

Molesworth Mrs.

Lettice



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Mrs. Molesworth

Lettice

Chapter One. “It Has Come.”

”...The Faith

...Which winged quick seeds of hope beyond the boundary walls of death.”

Dr Walter Smith, Hilda.

Lettice moved to the window. She choked down a little sob which was beginning to rise in her throat, and by dint of resolutely gazing out at what was before her, tried to imagine not only that she was not crying, but that she had not, never had had, the slightest inclination to cry.

A clumsy cart laden with wood, drawn by two bullocks, came stumbling down the hilly street. The stupid patient creatures, having managed to wedge their burden against some stones at the side of the road, stood blinking sleepily, while their driver, not altogether displeased at the momentary cessation of his labours, kept up a great appearance of energy by the series of strange guttural sounds he emitted, in the intervals of strenuous endeavours to light his pipe. Two or three Spanish labourers, looking, with their fine presence and picturesque costume, like princes in disguise, came slowly and gravely up the hill, the brilliant sunshine lighting up the green or scarlet sashes knotted round their waists and hiding the shabbiness of their velveteen breeches. One, a youth of not more than sixteen or seventeen, happened to look up as he passed by the window where the fair-faced, brown-haired girl was standing, and a gleam of gentle, half-comprehending pity, such as one sees sometimes in the expression of a great Newfoundland dog, came into his large, soft, innocent-looking dark eyes. Lettice started indignantly.

“What does that boy stare at me for?” she said to herself. “Does he think I am crying?”

But the quick movement had played her false. Two or three unmistakable tears dropped on to her dress. More indignantly still, the girl brushed them away.

“Absurd!” she half murmured to herself. “I am too silly to take things to heart so. Mamma not quite herself to-day. She is nervous and fanciful, no doubt, like all invalids, and less clearheaded than usual. One should not always pay attention to what an invalid says. She is weak, and that makes her give way to feelings she would not encourage generally.”

But just then the sound of her mother’s voice – low and faint certainly, but in no way nervous or querulous, with even a little undernote of cheerfulness in the calm tones – reached her where she stood. Even Lettice, with all her power of self-deception, could not feel that it seemed like the voice of a person who did not very well know what she was talking about; and, with another little jerk of impatience, she drew out her watch.

“I wish it were time to go out,” she half muttered to herself. “Nina is so childish; I can’t understand how mamma doesn’t see it.” For the snatches of talk going on about her mother’s sofa had to do with nothing more important than the grouping and placing of some lovely ferns and wild-flowers, which eighteen-year-old Nina and Lotty, the baby of the family, had brought in from their morning ramble.

“Yes,” said the mother, with real pleasure, almost eagerness, in her voice, “that is beautiful, Nina; I shall have the refreshment of those ferns before me all day, without having to turn my head. I shall be able, *almost*, to fancy myself in the woods again.”

“Why can’t you come, mamma?” said Lotty’s high-pitched, childish voice. “It really isn’t far, and you could have one of those nice low little carriages *nearly* all the way. I don’t think it *could* tire you.”

For an instant there was no reply. Lettice felt, though she could not see her mother, that she was striving to regain the self-control which Lotty’s innocent speeches now and then almost upset. And tears, sadder but less bitter than those which had preceded them, welled slowly up to the elder sister’s eyes. Then came Nina’s caressing tones, in half-whispers, as she stooped over her mother.

“Darling?” Lettice heard her murmur; and then, turning to Lotty, “Run away and take off your things; mamma is going to sleep a little.”

And Lettice still stood by the window, though the bullock-cart had jerked and slid down the street and was now lost to view, and the young Spaniard with the gentle lustrous eyes had long since passed out of sight. She was crying now – softly but unrestrainedly; her mood had changed. It would have mattered little to her present feelings though all the world had seen her tears.

“Oh! it is so sad, so unutterably sad, for her and for us,” she was whispering to herself. “There are times when I could almost find it in my heart to wish it were already over. I cannot *bear* to think of her suffering more.”

Just then an arm was passed round her waist, and the same caressing voice whispered, this time in *her* ear, the same word —

“Darling!”

Lettice did not speak, but she leant for a moment against her sister in a more clinging way than was usual with her.

“Nina,” she said wearily.

“Yes, dear,” said Nina. She was always very proud, poor girl, when Lettice seemed to turn to her for support or sympathy.

“It’s so miserable, isn’t it?”

“Yes, dear,” said Nina again. She would dearly have liked to add some words of comfort, but she did not know what to say. It was true. It *was* very miserable!

“Why should *we* be so unhappy?” Lettice went on. “Why should such troubles come to us; other people go on living happy peaceful lives, without these dreadful earthquakes of trouble? And we have only her.”

“I know,” said Nina softly.

“And, as things are, we can’t *even* wish it to go on, can we?” said Lettice, unconsciously raising her voice a little, as she spoke more energetically. “She suffers more and more, and – do you know, Nina?” She hesitated.

Nina looked round anxiously.

“Come into the other room,” she said. “Bertha is in the ante-room; she hears the slightest movement. But I don’t think mamma is very soundly asleep, and our talking may disturb her.”

“We may as well go into the garden a little,” said Lettice indifferently.

“And what was it you were going to say when I interrupted you?” asked Nina, half timidly, when they found themselves pacing up and down a little raised terrace walk which overlooked the street.

Lettice reflected for a moment.

“Oh, I remember,” she said. “It was about mamma. Don’t you think sometimes, Nina, that all this suffering is weakening her mind a little? She doesn’t seem so clear about things, and it worries me. For of course, though I would like, after – after mamma is gone, to do exactly as she would have wished, yet one must discriminate between what her real wishes and advice are, or were, and the sort of weak – yielding to feeling – I – I don’t quite know what to call it – I don’t mean to be disrespectful, of course – that must have come with her long illness and the suffering and all that. And it makes it difficult for me, still more difficult, to discriminate, you know. For it is such a responsibility on me – such a heavy responsibility!” and Lettice gave a little sigh.

But something in the sigh seemed to say that the heavy responsibility was not *altogether* disagreeable to her.

Nina walked on, her blue eyes fixed on the ground, her fair face contracted into an expression of unusual perplexity. She could not bear to disagree with or contradict Lettice – Lettice so clever, so unselfish, so devoted – the heroine of all her girlish romance! And yet —

“I don’t think quite as you do about mamma,” she said at last. “I can’t say that I see any sign of – of her mind failing. On the contrary, as she grows bodily weaker it seems to me that her mind – her *soul*, I would almost rather say – grows wiser and stronger, and sees the real right and best of all things more and more clearly.”

She had forgotten her fear of Lettice in the last few words, but she soon had cause to remember it again.

“Her mind failing,” repeated Lettice contemptuously. “How coarsely you express things, Nina! Whoever would say such a thing? As if mamma were an old woman in her dotage! What’s the matter? Surely you are not going to *cry*– for nothing!”

For Nina’s face had grown very red, and she fumbled about with her parasol in an uneasy manner. But she was *not* crying, and Lettice, watching her, saw another cause for the blush and the discomfort, in the person of a young man, who just then crossing the street raised his hat with a shy yet eager deference, which the most scrupulous of chaperones could not have objected to.

“That boy!” said Lettice under her breath. “And just now when I wanted to make Nina thoroughly sympathise with me! It is really detestable – one has no privacy here. We had better go back into the house,” she said aloud.

“Hush, Lettice; he will hear you!” exclaimed Nina, some stronger feeling overcoming even her awe of her sister. “He is going to speak to us.”

And before Lettice had time to reply, the young man came to a halt just below where they were standing.

“Is – I hope – excuse my interrupting you,” he began, for Lettice’s expression was not encouraging, to say the least. “I was so anxious to know if Mrs Morison is better to-day.”

“Thank you,” said Lettice, civilly but coldly. “Yes, on the whole I think she *is* rather better to-day.”

Nina, from under her parasol, darted on her sister a look half of reproach, half of surprise. “Better!” Mamma any better! How could Lettice say so? To her eyes it was very evident that she was daily growing worse. And she felt sure that Lettice saw it too. “She won’t allow it to herself,” she thought. “But I think it is better to own the truth. I would like Philip Dexter to know – I like him to be sorry for us.”

And there was a depth of sadness in her eyes that found its way straight to the young man’s heart, as, without having spoken a word, she bent her head in farewell when Mr Dexter turned to go.

“Stupid boy!” said Lettice impatiently. “Could he not have seen we did not want to speak to any one? But he is kind-hearted,” she went on, relenting, as she often did, after a too hasty speech; “I dare say he means well.”

“And are you not a little – just a little – prejudiced?” said Nina.

“Perhaps I am,” Lettice replied calmly; “and so, it seems to me, I and you and all of us *should* be. It is just that that I am thinking of, Nina. You know how strongly papa felt about his relations, and till now mamma has always seemed to feel the same.”

“No,” interrupted Nina; “mamma has often said to me that though she loved papa for feeling it so, for it was for *her* sake, she herself could not resent it all so much.”

“But that is not to say *we* should not,” exclaimed Lettice hotly. “Mamma is an angel, and now especially,” – here, in spite of herself, the girl’s voice broke – “she has none but gentle feelings to all. But for *us*– that is what is troubling me so. Mamma has actually said to me that after she is gone she hopes we may make friends – with *them*, that if they show any kindly disposition she hopes we

will meet them half-way. How *could* we do so? Nina, it would not be right. You don't think it would be right?"

Nina hesitated.

"Besides," pursued Lettice, "we shall have no need of kindness or help from them or any one. We shall have enough to live on, with care and management, and I understand all about that. I have been training myself all this time to replace mamma, and it is her greatest comfort to know this. I am not afraid of anything, except interference."

"But about money – you *must* have some one to help you," said Nina. "About investments, and interest, and dividends, – a girl *can't* manage all that."

"Oh, as for *that*," said Lettice airily, as if such trifling matters were quite beneath her consideration, "of course the lawyers and trustees can see to all that. Our cousin Godfrey Auriol is responsible for all that, and he must be very nice. I don't mind him at all, for of course he would never think of interfering; he is much too young."

"Too young!" said Nina; "why, he is not far off thirty! Philip Dexter told me so the other day. He is quite five years older than –"

"Philip Dexter has no business to talk of any of our relations at all," said Lettice loftily.

"Not even about how old they are?" said Nina.

"No, not even that," replied Lettice, though, in spite of herself, a little smile crept round her mouth.

Then the two girls stood still for a moment, and from the highest point of the terrace gazed out in silence on the lovely view before them. The fertile valley at their feet, the gently rising ground beyond, and far in the distance the lofty mountains, with their everlasting crown of snow; and over all the intensity of blue sky – the blue sky of the south, glowing and gleaming like a turquoise furnace.

"How beautiful it is!" said Nina.

"Yes," replied Lettice, "I suppose it is. But I shall never care for that kind of sunshine and blue sky again, Nina. I would rather have it grey and cloudy. It is such a mockery. It seems as if nature were so heartless to smile and shine like that when we are, oh, so miserable!"

"I like clouds, too, *some* clouds, better than that all blue," agreed Nina. "There is no mystery, no *behind*, in that sky. It doesn't make me feel nearer heaven."

And then they turned and went in again, for it was but seldom they both together left their mother for even so short a time.

Mrs Morison was dying, and she knew it. She had been ill for more than a year, but only since coming to spend a winter in the south had her malady assumed a hopeless form. It was not consumption, for which she was more than thankful for her children's sake. Indeed, it had been the result of over-exerting herself in attendance on her husband, whose death was the consequence of an accident on horseback some years previously. There had been a hope that the change of climate and the peculiarly soothing effect on the nervous system of the air of Esparto might have at least arrested the progress of her disease; but this hope had been of short continuance. For herself she was resigned, and more than resigned, to die; but, for long, the thought of leaving her children had caused a terrible struggle. But with decrease of physical strength had come increase of moral force, and above all, spiritual faith. She could trust God for herself, why not as fully for those far dearer to her than herself? And slowly but surely she had learnt to do so, thankful for such mitigation of the sorrow as had come by its gradual approach, which gave her time to prepare her elder daughters for what would be before them when they should have to face life without her. To endeavour, too, to undo certain prejudices which they had, not unnaturally, imbibed from their father, and even at one time from herself – prejudices which she now saw to have been exaggerated, which she had always in her heart felt to be unchristian.

But, alas! prejudice and dislike are seeds more easily sown than uprooted, for they grow apace, and, with a sigh, Mrs Morison realised that, as regarded Lettice, above all, she must leave this trouble, with many others, in wiser hands.

“I have said and done all I can for the present,” she said to herself; “I must leave it now. I would not have our last days together disturbed by what, after all, is not a vital matter. Lettice is too good and true to stand out should circumstances show her she is wrong.”

For Lettice *was* good and true, unselfish and devoted, eager to do right, but with the eagerness and self-confidence of an untried warrior, knowing nought of the battle and thinking she knew all, satisfied as to the temper and perfection of the untested weapons in her possession, full of prejudice and one-sidedness while she prided herself on her fairness and width of judgment.

But self and its opinions were kept much in the background during the few days that followed the morning I have been telling you of. Very calm and peaceful days they were, very sweet and blessed to look back upon in afterlife; for their calm was undisturbed by any misgiving that they might be the *last*- nay, to the sisters it was even brightened by a faint return of hope, when they had thought all hope was past.

“If mamma keeps as well as she has been the last few days, it will be almost impossible not to begin hoping again,” said Lettice one evening, after their mother had been comfortably settled for the night.

Nina’s less impulsive nature was slower to receive impressions, yet there was a gleam of real brightness in the smile with which she replied to her sister.

“Yes, really,” she said; “and doctors are *sometimes* mistaken. We must do all we can to keep her from having the *least* backcast now, just so near Arthur’s coming. How happy – oh, how wonderfully happy – we should be if she were to get even a little better, *really* better. Oh, Lettice, just think of it!”

“And how she will enjoy having us all together again next week. For Auriol’s holidays begin then too, you know, Nina; and with Arthur here to keep him quiet, poor little boy, it will be much easier than it was at Christmas.”

And with these happy thoughts the poor girls went to bed.

They had slept the sound peaceful sleep of youth, for three or four hours perhaps, when, with a start, they were both aroused by a soft knocking at the door. Half thinking it was fancy, they waited an instant, each unwilling to disturb the other. But again it came, and this time more distinctly. Trembling already so that she could scarcely stand, Lettice opened the door. Ah! there was no need for words. There stood old Bertha, her mother’s maid, with white though composed face, and eyes resolutely refusing to weep *as yet*.

“My dears,” she whispered, “there is – there is a change. You must come. Miss Lotty, poor thing, too. And I have sent for Master Auriol.”

Lettice’s face worked convulsively. She caught hold of Nina, and for an instant they clung together.

“*It has come*,” whispered Nina. “Let us be good for her sake, Lettice darling.”

“Yes,” said Bertha, “she wants you all.”

“All,” repeated Nina; “but, oh, Bertha, think of poor Arthur!”

Chapter Two. A New-Comer

“Who was this gentleman-friend, and whence?”

Lavender Lady.

About ten days later, a sad little group was assembled in the pretty drawing-room of the Villa Martine. It was a lovely evening, but the sunshine outside was not reflected on the young faces of Lettice Morison and her brother and sister. Lotty and Auriol, the children of the family, were amusing themselves quietly enough on the balcony, though now and then a little laugh made itself heard from their direction, causing Lettice to look up with a slight frown of disapproval on her pale face.

“How *can* they?” she said in a low voice, and she was moving to check them, when Nina held her back.

“Don’t be vexed with them,” she said deprecatingly, “they are only children. *She* would not be vexed – indeed, I think she would be glad for them not to be too crushed down.” Lettice’s eyes filled with tears – they were never far to seek in these days – and she sank down again in her seat with a sigh. The boy beside her, a slight, dark-haired fellow, with soft eyes like Nina’s, put his arm caressingly round her waist.

“Dear Lettice,” he said, “I can’t bear to see you looking so *very* unhappy.”

Lettice submitted to the caress, but scarcely responded to it. “I can’t help it, Arthur,” she replied. “I do not give way to grief wrongly, for I do not allow it to make me neglect any duty. I have been very busy to-day, getting in all the bills and so on that we owe here, writing to the landlord, and all kinds of things. You don’t know all there is upon me.”

A slight glance, which Lettice did not see, passed between Nina and Arthur. It seemed to encourage the boy to say more.

“I know,” he said. “I have seen how busy you have been. But are you sure that it was necessary? You know none of us have any legal authority – we are all minors – and our trustees *must* settle these things. And it would be so much less painful for you not to force yourself to do it all yourself. Godfrey Auriol will be here to-morrow; he is coming on purpose to get all settled.”

“Godfrey Auriol!” repeated Lettice with a slight tone of contempt. “What can *he* know about such things? His trusteeship is merely nominal. Of course it was natural and right to name him, our only relative, though not a very near one. But I have *never* thought of him as really to be considered.”

“You will find yourself mistaken, then, I suspect,” said Arthur, a touch of boyish love of teasing breaking through even his present subdued mood.

Lettice drew herself away from his arm.

“How *can* you?” she exclaimed, her tears flowing still more freely. “Nina, speak to him. How *can* he? And – and – Arthur, you can’t know what we have gone through, or you wouldn’t speak so. You weren’t here; you – ”

“Oh, Lettice, don’t say that to him,” interrupted Nina. “It is the not having been here that has been the cruellest of all to him, and he has not been selfish about it. Still, Arthur, you shouldn’t say *anything* to hurt Lettice;” for Nina was always assailed at her weakest point, by any approach to “appeal” on the part of her elder sister.

“I am very sorry. I didn’t mean it. That’s a stupid thing to say, but it’s true,” said Arthur penitently.

“And I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean what it sounded like,” said Lettice. “I know it has been worse for you than for any of us,” she went on, looking up in Arthur’s face with her tearful eyes.

Lettice was one of the few people in the world who seldom show to greater advantage than when in tears. Her eyes were not so fine as Nina’s and Arthur’s soft brown ones; they were grey –

good, sensible, “well-opened” eyes, but in a general way with a want of depth and tenderness in them. And this want the tears supplied. Her recent sorrow, too, had, as it were, etherealised and softened her whole face and its expression, whose real beauty was often marred by a certain hardness which seemed to render square and angular the outlines intended by nature to be curved and graceful. The thought struck Nina as her glance fell upon her.

“How *very* sweet and lovely Lettice looks just at this moment.”

And the thought, though not in quite the same form, struck another person who just at that moment entered the room.

He had never seen her before.

“What a lovely girl! Can that be Lettice? I have always heard that Nina was the beauty, but this girl is too dark to be Nina,” were the reflections that rushed through his mind in far less time than it takes to tell them. And in a moment his ideas were confirmed, for another girl, whose face had been completely hidden, turned at the slight sound of his approach, and by her exceedingly fair hair and complexion he recognised the Nina who had been described to him. But his eyes turned quickly from her to her sister.

“I beg your pardon a thousand times,” he said, his own face colouring a little as he spoke.

“I rang, but as no one answered, and as the front door was open, I ventured to come in. You know who I am,” – for all the three young people had started to their feet, too surprised as yet to find their voices. “I am Godfrey – Godfrey Auriol, your cousin, I hope I may call myself.”

By this time Lettice and the others had recovered their wits. Lettice came a step or two forward and held out her hand.

“Our cousin,” she repeated; “yes, certainly, Mr Auriol, we should be very sorry not to count you our cousin – you who are, I may say, our only relation;” and at these words an expression crossed her face which Godfrey saw but did not understand. But it was gone before it had time to settle there, or to spoil the first pleasing impression which he had received.

“I was so grieved,” he went on, while he shook hands with them all, “so very grieved that I could not be in time; that it was utterly impossible for me to come over in time for – ” He stopped short, but they all knew what he meant.

Lettice’s lips quivered.

“I wish you could have come,” she said softly, and again the expression that so embellished it stole over her face. “Indeed, that was really the only reason for your coming so far at all; you will not find much to see to, I think,” and she smiled a little, so that Mr Auriol felt puzzled. Her tone was too gentle for him to suspect any assertion of independence to be intended. “But we all knew you could not help it,” she added.

“You are always very busy, are you not?” said Nina, speaking for the first time.

“Pretty well,” said Godfrey, smiling. “I lost no time on the journey, and I was very glad to get off a day sooner than I had expected. I came straight here from the station, trusting to you to tell me what hotel I had better go to.”

“You came straight from the station? Then you’ve had nothing to eat. How thoughtless of us!” exclaimed Lettice, and, looking round, she saw that Nina had already disappeared.

“There is an hotel close by,” said Arthur. “I’ll go round with you if you like, as soon as you’ve had some dinner.”

“Thank you,” said Mr Auriol. “I’m very sorry to give you so much trouble, but I wanted to look you up at once. I can only stay so very short a time: I must be back in England within the week.”

“How can you talk of giving us trouble?” said Arthur; “it is you who are giving yourself a great deal for us;” and he glanced at Lettice as if to hint to her that she should endorse his speech. But she said nothing; only later in the evening, when their visitor was just about leaving, she said to him in a quiet but somewhat studied voice —

“I hope you will be able to see something of the neighbourhood while you are here. There are so many pretty excursions, and in a week one can do a good deal. Arthur himself has not seen much; he has only been three weeks with us all the months we have been here. And he would enjoy going about with you.”

Godfrey Auriol was not deficient in perception, still less in quick resolution when he saw occasion for it. He hesitated, but for half a second only, before he replied.

“Yes,” he said calmly, “it would be very pleasant were it feasible. But you know, Miss Morison, it is not for *pleasure* I have come all this way. There is a great deal of business to be seen to, and for some of it I must have your attention, though I would gladly spare you all trouble if I could. At what hour to-morrow may I come? It is no use putting off what has to be done, however painful.”

Lettice’s colour rose high – all over her face; she felt the mortification doubly, since it was in the presence of her younger sister and brother. But she did her best not to show what she felt, and to any one not knowing her well, her emotion might have passed for what was only natural and almost seemly under the circumstances. And even in the tone of her voice as she answered, it required a nice and skilled observer to detect the latent armour of resistance in which she was determined to clothe herself. Unfortunately for her, her three companions, the two younger ones thanks to their intimate knowledge of her peculiarities, the third by dint of unusual and cultivated power of discrimination, which she herself had raised to suspicion, were not deceived by her words, in themselves perfectly unexceptionable.

“At any hour you like,” she said. “Of course it is best that we should know all about our money, though I really do know already all that is practically necessary. But these kind of formalities must be gone through, I suppose. So I can be ready at any hour you like. Will ten o’clock do?”

“Perfectly, if it will suit you *all*?” said Mr Auriol, glancing inquiringly at Nina and Arthur. “I shall want you all three. The two little ones, of course, it would be absurd to talk to on such matters; but you three are much in the same position. You are all minors. Besides, it is not *only* about money matters I want to speak to you.”

These last two or three sentences were bitter pills for Lettice to swallow. Arthur and Nina had the consideration not to look at her. Once she opened her lips as if about to speak, but thought better of it and said nothing.

“I can put all that right at the proper time,” she reflected. “No use beginning about it now. But it is really too absurd, Nina and Arthur counted on a par with *me*!”

And it did seem so very absurd that she felt she could afford to smile at it, and with this consideration her calm returned. So that her brother and sister, and even Mr Auriol himself, were surprised, and somewhat impressed, by the perfectly unruffled tone in which she said pleasantly —

“Very well, then; to-morrow morning at ten o’clock we shall *all* be ready.”

“She must be extremely sweet-tempered,” thought Godfrey, when Arthur, having shown him to his hotel, had left him alone for the night.

“I am afraid I was rather rough to her. Her little assumption of independence was really only touching, poor child,” he went on to reflect, little dreaming, deluded man, of what was before him! “And Nina is very pretty and very attractive – I don’t wonder at Dexter – though she is not to be compared with Lettice for real beauty of feature and expression.”

Few words passed between the sisters after their guest had left them. When Arthur came in he found Lettice sitting alone. Nina had gone to bed, and she too was tired and meant to follow her at once.

“And don’t you like him?” Arthur could not help saying, as he kissed his sister for good night.

“Like him – whom?” said Lettice, as if awaking from a brown study. “Mr Auriol? Oh yes, I like him very well. He is much what I expected;” and Arthur said no more.

Notwithstanding his long journey of the preceding days, Mr Auriol was awake and up betimes the following morning. It was several years since he had been out of his own country, and the sights

and sounds about him struck him almost as freshly as if he saw and heard them for the first time. The early morning sunshine was softer and less monotonous than the midday effulgence which Lettice had complained of, and seemed to add vividness without glare to every detail of the picturesque scene on which his windows looked out. For it was market-day at Esparto, and the border-land town was a meeting-place for the denizens of many widely varying districts.

There were the country people from the near neighbourhood. The women, plain-looking save for their brilliant eyes, weather-beaten and prematurely aged through hard work and exposure, their brown leather-like skin showing harder and browner from the contrast with the light-coloured silk kerchiefs skilfully knotted round their heads, yet as a rule seemingly contented and cheerful enough as they chattered and chaffered round the great ancient fountain, the centre of the "Place." The men, far less numerous and far less energetic, handsome fellows many of them, though less so than the gaudily attired Spanish mountaineers lured to Esparto by the work sometimes to be had there in plenty, while yet looking as if labour or exertion of any kind was completely beneath their lordly selves. And here and there, recognisable at once by those acquainted with their peculiar type, Basques, descendants of that mysterious race whose origin and language have so long puzzled the learned in such subjects. Nor were there wanting specimens of still more remote nationalities. Two or three negro servants were bargaining and purchasing for their masters; and some little fair-haired English children, who had coaxed their maids to get up extra early before it was hot, to see the fun and bustle in the market-place; while a Russian nurse, gorgeous in scarlet and gold embroidery, indolently surveyed the scene from a balcony opposite.

It was picturesque in the extreme, and amusing. But after a while, staring out of the window being a diversion he most rarely indulged in, Mr Auriol tired of it, and after his modest breakfast of coffee and a roll, finding it was barely nine o'clock, he strolled out for a walk, though his ideas were of the vaguest as to what direction he should take.

"I have nearly an hour before they will expect me at the Villa Martine," he said to himself. "I have no wish to rub Mistress Lettice the wrong way by turning up too soon. It strikes me she would look upon that as almost worse than being too late. Where shall I go?"

He was turning the corner of the street, or Place, rather, as he asked himself this question, and before he had time to answer it he almost knocked against a young man who was hurrying in his direction.

"Pardon," was on the lips of both, when both exchanged it for a more friendly greeting.

"Dexter!" – "Auriol!" they respectively exclaimed, and then the new-comer added —

"I was just going to the hotel to ask if you had come, or were coming. Arthur Morison told me some days ago that you were expected. I met him accidentally."

"They did not expect me till to-day, and I came yesterday, so there has not been time for them to tell you. You see them sometimes, do you not?"

"You mean, do I visit them? Scarcely. I used to go there sometimes before Mrs Morison got so very ill. *She* was always kindness and cordiality itself to me. You know I had got to know the second Miss Morison very well a year ago in England, when she was staying with some neighbours of ours."

"Yes, I remember," said Mr Auriol. But he spoke absently.

"And it is all that horrid family feud. When they – at least I don't know why I should say 'they;' I believe it is only Lettice – found out my connections, the difference was most marked, though before then they had been quite friendly, and I had hoped to introduce them and my sister to each other. Those sorts of things are really too bad, carrying them down to the younger generation."

Godfrey bent his head in acquiescence, but did not speak.

"Do you," Philip went on again after a moment's pause, and with some little embarrassment – "do you think her as pretty as you had been told?"

"*Far* more so. 'Pretty!' – pretty is not at all the word for her. I think her distinctly beautiful," Mr Auriol replied, with a sort of burst of enthusiasm which somehow seemed rather to disconcert Philip.

“I thought you would. That fair hair with such dark eyes is so very uncommon,” he replied quietly. And instantly it flashed upon Mr Auriol that they were speaking at cross purposes. He smiled to himself, but for reasons of his own, and being perfectly unaware of the impression his words had made upon his companion, he decided not to explain his mistake.

“Your sister, Mrs Leyland, is much better, I was glad to hear?” he said courteously, thinking it just as well to change the subject.

“Oh, much better, thank you; quite well, indeed. We shall be leaving immediately. In fact, we should have left already, but, to tell you the truth, when it became evident that Mrs Morison was sinking I persuaded Anna to stay on a little, just to see if perhaps we could be of some service to those poor children. They seemed so lonely.”

“It was very good of you,” said Godfrey warmly.

“I – I thought my uncle and aunt would have wished it, and Anna thought so too,” said Philip.

“But it was no use. I believe Lettice would rather have applied to any utter stranger than to us.”

“Really,” said Godfrey, surprised, and even a little shocked. “I had no idea they still felt so strongly. Perhaps it’s just as well you told me, for I see I shall have some rather ticklish business to manage. But forewarned is forearmed. I may call on Mrs Leyland some evening, I hope? I shall have very few here.”

“Oh, certainly,” said Philip. “She will be delighted to see you.”

Then the conversation drifted into general matters. Philip escorted Mr Auriol to one or two points of interest in the little town, and at ten o’clock precisely the latter found himself at the gate of the Villa Martine.

Chapter Three. The Tug of War

“Your courage much more than your prudence you showed.”

Burns.

Lettice received her cousin in the drawing-room. She was, of course, expecting him, but there was not a touch of nervousness in her manner as she quietly shook hands with him, and in a friendly, perhaps slightly patronising tone, as if to put him quite at his ease, hoped that he found the hotel comfortable, that he had slept well, was not too tired with his journey, and so on, to all of which Mr Auriol replied with equal composure. But he was eyeing the young lady all the time, taking measure of her much more closely than she had any idea of. He observed her, too, with a certain curiosity as to her appearance. The night before he had seen her in a subdued light – almost, indeed, in shadow, as the consciousness of her recent tears had made her avoid coming forward conspicuously, and he wondered if he should find her as lovely as she had then appeared.

“She is, and she is not,” he decided. “Her features are all that I pictured them, but the soft sweet expression is gone. Yes, this morning I can believe her to be both prejudiced and self-willed.”

And his glance rested with pleasure on the somewhat anxious but thoroughly womanly and gentle expression of Nina’s fair face, as she just then entered the room, followed by Arthur.

Mr Auriol looked round him inquiringly.

“Have you any other room at liberty,” he said, “where there is perhaps a large table? There are a number of papers I wish to show you;” and he touched a packet which he held under his arm.

“We can go into the dining-room,” said Lettice, opening a door which led into it as she spoke; “though, really, Mr Auriol, you need not give yourself so much trouble. We are perfectly satisfied that our money is in good hands. Mamma often told me that my father had given himself immense trouble to place it safely, so that at his death there should be no trouble; in short, that our trustees would have nothing to do but leave it as it was.”

Mr Auriol made no reply. But when the four were seated round the dining-table, he deliberately undid his important-looking packet, and drew from it paper after paper, all neatly labelled and arranged, which he placed beside him.

“These,” he said, touching two mysterious-looking documents, “are the statements of your capital and of your income. I have had copies made, so that I can leave these with you, in case you ever wish to refer to them, as you are all three of an age to understand such matters to a certain extent. You said just now, Miss Morison, that everything to do with your money matters had been thoroughly seen to before your father’s death. I *must* explain to you that all was not as satisfactory as you imagine. Your father, as he constantly said himself, was not a good man of business. I am not afraid of your misunderstanding me when I say this. You cannot but know how deeply attached to him I was, and how much gratitude I shall always feel to him for much past kindness. I simply state the fact, with no disparagement to him. When he died his affairs were exceedingly confused and involved, and I, as one of his executors – the only one – for, you remember, Colonel Brown died suddenly just when your father did – hardly knew what to do. And I tell you honestly that I never could have got things into the satisfactory state they are now in, but for help which I cannot exaggerate, and from a quarter where, all things considered, one could little have expected it.”

Mr Auriol paused and looked round him. All the three young faces expressed strong feeling. On Lettice’s there was a look of tension painful to see. Her lips moved as if she would have asked her cousin to go on, but no sound came. He understood her, however, and pitying her heartily, he continued, his eyes fixed on the paper before him.

“That help came from your father’s stepbrother, the only son of his father by his second marriage – the merchant, Mr Ingram Morison.”

There was a dead silence. The tears were in Nina’s eyes, and Arthur’s face was quivering, but Lettice’s was deadly pale and stony. And when she spoke her voice was so unlike itself that all started.

“Did my mother know this?” she said in a tone which matched the look on her face.

“Not at first,” said Mr Auriol, still avoiding to turn his eyes in her direction; “not till things were all in order would Mr Morison allow her to be told anything. He risked very large sums – of course, not so large to him as to a less wealthy man, but still actually large – to save your fortune. And, thanks to his great acuteness and experience, he succeeded most wonderfully, so that at the present time you do not actually owe him *money*.”

“Thank Heaven for that,” murmured Lettice.

Mr Auriol turned upon her with a sharp movement of indignation. But when he went on speaking it was as if continuing his words, and not as if addressing himself to her in particular.

“But you do owe him, what to a generous mind is never a painful burden, an *immense* debt of gratitude.”

“Then I recall my words,” burst out Lettice. “I wish to Heaven it *were* money, that I could work for it – work my fingers to the bone, till I could repay every farthing. To owe gratitude, that can *not* be counted in money, to *that* man! Oh, it is too much! How dared you do it?” she flashed out to Godfrey. “How dared you let *him* interfere?”

“You would rather have had your mother reduced to beggary – you would rather have had her last days tortured by anxiety for all of you? *She* did not resent it; she, who had far more right than any of you to be influenced by the old quarrel, with which Ingram Morison, remember, had no more to do than I had. *She* was not ashamed to be grateful and to show her trust and confidence in him, as you will see, when at last she knew a great part, though not the whole, of the truth.”

“And why did she not tell me, then? Oh, mamma, mamma,” wailed Lettice, forgetful of or indifferent to her cousin’s presence, “why did you not tell me? I thought I had your whole confidence, and to find this out *now*!”

She shook with sobs, and Godfrey’s face softened.

“Lettice,” he said, calling her for the first time by her name – though none of them, himself included, noticed that he did so – “my poor child, try to be reasonable. Your mother did not intentionally deceive you. It was only very lately she knew about it. Ingram Morison acted with the greatest delicacy – exaggerated delicacy, he wanted no one to know what he had done, and even at the last I could only persuade him to let me tell her part of it. She meant to tell it to you – gradually, knowing your strong feelings about it. She wrote so to me. I have the letter. But evidently she had not time to do so, or she may have found it more difficult than she expected.” And, as he again paused, there rose before Lettice the remembrance of the morning when her gentle, almost timid mother, had tried to lead to the subject of the Morison relations, of her softened feelings towards them, and how she, Lettice, had repulsed the attempt with decision almost approaching violence, and had afterwards said to Nina that she thought bodily weakness must be affecting her mother’s judgment. And then, at the last, it had been, or had *seemed*, as it so often does, so sudden. There had been no time or strength for more than a whispered blessing before the smile of perfect peace with which she closed her eyes on this world, had lighted up the loved, worn features, and she had breathed her gentle soul away.

Lettice sobbed still, but more softly now; and Mr Auriol went on.

“Had she lived, she would, I know, have wished to know the whole, and wished you all to know it too. And I too confess to some personal feeling in the matter. I too have some family pride. Your mother was my cousin – of the same blood. *I* could not bear that so great a service should be unrecognised. And, before coming here, I told Mr Morison that, unless he would consent to my stating the facts to you, and having no mystery or concealment about it, I would try to throw up the whole.”

“And then?” said Arthur.

“Then,” said Mr Auriol slowly, “if you all – though, no, I will not insult you by supposing such a thing – but *if* you all retained this terrible prejudice against an innocent man, things would be still worse, for he would be your only guardian.”

Another blow for Lettice.

“Our guardian!” exclaimed Nina in surprise.

“Yes. By your father’s will your mother and I were your guardians, and while she lived *that* part of it was merely nominal for me. But she had the power to appoint another in case of her death. And she did so. She appointed – ”

“*Him?*” exclaimed Nina.

“Yes. Your uncle, or step-uncle, if you prefer to be quite exact – Mr Ingram Morison,” Godfrey replied simply.

Then, without waiting for further remarks, he went on to explain, as clearly as was possible to such inexperienced ears, a number of business details – summing up by giving them a clear idea of what money they were sure of; of some which still remained uncertain, and by making them most distinctly recognise that, but for their uncle’s “interference,” the post of trustee of their possessions would indeed, long before this, have been a sinecure.

“And now,” he said, “there remains only one more duty before we talk about less painful and overwhelming subjects. I have here your mother’s last letter to me, sending me her will, which she wished me to look over, as I did, and going on to express her last wishes. Shall I read it to you, or shall I leave it for you to read alone?”

“Read it now,” said Lettice, rather to her brother’s and sister’s surprise. For they did not hear the words which she whispered to herself: “Better drink the cup of bitterness to the dregs, and have it over.”

So Mr Auriol read the letter aloud.

It was a simply expressed but thoughtfully considered letter, with no word or allusion to distress or wound any of her children. She spoke of her intention to explain to them these facts which had so recently come to her knowledge, but that before doing so she would wish to know more – the whole, in fact – that her words might have the more weight in overcoming the prejudice which, to a certain extent, she blamed herself for having, if not encouraged, at least not opposed. “My husband,” she said, “resented his family’s behaviour for *my* sake. I have a right to do anything I choose towards breaking down the barrier, of which I fear I was in great measure the unwilling cause. And he, had he lived to know his brother as I now know him, would have felt with me in this. For, though he was hasty and impulsive, he was, when he would allow himself to see things clearly, essentially just. And how can any one blame Ingram Morison for events which took place when he was a mere child?” Then she went on to beg Godfrey to convey to her brother-in-law her deep sense of gratitude for what she already knew, and her hope that he would accept the guardianship, which no one else would be so fitted for. She spoke of her children altogether – of the old prejudice as shared by them all – in no way singling out Lettice as the least reasonable or persuadable, so that, as she listened, Lettice could not but feel in her heart that it was thanks to herself alone if she *had* come to appear so in Mr Auriol’s eyes, though it is to be feared that but small self-blame was the result of this consciousness. And then, with some general expression of confidence in Godfrey, and in his good judgment and good feeling, mingled with hopes that she might live long enough to understand all quite clearly and to make some arrangements for her children’s future, the letter closed.

“I was going to answer this letter,” said Mr Auriol – “I could not do so till I had Mr Morison’s permission to tell the whole, which caused some delay – but I was just going to answer it when I got Arthur’s telegram, telling me of her death. You see, the date is very recent;” and he held out the letter to Nina, who leant eagerly forward, while Lettice held herself stiffly aloof. “I managed to see Mr Morison before I came away – had I not done so, my coming would not have been of much use – and got his answers to all I had to ask him. And this is what he says. He accepts the trusteeship of

your money unconditionally, for which you cannot be too thankful. The guardianship which he *might* legally decline – for he is not forced to accept what he had not first been asked about – he accepts, too, but only to a certain extent. He will not interfere with you in any way disagreeable to you, unless positively obliged to do so. He leaves details to me: if *I* am satisfied, he will be so. At the same time he earnestly *wishes* to be to you all not only a guardian but an uncle. I am empowered to invite you all, as soon as you can leave here, to go to his country house, and remain there as long as you like – in any case till some definite arrangement can be made for you.”

“*Never!*” exclaimed Lettice, interrupting Mr Auriol. “Nina, Arthur, you will support me in this?”

Godfrey waited till she was silent, but then, without giving the others time to reply, he went on. “It is premature for you to give any answer as yet. Allow me to go on with what I have to say, without interrupting me, till I have fulfilled my commission. Mr Morison also wished me to say that, if Arthur has any taste for business, he will give him a position in his firm such as he would to a son of his own, if he had one.”

Arthur’s colour rose, and he seemed as if about to say something, but he checked himself. Not so Lettice.

“Arthur is going into the army, like papa. He is going up for Woolwich next Christmas. That has been decided long ago.”

Again with ceremonious politeness Mr Auriol waited till she left off speaking. Then, without taking the slightest notice of what she had said, he proceeded, “Or, if Arthur chooses any other career, he will do his best to help him. I think that is the substance of what I have to say to you from your uncle. You will give me an answer before I leave – some days before, indeed – the day after tomorrow, suppose we say. It will be the greatest possible satisfaction to me if you accept your uncle’s invitation. If not, there is no time to be lost in arranging something else.”

“We are quite ready to tell you what we intend doing – now at once, if you choose,” said Lettice.

“Not now. I wish you to think it over, and consult together,” he replied. “And I must tell you frankly that what you *intend* doing is not the question. You may tell me what you *wish*, with all freedom; and if I can, I will help you to carry out your wishes. But if I do *not* approve of them, I am bound by every consideration to tell you so, and to forbid them. If this sounds very ungracious, I am sorry for it, but I cannot help it. Having undertaken a very,” – here he hesitated, and evidently substituted a milder word for the one that had been on his lips – “onerous task, I will carry it out to the best of my power. But it rests with you three to make it a painful or pleasant one.”

He rose as he spoke. Nina rose, too, and held out her hand.

“Thank you, Cousin Godfrey,” she said simply, “for all your kindness.”

Mr Auriol turned to Lettice.

“Will you, too, not shake hands with me, Lettice?” he said, with a tone in his voice which touched her a little.

“Of course,” she said, rousing herself as it were by an effort. “I can have no possible reason for *not* shaking hands with you. I am only bitterly, most bitterly grieved that we should be, and have been, the cause of such trouble to you.”

“Do not be bitterly grieved, then,” he said, smiling. “Give me the satisfaction of feeling I have been, and may be, of service to you. I am your kinsman; it is only natural. Be reasonable, and try to trust those who wish to be true friends to you.”

But at these last words he felt the hand, which he had held for a moment or two, struggle in his grasp, and with an almost inaudible sigh he released it.

“Will you give me the names, so far as you know them, of the tradespeople here, and your landlord, and so on?” he said gently. “I must make up as accurate a statement as I can. There is a great deal more to do at such times than you have any idea of;” and then he went on to explain some details – of which till now she had had no idea whatever – to the rather bewildered girl.

She replied meekly enough; and when he had got the required information, he went out with Arthur as his guide.

Chapter Four. An Old Story and a New Secret

“Good nature and good sense must ever join; To err is human; to forgive, divine.”

Pope.

It was the last evening of the young Morisons being all together at the Villa Martine, for Arthur was returning to England the following day. And a fortnight or so later, the sisters and little Auriol, under the convoy of old Bertha, were to follow him there. Lettice had gone early to her room. She was worn out, though she would not allow it, with all she had gone through during the last week or two. And since Mr Auriol had left, she had put less constraint on herself; she no longer felt the necessity of calling pride to her aid.

“I am so dreadfully sorry for Lettice,” said Nina, as she and Arthur were sitting together unwilling, though it was already late, to lose any of their few remaining hours.

“So am I,” said Arthur. “But I am sorry for ourselves too, Nina. There is no doubt that all our troubles are very much aggravated by Lettice.”

“Arthur!” exclaimed Nina. “What do you mean? How could we ever get on without her?”

“Oh, I know all that,” said the boy – for boy he still was, though nearly seventeen – wearily.

“I know she is very good, and devoted, and clever, too; but, Nina, if she were but less obstinate and self-willed, how much happier – at least, how much less unhappy – we should be! If she had taken the advice of Godfrey Auriol, and made friends with our uncle – knowing, too, that mother wished it! Of course, I won’t allow to Godfrey that I disagree with her; at all costs, as you and I determined, we must keep together. But it is a terrible pity.”

“I don’t, however, see that for the present it makes very much difference, and in time Lettice may change.”

“Too late, perhaps,” said Arthur moodily. “It *is* just now that I think it *does* make such a miserable difference;” and as Nina looked up, with surprise and some alarm, and was just going to ask him to explain himself, he added hastily, as if eager to change the subject, “Do you know the whole story, Nina – the story of the old quarrel between my father and his family? I have heard it, I suppose; but I have got confused about it, though I didn’t like to let Godfrey see that I was so. Lettice has always been so violent about it, so determined that there was only the one way of looking at it, that it was no use asking her. And just these last days it has dawned upon me that I know very little about it. I have accepted it as a sort of legend that was not to be questioned.”

“I don’t know that there is very much to tell – not of actual facts,” said Nina. “Of course, it was all complicated by personal feeling, as such things always are. Mamma told me all; and lately, as you know, she regretted very much having not tried more to bring papa and his brother together. He, our uncle, was perfectly blameless, he was fifteen years younger than papa. Papa, you know, was grandpapa’s only son by his first marriage. His mother died young, and he, as he often said himself, was dreadfully spoilt. His father married again when he was about twelve; and though his stepmother was very good and nice, he was determined never to like her, and set himself against whatever she said, and fancied she influenced grandpapa very often, when very likely she did not. Grandpapa was in business, as, of course, you know, and very much respected, and very successful. He was of very respectable ancestry. His people had been farmers, but not at all *grand*. And he was the sort of man to be proud of having made his own way, and to despise those who tried to be above their real position. He had always determined that papa should follow him in his business; but, as might have been expected from a spoilt boy, papa *wouldn’t*

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