

Meade L. T.

A Very Naughty Girl



L. Meade

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CHAPTER I. – SYLVIA AND AUDREY

It was a day of great excitement, and Audrey Wynford stood by her schoolroom window and looked out. She was a tall girl of sixteen, with her hair hanging in a long, fair plait down her back. She stood with her hands folded behind her and an expectant expression on her face.

Up the avenue a stream of people were coming. Some came in cabs, some on bicycles; some walked. They all turned in the direction of the front entrance, and Audrey heard their voices rising and falling as they entered the house, walked down the hall, and disappeared into some region at the other end.

"It is all detestable," she muttered; "and just when Evelyn is coming, too. How strange she will think it! I wish father would drop this horrid custom. I do not approve of it at all."

Just then her governess, a bright-looking girl about six years Audrey's senior, came into the room.

"Well," she cried, "and what are you doing here? I thought you were going to ride this afternoon."

"How can I?" said Audrey, shrugging her shoulders. "I shall be met at every turn."

"And why not?" said Miss Sinclair. "You are not ashamed of being seen."

"It is quite detestable," said Audrey.

She crossed the room, flung herself into a deep straw armchair in front of a blazing log fire, and took up a magazine.

"It is all horrid," she continued as she rapidly turned the pages; "you know it, Miss Sinclair, as well as I do."

"If I were you," said Miss Sinclair, "I should be proud – very proud – to belong to an old family who had kept a custom like this in vogue."

"If you belonged to the old family you would not," said Audrey. "Every one laughs at us. I call it perfectly horrid. What possible good can it do that all the people of the neighborhood, and the strangers who come to stay in the town, should make free of Wynford Castle on New Year's Day? It makes me cross anyhow. I am sorry to be cross to you, Miss Sinclair; but I am, and that is a fact."

Miss Sinclair sat down on another chair.

"I like it," she said after a pause.

"Why?" asked Audrey.

"There were some quite hungry people passing through the hall as I came to you just now."

"Let them be hungry somewhere else, not here," said the angry girl. "It was all very well when some ancestor of mine first started the custom; but that father, a man of the present day, up-to-date in every sense of the word, should carry it on – that he should keep open house for every individual who chooses to come here on New Year's Day – is past endurance. Last year between two and three hundred people dined or supped or had tea at the Castle, and I believe, from the appearance of the avenue, there will be still more to-day. The house gets so dirty, for one thing, for half of them don't think of wiping their feet; and then we run a chance of being robbed, for how do we know that there are not adventurers in the throng? If I were the country-folk I would be too proud to come; but they are not – not a bit."

"I cannot agree with you," said Miss Sinclair. "It is a splendid old custom, and I hope it will not be abolished."

“Perhaps Evelyn will abolish it when she comes in for the property,” said Audrey in a low tone. Her face looked scarcely amiable as she said the words.

Miss Sinclair regarded her with a puzzled expression.

“Audrey dear,” she said after a pause, “I am very fond of you.”

“And I of you,” said Audrey a little unwillingly. “You are more friend than governess. I should like best to go to school, of course; but as father says that that is quite impossible, I have to put up with the next best; and you are a very good next best.”

“Then if I am, may I just as a friend, and one who loves you very dearly, make a remark?”

“It is going to be something odious,” said Audrey – “that goes without saying – but I suppose I’ll listen.”

“Don’t you think you are just a wee bit in danger of becoming selfish, Audrey?” said her governess.

“Am I? Perhaps so; I am afraid I don’t care.”

“You would if you thought it over; and this is New Year’s Day, and it is a lovely afternoon, and you might come for a ride – I wish you would.”

“I will not run the chance of meeting those folks on any consideration whatever,” said Audrey; “but I will go for a walk with you, if you like.”

“Done,” said Miss Sinclair. “I have to go on a message for Lady Wynford to the lodge; will you come by the shrubberies and meet me there?”

“All right,” replied Audrey; “I will go and get ready.”

She left the room.

After her pupil had left her, Miss Sinclair sat for a time gazing into the huge log fire.

She was a very pretty girl, with a high-bred look about her. She had received all the advantages which modern education could afford, and at the age of three-and-twenty had left Girton with the assurance from all her friends that she had a brilliant future before her. The first step in that future seemed bright enough to the handsome, high-spirited girl. Lady Wynford met her in town, took a fancy to her on the spot, and asked her to conduct Audrey’s education. Miss Sinclair received a liberal salary and every comfort and consideration. Audrey fell quickly in love with her, and a more delightful pupil governess never had. The girl was brimming over with intelligence, was keenly alive to the responsibilities of her own position, was absolutely original, and as a rule quite unselfish.

“Poor Audrey! she has her trials before her, all the same,” thought the young governess now. “Well, I am very happy here, and I hope nothing will disturb our present arrangement for some time. As to Evelyn, we have yet to discover what sort of girl she is. She comes this evening. But there, I am forgetting all about Audrey, and she must be waiting for me.”

It so happened that Audrey Wynford was doing nothing of the sort. She had hastily put on her warm jacket and fur cap and gone out into the grounds. The objectionable avenue, with its streams of people coming and going, was to be religiously avoided, and Audrey went in the direction of a copse of young trees, which led again through a long shrubbery in the direction of the lodge gates.

It was the custom from time immemorial in the Wynford family to keep open house on New Year’s Day. Any wayfarer, gentle or simple, man or woman, boy or girl, could come up the avenue and ring the bell at the great front-door, and be received and fed and refreshed, and sent again on his or her way with words of cheer. The Squire himself as a rule received his guests, but where that was impossible the steward of the estate was present to conduct them to the huge hall which ran across the back of the house, where unlimited refreshments were provided. No one was sent away. No one was refused admission on this day of all days. The period of the reception was from sunrise to sundown. At sundown the hospitality came to an end; the doors of the house were shut and no more visitors were allowed admission. An extra staff of servants was generally secured for the occasion, and the one and only condition made by the Squire was, that as much food as possible might be

eaten, that each male visitor might drink good wine or sound ale to his heart's content, that each might warm himself thoroughly by the huge log fires, but that no one should take any food away. This, in the case of so promiscuous an assemblage, was necessary. To Audrey, however, the whole thing was more or less a subject of dislike. She regarded the first day of each year as a penance; she shrank from the subject of the guests, and on this special New Year's Day was more aggrieved and put out than usual. More guests had arrived than had ever come before, for the people of the neighborhood enjoyed the good old custom, and there was not a villager, not a trades-person, nor even a landed proprietor near who did not make it a point of breaking bread at Wynford Castle on New Year's Day. The fact that a man of position sat down side by side with a tramp or a laborer made no difference; there was no distinction of rank amongst the Squire's guests on this day.

Audrey heard the voices now as she disappeared into the shelter of the young trees. She heard also the rumble of wheels as the better class of guests arrived or went away again.

"It is horrid," she murmured for about the twentieth time to herself; and then she began to run in order to get away from what she called the disagreeable noise.

Audrey could run with the speed and grace of a young fawn, but she had not gone half-through the shrubbery before she stopped dead-short. A girl of about her own age was coming hurriedly to meet her. She was a very pretty girl, with black eyes and a quantity of black hair and a richly colored dark face. The girl was dressed somewhat fantastically in many colors. Peeping out from beneath her old-fashioned jacket was a scarf of deep yellow; the skirt of her dress was crimson, and in her hat she wore two long crimson feathers. Audrey regarded her with not only wonder but also disfavor. Who was she? What a vulgar, forward, insufferable young person!

"I say," cried the girl, coming up eagerly; "I have lost my way, and it is so important! Can you tell me how I can get to the front entrance of the Castle?"

"You ought not to have come by the shrubbery," said Audrey in a very haughty tone. "The visitors who come to the Castle to-day are expected to use the avenue. But now that you have come," she added, "if you will take this short cut you will find yourself in the right direction. You have then but to follow the stream of people and you will reach the hall door."

"Oh, thank you!" said the girl. "I am so awfully hungry! I do hope I shall get in before sunset. Good-by, and thank you so much! My name is Sylvia Leeson; who are you?"

"I am Audrey Wynford," replied Audrey, speaking more icily than ever.

"Then you are the young lady of the Castle?"

"I am Audrey Wynford."

"How strange! One would think to meet you here, and one would think to see me here, that we both belonged to Shakespeare's old play *As You Like It*. But I must not stay another minute. It is so sweet of your father to invite us all, and if I am not quick I shall lose the fun."

She nodded with a flash of bright eyes and white teeth at the amazed Audrey, and the next moment was lost to view.

"What a girl!" thought Audrey as she pursued her walk. "How dared she! She did not treat me with one scrap of respect, and she seemed to think – a girl of that sort! – that she was my equal; she absolutely spoke of us in the same breath. It was almost insulting. Sylvia and Audrey! We meet in a wood, and we might be characters out of *As You Like It*. Well, she is awfully pretty, but – Oh dear! what a creature she is when all is said and done – that wild dress, and those dancing eyes, and that free manner! And yet – and yet she was scarcely vulgar; she was only – only different from anybody else. Who is she, and where does she come from? Sylvia Leeson. Rather a pretty name; and certainly a pretty girl. But to think of her partaking of hospitality – all alone, too – with the *canaille* of Wynford!"

CHAPTER II. – ARRIVAL OF EVELYN

Audrey met her governess at the lodge gates, and the two plunged down a side-path, and were soon making for the wonderful moors about a mile away from Wynford Castle.

“What are you thinking about, Audrey?” said Miss Sinclair.

“Do you happen to know,” said Audrey, “any people in the village or neighborhood of the name of Leeson?”

“No, dear, certainly not. I do not think any people of the name live here. Why do you ask?”

“For such a funny reason!” replied Audrey. “I met a girl who had come by mistake through the shrubberies. She was on her way to the Castle to get a good meal. She told me her name was Sylvia Leeson. She was pretty in an *outré* sort of style; she was also very free. She had the cheek to compare herself with me, and said that as my name was Audrey and hers Sylvia we ought to be two of Shakespeare’s heroines. There was something uncommon about her. Not that I liked her – very far from that. But I wonder who she is.”

“I don’t know,” said Miss Sinclair. “I certainly have not the least idea that there is any one of that name living in our neighborhood, but one can never tell.”

“Oh, but you know everybody round here,” said Audrey. “Perhaps she is a stranger. I think on the whole I am glad.”

“I heard a week ago that some people had taken The Priory,” said Miss Sinclair.

“The Priory!” cried Audrey. “It has been uninhabited ever since I can remember.”

“I heard the rumor,” continued Miss Sinclair, “but I know no particulars, and it may not be true. It is just possible that this girl belongs to them.”

“I should like to find out,” replied Audrey. “She certainly interested me although – Oh, well, don’t let us talk of her any more. Jenny dear” – Audrey in affectionate moments called her governess by her Christian name – “are you not anxious to know what Evelyn is like?”

“I suppose I am,” replied Miss Sinclair.

“I think of her so much!” continued Audrey. “It seems so odd that she, a stranger, should be the heiress, and I, who have lived here all my days, should inherit nothing. Oh, of course, I shall have plenty of money, for mother had such a lot; but it does seem so unaccountable that all father’s property should go to Evelyn. And now she is to live here, and of course take the precedence of me, I do not know that I quite like it. Sometimes I feel that she will rub me the wrong way; if she is very masterful, for instance. She can be – can’t she, Jenny?”

“But why should we suppose that she will be?” replied Miss Sinclair. “There is no good in getting prejudiced beforehand.”

“I cannot help thinking about it,” said Audrey. “You know I have never had any close companions before, and although you make up for everybody else, and I love you with all my heart and soul, yet it is somewhat exciting to think of a girl just my own age coming to live with me.”

“Of course, dear; and I am so glad for your sake!”

“But then,” continued Audrey, “she does not come quite as an ordinary guest; she comes to the home which is to be hers hereafter. I wonder what her ideas are, and what she will feel about things. It is very mysterious. I am excited; I own it. You may be quite sure, though, that I shall not show any of my excitement when Evelyn does come. Jenny, have you pictured her yet to yourself? Do you think she is tall or short, or pretty or ugly, or what?”

“I have thought of her, of course,” replied Miss Sinclair; “but I have not formed the least idea. You will soon know, Audrey; she is to arrive in time for dinner.”

“Yes,” said Audrey; “mother is going in the carriage to meet her, and the train is due at six-thirty. She will arrive at the Castle a little before seven. Mother says she will probably bring a

maid, and perhaps a French governess. Mother does not know herself what sort she is. It is odd her having lived away from England all this time.”

Audrey chatted on with her governess a little longer, and presently they turned and went back to the house. The sun had already set, and the big front-door was shut; the family never used it except on this special day or when a wedding or a funeral left Wynford Castle. The pretty side-door, with its sheltered porch, was the mode of exit and ingress for the inhabitants of Wynford Castle. Audrey and her governess now entered, and Audrey stood for a few moments to warm her hands by the huge log fire on the hearth. Miss Sinclair went slowly up-stairs to her room; and Audrey, finding herself alone, gave a quick sigh.

“I wonder – I do wonder,” she said half-aloud.

Her words were evidently heard, for some one stirred, and presently a tall man with a slight stoop came forward and stood where the light of the big fire fell all over him.

“Why, dad!” cried Audrey as she put her hand inside her father’s arm. “Were you asleep?” she asked. “How was it that Miss Sinclair and I did not see you when we came in?”

“I was sound asleep in that big chair. I was somewhat tired. I had received three hundred guests; don’t forget that,” replied Squire Wynford.

“And they have gone. What a comfort!” said Audrey.

“My dear little Audrey, I have fed them and warmed them and sent them on their way rejoicing, and I am a more popular Squire Wynford of Castle Wynford than ever. Why should you grumble because your neighbors, every mother’s son of them, had as much to eat and drink as they could desire on New Year’s Day?”

“I hate the custom,” said Audrey. “It belongs to the Middle Ages; it ought to be exploded.”

“What! and allow the people to go hungry?”

“Those who are likely to go hungry,” continued Audrey, “might have money given to them. We do not want all the small squires everywhere round to come and feed at the Castle.”

“But the small squires like it, and so do the poor people, and so do I,” said Squire Wynford; and now he frowned very slightly, and Audrey gave another sigh.

“We must agree to differ, dad,” she said.

“I am afraid so, my dear. Well, and how are you, my pet? I have not seen you until now. Very happy at the thought of your cousin’s arrival?”

“No, dad, scarcely happy, but excited all the same. Are not you a little, wee bit excited too, father? It seems so strange her coming all the way from Tasmania to take possession of her estates. I wonder – I do wonder – what she will be like.”

“She takes possession of no estates while I live,” said the Squire, “but she is the next heiress.”

“And you are sorry it is not I; are you not, father?”

“I don’t think of it,” said the Squire. “No,” he added thoughtfully a moment later, “that is not the case. I do think of it. You are better off without the responsibility; you would never be suited to a great estate of this sort. Evelyn may be different. Anyhow, when the time comes it is her appointed work. Now, my dear” – he took out his watch – “your cousin will arrive in a moment. Your mother has gone to meet her. Do you intend to welcome her here or in one of the sitting-rooms?”

“I will stay in the hall, of course,” said Audrey a little fretfully.

“I will leave you, then, my love. I have neglected a sheaf of correspondence, and would like to look through my letters before dinner.”

The Squire moved away, walking slowly. He pushed aside some heavy curtains and vanished. Audrey still stood by the fire. Presently a restless fit seized her, and she too flitted up the winding white marble stairs and disappeared down a long corridor. She entered a pretty room daintily furnished in blue and silver. A large log fire burned in the grate; electric light shed its soft gleams over the furniture; there was a bouquet of flowers and a little pot of ivy on a small table, also a

bookcase full of gaily-bound story-books. Nothing had been neglected, even to the big old Bible and the old-fashioned prayer-book.

"I wonder how she will like it," thought Audrey. "This is one of the prettiest rooms in the house. Mother said she must have it. I wonder if she will like it, and if I shall like her. Oh, and here is her dressing-room, and here is a little boudoir where she may sit and amuse herself and shut us out if she chooses. Lucky Evelyn! How strange it all seems! For the first time I begin to appreciate my darling, beloved home. Why should it pass away from me to her? Oh, of course I am not jealous; I would not be mean enough to entertain feelings of that sort, and – I hear the sound of wheels. She is coming; in a moment I shall see her. Oh, I do wonder – I do wonder! I wish Jenny were with me; I feel quite nervous."

Audrey dashed out of the room, rushed down the winding stairs, and had just entered the hall when a footman pushed aside the heavy curtains, and Lady Frances Wynford, a handsome, stately-looking woman, entered, accompanied by a small girl.

The girl was dragging in a great pile of rugs and wraps. Her hat was askew on her head, her jacket untidy. She flung the rugs down in the center of a rich Turkey carpet; said, "There, that is a relief;" and then looked full at Audrey.

Audrey was a head and shoulders taller than the heiress, who had thin and somewhat wispy flaxen hair, and a white face with insignificant features. Her eyes, however, were steady, brown, large, and intelligent. She came up to Audrey at once.

"Don't introduce me, please, Aunt Frances," she said. "I know this is Audrey. – I am Evelyn. You hate me, don't you?"

"No, I am sure I do not," said Audrey.

"Well, I should if I were you. It would be much more interesting to be hated. So this is the place. It looks jolly, does it not? Aunt Frances, do you know where my maid is? I must have her – I must have her at once. Please tell Jasper to come here," continued the girl, turning to a manservant who lingered in the background.

"Desire Miss Wynford's maid to come into the hall," said Lady Frances in an imperious tone; "and bring tea, Davis. Be quick."

The man withdrew, and Evelyn, lifting her hand, took off her ugly felt hat and flung it on the pile of rugs and cushions.

"Don't touch them, please," she said as Audrey advanced. "That is Jasper's work. – By the way, Aunt Frances, may Jasper sleep in my room? I have never slept alone, not since I was born, and I could not survive it. I want a little bed just the ditto of my own for Jasper. I cannot live without Jasper. May she sleep close to me, please, Aunt Frances? And, oh! I do hope and trust this house is not haunted. It does look eerie. I am terrified at the thought of ghosts. I know I shall not be a very pleasant inmate, and I am sorry for you all – and for you in special, Audrey. What a grand, keep-your-distance sort of air you have! But I am not going to be afraid of you. I do not forget that the place will belong to me some day. Hullo, Jasper!"

Evelyn flitted in a curious, elf-like way across the hall, and went up to a dark woman who stood just by the velvet curtain.

"Don't be shy, Jasper," she said. "You have nothing to be afraid of here. It is all very grand, I know; but then it is to be mine some day, and you are never to leave me – never. I was speaking to my aunt, Lady Frances, and you are to have your little bed near mine. See that it is arranged for to-night. And now, please, pick up these rugs and cushions and my old hat, and take them to my room. Don't stare so, Jasper; do what I tell you."

Jasper somewhat sullenly obeyed. She was as graceful and deft in all her actions as Evelyn was the reverse. Evelyn stood and watched her. When she went slowly up the marble stairs, the heiress turned with a laugh to her two companions.

“How you stare!” she said; and she looked full at Audrey. “Do you regard me as barbarian, or a wild beast, or what?”

“I am interested in you,” said Audrey in her low voice. “You are decidedly out of the common.”

“Come,” said Lady Frances, “we have no time for analyzing character just now. Audrey, take your cousin to her room, and then go yourself and get dressed for dinner.”

“Will you come, Evelyn?” said Audrey.

She crossed the hall, Evelyn following her slowly. Once or twice the heiress stopped to examine a mailed figure in armor, or an old picture on which the firelight cast a fitful gleam. She said, “How ugly! A queer old thing, that!” to the figure in armor, and she scowled up at the picture.

“You are not going to frighten me, you old scarecrow,” she said; and then she ran up-stairs by Audrey’s side.

“So this is what they call English grandeur!” she remarked. “Is not this house centuries old?”

“Parts of the house are,” answered Audrey.

“Is this part?”

“No; the hall and staircase were added about seventy years ago.”

“Is my room in the old part or the new part?”

“Your room is in what is called the medium part. It is a lovely room; you will be charmed with it.”

“I by no means know that I shall. But show it to me.”

Audrey walked a little quicker. She began to feel a curious sense of irritation, and knew that there was something about Evelyn which might under certain conditions try her temper very much. They reached the lovely blue-and-silver room, and Audrey flung open the door, expecting a cry of delight from Evelyn. But the heiress was not one to give herself away; she cast cool and critical eyes round the chamber.

“Dear, dear!” she said – “dear, dear! So this is your idea of an English bedroom!”

“It is an English bedroom; there is no idea about it,” said Audrey.

“You are cross, are you not, Audrey?” was Evelyn’s remark. “It is very trying for you my coming here. I know that, of course; Jasper has told me. I should be ignorant and quite lost were it not for Jasper, but Jasper puts me up to things. I do not think I could live without her. She has often described you – often and often. It would make you scream to listen to her. She has taken you off splendidly. Really, all things considered, you are very like what she has pictured you. I say, Audrey, would you like to come up here after your next meal, whatever you call it, and watch Jasper as she takes you off? She is the most splendid mimic in all the world. In a day or two she will be able to imitate Aunt Frances and every one in the house. Oh, it is killing to watch her and to listen to her! You would like to see yourself through Jasper’s eyes, would you not, Audrey?”

“No, thank you,” replied Audrey.

“How you kill me with that ‘No, thank you,’ of yours! Why, they are the very words Jasper said you would be certain to say. Oh dear! this is quite amusing.” Evelyn laughed long and loud, wiping her eyes with her handkerchief as she did so. “Oh dear! oh dear!” she said. “Don’t look any crosser, Audrey, or I shall die with laughing! Why, you will make me scream.”

“That would be bad for you after your journey,” said Audrey. “I see you have hot water, and your maid is in the dressing-room. I will leave you now. That is the dressing-bell; the bell for dinner will ring in half an hour. I must go and dress.”

Audrey rushed out of the room, very nearly, but not quite, banging the door after her.

“If I stayed another moment I should lose my temper. I should say something terrible,” thought the girl. Her heart was beating fast; she pressed her hand to her side. “If it were not for Jenny I do not believe I could endure the house with that girl,” was her next ejaculation. “To think that she is a Wynford, and that the Castle – the lovely, beautiful Castle – is to belong to her some

day. Oh, it is maddening! Our darling knight in armor – Sir Galahad I have always called him – and our Rembrandt: one is a scarecrow, and the other a queer old thing. Oh Evelyn, you are almost past bearing!”

Audrey ran away to her room, where her maid, Eleanor, was waiting to attend on her. Audrey was never in the habit of confiding in her maid; and the girl, who was brimful of importance, curiosity, and news, did not dare to express any of her feelings to Miss Audrey in her present mood.

“Put on my very prettiest frock to-night, please, Eleanor,” said the young lady. “Dress my hair to the best advantage. My white dress, did you say? No, not white, but that pale, very pale, rose-colored silk with all the little trimmings and flounces.”

“But that is one of your gayest dresses, Miss Audrey.”

“Never mind; I choose to look gay and well dressed.”

The girl proceeded with her young mistress’s toilet, and a minute or two before the second bell rang Audrey was ready. She made a lovely and graceful picture as she looked at herself for a moment in the long mirror. Her figure was already beautifully formed; she was tall, graceful, dignified. The set of her young head on her stately neck was superb. Her white shoulders gleamed under the transparent folds of her lovely frock. Her rounded arms were white as alabaster. She slipped a small diamond ring on one of her fingers, looked for a moment longingly at a pearl necklace, but finally decided not to wear any more adornment, and ran lightly down-stairs.

The big drawing-room was lit with the softest light. The Squire stood by the hearth, on which a huge log blazed. Lady Frances, in full evening-dress, was carelessly turning the leaves of a novel.

“What a quiet evening we are likely to have!” she said, looking up at the Squire as she spoke. “To-morrow there are numbers of guests coming; we shall be a big party, and Audrey and Evelyn will, I trust, have a pleasant time. – My dear Audrey, why that dress this evening?”

“I took a fancy to wear it, mother,” said Audrey in a light tone.

There was more color than usual in her cheeks, and her eyes were brighter than her mother had ever seen them. Lady Frances was not a woman of any special discernment. She was an excellent mother and a splendid hostess. She was good to look at, and was just the sort of *grande dame* to keep up all the dignity of Wynford Castle, but she never even pretended to understand her only child. The Squire, a sensitive man in many ways, was also more or less a stranger to Audrey’s real character. He looked at her, it is true, a little anxiously now, and a slight curiosity stirred his breast as to the possible effect Evelyn’s presence in the house might have on his beautiful young daughter. As to Evelyn herself, he had not seen her, and did not even care to inquire of his wife what sort of girl she was. He was deeply absorbed over the silver currency question, and was writing an exhaustive paper on it for the *Nineteenth Century*; he had not time, therefore, to worry about domestic matters. Just then the drawing-room door was flung open, and the footman announced, as though she were a stranger:

“Miss Evelyn Wynford.”

If Audrey was, according to Lady Frances’s ideas, slightly overdressed for so small a party, she was quite outshone by Evelyn, whose dress was altogether unsuitable for her age. She wore a very thick silk, bright blue in color, with a quantity of colored embroidery thrown over it. Her little fat neck was bare, and her sleeves were short. Her scanty fair hair was arranged on the top of her head, two diamond pins supporting it in position; a diamond necklace was clasped round her neck, and she had bracelets on her arms. She was evidently intensely pleased with herself, and looked with the utmost confidence from Lady Frances to her uncle. With a couple of long strides the Squire advanced to meet her. He looked into her queer little face and all his indifference vanished. She was his only brother’s only child. He had loved his brother better than any one on earth, and, come what might, he would give that brother’s child a welcome. So he took both of Evelyn’s tiny hands, and suddenly stooping, he lifted her an inch or so from the ground and kissed her twice. Something in his manner made the little girl give a sort of gasp.

“Why, it is just as if you were father come to life,” she said. “I am glad to see you, Uncle Ned.”

Still holding her hand, the Squire walked up to the hearth and stood there facing Audrey and his wife.

“You have been introduced to Audrey, have you not, Evelyn?” he said.

“I did not need to be introduced. I saw a girl in the hall, and I guessed it must be Audrey. ‘Cute of me, was it not? Do you know, Uncle Ned, I don’t much like this place, but I like you. Yes, I am right-down smitten with you, but I don’t think I like anything else. You don’t mind if I am frank, Uncle Ned; it always was my way. We are brought up like that in Tasmania – Audrey, don’t frown at me; you don’t look pretty when you frown. But, oh! I say, the bell has gone, has it not?”

“Yes, my dear,” said Lady Frances.

“And it means dinner, does it not?”

“Certainly, Evelyn,” said her uncle, bending towards her with the most polished and stately grace. “Allow me, my niece, to conduct you to the dining-room.”

“How droll you are, uncle!” said Evelyn. “But I like you all the same. You are a right-down good old sort. I am awfully peckish; I shall be glad of a round meal.”

CHAPTER III. – THE CRADLE LIFE OF WILD EVE

Eighteen years before the date of this story, two brothers had parted with angry words. They were both in love with the same woman, and the younger brother had won. The elder brother, only one year his senior, could not stand defeat.

“I cannot stay in the old place,” he said. “You can occupy the Castle during my absence.”

To this arrangement Edward Wynford agreed.

“Where are you going?” he said to his brother Frank.

“To the other side of the world – Australia probably. I don’t know when I shall return. It does not much matter. I shall never marry. The estate will be yours. If Lady Frances has a son, it will belong to him.”

“You must not think of that,” said Edward. “I will live at the Castle for a few years in order to keep it warm for you, but you will come back; you will get over this. If she had loved you, old man, do you think I would have taken her from you? But she chose me from the very first.”

“I don’t blame you, Ned,” said Frank. “You are as innocent of any intention of harm to me as the unborn babe, but I love her too well to stay in the old country. I am off. I don’t want her ever to know. You will promise me, won’t you, that you will never tell her why I have skulked off and dropped my responsibilities on to your shoulders? Promise me that, at least, will you not?”

Edward Wynford promised his brother, and the brother went away.

In the former generation father and son had agreed to break off the entail, and although there was no intention of carrying this action into effect, and Frank, as eldest son, inherited the great estates of Wynford Castle, yet at his father’s death he was in the position of one who could leave the estates to any one he pleased.

During his last interview with his brother he said to him distinctly:

“Remember, if Lady Frances has a son I wish him to be, after yourself, the next heir to the property.”

“But if she has not a son?” said Edward.

“In that case I have nothing to say. It is most unlikely that I shall marry. The property will come to you in the ordinary way, and as the entail is out off, you can leave it to whom you please.”

“Do not forget that at present you can leave the estate and the Castle to whomever you please, even to an utter stranger,” said Edward, with a slight smile.

To this remark Frank made no answer. The next day the brothers parted – as it turned out, for life. Edward married Lady Frances, and they went to live at Wynford Castle. Edward heard once from Frank during the voyage, and then not at all, until he received a letter which must have been written a couple of months before his brother’s death. It was forwarded to him in a strange hand, and was full of extraordinary and painful tidings. Frank Wynford had died suddenly of acute fever, but before his death he had arranged all his affairs. His letter ran as follows:

“My dear Edward, – If I live you will never get this letter; if I die it reaches you all in good time. When last we parted I told you I should never marry. So much for man’s proposals. When I got to Tasmania I went on a ranch, and now I am the husband of the farmer’s daughter. Her name is Isabel. She is a handsome woman, and the mother of a daughter. Why I married her I can not tell you, except that I can honestly say it was not with any sense of affection. But she is my wife, and the mother of a little baby girl. Edward, when I last heard from you, you told me that you also had a daughter. If a son follows all in due course, what I have to say will not much signify; but if you have no son I should wish the estates eventually to come to my little girl. I do not believe in a woman’s administration of large and

important estates like mine, but what I say to myself now is, as well my girl as your girl. Therefore, Edward, my dear brother, I leave all my estates to you for your lifetime, and at your death all the property which came to me by my father's will goes to my little girl, to be hers when you are no longer there. I want you to receive my daughter, and to ask your wife to bring her up. I want her to have all the advantages that a home with Lady Frances must confer on her. I want my child and your child to be friends. I do no injustice to your daughter, Edward, when I make my will, for she inherits money on her mother's side. I will acquaint my wife with particulars of this letter, and in case I catch the fever which is raging here now she will know how to act. My lawyer in Hobart Town will forward this, and see that my will is carried into effect. There is a provision in it for the maintenance of my daughter until she joins you at Castle Wynford. Whenever that event takes place she is your care. I have only one thing to add. The child might go to you at once (I have a premonition that I am about to die very soon), and thus never know that she had an Australian mother, but the difficulty lies in the fact that the mother loves the child and will scarcely be induced to part with her. You must not receive my poor wife unless indeed a radical change takes place in her; and although I have begged of her to give up the child, I doubt if she will do it. I cannot add any more, for time presses. My will is legal in every respect, and there will be no difficulty in carrying it into effect."

This strange letter was discovered by Frank Wynford's widow a month after his death. It was sealed and directed to his brother in England. She longed to read it, but restrained herself. She sent it on to her husband's lawyer in Hobart Town, and in due course it arrived at Castle Wynford, causing a great deal of consternation and distress both in the minds of the Squire and Lady Frances.

Edward immediately went out to Tasmania. He saw the little baby who was all that was left of his brother, and he also saw that brother's wife. The coarse, loud-voiced woman received him with almost abuse. What was to be done? The mother refused to part with the child, and Edward Wynford, for his own wife's sake and his own baby daughter's sake, could not urge her to come to Castle Wynford.

"I do not care twopence," she remarked, "whether the child has grand relations or not. I loved her father, and I love her. She is my child, and so she has got to put up with me. As long as I live she stays with me here. I am accustomed to ranch life, and she will get accustomed to it too. I will not spare money on her, for there is plenty, and she will be a very rich woman some day. But while I live she stays with me; the only way out of it is, that you ask me to your fine place in England. Even if you do, I don't think I should be bothered to go to you, but you might have the civility to ask me."

Squire Wynford went away, however, without giving this invitation. He spoke to his wife on the subject. In that conversation he was careful to adhere to his brother's wish not to reveal to her that that brother's deep affection for herself had been the cause of his banishment. Lady Frances was an intensely just and upright woman. She had gone through a very bad quarter of an hour when she was told that her little girl was to be supplanted by the strange child of an objectionable mother, but she quickly recovered herself.

"I will not allow jealousy to enter into my life," she said; and she even went the length of writing herself to Mrs. Wynford in Tasmania, and invited her with the baby to come and stay at Wynford Castle. Mrs. Wynford in Tasmania, however, much to the relief of the good folks at home, declined the invitation.

"I have no taste for English grandeur," she said. "I was brought up in a wild state, and I would rather stay as I was reared. The child is well; you can have her when she is grown up or when I am dead."

Years passed after this letter and there was no communication between little Evelyn Wynford, in the wilds of Tasmania, and her rich and stately relatives at Castle Wynford. Lady Frances fervently hoped that God would give her a son, but this hope was not to be realized. Audrey was her only child, and soon it seemed almost like a dim, forgotten fact that the real heiress was in Tasmania, and that Audrey had no more to do in the future with the stately home of her ancestors than she would have had had she possessed a brother. But when she was sixteen there suddenly came a change. Mrs. Wynford died suddenly. There was now no reason why Evelyn should not come home, and accordingly, untutored, uncared for, a passionate child with a curious, wilful strain in her, she arrived on New Year's Day at Castle Wynford.

Evelyn Wynford's nature was very complex. She loved very few people, but those she did love she loved forever. No change, no absence, no circumstances could alter her regard. In her ranch life and during her baby days she had clung to her mother. Mrs. Wynford was fierce and passionate and wilful. Little Evelyn admired her, whatever she did. She trotted round the farm after her; she learnt to ride almost as soon as she could walk, and she followed her mother barebacked on the wildest horses on the ranch. She was fearless and stubborn, and gave way to terrible fits of passion, but with her mother she was gentle as a lamb. Mrs. Wynford was fond of the child in the careless, selfish, and yet fierce way which belonged to her nature. Mrs. Wynford's sole idea of affection was that her child should be with her morning, noon, and night; that for no education, for no advantages, should she be parted from her mother for a moment. Night after night the two slept in each other's arms; day after day they were together. The farmer's daughter was a very strong woman, and as her father died a year or two after her husband, she managed the ranch herself, keeping everything in order, and not allowing the slightest insubordination on the part of her servants. Little Evelyn, too, learnt her mother's masterful ways. She could reprimand; she could insist upon obedience; she could shake her tiny fists in the faces of those who dared to oppose her; and when she was disporting herself so Mrs. Wynford stood by and laughed.

"Hullo!" she used to cry. "See the spirit in the young un. She takes after me. A nice time her English relatives will have with her! But she will never go to them – never while I live."

Although Mrs. Wynford had long ago made up her mind that Evelyn was to have none of the immediate advantages of her birth and future prospects, she was fond of talking to the child about the grandeur which lay before her.

"If I die, Eve," she said, "you will have to go across the sea in a big ship to England. You would have a rough time of it, perhaps, on board, but you won't mind that, my beauty."

"I am not a beauty, mother," answered Evelyn. "You know I am not. You know I am a very plain girl."

"Hark to the child!" shrieked Mrs. Wynford. "It is as good as a play to hear her. If you are not beautiful in body, my darling, you are beautiful in your spirit. Yes, you have inherited from your proud English father lots of gold and a lovely castle, and all your relations will have to eat humble-pie to you; but you have got your spirit from me, Eve – don't forget that."

"Tell me about the Castle, mother, and about my father," said Evelyn, nestling up close to her parent, as they sat by the roaring fire in the winter evenings.

Mrs. Wynford knew very little, and what she did know she exaggerated. She gave Evelyn vivid pictures, however, in each and all of which the principal figure was Evelyn herself – Evelyn claiming her rights, mastering her relations, letting her unknown cousin know that she, Evelyn, was the heiress, and that the cousin was nobody. Only one person in the group of Evelyn's future relations did Mrs. Wynford counsel her to be civil to.

"The worst of it all is this, Eve," she said – "while your uncle lives you do not own a pennypiece of the estate; and he may hold out for many a long day, so you had best be agreeable to him. Besides, he is like your father. Your father was a very handsome man and a very fine man, and I loved him, child. I took a fancy to him from the day he arrived at the ranch, and when he

asked me to marry him I thought myself in rare good luck. But he died soon after you were born. Had he lived I'd have been the lady of the Castle, but I'd not go there without him, and you shall never go while I live."

"I don't want to, mother. You are more to me than twenty castles," said the enthusiastic little girl.

Mrs. Wynford had one friend whom Evelyn tolerated and presently loved. That friend was a woman, partly of French extraction, who had come to stay at the ranch once during a severe illness of its owner. Her name was Jasper – Amelia Jasper; but she was known on the ranch by the title of Jasper alone. She was not a lady in any sense of the word, and did not pretend that she was one; but she was possessed of a certain strange fascination which she could exercise at will over those with whom she came in contact, and she made herself so useful to Mrs. Wynford and so necessary to Evelyn that she was never allowed to leave the ranch again. She soon obtained a great power over the curious, uneducated woman who was Evelyn's mother; and when at last Mrs. Wynford found that she was smitten with an incurable disease, and that at any moment death would come to fetch her, she asked her dear friend Jasper to take the child to England.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Jasper. "I'll take Evelyn to England, and stay with her there."

Mrs. Wynford laughed.

"You are clever enough, Jasper," she said; "but what a figure of fun you would look in the grand sort of imperial residence that my dear late husband has described to me! You are not a lady, you know, although you are smart and clever enough to beat half the ladies out of existence."

"I shall know how to manage," said Jasper. "I, too, have heard of the ways of English grandees. I'll be Evelyn's maid. She cannot do without a maid, can she? I'll take Evelyn back, and I will stay with her as her maid."

Mrs. Wynford hailed this idea as a splendid one, and she even wrote a very badly spelt letter to Lady Frances, which Jasper was to convey and deliver herself, if possible, to her proud ladyship, as the widow called her sister-in-law. In this letter Mrs. Wynford demanded that Jasper was to stay with Evelyn as long as Evelyn wished for her, and she finally added:

"I dare you, Lady Frances, fine lady as you are, to part the child from her maid."

When Mrs. Wynford died Evelyn gave way to the most terrible grief. She refused to eat; she refused to leave her mother's dead body. She shrieked herself into hysterics on the day of the funeral, and then the poor little girl was prostrated with nervous fever. Finally, she became so unwell that it was impossible for her to travel to England for some months. And so it happened that nearly a year elapsed between the death of the mother and the arrival of the child at Castle Wynford.

CHAPTER IV. – “I DRAW THE LINE AT UNCLE NED.”

“Well, Jasper,” said Evelyn in a very eager voice to her maid that first night, “and how do you like it all?”

“How do you like it, Evelyn?” was the response.

“That is so like you, Jasper!” replied the spoilt little girl. “When all is said and done, you are not a scrap original. You make me like you – I cannot help myself – but in some ways you are too cautious to please me. You don’t want to say what you think of the place until you know my opinion. Well, I don’t care; I’ll tell you out plump what I think of everything. The place is horrid, and so are the people. I wish – oh! I wish I was back again on the ranch with mother.”

Jasper looked down rather scornfully at the small girl, who, in a rich and elaborately embroidered dressing-gown, was kneeling by the fire. Evelyn’s handsome eyes, the only really good feature she possessed, were fixed full upon her maid’s face.

“The Castle is too stiff for me,” she said, “and too – too airified and high and mighty. Mother was quite right when she spoke of Castle Wynford. I don’t care for anybody in the place except Uncle Ned. I don’t know how I shall live here. Oh Jasper, don’t you remember the evenings at home? Cannot you recall that night when Whitefoot was ill, and you and mother and I had to sit up all through the long hours nursing her, and how we thought the dear old moo-cow would die! Don’t you remember the mulled cider and the gingerbread and the doughnuts and the apple-rings? How we toasted the apple-rings by the fire, and how they spluttered, and how good the hot cider was? And don’t you remember how mother sang, and how you and I caught each other’s hands and danced, and dear old Whitefoot looked up at us with her big, sorrowful eyes? It is true that she died in the morning, but we had a jolly night. We’ll never have such times any more. Oh, I do wish my own mother had not died and gone to heaven! Oh, I do wish it – I do!”

Evelyn crossed her arms tightly on her breast and began to sway herself backwards and forwards. Tears streamed from her eyes; she did not attempt to wipe them away.

“Now then, it is my turn to speak,” said Jasper. “I tell you what it is, Eve; you are about the biggest goose that was ever born in this world. Who would compare that stupid, rough old ranch with this lovely, magnificent house? And it is your own, Eve – or rather it will be your own. I took a good stare at the Squire, and I do not believe he will live to be very old; and whenever he dies you are to take possession – you and I together, Eve love – and out will go her ladyship, and out will go proud Miss Audrey. That will be a fine day, darling – a day worth living for.”

“Yes,” said Evelyn slowly; “and then we’ll alter things. We’ll make the Castle something like the ranch. We’ll get over some of our friends, and they shall live in the house. Mr. and Mrs. Petrie, who keep the egg-farm not a mile from the ranch, and Mr. Thomas Longchamp and Pete and Dick and Tom and Michael. I told them all when I was going away that when I was mistress of the Castle they should come, and we’ll go on much as we went on at the ranch. If mother up in heaven can see me she will be glad. But, Jasper, why do you speak in that scornful way of my cousin Audrey? I think she is very beautiful. I think she is quite the most beautiful girl I have ever looked at. As to her being stately, she cannot help being stately. I wish I could walk like her, and talk like her, and speak like her; I do, Jasper – I do really.”

“Let me see,” said Jasper in a contemplative tone. “You are learning to love her, ain’t you?”

“I don’t love easily. I love my own darling mother, who is not dead at all, for she is in heaven with father; and I love you, Jasper, and my uncle Edward.”

“My word! and why him?”

“I cannot help it; I love him already, and I’ll love him more and more the longer I see him and the more I know him. My father must have been like that – a gentleman – a perfect gentleman. Oh! I was happy at the ranch, and mother was like no one else on the wide earth, but it gave me

a sort of quiver down my spine when Uncle Edward took my hand, and when he kissed me. He is like what father was. Had father lived I'd have spent all my days here, and I'd have been perhaps quite as graceful as Audrey, and nearly as beautiful."

"You will never be like her, so you need not think it. You are squat like your mother, and you ain't got a decent feature in your face except your eyes, and even they are only big, not dark; and your hair is skimpy and your face white. You are a sort of mix'um-gather'um – a sort of betwixt-and-between – neither very fair nor very dark, neither very short nor very tall. You are thick-set, just the very image of your mother, and you will always be thick-set and always mix'um-gather'um as long as you live. There! I have spoken. I ain't going to be afraid of you. You had better get into bed now, for it is late. You want your beauty-sleep, and you won't get it unless you are quick. Now march! Put on your night-dress and step into bed."

"I have got to say my prayers first," said Evelyn, "and – " She paused and looked full at her maid. "I have got to say something else. If you talk like that I won't love you any more. You are not to do it. I won't have it."

"Won't she, then?" said Jasper. Her whole manner changed. "And have I hurt her – have I – the little dear? Come to me, my darling. Why, you are all trembling! Did you think I meant a word I said? Don't you know that you are the jewel of my eyes and the core of my heart and all the rest? Did your mother leave you to me for nothing, and would I ever leave you, sweetest and best? And if it is squat you are, there is no one like you for determination and fire of spirit. Eh, now, come to my arms and I'll rock the bitterness out of you, for it is puzzled you are, and fretted you are, and you shall not be – no, you shall not be either one or the other ever again while old Jasper lives."

Evelyn's eyes, which had flashed an almost ugly fire, now softened. She looked at Jasper as if she meant to resist her. Then she wavered, and came almost tottering across the room, and the next moment the strange woman had clasped the girl to her embrace and was rocking her backwards and forwards, Evelyn's head lying on her breast just as if she were a baby.

"Now then, that's better," said Jasper. "I'll undress you as though we were back again on the ranch, and when you are snug and safe in your little white bed we'll have a bit of fun."

"Fun!" said Evelyn. "What?"

"Don't you know how you like a stolen supper? I have got chocolate here, and a little pot, and a jug of cream, and a saucepan, and I'll make a rich cup for you and another for myself; and here's a box of cakes, all sorts and very good. While you are sipping your chocolate I'll take off Miss Audrey and Lady Frances for you. The door is locked; no one can see us. We'll be as snug as snug can be, and we'll have our fun just as if we were back at the ranch."

Evelyn was now all laughter and high spirits. She had no idea of restraining herself. She called Jasper her honey and her honey-pot, and kissed the good woman several times. She superintended the making of the chocolate with eager words and many directions. Finally, a cup of the rich beverage was handed to her, and she sipped it, luxuriously curled up against her snowy pillows, and ate the sweet cakes, and watched Jasper with happy eyes.

"So it is Miss Audrey you'd like to take after?" said Jasper. "You think you are not a patch on her. To be sure not – wait and we'll see."

In an instant Jasper had transformed her features to a comical resemblance of Audrey's. She spoke in mincing tones, with just sufficient likeness to Audrey to cause Evelyn to scream with mirth. She took light, quick steps across the room, and imitated Audrey's very words. All of a sudden she changed her manner. She now resembled Miss Sinclair, putting on the slightly precise language of the governess, adjusting her shoulders and arranging her hands as she had seen Miss Sinclair do for a brief moment that evening. Her personation of Miss Sinclair was as good as her personation of Audrey, and Evelyn became so excited that she very nearly spilt her chocolate. But her crowning delight came when all of a sudden, without the slightest warning, Jasper became Lady Frances herself. She now sailed rather than walked across the apartment; her tones were stately

and slow; her manner was the sort which might inspire awe; her very words were those of Lady Frances. But the delighted maid believed that she had a further triumph in store, for, with a quick change of mien, she now had the audacity to personate the Squire himself; but in one instant, like a flash, Evelyn was out of bed. She put down her chocolate-cup and rushed towards Jasper.

“The others as much as you like,” she said, “but not Uncle Ned. You dare not. You sha’n’t. I’ll turn you away if you do. I’ll hate you if you do. The others over and over again – they are lovely, splendid, grand – it puts heart in me to see you – but not Uncle Ned.”

Jasper looked in astonishment at the little girl.

“So you love him as much as that already?” she said. “Well, as you please, of course.”

“Don’t be cross, Jasper,” said Evelyn. “I can stand all the others; I can even like them. I told Audrey to-night how splendidly you can mimic, and you shall mimic her to her face when I know her better. Oh, it is killing – it is killing! But I draw the line at Uncle Ned.”

CHAPTER V. – FRANK'S EYES

Evelyn did not get up to breakfast the following morning. Breakfast at the Castle was a rather stately affair. A loud, musical gong sounded to assemble the family at a quarter to nine; then all those who were not really ill were expected to appear in the small chapel, where the Squire read prayers morning after morning before the assembled household. After prayers, visitors and family alike trooped into the comfortable breakfast-room, where a merry and hearty meal ensued. To be absent from breakfast was to insure Lady Frances's displeasure; she had no patience with lazy people. And as to lazy girls, her horror of them was so great that Audrey would rather bear the worst cold possible than announce to her mother that she was too ill to appear. Evelyn's absence, therefore, was commented on with a very grave expression of face by both the Squire and his wife.

"I must speak to her," said Lady Frances. "It is the first morning, and she does not understand our ways, but it must not occur again."

"You will not be too hard on the child, dear," said her husband. "Remember she has never had the advantage of your training."

"Poor little creature!" said Lady Frances. "That, indeed, my dear Edward, is plain to be seen."

She bridled very slightly. Lady Frances knew that there was not a more correct trainer of youth in the length and breadth of the county than herself. Audrey, who looked very bright and handsome that morning, ventured to glance at her mother.

"Perhaps Evelyn is dressed and does not know that we are at breakfast," she said. "May I go to her room and find out?"

"No, Audrey, not this morning. I shall go to see Evelyn presently. By the way, I hope you are ready for your visitors?"

"I suppose so, mother. I don't really quite know who are coming."

"The Jervises, of course – Henrietta, Juliet, and their brothers; there are also the Claverings, Mary and Sophie. I think those are the only young people, but with six in addition to you and Evelyn, you will have your hands full, Audrey."

"Oh, I don't mind," replied Audrey. "It will be fun. – You will help me all you can, won't you, Jenny?"

"Certainly, dear," replied Miss Sinclair.

"It is the greatest possible comfort to me to have you in the house, Miss Sinclair," said Lady Frances, now turning to the pretty young governess. "You have not yet had an interview with Evelyn, have you?"

"I talked to her a little last night," replied Miss Sinclair. "She seems to me to be a child with a good deal of character."

"She is like no child I ever met before," said Lady Frances, with a shudder. "I must frankly say I never looked forward with any pleasure to her arrival, but my worst fears did not picture so thoroughly objectionable a little girl."

"Oh, come, Frances – come!" said her husband.

"My dear Edward, I do not give myself away as a rule; but it is just as well that Miss Sinclair should see how much depends on her guidance of the poor little girl, and that Audrey should know how objectionable she is, and how necessary it is for us all to do what we can to alter her ways. The first step, of course, is to get rid of that terrible woman whom she calls Jasper."

"But, mother," said Audrey, "that would hurt Evelyn's feelings very much – she is so devoted to Jasper."

"You must leave the matter to me, Audrey," said Lady Frances, rising. "You may be sure that I will do nothing really cruel or unkind. But, my dear, it is as well that you should learn sooner or later that spoiling a person is never true kindness."

Lady Frances left the room as she spoke; and Audrey, turning to her governess, said a few words to her, and they also went slowly in the direction of the conservatory.

“What do you think of her, Jenny?” asked the girl.

“Just what I said, dear. The child is full of originality and strong feelings, but of course, brought up as she has been, she will be a trial to your mother.”

“That is just it. Mother has never seen any one in the least like Evelyn. She won’t understand her; and if she does not there will be mischief.”

“Evelyn must learn to subdue her will to that of Lady Frances,” said Miss Sinclair. “You and I, Audrey, will try to be very patient with her; we will put up with her small impertinences, knowing that she scarcely means them; and we will try to make things as happy for her as we can.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Audrey. “I cannot see why she should be rude and chuff and disagreeable. I don’t altogether dislike her. She certainly amuses me. But she will not have a very happy time at the Castle until she knows her place.”

“That is it,” said Miss Sinclair. “She has evidently been spoken to most injudiciously – told that she is practically mistress of the place, and that she may do as she likes here. Hence the result. But at the worst, Audrey, I am certain of one thing.”

“What is that, Jenny? How wise you look, and how kind!”

“I believe your father will be able to manage her, whoever else fails. Did you not notice how her eyes followed him round the room last night, and how, whenever he spoke to her, her voice softened and she always replied in a gentle tone?”

“No, I did not,” answered Audrey. “Oh dear! it is very puzzling, and I feel rather cross myself. I cannot imagine why that horrid little girl should ever own this lovely place. It is not that I am jealous of her – I assure you I am anything but that – but it hurts me to think that one who can appreciate things so little should come in for our lovely property.”

“Well, darling, let us hope she will be quite a middle-aged woman before she possesses Castle Wynford,” said the governess. “And now, what about your young friends?”

Audrey slipped her hand inside Miss Sinclair’s arm, and the two paced the conservatory, talking long and earnestly.

Meanwhile Evelyn, having partaken of a rich and unwholesome breakfast of pastry, game-pie, and chocolate, condescended slowly to rise. Jasper waited on her hand and foot. A large fire burned in the grate; no servant had been allowed into the apartment since Evelyn had taken possession of it the night before, and it already presented an untidy and run-to-seed appearance. White ashes were piled high in the untidy grate; dust had collected on the polished steel of the fire-irons; dust had also mounted to the white marble mantelpiece covered with velvet of turquoise-blue, but neither Evelyn nor Jasper minded these things in the least.

“And now, pet,” said the maid, “what dress will you wear?”

“I had better assert myself as soon as possible,” said Evelyn. “Mothery told me I must. So I had better put on something striking. I saw that horrid Audrey walking past just now with her governess; she had on a plain, dark-blue serge. Why, any dairymaid might dress like that. Don’t you agree with me, Jasper?”

“There is your crimson velvet,” said Jasper. “I bought it for you in Paris. You look very handsome in it.”

“Oh, come, Jasper,” said her little mistress, “you said I was squat last night.”

“The rich velvet shows up your complexion,” persisted Jasper. “Put it on, dear; you must make a good impression.”

Accordingly Evelyn allowed herself to be arrayed in a dress of a curious shade between red and crimson. Jasper encircled her waist with a red silk sash; and being further decked with numerous rows of colored beads, varying in hue from the palest green to the deepest rose, the heiress pronounced herself ready to descend.

“And where will you go first, dear?” said Jasper.

“I am going straight to find my Uncle Edward. I have a good deal to say to him. And there is mother’s note; I think it is all about you. I will give it to Uncle Edward to give to my Aunt Frances. I don’t like my Aunt Frances at all, so I will see Uncle Edward first.”

Accordingly Evelyn, in her heavy red dress, her feet encased in black shoes and white stockings, ran down-stairs, and having inquired in very haughty tones of a footman where the Squire was likely to be found, presently opened the door of his private sanctum and peeped in.

Even Lady Frances seldom cared to disturb the Squire when he was in his den, as he called it. When he raised his eyes, therefore, and saw Evelyn’s pale face, her light flaxen hair falling in thin strands about her ears, her big, somewhat light-brown eyes staring at him, he could not help giving a start of annoyance.

“Oh, Uncle Ned, you are not going to be cross too?” said the little girl. She skipped gaily into the room, ran up to him, put one arm round his neck, and kissed him.

The Squire looked in a puzzled way at the queer little figure. Like most men, he knew little or nothing of the details of dress; he was only aware that his own wife always looked perfect, that Audrey was the soul of grace, and that Miss Sinclair presented a very pretty appearance. He was now, therefore, only uncomfortable in Evelyn’s presence, not in the least aware of what was wrong with her, but being quite certain that Lady Frances would not approve of her at all.

“I have come first to you, Uncle Edward,” said Evelyn, “because we must transact some business together.”

“Transact some business!” repeated her uncle. “What long words you use, little girl!”

“I have heard my dear mother talk about transacting business, so I have picked up the phrase,” replied Evelyn in thoughtful tones. “Well, Uncle Edward, shall we transact? It is best to have things on a business footing; don’t you think so – eh?”

“I think that you are a very strange little person,” said her uncle. “You are too young to know anything of business matters; you must leave those things to your aunt and to me.”

“But I am your heiress, don’t forget. This room will be mine, and all that big estate outside, and the whole of this gloomy old house when you die. Is not that so?”

“It is so, my child.” The Squire could not help wincing when Evelyn pronounced his house gloomy. “But at the same time, my dear Evelyn, things of that sort are not spoken about – at least not in England.”

“Mother and I spoke a lot about it; we used to sit for whole evenings by the fireside and discuss the time when I should come in for my property. I mean to make changes when my time comes. You don’t mind my saying so, do you?”

“I object to the subject altogether, Evelyn.” The Squire rose and faced his small heiress. “In England we don’t talk of these things, and now that you have come to England you must do as an English girl and a lady would. On your father’s side you are a lady, and you must allow your aunt and me to train you in the observances which constitute true ladyhood in England.”

Evelyn’s brown eyes flashed a very angry fire.

“I don’t wish to be different from my mother,” she said. “My mother was one of the most splendid women on earth. I wish to be exactly like her. I will not be a fine lady – not for anybody.”

“Well, dear, I respect you for being fond of your mother.”

“Fond of her!” said Evelyn; and a strange and intensely tragic look crossed the queer little face.

She was quite silent for nearly a minute, and Edward Wynford watched her with curiosity and pain mingled in his face. Her eyes reminded him of the brother whom he had so truly loved; in every other respect Evelyn was her mother over again.

"I suppose," she said after a pause, "although I may not speak about what lies before me in the future, and you must die some time, Uncle Edward, that I may at least ask you to supply me with the needful?"

"The what, dear?"

"The needful. Chink, you know – chink."

Squire Wynford sank slowly back again into his chair.

"You might ask me to sit down," said Evelyn, "seeing that the room and all it contains will be –" Here she broke off abruptly. "I beg your pardon," she continued. "I really and truly do not want you to die a minute before your rightful hour. We all have our hour – at least motherly said so – and then go we must, whether we like it or not; so, as you must go some day, and I must – Oh dear! I am always being drawn up now by that horrid wish of yours that I should try to be an English girl. I will try to be when I am in your presence, for I happen to like you; but as for the others, well, we shall see. But, Uncle Ned, what about the chink? Perhaps you call it money; anyhow, it means money. How much may I have out of what is to be all my own some day to spend now exactly as I like?"

"You can have a fair sum, Evelyn. But, first of all, tell me what you want it for and how you mean to spend it."

"I have all kinds of wants," began Evelyn. "Jasper had plenty of money to spend on me until I came here. She manages very well indeed, does Jasper. We bought lots of things in Paris – this dress, for instance. How do you like my dress, Uncle Ned?"

"I am not capable of giving an opinion."

"Aren't you really? I expect you are about stunned. You never thought a girl like me could dress with such taste. Do you mind my speaking to Audrey, Uncle Ned, about her dress? It does not seem to me to be correct."

"What is wrong with it?" asked the Squire.

"It is so awfully dowdy; it is not what a lady ought to wear. Ladies ought to dress in silks and satins and brocades and rich embroidered robes. Motherly always said so, and motherly surely knew. But there, I am idling you, and I suppose you are busy directing the management of your estates, which are to be – Oh, there! I am pulled up again. I want my money for Jasper, for one thing. Jasper has got some poor relations, and she and I between us support them."

"She and you between you," said the Squire, "support your maid's relations!"

"Oh dear me, Uncle Ned, how stiffly you speak! But surely it does not matter; I can do what I like with my own."

"Listen to me, Evelyn," said her uncle. "You are only a very young girl; your mind may in some ways be older than your body, but you are nothing more than a child."

"I am not such a child as I look. I was sixteen a month ago. I am sixteen, and that is not very young."

"We must agree to differ," said her uncle. "You are young and you are not wise; and although there is some money which is absolutely your own coming from the ranch in Tasmania, yet I have the charge of it until you come of age."

"When I come of age I suppose I shall be very, very rich?"

"Not at all. You will be my care, and I will allow you what is proper, but as long as I live you will only have the small sum which will come to you yearly from the rent of the ranch. As the ranch may possibly be sold some day, we may be able to realize a nice little capital for you; but you are too young to know much of these things at present. The matter in hand, therefore, is all-sufficient. I will allow you as pocket-money five pounds a quarter. I give precisely the same sum to Audrey. Your aunt will buy your clothes, and you will live here and be treated in all respects as my daughter. Now, that is my side of the bargain."

Evelyn's face turned white.

"Five pounds a quarter!" she said. "Why, that is downright penury!"

“No, dear; for the use you require it for it is downright riches. But, be it riches or be it penury, you get no more.”

Evelyn looked full at her uncle; her uncle looked back at her.

“Come here, little girl,” he said.

Her heart was beating with furious anger, but there was something in his tone which subdued her. She went slowly to him, and he put his arm round her waist.

“Your eyes are like – very like – one whom I loved best on earth.”

“You mean my father,” said the girl.

“Your father. He left you to me to care for, and to love and to train – to train for a high position eventually.”

“He left me to motherly; you are quite mistaken there. Motherly has trained me; father left me to her. She often and often and often told me so.”

“That is true, dear. While your mother lived she had the prior claim over you, but now you belong to me.”

“Yes,” said Evelyn. She felt fascinated. She snuggled comfortably inside her uncle’s arm; her strange brown eyes were fixed on his face.

“I give you,” he continued, “the love and care of a father, but I expect a return.”

“What? I don’t mind. I have two diamonds – beauties. You shall have them to make into studs; you shall, because I – yes, I love you.”

“I don’t want your diamonds, my little girl, but I want other things – your love and your obedience. I want you, if you like me, and if you like your Aunt Frances, and if you like your cousin, to follow in our steps, for we have been brought up to approve of courteous manners and quiet dress and gentle speech; and I want that brain of yours, Evelyn, to be educated to high and lofty thoughts. I want you to be a grand woman, worthy of your father, and I expect this return from you for all that I am going to do for you.”

“Are you going to teach me your own self?” asked Evelyn.

“You can come to me sometimes for a talk, but it is impossible for me to be your instructor. You will have a suitable governess.”

“Jasper knows a lot of things. Perhaps she could teach both Audrey and me. She might if you paid her well. She has got some awfully poor relations; she must have lots of money, poor Jasper must.”

“Well, dear, leave me now. We will talk of your education and who is to instruct you, and all about Jasper too, within a few days. You have got to see the place and to make Audrey’s acquaintance; and there are some young friends coming to the Castle for a week. Altogether, you have arrived at a gay time. Now run away, find your cousin, and make yourself happy.”

Squire Wynford rose as he spoke, and taking Evelyn’s hand, he led her to the door. He opened the door wide for her, and saw her go out, and then he kissed his hand to her and closed the door again.

“Poor little mite!” he said to himself. “As strange a child as I ever saw, but with Frank’s eyes.”

CHAPTER VI. – THE HUNGRY GIRL

Now, the Squire had produced a decidedly softening effect upon Evelyn, and if she had not had the misfortune to meet Lady Frances just as she left his room, much that followed need never taken place. But Lady Frances, who had never in the very least returned poor Frank Wynford's affection for her, and who had no sentimental feelings with regard to Evelyn – Lady Frances, who simply regarded the little girl as a troublesome and very tiresome member of the family – was not disposed to be too soothing in her manner.

"Come here, my dear," she said. "Come over here to the light. What have you got on?"

"My pretty red velvet dress," replied Evelyn, tossing her head. "A suitable dress for an heiress like myself."

"Come, this is quite beyond enduring. I want to speak to you, Evelyn. I have several things to say. Come into my boudoir."

"But, if you please," said Evelyn, "I have nothing to say to you, and I have a great deal to do in other directions. I am going back to Jasper; she wants me."

"Oh, that reminds me," began Lady Frances. "Come in here this moment, my dear."

She took Evelyn's hand and dragged the unwilling child into her private apartment. A bright fire burned in the grate. The room looked cozy, cheerful, orderly. Lady Frances was a woman of method. She had piles of papers lying neatly docketed on her writing-table; a sheaf of unanswered letters lay on one side. A Remington typewriter stood on a table near, and a slim-looking girl was standing by the typewriter.

"You will leave me for the present, Miss Andrews," she said, turning to her amanuensis. "I shall require you here again in a quarter of an hour."

Miss Andrews, with a low bow, instantly left the room.

"You see, Evelyn," said her aunt, "you are taking up the time of a very busy woman. I manage the financial part of several charities – in short, we are very busy people in this house – and in the morning I, as a rule, allow no one to interrupt me. When the afternoon comes I am ready and willing to be agreeable to my guests."

"But I am not your guest. The house belongs to me – or at least it will be mine," said Evelyn.

"You are quite right in saying you are not my guest. You are my husband's niece, and in the future you will inherit his property; but if I hear you speaking in that rude way again I shall be forced to punish you. I can see for myself that you are an ill-bred girl and will require a vast lot of breaking-in."

"And you think you can do it?" said Evelyn, her eyes flashing.

"I intend to do it. I am going to talk to you for a few minutes this morning, and after I have spoken I wish you to clearly understand that you are to do as I tell you. You will not be unhappy here; on the contrary, you will be happy. At first you may find the necessary rules of a house like this somewhat irksome, but you will get into the way of them before long. You need discipline, and you will have it here. I will not say much more on that subject this morning. You can find Audrey, and she and Miss Sinclair will take you round the grounds and amuse you, and you must be very much obliged to them for their attentions. Audrey is my daughter, and I think I may say without undue flattery that you will find her a most estimable companion. She is well brought up, and is a charming girl in every sense of the word. Miss Sinclair is her governess; she will also instruct you, but time enough for that in the future. Now, when you leave here go straight to your room and desire your servant – Jasper, I think, you call her – to dress you in a plain and suitable frock."

"A frock!" said Evelyn. "I wear dresses – long dresses. I am not a child; motherly said I had the sense of several grown-up people."

“The garment you are now in you are not to wear again; it is unsuitable, and I forbid you to be even seen in it. Do you understand?”

“I hear you,” said Evelyn.

“Go up-stairs and do what I tell you, and then you can go into the grounds. Audrey is having holidays at present; you will find her with her governess in the shrubbery. Now go; the time I can devote to you for the present is up.”

“I had better give you this first,” said Evelyn.

She thrust her hand into her pocket and took out the ill-spelt and now exceedingly dirty note which poor Mrs. Wynford in Tasmania had written to Lady Frances before her death.

“This is from mother, who is dead,” continued the child. “It is for you. She wrote it to you. I expect she is watching you now; she told me that she would come back if she could and see how people treated me. I am going. Don’t lose the note; it was written by mother, and she is dead.”

Evelyn laid the dirty letter on the blotting-pad on Lady Frances’s table. It looked strangely out of keeping with the rest of her correspondence. The little girl left the room, banging the door behind her.

“A dreadful child!” thought Lady Frances. “How are we to endure her? My poor, sweet Audrey! I must get Edward to allow me to send Evelyn to school; she really is not a fit companion for my young daughter.”

Miss Andrews came back.

“Please direct these envelopes, and answer some of these letters according to the notes which I have put down for you,” said Lady Frances; and her secretary began to work. But Lady Frances did not ask Miss Andrews to read or reply to the dirty little note. She took it up very much as though she would like to drop it into the fire, but finally she opened it and read the contents. The letter was rude and curt, and Lady Frances’s fine black eyes flashed as she read the words. Finally, she locked the letter up in a private bureau, and sitting down, calmly proceeded with her morning’s work.

Meanwhile Evelyn, choking with rage and utterly determined to disobey Lady Frances, left the room. She stood still for a moment in the long corridor and looked disconsolately to right and to left of her.

“How ugly it all is!” she said to herself. “How I hate it! Mother, why did you die? Why did I ever leave my darling, darling ranch in Tasmania?”

She turned and very slowly walked up the white marble staircase. Presently she reached her own luxurious room. It was in the hands of a maid, however, who was removing the dust and putting the chamber in order.

“Where is Jasper?” asked the little girl.

“Miss Jasper has gone out of doors, miss.”

“Do you know how long she has been out?” asked Evelyn in a tone of keen interest.

“About half an hour, miss.”

“Then I’ll follow her.”

Evelyn went to her wardrobe. Jasper had already unpacked her young lady’s things and laid them higgledy-piggledy in the spacious wardrobe. It took the little girl a long time to find a tall velvet hat trimmed with plumes of crimson feathers. This she put on before the glass, arranging her hair to look as thick as possible, and smirking at her face while she arrayed herself.

“I would not wear this hat, for I got it quite for Sunday best, but I want her to see that she cannot master me,” thought the child. She then wrapped a crimson silk scarf round her neck and shoulders, and so attired looked very much like a little lady of the time of Vandyck. Once more she went down-stairs.

Audrey she did not wish to meet; Miss Sinclair she intended to be hideously rude to; but Jasper – where was Jasper?

Evelyn looked all round. Suddenly she saw a figure on the other side of a small lake which adorned part of the grounds. The figure was too far off for her to see it distinctly. It must be Jasper, for it surely was not in the least like the tall, fair, and stately Aubrey, not like Miss Sinclair.

Picking up her skirts, which were too long for her to run comfortably, the small figure now skidded across the grass. She soon reached the side of the lake, and shouted:

“Jasper! Oh Jasper! Jasper, I have news for you! You never knew anything like the – ”

The next instant she had rushed into the arms of Sylvia Leeson. Sylvia cried out eagerly:

“Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

Evelyn stared for a moment at the strange girl, then burst into a hearty laugh.

“Do tell me – quick, quick! – are you one of the Wynfords?” she asked.

“I a Wynford!” cried Sylvia. “I only wish I were. Are you a Wynford? Do you live at the Castle?”

“Do I live at the Castle!” cried Evelyn. “Why, the Castle is mine – I mean it will be when Uncle Ned dies. I came here yesterday; and, oh! I am miserable, and I want Jasper?”

“Who is Jasper?”

“My maid. Such a darling! – the only person here who cares in the least for me. Oh, please, please tell me your name! If you do not live at the Castle, and if you can assure me from the bottom of your heart that you do not love any one – any one who lives in the Castle – why, I will love you. You are sweetly pretty! What is your name?”

“Sylvia Leeson. I live three miles from here, but I adore the Castle. I should like to come here often.”

“You adore it! Then that is because you know nothing about it. Do you adore Audrey?”

“Is Audrey the young lady of the Castle?”

“She is not the young lady of the Castle. *I* am the young lady of the Castle. But have you ever seen her?”

“Once; and then she was rude to me.”

“Ah! I thought so. I don’t think she could be very polite to anybody. Now, suppose you and I become friends? The Castle belongs to me – or will when Uncle Ned dies. I can order people to come or people to go; and I order you to come. You shall come up to the house with me. You shall have lunch with me; you shall really. I have got a lovely suite of rooms – a bedroom of blue-and-silver and a little sitting-room for my own use; and you shall come there, and Jasper shall serve us both. Do you know that you are sweetly pretty? – just like a gipsy. You are lovely! Will you come with me now? Do! come at once.”

Sylvia laughed. She looked full at Evelyn; then she said abruptly:

“May I ask you a very straight question?”

“I love straight questions,” replied Evelyn.

“Can you give me a right, good, big lunch? Do you know that I am very hungry? Were you ever very hungry?”

“Oh, sometimes,” replied Evelyn, staring very hard at her. “I lived on a ranch, you know – or perhaps you don’t know.”

“I don’t know what a ranch is.”

“How funny! I thought everybody knew. You see, I am not English; I am Tasmanian. My father was an Englishman, but he died when I was a little baby, and I lived with mother – the sweetest, the dearest, the darlingest woman on earth – on a ranch in Tasmania. Mother is dead, and I have come here, and all the place will belong to me – not to Audrey – some day. Yes, I was hungry when we went on long expeditions, which we used to do in fine weather, but there was always something handy to eat. I have heard of people who are hungry and there is nothing handy to eat. Do you belong to that sort?”

“Yes, to that sort,” said Sylvia, nodding. “I will tell you about myself presently. Yes, take me to the house, please. I know *he* will be angry when he knows it, but I am going all the same.”

“Who is he?”

“I will tell you about him when you know the rest. Take me to the house, quick. I was there once before, on New Year’s Day, when every one – every one has a right to come. I hope you will keep up that splendid custom when you get the property. I ate a lot then. I longed to take some for him, but it was the rule that I must not do that. I told him about it afterwards: game-pie, two helpings; venison pasty, two ditto.”

“Oh, that is dull!” interrupted Evelyn. “Have you not forgotten yet about a lunch you had some days ago?”

“You would not if you were in my shoes,” said Sylvia. “But come; if we stay talking much longer some one will see us and prevent me from going to the house with you.”

“I should like to find the person who could prevent me from doing what I like to do!” replied Evelyn. “Come, Sylvia, come.”

Evelyn took the tall, dark girl’s hand, and they both set to running, and entered the house by the side entrance. They had the coast clear, as Evelyn expressed it, and ran up at once to her suite of rooms. Jasper was not in; the rooms were empty. They ran through the bedroom and found themselves in the beautifully furnished boudoir. A fire was blazing on the hearth; the windows were slightly open; the air, quite mild and fresh – for the day was like a spring one – came in at the open casement. Evelyn ran and shut it, and then turned and faced her companion.

“There!” she said. She came close up to Sylvia, and almost whispered, “Suppose Jasper brings lunch for both of us up here? She will if I command her. I will ring the bell and she’ll come. Would you not like that?”

“Yes, I’d like it much – much the best,” said Sylvia. “I am afraid of Lady Frances. And Miss Audrey can be very rude. She was very chuff with me on New Year’s Day.”

“She won’t be chuff with you in my presence,” said Evelyn. “Ah! here comes Jasper.”

Jasper, looking slightly excited, now appeared on the scene.

“Well, my darling!” she said. She rushed up to Evelyn and clasped her in her arms. “Oh, my own sweet Eve, and how are you getting on?” she exclaimed. “I am thinking this is not the place for you.”

“We will talk of that another time, please, Jasper,” said Evelyn, with unwonted dignity. “I have brought a friend to lunch with me. This young lady is called Miss Sylvia Leeson, and she is awfully hungry, and we’d both like a big lunch in this room. Can you smuggle things up, Jasper?”

“Her ladyship will be mad,” exclaimed Jasper. “I was told in the servants’ hall that she was downright annoyed at your not going to breakfast; if you are not at lunch she will move heaven and earth.”

“Let her; it will be fun,” said Evelyn. “I am going to lunch here with my friend Sylvia Leeson. Bring a lot of things up, Jasper – good things, rich things, tempting things; you know what sort I like.”

“I’ll try if there is a bit of pork and some mincepies and plum-pudding and cream and such-like down-stairs. And you’d fancy your chocolate, would you not?”

“Rather! Get all you can, and be as quick as ever you can.”

Jasper accordingly withdrew, and in a short time appeared with a laden tray in her hands.

“I had to run the gauntlet of the footman and the butler too; and what they will tell Lady Frances goodness knows, but I do not,” answered Jasper. “But there, if things have to come to a crisis, why, they must. You will not forget me when the storm breaks, will you, Evelyn?”

“I’ll never forget you,” said Evelyn, with enthusiasm. “You are the dearest and darlingest thing left now that motherly is in heaven; and Sylvia will love you too. I have been telling her all about you. – Now, Sylvia, you will not be hungry long.”

CHAPTER VII. – STAYING TO DINNER

Again at luncheon that day Evelyn was missing. Lady Frances looked round: Audrey was in her place; Miss Sinclair was seated not far away; the Squire took the foot of the table; the servants handed round the different dishes; but still no Evelyn had put in an appearance.

“I wonder where she can be,” said the Squire. “She looked a little wild and upset when she left me. Poor little girl! Do you know, Frances, I feel very sorry for her.”

“More than I do,” said Lady Frances, who at the same time had an uncomfortable remembrance of the look Evelyn had given her when she had left her presence. “Don’t let us talk any more about her now, Edward,” she said to her husband. “There is only one thing to be done for the child, and that I will tell you by and by.”

The Squire was accustomed to attend to his wife’s wishes on all occasions, and he said nothing further. Audrey felt constrained and uncomfortable. After a slight hesitation she said:

“Do let me find Evelyn, mother. I have been expecting her to join me the whole morning. She does not, of course, know about our rules yet.”

“No, Audrey,” said her mother; “I prefer that you should not leave the table. – Miss Sinclair, perhaps you will oblige me. Will you go to Evelyn’s room and tell her that we are at lunch?”

Miss Sinclair rose at once. She was absent for about five minutes. When she came back there was a distressed look on her face.

“Well, Jenny, well?” said Audrey in a voice of suppressed excitement. “Is she coming?”

“I think not,” said Miss Sinclair. – “I will explain matters to you, Lady Frances, afterwards.”

“Dear, dear!” said the Squire. “What a lot of explanations seem to be necessary with regard to the conduct of one small girl!”

“But she is a very important small girl, is she not, father?” said Audrey.

“Well, yes, dear; and I should like to say now that I take an interest in her – in fact,” he added, looking round him, for the servants had withdrawn, “I am prepared to love little Eve very much indeed.”

Lady Frances’s eyes flashed a somewhat indignant fire. Then she said slowly:

“As you speak so frankly, Edward, I must do likewise. I never saw a more hopeless child. There seems to be nothing whatever for it but to send her to school for a couple of years.”

“No,” said the Squire, “I will not allow that. We never sent Audrey to school, and I will have no difference made with regard to Evelyn’s education. All that money can secure must be provided for her, but I do not care for school-life for girls.”

Lady Frances said nothing further. She was a woman with tact, and would not on any consideration oppose her husband in public. All the same, she secretly made up her mind that if Evelyn proved unmanageable she was not to stay at Wynford Castle.

“And there is another thing,” continued the Squire. “This is her first day in her future home. I do not wish her to be punished whatever she may have done. I should like her to have absolute freedom until to-morrow morning.”

“It shall be exactly as you wish, Edward,” said Lady Frances. “I did intend to seek Evelyn out; I did intend further to question Miss Sinclair as to the reason why Evelyn did not appear at lunch; but I will defer these things. It happens to be somewhat convenient, as I want to pay some calls this afternoon; and really, with that child on my brain, I should not enjoy my visits. You, Audrey dear, will see to your cousin’s comforts, and when she is inclined to give you her society you will be ready to welcome her. Your young friends will not arrive until just before dinner. Please, at least use your influence, Audrey, to prevent Evelyn making a too extraordinary appearance to-night. Now I think that is all, and I must run off if I am to be in time to receive my guests.”

Lady Frances left the room, and Audrey went to her governess’s side.

“What is it?” she said. “You did look strange, Jenny, when you came into the room just now. Where is Evelyn? Why did she not come to lunch?”

“It is the greatest possible mercy,” said Miss Sinclair, “that Evelyn is allowed to have one free day, for perhaps – although I feel by no means sure – you and I may influence her for her own good to-night. But what do you think has happened? I went to her room and knocked at the door of the boudoir. I heard voices within. The door was immediately opened by the maid Jasper, and I saw Evelyn seated at a table, eating a most extraordinary kind of lunch, in the company of a girl whom I have never seen before.”

“Oh Jenny,” cried Audrey, “how frightfully exciting! A strange girl! Surely Evelyn did not bring a stranger with her and hide her somewhere last night?”

“No, dear, no,” said Miss Sinclair, laughing; “she did nothing of that sort. I fancy the girl must live in the neighborhood, although her face is unfamiliar to me. She is rather a pretty girl, but by no means the sort that your mother would approve of as a companion for your cousin.”

“What is she like?” asked Audrey in a grave voice.

Miss Sinclair proceeded to describe Sylvia’s appearance. She was interrupted in the middle of her description by a cry from Audrey.

“Oh dear!” she exclaimed, “you must have seen that curious girl, Sylvia Leeson. Your description is exactly like her. Well, as this is a free day, and we can do pretty much what we like, I will run straight up to Evelyn’s room and look for myself.”

“Do Audrey; I think on the whole it would be the best plan.”

So Audrey ran up-stairs, and soon her tap was heard on Evelyn’s door; the next moment she found herself in the presence of a very untidy, disheveled-looking cousin, and also in that of handsome Sylvia Leeson.

Sylvia dropped a sort of mock courtesy when she saw Audrey.

“My Shakespearian contemporary!” was her remark. “Well, Audrey, and how goes the Forest of Arden? And have you yet met Touchstone?”

Audrey colored very high at what she considered a direct impertinence.

“What are you doing here?” she said. “My mother does not know your mother.”

Sylvia gave a ringing laugh.

“I met this lady,” she said – and she pointed in Evelyn’s direction – “and she invited me here. I have had lunch with her, and I am no longer hungry. This is her room, is it not?”

“I should just think it is,” said Evelyn; “and I only invite those people whom I care about to come into it.” She said the words in a very pointed way, but Audrey had now recovered both her dignity and good-nature.

She laughed.

“Really we three are too silly,” she said. “Evelyn, you cannot mean the ridiculous words you say! As if any room in my father’s house is not free to me when I choose to go there! Now, whether you like it or not, I am determined to be friends with you. I do not want to scold you or lecture you, for it is not my place, but I intend to sit down although you have not the civility to offer me a chair; and I intend to ask again why Miss Leeson is here.”

“I came because Evelyn asked me,” said Sylvia; and then, all of a sudden, an unexpected change came over her face. Her pretty, bright eyes, with a sort of robin-redbreast look in them, softened and melted, and then grew brighter than ever through tears. She went up to Audrey and knelt at her feet.

“Why should not I come? Why should not I be happy?” she said. “I am a very lonely girl; why should you grudge me a little happiness?”

Audrey looked at her in amazement; then a change came over her own face. She allowed her hand just for an instant to touch the hand of Sylvia, and her eyes looked into the wild eyes of the shabby girl who was kneeling before her.

"Get up," she said. "You have no right to take that attitude to me. As you are here, sit down. I do not want to be rude to you; far from that. I should like to make you happy."

"Should you really?" answered Sylvia. "You can do it, you know."

"Sylvia," interrupted Evelyn, "what does this mean? You and I have been talking in a very frank way about Audrey. We have neither of us been expressing any enthusiastic opinions with regard to her; and yet now – and yet now –"

"Oh, let me be, Eve," replied Sylvia. "I like Audrey. I liked her the other day. It is true I was afraid of her, and I was crushed by her, but I liked her; and I like her better now, and if she will be my friend I am quite determined to be hers."

"Then you do not care for me?" said Evelyn, getting up and strutting across the room.

Sylvia looked at Audrey, whose eyes, however, would not smile, and whose face was once more cold and haughty.

"Evelyn," she said, "I must ask you to try and remember that you are a lady, and not to talk in this way before anybody but me. I am your cousin, and when you are alone with me I give you leave to talk as you please. But now the question is this: I do not in the least care what Sylvia said of me behind my back. I hope I know better than to wish to find out what I was never meant to hear. This is a free country, and any girl in England can talk of me as she pleases – I am not afraid – that is, she can talk of me as she pleases when I am absent. But what I want to do now is to answer Sylvia's question. She is unhappy, and she has thrown herself on me. – What can I do, Sylvia, to make you happy?"

Sylvia was standing huddled up against the wall. Her pretty shoulders were hitched to her ears; her hair was disheveled and fell partly over her forehead; her eyes gleamed out under their thick thatch of black hair like wild birds in a nest; her coral lips trembled, there was just a gleam of snowy teeth, and then she said impulsively:

"You are a darling, and you can do one thing. Let me for to-day forget that I am poor and hungry and very lonely and very sad. Let me share your love and Evelyn's love for just one whole day."

"But there are people coming to-night, Sylvia," said Evelyn. "I heard Jasper speak of it. Lots of people – grandees, you know."

Sylvia shuddered slightly.

"We never say that sort of word now in England," she remarked; and she added: "I am well-born too. There was a time when I should not have been at all shy of Audrey Wynford."

"You are very queer," said Evelyn. "I do not know that I particularly want you for a friend."

"Well, never mind; I think I can get you to love me," said Sylvia. "But now the question is this: Will Audrey let me stay or will she not? Will you, Audrey – will you – just because my name is Sylvia and we have met in the Forest of Arden?"

"Oh dear," said Audrey, "what a difficult question you ask! And how can I answer it? I dare not give you leave all by myself, but I will go and inquire."

Audrey ran immediately out of the room.

"What a wonderful change has come into my life!" she said to herself as she flew down-stairs and looked into different rooms, but all in vain, for Miss Sinclair.

Her mother was out; it was hopeless to think of appealing to her. Without the permission of some one older than herself she could not possibly ask Sylvia to stay. Sylvia could be more or less lost in the crowd of children who would be at the Castle that evening, but her mother's eyes would quickly seek out the unfamiliar face, inquiries would be made, and – in short, Audrey did not dare to take this responsibility on herself. She was rushing up-stairs again, prepared to tell Sylvia that she could not grant her request, when she came plump up against her father.

"My dear girl, what a hurry you are in!" he exclaimed.

"Oh yes, father," replied Audrey. "I am excited. The house is full of life and almost mystery."

“Then you like your cousin to be here?” said the Squire, and his face brightened.

“Yes and no,” answered Audrey truthfully. “But, father, I have a great request to make. You know you said that Evelyn was to have a free day to-day in which she could do as she pleased. She has a guest up-stairs whom she would like to ask to stay. May she ask her, father? She is a girl, and lonely and pretty, and, I think, on the whole, a lady. May we both ask her to dinner and to spend the evening? And will you, father, take the responsibility?”

“Of course – of course,” said the Squire.

“Will you explain to mother when she returns?”

“Yes, my dear – certainly. Ask anybody you please; I never restrain you with regard to your friends. Now do not keep me, my love; I am going out immediately.”

CHAPTER VIII. – EVENING-DRESS

When Audrey re-entered Evelyn's pretty boudoir she found the two girls standing close together and talking earnestly. Jasper also was joining in the conversation. Audrey felt her heart sink.

"How can Evelyn make free with Jasper as she does? And why does Sylvia talk to Evelyn as though they were having secrets together? Why, they only met to-day!" was the girl's thought. Her tone, therefore, was cold.

"I met father, and he says you may stay," she remarked in a careless voice. "And now, as doubtless you will be quite happy, I will run away and leave you, for I have much to do."

"No, no; not until I have thanked you and kissed you first," said Sylvia.

Audrey did not wish Sylvia to kiss her, but she could not make any open objection. She scarcely returned the girl's warm embrace, and the next moment had left the room.

"Is she not a horror?" said Evelyn. "I began by liking her – I mean I rather liked her. She had a grand sort of manner, and her eyes are handsome, but I hate her now. She is not half, nor quarter, as pretty as you are, Sylvia. And, oh, Sylvia, you will be my friend – my true, true friend – for I am so lonely now that mother is dead!"

Sylvia was standing by the fire. There was a bright color in both her cheeks, and her eyes shone vividly.

"My mother died too," she said. "I was happy while she lived. Yes, Eve, I will be your friend if you like."

"It will be all the better for you," said Evelyn, who could never long forget her own importance. "If I take to you there is no saying what may happen, for, whatever lies before me in the future, I am my Uncle Edward's heiress; and Audrey, for all her pride, is nobody."

"Audrey looks much more suitable," said Sylvia, and then she stopped, partly amused and partly frightened by the look in Evelyn's light-brown eyes.

"How dare you!" she cried. "How horrid – how horrid of you! After all, I do not know that I want to see too much of you. You had better be careful what sort of things you say to me. And first of all, if I am to see any more of you, you must tell me why Audrey would make a better heiress than I shall."

"Oh, never mind," said Sylvia; but then she added: "Why should I not tell you? She is tall and graceful and very, very lovely, and she has the manners of a *grande dame* although she is such a young girl. Any one in all the world can see that Audrey is to the manner born, whereas you –"

Evelyn looked almost frightened while Sylvia was talking.

"Is that really so?" she answered. "I ought to be just mad with you, but I'm not. Before the year is out no one will compare Audrey and me. I shall be much, much the finest lady – much, much the grandest. I vow it; I declare it; I will do it; and you, Sylvia, shall help me."

"Oh, I have no objection," said Sylvia. "I am very glad indeed that you will want my help, and I am sure you are heartily welcome."

Evelyn looked full up at Sylvia. Jasper had left the two girls together. The only light in the room now was the firelight, for the short winter day was drawing to an end.

"You, I suppose," said Evelyn, "are a lady although you do wear such a shabby dress and you suffer so terribly from hunger?"

"How do you know?" asked Sylvia.

"First, because you are not afraid of anything; and second, because you are graceful and, although you are so very queer, your voice has a gentle sound. You are a lady by birth, are you not?"

"Yes," said Sylvia simply. She neither added to the word nor took from it. She became very silent and thoughtful.

“Why do you live in such a funny way? Why are you not educated like other girls? And why will you tell me nothing about your home?”

“I have nothing to tell. My father and I came to live at The Priory three months ago. He does not care for society, and he does not wish me to leave him.”

“And you are poor?”

“No,” said Sylvia.

“Not poor! And yet, why are you almost in rags? And you did eat up your lunch so greedily!”

“I will answer nothing more, Evelyn. If you do not like me as I am, let me go now, and I will try to forget the beautiful, comfortable Castle, and the lovely meals, and you and your queer maid Jasper, and the beautiful girl Audrey; for if you do not want me as I am, you can never get me any other way. I am a lady, and we are not poor. Now are you satisfied?”

“I burn with curiosity,” said Evelyn; “and if mother were alive, would she not get it out of you! But if you wish it – and your eyes do look as if they were daggers – I will change the subject. What shall we do for the rest of the day? Shall we go out and take a walk in the dark?”

“Yes; that would be lovely,” cried Sylvia.

Evelyn shouted in an imperious way to Jasper.

“Bring my fur cloak,” she said, “and my goloshes. I won’t wear anything over my head. I am going out with Miss Sylvia Leeson.”

Jasper brought Evelyn’s cloak, which was lined with the most lovely squirrel inside and covered with bright crimson outside, and put it over her shoulders. Sylvia in her very shabby black cloth jacket, much too short in the waist and in the arms, accompanied her. They ran down-stairs and went out into the grounds.

Now, if there was one thing more than another which would hopelessly displease Lady Frances, it was the idea of any of her relations wandering about after dusk. But luckily for Evelyn, and luckily also for poor Sylvia, Lady Frances was some miles from Wynford Castle at that moment. The girls rushed about, and soon Evelyn forgot all her restraints and shouted noisily. They played hide-and-seek amongst the trees in the plantation. Sylvia echoed Evelyn’s shouts; and the Squire, who was returning to the house in time to meet his guests, paused and listened in much amazement to these unusual sounds of girlish laughter. There came a shrill shriek, and then the cry, “Here I am – seek and find,” and then another ringing peal of girlish merriment.

“Surely that cannot be Audrey!” he said to himself. “What extraordinary noises!”

He went into the house. From his study window he saw the flash of a lantern, which lit up a red cloak, and for an instant he observed the very light hair and white face of his niece. But who was the girl with her – a tall, shabby-looking girl – about the height of his Audrey, too? It could not be Audrey! He sank down into a chair, and a look of perplexity crossed his face.

“What am I to do with that poor child?” he said to himself. “What extraordinary, unpardonable conduct! Well, I will not tell Lady Frances. I determined that the child should have one day of liberty, but I am glad I did not make it more than one.”

After Evelyn and Sylvia had quite exhausted themselves they returned to the house.

Jasper was ready for them. She had laid out several dresses for Evelyn to select from.

“I have just had a message from her ladyship,” she said when the girls came in with their cheeks glowing and eyes full of laughter. “All the young people are to dine with the family to-night. As a rule, when there is company the younger members of the house dine in the schoolroom, but to-night you are all to be together. I got the message from that stuck-up footman Scott. I hate the fellow; he had the impudence to say that he did not think I was suited to my post.”

“He had better not say it again,” cried Evelyn, “or he will catch it from me. I mean to have a talk with each of the servants in turn, and tell them quite openly that at any moment I may be mistress, and that they had better look sharp before they incur my displeasure.”

“But, Eve, could you?” exclaimed Sylvia. “Why, that would mean – ”

“Uncle Ned’s death. I know that,” said Evelyn. “I love Uncle Ned. I shall be awfully sorry when he does die. But however sorry I am, he will die when his turn comes; and then I shall be mistress. I was frightfully sorry when mother died; but however broken-hearted I was, she did die just the same. It is so with every one. It is the height of folly to shirk subjects of that sort; one has to face them. I have no one now to take my part except dear old Jasper, and so I shall have to take my own part, and the servants had better know. – You can tell them too, Jasper; I give you leave.”

“Not I!” said Jasper. “I declare, Miss Evelyn, you are no end of a goose for all that you are the darling of my heart. But now, miss, what dress will you wear to-night? I should say the white satin embroidered with the seed pearls. It has a long train, and you will look like a bride in it, miss. It is cut low in the neck, and has those sleeves which open above the elbow, and a watteau back. It is a very elegant robe indeed; and I have a wreath of white stephanotis for your hair, miss. You will look regal in this dress, and like an heiress, I do assure you, Miss Eve.”

“It is perfectly exquisite!” said Evelyn. “Come, Sylvia; come and look. Oh, those dear little bunches of chiffon, and white stephanotis in the middle of each bunch! And, oh, the lace! It is real lace, is it not, Jasper?”

“Brussels lace, and of the best quality; not too much, and yet enough. It cost a small fortune.”

“Oh, here are the dear little shoes to match, and this petticoat with heaps of lace and embroidery! Well, when I wear this dress Audrey will have to respect me.”

“That is why I bought it, miss. I thought you should have the best.”

“Oh, you are a darling! What would not mother say if she could look at me to-night!”

“Well, Miss Evelyn, I hope I do my duty. But you and Miss Sylvia have been very late out, so you must hurry, miss, if I am to do you justice.”

“But, oh, I say!” cried Evelyn, looking for the first time at her friend. “What is Sylvia to wear?”

“I don’t know, miss. None of your dresses will fit her; she is so much taller.”

“I will not go down-stairs a fright,” said Sylvia. “Audrey asked me, and she must lend me something. Please, Jasper, do go to Miss Wynford’s room and ask her if she has a white dress she will lend me to wear to-night. Even a washing muslin will do. Anything that is long enough in the skirt and not too short in the waist. I will take it away and have it washed fresh for her. Do, please, please, ask her, Jasper!”

“I am very sorry, miss,” answered Jasper. “I would do anything in reason to oblige, but to go to a young lady whom I don’t know and to make a request of that sort is more than I can do, miss. Besides, she is occupied now. A whole lot of visitors have just arrived – fine young ladies and tall young gentlemen – and they are all chattering-chattering as though their lungs would burst. They are all in the hall, miss, chatting as hard as they can chat. No, I cannot ask her; I cannot really.”

“Then I must stop up-stairs and lose all, all the fun,” said Sylvia.

The gaiety left her face. She sat down on a chair.

“You will get me something to eat, at any rate, Jasper?” she said.

“Yes, of course, miss; you and I can have a cozy meal together.”

“No, thank you,” said Sylvia proudly. “I don’t eat with servants.”

Jasper’s face turned an ugly green color. She looked at Evelyn, but Evelyn only laughed.

“You want to be put in your place, Jas,” was her remark. “You are a little uppish, you know. I am quite pleased with Sylvia. I think she can teach me one or two things.”

“Well,” exclaimed Jasper, “if it is to be cruel and nasty to your own old Jasper, I wish you joy of your future, Miss Evelyn; that I do. – And I am sure, miss,” she added, flashing angry eyes at the unconscious Sylvia, “I do not want to eat with you – not one bit. I am sure your dress ain’t fit for any lady to wear.”

Sylvia got up slowly.

“I am going to look for Audrey,” she said; and before Evelyn could prevent her, she left the room.

“Ain’t she a spiteful, nasty thing!” said the maid the moment Sylvia’s back was turned. “Ain’t she just the very sort that your mother would be mad at your knowing! And I willing to be kind to her and all, and to have a dull evening for her sake, and she ups and cries, ‘I don’t eat with servants.’ Forsooth! I like her ways! I hope, Miss Evelyn, you won’t have nothing more to do with her.”

“Oh dear!” said Evelyn, lying back in her chair and going off into one peal of laughter after another. “You really kill me, Jas, with your silly ways. It was fun to see Sylvia when she spoke like that. And didn’t she take a rise out of you! And was not your pecker up! Oh, it was killing – killing!”

“I am surprised to hear you talk, Miss Evelyn, as you do. You have already forgotten your poor mother and what she said I was to be to you.”

“I have not forgotten her, Jas; but I mean to have great fun with Sylvia, and whether you like it or not you will have to lump it. Oh, I say, she has come back! – Well, Sylvia? Why, you have got a lovely dress hanging over your arm!”

“It is the best I could get,” said Sylvia. “I went to Audrey’s wardrobe and took it out. I did not ask her leave; she was not in the room. There were numbers of dresses, all hanging on pegs, and I took this one. See, it is only India muslin, and it can be washed and done up beautifully. I am determined to have my one happy evening without being docked of any of it, and I could not come down in my own frock. See, Evelyn; do you think it will do?”

“It looks rather raggy,” said Evelyn, gazing at the white India muslin, with its lovely lace and chiffon and numerous little tucks, with small favor; “but I suppose it is better than nothing.”

“I borrowed this white sash too,” said Sylvia, “and those shoes and stockings. I am certain to be found out. I am certain never to be allowed to come to the Castle again; but I mean to have one really great evening of grand fun.”

“And I won’t help you to dress,” said Jasper.

“But you will, Jasper, because I order it,” cried the imperious little Evelyn. “Only,” she added, “you must dress me first; and then, while you are helping Sylvia to look as smart as she can in that old rag, I will strut up and down before the glass and try to imagine myself a bride and the owner of Wynford Castle.”

Jasper was, after all, too much afraid of Evelyn not to yield to her will, and the dressing of the extraordinary girl began. She was very particular about the arranging of her hair, and insisted on having a dash of powder on her face; finally, she found herself in the satin robe with its magnificent adornings. Her hair was once again piled on the top of her head, a wreath of stephanotis surrounding it, and she stood in silent ecstasy gazing at her image in the glass.

It was now Sylvia’s turn to be appareled for the festive occasion, and Jasper at first felt cross and discontented as she took down the girl’s masses of raven-black hair and began to brush them out; but soon the magnificence of the locks, which were tawny in places, and brightened here and there with threads of almost gold, interested her so completely that she could not rest until she had made what she called the best of Sylvia’s head.

With all her faults, Jasper could on occasions have taste enough, and she soon made Sylvia look as she had seldom looked before. Her thick hair was piled high on her small and classical head; the white muslin dress fitted close to her slim young figure; and when she stood close to Evelyn, and they prepared to go down-stairs together, Sylvia, even in her borrowed plumes, even in the dress which was practically a stolen dress, looked fifty times more the heiress than the overdressed and awkward little real heiress.

When the girls reached the large central hall they both stopped. Audrey was standing near the log fire, and a group of bright and beautifully dressed children clustered round her. Two of the girls wore muslin frocks; their hair, bright in color and very thick in quantity, hung down below their waists. There were a couple of boys in the proverbial Eton jackets; and another pair of girls

of ordinary appearance, but with intelligent faces and graceful figures. Audrey gave a perceptible start when she saw her cousin and Sylvia coming to meet her. Just for an instant Sylvia looked awkward. Audrey's eyes slightly dilated; then she came slowly forward.

"Evelyn," she said, "may I introduce my special friends? This is Henrietta Jervice, and this is Juliet; and here is Arthur, and here Robert. Can you remember so many names all at once? Oh, here are Mary Clavering and Sophie. – Now, my dears," she added, turning and laughing back at the group, "you have all heard of Evelyn, have you not? This young lady is Miss Sylvia –"

"Sylvia Leeson," said Sylvia. A vivid color came into her cheeks; she drew herself up tall and erect; her black eyes flashed an angry fire.

Audrey looked at her with a slow and puzzled expression. She certainly was very handsome; but where had she got that dress? Sylvia seemed to read the thoughts in Audrey's heart. She bent towards her.

"I will send it back next week. You were not in your room. It was time to dress for dinner. I ran in and took it. If you cannot forgive me I will make an excuse to go up-stairs, and I will take it off and put it back again in your wardrobe, and I will slip home and no one will be the wiser. I know you meant to lend me a dress, for I could not come down in my old rags; but if I have offended you past forgiveness I will go quietly away and no one will miss me."

"Stay," said Audrey coldly. She turned round and began to talk to Henrietta Jervice.

Henrietta laughed and chatted incessantly. She was a merry girl, and very good-looking; she was tall for her age, which was between sixteen and seventeen. Both she and her sister were quite schoolgirls, however, and had frank, fresh manners, which made Sylvia's heart go out to them.

"How nice people in my own class of life really are!" she thought. "How dreadful – oh, how dreadful it is to have to live as I do! And I see by Audrey's face that she thinks that I have not the slightest idea how a lady ought to act. Oh, it is terrible! But there, I will enjoy myself for the nonce; I will – I vow it. Poor little Evelyn, however *gauche* she is, and however ridiculous, has small chance against Audrey. Even if she is fifty times the heiress, Audrey has the manners of one born to rule. Oh, how I could love her! How happy she could make me!"

"Do you skate?" suddenly asked Arthur Jervice.

"Yes," replied Sylvia bluntly. She turned and looked at him. He looked back at her, and his eyes laughed.

"I wonder what you are thinking about?" he said. "You look as if –"

"As if what?" said Sylvia. She drew back a little, and Arthur did the same.

"As if you meant to run swords into us all. But, all the same, I like your look. Are you staying here?"

"No," said Sylvia. "I live not far away. I have come here just for the day."

"Well, we shall see you to-morrow, of course. Mr. Wynford says we can skate on the pond to-morrow, for the ice will be quite certain to bear. I hope you will come. I love good skating."

"And so do I," said Sylvia.

"Then will you come?"

"Probably not."

Arthur was silent for a moment. He was a tall boy for his age, and was a good half-head above Sylvia, tall as she also was.

"May I ask you about things?" he said. "Who is that very, very funny little girl?"

"Do you mean Eve Wynford?"

"Perhaps that is her name. I mean the girl in white satin – the girl who wears a grown-up dress."

"She is Audrey Wynford's cousin."

"What! the Tasmanian? The one who is to –"

"Yes. Hush! she will hear us," said Sylvia.

The rustle of silk was heard on the stairs. Sylvia turned her head, and instinctively hid just behind Arthur; and Lady Frances, accompanied by several other ladies, all looking very stately and beautiful, joined the group of young people. A great deal of chattering and laughter followed. Evelyn was in her element. She was not a scrap shy, and going up to her aunt, said in a confident way:

“I hope you like this dress, Aunt Frances. Jasper chose it for me in Paris. It is quite Parisian, is it not? Don’t you think it stylish?”

“Hush, Evelyn!” said Lady Frances in a peremptory whisper. “We do not talk of dress except in our rooms.”

Evelyn pouted and bit her lip. Then she saw Sylvia, whose eyes were watching Lady Frances. Lady Frances also looked up and saw the tall and beautiful girl at the same moment.

“Who is that girl?” she said, turning to Evelyn. “I don’t know her face.”

“Her name is Sylvia Leeson.”

“Sylvia Leeson! Still I don’t understand. Who is she?”

“A friend of mine,” said Evelyn.

“My dear, how can you possibly have any friends in this place?”

“She is my friend, Aunt Frances. I found her wandering about out of doors, and I brought her in; and Audrey asked her to stay for the rest of the day, and she is happy. She is very nice, Aunt Frances,” said Evelyn, looking up full in her aunt’s face.

“That will do, dear.”

Lady Frances went up to her daughter.

“Audrey,” she said, “introduce me to Miss Leeson.”

The introduction was made. Lady Frances held out her hand.

“I am glad to see you, Miss Leeson,” she said.

A few minutes later the whole party found themselves clustered round the dinner-table. The children, by special request, sat all together. They chattered and laughed heartily, and seemed to have a world of things to say each to the other. Audrey, surrounded by her own special friends, looked her very best; she had a great deal of tact, and had long ago been trained in the observances of society. She managed now, helped by a warning glance from her mother, to divide Sylvia and Evelyn. She put Sylvia next to Arthur, who continued to chat to her, and to try to draw information from her. Evelyn sat between Robert and Sophie Clavering. Sophie was downright and blunt, and she made Evelyn laugh many times. Sylvia, too, was now quite at her ease. She contrived to fascinate Arthur, who thought her quite the most lovely girl he had ever met.

“I wish you would come and skate to-morrow,” he said, as the dinner was coming to an end and the signal for the ladies to withdraw might be expected at any moment. “I wish you would, Sylvia. I cannot see why you should refuse. One has so little chance of skating in England that no one ought to be off the ice who knows how to skate when the weather is suitable. Cannot you come? Shall I ask Lady Frances if you may?”

“No, thank you,” said Sylvia; then she added: “I long to skate just as much as you do, and I probably shall skate, although not on your pond; but there is a long reach of water just where the pond narrows and beyond where the stream rushes away towards the river. I may skate there. The water is nearly a mile in extent.”

“Then I will meet you,” said Arthur. “I will get Robert and Hennie to come with me; Juliet will never stir from Audrey’s side when she comes to Castle Wynford; but I’ll make up a party and we can meet at the narrow stretch. What do you call it?”

“The Yellow Danger,” said Sylvia promptly.

“What a curious name! What does it mean?”

“I don’t know; I have not been long enough in this neighborhood. Oh, there is Lady Frances rising from the table; I must go. If you do happen to come to the Yellow Danger to-morrow I shall probably be there.”

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