Molesworth Mrs.

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Содержание

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Chapter One.
"Such Nice-Looking People."

"Yes," said my father, "there is no doubt about it; it is the best thing to do. So that is decided."

The "yes" was no expression of agreement with any one but himself. It was simply the emphatic reiteration of the decision he had already arrived at.

He folded up the letter he had been reading, and replaced it carefully and methodically in its envelope, then glanced round the breakfast-table with the slightly defiant, slightly deprecating, yet nevertheless wholly good-tempered air which we all knew well —*so* well that not one of us would have dreamt of wasting time or energy by beating his or her wings against the bars of the dear man's resolute determination.

Some faces fell a little, others expressed philosophic resignation, one or two, perhaps, a kind of subdued exhilaration; but no one said anything except mother, who replied quietly, as was her wont —

"Very well; I daresay you are right."

Then ensued a little talk as to the details of the proposal, or rather decision, just announced, and five minutes later the family group had dispersed.

The one face on which something more than resignation had been distinctly legible was that of my youngest brother, Moore.

He was only fourteen, an age at which – for boy nature especially – it does not take much provocation to get up one's spirits to some pitch of agreeable excitement and expectancy. He ran after me as I left the dining-room, and followed me down the long cold stone passage leading to what he and my other brothers and I myself considered our own quarters. Then, as he overtook me, he slipped his hand through my arm.

"Do you mind, Reggie?" he said in a tone of some deprecation of his own satisfaction. "I think you might be a *little* pleased – any way for my sake. It's awfully jolly for *me*."

"Then I will be pleased, really pleased, my poor old Othello," I replied, heartily, I think. For Moore was our baby and pet, and we thought him irresistible. He was so pretty – everybody said that he, and not I, should have been the girl, if only one girl there was to be among us. He was fair-haired and fair-complexioned, yet not insipid looking, for his eyes were deeply blue, or at least appeared so, thanks to their bordering of dark eyelashes. "Irish eyes," though in other respects Moore's beauty was decidedly of the Saxon type. He had a right to his Irish eyes, as the rest of us to our Irish locks and browner skin. For Irish we were, *really* so as to ancestry, and in many particulars as to inherited character,

though none of us, not even my parents since their childhood, had ever been in Ireland.

Moore's face beamed, and lost its half-apologetic expression.

"Good old Reggie," he said. "Then I'll let myself be jolly right out, however Terry and Horry and Ger grumble at mother and you going away before the holidays are over," and he showed signs of whooping or hurrahing or something of the kind, which I hastened to nip in the bud.

"You had better be quiet about it, however you feel," I said warningly, "or father will begin to think you don't need change and rest, and all that kind of thing, after all."

"No, he won't," the boy replied confidently. "He never goes back once he's settled a thing. You know he never does, Reggie. Sometimes," and here certain reminiscences momentarily sobered his expression, "sometimes I wish he would – "

"And," I continued, "you'd better not let Terence and Gerald hear you talk of holidays. They don't own to anything but vacations now."

"That's just because they're not really grown-up," said Moore shrewdly; "at least not out in the world. Look at Jocelyn now – he might give himself airs. But he always talks of his holidays when he comes home. He very seldom even calls it 'leave,' though he is – how old is he now, Rex? Twenty-five? Yes – eleven years older than I."

"We're all getting very old," I said. "I shall be eighteen next

spring. Can you believe it? And there's only Horace between you and me. We shall all be grown-up before we know where we are, Moore." And I sighed as I said it. I did not want to be grown-up or to come out. Life suited me very well indeed just as it was, especially since we had left off going abroad every winter, and part of the summer too, sometimes, for mother's health. She had been so much stronger of late years, that we had been able to settle down in our own home, which I loved better than any place in the world, both for its own sake and because here I could enjoy to the full the society of my five brothers whenever "holidays" or vacations or leaves allowed them to be with us. So perhaps it is not to be wondered at that my father's breakfast-table fiat was something of a disappointment to me, though to many girls of my age it would have been received with delight. For it was the announcement of his decision that we were to set out on our travels again, to spend the next few months at least, out of England, at some German baths in the first place, and later on at one of the usual winter resorts for invalids.

Mother had flagged of late, or at least father thought so, and Moore, on the eve of public school life and always delicate, had not mended matters by catching whooping-cough at his preparatory school and having it badly. It would never do for him to start on his new career "below par," said my father; better delay it for a few months than have him break down and be sent home again with everything interrupted; in which argument no doubt there was great common-sense.

"Yes," I went on, "we shall all be grown-up in no time, and then dreadful things will happen. You and Horry will go off goodness knows where, and I shall be left alone. You are my last rose of summer, Moore. Not that I ever cared as much for Terence and Gerald as for you and Horace as companions. Terry has always been a bit of a prig, and Gerald too mad about soldiering, even though he doesn't find it easy to pass his examinations. Horace and you are my special brothers, aren't you, Othello?"

Moore squeezed my arm in token of affection. He was like a girl in many of his ways as well as in his looks – demonstrative and caressing, yet brave as a lion and essentially manly.

"You'll have *me* for ages yet," he said consolingly, "at least for holidays; and perhaps the dreadful things won't all be on the side of us boys. You'll be going and getting married, Reggie, once you're grown-up. Oh, *how* I shall hate your husband!"

I could not help laughing at his vehemence.

"Wait till he exists to be hated," I said. "You really needn't trouble about *him*. Perhaps there will never be such a person. Anyway, girls don't often marry as young as I am, so you can count upon me quite as securely as I can count upon you."

How lightly we spoke!

"And we shall have a longer time together now, thanks to going to these baths and places, than since I first went to school, four years ago. So after all you should count it a compliment to yourself, Rex, that I am so pleased about it."

Once my father decided upon anything, there was no danger of his letting the grass grow under his feet, or any one else's, till it was accomplished. We were then in early autumn; there was no time to be lost if we were to benefit by the waters of Weissbad. So within a very few days of the morning which had brought the great doctor's letter of advice, we found ourselves there – my parents, Moore, and myself, though father only stayed to see us comfortably installed, promising to return when the time came for our further move to winter quarters.

I have no intention of describing the quaint little watering-place. It had its own peculiarities, of course, as every place, no less than every individual, has, but in a general way it was like scores of others. And these general characteristics are now-a-days too familiar to be interesting – now-a-days, when an intimate acquaintance with Western Europe by no means gives one a right to rank as having travelled to any noticeable extent.

It was a nice little place, cheery and homely. We liked it better than we had expected, partly, no doubt, because we were specially favoured as to weather; partly, or greatly, perhaps I should say, because the beneficial effects of the place on my mother and brother became quickly and most satisfactorily visible.

But my peculiar interest in Weissbad, looking back upon it through a vista of many years as I now do, dates from a certain day, the precursor of a friendship which has taken rank as one of the great influences on my life.

It was mother who first drew our attention to certain newcomers into our little world for the time being. Any arrival was promptly noticed by that time, as many of the visitors had already left, and but for the unusually lovely weather, Weissbad would already have been almost deserted. I remember that day so well.

Moore and I had been a long walk – it was delightful to see how the boy's strength was returning – and when we came in, we found mother seated as usual at the wide window of our cheerful little sitting-room overlooking the "square," with its gardens in the centre, which was the great feature of the little town. She looked up brightly as we came in – not that that was in any way remarkable – when did mother not greet us brightly? – her face full of interest as if she had something pleasant to tell, which set at rest my fears that our long absence might have made her anxious.

"I have been amusing myself," she said, "by watching some new arrivals at this hotel. I saw them first in the courtyard when I was coming in from my walk, and something about them struck me at once. They looked so much more interesting than the other people here."

"Are they English?" I asked. "Certainly, the other English here still are the stupidest of the stupid. Not one young person among them."

I sat down as I spoke, for I was feeling rather tired, and quite ready for a little gossip.

"Oh, but," said mother, "you won't have to complain of that any more. Two, at least, are quite young, – sisters evidently, both very pretty, the younger one especially – she doesn't look much older than you, Regina – an elderly father, and another man, about thirty I should say, the brother, or possibly the husband, of the elder girl. I had only a glimpse of them at first, but since then I have been watching them from the window. They have been strolling all over the place, peering in at all the little shops in the square, so delighted with the novelty of everything evidently, as if they had never been abroad before. *The* one that took my fancy so specially was the younger one. I never saw a sweeter face!"

"We must find out who they are," I said; "but you know, mamma, I never care much about making friends with other girls; I understand boys so much better."

"And they're so much nicer," added Moore; "girls are so – so affected and stuck-up, except, of course, Reggie."

We laughed.

"What do you know about them?" I said. "Less even than I!"

"I know what the fellows at school say about their sisters. Of course they are very fond of them – lots of them, at least – and some of them are very jolly about games and things like that. But they do sit upon their brothers all the same. Lots do!"

"Perhaps it is not a very bad thing for the brothers sometimes," said mother. "I often wish you had had a sister, Regina, or failing that, a few really nice girl friends. Even *one* would be a great advantage to you."

I felt just a little nettled. Dear mother sometimes took up an idea too enthusiastically, and I did not in those days perhaps sufficiently appreciate the steady good judgment underlying her apparent impulsiveness.

"Oh, mamma," I said, "things are all right as they are. I don't want a sister, and I never have wanted one. And if we make friends with these people who have struck you so, please let it be in a general way. I don't want *any* girl friend?"

"You are certainly very premature?" said mother, smiling. "Probably enough they are only here for a night on their way somewhere else; and even if they were staying here, it by no means follows that we should become acquainted at all, though I own to being unusually attracted by their faces and general look. There was something pretty about the whole group."

Mother's gentleness disarmed me, as it always did. I felt a little ashamed of myself. Nor was I, to tell the truth, devoid of curiosity as to these newcomers. It is almost laughable to find how, in a temporarily restricted life, such as one leads at a quiet watering-place, one's dormant love of gossip and inquisitiveness about one's neighbours assert themselves!

Yes, there they were! I "spotted" them at once, as Moore would have said, when we entered the long dining-room, where supper was served at separate tables to each little party, and in my heart I at once endorsed mother's opinion. They were all so nice-looking and so happy. The elder of the two girls – for a girl she looked – I almost immediately decided must be the wife

of the younger man; something indefinable in his attitude and tone towards her suggesting a husband rather than a brother. The father, an elderly man, with grey hair, and delicate, somewhat wasted features, whose expression told of much sorrow, past rather than present, was not the least attractive of the quartette; his face lighted up with a charming smile when he spoke to or glanced at his daughters, both of whom, as mother had said, were decidedly pretty.

No, that is not the word for the younger one; "lovely," suits her far better, and before I had been five minutes in the same room with her, I more than endorsed mother's opinion.

"She is perfectly sweet," I thought to myself. "I wonder what her name is, and I wonder if we shall get to know them. I don't know that I wish it; I am perfectly sure she would not care for me. I would just seem a sort of tomboy to her. She looks so dreadfully – just what she should look! Such dear little white hands!" and I glanced at my own brown fingers and thought of my sunburnt face, with, for almost the first time in my life, a touch of shame. After all, perhaps mamma was in the right in her advocacy of parasols and veils, and above all, gloves!

Then the sound of the voices which reached us from the newcomers' table struck me with a sense of contrast, not altogether flattering to myself. The tones were so soft though clear, the slight laughter breaking out from time to time so gentle though gay, and entirely unaffected.

"Yes," I replied in answer to mother's – "Well, what do you

think of them?" – as we were slowly making our way upstairs again to our own quarters, "Yes, you were quite right, mamma; they are most attractive-looking people, and the little one is the prettiest person I have ever seen. But I don't want to get to know them! They wouldn't care for us, at least not for me. Of course they would like *you*, and they would feel bound to be polite to me, which I should hate."

Mother only smiled. She very often only smiled when I began what she called "working myself up" for no cause at all. But in her heart I think – indeed she owned to it afterwards – she was not a little pleased at the impression which she saw had already been made upon me.

"I daresay they'll be gone by to-morrow; I hope they will," said Moore consolingly. He was always so extraordinarily quick in perceiving any little thing that annoyed me. "*I* don't see anything so wonderful about that girl," he went on; "she is just a dressed-up sort of young lady. I am perfectly certain she can't play cricket or ride a pony bare-back like you, Reggie."

"I daresay not," I said. "And I almost wish I couldn't!" I added to myself rather ruefully.

But to-morrow came and they were not gone, nor apparently had they any intention of leaving, for we overheard them talking about excursions they were proposing to make in the neighbourhood, and the words "next week" occurred more than once.

I felt rather cross and dissatisfied that day, I remember.

Perhaps I had over-walked myself – very probably so; and now and then I caught mamma's eyes glancing at me with a somewhat perturbed expression.

"Are you not feeling well, Regina?" she said at last, when I had answered some little question rather snappishly, I fear.

"Of course I am quite well, mother, dear," I replied; "I am only rather cross, and I don't know why. I would rather you would scold me than seem anxious about me! Everybody has moods. I – well, yes, perhaps I was thinking a little about that girl. It must be nice to be so graceful and charming?"

"My poor, dear child," said mother, "don't distress yourself so needlessly! You know very well we would rather have our tomboy than any other girl in the world, though there is no reason why you should not be graceful and charming too, in your own way. You are very young still; you have plenty of time before you; but I do feel that it would be a great help to you, now especially, to have *some* girl friends."

I was beginning to feel it too, and did not repulse the suggestion, as I might have done even twenty-four hours previously.

"But it can't be helped," I said; "girl companions haven't come in my way. You know there are scarcely any young people at all in our neighbourhood at home."

"I know," said mother regretfully, "and with our having been away so much, I seem to have rather fallen out of touch with my own old friends, some of whom have daughters of about your

age. I have been thinking a great deal about it lately."

No more was said at the time, but I still felt far from anxious to make acquaintance with the new arrivals. The very thought of it overpowered me with shyness.

Strange to say, the acquaintance was brought about by the only one of us three who had seen nothing to admire in the pretty sisters.

I think it was on the third day after they had come, that Moore burst into our room one afternoon, his face rosy with excitement.

"Mother?" he said, "Reggie! I – I really couldn't help it, but – I couldn't be rude, you know! Those people that you've been talking about – the girl you think so pretty – well, they were sitting near me while I was having my afternoon coffee," – Moore loved of all things to have his coffee out in the garden by himself at a little table – "and listening to the band, and I heard them talking about the excursion to Oberwald, where we went last week, you know, and they were all in a muddle about it. They wanted to walk part of the way, and they had a map that they couldn't make out; and at last one of them – the youngish-looking man, turned to me and said, 'If you have been here some time, perhaps you can explain this route to us,' and of course I could, and I put them right in a minute. I told them the best way was to drive to that funny little inn where we had dinner, you remember, and then to walk the rest up to the view place, and get their carriage again when they came back; and they thanked me awfully, and – " Here Moore paused at last, half out of

breathlessness, half, I shrewdly suspected, because he felt a little shy of relating the sequel of his story. "They're not bad sort of people," he concluded somewhat lamely, "and I think the girl *is* rather pretty when you see her close to."

"*Rather* pretty," I repeated; "why, she's perfectly lovely, my dear boy. But you haven't finished. What more have you to tell? Did they invite you to be their guide?"

I spoke jestingly, but, to my surprise, I saw that my words had hit the mark, for Moore's fair face, which was already flushed with excitement, grew still redder.

"Not exactly," he said; "but I saw they'd have *liked* to ask me, so I said if it would be any good I wouldn't mind going with them – it's to-morrow they want to go – and – and – that I daresayed my sister would come too."

"Moore!" I exclaimed, aghast. And "My dear boy!" said mother.

Our exclamations put Moore on the defensive.

"Well," he said, rather indignantly, "I don't see that there's any harm in it. You've been awfully wanting to know them – "

"I'm sure *I* haven't," I interrupted.

"Well, any way, you were awfully down on me because I didn't think the girl was the most beautiful person in the world. And I don't think she is stuck-up, after all I'm sure you'd like her very much, and they seemed quite pleased when I said you'd come too – quite jolly about it. I told them mother couldn't walk so far, and that we had come here because she'd been ill."

"Indeed! and what did you *not* tell them?" I said, in an icy tone. But my heart misgave me as soon as I had uttered the words – Moore looked so thoroughly unhappy. Mother, as usual, interposed to smooth things down.

"After all, there is no harm done," she said. "I see no objection to Moore's going with them, and we can easily make some little excuse for you, Regina, if it is necessary. To begin with, there would not be room for so many in the carriage."

"Oh, yes, there would," said Moore, dejectedly. "They're going to have a much bigger one, which holds five inside and one on the box – or even two – by the driver. And the girl looked so pleased when I said you'd come. *I* shall feel as ashamed as anything if you don't; I know that, Reggie."

I had not the heart to tell him it was his own fault, and mother just said to him that he might trust her to put it all right. So in a minute or two he brightened up again, and it seemed as if the matter were at an end.

It was not so, however. When a thing is to be, it often seems as if even the most trivial events conspire to lead up to it. So it was in this case.

At supper that evening Moore turned his chair, so that he – or at least his face – should not be visible by his new acquaintances. I was sorry for him; he was feeling rather "small" and mortified, I could see, and I wished I had not snubbed his boyish officiousness so unmercifully. I had almost arrived at the point of hoping that some occasion would offer itself

for endorsing his friendly overtures, when my glance fell on an envelope lying – hitherto unnoticed – by my plate, and I realised by a flash of inspiration that here in my hands was the very opportunity I had been thinking of.

It was a letter addressed to —

"James Wynyard, Esq., Hotel Augusta, Weissbad, etc, etc."

I felt certain it was for one of the two men at the neighbouring table, and *almost* certain, though I had no grounds for being so, that it was for the elder, the father of the two young women. And even if I were mistaken, its having been deposited on our table gave an excellent excuse for speaking to them. Letters, as a rule, came in the morning – English letters, that is to say – but there was a second post late in the evening, and anything it brought was laid on the supper-tables. I touched mother's arm and showed her the address, saying in a low voice, "Shall I ask if it is for *them*?" when to my surprise she started. "Wynyard?" she said, "James Wynyard! Why, that was the name of Maud Prideaux's husband. How curious if – if it should be – "

She glanced up. Her face was aglow with excitement, as had been Moore's. But before she finished her sentence, I saw a look of new expectancy in her eyes, and turning in the same direction, I caught sight of "the father," as we called him, coming towards us, a letter in *his* hand also, and a look of inquiry and surprise in his face.

"I think," he was beginning, as he reached our table. But mother cut him short.

"Yes," she exclaimed, "you *are* Mr Wynyard, and I – you must remember me? – I am your Maud's old friend – Geraldine Terence – now Geraldine Fitzmaurice."

Chapter Two.
An Embryo Novelist

So it was. A minute or two's conversation sufficed to establish for each the other's identity, and to gather up the loosened threads of former acquaintanceship. Worse than loosened indeed, for mother's face grew sad when Mr Wynyard told her of the death of her old friend, Maud, his wife, which had occurred several years previously.

"I had no idea of it," she said. "We were so much abroad for some years that many changes may have taken place without my hearing of them. And curiously enough, I have been thinking of her – of your wife, Mr Wynyard, quite specially of late."

"Don't you find that that is often the case?" was the reply. "When some old link is about to be renewed, one has a sort of foreshadowing of it. Was it possibly," he added with a little hesitation, "the involuntary association of some likeness to *her* in either of my daughters, if you have happened to notice them?"

"Who could help doing so?" said mother in her pretty, gracious manner. "But no," she went on, "I don't think it was that! It was even before your arrival here that I was thinking of Maud. When I know them better I shall probably see some likeness in your daughters, but it has not struck me."

"We think Margaret the most like her," said the father.

"Margaret is Mrs Percy – she and her husband are travelling with us," and he nodded his head in the direction of his own party. "But your supper will be getting cold – "

"Come up to our sitting-room afterwards," said mother, "for our mutual introductions."

And so they did, and before I fell asleep that night I knew all about them, and had – I may as well confess it once for all – fallen over head and ears in love with the younger girl, Isabel!

Our guesses had been, as has been shown, correct so far as they went. The party of four were wonderfully "untravelled" for even those days. And the charm of novelty greatly enhanced their enjoyment of Weissbad and its neighbourhood. Mr Percy and his wife were thoroughly pleasant young people, and on further acquaintance, mother saw much in the latter that recalled her old friend.

But Isabel it is less easy to describe, and I will scarcely attempt to do so. To some extent her appearance, her very beauty, did her injustice, for it was difficult to believe that it could exist side by side with such complete unaffectedness and simplicity, such entire absence of vanity. She knew – she could not but know – that she was lovely, but she scarcely thought about it, *herself* in any way occupying a far smaller place in her thought than is the case with many a woman whose small claims on admiration one would imagine likely to beget humility and self-forgetfulness.

And the next day found Moore and myself most willing members of the excursion party to Oberwald. How well I

remember it all! My shyness melted away like morning mist in the happy geniality of our companions, above all of Isabel. She was just enough older than I to make it natural that she should take a little the lead in some ways. She had seen more of society than I of course, quietly though they lived at home, and since her sister's marriage, the fact of being in charge of her father's house had given her a little air of importance which was quaint and pretty.

Before that pleasant day was over we had compared notes on almost every department of girl-life. I had confided to her my newly awakened feelings of dissatisfaction as to my want of feminine tastes and tendency to "tomboyishness," and she on her side had told me that she was often afraid of growing too prim or narrow-minded in the well-arranged regularity of her own home-life.

"That was why," she said, "I was so glad to travel a little. I feel as if I needed to rough it in some ways. Father is too careful of me, too unselfish. I am afraid I have always been a spoilt child, and having no brothers, you see, may make me selfish without knowing it!"

She looked up at me anxiously with her sweet brown eyes. What was it they reminded me of? I had already noticed that her people called her by some peculiar pet name; I had not caught it exactly.

"What is it that your sister and father call you sometimes?" I said. "Is it 'Ella'?"

Isabel blushed a little.

"*No*," she said, "it is Zella. Rather a silly name, I am afraid. It came from a fancy of father's that my eyes were like a gazelle's."

"And so they are!" I exclaimed; "that is the look I have seen in them – some dogs have it too! I don't think it is at all a silly name. Will you let me call you by it sometimes?" for of course under the circumstances there had been no question of anything but "Isabel" and "Regina" between us from the first.

"Of course you may, if you like," she said. "But – " and she hesitated.

"But what?" I asked.

Isabel smiled.

"You mustn't be vexed with me," she replied, "if I can't promise to call you 'Reggie,' as your brother does. I don't like it – and Regina is such a pretty name and uncommon too."

"Mother never calls me anything else," I said, "but I am afraid I *am* half a boy. You must civilise me – mother will be eternally grateful to you if you do."

"I don't think you need civilising," said Isabel; "but perhaps in our different ways we may do each other good. I do hope your people will let you come to stay with us when we go home."

"I should love it of all things," I said. "I have scarcely ever paid any visits, and I have seen very little of England except quite near our own home. Is it very pretty where you live?"

"Not so much pretty as picturesque," Isabel replied. "To begin with, it is very, very out of the way; we are six miles from a

railway station of any kind, and sixteen from an important one. But papa's people have lived there for so long, that it doesn't seem out of the way to us. It is a place that changes very little."

"Then it is to be hoped that you have some nice and interesting neighbours," I said. "Near us there are so few young people."

"And there are not many near Millflowers either," said Isabel; "at least not within a good long drive. I hope you would not find it dull. There are interesting walks, if you care for wild, rugged scenery. The village itself is quite tiny. There is only one house of any importance besides the vicarage and ours, and that is – no good," she added, rather abruptly.

"Why not?" I inquired. "Is it uninhabited?"

Isabel hesitated.

"No," she replied. "The same people have lived in it for a great many years. They were there before father came into possession, on my uncle's death. But – " and again she paused.

My curiosity was aroused.

"Do tell me about them," I said.

"Well, yes, I don't see why I shouldn't," answered Isabel. "Father always tells us not to gossip about the Grim House, but you are sure to notice it when you come, so I may as well prepare you beforehand."

"The Grim House!" I exclaimed. "Is that the real name? Do tell me all about it. Is it haunted? It *must* be."

"No," said Isabel, shaking her hood. "It *isn't* haunted. At least I have never heard that it *was*. The real name is 'Grimsthorpe' –

Grimsthorpe House or Hall, I am not sure which; but it *is* always called 'The Grim House,' and has been, papa says, ever since he can remember. And it seems to suit the present inhabitants and the strange mystery there is about them."

I was all ears by this time, and scarcely dared to speak for fear of interrupting Isabel.

"Yes," I said; "do go on."

"There is so little to tell," she said; "that *is* the mystery. These people came there about twenty years ago. The house had been uninhabited for some time before that. It belonged to some one whose affairs had gone wrong, and there was some difficulty about letting it. And it was a good deal out of repair. Still there was no prejudice against it except that it was and is an extraordinarily dreary-looking place. Perhaps that was the attraction to the strange people who did take it. Our old gardener has told us about their coming. One day a gentleman arrived by train and drove out to our village. He went over the Grim House all by himself – there was only an old woman at the lodge who kept the keys, and he wouldn't let her go through the house with him. He was only about an hour there altogether, and then he drove back to the station as fast as he could."

"What was he like?" I could not help asking. "Did any one ever tell you?"

"I don't need to be told," was the unexpected reply. "I have seen him for myself once a week ever since I can remember. At church, I mean," she went on, smiling at my puzzled expression.

"They do come to church – all of them – and this one is the eldest of them. Of course he must have been younger-looking twenty years ago. Well, a few days after this stranger's first appearance, workmen arrived at the Grim House, a whole lot of them, Scart – that's our gardener – says. Some of them from a good distance, and they set to at the house and got it into order in no time. All at the new tenant's expense. Scart always says it must have cost a 'sight of money.' I don't fancy much was done in the way of making it pretty, for by all accounts, or rather by the few accounts that ever reach us, it is as plain and severe inside as it is grim outside. But any way, it was put into thorough repair, and then – they all came! They arrived late at night, so that no one knew anything about it till the next day."

Isabel stopped. I think she enjoyed the impression which she saw her story was making upon me.

"And who were the 'all'?" I asked.

"Four people," she replied. "Two men and two women – brothers and sisters they were soon known to be. None of them very young even then, and now the sisters both look fifty at least, and the elder brother older than that; the youngest-looking of them is the second brother. They arrived, as I say, twenty years ago, and from that day to this – would you believe it, Regina? – they have *never* set foot outside their garden wall, except to come to church every Sunday morning, which they do in all weathers. There is a standing order at the inn for a fly to come for them every Sunday all the year round."

"How extraordinary!" I exclaimed. "Has no one any idea why they behave so strangely? Are any of them out of their minds? Did none of the neighbours call on them?"

"Yes," said Isabel, replying to my last question first. "Several people tried to do so, but they were always met at the lodge by the information that the ladies could not see any one, and the calls were never returned. Of course all sorts of wild stories got about, but papa does not believe that there is the least foundation for any of them; and 'out of their minds!' Oh, no! none of them are that."

"But what do they do? How can they live? It must be so terribly monotonous?"

"I suppose that they have got used to it," said Isabel. "And the grounds round the house are very large. Perhaps if they have come through some fearful sorrow or tragedy, the mere feeling of peace must be a boon that we ordinary people can scarcely understand. And they seem devoted to each other. One cannot but hear a little gossip, for they make a point of engaging servants from the immediate neighbourhood, and these all say that they are very kindly treated, and that the Greys – that is the name of the family – 'are real gentry!' The only fault the servants find is, that it is very dull; but still, as they are allowed a good deal of freedom, they generally stay some years."

"It was rather clever not to bring any servants with them," I said. "Generally in stories of this kind they have some old family confidant bound over to secrecy."

"Yes," said Isabel smiling. "But you forget *my* story is not

fiction, but fact. It has been better than fiction to me though," she went on, "it has been a perpetual romance before my eyes all my life." Just then, as far as I remember, we were interrupted. I think that was all that Isabel told me that first day, of the strange story. But it had taken a great hold upon my imagination, and though I did not speak of it at home – I was not sure that I had any right to do so – my mind was full of it. And it was not long before the opportunity came for asking further questions about the Grim House and its occupants.

For now, during the two or three weeks that remained of our stay at Weissbad, our new friends and we were almost inseparable, and when father joined us again, the intimacy by no means decreased, and I could see that he, quite as much as mother, approved of Isabel's companionship for me. It was tacitly agreed by the elders of both parties that the friendship was to be encouraged, and that when we were again settled at home I should be allowed to pay a visit to the Wynyards.

And whenever we spoke of this visit-to-be, the subject of the Grim House was sure to be reverted to.

"I am looking forward tremendously to staying with you," I said one day to Isabel; "but do you know, even if I were not sure that I should enjoy it in other ways, I should be dreadfully disappointed not to go to Millflowers. I am so exceedingly interested about that queer family, I keep thinking and thinking about them and wondering what their secret *can* be."

Isabel looked a very little troubled.

"I hope I didn't do wrong in telling it you," she said. "I mean I hope it hasn't taken too great a hold on your imagination. Papa has always warned us so much not to think more than we can help about it. He cannot bear any sort of gossip, and he has very strong feelings about respecting these poor people's wish for secrecy and silence. And we have got accustomed to the mystery to a great extent."

"But there are some things," I persisted, "that you can't help knowing about them, without any prying into their affairs. Do they never get any letters, and is 'Grey' their real name, do you think?"

It was scarcely fair of me, perhaps, to put these questions to my friend, for, after all, her natural curiosity about her strange neighbours was only dormant. I saw that she hesitated to reply, so I hastened to add assurances of my discretion.

"You need not be afraid of my ever gossipping about the Grim House," I said. "I have not even mentioned it at home. But one *can't* help wondering about it. Do tell me all you know yourself."

"I think I have told you all there is to tell," said Isabel. "Nobody knows if 'Grey' is their real name or not; and as for their getting letters, I believe they never do – at any rate, not that we have ever heard of. They are *good* people, of that I am sure. The sisters' faces are so gentle, though dreadfully sad. The eldest brother is stern-looking, but the younger one looks kind, though very grave. And they are very charitable; the people in the village say they are sure of help from the Grim House whenever they are

in trouble. The Greys make their servants tell them of any illness or special poverty; and they are sensible too, the vicar says, in what they do."

"And have none of their servants ever told over anything?"

"There seems nothing to tell," said Isabel. "It is just a very quiet regular house. Things seem to go on from year's end to year's end just the same."

"It is too extraordinary," I exclaimed, "and dreadfully sad."

"And it will grow sadder and sadder as time passes," Isabel replied. "They can't all live for ever, and when it comes to the *last* one left there alone! It makes one shiver to think of it."

"But perhaps," I said, "the secret doesn't really concern them all? Perhaps if the eldest brother died the others would be free? They may in some way be sacrificed for him?"

But Isabel shook her head.

"I don't think so," she said. "The only strong feeling I have about it is that they are all suffering together through some one else's fault. They are so devoted to each other – there is never a breath of any discussion or quarrelling, and that *would* have been heard of through the servants."

This was the last talk we had on the subject before the time came for our new friends to turn homewards. We parted with great regrets on both sides, and many a wish on ours – on mine, at least – that we, like them, were bound for England on leaving Weissbad; but that was not our case. Father was more determined than ever that the winter must be spent in the South, though we

had begun to hope that the great improvement in our invalids already achieved would have brought about his consent to our all going home again. We quitted Weissbad a few days after the Wynyards, escorted by father, who left us again as soon as he had seen us installed for the second time – this time at one of the smaller, and in those days less-frequented, winter places on the Riviera.

The four or five months we spent there passed uneventfully – much as former winters had done in the years when sojourning in the South was a regular institution for us. Nothing so interesting as our meeting with the Wynyards at Weissbad happened to us; and indeed, but for one incident, trivial and scarcely noticed at the time, but which after-occurrences recalled to my memory, I should have no occasion to linger on our stay in the South.

The incident was the following.

The hotel at which we were staying was a small one, though comfortably managed on almost entirely English rules, for the visitors, many of whom came there year after year, were rarely of any other nationality than our own. It was therefore impossible, and would have savoured of churlishness and affectation, to keep ourselves apart, or to be on other terms than those of friendly acquaintanceship with our fellow-guests. None of them, however, were very interesting. On the whole, those whom we "took to" the most were a mother and two sons – quite young fellows, one about Moore's age, the other a year or two older. It was for the sake of the elder one that they were spending the

winter abroad, as a very severe illness had left him much in the state that we had dreaded for Moore himself, and the similarity of the circumstances naturally induced sympathy between us.

It was Moore, of course, who first made friends, beginning with the younger boy, and Mrs Payne, the mother, speedily followed it up by thanking us for some little kindness we happened to show her son.

"It is so dull for him here," she said, "as his brother is not able to do much. I almost wish we had left him at home at school. But it would have been dreary for him at Christmas – his father and my eldest son are such terribly busy people. Lawyers generally are, I suppose – and we hoped that Leo would have some chance of improving his French here, as he is going to a public school at Easter."

Mother confided to her in return Moore's prospects. Mrs Payne was a gentle, rather childish woman, of the type whom very clever men are often credited with preferring as wives, and we soon came to the conclusion that the old saying was exemplified in the present case. The sons, the elder one in particular, were decidedly intelligent above the average, and their admiration for their father and elder brother fully equalled that of their mother. Rupert, the invalid, took a great fancy to me, and before long I was the recipient of many of his secret hopes and aspirations, the most intense of which was that he should become a novelist.

"You see, Miss Fitzmaurice," he said to me one day, "I have

already, and would have increasingly, material ready to my hand. You don't know what extraordinary stories lawyers come across! Many of them there is no breach of confidence in repeating, and my brother Clarence has told me bits of others quite as strange as any fiction."

"Or stranger," I remarked, for at that moment Isabel's description of the Grim House and its inhabitants came into my mind.

"Yes," said Rupert, "you are right. Some stories are 'too strange not to be true.' And you see I could piece bits together, so that nobody could possibly recognise anything. My father knows *one* story which he says he can't tell us – I believe he says so partly to tantalise us – which he declares would make a first-rate sensational novel."

"And will he never be able to tell it to you?" I inquired, more for the sake of seeming interested in poor Rupert's conversation than because I cared to hear. The young fellow was rather of the "old-fashioned" order; there was a certain quaintness in his way of speaking which was not without its charm, though now and then he tired my patience a little. He was so unlike anything of "boy" kind I had ever come across.

"I don't know," he said gravely. "*Perhaps*, if all the people it concerns were dead. But they are none of them very old; some, I believe, still almost young."

"Then you *do* know something about it, after all," I replied, my interest increasing.

"*Scarcely* anything," said Rupert; "only this much, that it is a secret which affects a whole family, and that my father and one other are the only beings who are in their confidence. He has told Clarence and me that some day he may have to tell us – when he gets very old, or if his memory were failing. Two outsiders must know it."

"And yet it affects a whole family," I repeated. "They must be a very reticent set of people."

"More than that – it has darkened the life of a whole family; that, I think, was my father's exact expression," said Rupert eagerly. "I often and often think about it, and wonder what the secret can be."

As he said the words there suddenly flashed across my mind the remembrance of an almost similar exclamation that I had recently heard. Yes – it was Isabel speaking of the Grim House and its inhabitants. *What* a strange coincidence it would be if the family Rupert was speaking of should be the same people! Too strange to be possible, I thought, for I have greater belief, now that I have seen more of life, in coincidences than I had then.

But the idea did not remain in my mind. I dismissed it as too wildly improbable, and Rupert talked on about his contemplated works of fiction and their "plots" in so interesting a way, that the "stranger than fiction" story I had come across was for the time completely forgotten by me.

Chapter Three.
Millflowers

Our "banishment," as I sometimes, in a rather discontented mood, called our stay abroad, came to an end rather sooner than we had expected, thanks to an unusually early and genial spring, which made even father think that it would be safe for mother to return to England. Moore, by this time, was in rollicking health and quite fit for school. And to me our home-going was considerably damped by the knowledge that it meant parting with my last playfellow.

After all, the winter had passed pleasantly enough; the Paynes had helped to enliven it. But mother looked rather askance at my friendship with them.

"Boys again!" she said half-laughingly. "Always boys, Regina! I wish there had been a *Miss* Payne."

"She wouldn't have been half as nice as Isabel Wynyard," I replied. "And Rupert is really not like a boy; his whole interest is in books and things of that kind. But you should be pleased, mamma, that I have made *one* real girl friend at last."

"So I am," was the reply – "very pleased."

"If only they lived nearer us," I said with a sigh. "I shall be dreadfully dull at home when Moore goes."

"Poor Regina!" said mother. "Well, we must find something

to cheer you up."

And though I did not then know it, I believe that it was this conversation that made her determine to arrange for my promised visit to Millflowers as soon as possible. She never thought of herself, though home without *any* child in it seemed scarcely home to her.

The first few weeks, however, of our return were very bright and happy. It was delightful to have Moore so thoroughly his old self, and two of the other boys were with us for Easter; and best of all, the brother whom I cannot describe as a "boy," as he was already twenty-five – Jocelyn – our "eldest," and I must almost say "dearest."

He was deputed to take Moore to his new school, and very proud Moore was of him as an escort.

"How I wish I could go to Winchester with you both," I said the evening before they were to leave. "I really do think, Jocelyn," for it was to him I was talking, "it was a great mistake that I was not a boy after all, though I have been trying my best lately to make myself into a 'young lady'! Has mamma told you so? For every one of us, from oldest to youngest, confided in Jocelyn. I put the question with some little anxiety, for my brother's approval was very dear to me."

He smiled as he replied —

"Of course mother has told me of the new leaves you've been turning over – ever so many of them, though all in the same direction, and I intended to compliment you on the

great improvement in your style of hairdressing and the general smartness of your appearance! Don't be discouraged, my dear child. 'Rome wasn't built in a day!'"

"And it will take a great many days, if ever, I suppose you mean," I said rather ruefully, "to turn a tomboy into a oh! whatever she should be."

"But by what I hear," said Jocelyn, "you have got a first-rate model before you in the person of Miss Wynyard. I am very glad you are going to stay with them so soon."

I opened my eyes at this.

"So soon?" I repeated. "I have not been told anything about it."

"Well, don't let out that I told you, then," said Jocelyn. "I suspect mother must have been keeping it for a surprise to cheer you up after the boy and I leave to-morrow. I believe they are arranging for you to go very shortly. You will enjoy it, won't you?"

"*I* hope so," I replied. "As far as Isabel is concerned, I am sure I shall. But I have found out that I am very shy. I think I am rather afraid of Mr Wynyard. He has brought up his own daughters to be such pinks of perfection! I am sure that he won't approve of frivolous conversation. I remember Isabel saying how he disliked gossip. And oh! by-the-bye," I broke off, "that reminds me, Jocelyn! There is such a queer story, a regular mystery where the Wynyards live."

"Do you mean that the house is haunted?" said Jocelyn, laughingly.

"Oh, no; it is not about their own house, but a house near, in the neighbourhood. 'Grimsthorpe,' I think, is its proper name. I wonder if I might tell you about it? It isn't exactly a secret, but I have never mentioned it to mamma. Mr Wynyard might blame Isabel for gossipping if he found that mother had heard of it."

"As I am not likely to see Mr Wynyard, I think you may safely tell me the story, whatever it is," said Jocelyn.

I was delighted to do so.

"To begin with," I said, "the very name of the place – I don't mean its proper name, but the corruption of it, for the whole neighbourhood calls it the 'Grim House' – is enough to rouse one's curiosity!" And then I went on to relate the strange circumstances I had been told of.

My brother listened attentively, and with evident interest.

"What a queer story!" he said. "It suggests all manner of hidden tragedies. What a life for those poor men, even if they have done anything to deserve it! I can't help pitying them more than the sisters."

"The younger one is dreadfully delicate," I said, "so perhaps his life any way would have been a dull one. He is crippled somehow. I had the feeling that the elder brother, the eldest of them all, was the cause of their imprisoned life. But Isabel maintains that they are all suffering together for some one else. I do wonder if it will ever be explained!"

"There must be many mysteries," said Jocelyn, "that are never cleared up, but certainly this is a very curious one. Don't let

Moore hear of it if there is any chance of *his* ever going to the place; he could never rest contented till he got inside the Grim House. He'd be scaling the walls, and goodness knows what all, and would certainly get himself into trouble."

"I don't think that he or any one could feel more curiosity about it than I do," I said. "Isabel has got accustomed to it in all these years, but even *she* says she has fits of wondering and wondering about these queer people."

"And possibly," said Jocelyn thoughtfully, "possibly the root of it all is nothing very terrible. The poor things may have got morbid about it, whereas if they could make up their minds to consult some outsider it might all be put right. It is extraordinary how brooding over troubles magnifies and increases them."

Jocelyn was wise beyond his years, and what he said impressed me.

"It seems a pity that no one – Mr Wynyard, for instance, or the clergyman of the place, if he is a sensible man – tries to help them," I said. "I know I couldn't live beside four miserable-looking people for twenty years without trying to gain their confidence."

"It may have been tried," remarked my brother. "But of course that sort of thing cannot be forced. It would require great tact and experience. Don't go on thinking about it too much, Reggie, or it will get on your brain; and whatever you do, don't attempt any investigation of the secret."

I did not reply. To tell the truth, words had added a new

incentive to my great wish to unravel the mystery. What a good work it would be to get these poor lives out into the sunshine again! I was very young and very self-confident in some ways, and I did not then know that the onlookers whom I had tacitly reproached with indifference had already done their best in the direction of offering help.

The next day my brothers left us, and but for the anticipation of the pleasure in store for me which Jocelyn had told me of, I should have felt very low-spirited indeed. The morning following turned my hope into certainty. Mother opened a letter at the breakfast-table whose contents she read with evident satisfaction. In it was enclosed a note in Isabel's handwriting which mother passed on to me. It was quite short, just expressing her pleasure at the prospect of seeing me "so soon," and a few words added as a postscript increased my own excitement and satisfaction in the prospect of my visit to Millflowers. These were the words: – "I am doubly glad you are coming now," she wrote, "because something very strange, or rather unusual, has happened in connection with our local mystery, and I do so want to tell you about it. I am afraid I am a gossip at heart!"

I felt my face grow red with eagerness. Mother watching me, naturally attributed my excitement solely to pleasure at the invitation.

I thought you would be delighted, she said, full of sympathy *as* usual. "I have purposely not spoken of it to you before till it was quite settled. There was a little uncertainty about Isabel's plans,

as her sisters had talked of taking her away to pay some visits, but in the end this has been given up. So it is all right. You will start about this day week with Maple. It is rather a long journey, but Mr Wynyard has let me know all the trains. You will get there by daylight."

"Oh, I shouldn't mind how late I travelled with Maple," I said, for my maid had been with us since my childhood; though indeed, to tell the truth, my love of adventure would have found a good deal of attraction in the idea of travelling quite alone.

And the next few days passed quickly and pleasantly, mother sharing to the full my own happy expectations.

It *was* a long journey, for the Wynyards' home was as decidedly in the North as ours was in the South. But I enjoyed it, especially when we got into a part of the world that was quite new to me. For though I had travelled so much, there had been no great variety in our movements, which had always been southwards. My own country was but little known to me.

The evening was drawing in when we reached our last stopping-place, the nearest station to Millflowers, by name Scart Bridge. And here a pleasant surprise awaited me, for on the platform stood Isabel herself, all smiles and welcome – "prettier than ever," I thought to myself as I kissed her.

"How nice of you to have come yourself," I said, "for it is a long drive, isn't it?"

"Not so very long, after all," she replied. "I always enjoy meeting people so much – it is not like seeing them off. *You*

have had a long journey, though," she went on. "Aren't you very tired?"

"Not a bit," I replied. "It has all been so new to me. I have never been in this sort of country before."

By this time we were seated in the waggonette, which Isabel informed me she had assured her father I should much prefer to a close carriage.

"It is really not cold now," Isabel went on. "The evenings are getting quite long. And it is so nice, on coming to a new place, to know something of your surroundings at once, don't you think? In a brougham one sees nothing."

I looked about me with the greatest interest. It was the "North Country" unmistakably. Wild and hilly, bare to some extent, though here and there we caught sight of short stretches of forest land, for during a great part of the drive to Millflowers the view was very extensive. But the aspect of things in general was not cold or repellent, even to my southern eyes, for I saw the country to advantage in the clear sweet light of a mild spring evening.

"I think it is delicious," I said enthusiastically. And as after a time we came to a great stretch of moorland, I grew even more enthusiastic. "Oh how charming!" I exclaimed. "It seems so beautifully free and open – the air is so exquisitely fresh and scented – yes, is it not scented, Isabel?"

"*I* always fancy it is," she replied, "though it is too early in the year yet for the scent – the gorse! O Regina! you should see it when the gorse and heather are out!"

"Yes," I agreed. "It must be lovely. But do tell me," I went on, for my thoughts in those days were very erratic, "shall we pass the Grim House on our way? And O Isabel! do tell me what has happened there! You alluded to something in your letter."

A slight, the very slightest touch on my foot, and a glance at my friend's face checked me. I remembered that we were not alone, for Maple was in the waggonette with us, and I felt ashamed of my stupid indiscretion.

"You mean Grimsthorpe?" said Isabel quietly. "No, we do not pass that way. Not that there is much to see if we did; it is a very ugly house, though an old one. Indeed the houses about here are rarely picturesque, though I think ours is pretty inside, and so is the vicarage. There are no other at all large houses near us. Millflowers, you know, is a very tiny village. Did I ever tell you what some people believe to be the origin of the name?" she added with a smile. But I could see that my questions had made her a little uncomfortable and that she was anxious to change the conversation.

"No," I replied, feeling rather small. "I have wondered about it once or twice. It *is* an odd name."

"There is a legend," Isabel said, "that long, long ago some French refugees settled in this out-of-the-way part of the world, and set to work to distil 'scented waters' from the sweet-smelling plants and flowers – there is any quantity of thyme about here – they found, and that to their production they gave the name of 'Millefleurs' – a name still used for a well-known scent, of

course. At that time there were only two or three cottages where our village now is, and the story goes that these poor French people's secret gave its name to the place, getting corrupted into 'Millflowers.'"

"How curious! I wonder if it is true," I said.

Isabel seemed dubious as to this.

"Papa says it sounds rather as if the story had been made up to suit the name," she said.

"Then is your own house not *very* old?" I inquired.

"Not very – about eighty or a hundred years old," she replied. "It was originally just a sort of shooting-box – for our family has owned land about here for longer than that – and then my great-uncle took it into his head to enlarge it and make it his home. Grimsthorpe House is older; *it* was originally a large farmhouse – indeed it is not, to look at, much better than that now, though the grounds are extensive."

We had crossed the moor by this time, and the rest of the way was along a more sheltered road bordered with trees, and here and there a glimpse of cultivated fields, altogether a different kind of landscape, more like what I was accustomed to at my own home, and a few minutes more brought us to the entrance of the Manor-house as the Wynyards' place was now called.

As we passed through the lodge-gates, Isabel leant towards me and whispered —

"The Grim House is half-a-mile farther on, on the edge of another part of the moor."

Her father was standing at the front door to receive us. His welcome was most cordial and courtly, but I felt even more strongly than before that it would be very difficult for me to be at ease with him; and so I said, in other words, to Isabel when we were alone in the room she had taken me up to. A charming room it was, with windows on two sides, from one of which a peep of the moorland, with rising ground in the distance, was to be had, as Isabel pointed out to me.

"Yes," I said, as I threw myself into a tempting arm-chair, "it is all delightful; only, Isabel, I do wish I didn't feel so shy of your father!"

Isabel laughed.

"I can't understand it," she said. "I mean, I can't understand your feeling *shy* of him. He is so exceedingly kind and gentle. At the same time – " she hesitated.

"What?" I asked quickly.

"I *could* understand," she replied, "feeling afraid of him if one had done anything wrong – more afraid than if he were severe. When I was a small child and got into scrapes, as all children do sometimes, his look of almost perplexed distress made me feel worse, far worse, than if he had scolded me in a commonplace way."

"O Isabel!" I exclaimed, "you are making me feel far more frightened than before! I must be *awfully* careful while I'm here not to shock Mr Wynyard in *any* way. But I am so thoughtless and forgetful; and that reminds me how stupid it was of me to

allude to the Grim House mystery before Maple."

"Yes," said Isabel, "I thought it best to give you a hint. I was sure you wouldn't mind; for the best of servants gossip, and I should not have liked your maid to tell our servants that you and I had been talking about the Greys, though she is pretty sure to hear something about them while she is here. But, dear Regina, you really mustn't take up the idea that papa is alarming! He is so pleased to have you here, and has said to me more than once that he hoped you would make me less of 'an old woman,' which he says I am in danger of becoming. I get anxious about the housekeeping and things like that, and sometimes papa says I am not enough out of doors."

My spirits rose at this. I asked nothing better than to be out of doors from morning till night in this beautifully wild district.

"Your father won't have to complain of your leading too quiet a life if he leaves you to me," I said laughingly. "And the very first time we go out, Isabel, you will promise, won't you, to show me the Grim House! And oh!" I went on, "you haven't yet told me what has happened there just lately."

"It sounds so little to tell," said Isabel; "but if you could realise the utter isolation of these poor people, you would understand the sensation it has made. It is simply that they have had visitors for the first time in the memory of man!"

"What sort of visitors?" I asked eagerly.

"Two men – gentlemen – an old and a young one! They stayed at Grimsthorpe one night. They drove up in a fly from the station,

and it fetched them again the next morning. You see I have kept my eyes and ears open as regards the mystery, for your benefit."

"Did you see these men?" I asked.

"I am not quite sure, but I think I did see one of them," was the reply. "I had been in the village, and coming home I met a stranger who asked me the way to the church. Our church is rather curious; nobody quite knows how it came to be there, it is so big a church for so tiny a place."

"What was he like?" I inquired, thinking to myself that I should have been much more excited over the incident than Isabel appeared to be.

"It was almost dusk," she answered. "But his voice was a very pleasant and cultivated one. He was young, and I think good-looking. I was half inclined to ask him if he was a stranger in the neighbourhood or something of that sort, for I saw he had come down a path which only leads to the Grim House, though it wasn't till the next day that we heard of the wonderful event. It was Strott, of course, who told me of it!"

"I wonder who he was!" I said thoughtfully. "It certainly makes the whole still more interesting if they are beginning to have any communication with the outside world."

"There is one thing," said Isabel, "that I forgot to tell you. They really must be good people, for on one occasion they did break through their rule of never leaving their own grounds. It was when little Tony at the vicarage fell off a haystack and they feared for his life; he was insensible for many hours, and his

mother was in despair. That same afternoon the fly drove up to the vicarage, and, to Mrs Franklin's astonishment, the Misses Grey were announced! She could scarcely believe her ears, and she has often told me that the very excitement of their coming did her good."

"How very queer it is that you forgot to tell me of it before!" I could not help interrupting.

"I just did forget," said Isabel calmly. "You see we are so used to the Grim House strangeness that it doesn't strike us in the same way as it strikes you."

"And what were they like?" I asked, "and what had they come for?"

"To express their sympathy, and find out if they could be of any use," said Isabel. "Mrs Franklin was greatly touched. Of course their faces were quite familiar, but she had never heard their voices before. She said they were very, very gentle and apologetic, and pathetically timid. There were tears in their eyes, and they murmured something about being so fond of children, and that their own younger brother had had an accident as a boy, which had injured him lastingly. There was nothing they could do to help, though Mrs Franklin said she wished she could have invented something. She thanked them, of course, heartily, and the next day they sent down for news of Tony, by that time out of danger, and Mrs Franklin began to hope it would lead to some intercourse with these poor sad ladies. But no; the Grim House closed up again, and from that day to this they have never been

seen except at church."

"Then it appears that the only way to decoy them out of their den would be for some of you to get very ill, or have an accident or trouble of some kind," I said rather thoughtlessly.

Isabel gave a little shiver.

"Don't talk of such things!" she exclaimed. "I am afraid I am naturally rather cowardly. I don't know if you have found that out yet, Regina? You mustn't despise me for it. Margaret consoles me by saying that she thinks it was the effect on my nerves of mamma's sudden death. I was such a little girl at the time, and it was so terribly sad – seeing her apparently quite well one evening, and being told the next morning that I should never see her again."

"Did you *not* see her?" I asked in a lowered voice. Sorrow of this kind had never come near our happy family circle, and the mere allusion to it filled me with awe.

Isabel shook her head.

"No," she replied. "They thought it better not, but I am not sure that it was so. Margaret says she looked lovely. I could not understand it; she seemed to have disappeared, and yet I was frightened to ask any one about it. For nights and nights I lay awake wondering where she had gone, or rather *how* she had gone; for of course they assured me that she was in a happy world. But it was so dreadful to me that she had gone without saying good-bye. I think I scarcely believed what I was told."

"Poor little Zella!" I said tenderly. "I think indeed it was

enough to shake your nerves."

There was no more time for talking, as at that moment the dressing-bell sounded. But the conversation had left its mark on me. All through the evening, which was a very bright and pleasant one, and during which my shyness in Mr Wynyard's presence began to fade a little – all through that first evening the thought of the poor "Grey ladies," as I had begun to call them to myself, never left me. The picture of them in their pathetic timidity touched me curiously. And how good they must be to have made such an effort as that of going to the vicarage because there was trouble there!

And when I went to bed my meditations took an even more definite shape.

"I wonder how those four poor things are spending this evening," I thought. "So near us and yet so far off. I wonder if they have a piano or anything of that sort to pass the time. It *would* be a good work, surely it would be, to get to know them, and break down the dreadful barrier they have placed round themselves. It seems so probable that they are exaggerating their troubles, whatever these may be."

Chapter Four.
"Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted."

The next few days passed very pleasantly. The weather was fine though rather cold, but the fresh bracing feeling of the air seemed to suit the place, and I enjoyed its invigorating effect to the full. It was before the days of bicycles, but Isabel had a little pony-cart and a sturdy, sure-footed pony, in which we managed to get over the ground in a wonderful way. Hilly roads and rough ground were no obstacles to our progress; sometimes even, we ourselves lifted the cart over some specially awkward place, the pony seeming quite to enter into the fun of the thing.

We walked, too, quite long distances now and then, and several times, both walking and driving, we passed the high walls which surrounded Grimsthorpe House, the object of so much curiosity and speculation on my part.

As Isabel had warned me, there was but little to be seen of the house itself, except from one side, where a rise in the road enabled passers-by to look down, as it were, on the place.

And worthy of its name did it look, – "grim" indeed, as it was called.

It was a square grey building, with narrow windows in straight rows. There was nothing about it in the very least picturesque or attractive, for it was far too modern to at all suggest

anything mediaeval or mysterious; it was just thoroughly ugly and forbidding. Yet to me it was full of fascination. We never passed the point of view in question without my begging Isabel to stop and have a good look at it, which at last she began to be rather unwilling to do.

"I think really it is getting on your brain, Regina," she said. "I almost wish I had never told you anything about it."

"As if any one could have helped noticing it," I exclaimed. "But for the neatly kept grounds" – for neat they were, so far as one could see, though with nothing ornamental about them at this season at least – "one could be tempted to think it was a prison or a workhouse."

"Prisons and workhouses are models of neatness, I believe," said Isabel. "But certainly these gardens could not belong to anything of the kind. And there are flowers at one side of the house later on in the year. I have an idea that the younger brother – the cripple – looks after them."

"Have you ever seen him gardening?" I asked eagerly.

Isabel shook her head.

"Oh, no," she replied, "I have never seen one of the family except in church."

"I am longing for Sunday," I said. For though I had already been more than a week at Millflowers, I had not yet been to the village church, as on my first Sunday there we had driven some miles in a different direction, by Mr Wynyard's wish, to hear a noted preacher who happened to be visiting in that

neighbourhood.

We were standing just then, Isabel and I, on the rising ground I have spoken of, and my eyes were fixed on Grimsthorpe.

"No," I went on, "I have never seen anything so strange. It might be an enchanted – not 'palace,' it is too ugly for that. I don't know what to call it. We have stood here some minutes, and there has not been the very slightest sign of life to be seen or heard. Not even a dog barking. How do they manage to make even their servants as noiseless and invisible as themselves?"

"You are drawing on your imagination a little," said Isabel, smiling. "There *is* a gardener mowing the grass in that corner. See!" and she pointed it out, "and – yes! there is the baker's cart driving up the back entrance."

I was almost disappointed by her matter-of-factness.

"You are so desperately unromantic," I said impatiently. "You needn't have pointed out the gardener and the baker!" And in my own mind I thought that I would keep my curiosity more to myself in the future. "I don't believe Isabel would at all sympathise in any plan for getting to know these people!" but in this I did her injustice.

That very evening, just as it was beginning to get dusk, Isabel was called away by her father, as not infrequently happened, to do some writing for him. I was not inclined to stay indoors, so I ran upstairs to fetch my outdoor things, telling Isabel as I went, that I was going for a stroll on my own account, to pass the time that she was with her father.

Scarcely conscious of any intention of the kind, I turned nevertheless in the direction of the mysterious house. It was too late to have climbed up the hilly road referred to; besides, the fading light would have made it impossible to distinguish anything. So I contented myself with skirting the high wall of the grounds on the side nearer the Manor-house. I had walked about three-quarters of a mile, and was beginning to think it was time to return, when, standing still for a moment in consideration, I heard, in the perfect silence which seemed to pervade the locality, the sound of approaching footsteps. I glanced round, but no one was to be seen on the road, and as the steps drew nearer and more distinct, I became aware that they were those of some one on the inner side of the wall. I stood listening more and more intently, when, to my surprise and almost alarm, a figure appeared before me on the path, several yards beyond the spot I had reached. It was that of a person who had emerged from within; the fact being, though I was not then aware of it, that there was a door in the wall a little farther on.

Half confused, half frightened by this sudden apparition, I remained motionless, in what must have appeared a bewildered way to the newcomer. But before my fears had time to increase, the sound of a voice, unmistakably that of a gentleman, reassured me. Till he was close to me it was too dusky to distinguish his features clearly, but I saw him lift his hat as he approached.

"Excuse me," he said. "May I ask if you have possibly seen a pocket-book on the path about here? I think I must have dropped

it – not far off – an hour or two ago, and very few people pass this way."

My curiosity, as well as my sympathy, was at once awakened.

"It must be," I thought to myself, "one of the Greys. Perhaps they come out here more than is known, for a little change. How I wish I had found the pocket-book; it might have been an opening!"

But to him I could only reply —

"No, I am sorry I have seen nothing of the kind. It has been almost too dark, though, to see it, as I have only just now come straight up the road."

Even now, close as we were, I could not distinguish his face very clearly, for the waning light was still further decreased by clouds. I saw, however, that he was anxious and worried, though, looking at him as attentively as I dared, I was surprised to see that he was not an elderly man, as from Isabel's description the older brother must be.

"And it cannot be the younger," I thought, "as he is crippled, and this man walks quite easily."

He thanked me, and passing me, again raising his hat, walked quickly along the road, down which I was about to retrace my steps.

I waited a moment or two, and then followed him at a more leisurely pace. But I had not gone more than a hundred yards or so when I saw again his figure emerging from the gloom before me. In spite of myself I felt a little afraid. The modern ghost is so very

material and commonplace in appearance, by all accounts, that one may easily mistake it for a real flesh and blood personality.

"Can this path be haunted?" I asked myself, and as the stranger came nearer I involuntarily shrank up a little towards the wall.

But as he was passing, the cheerful tones of his voice dispelled my misgivings. He made an almost imperceptible pause in his quick pace, exclaiming —

"I have found it! So sorry to have troubled you!" then hurried on, doubtless to enter the grounds at the same spot whence he had emerged, and where my common-sense told me there must be a door of some kind.

"I shall make Isabel come this way to-morrow to look for it," I said to myself, and I hurried home, eager to relate to her my exciting adventure.

She was looking out for me, walking up and down the drive.

"I could have come with you if you had waited five minutes. Papa only wanted me for a moment or two, after all. It is rather too dark for you to be out alone, and I didn't know which way you had gone," she said.

"O Isabel!" I exclaimed. "Something so interesting has happened;" and I quickly related the incident, my friend listening attentively.

"Was it a Grey or a ghost?" I ended up half jokingly, but Isabel's face was full of grave consideration.

"I never *heard* of a ghost in or about the Grim House," she

said seriously. “But still less can I think it was one of the Grey brothers. The elder one is *quite* old-looking, peculiarly worn and haggard, and the other, as I have told you, though he has a sweet, calm face, is an unmistakable cripple. He walks very slowly, and generally with a crutch.”

“It is very mysterious, then,” I replied, “though I shall not feel satisfied that it was not the elder brother till I have seen him for myself on Sunday. Do let me sit where I can have a good view of them, Isabel. I promise you I will peep at them most discreetly.”

Isabel smiled, but seemed nevertheless a little disapproving.

“I hope they won’t occupy your thoughts during the whole of church-time,” she said.

“No, no,” I replied. “Of course I wouldn’t let it be so. Though naturally what has happened this evening makes me more anxious than ever to see them.”

Fortunately for my peace of mind, this day was already Friday. I had not, therefore, long to wait. Millflowers church still belonged to the old order of things. There were two or three square pews, cushioned and curtained, for the “upper ten” of the village, one of which, of course, was appropriated to the Manor-house, and another to Grimsthorpe; and Isabel kindly arranged, not without some conscientious scruples, I fear, however, that I should occupy the corner whence the melancholy quartette could best be seen. She made a little plan of the church and the pews the evening before, for my benefit.

But without anything of this kind – almost, I think, without

having been on the look-out for the denizens of the Grim House at all – they would, it seems to me, at once have attracted my attention. Indeed, at the first moment, I felt surprised that every one in the church did not turn round to look at them, forgetting the many years – years more than my whole existence – during which the solemn little procession of the four sad-faced people had, Sunday after Sunday, made their way up the aisle to the gloomy old pew. No – sad I can scarcely call them all, without making one exception. The face of the younger brother was, as Isabel had said, not only sweet, but calm and peaceful in expression, though he appeared pathetically delicate, with large soft eyes and almost colourless complexion.

"*He* is not the guilty one, if guilty one there is," I decided. "*He* is not the cause of the family unhappiness and isolation. I should say he is a sort of saint, happy to bear for the sake of others."

Then my eyes turned to the elder brother. The sisters I had already glanced at, and found them exactly what I had expected from Isabel's description – refined, rather insignificant-looking, inexpressibly melancholy; but the face of the senior of the party was in a sense the most interesting of all. He was evidently a strong man, well-made and originally powerful. But his frame was prematurely bent, the lines of his fine features were worn and furrowed. It was a good face, but the expression had become almost fiercely defiant and hard.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.