Molesworth Mrs.

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# Molesworth Mrs. Hathercourt

## Chapter One
## “Twoe Sisters.”

“The haunted aisles, the gathering gloom,
By some stray shaft of eve made fair;
The stillness of the neighbouring air,
The faded legends of the tomb.
I loved them all…”

*Songs of Two Worlds.*

Hathercourt Church is not beautiful, though the internal evidence in favour of its having at one time been so is considerable. It has suffered sorely at the hands of plasterers and white-washers; yet the utmost efforts of these misguided people have not altogether succeeded in effacing the traces of a better state of things – there is still grandeur in the sweep of the lofty roof, oak-raftered behind its dingy white covering; still “meaning and mystery” in the quaintly varying windows; much satisfaction for the learned in such matters, and indeed for the unlearned too, in the unmistakable beauty of the carved screen, the one object

untampered with since the days when it gladdened the eyes of the ancient men who fashioned it, long, long ago.

A *very* long "long ago" that time used to seem to Mary Western when, in the intervals of her attention to the service, she sometimes dreamed of those far-away days. She was not much given to dreaming, but in Hathercourt Church there were circumstances under which the temptation became irresistible.

After a course of years the words of the morning service, especially when read, Sunday after Sunday, by the same familiar voice with precisely the same intonations, are apt to grow monotonous; and had Mary not occasionally allowed her thoughts to go wool-gathering, the chances are that her brown straw hat would have been seen to nod, and she might have fallen asleep altogether. For that part of Sunday morning which preceded their appearance in church was a tiring and trying ordeal to the elder daughters of the Western household. There was the early class at the school, there were "the boys" at home to keep peace among, there were the very little children in the nursery to coax into unwonted quiet, for on Sunday mornings "papa" really must not be disturbed, and mamma, "poor mamma," looked to her girls to do their part in helping her.

Hathercourt Rectory offered in every particular a contrast to its neighbour, the church. The one was old, very old, the other comparatively new; the Rectory was full to overflowing of life and noise and bustle, the church, even when its whole congregation was assembled, seemed empty and bare and

strangely silent.

"It is thinking about all the people that used to be here – the air is too full of their voices for outs to be heard much," Mary said to herself sometimes, and her girlish eyes would see strange scenes, and strange murmurs would sound in her ears. There was the leper window in the chancel, which alone, she had been told, testified to a date not more recent than that of the reign of King John. Mary's glance never fell upon it without a shudder, as in imagination – imagination in this case no doubt falling far short of reality – she saw huddled together the crowd of accursed beings, old world Pariahs, gazing up with bleared yet longing eyes at the priestly forms about to dispense the mystery to them, doubtless with little meaning but that of a charm. Then there were the tablets on the walls, many of them very old, telling in a few simple words a whole life history, or in some cases that of an entire family, whose members had either died out or left the neighbourhood so long that these chronicles of death were all that remained to tell of their ever having lived.

There was one tablet in particular on which Mary, sitting in her own corner of the wide bare pew, had for so many years, Sunday after Sunday, allowed her eyes to rest that it had grown to seem to her a part of her own life. The service would not have been the same to her without it; her father, she almost fancied, could not have got through his morning's work had the tablet been removed from its place, a little to the left of the reading-desk. Mary knew its burden by heart as well as, or better than, "the creed, the ten

commandments, and the Lord's prayer," yet she could no more help reading it afresh every time she came into church than one can help counting the tantalising telegraph-wires, as they slowly rise up, up, then down again, from the window of a railway-carriage.

Of a time far remote from railways and telegraphs told the old tablet in Hathercourt Church.

"Here lieth," so ran the inscription, headed in the first place by an imposing coat-of-arms, the date 1597, and the initials M.B. – "Here lieth the bodi of Mawde, the elder sister of the twoe dovghters of Arthur Mayne, late of Southcotte, and the late wife of John Beverley of Hathercourt, who departed this worlde the sixt day of November, 1597, whiche John and Mawde had issve five soones and five dovghters, whiche Mawde, the wife of the seid John Beverley, esqvier, and dovghter of the seid Arthur Mayne, esqvier, was 37 yeres oolde at the time of her deathe."

Mary's meditations on "whiche Mawde" represented various stages in her own history. Long ago, in the days of little girlhood, the era of brown straw hats and tendency to nod, it was not Mawde herself, so much as the great army of "soones and dovghters" she had left behind, on which her imagination dwelt. They must have been quite tiny things, she calculated, some of these Beverley boys and girls, when their mother died. How they must have missed her! How, beyond words, terrible would be *their* plight, that of the nineteenth century Western children, that is to say, in such a case! Mary trembled at the mere dream of

such a possibility. Poor little Beverley boys and girls! what had become of them all? Had they grown up into good men and women, and married and had children of their own, and died, and in their turn, perhaps, had tablets put up about them in far-away churches? What a great many stories might be told of all that had happened to poor Mawde's children and children's children since that dreary "sixt of November" when they were left motherless!

But as time passed on, and Mary grew into womanhood, Mawde herself engaged her sympathy. Thirty-seven when she died, that was not so *very* old. She must have been married young, probably, and had a busy life of it. Was her husband kind and good, and did she love him and look up to him? They could not have been poor, that was one comfort to think of; life, even with the ten "soones and dovghters," could not have been quite so hard upon John Beverley's wife as, Mary thought with a little sigh, "mamma" found it sometimes. And then her fancy would wander to the sister dimly alluded to in the inscription, the *younger* daughter of Arthur Mayne. What was her name, what had become of her, and did she and Mawde love each other very much? Mary used to wonder, as her glance strayed to *her* sister at the other corner of the old pew – her own especial sister, for somehow Alexa and Josephine, being much the younger for one thing, never seemed *quite* as much her sisters as Lilias. How strange and sad that the record of affection should die, and only the bare fact of the old relationships exist! Mary could hardly picture to herself a tablet even three hundred years hence bearing

*her* name, on which there should be no mention of Lilias too.

The congregation at Hathercourt Church was never, under the most favourable circumstances, those even of "weather permitting" to the extent of cloudless skies and clean roads, anything but a scanty one. And on rainy days, or very cold days, or very hot days, it was apt to dwindle down to a depressing extent. Of an afternoon it was seldom quite so poor, for, unlike the denizens of the manufacturing regions, who would consider it very hard lines to have to hurry over their Sunday hot joint for the sake of so-called evening service three or four hours before its time, the agriculturalists, employers, and employed of Meadshire and its neighbouring counties, much prefer the half-past two o'clock service to any other: So, as a rule, Mr Western reserved his *new* sermon for the afternoon, contenting himself with choosing for the morning one of the neatly tacked together manuscripts which for many years had lain in a dusty pile in a corner of his study. Sometimes, when they compared notes on the subject, Lilias and Mary agreed that they preferred the old sermons to the new.

"Papa must have been clever when he was young," Mary would observe, thoughtfully.

"He is clever *now*," Lilias would rejoin, with some little show of indignation.

"Yes – but – I suppose anxieties, and cares, and growing older, cloud it over in a way," was the best solution Mary could arrive at as to why greater things had not come of her father's talents.

Perhaps the truth was that they were not very remarkable – not so remarkable, certainly, as to have forced for themselves a way through the adverse circumstances of being united to a somewhat easy-going, kindly, and contented nature such as that of the Rector of Hathercourt, whose worldly needs had never been pressing enough to force him to great exertion, who loved the place he had lived in for a quarter of a century, and was not hard upon his people, even though they were averse to morning service, and now and then indulged in forty winks, even of an afternoon.

"We have got into each other's ways," he would say sometimes, with a mixture of deprecation and self-congratulation, when, even to Hathercourt, echoes of the strange noises beginning to be heard in the ecclesiastical "great world" would find their way. "We understand each other, and know each other's good points. I don't pretend to go along with all these changes, though I am far from saying no good may come out of them. But they are not in our way – they are not in our way; and, after all, there is something in letting well alone. It is something to feel, as I hope to do when I die, that at least I haven't left my people *worse* men and women than I found them – eh, Polly?"

For on his second daughter's face there came sometimes a look her father hardly understood – a look of questioning and consideration, of less readiness to take things just as she found them, than altogether tallied with his philosophy. Yet Mary was his favourite child. Lilias disagreed with him openly in her sweet-

tempered way, grumbling with a sunny face at their monotonous and secluded life, and openly avowed her determination to change it for a different one, should she ever get a chance of doing so to advantage.

"What *would* you do with five old maids, papa?" she would say sometimes. "Just fancy us all in a doleful row – the *five* Miss Westerns! In ten years hence even Francie will be grown up, remember."

"Ten years may bring – indeed, are sure to bring many changes, Lily dear," her mother would say – "some, perhaps, that it would take half the heart out of us could we foresee."

"Mamma is so sensible and reasonable always, I sometimes think she has forgotten what it was to be a girl," said the elder to the younger sister one October Sunday morning as they were crossing the pretty little bit of inclosed meadow land which was all that separated the church from the Rectory.

"No," said Mary, "it isn't that; she knows and remembers quite well. It is that she knows *too* well, I fancy."

"How do you mean, Polly? I'm stupid at understanding things, unless people say them plainly. Stay a minute, we are in plenty of time – nobody is coming to church yet, and it is so nice here under the trees." Lilias leaned against one of a beautiful cluster of horse-chestnuts growing in the middle of the church paddock, and as she spoke looked up through the already fast baring branches to the cold, grey, blue sky overhead. "Dear me, how very quickly the leaves are falling this year!" she said, "it was

that stormy weather in September that shook them, and, once they begin to fall, winter seems to come with a rush."

Mary smiled, and her lips moved as if she was going to speak, but she stopped and said nothing.

"What were you going to say, Mary?" asked Lilias, whose eyes had idly journeyed down from the sky to her sister's face. "Why did you stop?"

"On second thoughts I thought it not worth saying," replied Mary, "but I'll tell you if you like. It was only what you said about the leaves – it made me think that was what mother feels. *She* knows how fast they fall once they begin, and it makes her afraid for us in a way. *She* doesn't want to hurry us out into the storms; we have always been so well sheltered."

Lilias looked at her sister for a minute without speaking. "How prettily you see things," she said, admiringly. "You think of things that would never come into my head, yet people fancy you are the practical and prosaic one of us all. I believe it is all because you are called Mary."

"But Mary was just *not* the practical and prosaic one. You mean Martha."

"No; no, I don't. Marys nowadays are practical and prosaic, any way. I don't mean to say that you are, except sometimes, perhaps. I think you must be very like what mamma was at your age, but I fancy you are cleverer and – "

"And what?"

"And wiser – at least, in some ways. You would not be satisfied

to marry just such a person as my father must have been; you would want some one more energetic and stronger altogether."

"Perhaps," said Mary. "But I do not think we need speculate about that sort of thing for me, Lilias; there's plenty of time to think what sort of a person I would marry, if ever I do, which very likely I won't."

"Don't speak like Mrs Gamp, and please don't be so sensible, Mary. If you only would be silly sometimes, you would be perfect – quite perfect," said Lilias.

Mary smiled.

"But indeed," continued Lilias, "I am not at all sure that it *is* sensible to look at things as you do. If none of us marry, or do anything for ourselves, it will come to be rather hard upon papa in a few years."

"But why suppose none of us will marry?" said Mary. "It is unlikely, to say the least, that we shall *all* be old maids."

"I don't know that it is," replied Lilias, seriously. "I am three-and-twenty, remember, and you not two years younger, and things go on just the same year after year; we never make a new acquaintance or go anywhere."

"Except to the Brocklehurst ball," put in Mary.

"Oh, that Brocklehurst ball," said Lilias, laughing. "Many and many a time, when it comes round again, I have been tempted to give up going, just that I might be able to say I had not been, when every one shakes it at me reproachfully if ever I grumble. What good is the Brocklehurst ball, Mary? It is so crowded, and

the people come all in great parties; we never get to know any one. I suppose our beauty is not of that striking order to shine out through country made dresses, and crowds of finer people! I enjoy it, of course – even dancing with Frank Bury is better than not dancing at all."

"Or with one of Mr Greville's curates," said Mary, mischievously.

"Don't," said Lilias. "I cannot bear the subject. I told you some time ago – and I shall always say so – the bane of our life has been curates. Because papa is a poor clergyman, with lots of daughters, every one seems to think there can be, and should be, nothing before us but curates. It almost makes me dislike papa, to think he ever was one!"

"Lilias," said Mary, suddenly, "we shall be late. The school children have gone in, and there are the Smithson girls coming up the lane, and they are always late. Do come!"

It felt chilly in church that morning. There was a decidedly autumn "feel" in the air, and the ancient building always seemed ready to meet winter, with its gloom and cold, more than half way. With corresponding reluctance to admit warmth and sunshine, it shrank from the genial spring-time – summer had to be undeniably summer before its presence could be realised within the aged walls. And this morning the congregation was even unusually small, which made the bareness and chilliness more obtrusive.

Mary was busy in a calculation as to how many years would

have passed since Mawde Beverley's death "come" the next "sixt of November," a date fast approaching, for it was now late in October, when there fell on her ears a sound – the mere shadow of a sound it seemed at first – which almost made her think she was dreaming. Such a sound had *never* before been heard in Hathercourt Church on a Sunday morning; the sensation it produced in her, as gradually it grew louder and clearer, and more unmistakable, was so overpowering that she was positively afraid to look up. Had she done so she would have expected to see the whole congregation turning to the door in awestruck anticipation of some portentous event. For the sound was that of carriage wheels – coming nearer, nearer, till at last – yes, there could now be no mistake, they stopped at the church gate. Then, after a little pause, came the creaking of the heavy oaken door, opened cautiously – the intruders evidently expecting themselves to be late comers – and seeming, as is the manner of doors, on that account to make all the more noise. Again a little hesitation, then the sound of footsteps, several footsteps, coming along the aisle, the rustle of dresses, a faint, indescribable stir in the air, the result, probably, of the heads of nearly all the congregation present being turned in the direction of the persons approaching. Mary's curiosity overcame her at last. She glanced up, first at Lilias, whose eye she caught for an instant, an instant in which it spoke volumes.

"You *must* look at what is coming up the aisle," it said, "it is worth looking at. See how discreetly I manage to do so – my

prayer-book a little to one side. No one would guess I was not attending to the service."

But from where Mary sat so much diplomacy was hardly called for. Another moment brought the newcomers full in her view, as they filed in, one after the other, two ladies, then two gentlemen, to a pew some little way in front. The first lady was middle-aged, if not elderly, well-dressed and rather fat; the second was tall and thin, and seemingly very young, well-dressed too, and – an accidental turn of her head brought the face full in sight – yes, there was no doubt of it, very, *very* pretty. Pretty with the prettiness that is almost, but not *quite*, beauty, that might, perhaps, grow to be such in a few years, for just now she could not, thought Mary, be more than sixteen or seventeen – the rounded cheek and white forehead, on which the dark, soft hair lay so nestlingly, had no lines or suspicions of furrows such as are seldom altogether escaped even at twenty; the nose, the mouth, the lovely, happy looking eyes, showing bright blue through the long black lashes, all told of the very first spring-time of life; the poise of the graceful little head on the shoulders, the flutter of unconcealed interest with which she looked about her, put her extreme youth beyond a doubt.

"How pretty she is!" thought Mary. "How bright and sweet and happy she looks!"

And for a moment or two the girl personally so interested her that she forgot to ask herself the question at which Lilias had long ago aimed, "Who can she be?" or rather, "Who can they be?"

For the "they" was made up by more interesting objects than the well-dressed, rather fat lady at the top of the pew. The rest of the "they" consisted of two gentlemen, who next fell under Mary's investigation. Neither of them was old, yet one was decidedly older than the other; both were good-looking, but one was better than good-looking, he was undoubtedly handsome, and his expression was almost as attractive in its way as that of the young girl beside him. Could they be brother and sister? thought Mary to herself. There was no striking likeness between them, certainly, but neither was there any decided *unlikeness*, and she fancied there was something brother and sister-like in the way they sat together, sharing a hymn-book when the time came for the anthem's substitute, Hathercourt Church being supposed to be "a place where they sing," though the way in which the singing was performed was sometimes a matter of mortification to the Western girls, considering the time and labour they bestowed on the "choir." It seemed unusually bad to Mary to-day, listening, as she caught herself doing, with "other people's ears;" and once, when she fancied that she detected the ghost of a smile pass between the two young people on whom she was bestowing so much attention, she felt her cheeks grow hot, and she turned her eyes away from them with a little feeling of irritation.

"I wish strangers would stay away, if they come to criticise," she said to herself.

Just then for the first time she caught distinct sight of the face of the other gentleman, the elder of the two. It was grave and

serious enough to please her, surely! Too grave and serious by far, she decided. It was like turning from sunshine into gloom to watch his dark, quiet face after the two beside him. He looked older, a great deal older, than his companions.

"Thirty-three or four, at least," was the age with which many credited him, but when she looked at his face again, she doubted the correctness of her opinion. It was more grave than old, after all, and after all, too, there was something rather nice about it. What fun it would be to talk them all over with Lilias afterwards! What – Suddenly a little pause in her father's voice startled her wandering thoughts back to the present; the sermon was just coming to an end, and with considerable compunction Mary confessed the truth to herself – she had not heard a word of it! Certainly these strangers had a great deal to answer for.

There was a little delay in the coming out of church. The Smithson girls, and old Mrs Bedell, and even the school-children and the clerk seemed to be stupefied by the presence of the unexpected visitors; they all hung back and stared at the strangers, and at each other, as if they did not know what to do, till at last Lilias Western, waxing impatient, touched her mother with the end of her parasol, and leaning across little Francie and Brooke, whispered something which resulted in the rector's wife, contrary to the usual order of procedure, leading the way down the aisle, followed by her goodly array of sons and daughters. Thus encouraged, the rest of the congregation followed with a rush, and when Lilias looked back from the door, there was no

one to be seen in the church but the two gentlemen and two ladies, gazing about them in dignified desertion.

"What a set of boors all the people make themselves look," exclaimed Lilias, almost before the Rectory party was out of earshot of the other members of the congregation.

"Hush, Lilias, some of them will hear you," said her mother. "They don't mean to be rude, poor people. You must remember how unaccustomed they are to strangers."

"Mamma," interrupted George, the second Western boy, hurrying up – "mamma, who can those people be? They've come out of church, and they're standing staring about as if they didn't know what to do. Where can they be going to? Their carriage hasn't come back."

Lilias's fair face flushed – a very small amount of excitement was enough to deepen the soft pink colour of her cheeks at any time.

"We should do something, mamma," she said, appealingly. "Shouldn't Basil or George run back and ask them if they would like to wait at the Rectory till their carriage comes? You, Basil, run back, do, and ask them if they wouldn't like to come in and rest a little." (Basil was much the best-looking of "the boys.")

"Rest – rubbish!" he said, contemptuously. "Haven't they been resting in church all this time? I'm not going with such a nonsensical message," and he turned away.

"George, you go, as Basil seems afraid of behaving like a gentleman," said Mrs Western.

But George, too, hesitated.

"I wouldn't mind if it wasn't for those ladies. Mother, they are so *awfully* grand," he said, beseechingly.

Lilias's face grew scarlet.

"I will go myself, then," she exclaimed, and turning quickly, she had gone some way across the grass before the others quite understood her intention. Mrs Western looked distressed.

"Lilias excites herself so," she said.

"I'll ran after her, mother," said Mary, quickly, and in another moment she was by her sister's side. Lilias was still flushed and breathless to boot.

"Did you ever know such ill-mannered, rude – " she was beginning, but Mary interrupted her.

"They are just *boys*," she said, philosophically. "But, Lilias, you have put yourself quite into a fever. Let me go and speak to these ladies – yes, do, I would rather – it is better for me than for you."

"But why?" said Lilias, doubtfully, though visibly relaxing her speed.

Mary laughed.

"I can't say exactly, but somehow it's not dignified for you to go hurrying back in that sort of way, and for me – well, I don't think it matters."

Lilias still hesitated.

"It isn't that," she said; "I wouldn't have you do anything I would not do myself, only – Mary, you will laugh at me – I do

feel *so* shabbily dressed."

Mary did not laugh. She looked at her sister with real sympathy and concern. There are some of the trials of poverty whose stings are even more acutely felt at three-and-twenty than at seventeen, and Mary pitied Lilias where she might have laughed at Alexa.

"Let me speak to them, then," she repeated. "Do, Lilias; I will hurry on, and you may follow slowly and see how I comport myself," and Lilias made no further objection.

"How Lilias under-estimates herself," she thought. "Who, with eyes in their heads, would think of her dress when they see her face?"

She was close to the little group of strangers by this time. They were standing just outside the porch, "staring about them," George had said – rather, it seemed to Mary, examining with some interest the outside appearance of the ancient church. Three of them did not see her approach, the two ladies and the handsome, fair-haired man were at a little distance and looking the other way; only the elder of the two gentlemen was standing so as to face her, and he appeared sublimely unconscious of her errand having anything to do with himself or his friends. He moved aside a little as she drew near, evidently with the idea that she was going into the church again. Mary's heart beat a little faster; this was by no means what she had bargained for, but there was no retreat possible now. There was Lilias slowly advancing in the background, her grey alpaca skirt trailing behind her on the

grass with all the elegance of silk or cashmere – somehow Lilias *never* looked shabbily dressed! – her very observant blue eyes doubtless taking in the situation fully. Mary felt that the credit of the family was in her hands; she must prove herself equal to the occasion.

"I – I beg your pardon – excuse me," she began, but the gentleman did not seem to understand that she was speaking to him; half mechanically he raised his hat, under the impression that the young woman, or lady, he had scarcely observed which, was about to pass by him into the porch, when again she spoke, and this time more distinctly. "Excuse me," she said again; "mamma – my mother, I mean – thinks perhaps the ladies will be tired. Do you think they would like to come over to the Rectory and rest a little?"

# Chapter Two
# Who – Whence and Why?

Joan. – ”… she with the green kirtle too. Ah, but they are bravely clad!”

Isabel. – “And see, sister, he in the crimson doublet. Save me, but they are a pretty pair!”

Dame Winnifrith. – “Fie on ye, damsels! Call ye that a saying of your prayers? Fie on ye!”

Old Play.

She had stopped just in front of him. This time her voice could not fail to attract his attention, and with a slight start – for his thoughts had been busied with matters far away from the present – he turned a little and looked at her. This was what he saw: a girl with a face still slightly tanned by last summer’s sun – or was the brown tinge, growing rosier on the cheeks, her normal complexion? afterwards he thought of it, and could not decide – very bright, *very* wavy chestnut-coloured hair, ruffled a little about the temples, and growing low on the forehead; pleasant, hearty eyes, looking up at him with something of embarrassment, but more of amusement, eyes of no particular colour, but good, nice eyes all the same – a girl whom it is difficult to describe, but whose face, nevertheless, once learned, could not easily be forgotten. There was something about it which softened the

seriousness of the man looking at her; his own face relaxed, and when he spoke it was with a smile, which, beginning in the grave, dark eyes before it journeyed down to the mouth, so transformed the whole face that Mary mentally improved upon her former dictum; there was certainly something not "rather" only, but "very nice" about the elder of the strangers "when he smiled." Mary had yet to learn the rarity of these pleasant gleams of sunshine.

"I beg your pardon," he said – for notwithstanding that Mary's alpaca was several degrees shabbier than her sister's and that her little white bonnet was of the plainest "home-make," he felt not an instant's doubt as to her being that which even in the narrowest conventional sense is termed "a lady" – "I am so sorry. I had no idea you were speaking to me. I shall tell my aunt and sister what you say; it is very kind of your – I beg your pardon again. I did not quite catch what you said."

He had been on the point of turning to speak to his companions, but stopped for a moment, looking at Mary inquiringly as he did so.

"My message was from my mother, Mrs Western – I should have explained," Mary replied. "I am – my father is the clergyman; we live at the Rectory opposite."

She bent her head in the direction of her home. The stranger's brow cleared.

"Of course," he said, "I understand. Thank you very much. – Alys," he called, hastening a step or two in the direction of the

two ladies – "Alys, tell your aunt that this young lady has come to ask if you would like to wait at the Rectory till the carriage comes."

The girl caught the sound of her own name in a moment; she had quick ears.

"How kind of you – how very kind of you!" she exclaimed, running up to where Mary still stood. "Laurence, please ask aunt to say yes. I *would* like to go across to the Rectory." She was close beside the gentleman now. "Laurence," she continued, giving him a little pull to make him listen to what she went on to say in a whisper, "I want to see those girls, the clergyman's daughters; I noticed them coming out of church. One is *so* pretty. Ah, yes, there she is!" as she descried Lilias standing a little way off. "Is that your sister?" she went on, turning again to Mary. "Do you think she would mind if I went to speak to her? I do so want to see her quite close – she is so very, very pretty."

The gentleman looked annoyed.

"Alys," he was beginning, "you really should – " But at this juncture up came the fair-haired man and the elderly lady, and from another direction Lilias, her curiosity overpowering her misgivings, moved slowly towards the group. Mary's position was growing a little uncomfortable; she was glad to take refuge by her sister's side. Again Mrs Western's message of hospitality was repeated, this time to the elderly lady, whose name Mary thus discovered to be Winstanley; she, too, was profuse in her expression of thanks.

"So very kind of you," she said to Lilias, who, feeling extremely conscious of her grey alpaca, replied by a bow of extra dignity.

"I really do not know what we had best do," continued Miss Winstanley; "the carriage should have been back by this time."

"If you and Alys like to wait at the Rectory, Cheviott and I can walk on to see if it is coming," said the fair-haired young man, speaking for the first time.

At the sound of his voice Lilias looked up, and an expression of surprise crossed her face.

"Captain Beverley!" she exclaimed, impulsively, instantly, however, appearing to regret the avowal of recognition, for she grew scarlet and glanced at Mary in real distress. "I am sure he will not know me again," she was thinking. "What a horrid, stupid thing of me to have done! – a man I only met once in my life, and that at a ball nearly two years ago! What *will* he think of me?"

Mary felt perplexed. She could not understand her sister's embarrassment, and was therefore unable to help her. But the awkwardness lasted for a moment only. With a flush of evident gratification, Captain Beverley stepped forward.

"Miss West!" he said, eagerly. "I was almost sure it was you, but I scarcely hoped you would remember me. I had no idea you lived at Hathercourt. Is it your home?"

"Yes," replied Lilias, though still with a shade of constraint in her manner, "my father – our father," turning to Mary with a pretty sisterly air, "Mr Western, is the rector."

"Dear me, how curious I did not know it," said Captain Beverley. "Cheviott," he continued, turning to his companion, "you remember our meeting Miss West – Western, I mean – at the ball at Brocklehurst the year before last?"

Mr Cheviott bowed, somewhat stiffly, it seemed to Mary.

"I fear you are mistaken, Arthur," he said, "I do not think I ever had the honour of being introduced to Miss Western."

"Arthur" looked annoyed, and as if he hardly knew what to do; Lilias's face flushed again, and Miss Winstanley began talking to Mr Cheviott in a hurried, fussy manner, with so palpably evident an anxiety to set every one at ease that she only succeeded in making them all more uncomfortable. Mary, animated by a sudden consciousness of antagonism to Mr Cheviott, came quietly to the rescue.

"I think, Lilias," she said to her sister, speaking distinctly, so that they all heard her, "I think mamma will be wondering why we are so long. If these ladies, Miss Winstanley and Miss – "

"Cheviott," put in Captain Beverley, hastily.

"Miss Cheviott, do not think it worth while to rest at the Rectory, perhaps we had better not interrupt them any longer. Of course," she went on, turning to Miss Winstanley with a smile that showed she meant what she said, "if your carriage does not come soon, and we can do anything to help you, we shall be very glad. One of the boys can go to the village to see about it, if you like; we have no carriage, otherwise I am sure – "

"Thank you, thank you," interrupted Miss Winstanley,

nervously glancing at her silent nephew, and, without his permission, not daring to commit herself to anything but generalities, "you are, really, so very kind, but I think the carriage is sure to come soon. Don't you think so, Laurence?"

"It's here now," exclaimed Alys Cheviott, in a disappointed tone; "and Laurence," she added, in a lower tone, but not low enough to prevent Mary's hearing the words, "you are very, *very* cross."

Mary was quite inclined to agree with her, but, looking up at the moment, she caught a smile on Mr Cheviott's face as he made some little answer to his sister, a smile which so altered his expression that she felt puzzled. "I don't like him," she said to herself, "he is haughty and disagreeable, but still I fancy he could be nice if he liked."

Another minute or two and the strangers were driven away – with smiles and thanks from pretty Alys and her aunt, and bows of equal deference, but differing in cordiality, from the two gentlemen. Lilias and Mary walked slowly homewards across the grass, Lilias unusually silent.

"Well, Lilias," said the younger sister, after waiting a little to see if Lilias was not going to speak, "well, we have had quite an adventure for once."

"Yes," said Lilias, absently, "quite an adventure. But, oh, Mary," she went on, with a sudden change of voice, "don't speak of it; I am *so* disgusted with myself."

"What for?" said Mary. "I didn't understand. Was it about

recognising that gentleman, Captain Beverley, you called him, I think? And some one called him Arthur – how curious!” she added to herself.

“Yes,” said Lilias, “it is about that. I met him two years ago, and danced with him twice, I think. I thought he was very nice-looking and danced well, but, *of course*, that was all I thought about him. I think I must have told you about him at the time; it was the year you did not go to the ball – Brooke was ill, don’t you remember, with the measles, and you were nursing him because you had had it – but I had nearly forgotten him, and then seeing him so unexpectedly again his name came into my head and I said it! It must have looked as if I had never seen a gentleman before to have remembered him so distinctly – oh, I am so ashamed of myself!”

“I don’t think you need to be. I think it was perfectly natural,” said Mary.

“Oh, yes, in one way, I know it was. I am not really ashamed of *myself*, I did nothing wrong. It is what those people must have thought of me,” said Lilias.

“I wish you would not care what people think of you,” answered Mary. “What does it matter? We shall probably never see any of them again. How pretty the girl was! By-the-bye, Captain Beverley’s name is Arthur, he may be a descendant of ‘Mawde’ in the tablet, Lilias. Her name was Beverley, and her father’s ‘Arthur.’ Very likely one of her sons would be called after her father. I wonder if that has anything to do with their coming

here," she went on, growing more interested in Captain Beverley than she had hitherto appeared.

"How do you mean?" asked Lilias.

"Why, supposing he is a great grandson, a great, great, great grandson – oh, more than that – there has been time for six or seven generations – supposing he is a descendant of Mawde's, he may have something to do with this neighbourhood, and that may have brought him here."

"We should have heard of him before this," objected Lilias. "Papa knows every land-owner of any consequence in the country by name, and I never heard of any one called Beverley."

"Here is papa," said Mary, looking back just as Mr Western emerged from the church, where he had been detained later than usual by some little official discussion, "let us wait for him and ask him. Papa," she continued, as her father came up to them, "do you know that one of those gentlemen who came to church is called Beverley?"

"And Mary is making up quite a romance about his being descended from the old woman on the tablet," said Lilias, laughing, but yet not without interest. "There are no people of the name hereabouts now?"

"Beverley," repeated Mr Western, "how do you know that is his name?"

The girls explained.

"No, there are no gentle-people of that name hereabouts nowadays," said Mr Western. "The old Hathercourt Beverleys

have quite died out, except, by-the-bye, – I was told the other day that old John Birley, who died at Hathercourt Edge last year, was a lineal descendant of theirs."

"That rough old farmer!" exclaimed Mary, her thoughts flying back to "Mawde."

"Yes, you remember him? It was Greville, I think, that was telling me about it. The name 'Birley' he said was only a corruption of Beverley. The old man was very proud of his descent. He left the farm and what money he had saved to a Mr Beverley, whom he believed to be of the same family – no one in this neighbourhood. By-the-bye, that may be the young man you are telling me about, Mary, which was he – the fair or the dark one?"

"The fair one," replied Mary, "the other was a Mr Cheviott."

"Cheviott – ah, indeed," said Mr Western, with a tone of faintly discernible satisfaction. "I fancy that must be Mr Cheviott of Romary. You remember Romary, girls, that beautiful old place near Withenden. We went there picnicking once, several years ago."

"Yes, I remember," said Lilias, "but I thought the people living there were called Romary, not Cheviott."

"Well, this Mr Cheviott was a nephew or grandson – all the male Romarys had died out, I suppose," said Mr Western.

They were at the Rectory door by this time. An unmistakable odour of roast mutton greeted them as it opened.

"It must be dinner-time," said Lilias, going in. "Dear me," she

added to herself, as she slowly made her way up-stairs to the plainly furnished but neat little bedroom that she shared with her sister, "dear me, how nice it would be to be rich, and have nice pretty luncheons instead of these terrible early dinners, so hot and fussy, and all the children crowding round the table! Dear me – "

But she took off her bonnet and shawl and went down with a cheerful face to help in the distribution of the roast mutton, bright and merry and very fair to look upon, as was her wont.

Mary had waited a moment at the hall door with her father. They stood looking out at the autumn landscape; there came a sudden gleam of sunshine through the trees, lighting up the grass with a yellow radiance, and lingering gently on the many-coloured stones of the venerable church.

"It's a nice old place, after all, child, is it not?" said Mr Western.

"Yes, indeed, father," replied the girl.

"I, for my part, am very content to think that I shall spend my life here, and rest peacefully over there in the shadow of my old church, when the time comes," continued the Rector; "but for you young people I suppose it's different somehow," and he sighed a little.

"How do you mean, father dear?" said Mary, softly, and she came closer to him and slid her hand into his arm. "What makes you speak that way to-day?"

"I don't exactly know, my dear," he replied. "Possibly the sight

of those strangers in church set me considering things. I should like you girls to have a few more – well, advantages I suppose they are in a sense, after all – I should like to see Lilias and you as nicely dressed as that pretty girl this morning, eh, Mary?"

"Dear father?" said Mary, affectionately. "But we're very happy, papa. I am, at least, and Lilias tries to be anyway. But I dare say it's harder for her than for me – she *might* get so very much admiration, and all that sort of thing, you know."

Mr Western smiled – there *were* people in the world, he thought to himself, who would see something to admire in the eager face beside him too; but he said nothing, and just then the dinner-bell rang, and a hurry of approaching footsteps told that to some at least of the Rectory party it was not an unwelcome sound. Mary fled up-stairs, her father followed the hungry flock into the dining-room. And the Sunday meal that day was considerably enlivened by discussions about the mysterious strangers. Who were they? – whence had they come, and wherefore? – and, "Will they come again next Sunday?" said little Frances, a question which her eldest sister very summarily answered in the negative.

"They have given you all something to talk about, children, anyway," said Mrs Western.

"Yes," said Basil, who, on the strength of having left school three months ago, considered himself a man of the world, "it's ridiculous how people get excited about nothing at all, when they live such shut-up lives. I bet you the whole neighbourhood's full of it. All the old women will be discussing these unfortunate

people over their tea-tables at this very moment."

"Not over their *tea*, Basil," said little Brooke. "They don't have tea till four o'clock."

# Chapter Three
# The Colour of the Spectacles

> "Mais, il faut bien le reconnaître, tout est relatif en ce monde, et les choses nous affectent toujours dans la mesure de l'éducation que nous avons reçue et du milieu social où nous avons été élevés."
>
> Enault.

Mrs Western's views of life differed considerably from those of her husband – she had quite another stand-point. She was not ambitious, nothing in her experience had ever tended to make her so, and though by nature she was far less "easy-going" than the Rector, yet her thoughts concerning the future of her children were not by any means so harassing and dissatisfied as his. Had she seen anything to worry about, she *would* have worried about it, but she did not see that there was. Her boys and girls were infinitely better off, better cared for, better educated than she had been, and happier far than she ever remembered herself before her marriage, and she saw no reason why, if they turned out good and sensible, as they mostly promised to do, they should not all get on fairly well in life, without feeling that their start in the great race had been weighted with undue disadvantages.

Yet the Rector's wife was not a *peculiarly* reasonable woman; circumstances mainly had made her appear so, or rather,

perhaps, had never called forth the latent *unreasonableness* which we are told, by authority we dare not question, is a part of every feminine character. When she married Mr Western, she was only a governess in a family where she was not unkindly treated, but where no special thought was bestowed upon her. She was not discontented, however; for the kindness she received she was sincerely grateful, and considered herself, on the whole, a fortunate girl. She was not remarkably pretty, but pleasing and gentle, and with a certain sedateness of air and manner not without a charm of its own. People spoke of her, when they did speak of her, which was not often, as "a very sensible girl;" in point of fact, she was more than sensible; she had both intellect and originality, neither of which was ever fully developed – in one sense, indeed, hardly developed at all. For her youth had been a depressing one; from her earliest years she had been familiar with poverty and privation, and she only was not altogether crushed by them because personally she had had experience of nothing else.

Her father had been one of the several younger sons of a rich and well-born man. But neither the riches nor the good birth had helped him on in life. He quarrelled with his parents by refusing to enter the profession designed for him; he made bad worse by a hasty and imprudent marriage; he hopelessly widened the breach by choosing to resent on his own people his young wife's speedy death, and declining to accept any help in the bringing up of his motherless little daughter. And then his old parents died, and the brothers and sisters, married and scattered, and absorbed in their

individual interests, learned to forget, or to remember but with a sore reproach worse than forgetting, this hot-headed, ungrateful "Basil," who had not condoned by success in his self-sought career the follies of his youth. And before many more years had passed, poor Basil Brooke died himself, nursed, and comforted, and sorrowed for by but one little solitary being, his thirteen-years-old Margaret, for whom at the last he had managed to scrape, together a tiny sum that left her not absolutely destitute, but was enough to pay for her schooling till, at eighteen, she went out into the world on her own small account as one of the vast army of half-educated girls who call themselves governesses.

But if Margaret Brooke's pupils obtained no very great amount of so-called "book-learning" from their young teacher, at least they learned no harm, and indirectly no small amount of good. For she herself was good – good, and true, and healthy-minded, perfectly free from self-consciousness, or morbid repining after what had not fallen to her lot. Once in her governess life she came across some members of her dead father's family. Being really gentlefolks, though self-absorbed and narrow-minded, it did not occur to them to ignore their poor relations. They even went out of their way to show her some little kindness, which the girl accepted pleasantly and without bitterness; for, young as she was at the time of her father's death, she had yet been able to discern that the family estrangement had been mainly, if not altogether, of his own causing. So the rich Brookes spoke favourably of poor Margaret, and though it

was taken for granted among them that the fact of her existence was a mistake, she was, on the whole, regarded with approval as doing her part towards making the best of an unfortunate business. And when, two or three years later, Margaret, to her own inexpressible astonishment, found herself actually fallen in love with by the most charming and unexceptionable of young curates, a curate too with every prospect of before long becoming a rector, and when this prospect was ere long fulfilled, and Margaret, in consequence, became Mrs Western, her Brooke cousins approved of her still more highly, to the extent even of sending her a tea-pot, cream-jug, and sugar-basin of the best electro-plate as a wedding present.

But all that was now nearly a quarter of a century ago – the generation of Brookes who had seen Margaret in her youth, who had some of them been contemporaries of her father, had mostly died out – they were not a long-lived race – and the old relationship had grown to seem more of a legend than a fact. A legend, however, which, little as the young Westerns knew of the far-off cousins who now represented their mother's people, was not likely to be allowed by them to sink into oblivion. They were too well-bred and right-minded to be ashamed of their mother's position when their father wooed and won her, but, nevertheless, half unconsciously to themselves, perhaps, the knowledge of this fact made it all the more agreeable to be able to say to each other, with dignity and satisfaction, "Though mamma was poor when she was a girl, her family was quite as good, if not, indeed, better

than papa's."

And "papa" himself was the first always, on the rare occasions when such subjects came under discussion, to remind his girls and boys of the fact, but Mrs Western herself thought little about it. She lived in the present, even her lookings forward to the future were but a sort of transference of her own life and experience to others. She hoped that her daughters, if they married at all, would marry as happily as she had done, and beyond this she was not ambitious for them, and conscientiously tried to check Lilias's good-tempered murmurings at the monotony of their life by platitudes, in which she herself so entirely believed that they sometimes carried with them a certain weight.

Mrs Western was less interested than the rest of the Rectory party in the mysterious strangers who had so disturbed the Hathercourt devotions this Sunday morning. She did not like strangers; she had a vague fear of them – not from shyness, but from a sort of apprehensiveness which her early life, probably, had caused to become chronic with her. When Lilias snubbed little Frances's inquiry as to whether these ladies and gentlemen would come to church again next Sunday, in her heart the mother hoped the elder sister's "no, of course not," would be justified by the event, and, secretly, she chafed at the talk that went on round the table, talk in which even Mr Western was interested, as she could see.

"You remember Romary, Margaret?" he said, across the table,

"that splendid place near Withenden?"

"Yes, I remember it," replied Mrs Western, "but I don't like splendid places," she added, with a little smile.

"Nor splendid people?" said Lilias, half mischievously. "Isn't mother funny – odd I mean, in some ways – difficult to understand?" she said afterwards to Mary, "she seems so afraid of our ever going the least out of the jog-trot, stupid way."

"She is over-anxious, perhaps," said Mary.

"No, I don't think it is that exactly," said Lilias. "I think papa is the more anxious of the two. I sometimes wish mamma were a little more, not anxious exactly – I don't know what to call it – a *little* more worldly, perhaps." Mary laughed.

"You would have liked her to invite those fine people to luncheon last Sunday, and then, perhaps, they would have taken a fancy to us, and invited us to go to see them?" she said, inquiringly.

"Nonsense, Mary! Do leave off talking about those people. I am tired to death hearing about them," replied Lilias, impatiently. "Invite them to luncheon – to roast mutton and rice pudding, and a dozen children round the table! – Mary, I wish you wouldn't say such silly things."

"You are difficult to please, Lilias. Only the other day you told me, if I would be silly sometimes I should be almost perfect," said Mary, dryly.

And then Lilias kissed her, and called herself "cross," and there was peace again. But somehow, after this, the subject of

the strangers was scarcely alluded to.

And "next Sunday" came and went, and if Mary descried some little attempt at extra self-adornment on Lilias's part, she was wise enough not to take notice of it; and if Mr Western preached his new sermon in the morning instead of the afternoon, I question if any one discovered the fact. For, with these possible exceptions, the day was not a marked one in any way, and with a little sigh, and a smile too at her own folly, Lilias decided, as she fell asleep, that as yet there was little prospect of a turning-point in her life being at hand.

The week that followed this uneventful Sunday was a date to be remembered, and that had been tremulously anticipated by one heart, at least, among those of the Rectory party. It was to see the eldest son started on his career in life, and calm enough though she kept herself to outward appearance, to the mother this parting was a painful crisis. Her "boy Basil" was leaving her forever, for "boy" she could not expect him to return. He was going up to town for a few months in the first place, having been lucky enough to obtain a junior clerkship in a great mercantile firm, with a prospect – the few months over – of being transferred to the branch house abroad, where his chances of success, said the authorities, "if he behaved himself," were pretty certain in the long run, though not, in the mean time, bewilderingly brilliant. He was a good sort of a boy in his way, and family affection among the Westerns was fairly and steadily developed; but nevertheless, with the exception of his mother, none of

the household lost a night's rest on account of his approaching departure, and Lilias openly avowed her conviction that Basil was greatly to be envied, and that it would be far pleasanter for him to pay home visits now and then, when he knew something of the world, and could make himself entertaining, than to have a great hulking hobbledehoy always hanging about, and getting into mischief. Mary, too, agreed that "it was a very good thing for Basil," and nobody cried when he said good-bye except poor Francie, whose seven years were innocent of philosophy or common sense, and who only realised that her big brother was going "far, far away."

But still, when he was fairly gone, there fell over them all a certain depression – a sort of blank and flatness, which every one was conscious of, though no one would own it to another. It was a dull afternoon, too, threatening to rain, if not actually doing so, and, to suit Basil's convenience, they had had dinner at half-past twelve, a whole hour earlier than usual, so that by four o'clock Lilias declared she felt ready to go to bed.

"You are suffering from suppressed excitement, after all, I suspect," said Mary, looking up from Alexa's German translation, which she was correcting. "There is a sort of excitement in thinking poor Basil is really started, though we are glad of it."

"I am not excited; I wish I were," said Lilias, listlessly. "I am only idle and stupid!"

"Get something to do then," replied Mary. "There, I have

finished the school-room affairs for to-day. I wonder if mamma has anything she would like us to do – I can't ask her; she is up in her own room, and I don't like to disturb her yet. It is too dull to go out. Supposing we practice that duet, Lilias?"

"Supposing in the first place we make this room tidy," said Lilias, looking round her reflectively. "Supposing now, Mary – just *supposing* any one were to come to call, what would they think of this room?"

"They wouldn't think ill of the poor room," answered Mary, laughing, and setting to work energetically as she spoke to "tidy up;" "they would probably reserve their thoughts for the careless people who lived in it. There now, that looks better; let us poke up the fire a little, and draw the sofa near it for poor mother when she comes down, and I'll tell you what – I've got a thought, Lilias. Supposing we make the children have tea by themselves in the dining-room for once, and we have it in here for mother on a little table?"

"Yes, do," said Lilias, heartily; "it would be quite a treat for her."

"And I know the children will be good," said Mary; "they understand that mother is dull about Basil's going. We are to have a light supper at eight, you know, as papa will be back by then, so we can have tea earlier than usual."

"If there is any meal I dislike more than an early dinner," said Lilias, as she stood on the hearth-rug surveying the room, which, thanks to her own and her sister's efforts, now looked neat and

comfortable, “it is ‘a light supper.’ The room doesn’t look so bad now, Mary; somebody may come to call if he or she likes.”

It was really a pretty room; it was prettily shaped, and the look-out upon the old church through a long, rather narrow window at one end, evidently purposely designed, was striking and picturesque. Pretty and graceful, too, was the wide, low bow-window at the other end with a cushioned seat running all round, and in summer a pleasant view of the best kept bit of the Rectory garden. Even now in late autumn there was a bright, fresh look about the room, notwithstanding the extreme simplicity of the furniture and its unmistakable evidences of age; and when Mary had stirred up the fire into a brisk little blaze, and with her own hands arranged the tea-things on a small table beside the sofa, she felt very fairly satisfied with the aspect of the whole.

“Won’t mamma be pleased, Lilias, when she comes down?” she exclaimed. “I have made the tea; it’s all ready. Will you go up-stairs and ask her to come down, or shall I?”

“You deserve to go; it was your idea,” Lilias was beginning, when an unexpected sound made her suddenly stop short “Mary,” she exclaimed, “that’s the front door bell! What a bother – just as we have got all so comfortable for mamma! It must be old Miss Bury – nobody else would come to call on such a day; it seems like a judgment upon me for joking about visitors.”

“We can’t help it,” said Mary. “I only hope Ann will hear the bell and answer it quickly. She is sometimes so slow, and Miss Bury doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“There she is,” exclaimed Lilias, as the sound of feet crossing the hall was heard. “Who can it be, Mary? It doesn’t seem like Miss Bury’s voice.”

“Some one for papa, perhaps,” replied Mary; but almost as she spoke the door was thrown open, and Ann, muttering something too indistinct to be understood, ushered a gentleman into the quickly gathering darkness of the room.

He came in quietly, evidently not expecting to find any one in the room, for in fact he believed himself to be entering Mr Western’s study, there to await the result of Ann’s inquiries as to the hour at which her master was expected home. Nevertheless, in one respect he had the advantage of the two girls, for the hall whence he emerged was even darker than the drawing-room, whereas the sisters, standing together on the hearth-rug in the full light of the newly-stirred fire, were by him at once and easily recognised.

“I am afraid I am disturbing you – I must really apologise,” he began, his face, had they been able to see it, lighting up with pleasure as he spoke. “I only asked for Mr Western, and I am sorry – ” he hesitated.

“Papa is out,” said Mary, though quite in the dark physically and mentally as to whom she was addressing; “but if it is anything we can tell him – ” she turned to her sister, surprised at her silence, but her appeal was disregarded – “if it is anything we can tell him – or – or would you like to see mamma? Won’t you sit down, and I will get a light?” she went on, without giving him

time to answer.

"Thank you," said the gentleman, coming forward a little; "but I am really ashamed – " he was repeating, with increased hesitation, when Mary again interrupted him.

"It is Captain Beverley," she exclaimed. "I had not the least idea who you were, for I did not recognise your voice. Lilias," she continued, turning to her sister, this time so pointedly that Miss Western was obliged to come to her assistance, "you generally recognise voices more quickly than I do – did you not know that it was Captain Beverley?"

"You give me credit for greater acuteness than I possess, Mary," said Lilias calmly, bowing with dignified ease to the intruder; "it is not easy to recognise a voice one has not heard more than once or twice. But if you will come nearer the fire, Captain Beverley, we shall feel less mystified; and, Mary, do ring for lights."

The calmness, and the dignity, and the ease were all lost upon the young man, and Lilias, had she been able to read his thoughts, would have been saved a good deal of constraint. He was only thinking how very pretty, how beautiful she was – this tall, fair, lily-like girl, as she stood in the firelight, her face and bright hair thrown into strong relief by the dusk of the rest of the room; and had she allowed herself simply at once to acknowledge her recognition, he would have been conscious of nothing but honest gratification. As it was, he really did feel awkward and uncomfortable; it seemed to him he had intruded

without proper justification, and somehow this disagreeable sensation was increased by all he saw about him. It was not in the least what he had expected; the pretty, graceful-looking room, whose deficiencies the friendly gloom concealed, and whose best points were shown to advantage by the flickering, dancing light, the little tea-table so neatly set out, and the two girls themselves – the one with the bearing of a princess, and the other with a sort of straightforward unconsciousness worth all the "manners" ever taught or talked about – it was not in the least what he had expected, and he felt that he had been guilty of gross presumption in thus making his way into Mrs Western's drawing-room. Once he had seen Lilias before, and admired her more than he had ever admired any one in his life, and when he had suddenly decided that, for the local information he was in quest of, there was no one to whom he could so fitly apply as to the Rector of Hathercourt, he had been conscious in the very bottom of his heart that, if he went over to see Mr Western, there would be a chance of seeing his daughter too. But he had not fancied he would see her in this sort of way – so he felt all his former ideas confused and unsettled.

Still it was very pleasant to find himself in the Rectory drawing-room; the outside chill and dreariness made the cheerful indoors all the more attractive, and, though feeling by no means sure that he had any business to be where he was, he had not the strength of mind to tear himself away, to get up from his low chair by the fire and the prospect of a cup of tea, and,

with a proper amount of apology for his intrusion, to leave a message with the girls for their father and set off on his solitary, uncomfortable walk back again to Hathercourt Edge. So he sat still, and by thus doing, little though he knew it, passed the Rubicon.

Mary had disappeared, to return in a minute with a lighted lamp which she placed on a little table, her way of obeying her sister's injunction to "ring for lights." Then she stopped for a moment, hesitating, and Captain Beverley half rose from his chair.

"Shall I tell mamma tea is ready, Lilias?" she said, "and that Captain Beverley is here?"

"Yes, please do," replied her sister, graciously. "My mother is not very well to-day," she continued, turning to the young man, and almost for the first time directly addressing him, "at least, she has been rather upset by my brother's going away, but I have no doubt she will come down, if you would like to see her."

"Thank you," said Captain Beverley, growing uncomfortable again, and yet feeling increasingly reluctant to take his departure. "I should be very sorry to disturb Mrs Western, but if she is coming down in any case," he glanced at the tea-table, "perhaps – I should like to explain to her what I wanted to see Mr Western about. – I should like you to understand that I did not mean to come forcing my way here without a proper reason," was the real thought in his mind, and somehow Lilias instinctively half divined it, and her dignity abated a little.

"Mary, please go and ask mamma to come down, if she can," she said to her sister, and Mary went off on her errand.

"I have been leading a very lonely life the last few days," said Captain Beverley, when he found that Miss Western was in no hurry to start a subject of conversation.

"Indeed," said Lilias.

"Yes," he continued, "very lonely and not particularly comfortable, as you can fancy, when I tell you where my present quarters are. I am living in the farm-house at Hathercourt Edge, with an old woman to 'do for me,' and she does 'do for me' I can assure you," he added, with a hearty, boyish laugh.

In spite of her grand resolutions, Lilias could not help laughing too.

"I know that old-woman, I think," she said; "we often see her when we pass that way. She was old John Birley's housekeeper, wasn't she? – at least, she 'did for him.' I do pity you, but I wonder you stay there."

"Needs must," replied Captain Beverley, "and there is good in everything, they say. My uncomfortable life makes me appreciate civilisation doubly when I return to it. You don't know what a treat it is to find myself in this cheery room, and how much I shall enjoy – " he stopped short.

"What?" said Lilias.

"A cup of good tea, if you will give it me, I was going to say, only it suddenly struck me it was a very impertinent suggestion to be made by a stranger who has no business to be in your drawing-

room at all, Miss Western. The fact of the matter is, I find it difficult to recollect I am a stranger, for ever since I met you that evening two years ago, I have remembered you so distinctly that I could fancy I have seen you often since. It was your first ball, was it not?"

"No," said Lilias, "I had been at two before."

"Ah, well," he replied, "that's much the same thing," – little understanding that to poor Lilias a ball counted for a year, and that therefore, having made her *début* at Brocklehurst at nineteen, she already numbered twenty-one summers, or winters, when he first met her. "It's much the same thing," he went on, without giving her time for the explanation which her honesty was on the point of volunteering; "it has always seemed like my first ball to me, for I had only returned from India the week before, and I wasn't much in the way of balls there."

"Yes, I remember your speaking of India," said Lilias, "but I think you said you were going back there again, did you not?"

"I did think so then," he replied, "but things have changed. I sold out a few months ago, otherwise I should not be here now. And an unexpected piece of good luck befell me just then. You may have heard of old John Birley's strange will?"

Before Lilias could reply, the door opened, and Mrs Western and Mary made their appearance.

# Chapter Four
# A Cup of Tea

"I have no ambition to see a goodlier man."

*Tempest.*

"I am so very much obliged to you for seeing me. I am afraid it is very inconvenient and uncomfortable for you – in fact, as I have been telling your daughters, I am altogether ashamed of myself," was the apology with which Captain Beverley met Mrs Western.

"But you need not be so, I assure you," she answered, quietly, as she sat down on the sofa by the fire. "I have been a clergyman's wife too many years not to be quite accustomed to act as my husband's deputy when he is out of the way; and Mary – my daughter, I mean," she added, glancing towards the girls, "tells me you wanted particularly to see Mr Western. Is it anything in which I can do instead of him, or will you leave a message? I fear he will not be home till late."

Notwithstanding the perfect courtesy of this speech, there was something in it which made Captain Beverley regret again what he had done. He grew hot when he remembered that not two minutes ago he had been making interest with the beautiful Miss Western for a cup of tea, and now her mother made him feel that he was expected to give his message and take his departure – the

sooner the better.

"How completely Cheviott has been mistaken about these people!" he thought to himself; but though Mary, who was standing nearest him, could not read this reflection, she perceived the quick change of expression in his open, good-tempered face, and she felt sorry – sorry for him, and a little tiny bit vexed with her mother.

"Mamma," she broke in, before Mrs Western had time to say any more, "you must really have tea at once; it will be getting cold. Shall I pour it out, Lilias, or will you?"

"I will, thank you," said Lilias, not quite sure if she appreciated her sister's tactics, but seating herself before the tea-table as she spoke. "Mother, dear, stay where you are, do," seeing that Mrs Western was getting up from her seat.

"I was only looking to see if there were cups enough, my dear. Captain Beverley, you will have a cup of tea?" said Mrs Western, her natural instinct of hospitality asserting itself in defiance of her dislike to strangers.

"Thank you," he replied, gratefully; "I really cannot resist the chance of a cup of *good* tea. My old woman has been giving me such a horrible decoction. What do people do to tea to make it taste so fearful, I wonder?" he continued, seriously. "It seems the simplest thing in the world just to pour hot water over a spoonful or two, and let it stand for a few minutes."

The girls laughed, and Mrs Western smiled.

"It is evident you are a bachelor, Captain Beverley," she said.

"There is nothing that depend more on *how* it is made than tea. For instance, hot water is not necessarily *boiling* water as it should be, and the 'standing a few minutes' should not mean brewing by the fire for half an hour or more."

"I see," said Captain Beverley. "I wonder if it would be any use trying to teach old Mrs Bowker how to make tea properly."

"Mrs Bowker!" repeated Mrs Western in surprise.

Lilias laughed again at the bewilderment in her mother's face.

"How prettily she laughs," thought Captain Beverley, "I wish Laurence could see her. He declares not one woman in a hundred can laugh becomingly."

"Captain Beverley is staying at old Mrs Bowker's, mamma," she exclaimed – "at least, at John Birley's farm."

"Or, to be perfectly correct," said Captain Beverley, "old Mrs Bowker is staying with *me*, though I am quite sure she does not see the arrangement in that light at all. I was just telling Miss Western," he continued, turning to the mother, "that Hathercourt Edge – that is to say, the old farm-house and, what is of more importance, a considerable amount of land – has just become my property; the last owner, John Birley, left it to me as the oldest lineal descendant of the *name*– of the Beverleys of Hathercourt. He had no near relations, and had always been proud of his own descent from the Beverleys; he came straight down from a John Beverley who owned all the land about here early in the seventeenth century, I believe, but whose eldest son sold a lot of it, so that in process of time they came to be only farmers."

"That John Beverley must have been 'Mawde's' husband, Lilias," said Mary.

Captain Beverley looked up with interest.

"Do you mean the 'Mawde' about whom there is a tablet in the church here?" he said.

"Yes," replied Mary. "Mawde Mayne, who married John Beverley of Hathercourt."

"Ah! yes, that's the same Mawde," said Captain Beverley. "She is our common ancestress – poor old John Birley's and mine, I mean. I come from another of her sons, who left these parts and married an heiress, I believe, but his descendants have had nothing to do with this place from that time to this. Isn't it strange that Hathercourt, a part of it at least, should come back to me after all these generations?"

"It is very nice, I think," said Mary. "I should be so proud of it, if I were you."

Her eyes sparkled, and her face brightened up eagerly. For the first time it struck Captain Beverley that there was something very "taking" about the second Miss Western. But his glance did not rest on her; it travelled on to where Lilias sat behind the tea-tray, with a half-unconscious appeal to her for sympathy in what he was telling. Lilias, looking up, smiled.

"Yes," she said, softly, "it is very strange."

"Then," began Mrs Western, with some little hesitation, "are you, may I ask, Captain Beverley, going to live altogether at Hathercourt Edge? You can hardly do so, though, in the house

as it is at present. It is barely habitable, is it?"

"Very barely," replied the young man. "You never saw such a place. But I must not grumble; poor old John kept the land up to the mark, though he spent nothing on the house. I don't mean to settle here," (Mrs Western breathed a sigh of relief), "I have another place which is let just now, but will soon be free again, and my cousin advises me to live there and farm it myself. All I mean to do here is to build a good farm-house, and establish some trusty man as bailiff, and then I can easily run down now and then – I am often at Romary – and see how things are going on. And this brings me to what I wanted to see Mr Western about. I want to ask his opinion of a young man here who has been recommended to me for my situation."

"Mr Western will be very glad to tell you all he can, I am sure," said the Rector's wife. "I dare say he will be able to walk over to Hathercourt Edge to-morrow to see you, for about such a matter it would be better for you to speak to himself."

"Thank you," said Captain Beverley. "But I couldn't think of giving Mr Western so much trouble. I can easily come over again, and if he is out it doesn't matter – it is only a pleasant walk – and – and if I am not a great trouble, I shall be only too grateful to have some one to speak to, for I am dreadfully tired of the old farmhouse, and I must be here alone another fortnight. By then my cousins will be back at Romary, and I can take up my quarters there. You know Romary, of course?"

"No," said Lilias, to whom the question seemed to be

addressed, her colour rising a little; "at least, I have only been there once."

"It is some miles from here, and we have no carriage," said Mrs Western, simply. "Old Mrs Romary called on me when we first came here, but I never saw any more of them. We know very few of our neighbours, Captain Beverley, for we are not rich, and we live very quietly." Mary looked up at her mother admiringly. Lilias glanced at Captain Beverley. His colour, too, had deepened a little.

"Then I must thank you all the more for being so kind to me," he said, impulsively. "And, Mrs Western, if, as I shall really be your very nearest neighbour, you will let me be to some extent an exception to the rule, I shall thank you still more," he added, with a sort of boyish heartiness which it was difficult to resist.

He had got up to go, and stood looking down at his hostess as he spoke with such a kindly expression in his honest blue eyes, and – he was so undeniably handsome and gentlemanlike that Mrs Western's cold manner thawed.

"The thanks will, I think, be due from us to you if you come to see us now and then when you are in the neighbourhood; that is to say, at Hathercourt Edge. Romary is too far off for us to consider its inhabitants neighbours," she replied. "And I don't quite understand, but Romary is not your home, is it?"

"Oh dear, no," he replied, evidently a little surprised at the question. "Romary belongs now to my cousin, Mr Cheviott. It has been his ever since his uncle's death, but he has only lately

come to live there. He was my guardian, and the best and wisest friend I have ever known, though not more than ten years older than myself," he added, warmly.

"And that young lady – we thought her *so* pretty," said Lilias – "she is Miss Cheviott, then, I suppose?"

"Yes, she is his sister. I am glad you think her pretty. She is a dear little thing," he replied, looking pleased and gratified. "But I am really detaining you too long. Will you be so kind as to tell Mr Western that I shall hope to see him in a day or two? Good-bye, and thank you very much," he said, as he shook hands with Mrs Western and her daughters, Lilias last.

"For a cup of tea?" she said, laughing.

"Yes, Miss Western, for a cup of tea," he repeated.

"I like him," said Mary, when the door had closed on their visitor; "he is honest, and unaffected, and kindly."

"He is very boyish," said Lilias; "somehow he seems more boyish than when I saw him two years ago."

"When you saw him two years ago?" repeated Mrs Western. "I did not know you had ever seen him before."

"Yes, mamma. I met him at my second Brocklehurst ball. Mary remembers my mentioning him," replied Lilias, meekly enough. "I did not know where he had come from, or whom he was staying with, or anything about him, and indeed I had forgotten all about him till the other day when he came to church."

"He is a pleasant-looking young man," said Mrs Western.

"Pleasant-looking, mother?" exclaimed Mary. "I call him *very* handsome."

Lilias smiled, but her mother looked grave.

"Well, well," she said, "I dare say he is handsome; but in my opinion, my dears, there is great truth in the old saying, 'handsome is that handsome does,' and we do not know anything at all about this Captain Beverley's doings, remember."

"At least we know nothing '*un*handsome' about them," said Mary, who seemed in an unusually argumentative mood.

"Oh dear, no. I have no reason to say anything against him. I know nothing whatever about him," said Mrs Western, calmly; "but I do not like making acquaintance too quickly with young men. One cannot be too careful. And you know, my dears, I have always said if ever you do marry I hope and trust it will be some one quite in your own sphere."

"Mamma!" exclaimed Lilias, growing scarlet, and with a touch of indignation in her tone, "why should you allude to such a thing? Just because a gentleman happens to have called to see papa on business – as if we could not have spoken two words to him without thinking if we should like to marry him."

"You need not fire up so, Lilias," replied her mother. "You very often speak about marrying, or not marrying, and I have heard you maintain it was gross affectation of girls to pretend they never thought about their future lives."

"Yes," said Lilias, "I know I have said so, and I think so, but still there is a difference between that and – Well, never mind.

But, mother," she went on, with returning playfulness, "I must warn you of one thing. If by 'our own sphere' you mean *curates*, then the sooner, as far as I am concerned, I can get out of my own sphere the better."

Mrs Western did not laugh.

"Lilias," she began, gravely, but the rest of her remonstrance was lost, for at that moment the drawing-room door opened softly, and a pair of bright eyes, surmounted by a shag of fair hair, peeped in, cautiously at first, then, their owner gathering courage, the door opened more widely, and a tall thin girl, in a brown stuff skirt and scarlet flannel bodice, made her appearance.

"Josey, what do you want? Don't you know it is very rude to come peeping in like that? How did you know we were alone?" said Mary, somewhat peremptorily.

"Then he's gone? – I thought he was," answered Josephine, composedly. "All right, Alexa, you can come in," she turned to call to some one behind her, and, thus encouraged, a fourth Miss Western – the third as to age, in point of fact – followed Josephine into the room.

"Is mamma better? I have really done my best, Mary, to keep them all quiet," she began, plaintively, "but George and Josey do *so* squabble. They wanted to find out who was calling, and I could hardly prevent them coming to peep in at the door. Yes, Josey, you needn't make faces at me like that. It's quite true – you know it is."

"I didn't say it wasn't," said Josey, "but there are more ways than one of telling the truth. Somebody else was just as inquisitive as 'George and Josey,' but *she* was far too lady-like to do such a thing as peep. She would let other people peep for her – that is *her* way of doing things she shouldn't," the last words uttered with withering contempt.

Alexa was a pretty, frightened-looking little creature of sixteen. She had soft, wistful-looking dark eyes, which filled with tears on the smallest provocation.

"Mamma," she exclaimed, "it isn't true! I only said I would like – "

"I do not want to hear any more about it, Alexa," interrupted Mrs Western with decision. "I do think you and Josephine might have some little consideration for me to-day, instead of quarrelling in this way."

The culprits looked ashamed of themselves; but in two minutes Josephine's irrepressible spirits had risen again.

"You might tell me if it really was Captain Beverley," she said to her elder sisters. "What did he come for? – why did he stay such a time?"

"Don't answer her, Mary," said Lilias, hastily. "Josephine, I can't understand how you can be so unladylike."

"Come up-stairs with me, Josey," whispered Mary, who saw the storm-clouds gathering again on her young sister's handsome face. "Do remember that mamma is tired and dull to-night, and we should all try to comfort her. I will read aloud to you all for

half an hour, if you like, and leave mother and Lilias in peace."

But Lilias's spirits seemed to have received a check. She remained unusually quiet and depressed all the evening, and Mary felt puzzled.

"She cannot really have taken to heart what mother said," she thought to herself. "Mamma has often said things of that sort without Lilias minding."

And when bed-time came and she was alone with her sister, she set to work to find out what was wrong.

"What has made you so dull this evening, Lilias?" she asked, gently.

"Nothing, or rather, perhaps, I should say everything," replied Lilias. "Mary," she went on; she was sitting in front of the looking-glass, her beautiful fair hair loosened and falling about her shoulders, and as she spoke she put her hands up to her face, and leaning with her elbows on the table gazed into the mirror before her – "Mary, don't think me conceited for what I am going to say – I wouldn't say it to any one but you. Do you know, I think I wish I wasn't pretty."

"Why?" said Mary, without, however, testifying any great astonishment.

"If I could tell you exactly why, I should understand myself better than I do," she replied. "I fancy somehow being pretty has helped to put me out of conceit of my life; and after all, what a poor, stupid thing it is! A very few years more, I shall be quite *passée*– indeed, I see signs of it coming already. I want to be

good and sensible, and sober, and contented like you, Mary, and I can't manage it. Oh, it does makes me so angry when mamma talks that way – about our own sphere and all that!"

"You shouldn't be angry at it, it does not really make any difference," said Mary, philosophically; "poor mamma thinks it is for our good."

"But it isn't only that; it is *everything*. Mary, people talk great nonsense about poverty not necessarily lowering one; it does lower us – that I think is the reason why I dislike mamma's saying those things so. There is truth in them. We are rapidly becoming unfit for anything but a low sphere, and it is all poverty. Did you ever see anything more disgraceful than the younger girls' manners sometimes? – Alexa's silly babyishness, and Josephine's vulgar noisiness? They should both be sent to a good school, or have a proper governess."

"Yes," said Mary, looking distressed, "I know they should."

"I can't bear shamming and keeping up appearances," continued Lilias, "it is not *that* I want, that would be worse than anything, but I do feel so depressed about things sometimes, Mary. It is a sore feeling to be, in one sense, ashamed of one's home. I hope Captain Beverley will not come again."

"He is almost sure to do so," said Mary. "I wish you would not feel things quite as you do, Lilias; I can sympathise with you to a certain extent, but, after all, there is nothing to be really ashamed of. And if Captain Beverley, or any one, judges us by these trifling outside things, then I don't think their regard is

worth considering."

"But it is just by these things that people *are* judged, and that is where the real sting of poverty like ours lies," persisted Lilias.

And Mary, who sympathised with her more than she thought it wise to own to, allowed that there was a great deal of truth in what she said. "But must it not be harder on papa and mamma than on us?" she suggested.

"I don't know," said Lilias, "not in the same way I fancy. Papa feels it more than mamma, I sometimes think, only he is naturally so easy-going. And poor mamma, even if she does feel it, she would not show it. She is so unselfish; and how hard she works for us all! I don't think she could work so hard if she felt as depressed as I do sometimes – especially about the younger ones."

"But you do work hard also, Lilias," said Mary, "and you are nearly always cheerful. You are unselfish too. Oh! Lilias, I should so like to see you very, very happy!"

# Chapter Five
# In the Balner Woods

> "And so at length with the fading year;
> There comes a tender time once more,
> And the year clings more fondly to life and light,
> Now that its labour is over and done.
> And the woods grow glorious with purple and red,
> As bright as the flowers of spring."
>
> *Songs of Two Worlds.*

The next morning was dull and rainy. It was dull enough at Hathercourt Rectory, but far worse at Hathercourt Edge, and even Arthur Beverley's unfailing good spirits felt the influence of the outside dreariness.

"I wish I hadn't gone over to the Rectory yesterday," he said to himself, "it would have been something to do to-day. I can't go again till to-morrow, at soonest, and it is so horribly dull here. I wonder what those girls do with themselves on such a day as this. Their life must be very monotonous, though they look happy enough. I can't understand why Laurence doesn't like them. I wonder if that old fool is going to give me any breakfast?" He turned from the window to look at the table; it was covered with a very crumpled and coarse cloth, the forks and spoons,

etc, were of the homeliest description, there was nothing in the shape of eatables but the half of a stale loaf, and an uninviting-looking lump of evidently salt butter, on a cracked plate. Captain Beverley eyed it all rather disconsolately. Then he went to the door – he had to stoop to avoid knocking his head on the lintel – and called down the narrow, red-tiled passage leading to the kitchen.

"Mrs Bowker, I say. Aren't you going to give me any breakfast this morning?"

No Mrs Bowker appeared in answer to his summons, but out of the depths of the kitchen a voice replied:

"I'm a-bringin' it, sir."

"And what is it? Bacon?"

"No, sir – heggs," was the reply.

"Heggs," he repeated, as he turned back again into the parlour, "of course. I might have known, by this time, if it wasn't bacon it would be 'heggs.' I declare, if I were that Mrs Western, and she I, I wouldn't be so inhospitable. She might have asked me to go to breakfast, or luncheon, or something. I am sure those nice girls would if they could. Ah! well, here comes the heggs, and letters, too! – What's going to happen, Mrs Bowker? The postman's not above half an hour late this morning!"

"May be he walks fast to get out of the wet," Mrs Bowker suggested, composedly, as she left the room.

There were three letters, two manifestly uninteresting, and Captain Beverley tossed them aside. The third had the postmark

"Paris." It was from Mr Cheviott, and his cousin opened and read it eagerly. It was rather a long letter, once or twice he smiled, and once, when he came to a passage close to the end, a slight frown contracted his good-humoured face.

"Laurence takes up such unreasonable prejudices," he said to himself, with some irritation. "What can he know about it?"

This was the passage that annoyed him: "I hardly think the man you mention would be experienced enough for your situation – in any case I would not, if I were you, consult the Hathercourt clergyman about him, for by all accounts *he* is far from a practical person as to such matters, and I rather fancy there is nothing superior about the Rectory family. They are desperately poor for one thing, but, of course, you will not need to make friends with them; it is not as if Hathercourt were to be your head-quarters."

Captain Beverley ate his breakfast and pondered over his letter. Then he got up and went to the window, and looked out at the rain.

"It is very annoying of Cheviott to have taken up this prejudice against Owen," he thought. "I believe he is the very man for me, and, at any rate, it is necessary to hear all I can about him. And as for what Cheviott says about the Westerns I think nothing of it whatever, and he himself would be the first to own he had been mistaken if he saw the sort of people they really are. I can understand their not being popular well enough; they are proud and won't stand being patronised."

His meditations ended in his deciding to walk over again to

Hathercourt that very afternoon – it would not do to put off hearing about Owen and settling the matter, and this he could easily explain to Mr Western, as an excuse for troubling him about it. And, having arrived at this decision, things in general began to look considerably less gloomy – he got out the plans for the new farmhouse, and examined them critically, rolling them neatly up again, when the idea struck him that it would be well to take them with him to the Rectory, in the afternoon.

"Mr Western may like to see them," he thought, "and, as he is the clergyman of the parish, it will gratify him to be consulted."

Then he answered Mr Cheviott's letter, saying nothing about his visit to Hathercourt, and merely mentioning that he was making further inquiries about the man Owen, ending with a description of Mrs Bowker for Alys's benefit, and a hearty wish that they were all back at Romary.

This important task accomplished, he looked at his watch and saw that it was eleven o'clock, so he sauntered out for a stroll round the farm and a talk with his head man. The rain was ceasing, and there was no sort of reason why he should not walk over to the Rectory in the afternoon; besides, to-morrow would be Saturday, a day on which clergymen, proverbially, dislike to be interrupted. So, having dispatched a couple of rather tough mutton chops, which was all Mrs Bowker condescended to allow him in the way of luncheon, by half-past two o'clock Captain Beverley found himself more than ready for his second expedition to Hathercourt. It was really too early to call, however,

but the day had grown pleasant out of doors, and inside the old farm-house he felt it impossible to kill any more time. A "happy thought" occurred to him – why not go round by the Balner woods? It was a long walk and he might probably lose his way, but if he did he could but try to find it again – anything was better than hanging about Hathercourt Edge doing nothing.

It was November now, but who that has really *lived* in the country – lived in it "all the year round," and learned every change in the seasons, every look of the sky, all the subtle combinations of air, and light, and colour, and scent, which give to outdoor life its indescribable variety and unflagging interest, who of such initiated ones does not know how marvellously delicious November can sometimes be? How tender the clear, thin, yellow tone of the struggling sunbeams, the half frosty streaks of red on the pale blue-green sky, the haze of approaching winter over all! How soft, and subdued, and tired the world seems – all the bustle over, ready to fall asleep, but first to whisper gently good night! And to *feel* November to perfection, for, after all, this shy autumnal charm is not so much a matter of sight, as of every sense combined, sound and scent and sight together, lapsing into one vague consciousness of harmony and repose – the place of places is a wood. A wood where the light, faint at the best, comes quivering and brokenly through the not yet altogether unclothed branches, where the fragrance of the rich leafy soil mingles with that of the breezes from the not far distant sea, where the dear rabbits scud about in the most unexpected places,

and the squirrels are up aloft making arrangements for the winter – oh! a wood in late autumn has a strange glamour of its own, that comes over me, in spirit, even as I write of it, far, far away from country sights and sounds, further away still from the long-ago days of youth and leisure, and friends to wander with, in the Novembers that then were never gloomy.

Arthur Beverley was by no means sentimental – he whistled cheerily as he went along, and thought more of the probable amount of shooting in the Balner woods than of the beauty around him, yet he was not insensible to it.

"How jolly it seems after the rain," he said to himself. "After all, there's nowhere like England, fogs and all – it's fresh, and wholesome, and invigorating, even in murky weather, like what we've had lately," and he stood still and looked round him approvingly.

Suddenly a sound, a faint sound only, caught his ear. He listened. It came again. This time he distinguished it to be that of cheerful voices approaching him, then a merry laugh, a little exclamation, and the laugh again. Arthur Beverley's face lighted up with interest; he felt sure he knew that laugh. He hastened on and, after a few moments' quick walking, a little turn in the path brought him in sight of a group of figures just in front of him; they were the Western girls, the Western girls in great force, for, besides the two he knew already, there were the younger ones, Alexa and Josephine, and little Francie. And the laugh had been Lilias's – he was not mistaken.

She was standing with her back towards him, and so was Mary, but the tiny girl beside them drew their attention to his approach.

"A gentleman, sister," she exclaimed, pulling Miss Western's skirt. And Lilias, turning round, met his hearty look of pleasure.

"I thought it was you," he said, as he shook hands, "I heard you laugh."

"How do you know it *was* my laugh?" said Lilias, smiling.

"I recognised it," he said, quietly.

And Mary glanced up at him brightly. "Yes," she said, "it was Lilias. She was laughing at Alexa, who screamed because a rabbit ran across the path. That's not like a country girl, is it, Captain Beverley?"

"Alexa screams if a butterfly settles on her," said Josephine, disdainfully, trying to balance herself on the hooked handle of her umbrella, which she was holding upside-down for the purpose.

Captain Beverley looked at her and at Alexa with good-humoured curiosity. Alexa looked pretty and frightened, but Josey, her long thin legs emerging from a shabby waterproof, her "touzled" fair hair tumbling out from under a still shabbier hat, was rather a remarkable object.

"These are your younger sisters, I suppose?" he said, turning to Lilias.

"Yes," she answered, rather shortly; "we all came out for a ramble as soon as the rain cleared off. It is so miserable to be

shut up in the house all day."

"Just what I have been feeling," he replied. "Not that I mind the rain, but still one can't exactly set off for a walk in it unless one has something to do or somewhere to go. It is very lucky for me that I met you; I was just making up my mind to losing my way."

"I dare say we can direct you," said Lilias, "but we are not going your way. We are going home; it must be about half-past three now, and we have been out ever since dinner-time. Mary, don't you think we should be going home? – it is a good walk from here, you know. You can direct Captain Beverley to Hathercourt Edge better than I, I think."

"But I don't want to be directed to Hathercourt Edge," said Captain Beverley, with a very slight touch of annoyance in his tone. "I have just come from there. Of course, if you won't let me walk with you, I must submit; but I *was* bound for Hathercourt Rectory. I am very anxious to see Mr Western, and thought I might again take my chance of finding him at home. That is to say, if he will not think me very troublesome."

"Of course he will not," answered Mary, heartily; "he was very sorry to have missed you yesterday, and I know he will be at home all this afternoon. Which way shall we go back, Lilias – by the Southmore road, or all the way through the wood?"

"By the wood decidedly, *I* should say," answered Captain Beverley. "Miss Western," he went on, quickly, "you have got *such* a bramble on your skirt – there, now, I have got him – step

forward, please – yes, that's it."

By this manoeuvre he had managed to get Lilias and himself a little in front of the others, and he maintained his ground by walking on beside her. Francie was at her other side, so the arrangement into threes seemed to come about quite naturally, Mary following with Alexa and Josephine. By degrees Lilias lost the slight constraint which her manner had shown at first, and became her usual happy, winning self. The sound of her voice, and now and then of her laugh, was enough to make Mary happy too, and well content to keep behind at a reasonable distance, so that Lilias should not be annoyed by the exhibition before a stranger of Alexa's foolish shyness or Josey's uncalled-for remarks.

The sun came out more brightly, and gleamed and quivered down the wood alleys before them. What did they talk of, those two, as they walked on quietly, little Francie beside them, trotting along, lost in her own pretty baby dreams of fairies and brownies and the like, with which her small head was filled, all unconscious of the old, old drama beginning once more to be re-enacted in the old, old way that is ever new? What did they talk of? Could they have told, or did it matter? All about everythings and nothings, no doubt, so called "small talk," which yet seemed full of interest, nothing very wise or weighty – so much, at least, is certain – but certain too that the walk through the Balner woods that sweet November afternoon was neither wearisome nor long to Lilias Western and the new owner of the old Edge farm.

The sunshine had tempted Mr Western out too. He was walking about the garden when his five daughters, escorted by Captain Beverley, reached the Rectory. A momentary expression of surprise crossed his face as he came forward to meet them, at first sight of the stranger, but it was succeeded by a look of gratification and pleasure, which quickly set the young man's mind quite at rest, and left him no doubt of being welcome.

"I was quite intending to walk over to Hathercourt Edge to see you, to thank you for the friendly visit yesterday, which I was sorry to have missed," said the Rector, with a slight touch of old-fashioned formality, not unbecoming to his tall, thin, refined-looking figure and gentle face, as he shook hands with Captain Beverley, "and now I see I must thank you also for taking care of my girls."

"We don't need to be taken care of that way, papa," said Josephine, "we were only in the Balner woods, and Captain Beverley was coming here, anyhow."

"He only tookened care of Lily and me," said Francie, importantly, but the observation was a happy one. It was impossible not to laugh at it, and Josey's abruptness passed unrebuked.

"I certainly deserve no thanks," said Captain Beverley. "My visit yesterday was a selfish one, and as for to-day – why, all my thanks are due to you, Francie! I should have been lost in the woods, and perhaps eaten up by Red Riding-hood's wolf if I had not met you, and been shown the way here."

"But that wolf was killed long ago, Lily says," said Francie, staring up with great bewilderment in her blue eyes. "It couldn't have eatened you up when it was killed itself."

"Indeed. I am very glad to hear it," replied Captain Beverley, gravely, "then I needn't be afraid of coming through the Balner woods; it is a good thing to know that. It is a much pleasanter walk than by the road," he went on, turning again to Mr Western. "I really was on my way here when I met your daughters. I am afraid you will think me very troublesome."

His manner was certainly boyish, but not in the least awkward. That Mr Western was "taken" with him was quickly evident.

"Indeed, no," he said, heartily. "Living here so completely out of the world, as you see, it is very seldom that we have the pleasure of showing even the little hospitality we have in our power. But, such as it is, I hope you will accept it. Lilias, Mary," he continued, turning to his daughters, the younger ones having by this time disappeared, "tell your mother that Captain Beverley is here."

"I will," said Mary, hastening away with a great excitement in her thoughts, "I do believe papa is going to ask him to stay to tea. What will mamma say?" and not knowing whether she was pleased or distressed, she hurried in to break the momentous tidings to her mother, and to consult the cook.

Lilias was following her, but her father called her back. "You need not both go, my dears," he said with sudden remembrance of unwritten letters awaiting him in his study, which must be

seen to before four o'clock post-time. "Perhaps Captain Beverley would like to have a look at the church again, if you will take him to see it. I will follow you in a few minutes, but I have a letter or two I must finish, which I was forgetting."

"*Pray* don't let me interrupt you," exclaimed Captain Beverley, with anxiety almost disproportionate to the occasion. "I should very much like to look at the church, for there are some tablets there I want to examine. And if Miss Western will explain them a little, I shall be very much obliged."

Lilias hesitated. "Mary understands them better than I do," she began, but her father interrupted her.

"I will send her after you, if you go on, and I will finish my letters as quickly as I can, and then, Captain Beverley, I shall be at your service. Mrs Western tells me you want to hear about Joseph Owen. You will stay and – I can't say *dine* with us – we are very uncivilised, you see; we have a mongrel meal at six!"

He spoke with a slight nervousness, which made Lilias's cheek grow hot. "Poor dear father!" she ejaculated, mentally. But the guest seemed blissfully unconscious of his host's hesitation.

"You are very kind indeed," he said, eagerly. "I should very much like to stay, if I shall not be a trouble. It is so wretchedly dull and uncomfortable at the Edge, I don't think I could have stood it much longer, unless – if you had not taken pity on me," he added, laughingly, as Lilias led the way across the grass to the old church.

Mary joined them there in a few minutes, and while Captain

Beverley was examining the old coat-of-arms on the tablet in memory of his ancestress, she found time to whisper to her sister, —

"Mamma knows that papa has asked him to stay to tea. I don't think she minds much."

"But what will there be for tea?" said Lilias, in consternation.

"Oh! that will be all right," replied Mary, reassuringly.

And, somewhat to Lilias's surprise, her mother showed herself far more amiably disposed for Captain Beverley, on further acquaintance, than might have been anticipated.

"Though, indeed," said Mary, when, at night, they were talking over in their own room the pleasant evening they had had, "it would be difficult *not* to feel amiably disposed to him! He is so unaffected and hearty, and yet not by any means a goose. He liked talking to papa about sensible things, I could see."

"He talked sensibly to me, too," said Lilias, dryly, "though, of course, I cannot answer for what he may have said to you."

"Lilias!" exclaimed Mary, "don't be so silly. You know – "

"What do I know?"

"That I am not the sort of girl likely to have anything but sensible things said to me, especially when *you* are there."

Lilias laughed merrily. "Really, Mary, you are very complimentary. You trust to me to absorb all the nonsense, and leave the sense for you! I think I shall keep out of the way, if Captain Beverley comes here again."

"Then he wouldn't come any more," said Mary. "Lily, I'm

sleepy, say good-night, please."

"Good-night, though I am not sleepy at all," said Lilias, cheerfully.

What had become of all her low spirits? thought Mary, with a little bewilderment Lilias was not usually so changeable. The evening had certainly been a very pleasant one; even the younger girls had somehow shown to advantage; and Captain Beverley had not merely ignored, he had seemed perfectly unconscious of the homeliness of their way of living – the crowded tea-table, the little countrified waiting-maid, the absence of the hundred and one small luxuries which to him could not but be matters of course. And his unconsciousness had reached favourably on his entertainers; Mr Western lost his nervousness, Mrs Western her gentle coldness, and every one seemed at ease and happy. Any stranger glancing in would have thought them all old friends, instead of new acquaintances, of the handsome young man who was the life and soul of the party.

"Mary," said Lilias again, just as Mary was falling asleep, "Captain Beverley will be at the Brocklehurst ball this year. He is to be staying at Romary."

"I thought you said you were never going again," said Mary, who had her wits about her, sleepy though she was.

"But you would hot like to go without me, I know," replied Lilias, meekly. "Oh, Mary, I do wish we could have new dresses for once!"

Mary did not consider this observation worth waking up

to answer. But her dreams were a strange medley – Captain Beverley dancing at a ball with his great grandmother Mawde, dressed all in scarlet, as if she were Red Riding-hood, but with a face like Lilias's. And what Lilias's dreams were, who can say?

But the Brocklehurst ball was three weeks off as yet, and there was no lack of opportunities of discussing it with Captain Beverley.

Surely November this year must have been an exceptionally fine one, for there seemed few days on which Arthur Beverley did not find his way through the woods, or by the road, to the Rectory, with some excuse in the shape of further plans to be shown to Mr Western, or a book to lend to the girls or their mother, or without any, save the sight of his own bright face, and an eager proposal that they should all set off on a long ramble somewhere or other, instead of wasting one of the few fine days of late autumn, moping in the house. And by degrees it came to be a matter of course that, if the owner of Hathercourt Edge chose to drop in at any or every meal, he should be welcome, and that if he stayed away he should be missed, and Mrs Western's fears and vague apprehensions gradually softened, now that this terrible wolf had actually taken up his quarters in the midst of her flock without, so far, any of them being the worse!

"He seems like a sort of elder brother among them all," she said to her husband. "I wish Basil had been at home – contact with such a man would have done him good."

Mr Western agreed with her, for he, too, had greatly "taken" to

the young stranger. It was pleasant to him to find that he had not altogether fallen out of the ways of his class, that cares, and small means, and living out of the world had not crusted over his former self past recognition. Arthur Beverley had not been at college, but he, as well as his host, had been an Eton boy, and poor George, to whom the name of Eton was that of a forbidden Paradise, listened with delight to the many reminiscences in common of his father and his guest, notwithstanding the quarter of a century which divided their experiences. So everybody in his or her own way felt pleased with Captain Beverley, and his coming seemed to have brought new life and sunshine into the Rectory. Lilias alone spoke little of him, and Mary sometimes lay awake at night "thinking."

# Chapter Six
# Marrying or Giving in Marriage

> "If there's no meaning in it," said the king, "that saves a world of trouble, as we needn't try to find any. And yet I don't know."
> *Alice in Wonderland.*

November was not bright everywhere, however. In Paris everything, out of doors, that is to say, was looking extremely dull, and Alys Cheviott many times, during the four weeks her brother had arranged to stay there, wished herself at home again at Romary. For Paris, though people who have only visited it in spring or summer (when the sunshine, and the heat, and the crowds, and the holiday aspect of everything are almost overwhelming) can hardly perhaps realise the fact, *can* be exceedingly dull, and hotel life at all times requires bright weather, and plenty of outside interests, to make it endurable. Alys did not care particularly about balls or parties; she was too young to have acquired much taste for such amusements, though young enough to enjoy heartily the two or three receptions at which Mr Cheviott had allowed her to "assist." But it was the day-time she found so long and dreary. She wanted to go out, to shop and to look about her, and to take long walks in the Bois de Boulogne in the morning, and drives with her brother in

the afternoon, and every day the weather put all expeditions of the kind out of the question. It rained incessantly, or, at least, as she complained piteously, "when it didn't rain it did worse – it looked so black and gloomy that no one had the heart to do anything." Alys had been in Paris several times before, she had seen all the orthodox lions, and had not, therefore, the interest and excitement of the perfect novelty of her surroundings to support her, and as day after day passed, with no improvement to speak of, she began sorely to regret having teased her brother into allowing her to accompany him on this visit, in this case necessitated by the business arrangements of a friend.

"I'll never come with you again, Laurence, *anywhere*, when it has anything to do with business," she declared.

"Who is 'it'?" inquired Mr Cheviott, calmly.

"Laurence, you are not to tease me. I am too worried to stand it, I am, really," she replied.

"'It' again! Alys, you are growing incorrigible. I really think my best plan would be to send you to a good school for a year or two – the sort of place where 'young ladies of neglected education' are taken in hand."

He spoke so seriously that for a quarter of a second Alys wondered if he could be in earnest. She turned sharply round from the window against which she had been pressing her pretty face in a sort of affectation of babyish discontent, staring out at the leaden sky, and the wet street, and the dreary-looking gardens in the distance.

"Laurence!" she exclaimed. But Laurence's next remark undeceived her.

"You should not flatten your face against the window-pane. You will spoil the shape of your nose, and you have made it look so red," he observed, gravely. "Would you care to live, Alys, do you think, if you had a red nose?"

Alys gently stroked the ill-treated member as she answered, thoughtfully:

"I hardly think I should. Laurence, do you know there *have* been times when I have been afraid they might run in the family."

"What?" asked Laurence, philosophically.

"Red noses," answered Alys, calmly. "Aunt Winstanley has one, you know. She says its neuralgia, but *I* feel sure it is indigestion."

Laurence looked up at her with a smile, which broke into a laugh as he observed the preternatural gravity of her expression.

"Come and sit down and have some breakfast, you absurd child," he said. He was already seated at the table.

Alys walked slowly across the room, and took her place opposite him. She looked blooming enough notwithstanding all the trials she had had to endure. As the Western girls had pronounced her, such she was, very, *very* pretty – as pretty a girl as one could wish to see. Her soft dark hair grew low, but not too low, on the white, well-shaped forehead; her features were all good, and gave promise of maturing into even greater beauty than that of eighteen; her blue eyes could look up tenderly as well

as brightly from under their long black eyelashes, for their colour was not of the cold steel-like shade that is often the peculiarity of blue eyes in such juxtaposition. But the tenderness was more a matter of the future than the present, for hitherto there had been little in her life to call forth the deeper tones of her character; she was happy, trustful and winning, full of life and vigour; incapable of a mean thought or action herself, incapable of suspecting such in others.

Mr Cheviott looked at her critically as she sat opposite him.

"Alys," he said at last, "I am afraid I have not brought you up well."

"What makes you think so all of a sudden, Laurence?"

"I am afraid you are spoiled. You are such a baby."

Alys's eyes flashed a little.

"Are you in earnest, Laurence?"

"A little, not quite."

"I think you have got into the habit of thinking other people babies, and it's a very bad habit. You like them to do just exactly what you tell them, and yet you laugh at them for being babies. You think Arthur is a baby too."

"There are babies and babies," Mr Cheviott replied. "Some do credit to those who bring them up, and some don't."

"Well, *he* does, whether I do or not," said Alys, "he is as kind, and good, and nice, and sensible as he can be. And do you know what I think, Laurence? If there are different kinds of babies, there are different ways of being spoiled, and I sometimes think

*you* are spoiled! I do," she continued, shaking her head solemnly. "Arthur spoils you, and aunt of course does. I believe I am the only person that does not."

"And how do you manage to steer clear of so fatal an error?"

"You are not nice, indeed you are extremely disagreeable when you speak like that," said Alys, "but still I think I will tell you. I don't spoil you because I don't think you *quite* perfect as everybody else does," and she glanced up at him defiantly.

Mr Cheviott laughed. He was just going to answer, when there came an interruption in the shape of his manservant.

"Letters!" exclaimed Alys, "I do hope there are some for me; they will give me something to do. Are there any for me, Laurence?"

"Yes, two, and only one for me."

"From aunt and from Arthur," said Alys. "I will read aunt's first, there is never anything in hers. She just tells me over again what I told her, and makes little comments upon it. Yes, 'so sorry, dearest Alys, that the weather in Paris has so spoiled the pleasure of your visit, and that during the last week you have scarcely been able to get out, except in a close carriage, for a miserable attempt at shopping. And so you enjoyed Madame de Briancourt's ball on the whole, very much, and your pink and white grenadine looked lovely, and Clotilde did your hair the new way.' Did you ever hear anything so absurd, Laurence? It is like reading all I have written over again in a looking-glass, only then the letters would be all the wrong way, wouldn't they?"

But Mr Cheviott did not answer, and Alys, looking up, saw that he had not heard her; he was busily reading his own letter, and its contents did not seem to be satisfactory, for a frown had gathered on his brow, and, as he turned the first page, a half-smothered exclamation of annoyance escaped him.

"What is the matter, Laurence?" said Alys. "You don't seem any better pleased with your letter than I am with mine?"

"How do you mean? What does he say to you?" inquired her brother, quickly.

"Who? Oh, Arthur, you mean. I haven't opened his yet. I was saying how stupid aunt's letters are. So yours is from Arthur, too, is it?" said Alys, pricking up her ears, "what's the matter? Is he going to be married? I do wish he were."

"Alys!" exclaimed Mr Cheviott, with real annoyance in his tone, "do be careful what you say. You are too old to talk so foolishly. It is unbecoming and unladylike."

"Why? What *do* you mean?" said Alys, opening wide her blue eyes in astonishment. "Why shouldn't I talk of Arthur's being married? I have noticed before that you seem quite indignant at the thought of such a thing, and I don't think you have any right to dictate to him. It's just what I was saying, he has spoiled you by giving in so, and the more inches he gives you the more ells you want to take."

"I have spoiled *you*, Alys, by allowing you to speak to me as you do. It is most unjustifiable; and the way you express yourself is worse than unladylike, it is vulgar and coarse."

He got up and left the room. Never in all her life had Alys been so reproved before, and by him of all people, her dear, dear, Laurence – her father and mother and brother in one, as she often called him. She could not bear it; she threw aside the unlucky letters which in some way or other she felt to have been the cause of her distress, and burst into tears. She cried away quietly for some time, till it occurred to her to wonder more definitely in what way she had really displeased her brother, and the more she thought it over the more convinced she became that Arthur's letter had been the primary cause of his annoyance, and her own remarks nothing worse than ill-timed and unwise.

"For I *very* often say much more impertinent things, and he only laughs," she reflected.

There was some comfort in this. She dried her eyes and resolved to try to make peace on the first opportunity. "Laurence is very seldom angry or unreasonable," she thought; "but, of course, as I was saying just now, he is not *perfect*. But I am sure he does not really think me 'coarse and unladylike.' What horrible words!" And the tears came back again.

Just then her glance fell on Captain Beverley's unopened letter. "I wonder if I shall find out, from what he says to me, how he has managed to vex Laurence so," she thought to herself, tearing open the letter, and quickly running through its contents. It was a pleasant, cousinly letter, amusing and hearty, but with nothing that would, to Alys, have distinguished it from others she had, from time to time, received from Arthur, had not her eyes been

sharpened by her brother's strange annoyance. Instinctively she hit upon the cause of offence; two or three times in the course of the letter allusion was made to the Western family, to their "kindness and hospitality," their general "likeableness," and a far less quick-witted person than Miss Cheviott would have been at no loss to discern Captain Beverley's growing intimacy with the Rectory household, and to suspect the existence of some special attraction, though possibly as yet unsuspected by the young man himself.

"I am sure it is about the Westerns that Laurence is annoyed," said Alys to herself. "I have noticed that he does not like them, and he is afraid of Arthur falling in love with one of them. But why shouldn't he? I can't understand Laurence sometimes. I am sure if ever *he* marries it will be to please himself, and nobody else. What is the good of a man's being rich if he can't do that? And Arthur is rich enough! Yes, the more I think of it the more sure I am that it was something about the Westerns that made Laurence angry."

She was not long left in doubt. The door opened and Mr Cheviott made his appearance again. He looked grave and preoccupied, but as calm as usual. When, however, his glance fell on Alys's flushed cheeks and tearful eyes, his expression grew troubled. He came behind her chair and putting his hand on her head, turned her face gently towards him.

"Do you think me very harsh, Alys?" he said, kindly. "I did not mean to be so, but I was annoyed, and, besides that, I cannot

bear that habit of joking about marrying, and so on, especially the sort of way girls do so nowadays. It is very offensive."

"But I wasn't joking, Laurence. I had no thought of it," replied Alys. "I will never speak about anything of the kind at all, if you dislike it; but truly you misunderstood me. I don't think what I said would have annoyed you if you had not been vexed about something else."

"Perhaps not," said Mr Cheviott, kindly. "Well, dear, I am sorry for making you cry, but you will forgive me, won't you?"

Alys smiled up through the remains of her tears.

"Of course," she replied. "You know you could make me think it all my own fault, if you liked, Laurence. And I understand what you mean about disliking joking about marrying, and so on, but indeed I was quite in earnest. I should very much like Arthur to marry, and I cannot imagine why you should so dislike the idea of it."

She glanced at her brother questioningly as she spoke – her curiosity strengthening as her courage revived – but his expression baffled her.

"Why do you so much wish Arthur to marry?" he inquired. "You have never seemed to dislike him, Alys."

"Dislike him!" she repeated, innocently. "Dislike Arthur! *Of course* not. I like him more than I can tell; indeed, I think I love him next best to you of everybody in the world. How could I dislike him? And if I did, how could that possibly have anything to do with my wishing him to marry? Why, I want *you* to marry,

but I have given it up in despair."

Mr Cheviott looked slightly self-conscious at his sister's cross-questioning, but turned it off as lightly as he could.

"You might want to get rid of him," he said, carelessly. "Of course, if he were married, we should not see so much of him. Why do you want him to marry?"

"Just because it would be nice, that is to say, if his *wife* were nice, and I don't think Arthur would marry any one that wasn't," said Alys. "She would be in a sort of way like a sister to me, you know, Laurence."

"Those dreams are seldom realised," observed Mr Cheviott, cynically. "As nature did not give you a sister, I would advise you to be content with what she did give you, even though it is only a very cross old brother. But what has put all this of Arthur's marrying into your head just now, Alys? Has he been taking you into his confidence about any nonsense – falling in love, or that kind of thing, I mean?" And he eyed Arthur's letter suspiciously.

"Oh! dear no. Read his letter for yourself, and you will see there is nothing of the kind," replied Alys. But she watched her brother's face rather curiously, as she added, "He seems to like the family at Hathercourt Rectory very much – those pretty girls, you know, that we saw that Sunday. He says they have been very civil to him."

"Very probably," said Mr Cheviott, dryly, as he took up the letter. "Pretty girls, do you call them, Alys? One was handsome, but the other wasn't."

"I liked them both," persisted Alys. "One was beautiful, and the other had a sort of noble, good look in her face, better than beauty."

"What a physiognomist you are becoming, child!" said her brother, from the depths of Arthur's letter. He read it quickly, and threw it aside; then he went to the window, and stood looking out for a minute or two without speaking. "Alys," he said at last, so suddenly that Alys started, "you said just now that it was very dull here; so it is, I dare say, for no doubt the weather is horrible. You would not mind, I suppose, if I arranged to go home rather sooner than I intended?"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't mind at all," replied Alys, looking surprised; "but, Laurence, I thought you couldn't possibly get your business finished sooner than you said."

"I think I might manage it," he said. "Indeed, I fancy I am needed on the other side of the water quite as much as here. I may have to come back again before long, but that's easily done. I'm going out now, Alys, but I shall be in by one, and if it's at all fine this afternoon, we might pay the calls we owe, especially if we are leaving sooner. I can tell you certainly what I fix by luncheon-time."

"Very well," replied Alys. "I shall not be sorry to go home, and for one thing, Laurence, I should like to be at home in time for the Brocklehurst ball."

"*What* a reason!" exclaimed Laurence, as he left the room. "Now that you have reminded me of it, it is almost enough to

tempt me to stay away to escape it."

At luncheon-time he returned, telling her that he had fixed to leave in two days.

"And just out of contradiction," said Alys, "I believe it is going to be bright and fine;" for a gleam of positive sunshine, as she spoke, made its way into the room.

"All the better for our calls," said Laurence.

The gleam strengthened into steady brightness, and when Alys found herself, wrapped in the most becoming of attires, velvet and furs, seated beside her brother in a very luxurious carriage, behind two very respectable horses, the young lady began to feel that it might have been very possible to enjoy herself, if only the fine weather had been quicker of coming. It was a little – just the very least little bit in the world – provoking that now, just as it *had* come, Laurence should make up his mind that they must go.

She looked at him doubtfully as the thought crossed her mind. The sunshine did not seem to have any exhilarating effect upon him; he looked dull and more careworn than since they had been in Paris.

"Laurence," she said, hesitatingly, "I suppose you have *quite* made up your mind to leave on Friday?"

"Quite," he said, gently. "Are you beginning to regret it?"

"A little; it is nice when it is fine, isn't it? Paris forgets the rain so quickly."

"Paris forgets all disagreeable experiences far too quickly."

Alys gave a little shiver.

"Oh, please don't put revolutions, and barricades, and guillotines in my head, Laurence," she said, beseechingly. "Even the names of the streets are associated with them, if one begins thinking of such things. One must do at Rome as the Romans do, so let me be thoughtless in Paris."

"Still, on the whole, you prefer England. You would not like to marry a Frenchman, would you, Alys?"

"*Of course* not," replied Alys, "and of all things I would not like to be married in the French way, hardly knowing anything about the man I was to marry. Ermengarde de Tarannes, Laurence, that pretty girl whom we saw at the Embassy, is to be married to a Marquis something or other, Mrs Brabazon told me, whom she has *really* only seen three times, for he is now in Italy, and will only return the week before the marriage. Fancy how horrible!"

Mr Cheviott smiled.

"You are a regular little John Bull, child," he said; "still I understand your feeling. There is something to be said, however, in favour of the French way of arranging such things, where the parents or guardians of a girl are sensible people, that is to say. Perhaps a union of both ways would be perfection."

"How do you mean?" asked Alys.

"Supposing a case where a girl had known a man nearly all her life, and had got to care for him unconsciously almost, and that at the same time he was the very man of all others whom, for every reason, her parents, or whoever stood in their place, wished her

to marry, would not such a case be pretty near perfection?"

"Rather too perfect," said Alys. "The chances are that the hero would spoil it all by not wanting to marry *her*."

Mr Cheviott looked annoyed.

"Don't be flippant, Alys," he said; "of course that part of it I was taking for granted."

"I didn't mean to be flippant," said Alys, penitently; "I never want to vex you, Laurence. I'd do anything to please you. I'm not sure that I would not even marry to please you, if you want to try an experiment of the French way."

She looked up in her brother's face with a smile, and he could not help returning it.

"If you promise never to marry to *dis*please me, I shall be satisfied," he answered. "But, after all, it's a difficult question. I have known some English marriages turn out quite – ah, surely *more* miserable than ever a French one could."

"But what has put marrying so much into your head to-day? This morning you were distressing yourself about Arthur's prospects, and now you are worrying yourself about mine?"

"Not *worrying* myself. It is only natural I should think about your future sometimes. And if your memory is not very capricious, Alys, I think it will tell you that it was yourself, not I, who first began talking about marriage this morning, when Arthur's letters came. Do you remember?"

"Yes; but still – "

"Here we are at Madame de Briancourt's," interrupted Mr

Cheviott.

“Madame” was at home, and the brother and sister made their way across the spacious entrance, along a corridor, then through a suite of rooms, hardly so beautiful by daylight as when Alys had last seen them on the evening of a grand reception, to a small boudoir at the very end of all. As she passed along, Alys’s thoughts continued in the same direction.

“But still,” she repeated to herself, “I don’t understand Laurence. I am sure he has got something in his head – about Arthur – or about me; still *perhaps* it is not that: he may have been annoyed about something quite different, and Arthur’s letter may not have anything to do with our going away in such a hurry. Anyway, I can leave it to Laurence; I am not going to bother my head about it, for there may be nothing in it, after all.”

And, two minutes afterwards, her head was full of other things, for there was what, to Alys’s eyes, looked quite a crowd of gayly dressed ladies and gentlemen when the door at the end of the long suite was thrown open, and the brother and sister found themselves, for the moment, the observed of all observers.

# Chapter Seven
# This Very Little World

Alonzo. – What is this maid with whom thou wast at play?
Your eldest acquaintance cannot be three hours.
*Tempest.*

For the beautiful Miss Cheviott, little though she had been seen in Paris, had been seen enough to make a considerable sensation, especially as rumour, in this case with somewhat more foundation than usual, added the epithet *heritière* to the rest of Alys's charms. Parisian papas and mammas sighed at the perversity of the British customs, which forbade their entering the lists on behalf of their eligible Adolphes and Gustaves, and the representatives of the English upper ten thousand, then in Paris, would have been very ready to make great friends with the brother and sister. But their advances were hardly reciprocated; Alys's inexperience failed to appreciate them, and Mr Cheviott's somewhat "stand-off" manner was not encouraging. Ill-natured people made fun of him for "mounting guard over his sister," more amiably inclined observers pronounced such brotherly devotion to be really touching, but one and all fell short of attaining to anything like intimacy with the owner of Romary or the reputed heiress.

So some amount of curiosity, added to the interest inspired by the two Cheviotts and the buzz of conversation in Madame de Briancourt's boudoir, perceptibly subsided for a minute or two on their first appearing. Alys, in her simplicity, hardly observed this, or, if she did so, was not struck by it as anything unusual, but Mr Cheviott noticed and was a little annoyed by it.

"I would not have called here this afternoon, if I had known we should find Madame de Briancourt 'at home' in such force," he said to an English lady of his acquaintance after paying his respects to his hostess.

"Ah, you have not been long enough in Paris to be quite *au fait* of everything," said Mrs Brabazon, good-naturedly. "There is always a great crowd here on Thursdays. But why should you object to it? It is all the more amusing."

"I am not fond of crowds, and, as for my sister, she is quite unaccustomed to anything of the kind. She is hardly 'out'," he added, with a smile.

Mrs Brabazon smiled too. "I can quite believe it," she replied, "and I can, too, prophesy very certainly that, in her present character as your sister, she will not be 'out' *long*."

She looked up at Mr Cheviott expecting to see that the inferred compliment had pleased him. But, to her surprise, far from testifying any gratification the expression of his face seemed rather to tell of annoyance, and, being a good-natured woman, Mrs Brabazon felt sorry, and began wondering what there could have been in her harmless little speech so evidently to

"rub him the wrong way." Alys, sitting at a little distance talking to a young lady to whom Madame de Briancourt had introduced her, happened at this moment to look round and caught sight of her brother's face.

"Laurence is vexed at something," she thought, and, moving her chair a little so as to bring herself within speaking distance of her brother and Mrs Brabazon, she tried to think how she could give a turn to the conversation which so evidently was not to Mr Cheviott's taste. The "turn" came from another direction. A tall, thin boy of sixteen, or thereabouts, a boy with a somewhat anxious and almost girlishly sweet expression of face, came softly and half timidly across the room in Mrs Brabazon's direction.

"Aunt," he said, hesitatingly, "I think it is getting rather late – that is to say, if you are still thinking of a drive."

"I was just thinking so myself, Anselm. Just you find out, my dear boy, if the carriage has come; it was to follow us here, you know, and I shall be ready in a moment."

The boy turned away to do as she asked.

"That is my *other* nephew – Anselm Brooke," she explained to Mr Cheviott. "Basil you know?"

"Oh, yes," said Alys's brother, with evident interest. "How is he, poor fellow? I was just going to ask you. Better, I hope?"

Mrs Brabazon shook her head, and the tears filled her eyes.

"There will be no real 'better' for him, I feel sure," she said, sadly. "Yet my brother will not believe it, or rather persists in saying he does not. I can understand it; I remember how

obstinately incredulous I was when Colonel Brabazon's illness became hopeless. But it is sad, is it not? You remember what a fine young fellow Basil was only last year?"

"Yes," said Mr Cheviott, kindly. "It is very sad."

"And poor Anselm, it is really piteous to see his devotion to Basil. He has always looked up to him as to a sort of superior being, and indeed Basil has been treated as such by us all. Anselm has always been so delicate and backward – a frail staff to lean upon, but my mind misgives me that before long his father will have no other."

"Do the doctors think as you do?"

"They do not *say* so, but I feel sure they think so."

"I should like to see Basil again before I leave. May I call, do you think?"

"By all means; it would please him very much. Are you going straight home when you leave Paris – to Meadshire, I mean, for that is 'home' now to you, I suppose."

"Yes," replied Mr Cheviott, "we go straight to Romary. You must come and see us there some time or other, Mrs Brabazon."

"Thank you," she said, with a sigh, "I must make no plans just now. My time belongs entirely to my brother and the boys. But talking of Meadshire reminds me – is it anywhere near Withenden that you live?"

"Very near – within a mile or two."

"Have you ever heard of a place called Hathercourt near there?" inquired Mrs Brabazon, with interest. "You don't happen

to know anything of the clergyman of Hathercourt, or rather of his family? West, I think, is the name."

"Western," interrupted Alys close by. "Oh, yes, they are such pretty girls. I am sure they are nice."

"How can you possibly judge, Alys?" said her brother, coldly. "You only saw them once in your life, and just for a mere instant."

But Alys's eager, flushed face, and warmly-expressed admiration of the Western sisters, had absorbed Mrs Brabazon's attention; she hardly heard what Mr Cheviott said, or, if she did, she gave no heed to it.

"So you know them, then, Miss Cheviott?" she said, cordially, smiling at Alys as she spoke. "Do tell me all you know about them. 'Girls,' you say – are they all girls, then – no sons?"

"Oh, yes," said Alys, "I think there are sons – indeed, I feel sure there are. But it was the girls I noticed, one was *so* pretty."

The eagerness died out of her voice, for the expression of her brother's face told her that again she had managed to displease him.

"How unlucky I am to-day," she said to herself, and the change in her manner was so complete that Mr Cheviott was afraid Mrs Brabazon would notice it.

"It is a case of 'all kinds' in the Western household," he said, with a slight laugh. "Alys and I only saw them once in church – there seemed to be girls and boys, of every size, down to little mites – a regular poor parson's family."

"But what sort of people are they?" asked Mrs Brabazon.

"Being such near neighbours, you must hear something about them."

"They are not such very near neighbours of ours. Withenden is the nearest railway station to Hathercourt, and we are only three miles from Withenden, but Hathercourt again is four miles the other way. Of course I take some interest in Hathercourt now, on Arthur Beverley's account. You heard of his romantic legacy?"

"Oh! yes," said Mrs Brabazon. "He wrote all about it to Basil. But I wish you would tell me anything you do know or have heard about these Westerns."

"Which is very little. They are not in any sort of society."

"How could they be, if they are so very poor?"

Mr Cheviott slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"I did not say they could be," he answered, with a smile. "I was only, at your bidding, telling the very little I know about them. They are not in any society, not only because they are very poor, but because people know nothing about them. The father is not a man who has distinguished himself in any way, and I believe he married beneath him – a poor governess, or something of that kind – so what can you expect?"

Mrs Brabazon gave a curious smile.

"Oh! indeed," she said, dryly. "So the *on dit* of Meadshire is that the Rector, or Vicar – which is he? – of Hathercourt married beneath him. Thank you; I am glad to know it. Here comes Anselm, I must go! You said these Western girls were pretty, did you not, Miss Cheviott?" she went on, turning to Alys.

"Their beauty must be of the dairy-maid order, I suppose?"

Alys felt that her brother's eyes were fixed upon her, but she answered sturdily nevertheless.

"On the contrary, they are particularly refined-looking girls. The eldest one especially has the sort of look that – that – " she hesitated.

"That a princess of the blood royal might have," suggested Mrs Brabazon, laughingly.

Alys smiled, and so, to her relief, did her brother. Then Mrs Brabazon and the boy Anselm took their departure, and not long after, Madame de Briancourt having overwhelmed them with her pretty regrets and desolations at their leaving Paris so abruptly, the brother and sister bade their hostess farewell, and drove off again on their round of calls.

"Laurence Cheviott is evidently prejudiced against these Westerns. I wonder why, for I think him a reasonable sort of man, on the whole," said Mrs Brabazon to herself. "Can it be possible that he has fallen in love with this very magnificent Miss Western, whom his sister admires so much, and that she has snubbed him? *That* I can quite believe he would find it hard to forgive. But, oh! no, that is quite impossible. I remember he said he had only seen them once. I think I shall get Basil, poor fellow, to write to Arthur Beverley; he may know something of them. I would like to see them, and it would be a satisfaction to Basil too."

"What possible reason can Mrs Brabazon have for wanting

to know anything about those Westerns? I am afraid she is something of a busybody after all. Surely Arthur cannot have been writing anything about them to Basil Brooke? Oh, no, it can't be that, for if he had written anything of consequence, it would have been confidentially, and he would hardly be likely to trouble Brooke about anything of *that* kind now," thought Mr Cheviott, when he found himself in the carriage again beside his sister, driving rapidly away from Madame de Briancourt's.

Alys noticed his abstraction.

"What are you thinking of, Laurence?"

"Only what a very little world this is!"

"I know," exclaimed Alys, not sorry to draw the conversation round to a point where her mind was not at rest. "You are thinking how strange it was that we should twice in one day hear Hathercourt Rectory spoken of – at least, not twice spoken of, but I mean mentioned, in Arthur's letter, and again by Mrs Brabazon. Laurence, were you vexed with what I said of the Westerns? Did it seem like contradicting you?"

"Oh, no, you could not help saying what you thought – nor could I," he added, after a little pause.

"I did think those girls *so* pretty, especially the eldest one, and not only pretty, but something more – good and nice."

"I don't see how they *can* be superior, however, considering their disadvantages," said Mr Cheviott, musingly. "I don't agree with you in admiring the elder one more than the other. There was something not commonplace about that younger girl," and

a curious feeling shot across his mind as he recalled the young face with the kindly honest eyes and half shy smile that had met his glance that Sunday morning in the porch of the old church – a feeling almost of disloyalty in the words and tones with which he had replied to Mrs Brabazon's inquiries – a ridiculous feeling altogether to have in connection with a girl he had only seen once in his life, and that for not more than five minutes. But the vision of Mary Western's face had imprinted itself on his memory, and refused to be effaced.

Alys fancied that the prejudice she had suspected was passing away; it could not have been very deep after all. She determined to take a bold step, and one that she had been meditating for some time.

"Laurence," she said, "when we go back to Romary I wish you would let me know those girls. I can't tell you why I have taken such a fancy to them, but I *have*. You could soon judge by seeing a little more of them if they are nice girls, and I am *sure* you would find they are. I have never had many companions, and it is dull sometimes – rather dull, I mean."

She looked up in his face appealingly. It was very grave.

"Surely," he was saying to himself, "the Fates are dead against me. What can have put it into the child's head to want to set up a romantic friendship with these Westerns? Can Arthur have to do with it? Can he possibly have written anything to Alys besides what I saw?"

"You are vexed with me, Laurence," she said, deprecatingly,

as he did not speak. Then he looked at her and felt ashamed of his suspicions, and his tone was gentle when he answered:

"No, I am not vexed with you, but a little disappointed, perhaps, at your asking anything so foolish. Just reflect, dear, what *can* you know of those girls to make you wish to choose them for friends – "

"They have such nice faces."

"And what I know of the family is not to their advantage," pursued Mr Cheviott, without noticing the interruption. "None of the Withenden people speak cordially of them, or indeed seem to know anything about them."

"And you call that to their disadvantage, Laurence!" exclaimed Alys – "you who have so often said what a set of snobs the Withenden people are. Of course it is very easy to see why the Westerns are disliked; they won't be patronised by the county people, and they are too refined for the Withenden set, and so they keep to themselves, and the girls' beauty makes everybody jealous of them."

She looked up in her brother's face triumphantly, feeling that she had the best of it, and so, too, in his heart, felt Mr Cheviott. But he could not afford to own himself vanquished, and took refuge in being aggrieved.

"Very well, Alys," he said, coldly, "I cannot argue with you; you will be of age in three years, and then you can choose your own friends, but while you are under my guardianship, I can but direct you to the best of my judgment, however you may dislike

it."

Alys's eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, Laurence, don't speak to me like that; I am so unlucky to-day. I did not – indeed I did not mean to vex you; I should never want to go against your wishes —*never*, not if I live to be a hundred instead of twenty-one. Laurence, do forgive me!"

And Laurence smiled and "forgave," though wishing she were convinced as well as submissive, for somewhere down in the secret recesses of his consciousness, there lurked a misgiving which shrank from boldly facing daylight as to whether his arguments had altogether succeeded in convincing himself.

"I am very sorry to hear of Basil Brooke being so ill," he said by way of changing the conversation.

"Is that one of Mrs Brabazon's nephews?"

"Yes, the elder; they have come to Paris to try some new doctor, but it is no use. I thought so when he first got ill; and now what his aunt says shows it is true. Poor fellow!"

"Have you known him long? I don't think I ever heard you speak of him before," said Alys.

"He was more a friend of Arthur's than mine; they were in the same regiment. But here we are at Mrs Feston's."

On the whole, Alys enjoyed these few last days in Paris much more than the weeks which had preceded them. She was touched by her brother's evident anxiety that she should do so. Never had she known him more indulgent and considerate, but yet he was less cheerful than usual – at times unmistakably anxious and

uneasy. There came no more letters from Captain Beverley, but Alys was not sorry.

"It was something in that letter of Arthur's that annoyed Laurence so the other day," she thought to herself; "and fond as I am of Arthur, I couldn't let him or any one come between Laurence and me."

And she was not quite sure if she felt pleased or the reverse when her brother told her that, in all probability Captain Beverley would be their guest almost as soon as they reached Romary.

"You haven't written to tell him when we are going home, have you, Alys?"

Alys looked up from her letter to Miss Winstanley in surprise at the inquiry.

"I?" she said; "oh dear, no. I leave all that to you of course. I have not answered Arthur's letter at all; there seems to have been so much to do this last day or two."

Her brother seemed pleased and yet not pleased.

"It is just as well. I don't think I shall tell him either. We'll take him by surprise – drive over to see him in his bachelor quarters at the farm-house the day after we get home, eh?"

"Oh, yes, do," exclaimed Alys, eagerly. "We'll say we have come to luncheon! What fun it will be; for Arthur has about as much notion of housekeeping as the man in the moon, and he will look so foolish if he has to tell us he has nothing in the house but eggs!"

"You don't suppose he has been living on nothing but eggs all

this time, do you?"

"He may have had a chop now and then for a change," observed Alys; "but from what he said in his letter, I don't fancy he has had to depend much on himself. He seems to have been a great deal with his friends at the Rectory."

There was intention in the allusion. Alys stole a look at her brother's face to see if the effect was what she half anticipated. Yes; the amusement had all died put of his expression, to be replaced by annoyance and anxiety. Alys's conscience smote her for trying experiments at the cost of her brother's equanimity.

"Poor Laurence!" she reflected. "I wish he would not worry himself so much about other people's affairs. Arthur is quite able to take care of himself. But evidently it *is* about him and the Westerns that Laurence is in such a state of mind. I really do wonder why he should care so much."

And the next morning the Cheviotts left Paris.

# Chapter Eight
# Plans

"Se'l sol mi splende, non curo la luna."
*Italian Proverb.*

"*Man proposes, but the weather interposes*," is a travesty of the well-known old saying, which few people would dispute the truth of. Directly the delay in the Cheviotts' return home was traceable to other agencies, but indirectly the weather was at the bottom of it after all. The journey to London was accomplished without let or hindrance by the way; the let and the hindrance met the brother and sister on their arrival at Miss Winstanley's house, where they were to spend the night, in the shape of a letter for one thing, and of a bad sore throat of their hostess for another. And all that was wrong was the fault of the weather! Miss Winstanley had caught cold through getting her feet wet the Sunday before, when the morning had promised well and turned out a base deceiver by noon; and the letter was from the housekeeper at Romary, written in abject distress at the prospect of her master and mistress's return home sooner than she had expected them. More than distress, indeed; the letter closed an absolute entreaty that they would not come for ten days or so. It was "a terrible upset with the pipes," she wrote, that was the cause of her difficulty – an upset caused by a complete overhauling of these mysterious modern

inventions of household torture, the necessity for which had been revealed by some days of unusually heavy rains, by which "the pipes" had been tested and found wanting, and the Withenden plumbers being no exception to their class, long celebrated as the most civil and procrastinating of "work-people," had already exceeded by several days the date at which the business was to have been concluded.

"Pipes is things as can't be hurried," wrote Mrs Golding, pathetically, "and, as everybody knows, it's easy getting work-people into a house to getting them out again; but what with the pipes and the men, the house is in that state I cannot take upon myself to say what my feelings would be for you and Miss Alys to see it."

Now Mrs Golding was an excellent servant; she had been Alys's nurse, and though her grammar was far from irreproachable, and her general appearance not more than respectable and old-fashioned, she was thoroughly well qualified for the somewhat onerous post to which, on her master's accession to Romary, he had at once promoted her. But she had two faults – she had feelings and she had nerves.

The letter came at breakfast-time. Alys and her brother were by themselves, Miss Winstanley's sore throat preventing her coming down as early as usual. Mr Cheviott read it, and tossed it across the table to his sister.

"So provoking!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Alys, "it is tiresome just when you were so

particularly anxious to go home. But I see no help for it; when nurse takes to her 'feelings,' what can we do? No doubt the house is in a terrible mess, and if we persisted in going down at once, I really believe she would have a fit. If we wait a few days, as she suggests, you may trust her to have everything ready for us; and indeed, Laurence, I was thinking just before nurse's letter came that it seemed hardly kind of me to go away when aunt is ill and all alone. She will be able to come with us to Romary in a week, she says, if we can wait till then."

Mr Cheviott did not at once answer.

"It is unlucky," he said at last; "but, as far as I am concerned, I must not put off going home, and Mrs Golding's feelings must just make the best of it. But you had better stay here a week or so, Alys, I see that, so you can tell my aunt so."

"Thank you," said Alys; "but I wish you could stay too."

But "No, it is really impossible," was her brother's reply, and soon after he went out.

Alys did not see him again till about an hour before dinner-time.

"Is my aunt up yet?" he inquired, as he came in, and even in the tone with which he uttered the two or three words she could perceive a cheerfulness which had not been his in the morning.

"No," she replied, "but she says she will come into the drawing-room after dinner. She is much better."

"Ah, well, then, if I am not to see her till after dinner, you must tell her from me that I have taken the liberty of inviting a

friend to dinner in her name. Fancy, Alys, almost the first person I ran against this morning was Arthur. He only came up to town yesterday for a few days to settle something about this new farm-house that his head's running upon – so lucky we met!"

"Yes, very. I shall be so glad to see him," said Alys, heartily. "But what a pity, Laurence, that you have to go just as he has come. It would have been so nice for all of us to go home together."

Mr Cheviott hesitated.

"I am not, after all, perfectly certain that I shall go down to Romary quite so soon as I said. Part – in fact, the chief part – of my business was with Arthur, and if he stays in town a few days too, we may all go down to Romary together, as you wish."

"That's very nice of you, Laurence. I really think my training is beginning to do you good. Aunt, of course, will be delighted to see Arthur, but I will go and tell her about it now."

She was leaving the room when her brother called her back. "Remember," he said, "I haven't *promised*," but Alys laughed and shook her head, and ran off.

"I can manage Arthur," she thought, "if it depends on him. But I am sure there is something Laurence has not told me that has annoyed him lately, though he looks happier to-night – I wonder what it is all about."

Captain Beverley was a great favourite with Miss Winstanley, whose affection for her nephew – her half-brother's son – Laurence Cheviott, was considerably tempered with awe. But

with Arthur she always felt at ease.

"It is not that I mind being laughed at, now and then," she would confide to Alys, pathetically, "but with Laurence I really never feel sure if he is laughing at me or not. Of course he is never wanting in real respect, and he is the best of nephews in every way, but I can't deny that I am frightened of him, and, however *you* laugh at me, my dear, you can't laugh me out of it. I always have been afraid of Laurence, ever since he was a baby, I believe. He has had such a dreadfully *superior* sort of way of looking at one, and saying, 'What for does you do that?'"

"What a dreadful baby he must have been! I always tell him he was never snubbed as much as would have been for his good," Alys would reply, upon which her aunt would observe, with a sigh, that it was "far too late in the day to think of anything of the kind *now*."

Her spirits rose greatly when she heard that Arthur was coming to dinner.

"I really think I feel well enough to dine with you, after all," she said to Alys. "It would certainly seem more hospitable, as Arthur is coming, and I don't like to get the character of exaggerating my ailments," and Alys agreed with her that if she were "well wrapped up," the exertion of going down two flights of stairs to the dining-room was not likely to do her any harm.

"But you know, aunt, you mustn't eat too much at dinner," said Alys, gravely, "for if you feed a cold you'll have to starve a fever. A little soup and a spoonful of jelly – anything more might

be very dangerous."

"Naughty girl, *you* are laughing at me now," remonstrated poor Miss Winstanley, but Alys assured her solely that she was "quite, quite in earnest."

And the *partie carrée* was a very cheerful one. Laurence seemed more light of heart than he had been for some time; Arthur, whose state of spirits was, to give him his due, seldom such as to cause his friends much anxiety, was even gayer and merrier than usual, almost feverishly so, it seemed to Alys once or twice, and yet again, when she caught his eyes fixed upon her with a sort of appealing anxiety in their expression that she never remembered to have seen in them before, she could have fancied, were such a fancy possible in connection with so light-hearted and thoughtless a being, that he, in his turn, had something on his mind. Could the mantle of Laurence's recent anxiety have fallen upon him? she asked herself. It seemed so strange to associate anxiety of any kind with Arthur that she tried to dismiss the idea, and told herself that she must have grown morbid from being so much alone with Laurence, and fancying he was vexed or annoyed whenever he looked dull.

"Then it is all nicely settled about our staying in town, and going down to Romary together. It all depends on you, Arthur."

Captain Beverley looked surprised.

"On *me*!" he exclaimed, "how do you mean? I thought it all depended on Miss Winstanley's sore throat."

"Oh! no. Laurence's staying has nothing to do with aunt. He

said he had business with you, but that you could settle it in town as well as at Romary, if you could stay – and so you will stay, won't you? It would be so much nicer to go down all together."

Captain Beverley looked increasingly mystified.

"I don't understand – " he was beginning, but Mr Cheviott, whose attention had been caught by the sound of his own name, interrupted him.

"It is Alys herself who does not understand," he said, good-humouredly, but not without a little constraint. "If you had been still at that delightful farm-house of yours, Arthur, I would have joined you there, and talked over these improvements. But that can wait, I dare say, and if you care to go into the financial part of it, we can do that in town as well. You are not in a hurry to go back to your new quarters, are you? You will wait and go back with us to Romary, as Alys wishes, won't you?" Captain Beverley looked a little surprised, and a little disconcerted. He was not prepared for his cousin's sudden interest in his improvements at Hathercourt, and hardly understood it, for hitherto Mr Cheviott had looked somewhat coldly on the schemes Arthur was full of, and he was still less prepared to be cross-questioned as to his length of stay in town, which in his own mind he had decided was to be a very short one.

"Thank you," he said, with a little hesitation. "I should like to go over the plans for the Edge with you very much. But as to my staying in town another week, I really can't say. I only ran up for a couple of days, and there are lots of things waiting for me to

settle about at Hathercourt."

"You are becoming quite a man of business, I see," and Alys fancied that Arthur winced a little.

She felt sorry that she had said anything about their plans till she could have seen Arthur alone, for somehow she had managed to cause an uncomfortable feeling – the cheerfulness of the little party seemed to have flown; Laurence grew silent and abstracted; Alys tried nervously to hit upon a safe subject of conversation. Fortune favoured her.

"By-the-bye, Arthur," she said, suddenly, "have you heard anything about the Brocklehurst ball? When it is to be, I mean. Some one said something about its being earlier than usual, and I shall be rather glad, for it will be less likely to interfere with other things than when it is so near Christmas time."

Captain Beverley looked up in surprise.

"It is to be in a fortnight – in less than a fortnight, indeed, on the fourth, and to-day is the twenty-third," he replied. "Did you not know? I supposed you had made all your arrangements."

"Oh! I am so sorry!" exclaimed Alys. "I had all sorts of plans in my head, and now it will be too late."

"What will be too late? What are you talking about?" said Mr Cheviott; and when Alys explained, he looked rather ashamed of himself.

"I should have told you, Alys, but I completely forgot about it. I found a letter here last night when we arrived, asking us to go to Cleavelands on the twenty-second, and go to Brocklehurst

with a party from there. You would like that, wouldn't you?"

But Alys's face did not brighten up as he expected.

"I thought you liked the Cleaves so much," he said.

"Yes, I do. I like young Mrs Cleave very much. It isn't that. It is only that I had set my heart on going from Romary, and asking nice people to go with us."

"So we might have done, but for this visit to Paris," said Mr Cheviott. "But it can't be helped. There will be more balls in the neighbourhood before the winter is over."

"Arthur," said Alys, suddenly, but in a low voice, when, later in the evening, she had got Captain Beverley to herself in a corner of the drawing-room – "Arthur, do you know what I had set my heart on for the Brocklehurst ball."

"What sort of dress, do you mean?" said her cousin. "No, I certainly do not know, and I am perfectly sure I couldn't possibly guess. So you had better tell me."

"I don't mean a *dress*," said Alys, contemptuously, "I meant a *plan*."

Captain Beverley did not at once answer.

"A *plan*, I say, Arthur, don't you hear?" repeated Alys, impatiently.

"I beg your pardon," exclaimed Arthur, rallying his attention. "A plan to show me, did you say? For my new farm-house? It is very good of you to trouble about it."

"Oh! Arthur, how provoking you are! What is the matter with you?" exclaimed Alys. "Of course it wasn't that sort of plan I was

talking of. It was a plan of mine – one that I had made in my head, don't you understand? It was about the Brocklehurst ball. I wanted to coax Laurence into letting me call on the Westerns, Arthur, the Westerns at Hathercourt, you know, and then I would have got him to let me ask them – the girls, of course, I mean – to come to stay at Romary for two or three days, and go to the ball with us. Wouldn't it have been nice, Arthur? It would have been a treat for them, as the children say. They are such pretty, nice girls, and I am sure they don't have many 'treats'."

She looked up in Arthur's face with eager, sparkling eyes, and this time she had no need to recall his attention. His eyes were sparkling too, his colour rose, his voice even seemed to her to shake a little with suppressed excitement as he replied to her:

"Alys, you are the best and nicest girl in the world. It was just like you, you dear good child, to think of such a thing, and I thank you – I always shall thank you for it with all my heart. I felt sure," he went on, more quietly – "I felt sure I should find I might count upon you, and now I know it. I have a great deal to tell you, Alys, and I – "

But at this moment Mr Cheviott's voice was heard.

"Alys," he was saying, "are you not going to play a little? What mischief are Arthur and you concocting over there?"

He came towards them as he spoke. Captain Beverley had laid his hand on Alys's in his eagerness, his face was flushed, his whole manner and air might easily have been mistaken for those of an accepted or would-be lover, and the start with which he

threw himself back on his own chair as his cousin approached, increased the apparent awkwardness of the situation. But Alys, though her cheeks were rosier, her eyes brighter than their wont, answered quietly and without confusion:

"We are not concocting mischief, Laurence," she said; "we are too wise and sensible for anything of the kind, as you might know by this time. We'll have another talk about our *plans* to-morrow, Arthur. Come and sing something now to please aunt, as she made an effort to do you honour by coming down to dinner."

And the *tête-à-tête* between the cousins was not renewed that evening, nor, as Alys had proposed, "to-morrow," for Arthur did not make his appearance at Miss Winstanley's the next day at all. Mr Cheviott saw him and went with him to the architect's, and brought back word that he was over head and ears in model pig-sties and shippons.

"And in farm-houses too," he said. "I think it very foolish of him to lay out money on doing much to the house itself. It is quite good enough as it is for the sort of bailiff he should get."

"Oh, then, he does not intend to live at Hathercourt Edge himself," remarked Miss Winstanley.

Mr Cheviott turned upon her rather sharply.

"Live there himself!" he exclaimed, "of course not. What could have put such an idea in your head, my dear aunt? At the most, all the income he can possibly hope to make out of Hathercourt will be within three hundred a year, and he has quite three thousand a year independent of that; he could have

no possible motive for settling at Hathercourt."

"But is there not some condition attached to Arthur's fortune?" said Miss Winstanley, vaguely. "I remember something about it, and he said the other day that he would not be of age for two years."

"No; by his father's will he is not to be considered of age till he is twenty-seven."

"Then I should say it would be a very good thing for him to settle down at Hathercourt for two years and learn farming before he has to manage Lydon for himself," said Alys.

"*Nonsense*, Alys," said her brother, severely. "What can you possibly know about anything of the kind?"

But Alys did not appear snubbed.

"I rather suspect Arthur has some plan of the kind in his head, whether Laurence thinks it nonsense or not," she remarked to her aunt, when they were by themselves in the drawing-room. "By-the-bye, aunt, what did you mean about there being some sort of condition attached to Arthur's getting his property? I never heard of it."

"Oh, I don't know, my dear. I dare say I have got hold of the wrong end of the story – I very often do," said Miss Winstanley, nervously, for something in Mr Cheviott's manner had made her suspect she was trenching on forbidden ground. "And besides, if you have never been told anything about it, it shows that, if there is anything to hear, Laurence did not wish you to hear it."

"Laurence forgets sometimes that I am no longer a child,"

retorted Alys, drawing herself up. “However, it doesn’t matter. If Arthur looks upon me as a sister, it is best I should hear all about his affairs from himself. But, Aunt Fanny,” she continued, in a softer tone, “was there not something unhappy about Arthur’s parents? Laurence has alluded to it sometimes before me, and I have often wondered what it was.”

“It was just everything,” replied Miss Winstanley, sadly, “the marriage was a most foolish one. They were utterly unsuited to each other, and it was just misery from beginning to end.”

“Was Arthur’s mother not a lady?” asked Alys.

“Oh, yes; you could not have called her unladylike,” replied Miss Winstanley. “It was not that – she married Mr Beverley without any affection for him, entirely for the sake of his position. She was older than he, and her people were very poor, and scheming, I suppose, and he was infatuated.”

“And then he found out what a mistake he had made?”

“Oh, it was most miserable. And Edward, Arthur’s father, you know, was no one to make the best of such a state of things. He was always so hot-headed and impulsive, and he had offended all his friends by his marriage. Your mother, Alys, poor dear, was the only one who stood by him. And he was grateful to her; yes, he certainly was.”

“But she died,” said Alys. “How sad it all sounds!”

“Yes, she died, but Edward did not long survive her. He was never a strong man, and he was utterly disappointed and broken down. The last time I saw him, Alys, was with you in his arms

– a tiny trot you were – and Arthur playing about. Poor Edward was trying to see some likeness to your mother in you, and he was impressing upon Arthur that he must take care of you, and be very good to you always."

"And so he has been – always," replied Alys. "Next to Laurence, aunt, I do not think there is any one in the world I care for more than for Arthur. I would do anything for him, *anything*

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