

Molesworth Mrs.

A Christmas Posy



Mrs. Molesworth

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Mary Louisa Stewart Molesworth

A Christmas Posy

A FRAGMENT

Part I

*"Those never loved
Who dream that they 'loved once.'"*

– E. B. Browning.

"You won't be long any way, dear Auntie?" said Sylvia with a little sigh. "I don't half like your going. Couldn't you wait till the day after to-morrow?"

"Or at least take me with you," said Molly, Sylvia's younger sister, eagerly.

Auntie hesitated – she glanced up at as much of the sky as could be seen through the lace-shrouded windows of their pretty Paris *salon* – it was already beginning to grow dusky, for though only half-past three, it was the thirty-first of December, and a dull day – and then turned with decision towards the door.

"No, dears," she said; "I shall go more quickly alone. Sylvia's cold would be none the better for going out so late, and I would rather you, Molly, stayed with her. So good-bye, darlings; I shall not be long."

"I should not like to think of poor Sylvia sitting alone in the gloaming, to-day of all days," said Auntie to herself as she made her way down the three flights of handsome marble stairs which led to their *appartement*. "I can see she is very sad – remembering how different it was this day last year. And dear Molly's good spirits are an inestimable blessing. Ah, my darlings, I may do my best, I *will* do my best, but I cannot make up to you for grandmother;" and with the tears in her eyes, and many a tender thought in her heart, Auntie made her way along the street.

The two girls were watching her, though she did not know it. There was a tiny balcony outside the window on to which Molly stepped almost as soon as the door had closed on Auntie.

"Come out here for a moment, Sylvia," she called to her sister; "we can see her as far as the corner" – for the street was one of the wide handsome avenues in the new part of Paris, and there were few passers-by. "As far as the corner," therefore, it was easy to distinguish Auntie's figure in its deep mourning dress – not *quite* so erect or active as it used to be, for Auntie was no longer young, and this year, so nearly ended now, had brought her the greatest sorrow of her life – as she quickly made her way.

"Dear Auntie," said Sylvia; "I wish she were back again. I am sure we could have done without money for a day."

"*Two* days it would have been," corrected Molly; "the bank will be closed to-morrow, you know."

"Of course I know that," said Sylvia, a little testily.

"And there are some people coming to be paid, and Auntie never likes to keep any one waiting," continued Molly imperturbably. "If Auntie had only taken me with her –"

"How absurd you are!" said Sylvia. "You speak as if Auntie were a baby, or as if no one could take care of her but you – no, dear," she broke off hastily, "I should not speak like that. I

don't mean to be cross – but oh, Molly, how we do miss grandmother," and the quickly rising tears in the pretty eyes raised to her sister's face at once subdued any resentment Molly may have felt. She bent her tall figure – for, though nearly two years younger, she was taller than her sister – and enveloped Sylvia in a loving hug.

"My darling," she said – the mass of fair hair, which, even at eighteen, she found it no easy matter to keep in order, mingling with Sylvia's soft clustering chestnut locks; "my darling – of course we do – but, Sylvia, we must try to be happy. Think how *she* always said so. And next year – next year may be happier. Papa and Ralph are almost sure to be with us again by this time next year."

"*This* year has certainly only brought us sorrow," said Sylvia mournfully; "I wish Auntie had not gone out. I have a presentiment something will go wrong."

"Don't be fanciful, dear; Auntie will soon be back. Come in and let us get ready a cosy tea for her, and finish the old year as cheerfully as we can. And oh, Sylvia – your cold! – and you've been out on the balcony without even a shawl."

No wonder these girls loved their aunt. Since their infancy their grandmother and she had replaced to them the mother they had never known – and the father who was but seldom able to be with them. And now the grief, the inexpressible grief of having lost that dearest of grandmothers had deepened and strengthened the affection of the three for each other. Their life was somewhat lonely at present. Grandmother had died in the south, at the pretty villa which, after so many years passed in it, had come to seem "home." But she had wished her grandchildren to return to England, their real home; there, before long, to be rejoined by their father and elder brother at present in the East. And they were spending this winter in Paris – "on the way," as it were – for the benefit of Sylvia's drawing and Molly's music; and partly, too, perhaps, because the old home in the south, *without* "grandmother dear," would have seemed too unbearably desolate.

The curtains were drawn, the fire blazed brightly, the lamp on the *console* at the side of the room threw a soft pleasant glow on the dainty table set out temptingly for "afternoon tea," which, notwithstanding their long residence in France, Auntie and her nieces were very fond of. And with the little exertion of making all as bright and pretty as they could, the girls' spirits had come back.

"It *does* look nice," said Molly approvingly, as she stepped back towards the door to judge of the general effect. "How I do wish dear grandmother were here to see how neat and nice it looks. I really do think, Sylvia, that I am getting to be very 'handy,' and to have a good deal of taste in nice little ways – just what grandmother used to wish for me;" and the candour and honesty in her fair face as she innocently expressed her little bit of self-approval made Sylvia turn away so that Molly should not see the smile of amusement it was impossible altogether to repress. For Molly's open satisfaction with herself when it seemed to her that she deserved a little encouragement, was one of the funniest things about her still.

"Yes, dear, it does look very nice," said Sylvia. "And – Can that be Auntie's ring already?" she broke off. "How very quick she has been."

And almost before she had finished the words the door was thrown hastily open, and Auntie was beside them. But what an Auntie! Pale, looking older by ten years than when she had left them, breathless, her lips for a moment trembling so that she could not speak. The girls' warm words of welcome died away as they gazed at her in terror.

"Auntie, Auntie dearest, what is it; oh, what is it?" they exclaimed, while visions of every possible and impossible misfortune – a telegram with bad news of papa or Ralph taking front place as the worst of all – rushed before their imaginations with the inconceivable rapidity with which such speculations picture themselves at such times of excitement. Auntie struggled for self-control.

"No, no – not bad news," she whispered at last, in answer to some all but inaudible breath which had perhaps escaped the poor children's lips. "You must – oh, you must forgive me. It was all my own fault. I should not have gone."

"Oh Auntie, Auntie," cried Molly, by this time in sobs, "what is it then? Have you been run over?"

"How could Auntie be here if she had been?" said Sylvia, hardly able to help smiling, even in the midst of her fright, at the Molly-like question. "But oh, Auntie, do try to tell us."

Auntie was a little calmer by now. She looked up with a piteous expression in her still white face.

"My dears, my dears," she said, "you must not be vexed with me, and yet I feel that you have a right to be so. I have had such a misfortune – I have lost – just now, on my way to or from the bank, I don't know which – I have *lost* dearest mother's – your grandmother's old watch! And with it the locket that was always attached to it, you know – the one with *her* great-grandfather's and his daughter's hair."

"I know," said Molly, "gray hair on one side and bright brown like Sylvia's on the other. Oh, Auntie, Auntie —*poor* Auntie."

And Sylvia flung herself down beside poor Auntie and burst into tears of sympathy. It was sweet to Aunt Laura, even in the midst of her acute distress, to feel that their first thought was not for the loss itself – much as it could not but touch them – but of sorrow for *her*.

"Grandmother's old watch – grandmother dear's old watch," repeated the two girls, as if they could not believe it. The old watch they remembered all their lives, whose face was almost as familiar to them as that of grandmother herself – the watch and locket which seemed almost a part of her – it was terrible, it was too bad to be true!

"How did it happen?" said Sylvia, trying to choke down her tears. "Tell us more, Auntie. Can nothing be done? You don't think it was stolen?"

"No – I feel sure I dropped it. I remember now that it was not securely fastened. That is what vexes me so terribly – to think it was my own fault! Oh, Sylvia – oh, Molly, when I saw it was gone I felt as if I should go out of my mind! It was just as I came out of the bank that I missed it, but it may have dropped some minutes before. I was hesitating as to whether I should have time to walk home, or if I should take a *coupé* so as to get back to you quicker, my dears – "

"And we had made all so cosy for you – such a dear little tea – just look, Auntie;" and herself casting a glance round at their pretty preparations, Molly's tears flowed afresh.

"I had a presentiment," said Sylvia. "But go on, Auntie."

"And I looked at my watch – I mean, I was going to do so," continued Auntie, "and found it was gone. Of course I ran back to the bank, but it was not there. I rushed up and down the street and asked everybody I saw – I even went into some of the shops – I am afraid I must have seemed quite dazed. Then my only idea was to get back to you, so I called a *coupé* and – " here poor Auntie broke down again.

"And is there nothing to be done?" repeated Sylvia.

"The coachman," said Auntie, "the coachman advised me to go to the 'commissaire de police' nearest to where I lost it. I have the name of the street. So now that I have seen you, I will go there at once," and she rose as she spoke. "Take my bag, Molly dear," she added, handing it to her. "The money is in it."

"It is a good thing *it* wasn't lost too," said Molly, whose spirits were already beginning to reassert themselves. "But, Auntie, you must have some tea before you go. It is *quite* ready."

Auntie, whose hand was already on the door, was beginning to refuse when Sylvia interrupted. "Yes, Auntie dear, you *must*," she said. "And while you are taking it, it will give me time to get ready."

"You, my child! I will not let you come – with your cold too."

"My cold is very little, Auntie dearest; I must come – I should come," she added pleadingly. "You can't go about by yourself, so upset as you are too. *Grandmother* told me I was to take care

of you. Yes, Molly dear, I know you would go, but I am a year and nine months older," continued Sylvia, rising to the dignity of her nineteen years. "It is right I should go."

She gained the day, and so did Molly, to the extent of persuading her aunt to swallow a cup of tea, – what a different tea-taking to that they had been looking forward to! – and in five minutes Auntie and Sylvia were driving along the streets which the former had but so lately passed through.

"Poor Molly," said Auntie.

"She will be getting up her hopes and expecting us to bring back good news," said Sylvia. "Well, we *may* find it, Auntie. They say honest people *sometimes* take things at once to the nearest police-office."

But this small grain of hope was quickly crushed. The "commissaire de police" was civil, but not encouraging. The ladies would do better to wait a day or two and then apply to the "Préfecture de Police," in other words, the central office, where waifs and strays of private property, should they chance to fall into honest hands, were pretty sure to be eventually deposited.

"A day or two," repeated Auntie, appalled. "Can I do nothing at once?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "That was as Madame chose. It would do no harm to write at once, describing the lost articles and giving her address. But as for hearing of them at once, that was more than improbable. It was the eve of the New Year – the worst day of all the year on which to have such a misfortune; everybody respectable was busy with their own affairs; and yet there were lots of beggars and such like about the streets. If – even supposing," as if the supposition were of the wildest – "that the watch had fallen into honest hands, a week or ten days would probably pass before Madame would have news of it."

"And if it were deposited *here*," said Auntie timidly – "that does sometimes happen, I suppose?"

"If it were deposited here, it would be as if it were not here," said the commissaire sententiously. "That is to say we should send it on to the Préfecture. I have not even the right to tell you if it is at this moment here or not, though to give you pleasure," he proceeded with unconscious sarcasm, "I will declare to you that it is *not*."

"Then there is no use my returning here again to inquire?"

"Not the least – write to the Préfecture making your statement, and call there four or five days hence – no use going sooner," said the commissaire with a wave of his hand in token of dismissal. So Auntie and Sylvia, with sinking hearts, turned sadly away.

"Little does he understand what four or five days of suspense seem to me," said Auntie.

"To *us* too, dear Auntie," said Sylvia, squeezing Auntie's arm under her cloak as they made their way home through the now dark streets, Auntie preferring to walk now that there was plainly no more to be done that called for haste.

"That is the worst of it – I have made this New Year time still sadder than it need have been for you two, my darlings."

It was hard to go in with no good news for Molly, whose spirits, as Sylvia had foreseen, had already risen to the point of feeling sure her aunt and sister would return triumphant, treasure-retrove in hand! But even now she was not disconcerted. "A week or ten days," she repeated, when she had heard all there was to tell; "ah, that shows, Auntie dear, we need not give up hope for ever so long."

She had need of her good spirits for herself, and the others too, during the days that followed. It would be impossible and wearisome to relate all that Auntie did and tried to do. The letters to "all in authority" in such matters, the visits to the Préfecture de Police, to the company who took charge of printing and posting handbills promising rewards for the restoring to their owners of lost objects, to the famous "Montde Piété," the great central pawnbroker's of Paris, even – For a week and more Auntie and the two girls, so far as it was possible for them to help her, did little else than exhaust themselves in such efforts, seizing every suggestion held out by sympathising friends, from

the *concierge* to their old friend the white-haired Duchesse de St. Gervais, who related to them a long and interesting but slightly irrelevant story of how a diamond ring of her great-grandmother's had been found by the cook in the heart of a cauliflower just as she was about to boil it for dinner!

"I really think," said Auntie weariedly, as she threw herself down on the sofa after an expedition to the office of the most widely read Paris daily paper, where she had spent a small fortune in advertisements, "I really think quite half the world is constantly employed in finding, or rather searching for, the things that the other half is as constantly employed in losing. I could fill a three-volumed novel with all I have seen in the last few days – the strange scenes, the real tragedies of feeling – the truly wonderful mechanism of all this world of functionaries and offices and regulations. And some of these people have been really so kind and sympathising – it is astonishing – one would think they would be too sick of it all to have any feeling left."

"I am sure *anybody* would be sorry if they understood that it was dear, *dear* grandmother's watch – and even if they knew nothing, any one would be sorry if they saw your poor dear sweet little unhappy face," said Molly consolingly.

But though her words called forth a rather wintry smile from Auntie and Sylvia, it was with sad hearts that all three went to bed on the night of the ninth day since the loss.

Part II

Up ever so many pairs of steep winding stairs, somewhat later that same evening, in a small barely furnished little room in one of the busiest and most thickly inhabited parts of Paris, a young woman with a baby on her knees was seated in front of a small fire. It was cold – for, alas, in the dwellings of the poor want of fresh air and ventilation does not mean *warmth* – and now and then she stirred the embers, though carefully, as if anxious to extract what warmth she could without exhausting its source.

"I must keep a little fire together for Bernard," she said to herself. "He is late this evening. Perhaps I had better put the little one to bed – still it is cold for her, for it would not yet be prudent to lay her beside Paul, though he is so much better. What a blessing he is so much better, my poor little boy! One should not complain, even though it is hard to think of what this fortnight's illness has cost, fifty francs at least, and my work in arrears. And to think of that watch lying there useless all this time! Not that I would have Bernard sell it, even if we dared. But still I can understand the temptation were it a thing one *could* sell, to many even poorer than we. To-morrow, if there is still no advertisement in any of the papers, I really think I will no longer oppose Bernard's taking it to the police, and giving up all hopes of any reward, and even of the satisfaction of knowing its real owner has got it. For they say lost objects sometimes lie at the Préfecture for years, and it does not look as if the person it belongs to was very eager to get it back, otherwise it would have been advertised or placarded. Perhaps it is some one very rich, who has many watches; and yet – that old locket with the date of more than a hundred years ago, so simple too, evidently preserved as a family relic, and the watch too, old, though still so good, as the watchmaker next door assured Bernard, worth quite two or three hundred francs. Perhaps the owner is very distressed about it, but still three or four hundred francs could not possibly be to him or her what they would be to us just now! Why, even *one* hundred would get us nicely round the corner again!"

For Madame Bernard was a sensible little woman with no exaggeration about her. But it is growing colder, and still her husband does not return. She must gather the remnants of the fire together, and baby at all costs must go to bed, and if Bernard does not soon come she herself must go too. She cannot risk catching a bad cold herself just as Paul is recovering from an attack of bronchitis. And she is turning to open a door leading into the one bedroom of their *appartement*, when the well-known sound of a latch-key in the door of the tiny vestibule arrests her.

"Bernard, at last!" she exclaimed with a sigh of relief.

A man, young still, though older than she, entered. He was thin and pale and poorly clad. But his face was intelligent and pleasant, and he had an undoubted air of respectability. And to his wife's accustomed eye, late as it was and tired as he should have been, his face had a flush of excitement on it which half prepared her for news of some kind.

"At last," he repeated. "Yes, I am very late, but I will not grumble as I did this evening when we were told we must work overhours, for it is thanks to the lateness that I have – prepare yourself, my girl – I have found the owner of the watch!"

"The owner of the watch!" repeated his wife. "How? where? But you had not the watch with you? You have not given it back? Not without – " and the little woman hesitated; her husband seemed so pleased, so excited. "If possibly it is a poor person," she reflected, "Bernard is quite capable of giving it back with delight for nothing but a word of thanks! Yet what would not forty, nay, even fifty francs be to us just now." Still she did not like to say anything to damp his pleasure. But he read her misgiving – he had perhaps a little enjoyed teasing her!

"Calm yourself, my child," he said, though Madame Bernard was certainly much less excited than he; "it is all right. When I said I had found the owner, I meant to say I know *where* to find him, or her. Twenty minutes ago I knew as little as you do at this moment. But coming along the

Boulevard, suddenly the light of a gas-lamp flaring up a little fell on a yellow paper on the wall – had it been in the daytime I should never have seen it, it was so badly placed – 'fifty francs reward.' I scarcely thought I would stop to read it at first; how many yellow posters have I not read these last few days! But in an instant 'watch' caught my eyes. Here is the description;" and he drew out a shabby pocket-book in which he had copied it word for word. "You see it is our old friend, and no other – 'English watch, locket, *souvenir de famille*, etc. Owner to be found at 99 Avenue Malmaison.' So off I go to No. 99 to-morrow morning as early as I possibly can."

"And you will be very careful, Bernard," said his wife. "Give it up to no one but the owner himself."

"And make sure of the reward, eh, my girl?" said he, laughing. "Yes, yes – you may trust me. I know fifty francs will not fall to us badly just now. And if it is a rich person I shall take it with a clear conscience, for I really have worked to find the owner."

And in very much better spirits than they had been since the beginning of little Paul's illness, the poor young-couple betook themselves to their night's rest.

One person at No. 99 Avenue Malmaison had not known what a good night's rest was for some time. Poor Auntie! she was beginning to feel that she must make an effort to resign herself, and to throw off the excessive depression which the loss of "grandmother's" watch was causing her. It was not fair, she argued, to make Sylvia and Molly suffer for what she and she alone deserved to be blamed for. So she tried to look more cheerful than she felt. I don't think her efforts deceived the two pairs of sympathising young eyes, but the sisters nevertheless understood and appreciated them, and felt that they too must put on a braver face than came quite easy. So to all outward appearance the trio had recovered their usual bearing. And Sylvia and Molly, as was only natural, went to bed and slept soundly, though never without a last waking thought of "Poor Auntie! oh, if the watch *could* but be found!" while the watch's owner tossed about in wakeful distress. The more she tried to look bright in the day, the more impossible it seemed to forget her troubles in the temporary oblivion of a sound sleep. "It is really wrong of me to fret so about the loss of any *thing*," she would say to herself. "I seem more overwhelmed than even during the first few terrible days after mother's death. Though after all, *were* those first few days terrible? Just at the first when the door seems still as it were half-open, and we feel almost as if we could see a little way *in*, where our dear ones have gone – no, those first days are *not* the worst."

And somehow, as she said so to herself, there seemed to fall over Auntie a feeling of calm and peacefulness such as she had known little of for long. Then came before her the remembrance of "grandmother dear's" sweet, quiet face as she had seen it the last time, in the beautiful calm of holy death. "It is *wrong* to fret so, my child," the well-known voice seemed to say. And listening to it Auntie fell into a quiet and profound sleep.

It was curious – a sort of coincidence, I suppose, one would call it – that this peaceful sleep came to poor Auntie just at the moment at which Bernard, on his way home, espied by the light of the flaring gas-lamp the yellow poster with its "fifty francs reward" in big black letters!

When Auntie woke she saw at once by the light that it was much later than her usual time. But she felt so quiet and peaceful and rested – almost as one does on waking from the first real sleep after an illness – that she tried to fancy she was still half-dreaming, and that it could not yet be time to get up. A slight noise – a *very* slight noise it was – at the side of her bed made her at last, though reluctantly, open her eyes again and turn slightly round. Quick ears and watchful eyes were on the alert —

"Oh, Auntie – Auntie dear – you are awake at last. You have had a nice sleep?"

"Very – a very sweet sleep, my darling," said Auntie, smiling, for the last night's impressions were strong upon her. She was not going to make herself unhappy any more about that which could not be cured.

Molly's bewildered eyes turned towards her sister.

"She looks so happy," she whispered. "Can she know, can she have heard us talking?"

No – she had heard nothing – but *something*, some indefinable instinct now seemed suddenly to awaken her suspicions.

"Molly – Sylvia!" she exclaimed, starting up. "What is it? What are you saying? It cannot be – " But before she had time to say more she was interrupted.

"Yes, it *can* be – it *is*," they called out. And something, a softly shining something, round and smooth, with a smaller shining thing attached to it, dangled above her eyes.

"The watch, Auntie – grandmother dear's own old watch, and the locket! A man – such a nice civil poor man – found them, and has brought them back, while you were still asleep."

"And we could not bear to waken you. You looked so tired and white, and were sleeping so quietly. But it was all right," Molly hastened to assure her. "We lent the money – the fifty francs reward, you know – and he was so pleased, poor man. I am afraid he is *very* poor."

"He asked for a certificate – a little note to say he had been honest in bringing it back," added Sylvia. "But we thought, and so did he, that it would be better for you to write it. So he is going to call again – to-morrow or the day after in the evening – it is such a long way off where he lives, he says."

"What good will the certificate do him?" asked Auntie, stroking and smoothing her dear watch all the time.

"He said it might get him promoted in the office where he works," said Molly, "And he says the watch is a *very* good one – he took it to a friend of his who is a jeweller. So you see, Auntie, though he couldn't have sold it here – you remember they told us it was impossible to sell jewellery that isn't one's own here, as one has to tell all about where one got it and all that – he might have kept it for himself."

"Or sent it away to be sold somewhere else," said Sylvia.

"Oh yes, no doubt he could have done something with it, if he hadn't been really honest."

"And yet so poor," said Auntie thoughtfully. Then she looked again at the watch with such a loving gaze that it brought tears to the girls' eyes.

"Oh, Auntie darling, *how* nice it is to see you looking like yourself again," said Molly. "It seems almost, doesn't it," she added in a lower voice, "as if its coming back were a little message from grandmother?"

How different appeared everything that happy day! How bright the sunshine, even though but some pale wintry beams struggling through the cold gray sky; how nice everything they had to eat seemed – was it, perhaps, that the kind-hearted cook in her sympathy took unusual pains? – how Auntie smiled, nay, laughed right out, when Molly suddenly checked herself in saying something about what o'clock it was, forgetting that it was no longer a painful subject! How grateful they all felt to be able to go to bed in peace without the one ever-recurring, haunting thought, "If the watch could but be found!"

And with the night came another thought to Auntie.

"Sylvia and Molly," she said the next morning, "I have been thinking so about those poor people – the man who found the watch I mean – and his family," for he had told them he was married and had children. "I do feel so grateful to him. I feel that I must go and see for myself if they are so very poor. You have the exact address?"

"Oh yes," Molly replied, "we wrote it down. But oh, Auntie dear, you *will* let us go with you."

Auntie hesitated a little, but yielded in the end.

"You will promise to let me go in first," she said, "just to see that it is quite respectable, and no infectious illness or anything that could hurt you."

Bernard hardly knew his little wife again when he got home that evening. The fifty francs had greatly cheered her the night before, but their influence could not explain the state of delight between tears and laughter in which he found her this time.

"Oh, my friend – oh, Bernard," she exclaimed, "what a happy thing it was for us that you found the watch's owner and took it at once! They have been here; only fancy such distinguished ladies coming themselves so far just to see if they could be of any service to us in return for ours to them. That was how they put it – was it not touching? The old lady" – poor Auntie, I don't think she would *quite* have liked that! – "to whom belongs the watch, so good and kind, oh, so kind; and the younger ones two angels, *angels* simply, I repeat it, Bernard. And when they heard all – I could hide nothing, they questioned me with such sympathy, about Paul's bronchitis and all – they set to work to consider how best they could help us. The lady gave Paul, into his own little hand, another note of fifty francs. That will clear off everything, and make us quite as well off as before his illness; and besides that, they have a good deal of work they want me to do, that will be well paid, better paid than what I do for the shops. And they will try to recommend me to some of their friends, – what I have always wished for, to work for ladies direct instead of for the shops. Oh, Bernard, it was a happy day for us when you found that old watch!"

There is no need to say that Auntie and her nieces were as good as their word.

"On the whole," said Molly, with her customary philosophy, "it was almost worth while to go through all the unhappiness for the sake of the delight of getting the watch back again, especially as it really has been a good thing for those nice poor people. But, Auntie, you will have all your dresses made with watch-pockets now, won't you?"

"Indeed I will," said Auntie with a smile, "and thank you for your good advice, my Molly. Who would think you had ever been the complacent possessor of six pinless brooches?"

At which Molly and Sylvia both laughed, though Molly blushed a little too.

"I am really careful now, I do think," she said. "You know, dear Auntie," she added in a lower voice, "Sylvia and I, more than ever, *now*, try to do and be all that *she* wished, in little as well as in big things. Dear, dear grandmother!"

MY PINK PET

Chapter I

*"For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather – ."*

Christina Rossetti

It is getting to be "a good while ago" since I was a little girl. Sometimes this comes home to me quite distinctly: I feel that I am really growing an old woman, but at other times I cannot believe it. I have to get up and cross the room and look at myself in the mirror, and see with my own eyes the gray hairs and the wrinkles in order to convince myself that childhood, and maidenhood, and even middle age, are all left far behind. At these times "now" appears the dream, "then" the reality; and, strangely enough, this very feeling, I am told, is one of the signs of real old age, of our nearing the land that at one time we fancied so "very far off" – farther off, it seems to me, in middle age than in early childhood, when it is easier for us to believe in what we cannot see, when no clouds have come between us and the true sky beyond.

I have been in many countries, and lived many different lives, since I was a little girl. I have been months together at sea, when dry land itself seemed almost to become a dream. I have been for long years in India, and grown so used to burning skies and swarthy faces that I could hardly believe in the reality of cool England, with its fresh fields and shady lanes; yet all these scenes are growing hazy, while clearly, and yet more clearly, there rises before me the picture of my old, old home and childish days, of special things that happened to me then, of little pleasures and troubles which then seemed very great, and in one sense really were so, no doubt, for they were great to *me*.

I will tell you about a trouble I once had, if you like. I am afraid you will hardly count it a *story*, but still some among you may find it interesting. For, after all, children are children even nowadays, when so much more is done to make them clever and wise than was the case when I was a little girl; and the feeling that your parents and grandparents had their childish sorrows and joys, and hopes and fears and wonders, just as you have, is always a good and wholesome feeling to foster on both your side and theirs.

Our home was in a small town in rather an out-of-the-way part of the country. It is out of the way still, I believe, as the railways have not gone very near it, but I know little about it now. It is many years since I was last there, and I do not think I wish ever to see it again. I would rather keep my memory's picture of it unchanged.

Our house stood at the outskirts of the little town; in front of it there stretched a wide heathery common, which extended a mile or two into the country; and over this common, at certain seasons, the west wind blew so strongly that it was, we used to say, really like living at the seaside. The sea was only six or eight miles away; sometimes we fancied the wind "tasted salt."

The house itself was comfortable and old-fashioned, and had plenty of rooms in it, which you will allow to have been necessary when I tell you that I was the youngest of nine children, most, or at least many, of whom had been brought up at home. My eldest sister was married – she had always been married, I thought, for I could not remember her anything else. My other three sisters were all more or less grown up, and the only brother at all near my own age was away at a boarding-school. So it came to pass that, though I had so many brothers and sisters, I was rather a solitary little girl.

But I was not an unhappy child by any means. I had everything I wanted, even down to a tiny little bedroom all to myself; and though I was not perhaps indulged as much as some children I see nowadays, I don't think I was on that account to be pitied. My parents were quiet, and perhaps rather unusually undemonstrative; and indeed it was not then the fashion to be very familiar with one's father and mother. We always said "sir" and "ma'am" to them, and I never thought of entering or leaving the drawing-room without stopping to curtsy at the door. How would you like that, children? My father was very particular about such matters, more so than most, perhaps, from having been many years in the army, where, I once overheard an old brother-officer say, he had been considered rather a "martinet," if you know what that means; and my dear mother, who by herself, perhaps, would have been almost too gentle to keep all her family in good order, was firm as a rock where any wish of *his* was concerned.

Till I was nearly nine years old I was exceedingly fond of dolls, of which I had several of different degrees of ugliness. But about that age I was taken away for a few weeks to visit an aunt of my mother's at the seaside, and as we travelled all the way there and back in the coach, our luggage had to be much less in quantity than can now be comfortably stowed away in the van of an express train. And "Lois must leave her dolls at home" was the decision of my sixteen-year old sister Emilia, who, with my mother and myself, was to make the journey.

At first I was greatly distressed, though, being a very quiet and uncomplaining child, I said little.

"Mayn't I take one?" I said humbly to my mother. "Miss Trotter or Lady Mirabelle would take up so little room; or might I carry one in my arms?"

Emilia, my sister, was desired to look over the dolls and report on them. She did so, but, alas! most unfavourably.

"They are such disreputable-looking things," she said half-laughingly to my mother, "I should really be ashamed for my aunt to see them. She likes everything so neat, you know. And mother, Lois is really growing a great girl – don't you think it is a good time to break her of dolls?"

So my dolls were left behind. I don't think I grieved *very* much over them. The excitement of the journey and the being considered a great girl by Emilia went far to console me. Besides, I had been beginning to find such big dolls rather inconvenient, as I did not care to play with them in the common way merely. My great pleasure was in making them act the different characters in some romance of my own concoction, and I found smaller *dramatis personæ* more easily managed. Of late I had even tried to cut out figures in paper for this purpose, but I could not make them anything but grotesque and ugly, and had for some time past been "casting about" in my mind as to some less objectionable puppets.

How well I remember the first night at Sandilands! The journey I have somehow almost forgotten. I suppose it was in no way very remarkable, and it is not unlikely that I fell asleep in the coach, and that this had to do with what followed.

My great-aunt was a tiny little old lady, so tiny that small as I was myself she made me feel clumsy. Her house, too, was in proportion to herself. She received us with the greatest affection, but was so nervously anxious to make us comfortable that I could not but feel strange and shyer than usual. Notwithstanding my mother's encouraging whispers and Emilia's tugs and nods, I showed myself to sad disadvantage, which was especially unfortunate, as I was Aunt Lois's god-daughter, and had been brought to see her on purpose to please her. I spilt my tea, I trod on the cat's tail, I knocked over a valuable Indian jar filled with pot-pourri, which fortunately, however, was not broken, till at last, in despair, my mother agreed to Emilia's repeated suggestion that I had better go to bed.

And to bed I went, in considerable distress, though a little consoled by the kind way in which my aunt kissed me and patted me on the back as she said good-night.

I was to sleep in a small room, generally used as a sort of study. My aunt had thoughtfully arranged a little bed in it for me, thinking the only other unused bedroom, which was up at the top of the house, would be so far away from my mother and Emilia that I should feel lonely. I went to bed quietly, and, notwithstanding the strangeness of everything about me, soon fell asleep. But an hour or two later, just when my mother and aunt were sitting comfortably chatting, and Emilia trying over some old songs on the thin-toned piano, they and the two maid-servants in the kitchen were suddenly startled by piercing screams from my room.

Upstairs they all ran – Emilia arriving the first.

"What is the matter, Lois?" she exclaimed. "Have you set yourself on fire?"

I was sitting up in bed, my eyes almost starting out of my head with fright.

"The faces, the faces!" I cried. "See, Emilia, up there!"

It was a minute or two before she could see what I meant, and by that time my mother and aunt and the servants were all in the room. Emilia would have scolded me, but Aunt Lois hurried forward and soothed me, oh, so kindly, while she explained that what in my half-awakened state I had taken for two faces were nothing but two Dutch china vases, standing on the top of a high old-fashioned cabinet in a corner of the room. The door having been left slightly ajar, a ray of light from the lamp on the landing had penetrated into the room, just catching the cabinet, while leaving everything else in darkness.

I sobbed and cried for some time, but persisted in staying where I was instead of changing places with Emilia, as was proposed, now that I really knew there was nothing to be afraid of.

"Brave girl!" said my aunt approvingly. "And to-morrow, for a reward, you shall have the key of the cabinet and examine it for yourself. It is filled with curious foreign shells, and if you care for them you shall have some to take home with you."

And with this delightful anticipation I fell peacefully asleep.

Chapter II

My aunt was as good as her word. The next morning, when breakfast was over, she went up with me to my little room and unlocked the cabinet. It was, as she had said, filled with lovely curious shells, of every size and shape. Some of the trays were in considerable disorder.

"You may put them straight for me, Lois, my dear," she said, "and when you have done so, you may play with them every day while you are here. And when you go away I shall give you a few. I cannot give you many, for the cabinet was arranged and given to me by my dear brother, who is dead, and I should not like to spoil the look of it. But before you go you may choose twenty to take away with you."

"Thank you, Aunt Lois," I said soberly. But she must have seen by my face that I was pleased, for she added —

"And when I die, Lois, you shall have the cabinet and all the shells."

"Thank you, Aunt Lois," I said again, not indeed knowing what else to say, though I felt rather uncomfortable when she talked of dying.

After this, for some days to come, I was perfectly happy. Morning, noon, and night I was at the shells. The only trouble was that it was a grief to me ever to leave them, and of course, as I had been brought to Sandilands partly for the benefit of the sea-air, my mother could not allow me to spend all my time in one small room.

One day, just after our early dinner, I had escaped to my treasures as usual, when Emilia followed me upstairs to tell me to put on my hat and cape for a walk by the sea-shore. My face fell, but of course I did not venture to make any objection.

"Can't you bear to tear yourself away from your shells even for an hour?" said Emilia. "What a queer child you are! What can you find to play at with them; they are all arranged in perfect order long ago?"

"They are so pretty. I like putting their colours together," I said, fondly touching, as I spoke, the shells of one tray, which were my especial favourites.

"Yes, they *are* pretty," said Emilia. "How lovely that delicate pink one is, in the middle of those dark-brown tortoiseshell-looking ones! It is like a princess surrounded by her slaves."

I started with pleasure. Emilia's suggestion opened a new world to me. Here before me, in my shells, were the very puppets I had been in search of!

"Oh, Emilia!" I exclaimed, "*what* a good idea!"

But when she questioned me as to what I meant, I got shy again, and refused to explain. I was afraid of her laughing at me, and hurried away to put on my hat, more eager than ever to get back to these delightful playfellows, as I really considered them.

And what games did I not have with them! I made them act far more wonderful dramas than I could possibly describe to you, children. I went through ever so many of the *Arabian Nights* stories, with the shells for caliphs and weseers, genii, and enchanted damsels. I acted all the well-known old fairy tales, as well (or better) known in my childish days as now: Cinderella and dear Beauty and Riquet with the tuft. There was one brown shell with a little hump on its back which did splendidly for Riquet. Then for a change to more sober life I dramatised *The Fairchild Family* and *Jemima Placid*, taking for my model a little book of plays for children, whose name, if I mistake not, was *Leisure Hours*.

But through all my fanciful transmogrifications I was constant in one particular: the beautiful pale-rose-coloured shell which Emilia had admired was ever my *prima donna* and special favourite. It — I very nearly had said "she" — was in turn the lovely wife of Hassan of Balsora, Princess Graciosa, and Lucy Fairchild, whom, on mature consideration, I preferred to her sister Emily, as, though not so pretty, she was never guilty of such disgraceful conduct as eating "plum jam" on the

sly and then denying it! And when no special "actings" were on hand, and my beautiful shell might have been supposed to be nothing but a shell, the pleasures of my fertile imagination were by no means at an end. The pretty thing then became a sort of beloved friend to me. I talked to it, and imagined it talked to me; I confided to it all my hopes and fears and disappointments, and believed, or pretended to myself to believe rather, that the shell murmured to me in reply sweet whispers of affection and sympathy; I carried it about with me everywhere, in a tiny box lined with tissue-paper and cotton-wool; indeed it seems to me now that many, perhaps most people, if they had heard what nurses call "my goings-on," would have thought my wits decidedly wanting. But *of course* I told no one of my new fancy. I don't think at that time I *could* have done so. I lived in a happy dream-world of my own alone with "my pink pet," for that was the only "real" name I ever gave to the shell, and no longer in the least regretted Miss Trotter or Lady Mirabelle, though I often "amused" my present favourite with stories of the sayings and doings of its predecessors in my affections.

Of course my pink pet accompanied me home. There was great consultation with my shell as to the nineteen others to be chosen, and there was one moment's breathless suspense when my aunt told me to show her my selection, and I gravely did so, watching her face the while.

What if she should refuse to me the gift of the one, for which I would gladly have gone without all the others?

"You have made a very modest choice, Lois," she said at last. "Are you sure you wouldn't like any others better? These are rather rare shells," she added, touching a little group of two or three that generally figured as my pink pet's maids of honour, "but these, and this, and this – are common enough."

"But this is the only one of the sort in the cabinet," I replied, reddening with vexation, for my favourite had been one of those Aunt Lois had described as "common." Actually, at the risk of losing my beautiful shell, I could not help standing up in its defence.

"Why, that's the one I thought so pretty, isn't it?" said Emilia, coming forward. "Lois thinks it worth its weight in gold, aunt. She keeps it in an old pill-box, and –"

"You're *very* unkind, Emilia," I exclaimed angrily; "you've no business to pry into what I do."

"Hush – hush! my dear," said Aunt Lois in her fussy way, yet not unkindly, and looking at me with some curiosity. "Give me my spectacles, and let me see this remarkable shell better. Yes – you are right, your young eyes are sharper than mine, it *is* a rare shell. I think there were only two of them in the cabinet, and one must have been broken, though I did not know it."

Oh, how I trembled! Supposing Aunt Lois were to say she could not spare this one precious specimen! Emilia put my thoughts into words for me, for which I did not thank her.

"If it is the only one," she said, "of course Lois won't expect you to give it to her." She glanced at me reproachfully. My eyes fell, but I did not speak.

"I would not on any account go back from my promise," said my aunt. "If the child has a special fancy for the shell, let her have it by all means, even were it far more valuable than it is."

I could hardly speak, so great had been my suspense, but I whispered "Thank you, Aunt Lois," in a husky voice, and I fancy by the way my aunt again looked at me that she saw there were tears in my eyes. And the next day we went home.

Chapter III

After this I grew fonder than ever of my pink pet. But at the same time I was more careful than before to let no one know of my queer fancy. Emilia's remarks had alarmed me, for I had had no idea that she had noticed my treasure. I could not bear being laughed at, and I intensely dreaded my brothers getting hold of the story and playing me some trick which might deprive me of my favourite. I never played with my shells except when I was quite alone, and deeply regretted there being no key to the lock of my room, by which I might have secured myself against intruders. But as I had always been in the habit of playing a great deal by myself, and had always, too, been quiet and reserved, no one took any special notice of me or my occupations, particularly as every one in the house was just then much occupied with preparations for the approaching marriage of my second sister, Margaret. So I spent hours and hours by myself – or rather not by myself, for I had for my companions far more wonderful beings than were ever dreamt of anywhere save in a child's brain, and with my pink pet went through more marvellous adventures by far than Munchausen himself.

One day I was playing as usual in my own little room, when the door suddenly opened and Emilia and Margaret came in. They were both laughing. I started up in terror and threw my handkerchief over the little group of shells, who had just been performing a tournament on a cane-bottomed chair, on the seat of which, with an old piece of French chalk, I had marked out the lists, the places for spectators, and the daïs of honour for the queen, represented of course by my rose-coloured shell.

"What are you doing, Lois?" said Emilia.

"Nothing, at least only playing," I said confusedly.

"We didn't suppose you were doing anything naughty," said Margaret. "Don't look so frightened. Let us see what you are playing at."

I hesitated.

"Come now," said Emilia laughingly, "do let us have it. You had got as far as – let me see what was it, 'Oh ladye fair, I kneel before thee,' wasn't that it, Margaret?"

I turned upon her in sudden fury. But before I could speak, Emilia, not noticing my excitement, had snatched away the handkerchief from the chair, and with mischievous glee picked out my pink pet.

"See, Margaret," she cried, "this is the 'ladye fair,' Lois's familiar."

I had found my voice by now – found it indeed; it would have been better had I remained silent.

"Oh, you mean girl!" I exclaimed. "Oh, you bad, wicked sister! You've been listening at the door; am I not even to be allowed the privacy of my own chamber?" I was growing dramatic in my excitement, and unconsciously using the language of some of my persecuted heroines.

"Lois," cried Margaret, "do not excite yourself so. We did not listen at the door, but you were speaking so loud, I assure you it was impossible not to hear you."

Somewhat softened and yet inexpressibly annoyed, I turned to Margaret, unfortunately in time to see that it was only by the greatest efforts she was controlling her laughter. My words and manner had been too much for her, anxious as she was to quell the storm.

"I will bear no more," I said passionately. "Unnatural sisters that you are to jeer and mock at me. Give me my shell, Emilia. How dare you touch it?"

Startled, and really a little frightened by my manner, Emilia silently held out the shell. I snatched at it, how it was I never could tell – whether she or I dropped it I know not, nor do I know whose foot trod on it, but so it was. In the scuffle my treasure fell to the ground; my pink pet was crushed into a little heap of shell dust.

"Oh, Lois, dear Lois, I am so sorry," exclaimed Emilia, all her mischief and glee at an end. But I did not speak. For a moment I stared at the fatal spot on the floor, then stooping down I scooped up as well as I could the fragments of what had been so dear to me, and hiding them in my hand rushed from the room, still without speaking. I really hardly knew what I was doing; afterwards I remembered hearing Emilia say in a frightened tone —

"Margaret, what can we do? I never saw Lois like that before. Can she be going out of her mind?"

I thought I *was* going out of my mind. Even now, children, old woman as I am, I cannot bear to recall the misery of that time. I ran out into the garden, and lay with my face hidden in an old deserted arbour, where I trusted no one would come to seek me. I had put the "ashes" of my favourite into the pill-box, and held it in my hands while I cried and sobbed with mingled anger and grief. The afternoon went by, but no one came to look for me.

"It must be nearly tea-time," I said to myself, though reluctant to own that I was hungry. "No one cares what becomes of me."

Just then I heard a step approaching. It was Emilia.

"Oh, Lois!" she exclaimed; and I could tell by her voice that she had been crying. "I have been looking everywhere for you. Oh, dear Lois, do say you forgive me?"

"No," I said sullenly, turning from her and pushing away her outstretched arms, "I will *never* forgive you."

And this was my only reply to her repeated words of sorrow and affection, till at last in despair she went away. Then, knowing that my retreat was discovered, I got up and went into the house, up to my own room. I sent down word by one of the servants that my head ached, and I did not want any tea, and my mother, judging it wiser from my sisters' account of me not to drive matters to extremity, let me have my own way. She came up to see me, and said quietly that she hoped my head would be better to-morrow, but that was all, and I encouraged nothing more, and when Emilia came to my door to say good-night, I would not answer her.

The next day things were no better. By this time my continued crying had really made my head ache more badly than it had ever ached before. I got up and dressed, but had to lie down again, and thus I spent the day; and when my sisters came in to see me I would not speak to them. Never, I think, was child more perfectly miserable; and though I gave little thought to that part of the matter, I can now see that I must have made the whole household wretched. And yet by this time I was doing myself the greatest injustice. I was no longer angry with Emilia. I was simply sunk in grief. My pink pet was crushed into dust; how it had happened, or who was to blame, I did not care. I was just broken-hearted.

I think it must have been the evening of the second day after the tragedy of the shell that I was sitting alone in my little room, when there came a tap at the door. "Come in," I said listlessly, never for a moment supposing it to be any one but the housemaid. The door opened and I glanced up. My visitor was Aunt Lois. I had forgotten all about her coming, though I now remembered hearing that she was expected a week or two before Margaret's marriage.

"Aunt Lois!" I exclaimed, starting up, but when I felt her bright kindly eyes looking at me inquiringly, I grew red and turned away; but she came forward all the more eagerly.

"So my poor little girl," she said, "I hear you have been in great trouble."

I did not speak — I began to cry quietly.

"And some one else has been in trouble too," she said; "you have made Emilia very unhappy."

I raised my head in surprise. "Emilia!" I repeated; "she doesn't care. She only laughed at me."

"She *does* care, Lois," said my aunt. "She has tried to tell you so several times."

"Yes," I said confusedly, "she did; but I didn't think anybody cared *really*."

"No, you have been thinking of no one but yourself, Lois; that is the truth, dear. But now listen to me, and don't think I am going to laugh at you. I understand how you have been feeling.

Once, when I was a little girl, I was very nearly as miserable about the loss of a – guess now – what *do* you think?"

I looked up with interest.

"I don't know," I said; "was it a pet bird, or something like that?"

"No," replied Aunt Lois, "nothing half so sensible. I don't think you could guess. It was nothing but a little sugar mouse, which I had had for some weeks, till at last one day, forgetting that it was only sugar, I left it so close to the fire that it melted. But many times in my life I have thought of my poor mouse with gratitude, Lois. It taught me some good lessons. Can you guess what they were?"

"Not to care too much for things, I suppose," I said.

"Not *exactly* that. I don't think 'caring' ever does us harm; but *what* one cares for, that is the thing. You will understand in good time."

I looked up again, thoughtfully this time.

"I think I do understand, a little," I said. "You are so kind, Aunt Lois."

"I don't like to see people unhappy if I can cheer them," she said. "Do you, Lois?"

I did not reply.

"Shall I call Emilia?" she said. "You can make *her* happy again."

"Please," I whispered.

Aunt Lois went to the door, and I heard her call my sister. She must have been waiting somewhere near, for in a moment she was in the room. She ran up to me and put her arms round me and kissed me fondly – more fondly I think than ever any one had kissed me before.

"Dear little Lois," she said, "I have been *so* sorry about you. Won't you forgive me? And I have not been a good sister to you – I have left you alone to make amusement for yourself when I might have helped you. Aunt Lois has shown me it all, and I want to begin now quite differently, so that you shall never feel lonely again."

I kissed her in return. Who could have helped doing so? There were tears in her eyes – those merry bright eyes that I had never before seen looking sad; and it seemed to me that all of a sudden I found out how sweet and pretty Emilia was.

"Dear Emilia," I said, and then touching a little knot of pale-rose-coloured ribbon that she happened to be wearing, and which seemed just to match the pretty flush in her cheeks, I whispered very low, "Will *you* be my pink pet, Emilia?"

She laughed happily. "That reminds me," she said, and out of her pocket she drew a tiny box, which she gave me. I opened it, and gave a little cry of surprise. There, in a nest of cotton-wool, there lay before me, lovely as ever, my beloved shell!

"Emilia!" I exclaimed, "where did you get it? It was broken to bits."

"I brought it," said Aunt Lois. "Don't you remember my saying there had once been two of those rare shells? Emilia wrote to ask me to hunt all through the cabinet to see if possibly the other was still there; and I actually did find it. It was hidden in a very large shell, that somehow or other it had got into – one of the large shells you seldom played with."

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