked too dark for his face. He was small too, no taller than Miss Bess, and with none of her upright hearty look. But when he smiled his expression was very sweet. He smiled now, with a sort of relief and pleasure, and I saw that he gave a little squeeze to Miss Lally's hand, which he was holding.

'Yes,' he said, 'it's a nice name. The other nurse was called "Sharp;" it suited her too,' with a twinkle in his eyes I was pleased to see. 'Lally can't say her "th's" properly,' he went on, as if he was excusing her a little, 'nor her "r's" sometimes, though Bess and I are trying to teach her.'

'It's so babyish at *her* age, nearly six, not to speak properly,' said Miss Bess, with her little toss of the head, at which Miss Lally's face puckered up, and the corners of her mouth went down, and I saw what Sarah Nutfold meant by saying she was rather a 'whiney' child. I didn't give her time for more just then. I had got Miss Baby up in my arms, where she was leaning her sleepy head on my shoulder in her pretty baby way. I felt quite in my right place again.

'Come along, Miss Lally, dear,' I said. 'It must be your bed-time too, and if you'll come upstairs with Miss Baby and me, you'll be able to show me all the things – the baths, and the sponges, and everything – won't that be nice?'

She brightened up in a moment – dear child, it's always been like that with her. Give her a hint of anything she could do for others, and she'd forget her own troubles – fancy or real ones –

that minute.

'The hot water's all ready,' said Mrs. Nutfold. 'I kep' the fire up, so as you shouldn't have no trouble I could help, Martha, my dear.'

And then the three of us went upstairs to the big room at the back, where I was to sleep with Miss Baby in her cot, and which we called the night nursery. Miss Lally was as bright as a child could be, and that handy and helpful. But more than once I heard a sigh come from the very depths of her little heart, it seemed.

'Sharp never lettened me help wif Baby going to bed, this nice way,' she said, and sighed again.

'Never mind about Sharp, my dear,' I said. 'She had her ways, and Martha has hers. What are you sighing about?'

'I'm so fwightened her'll come back and you go, Marfa,' she said, nestling up to me. Baby was safe in bed by now, prayers said and all. 'And – I'm sleepy, but I don't like going to bed till Queen comes.'

'Who may she be, my dear?' I asked, and then I remembered their talking that day in the street. 'Oh, it's Miss Bess, you mean.'

'Yes – it's in the English hist*ory*,' said the child, making a great effort over the 'r.' 'There was a queen they called "Good Queen Bess," so I made that my name for Bess. But mamma laughed one day and said that queen wasn't "good." I was so sorry. So I just call Bess "Queen" for short. And I say "good" to myself, for my Bess *is* good; only I wish she wouldn't be vexed when I don't speak words right,' and again the little creature sighed as if all

the burdens of this weary world were on her shoulders.

'It's that Miss Bess wants you to speak as cleverly as she does, I suppose. It'll come in time, no fear. When I was a little girl I couldn't say the letter "l," try as I might. I used to leave it out altogether – I remember one day telling mother I had seen such a sweet "ittie 'amb" – I meant "little lamb."'

'Oh, how funny,' said Miss Lally laughing. She was always ready to laugh. 'It's a good thing I can say "l's," isn't it? My name wouldn't be – nothing – would it? – without the "l's."'

'But it's only a short, isn't it, Missy?' I said.

'Yes, my *weal* name is "Lalage." Do you fink it's a pretty name?' she said. She was getting sleepy, and it was too much trouble to worry about her speaking.

'Yes, indeed, I think it's a sweet name. So soft and gentle like,' I said, which pleased her, I could see.

'Papa says so too – but mamma doesn't like it so much. It was Francie's mamma's name, but she's dead. And poor Francie's papa's dead too. He was papa's brother,' said Miss Lally, in her old-fashioned way. There was a funny mixture of old-fashionedness and simple, almost baby ways about all those children. I've never known any quite like them. No doubt it came in part from their being brought up so much by themselves, and having no other companions than each other. But from the first I always felt they were dear children, and more than common interesting.

A few days passed – very quiet and peaceful, and yet full of

life too they seemed to me. I felt more like myself again, as folks say, than since my great trouble. It *was* sweet to have real little ones to see to again – if Miss Baby had only known it, that first evening's bathing her and tucking her up in bed brought tears of pleasure to my eyes.

'Come now,' I said, to myself, 'this'll never do. You mustn't let yourself go for to get so fond of these young ladies and gentleman that you're only with for a day or two at most,' but I knew all the same I couldn't help it, and I settled in my own mind that as soon as I could I would look out for a place again. I wasn't afraid of what some would count a hardish place – indeed, I rather liked it. I've always been that fond of children that whatever I have to do for them comes right – what does try my temper is to see things half done, or left undone by silly upsetting girls who haven't a grain of the real nurse's spirit in them.

My lady wrote at once on hearing from Mrs. Nutfold. She was very angry indeed about Sharp's behaviour, and at first was by way of coming down immediately to see to things. But by the next day, when she had got a second letter saying how old Sarah had fetched me, and that I was willing to stay for the time, she wrote again, putting off for a few days, and glad to do so, seeing how cleverly her good Mrs. Nutfold had managed. That was how she put it – my lady always had a gracious way with her, I will say – and I was to be thanked for my obligingness; she was sure her little dears would be happy with any one so well thought of by the dame. They were very busy indeed just then, she and Sir

Hulbert, she said, and very gay. But when I came to know her better I did her justice, and saw she was not the butterfly I was inclined to think her. She was just frantic to get her husband forward, so to speak, and far more ambitious for him than caring about anything for herself. He had had a trying and disappointing life of it in some ways, had Sir Hulbert, and it had not soured him. He was a right-down high-minded gentleman, though not so clever as my lady, perhaps. And she adored him. They adored each other – seldom have I heard of a happier couple: only on one point was there ever disunion between them, as I shall explain, all in good time.

A week therefore – fully a week – had gone by before my little ladies' mother came to see them. And when she did come it was at short notice enough – a letter by the post – and Mayne, the postman, never passed our way much before ten in the morning. So the dame told as how she'd be down by the first train, and get to Clover Cottage by eleven, or soon after. We were just setting off on our morning walk when Sarah came calling after us to tell. She was for us not going, and stopping in till her ladyship arrived; but when I put it to her that the children would get so excited, hanging about and nothing to do, she gave in.

'I'll bring them back before eleven,' I said. 'They'll be looking fresh and rosy, and with us out of the way you and the girl can get the rooms all tidied up as you'd like for my lady to find them.'

And Sarah allowed it was a good thought.

'You've a head on your shoulders, my girl,' was how she put it.

So off we set – our usual way, over the common to the firwoods. There's many a pretty walk about Brayling, and a great variety; but none took the young ladies' and Master Francie's fancy like the firwoods. They had never seen anything of the kind before, their home being by the seashore was maybe the reason – or one reason. For I feel much the same myself about loving firwoods, though, so to say, I was born and bred among them. There's a charm one can't quite explain about them – the sameness and the stillness and the great tops so high up, and yet the bareness and openness down below, though always in the shade. And the scent, and the feel of the crisp crunching soil one treads on, soil made of the millions of the fir needles, with here and there the cones as they have fallen.

'It's like fairy stories,' Miss Lally used to say, with her funny little sigh.

But we couldn't linger long in the woods that morning, though a beautiful morning it was. Miss Bess and Miss Baby were in the greatest delight about 'mamma' coming, and always asking me if I didn't think it must be eleven o'clock. Miss Lally was pleased too, in her quiet way, only I noticed that she was a good deal taken up with Master Francie, who seemed to have something on his mind, and at last they both called to Miss Bess, and said something to her which I didn't hear, evidently asking her opinion.

'Nonsense,' said Miss Bess, in her quick decided way; 'I have no patience with you being so silly. As if mamma would be so

unjust.'

'But,' said Master Francis hesitatingly, 'you know, Bess – sometimes – '

'Yes,' put in Miss Lally, 'she might think it had been partly Francie's fault.'

'Nonsense,' said Miss Bess again; 'mamma knows well enough that Sharp was horrid. I am sure Francie has been as good as good for ever so long, and old Mrs. Nutfold will tell mamma so, even if possibly she did not understand.'

Their faces grew a little lighter after this, and by the time we had got home and I had tidied them all up, I really felt that my lady would be difficult to please if she didn't think all four looking as bright and well as she could wish.

I kept myself out of the way when I heard the carriage driving up, though the children would have dragged me forward. But I was a complete stranger to Lady Penrose, and things having happened as they had, I felt that she might like to be alone with the children, at first, and that no doubt Sarah Nutfold would be eager to have a talk with her. I sat down to my sewing quietly – there was plenty of mending on hand, Sharp's service having been but eye-service in every way – and I won't deny but that my heart was a little heavy thinking how soon, how very soon, most likely, I should have to leave these children, whom already, in these few days, I had grown to love so dearly.

I was not left very long to my meditations, however; before an hour had passed there came a clear voice up the old staircase,

'Martha, Martha, come quick, mamma wants you,' and hastening out I met Miss Bess at the door. She turned and ran down again, I following her more slowly.

How well I remember the group I saw as I opened the parlour door! It was like a picture. Lady Penrose herself was more than pretty – beautiful, I have heard her called, and I think it was no exaggeration. She was sitting in the dame's old-fashioned armchair, in the window of the little room; the bright summer sunshine streaming in behind her and lighting up her fair hair – hair for all the world like Miss Lally's, though perhaps a thought darker. Miss Baby was on her knee and Miss Bess on a stool at her feet, holding one of her hands. Miss Lally and Master Francie were a little bit apart, close together as usual.

'Come in,' said my lady. 'Come in, Martha,' as I hesitated a little in the doorway. 'I am very pleased to see you and to thank you for all your kindness to these little people.'

She half rose from her chair as I drew near, and shook hands with me in the pretty gracious way she had.

'I am sure it has been a pleasure to me, my lady,' I said. 'I've been used to children for so long that I was feeling quite lost at home doing nothing.'

'And you are very fond of children, truly fond of them,' my lady went on, glancing up at me with a quick observant look, that somehow reminded me of Miss Bess; 'so at least Mrs. Nutfold tells me, and I think I should have known it for myself even if she had not said so. I have to go back to town this afternoon

– supposing you all run out into the garden for a few minutes, children; I want to talk to Martha a little, and it will soon be your dinner time.'

She got up as she spoke, putting Miss Baby down gently; the child began grumbling a little – but, 'No, no, Baby, you must do as I tell you,' checked her in a moment.

'Take her out with you, Bess,' she added. I could see that my lady was not one to be trifled with.

When they had all left the room she turned to me again. 'Sit down, Martha, for a minute or two. One can always talk so much more comfortably sitting,' she said pleasantly. 'And I have no doubt the children have given you plenty of exercise lately, though you don't look delicate,' she added, with again the little look of inquiry.

'Thank you, my lady; no, I am not delicate; as a rule I am strong and well, though this last year has brought me troubles and upsets, and I haven't felt quite myself.'

'Naturally,' she said. 'Mrs. Nutfold has told me about you. I was talking to her just now when I first arrived.' Truly my lady was not one to let the grass grow under the feet. 'She says you will be looking for a situation again before long. Is there any chance of your being able to take one at once, that is to say if mine seems likely to suit you.'

She spoke so quick and it was so unexpected that I felt for a moment half stupid and dazed-like.

'Are you sure, my lady, that I should suit you?' I managed to

say at last. 'I have only been in one place in my life, and you might want more experience.'

'You were with Mrs. Wyngate, in – shire, I believe? I know her sister and can easily hear any particulars I want, but I feel sure you would suit me.'

She went on to give me a good many particulars, all in the same clear decided way. 'The Wyngates are very rich,' she said, as she ended. 'You must have seen a great deal of luxury there. Now we are not rich – not at all rich – though we have a large country place that has belonged to the family for many hundreds of years; but we are obliged to live plainly and the place is rather lonely. I don't want you to decide all at once. Think it all over, and consult your parents, and let me have your answer when I come down again.'

'That will be the difficulty,' I replied; 'my parents wanted me to stay on some time with them. There is nothing about the work or the wages I should object to, and though Mrs. Wyngate was very kind, I have never cared for much luxury in the nursery – indeed, I should have liked plainer ways; and I love the country, and as for the young ladies and gentleman, my lady, if it isn't taking a liberty to say so, I love them dearly already. But it is father and mother – '

'Well, well,' said my lady, 'we must see. The children are very happy with you, and I hope it may be arranged, but of course you must consult your parents.'

She went back to London that same afternoon, and that very

evening, when they were all in bed, I slipped on my bonnet and ran home to talk it over with father and mother.

CHAPTER III
TRELUAN

There were fors and againsts, as there are with most things in this world. Father was sorry for me to leave so soon and go so far, and he scarce thought the wages what I might now look for. Mother felt with him about the parting, but mother was a far-seeing woman. She thought the change would be the best thing for me after my trouble, and she thought a deal of my being with real gentry. Not but that Mrs. Wyngate's family was all one could think highly of, but Mr. Wyngate's great fortune had been made in trade, and there was a little more talk and thought of riches and display among them than quite suited mother's ideas, and she had sometimes feared it spoiling me.

'The wages I wouldn't put first,' she said. 'A good home and simple ways among real gentlefolk – that's what I'd choose for thee, my girl. And the children are good children and not silly spoilt things, and straightforward and well-bred, I take it?'

'All that and more,' I answered. 'If anything, they've been a bit too strict brought up, I'd say. If I go to them I shall try to make Miss Lally brighten up – not that she's a dull child, but she has the look of taking things to heart more than one likes to see at her age. And poor Master Francis – I'm sure he'd be none the worse of a little petting – so delicate as he is and his lameness.'

'You'll find your work to do, if you go – no fear,' said mother. 'Maybe it's a call.'

I got to think so myself – and when my lady wrote that all she heard from Mrs. Wyngate was most satisfactory, I made up my mind to accept her offer, and told her so when she came down again for a few hours the end of the week.

We stayed but a fortnight longer at Brayling – and a busy fortnight it was. I had my own things to see to a little, and would fain have finished the set of shirts I had begun for father. The days seemed to fly. I scarce could believe it was not a dream when I found myself with all the family in a second-class railway carriage, starting from Paddington on our long journey.

It was a long journey, especially as, to save expense, we had come up from Brayling that same morning. We were not to reach the little town where we left the railway till nearly midnight, to sleep there, I was glad for the poor children's sake to hear, and start again the next morning on a nineteen miles' journey by coach.

'And then,' said Miss Lally, with one of her deep sighs, 'we shall be at home.'

I thought there was some content in her sigh this time.

'Shall you be glad, dearie, to be at home again?' I said.

'I fink so,' she answered. 'And oh, I am glad you've comed wif us, 'stead of Sharp. And Francie's almost more gladder still, aren't you, dear old Francie?'

'I should just think I was,' said the boy.

'Sharp,' – and the little girl lowered her voice and glanced round; we were, so to speak, alone at one end of the carriage, – Miss Lally, her cousin and I, for Miss Baby was already asleep in my arms and Miss Bess talking, like a grown-up young lady, at the other end, with her papa and mamma – 'Sharp,' said Miss Lally, 'really *hated* poor Francie, because she thought he told mamma about her tempers. And she made mamma think he was naughty when he wasn't. Francie and I were frightened when Sharp went away that mamma would think it was his fault. But she didn't. Queen spoke to her, and Mrs. Dame' (that was her name for old Sarah) 'did too. And you didn't get scolded, did you, Francie?'

'No,' said Master Francie quietly, 'I didn't.'

He looked as if he were going to say more, but just then Miss Bess, who had had enough for the time, of being grown up – and indeed she was but a complete child at heart – got up from her seat and came to our end of the carriage. Sir Hulbert was reading his newspaper, and my lady was making notes in a little memorandum book.

'What are you talking about?' said the eldest little sister, sitting down beside me. 'You all look very comfortable, Baby especially.'

'We are talking about Sharp going away,' replied Miss Lally, 'and Francie thinking he'd be scolded for it.'

'Oh! do leave off about that and talk of something nicer. Franz is really silly. If you'd only speak right out to mamma,' she went

on, 'things would be ever so much better.'

The boy shook his head rather sadly.

'Now you know,' said Miss Bess, 'they would be. Mamma is never unjust.'

She was speaking in her clear decided way, and feeling a little afraid lest their voices should reach to the other end – I wouldn't have liked my lady to think I encouraged the children in talking her over – I tried to change the conversation.

'Won't you tell me a little about your home?' I said. 'You know it'll all be quite new to me; I've only seen the sea once or twice in my life, and never lived by it.'

'Treluan isn't quite close to the sea,' said Master Francis, evidently taking up my feeling. 'We can see it from some of the top rooms, and from one end of the west terrace at high tides, and we can hear it too when it's stormy. But it's really two miles to the coast.'

'There are such dear little bays, lots of them,' said Miss Bess. 'We can play Robinson Crusoe and smugglers and all sorts of things, for the bays are quite separated from each other by the rocks.'

'There's caves in some,' said Miss Lally, 'rather f'ightening caves, they're so dark;' but her eyes sparkled as if she were quite able to enjoy some adventures.

'We shall be at no loss for nice walks, I see; but how do you amuse yourselves on wet days?'

'Oh! we've always plenty to do,' said Miss Bess. 'Miss Kirstin

comes from the Vicarage every morning for our lessons, and twice a week papa teaches Franz and me Latin in the afternoon, and the house is very big, you know. When we can't go out, we may race about in the attics over the nurseries. There's a stair goes up to the tower, just by the nursery door, and you pass the attics on the way. They're called the tower attics, because there are lots more over the other end of the house. Francie's room is in the tower.'

It was easy to see by this talk that Treluan was a large and important place.

'I suppose the house is very, very old?' I said.

'Oh yes! thousands – I mean hundreds – of years old. Centuries mean hundreds, don't they, Franz?' said she, turning to her cousin.

'Yes, dear,' he answered gently, though I could see he was inclined to smile a little. 'If you know English history,' he went on to me, 'I could tell you exactly how old, Treluan is. The first bit of it was built in the reign of King Henry the Third, though it's been changed ever so often since then. About a hundred years ago the Penroses were very rich, very rich indeed. But when one of them died – our great, great grand-uncle, I think it was – and his nephew took possession, it was found the old man had sold a lot of the land secretly – it wasn't to be told till his death – and no one has ever been able to find out what he did with the money. It was the best of the land too.'

'And they were so surprised,' said Miss Bess, 'for he'd been a

very saving old man, and they thought there'd be lots of money over, any way. Wasn't it too bad of him – horrid old thing?'

'Queen,' said Miss Lally gravely. 'You know we fixed never to call him that, 'cos he's dead. He was a – oh, what's that word? – something like those things in the hall at home – helmet – was it that? No – do tell me, Queen.'

'You're muddling it up with crusaders, you silly little thing,' said Miss Bess. 'How could he have been a crusader only a hundred years ago?'

'No, no, it isn't that – I said it was *like* it,' said Miss Lally, ready to cry. 'What's the other word for helmet?'

'I know,' said Master Francis, '*vizor*– and – '

'Yes, yes – and the old man was a *miser*, that's it,' said the child. 'Papa said so, and he said it's like a' illness, once people get it they can't leave off.'

Miss Bess and Master Francis could not help laughing at the funny way the child said it, nor could I myself, for that matter. And then they went on to tell me more of the strange old story – how their great grandfather and their grandfather after him had always gone on hoping the missing money would sooner or later turn up, though it never did, till – putting what the children told me together with my lady's own words – it became clear that poor Sir Hulbert had come into a sadly impoverished state of things.

'Perhaps the late baronet and his father were not of the "saving" sort,' I said to myself, and from what I came to hear afterwards, I fancy I was about right.

After a while my lady came to our end of the carriage. She was afraid, she said, I'd find Miss Baby too heavy – wouldn't I lay her comfortably on the seat, there was plenty of room? – my lady was always thoughtful for others – and then when we had got the child settled, she sat down and joined in our talk a little.

'We've been telling Martha about Treluan and about the old uncle that did something with the money,' said Miss Bess.

My lady did not seem to mind.

'It is a queer story, isn't it?' she said. 'Worse than queer, indeed – ' and she sighed. 'Though even with it, things would not be as they are, if other people had not added their part to them.'

She glanced round in a half impatient way, and somehow her glance fell on Master Francis, and I almost started as I caught sight of the expression that had come over her face – it was a look of real dislike.

'Sit up, Francis – do, for goodness' sake,' she said sharply; 'you make yourself into a regular humpback.'

The boy's pale, almost sallow face reddened all over. He had been listening with interest to the talking, and taking his part in it. Now he straightened himself nervously, murmuring something that sounded like, 'I beg your pardon, Aunt Helen,' and sat gazing out of the window beside him as if lost in his own thoughts. I busied myself with pulling the rugs better over Miss Baby, so that my lady should not see my face just then. But I think she felt sorry for her sharp tone, for when she spoke again it was even more pleasantly than usual.

'Have you told nurse other things about Treluan, children?' she said. 'It is really a dear old place,' she went on to me; 'it might be made *quite* delightful if Sir Hulbert could spend a little more upon it. I had set my heart on new furnishing your room this year, Bess darling, but I'm afraid it will have to wait.'

'Never mind, dear,' said Miss Bess comfortingly, in her old-fashioned way, 'there's no hurry. If I could have fresh covers to the chairs, the furniture itself – I mean the *wood* part – is quite good.'

'I did get some nice chintz in London,' said her mamma; 'there was some selling off rather cheap. But it's the getting things made – everything down with us is so difficult and expensive,' and my lady sighed. Her mind seemed full of the one idea, and I began to think she should try to take a cheerier view of things.

'If you'll excuse me mentioning it,' I said, 'I have had some experience in the cutting out of chair-covers and such things. It would be a great pleasure to me to help to make the young ladies' rooms nice.'

'That would be very nice indeed,' said my lady; 'I really should like to do what we can to brighten up the old house. I expect it will look very gloomy to you, nurse, till you get used to it. I do want Bess's room to look better. Of course Lally is in the nursery still, and won't need a room of her own for a long time yet.'

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